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The Spring Marches of 2006

Latinos, Immigration, and Political Mobilization in the 21st Century

Adrian D. Pantoja
Pitzer College
Cecilia Menjívar
Lisa Magaña
Arizona State University

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In the spring of 2006, Congress considered new legislation—the so-called Sensenbrenner bill, named after Rep. James Sensenbrenner—that would in effect criminalize undocumented immigrants or make it a felony to be in the United States illegally and would add more miles of fencing along the Mexican–U.S. border. Immigrant advocacy networks across the United States mobilized to oppose the legislation. These networks called for the end of anti-immigrant legislation and for the implementation of another type of legalization policy, similar to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of the 1980s. In April 2006, political demonstrations ensued across the United States, in 39 states and in more than 140 cites, in what the organizers called a "national day of action for immigration justice" (http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/04/10/immigration/index.html). The protests were most visible in Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, Seattle, Phoenix, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and estimates of their size ranged between 200,000 in Phoenix to more than 1 million in Los Angeles, illustrating remarkable grassroots mobilization in a short period of time.

These unprecedented political demonstrations took many observers by surprise; the demonstrations represented much more than the hundreds of thousands of individuals in streets. These marches came to symbolize that immigrants could no longer be neatly separated from the rest and treated simply as the "other." Immigrants were now acting politically, just like "us." Although undocumented immigrants have inhabited legitimate spaces through practices that include working, paying taxes, attending to children, becoming part of community organizations and school boards, and sending remittances to their families back home (Coutin, 2000) and thus have

Authors' Note: We are indebted to the many reviewers who provided insightful feedback and to the *American Behavioral Scientist* for giving us the opportunity to present this collection. Please address correspondence to Adrian D. Pantoja, PhD, Pitzer College, 1050 N. Mills Ave., Claremont, CA 91711.

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already been part of "us," the marches cast new light on these immigrants. The marches rendered the immigrants visible to the U.S. public and pundits, and the presence, participation, and civil and political engagement of immigrants became central to immigration debates. The marches and the significant mobilization behind them served as a visible demonstration that immigrants and their supporters could muster political action and clout. Questions about what to do about the immigration "problem" had dominated debates until then. But as Ngai (2007) noted, the demonstrations shook up the immigrant question; through their participation in the marches, immigrants were now part of "us" and "we" could not decide on immigration policy without their participation.

Demonstrators from a variety of platforms were targeted to participate. While at work sites or at their homes, individuals were called to march. Immigration advocacy groups included members of churches, unions, student organizations, and other grassroots coalitions that galvanized demonstrators in both Spanish and English. Unions, such as the Service Employees International Union and the AFL-CIO, organized demonstrators as well. Indeed, the participation of a wide range of grassroots organizations and individuals from different walks of life made experts ponder the emergence of a "pan-Latino" identity through these marches (http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/04/10/immigration/index.html), an issue that Martinez discusses in depth in this issue. Common to cities around the country where demonstrations took place were the large numbers of students from high schools and universities who participated in the events. Debates ensued as to whether students should have missed school in order to participate. Some observers touted the events as great lessons in civics, whereas others maintained that education is the most important political resource and should not be wasted. Student demonstrators included U.S.-born Latinos as well as recent immigrants of Latin American origin who came to the country undocumented and are still uncertain of their future. In some cases, the students were the catalysts for adult family members to participate politically, an issue that Bloemraad and Trost as well as Getrich examine in this issue. Demonstrators also included non-Latino immigrants as well as members of other U.S. minorities who could see in the demonstrations efforts a link to civil rights mobilization.

Notably, religious groups were also important organizers. Religious leaders of different denominations participated either by mobilizing their own churches to participate in the marches or through ecumenical efforts to rally congregations to participate. In this regard, we note not only the active participation of the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, which have long histories of mobilizing politically for immigrants' rights (Espinosa, 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2006), but also that of Pentecostal denominations. Thus, religious congregations, including those previously thought to be "apolitical," not only provide immigrants with immediate assistance but may also offer them alternative avenues for political mobilization (Aponte & De La Torre, 2006).

