

1 Immigrants & American Civic Institutions

*E*ach week during the fall of 1999, immigrant Chinese garment and restaurant workers in New York City demonstrated outside the New York State Workers' Compensation Board. Although most had few economic resources and most lacked English language skills and citizenship, they went with petitions and signs to demand that the board expedite payments and accept accountability for worker safety. Around the same time in Los Angeles, immigrant Mexican day laborers formed an independent workers' association and began participating in political theater groups as part of an effort to demand fair wages. In late September 2003, nearly a thousand immigrants and their supporters from around the country headed for Washington, D.C., as part of the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, modeled after the freedom rides conducted as part of the 1960s civil rights movement. The immigrant freedom riders traveled to the nation's capital to demand legalization for undocumented workers, a more efficient and fair naturalization process, policy reforms to promote the reunification of families separated by migration, and greater civil rights and civil liberties protections for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. The ride culminated in a rally and festival that drew more than one hundred thousand people and included a national congressional lobbying effort.

These examples of political activism stand in sharp contrast to accounts about the apathy and disengagement of contemporary U.S. immigrants. As a group, these immigrants exhibit low rates of political participation compared to the general population. However, in the late 1990s, I noticed that some immigrants were taking part in political activities, and I began to wonder if the statistics that were frequently reported as evidence of immigrants' reluctance to participate politically really told the whole story. Strikingly, those who were organizing and attending protest events

were, according to conventional theories of political participation, among the least likely to be politically active—immigrants lacking citizenship or legal residency, with limited English skills, and living on poverty wages. Why would immigrants stuck in some of the country's lowest-paying jobs and struggling to put food on the table take time out of their busy days to attend a rally, go to a march, or lobby Congress?

That question was further animated by interviews I conducted with Chinese and Mexican immigrants and community leaders in New York City and Los Angeles during 1999 and 2000. When I asked about their communities and why they had or had not become involved in U.S. politics, two types of responses stood out. To the question of whether she felt that she was a part of the American political system, a Chinese immigrant woman replied, "The two big political organizations here, Republican and Democrat, mainly just care about white people. Percent of voters, minority, don't carry weight so [they are the] first group to be sacrificed. If all minorities vote, greater percent of voting power. Otherwise, we will continue to be ignored. If we don't vote, we will remain insignificant." Asked about opportunities for participation in the United States, another Chinese immigrant woman paused for a moment and then said, "I guess I only participate in the church. I'm never interested in politics, only if the church says something."

These statements reflect two common claims among the immigrants I interviewed. On the one hand, they often observed that the two major political parties seem to have no real interest in or involvement with immigrants. On the other hand, interviewees remarked that groups that do community-based work—labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions—involve immigrants in political activities.

Civic Institutions e³ Immigrant Political Mobilization

This book focuses on the role that American civic institutions play in mobilizing immigrants. My field research led me to some conclusions that challenge the assumption that immigrants' failure to participate more actively in politics is rooted in their shortcomings or attitudes. I concluded that the low levels of political participation among contemporary minority immigrants do not result from individual apathy, lack of assimilation, or even a preoccupation with the homeland, as some popular and scholarly

accounts suggest. Instead, the research indicates that American civic institutions' level of involvement with an immigrant community affects the level of political participation by members of that community. Institutions are not neutral actors in the process of immigrant mobilization, and their historical and political contexts, including incentives and the racial attitudes of the American public and elites, influence who gets to participate in the U.S. political system. The incorporation of immigrants into the political system poses challenges and offers opportunities to American civic institutions—including political parties, labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions. This book challenges institutions to do more in terms of fulfilling the democratic ideal of full participation and inclusion for all citizens and points to how that could be accomplished.

