

EXCERPTED FROM

New
Immigrant Communities:
Finding a Place
in Local Politics

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ISBN: 978-1-58826-722-1 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

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This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

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Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, Polish immigrants arriving in Chicago or Italian immigrants arriving in Buffalo could turn to a dense network of mutual aid societies for help in establishing their families in a new and difficult environment. This network included local churches and local representatives of political parties. The party organizations “presented themselves to the immigrants in immediate, personal terms. The bosses were gregarious human beings whose power was based on personal relations with people around them . . . [the boss] frequently helped the people out in times of need . . . [and] asked only for a vote on election day” (Kantowicz 1975, 41).

But in the early part of the twenty-first century, a Mexican American community leader in Los Angeles stated that if you stopped someone on the street and asked them to direct you to the local office of the Democratic Party, they would “look at you with bewilderment: ‘What is this crazy guy talking about?’” (Wong 2006, 51). Nevertheless, community organizations play an important role in easing immigrants’ struggles in a new place today, just as they did a century ago. These organizations, however, have a more distant relationship with political parties than their early twentieth-century counterparts, and often a closer relationship with local, state, and federal governments. I am concerned about the implications of these changes for the ways that immigrants to the United States acquire the attributes they need to become full participants in the US political system: knowledge and understanding of the explicit and implicit rules for political involvement, an understanding of their rights, the motivation to participate, and the political skills to do so.

In 2004, when this study was begun, the Census Bureau estimated that the United States was home to about thirty-one million foreign-born adults over the age of eighteen.¹ The majority of these are noncitizens, none of whom can vote except in local elections in a few places² and many of whom are reluctant to participate in almost any sort of political activity for fear of drawing the attention of federal agencies, a particular danger in the post-9/11 world. Imagine placing these denizens on a continuum from undocumented, short-term, or circular immigrants at one extreme to long-naturalized citizens at the other end. There may be disagreement about where to draw the line, but most Americans would agree that our political system is benefited if the people toward the latter end of this continuum are full participants in US political and civic life. Conversely, the political system's stability and its very democratic values are threatened if high rates of immigration produce large numbers of nonparticipating, unrepresented, disengaged residents.

New arrivals to the United States settle in places with varied political and social characteristics. This book is concerned with how immigrants move toward a situation where they have a "place at the table" in local politics; that is, their organizations and their leaders are consulted, their members are seen as valuable constituents, and their interests are seen as part of the political calculus. Traditionally, immigrants to the United States have concentrated in a relatively small number of gateway cities, and much of the research on political incorporation of immigrants, historical and contemporary, has focused on these cities. Though the traditional gateway cities are still popular destinations for immigrants to the United States, newcomers are also settling in states and cities that have experienced little recent immigration. This exploratory research examines the following midsized cities: Chico, California; Fort Collins, Colorado; Lansing, Michigan; Spokane, Washington; Syracuse, New York; and Waco, Texas. I draw primarily on the results of interviews conducted in each city with elected officials and people who managed their campaigns; political party leaders; and directors and staff members of organizations that provided services to immigrant groups, advocated for immigrant rights, or were otherwise relevant to understanding the position of immigrant groups in that city.

This book has four primary goals. First, I hope to connect my research to the substantial new research being produced on the political behavior and political incorporation of immigrants. As well, I hope to help develop an argument that focuses on incorporation as a

process involving groups and organizations that takes place in particular political contexts, as an important supplement to approaches that focus primarily on individual attitudes and behaviors.

Second, given that midsize cities are immigrant destinations as well as the larger metropolitan areas that are more typical research sites, this study serves a descriptive function: it attempts to provide a basic sense of the immigrant experience with civic and political life in these six cities. The information gathered with regard to each city is broad, nonexhaustive, and oriented toward constructing a general overview, rather than a systematic and detailed picture, of immigrant groups' situations.

Third, the book tries to answer the question that motivated me to undertake the research in the first place: to what extent have nonparty organizations replaced parties as the primary institutional political socializers of immigrants, and what are the implications of this change?

Fourth and most important, though this study is not designed to rigorously test hypotheses, I do attempt to make comparisons among the cities as to the progress and success of immigrant incorporation, and to suggest attributes of both the context and the immigrant groups that might account for variation in political incorporation. Some of the aspects of place that may differentially shape immigrant incorporation include the political and geographical isolation of the city, the historical existence of a significant refugee stream among the city's immigrants,³ and the types and strengths of the connections among immigrant-related organizations and among these organizations and other civic and political organizations in the community. My research suggests that the fundamental step of naturalization is facilitated by community organizational capacity that is sometimes based partially on organizational spillover from refugee programs. The next step of group representation in decisionmaking seems to be related to the strength of the connections between immigrant groups and the larger community, particularly in the form of political allies and supportive organizations.

Notes

1. US Census Bureau, *Foreign-Born Population of the United States, Current Population Survey—March 2004, Detailed Tables (PPL-176)*.

2. In parts of Maryland, including Tacoma Park, noncitizen residents can vote in local elections. Legislatures in San Francisco and Washington DC are considering similar measures. In New York City, parents with children in the

public schools were able to vote in school board elections before 2004. Information about the immigrant voting rights movement can be found at the Migration Information Source, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=265>. See also Hayduk 2004 for a comprehensive discussion of immigrant voting rights.

3. A refugee is a person who has been forced from his or her home, crossed an international border for safety, and has well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. The US State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration helps refugees settle in the United States through agreements with local nonprofit agencies. Other immigrants may enter the United States legally using work visas or for family reunification visas; still others enter without documents, or overstay their visas. Refugee policy is discussed further in Chapter 7.