The peaceful marches of 2006 served as an important reminder that immigration (and immigrants) and politics have been closely linked in U.S. history. It would be a

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mistake to think of the demonstrations as a spontaneous event in 2006 or even as a recent occurrence, as Cordero Guzman, Martin, Quiroz-Becerra, and Theodore note in their work in this issue. Although it is always essential to highlight traditional political involvement, such as electoral participation, partisan outreach, or the number of elected officials, it is also important to understand local participation in politics as distinct and no less critical. Irrespective of the factors that discourage political participation in more traditional outlets, many individuals engage in a wide range of participatory political activities. For instance, grassroots organizing efforts have resulted in improvements of labor conditions, attention to the environment, and betterment of educational institutions, to name a few. This also means that individuals are, in fact, highly politically active but their actions may not be fully assessed (Garcia, 2003) or recognized as such, particularly when their actions are examined through traditional frameworks. Thus, although much of the literature revolves around organizational and leadership roles, it is important to note the contributions of other types of politics. Among Latinos, nontraditional political participation research focuses on the organizing movements and political players in this group at the local level (Hardy-Fanta, 1993). These actions are characterized by groups or individuals prepared to demand action on a problem or issue, such as civil rights reform, racial equality, environmental racism, or gender equity, as a few noted examples demonstrate (Torres & Katsiaficas, 1999). Research on this type of activity illustrates significant political fervor among Latino groups (Pardo, 1998; Pulido, 1996).

The significance of the spring 2006 immigrant rights protests for scholars studying civic engagement is that most of the participants possessed a sociodemographic profile that would suggest political apathy or inactivity (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995). Related, there is a dearth of scholarly research on immigrant and youth civic engagement. Two of the articles in this issue address this absence in the literature by examining youth participation in the spring 2006 protests. Bloemraad and Trost draw on 40 in-depth multigenerational interviews of Mexican-origin families in Richmond and Oakland, California. The authors find that young participants brought the adults in their families to protest, an observation that runs contrary to theories of political socialization that focus on the influence adults have on their children. Among the youth, schools provided important sites for collective actions. Teachers, administrators, and fellow students provided not only political information but also encouragement on taking direct action to oppose the controversial bill H.R. 4437. Students drew on new technologies such as myspace.com and text messaging to disseminate information on the protest activities. Work and religious sites proved instrumental in mobilizing youth and immigrants alike. Bloemraad and Trost provide a new bidirectional mobilization framework for understanding family politicization.

In a similar vein, Getrich's study in this issue seeks to examine how second-generation Mexican youth in San Diego constructed a sense of belonging within American society and polity in light of the anti-immigrant attacks directed at

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members of their families and friends who have undocumented status. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 54 teens, Getrich finds that for them belonging was divided broadly between people who have papers and people who do not have papers. Hence, regardless of whether one was a native-born citizen, naturalized citizen, legal permanent resident, or some other legal status, those who had papers belonged and enjoyed a wide range of opportunities relative to those without papers. Yet many youngsters felt that those without papers should be included in the social body. For them, inclusion was based on geographic residence and contributions to American society and not on formal legal status. This sense of extending inclusion to noncitizen residents led these youth to participate in protest activities related to H.R. 4437. Similar to Bloemraad and Trost, Getrich finds that the teens drew on preexisting social networks such as family and organized for protest activities in the schools and on the Internet via myspace.com. In the end, their sense of empathy with undocumented immigrants and protests activities helped reaffirm a sense of ethnic identity as Mexicans regardless of citizenship status.