Shifts in the American institutional landscape have affected immigrant political participation and mobilization in specific ways. In the past, waves of immigrants from Europe were at the heart of U.S. politics: "Nineteenth-century immigrants arrived to find important political groups eager to satisfy their material needs. Political party organizations, especially the many urban political machines, needed immigrants' votes and did their best to get them" (Schier 2002, 16). In contrast to earlier immigrants, those of today, who hail mostly from Asia and Latin America, find themselves on the periphery of the American political system. Fundamental differences in how parties mobilize people to participate in American politics partly account for this change. Local political machines and party organizations formerly exhibited a consistent and committed interest in political mobilization at the neighborhood level but are no longer a vital presence in U.S. communities generally and in immigrant communities in particular. Those efforts have been replaced by the centralization of campaigns in the Republican and Democratic national headquarters, where technicalization, in the form of direct marketing and mass media campaigns, has become the norm. Unless the mainstream political parties modify the mobilization strategies that they perfected at the end of the 1990s, other civic organizations may become the most viable institutions for encouraging immigrant involvement in American politics.

In the absence of strong, local-level party activity, the influence of community organizations may be even greater than had previously been the case.¹ This book examines the role of labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associa-

tions, and religious institutions in immigrant communities' mobilization and participation. By providing immigrants with opportunities to participate in both electoral and nonelectoral political activities, these organizations form an institutional bridge between immigrant communities and the larger political system.

America's Shifting Demographics

Although the shift in the institutional landscape constitutes a significant factor in the process of political mobilization, it pales in comparison to the shift in the U.S. demographic landscape. America is a nation of immigrants, but today, people from all over the world are entering the country in numbers not seen since the great waves of immigration from Europe of the past century.² In 2000, approximately 28 million immigrants resided in the United States, about 10 percent of the total U.S. population—the highest percentage since the 1930s.³ Today, more than one out of every five people living in the United States is an immigrant or the child of immigrants. Because of their immense demographic force, immigrants profoundly affect the nation's institutions and communities.

Latinos and Asian Americans are the two largest and fastest-growing U.S. immigrant populations.⁴ Immigration, not the birthrate among those already living in the United States, is the primary factor driving population growth for both groups.⁵ In 2002, Asian American and Latino immigrants accounted for more than 75 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population. Approximately one in every four immigrants is Asian American, and one in every two is Latino. The Asian American population grew from 7 million in 1990 to more than 10 million in 2000, more than 60 percent of them immigrants. Although Asian Americans make up only about 5 percent of the U.S. population, in some regions they represent a much larger proportion.⁶ Similarly, the U.S. Latino population grew from 22 million in 1990 to more than 35 million in 2000, and almost 40 percent are immigrants. Latinos make up more than 12 percent of the current U.S. population, and, as is the case for Asian Americans, that proportion is much higher in some regions.⁷ In contrast, in 2000, fewer than 4 percent of non-Latino whites and 7 percent of blacks were foreign-born (Schmidley 2001).

Given these massive demographic changes, understanding the place of immigrants in the U.S. civic sphere has never been more critical. Not only

is the number of immigrants growing, but they and their children are also becoming a larger segment of the political system. Immigrants constitute about 13 percent of the U.S. voting-age population, and their potential political influence is magnified by their concentration in California, New York, New Jersey, Texas, Florida, and Illinois, all states that command a large number of electoral college votes (Mollenkopf, Olson, and Ross 2001). The political mobilization of this group has the potential to alter the shape of the future American political system.

Despite the tremendous growth in the Latino and Asian American populations, their demographic power is not reflected in their political involvement. These groups are characterized by low rates of voting participation, and recent Latino and Asian American immigrants are even less likely to vote than are their native-born counterparts (Ong and Nakanishi 1996; DeSipio 1996; Cho 1999; Ramakrishnan 2005). Among voting age citizens, only 52 percent of Asian Americans and 58 percent of Latinos reported that they were registered to vote in 2004, compared to 69 percent of blacks and 75 percent of whites (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). Just 45 percent of Asian American and 47 percent of Latino adult citizens report voting in 2004, compared to 60 percent of black and 67 percent of white adult citizens. Thus, even when citizenship status is taken into account, these groups continue to register and vote at lower rates than blacks or whites (Schmidley 2001; Lien 2001; Leighley 2001; Jamieson, Shin, and Day 2002; Ramakrishnan 2005).

Low rates of voting participation partly explain why parties have been slow to turn their attention toward Asian American and Latino immigrants. There are few incentives in the U.S. political system encouraging parties to target low-propensity voters. Parties tend to devote their energies toward mobilizing the most likely voters in order to achieve the most “bang for the buck.” Whether because of assumptions about immigrant apathy or because parties rarely focus beyond the next election, Asian Americans and Latinos—and particularly the immigrant members of those groups—receive less attention than the general population. Yet the parties’ reluctance to mobilize these groups ignores several key points. Research has shown that with the passage of time, today’s immigrants will become tomorrow’s citizens and voters (Ong and Nakanishi 1996; Mogelonsky 1997; Myers, Pitkin, and Park 2005). In so doing, America’s mainstream political parties are missing an opportunity to win these people over as constituents and as a base. More broadly, the parties are relinquishing a

responsibility to shape the political socialization of these groups. Their focus on voting trends also turns a blind eye to nonvoting forms of political activity. Involvement in those sorts of activities can serve as a mechanism for political socialization and engagement, both for noncitizens, who cannot vote, and for newer citizens, who may hesitate to turn out to vote. These activities rarely have direct electoral outcomes, but they can form the bedrock for actions that will have those outcomes. Significantly, nonvoting activities can be organized and led by groups that have only tenuous connections (or no connection whatsoever) to American political parties.

*The Nature of Democracy & the Role of Institutions
in Immigrant Political Participation*

The number of immigrants living in the United States today is not the only reason that we must pay attention to immigrant political participation. Political theorists since Alexis de Tocqueville have claimed that involvement in civic life provides the foundation for a strong democracy. Carole Pateman (1970), among others, asserts that civic engagement fosters the skills and attitudes necessary for the democratic process and facilitates the acceptance of collective decisions. Participation in politics in particular is the mechanism by which citizens influence their government. Through participation, citizens communicate their needs, interests, and preferences; participation can take many forms in addition to voting, including protesting, marching, signing petitions, or working for change in community groups (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). In addition, even when it is not explicitly political, civic engagement helps people to communicate and organize more effectively, which can further strengthen democracy (Pateman 1970).

Numerous political scientists have recognized the importance of institutions for participatory democracy. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady note that “social institutions play a major role in stimulating citizens to take part in politics by cultivating psychological engagement in politics and by serving as the locus of recruitment to activity” (1995, 6). In his case study of the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas, Mark Warren demonstrates that the organization fosters social connections and engagement in existing community institutions—that is, churches—to create an important link between community members liv-

ing in poor areas and the larger political system. He argues that “the foundation for people’s development as members of society and as democratic citizens lies in local communities.” In particular, “It is the institutions of local community life, schools, churches, and less formal interactions that integrate people into democratic society” (2001, 22).

Robert Putnam’s social-capital perspective on civic engagement also emphasizes the importance of institutions. Social capital consists of “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000, 19). The forging of these connections can lead to greater economic mobility and even greater health and happiness. In large part, these social networks are fostered in civic institutions, which have many benefits for a democracy. They help individuals to make collective demands on government by providing a place for the generation and exchange of information and ideas. “When people associate in neighborhood groups, PTAs, political parties or even national advocacy groups, their individual and otherwise quiet voices multiple and are amplified” (338). Civic institutions reinforce democratic habits by giving individuals an opportunity to learn to run meetings, speak in public, organize projects, and debate public issues (339). Community organizations constitute places where immigrants can build democratic skills.

Robert Dahl (1998) suggests that democracy rests on the assumption that people are equally represented, and that assumption is also implicit in Putnam’s vision of a stable, healthy democracy. No person or group should be treated as intrinsically privileged vis-à-vis other people or groups, and there should be parity in participation and representation (Dahl 1998).⁸ In reality, lack of parity in participation rates characterizes the country’s various groups. Immigrants, especially those from Asia and Latin America, often find themselves on the periphery of the American political system, especially in terms of political participation (Ramakrishan 2005).