This theme of ethnic solidarity is taken up in Martinez's study as well. Her work, based on 55 in-depth interviews with Latino and non-Latino elites throughout Colorado, finds that a sense of shared fate among Latinos emerged in the wake of the spring protests as many Latinos found themselves either directly or indirectly targeted by anti-immigrants and anti-Latino sentiments. This sense of ethnic solidarity is also a consequence of Latino elite efforts seeking to frame the immigration debate in a manner that appealed to native-born Latinos. In this vein, political elites were able to overcome long-standing tensions between native-born Mexicans (Chicanos) and foreign-born Latinos and immigrant Latinos. Thus, native-born Latinos became part of a larger social movement for immigrant rights in Colorado. An important contribution of Martinez's work is that it extends research on African American sociopolitical identities to Latinos and finds that ethnic solidarity among a historically heterogeneous population can serve as a powerful vehicle for political mobilization.

The central issue of identity is again taken up in the Summers Sandoval piece. He notes that national symbolic identities play an important role in political mobilization. This author uses a Chicano/Latino and cultural studies framework to analyze the symbolic construction of the illegal immigrant as a disobedient body whose movement and presence in the United States are popularly equated with criminality—disobedience of the law. Such popular frames have enabled the public and political elites to view the illegal immigrant as a person who consciously chooses to break the law rather than situate the illegal immigrant into a broader context that considers global socioeconomic and political forces that often dislocate individuals from their communities. Thus, punitive laws designed to punish the lawbreaker become popular. Summers Sandoval contends that participants in the immigrant rights protests, many of whom were undocumented, used symbolic politics to subvert this dominant narrative, or reclaimed disobedience, by presenting an alternative frame, one that stressed their humanity. Many protesters held placards with statements such as "I am

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not illegal, I am human" or "No human being is illegal." It is difficult to assess the degree to which these actions changed popular discourse and perceptions of undocumented immigrants. However, future research is likely to reveal in greater detail the short-term and long-term consequences of these protests.

The fact that many Latino political leaders were surprised by the extent and size of the protests suggests that the protests were merely a spontaneous reaction to H.R. 4437. The article by Cordero-Guzman et al. counters this popular perception by arguing that the 2006 mobilizations for immigrant rights were an outgrowth of long-standing cooperative efforts and well-established institutional networks of immigrant-serving community-based organizations, social service providers, and advocacy groups. Using Chicago and New York City as case studies, these authors analyze data from a survey of 498 nonprofit organizations conducted prior to the demonstrations in 2006. Cordero-Guzman et al. note that because H.R. 4437 directly threatened immigrant rights advocacy and social service organizations, immigrant-serving organizations were at the center of the organizing efforts, working at all levels and providing resources for all organizing activities. Their study provides a unique look at how these organizations representing diverse communities formed coalitions and partnerships to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people to action in their respective cities. These authors conclude by observing, "Within days of the marches, organizers in both cities [Chicago and New York] began work to transform the energy of the protests into an enduring political base that can translate into electoral power." Similar efforts were undertaken in other cities, including Los Angeles, the location of the largest of the 2006 marches.

The extent to which these protests will have a long-term impact on Latino political empowerment remains an open question. Félix, González, and Ramírez take up this issue by exploring citizenship drives in Los Angeles that occurred after the spring 2006 marches. Drawing on earlier research that documented an increase in Latino naturalizations and political participation in California in the mid-1990s as a result of a hostile political climate in the form of Proposition 187 (Pantoja, Ramirez, & Segura, 2001), these authors seek to understand whether a similar phenomenon occurred in the wake of H.R. 4437 and the spring protests. Félix et al. report that Spanish-language radio DJs or *locutores* were instrumental in mobilizing large numbers of immigrants to the protest rallies. The National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO), in collaboration with a number of Spanish-speaking media outlets, civic organizations, and a well-known *locutor*, Eduardo Sotelo, also known as *El Piolín*, launched a series of well-publicized naturalization drives. The article by Félix, González, and Ramírez is based on data obtained from interviews with 138 respondents in two citizenship workshops that assisted more than 2,000 applicants for naturalization. More than 85% of the respondents became aware of the workshops through one of NALEO's media partners, a finding that highlights the important role that the Spanish-language media played in empowering Latino immigrants. Although only 16% of their respondents participated in the 2006 Los Angeles immigrant rights