Challenges for Improving Immigrant Political Participation

Understanding what shapes patterns of civic engagement and political mobilization among immigrants is the first step toward addressing the disparity in participation and representation (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1999, 429). Over the past two decades, observers and scholars

have tried to identify exactly why Latinos and Asian Americans are not more involved in the American political system.⁹ Some scholarly and popular press accounts point to political apathy or cultural barriers that discourage political participation among immigrants (Skerry 1993; Fletcher 2000). Others attribute low levels of immigrant political engagement in the United States to plans to “return to the old country” and a focus on the politics of the homeland (Barone 2001, 180–81; Huntington 2004, 269, 276–91). Many studies have shown that lack of citizenship and failure to meet voter-registration requirements generally represent the biggest barriers to participation, at least in terms of voting.¹⁰ Individual-level variables, such as lack of socioeconomic resources, not being of voting age, and a language barrier, also contribute to low levels of political participation for Latinos (Pachon 1998; Cho 1999; Citrin and Highton 2002) and, to a lesser degree, Asian Americans (Cho 1999; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004).

These researchers, however, have paid less attention to the institutional sources of mobilization, especially for Asian Americans and Latinos (see, however, Leighley 2001; Lien 2001). This book remedies that shortcoming by examining mobilization strategies within the institutional context of civic engagement not only to explain the relative absence of political involvement in those two groups but also to suggest ways for those institutions to take a more active role in bringing them into the political system. Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen (1993) observe that people are not mobilized equally across the population. One reason the authors cite is that political-party leaders strategically target those people on whom they can count as allies, those who are socially well positioned and influential, and those who are the most likely to respond to mobilization (31). In the United States, mobilization patterns are also linked to race. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady find that whites are much more likely to report being recruited into politics than either blacks or Latinos (1995, 151). In the most comprehensive study of mobilization and race to date, Jan Leighley (2001) finds wide disparities between whites and minorities (blacks and Latinos) in terms of general levels of mobilization. However, she also finds that the gaps depend on type of mobilization. Gaps are widest for “particularized mobilization,” described as requests from candidates, parties, or groups for individuals to become involved in specific political activities such as voting, campaigning, or participating in local

politics (102). Gaps in mobilization shrink when one considers more general requests to participate, which occur in the workplace, at church, or through voluntary associations (103).

Mobilization entails an effort by individuals or groups of individuals to bring people into the political system through encouragement, incentives, and the provision of opportunities to participate in politics (see also Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). In this book, I distinguish between three types of mobilization: mass, selective, and limited.

Mass mobilization is the recruitment and organization of a large number of people to participate in political action. A mass mobilization does not necessarily have to be effective, and it can occur to force change or to maintain the status quo, but it must involve assembling and organizing a mass of people for a specific action.

Selective mobilization is the strategic targeting of recruitment efforts to expend the least effort to achieve the greatest effect. Political party leaders often engage in selective recruitment during an election campaign, targeting the individuals who are the most likely voters (such as those with substantial socioeconomic resources) and who are likely to mobilize others (especially those centrally placed in social networks) (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Historically, parties have engaged in the mass mobilization of immigrants. Today, however, selective mobilization has left many immigrants on the periphery of the political system.

Community organizations, focused on social service, advocacy, or other missions, generally lack the resources to engage in mass political mobilization. Instead, they rely on *limited mobilization*, which involves the recruitment of limited numbers to take part in political action, often relating to a specific issue or concern. By engaging in limited mobilization, community organizations can lay the foundation for mass mobilization in immigrant communities by recruiting some members of those communities to take part in U.S. politics and by imparting critical organizing and communication skills to those immigrants. Because of their long-standing local presence in immigrant communities, community organizations may eventually serve as the institutions from which mass mobilization efforts can be launched in those communities. For mass mobilization efforts to be effective, they may need to be connected to trusted community institutions. Trust can be built through community organizations' current efforts to engage in limited mobilization.

Meeting the Challenges of Mobilizing Contemporary Immigrants

The research I conducted in 1999 and 2000 indicates that political parties are not giving priority to the political mobilization of Asian American and Latino immigrants. Instead, labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions are engaging in political organizing efforts. These activities offer a window onto the mechanisms and potential for the future incorporation of immigrants into the American political system. This book will point to how civic institutions could do more in terms of fulfilling the democratic promise of full participation by focusing on the limitations and strengths of those institutions for mobilizing immigrants to participate in the political system.

The growing numbers of immigrants to the United States present challenges to American civic institutions. Many conservatives in particular are concerned that contemporary immigrants are preoccupied with economic advancement to the detriment of their civic and cultural engagement (Geyer 1996). Fears that immigrant political apathy or resistance to assimilation will erode the country's civic culture are one element underlying the calls for stricter limits on immigration.

These fears about immigrant apathy and resistance to assimilation neglect the role that immigrants could play in our democratic society were they to become engaged members of the American polity. This possibility unfolds on four key axes: (1) an intensified role for community organizations as agents of political mobilization; (2) the appearance of unanticipated types of participation and processes of mobilization; (3) the role of time in immigrants' political participation and the imperative for mainstream political parties to embrace long-term mobilization strategies to encourage and accelerate immigrant political participation; and (4) an acknowledgment that immigrant involvement in ethnic-based organizations or in homeland politics does not necessarily preclude—or even diminish—immigrant civic involvement in the United States.

Axis I: Community Organizations as Mobilizing Agents

Local party organizations—the institutions critical to the mobilization of earlier waves of European immigrants—no longer mobilize newcomers in a consistent or committed fashion. In contrast, as in the past, organi-

zations that engage in community-based work continue to mobilize immigrants despite limitations related to lack of resources and to a focus on providing social services rather than on developing political activities (Skerry 1993; Sterne 2001; A. Lin forthcoming). For example, in Los Angeles, the Chinatown Service Center offers classes in English as a second language and in citizenship, and the Day Laborers Project at the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights Los Angeles brings together immigrant workers at soccer games to inform them about their rights as workers and helps them to organize collectively around wage issues.

Like the general population, many immigrants who join community organizations are among the most socioeconomically advantaged within their communities. Surprisingly, however, organizations also mobilize those individuals who traditional theories of political participation, especially socioeconomic theories, contend are the least likely to participate: those who have few resources, who do not speak English, and who are not citizens. The ability of organizations outside the mainstream party system to politically mobilize some of the least privileged segments of the immigrant community—day laborers, garment workers, and undocumented immigrants—indicates the potential generally to mobilize the immigrant community. This compels us to revisit theories of political participation that make assumptions about who is and who is not likely to participate in the American political system.

Which features of community organizations make them successful in mobilizing immigrants? Ethnic voluntary associations, advocacy and social service organizations, and even religious institutions are often led and staffed by individuals with strong familial or other ties to the immigrant community they serve. That background endows these people with expertise and understanding about those groups, thereby facilitating mobilization around shared interests and identities. Community groups organize immigrants by recognizing the complexity and multiple aspects of immigrant identity and by being sensitive to the unique histories, traditions, language, and policy needs of local immigrant communities. Studying these organizations provides a powerful lens through which to observe how institutional strategies and behaviors encourage greater mobilization among immigrants generally and helps us to understand the limits to mobilizing immigrants on a mass scale.