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rallies, more than 70% expressed a desire to participate. One of the most noteworthy findings is that most of those seeking naturalization in this workshop became lawful permanent residents in the early 1990s. In other words, they were seeking U.S. citizenship after having been in the country 16 years. Typically, eligibility for naturalization occurs after 5 years of being a lawful permanent resident. In other words, the mass protests seemed to have mobilized Latino immigrants who had been in the country for a significant length of time rather than those who were most recently eligible. Whether this pattern is unique to Los Angeles is presently unknown. . What is clear is that the pro-immigrant demonstrations and anti-immigrant context helped to activate a new pool of potential Latino citizens and voters.

The works in this special issue illustrate how politically marginalized populations become politically active and their actions significant. Each of these works highlights the importance of social networks, technology, families, ethnic identities, Spanish-language media, churches, unions, advocacy groups, and other factors as vehicles for political mobilization and opposition to H.R. 4437. Protest politics became a necessary tool for opposition and may become an important stepping stone for further political action. In short, nontraditional politics are considered key dimensions of how politically marginalized groups can participate in the political arena, and such politics are a central resource for these groups (Magaña & Mejia, 2004).

Although many of the demonstrators in these marches carried signs with the words "Today we march, tomorrow we vote," it remains to be seen whether and how these demonstrations will influence political participation in more traditional politics such as voting. Future research will provide us with a better understanding of the short-term and long-term consequences of the marches on immigrant and youth political behavior. Our efforts here are to highlight the first wave of scholarship researching this historic event. Much more work remains to be done. But we believe that our contributors have added significantly to our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the 2006 protests.

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Adrian D. Pantoja is an associate professor of political studies and Chicano studies at Pitzer College, a member of the Claremont Colleges. Professor Pantoja's research revolves around the Latino population, immigration, public opinion, and voter behavior. His research has appeared in a number of refereed journals, including *Political Research Quarterly*, *Political Behavior*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *International Migration*, and the *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*. He has contributed chapters for several edited volumes, most recently "Politics y la Iglesia: Attitudes Toward The Role of Religion in Politics Among Latino Catholics" in *Catholics and Politics, The Dynamic Tension Between Faith and Power* (2008 Georgetown); "Puerto Rican Exceptionalism? A Comparative Analysis of Puerto Rican, Mexican, Salvadoran, and Dominican Transnational Civic and Political Ties" in *Latino Politics, Identity, Mobilization and Representation* (2007 Virginia); and "Descriptive Representation, Political Alienation and Political Trust: The Case of Latinos in Connecticut" in *Latinos in New England* (2006 Temple). He received his PhD in political science from the Claremont Graduate University.

Cecilia Menjívar is Cowden distinguished professor of sociology in the School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on the social processes at the intersection of macro structural forces and the micro processes of daily life. She has conducted research on social networks, gender relations, family dynamics, and religious communities both in Latin America and in the United States, primarily among Central American immigrants. Her publications include *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (University of California Press, 2000); *Through the Eyes of Women: Gender, Social Networks, Family and Structural Change in Latin America and the Caribbean* (edited) (De Sitter Publications, 2003); and *When States Kill: Latin America*, *the U.S. and Technologies of Terror*, coedited with Nestor Rodriguez (University of Texas Press, 2005). She received her PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Davis

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Lisa Magaña is an associate professor in the Department of Transborder Studies at Arizona State University. She has published in the area of immigration and Latino public policy issues, in publications such as *Harvard Hispanic Policy Journal*, *Journal of Policy Studies*, and *Journal of Social Psychology.* She is the author of *Straddling the Border* (University of Texas Press) and *The Politics of Diversity* (University of Arizona Press). Dr. Magaña has been a research associate at the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute and a visiting lecturer and assistant professor at Pitzer College, UCLA, and Williams College. She received her doctorate from the Center for Politics and Economics at Claremont Graduate University.

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