Axis 2: Unanticipated Processes of Political Mobilization

Nonparty community organizations' activities may also lead to the development of unanticipated processes of political mobilization among Asian American and Latino immigrants. Those processes could differ in important ways from what European immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries experienced. For example, whereas political parties are credited with bringing European immigrants into American electoral politics, the contemporary institutional dynamic is likely to provide multiple channels of political socialization in a broad range of electoral and non-electoral activities. In addition, mobilization by parties is likely to lead to organization around a party platform or comprehensive agenda, but mobilization led by labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions is likely to be driven by issue-specific and issue-oriented mobilization strategies. In addition, contemporary community organizations, perhaps to an even greater degree than in the past (Skocpol 1999b), allow for the retention of ethnic and racial identity and its strong role in organizing. Thus, developing a fuller understanding of political mobilization requires that more careful attention be paid to all these processes.

Critics argue that ethnic-based organizations can be divisive and lead to ethnic balkanization because they promote ethnic identity to the detriment of a common American identity (Skerry 1993; Huntington 2004). Although certain organizations mobilize immigrants around shared racial and ethnic identities, most do not do so at the expense of recognizing other types of identities. Immigrants possess multiple and intersecting identities, and immigrant community organizations mobilize around this array of identities, including identity as a worker or gender identity rather than just ethnic and racial identity. Given that some ethnic-based community organizations have forged multiethnic or multiracial alliances, the likelihood that political mobilization by these organizations will provoke ethnic divisions is also minimal.

Some authors who have studied immigrants' participation have relied heavily on aggregate demographic data (censuses, exit polls), which are restricted to an important but narrow form of political behavior: voting (Mollenkopf, Olson, and Ross 2001; Fraga and Ramirez 2003). "Because casting a ballot is, by far, the most common act of citizenship in any democracy . . . political scientists appropriately devote a great deal of

attention to the vote” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 23). However, like those scholars who claim that political participation encompasses more than just participation in electoral politics (Verba and Nie 1972; J. Scott 1985; Kelley 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Marable 1984), I have defined political participation more broadly, as an “activity that is intended to or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 9).

Thus, it is important to pay attention to those activities that are aimed not directly at the formal government but indirectly at those who are perceived to influence or control the distribution of resources and services. For example, to win wider support, a group might organize a protest to draw media attention to a lack of good neighborhood schools rather than directly petitioning the government for increased school funding. Because many immigrants are not U.S. citizens and are therefore barred legally from voting, it is especially critical to consider their involvement in extraelectoral activities. Unlike voting, which is a quintessentially individual act, many extraelectoral activities are best undertaken through civic institutions, which organize around a sense of group membership or shared group interests (Putnam 2000). Immigrants’ political activities encompass both traditional electoral participation and such extraelectoral actions as protests, marches, and demonstrations.¹¹ Immigrants can and will participate in politics through a wide variety of activities, many of which take place in arenas other than the voting booth. Consequently, it is imperative to consider those institutions that mobilize different types of participation at both the grassroots and mass levels (Tate 1993; Harris 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Calhoun-Brown 1996).

*Axis 3: Political Acculturation over Time and
Long-Term Mobilization Strategies*

The passage of time, manifested as duration of residence in the United States, inevitably leads to greater immigrant participation in electoral and nonelectoral politics. Gradual acculturation into American life was as important for earlier European immigrants as it is for today’s arrivals. This holds true not only across generations but also within the first (foreign-born) generation.¹² Thus, the political participation of Asian American and Latino immigrants can be expected to increase with duration of stay and at a slow and steady rate over many years.

One reason that parties are ineffective in drawing immigrants into the

political system is that they are always preoccupied with the next immediate election and consequently usually employ very short-term strategies. This is significant because if political parties do not mobilize immigrants consistently and if other types of civic organizations face resource limitations that prevent them from mobilizing immigrants on a mass scale, long-term socialization may be the only mechanism that reliably will bring large numbers of immigrants into the American political system. Given that political participation for immigrants is time-dependent, American civic institutions ought to adopt longer-term mobilization strategies.

Axis 4: Involvement in Homeland Politics and Transnational Organizations

Some researchers have suggested that immigrants with strong ties to their countries of origin focus on their homeland politics almost exclusively and are thus less active in American politics (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Barone 2001). Increasing globalization tends to strengthen bonds to the homeland. Air travel and sophisticated yet increasingly accessible communications systems such as the Internet, e-mail, and cell phones facilitate the development and maintenance of transnational attachments. Contemporary immigrants' linkages to their countries of origin are both strong and varied. Many return home frequently, send money, build crossborder social networks and communities, and invest in projects and property in their former hometowns, all of which helps to construct hybrid or overlapping identities. And some immigrants remain politically active in their homelands. In an age marked by rapid globalization, attention must be paid to the transnational character of migration.

However, the assumption that a strong interest in or concern for the country of origin implies indifference toward U.S. political life should be challenged. The widespread belief that first-generation immigrants' concern with homeland issues precludes the possibility of their participation in U.S. politics is not supported empirically. Analysis of surveys and qualitative interviews suggests that transnational political activity is associated with greater political participation for some U.S. immigrants. Institutional strategies should recognize that in certain groups, those active in their homeland politics also tend to be the most politically active in their U.S. communities. This trend has implications for American civic institutions and their relationship to immigrant communities. In particular, rather than dismissing immigrants involved in politics related to their home

countries as being apathetic or disloyal to the American political system, civic institution leaders should consider transnational activists a potential source of participatory leadership in U.S. politics.

Studying Immigrant Mobilization

Many studies of immigrant political participation and mobilization have been based on case studies of a single racial or ethnic group, which makes generalization difficult (Jones-Correa 1998; Karpathakis 1999; Rogers 2000a). This book moves beyond that limitation by focusing on Asian Americans and Latinos, two groups for which political mobilization is a critical issue as a result of both their growing numbers and their historical exclusion from the political system. Chinese and Mexican immigrants, the two largest subgroups within those panethnic categories, receive special comparative attention based on interviews in the metropolitan gateway cities of New York and Los Angeles. Chinese and Mexican immigrants share many similar challenges in terms of language acquisition, naturalization, and minority-group status, but they also differ in the size of their U.S. populations, proximity to countries of origin, and average economic resources. Although no ethnic group is reducible to a single, monolithic identity (Benhabib 2002), the comparative focus on these two major groups has led to observations that may apply not only to immigrants but also to minorities and to voters generally.

Data gathered through both qualitative and quantitative methods helps to shed light on the role of American civic institutions in immigrant political mobilization. The majority of the qualitative data was collected during 1999 and 2000, primarily through in-depth interviews with leaders of immigrant community organizations and with immigrants from Chinese and Mexican communities in New York and Los Angeles. I also collected data through fieldwork that involved participant observation at immigrant community events, cataloging and coding printed materials from community organizations, and extensive note taking. In addition, I analyzed quantitative data from three surveys, including the 2000–2001 Pilot National Asian American Political Survey, the 1989–1990 Latino National Political Survey (see de la Garza et al. 1992), and the 1999 *Washington Post*/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University National Survey on Latinos in America. (For details on the study's methodology, see the appendix.)

Conclusion

Immigration, primarily from Asia and Latin America, has fundamentally transformed the American population. Scholars and popular commentators have observed that these immigrants participate in politics at lower rates than the general population and often attribute this phenomenon to political apathy or preoccupation with the homeland. Some individuals have voiced concern that lack of participation among immigrants will undermine American civil society. However, little research has investigated the role that American civic institutions play in mobilizing immigrants toward involvement in U.S. politics. The research on which this book is based supports the premise that the political mobilization of contemporary immigrants poses not a threat to the American polity but an opportunity for democratic revitalization.

How do American civic institutions—parties, labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions—react to the challenges and opportunities posed by new Americans from around the world? What types of American civic institutions provide pathways toward democratic participation for an increasingly diverse American populace? Which civic institutions are becoming less relevant in the face of massive demographic change? What strategies can civic institutions employ to better support immigrants' civic participation? The chapters that follow examine these questions. Although this book focuses on how American civic institutions respond to Chinese and Mexican immigrants in particular, it will also reveal how civic institutions could enhance their support of democratic participation by the American population as a whole.