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⇒ The Binational Civic and Political Engagement of Mexican Migrant Hometown Associations and Federations in the United States

Introduction

This article focuses on the history and current situation of Mexican hometown associations (HTAs) in the United States with a special emphasis on Chicago-based Mexican hometown associations and federations. It presents empirical evidence of new forms of binational engagement among Mexican migrant communities in the United States leading to the creation of a Mexican migrant civil society.

Mexican hometown associations and federations in the United States have attracted considerable attention in the last decade, mainly for their potential as agents of social change in their communities of origin. However, the phenomenon of hometown associations is not confined to the United States. In fact, both at the historical and contemporary levels, we know that hometown associations and similar types of voluntary migrant associations have existed in all types of receiving societies. The recent work of historian José Moya provides an illuminating account of the many hometown associations that European, African, Middle-Eastern, and Asian immigrants created in South America, the Caribbean, and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Moya 2005: 847-850).

Grassroots organizations of Mexican migrants have proliferated since the early 1980s in the United States, especially in metropolitan Los Angeles and Chicago. Recently, these organizations have also become more visible in less urban areas such as the San Joaquin Valley in California and in smaller communities in the Midwest and the South that have become new destinations of Mexican migration. Although migrants from different regions in Mexico have forged several kinds of organizations—including committees, fronts, and coalitions—by the end of the 1990s hometown associations and home state federations had become the most prevalent grouping of Mexican migrants (Escala Rabadán/Bada/Rivera-Salgado 2007).

In contrast to the relative informality and political isolation that characterized them in the mid-1990s, these associations have consolidated their structures. Their philan-

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thropic activities have also changed. Their initial infrastructure projects were infrequent and haphazardly organized; today cross-border fund-raising and investments in home community infrastructure have grown in scale and become much more formalized and systematic. Increased visibility has led to recognition in public and political spheres, encouraging dialogue with federal, state and municipal governments in Mexico.

Between 1998-2006, the total number of HTAs registered nationwide almost doubled, with an increase from 441 to 815 organizations. Although the data is incomplete, there is a clear pattern of growth in the numbers of HTAs and their expanding presence in parts of the United States beyond traditional migrant destinations. This organizational form has expanded to include Mexican migrants from 28 Mexican states with associations established in 35 states in the U.S. (Secretaría de Desarrollo Social 2006). In 2003, 80 percent of these associations were concentrated in California and Illinois, a figure consistent with the current clustering of the Mexican migrant population.

Mexican Hometown Associations in Historical Perspective

While it is true that Mexican hometown associations were originally formed in the second half of the twentieth century in the U.S., they arrived to occupy the space left by the Mexican mutual-aid societies of the early twentieth century, which were contemporary to the voluntary associations of European immigrants. For instance, the Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe founded *landmanshaftn* according to their towns of origin, first to provide for synagogues and then for mutual aid and cemetery rights in New York and Chicago (Cohen 1990: 69). By 1920, the Jewish community had consolidated a network of 3,000 associations and almost half a million members (Soyer 1997).

Italian immigrants also organized in urban America. They first created small fraternal societies for mutual help. Between 1910 and 1920, the Italians had 160 benefit groups in Chicago based mostly on village and regional associations (Bodnar 1985: 123). The Italians organized around the spirit of *campanilismo*, or loyalty to their communities of origin. In many cases, European immigrants transplanted organizations from the old world and adapted them to their new lives. This fact should be emphasized because it was not until the 1970s that scholars recognized the pre-migratory organizational traits of immigrants to the U.S. Thanks to the strong admiration of Alexis de Tocqueville for the associational vigor of U.S. society, it was believed for a long time that migrants lacked the necessary attributes that would lead to philanthropic activities and that assimilation to American society planted the seed for the creation of immigrant-led voluntary associations (Moya 2005: 836). The fact that voluntary associations were very common in many sending countries and the evidence of pre-migratory organizational activities of some immigrant groups offers a better perspective from which to understand the origins of migrant-led voluntary associations. However, the persistence or disappearance of these organizations over time might be connected to differences in the context of their reception which could have encouraged or discouraged the vitality and survival of migrant associations over time.

The case of Mexican migrant organizations in the early twentieth century was similar to that of their European counterparts. Mexicans also formed civil associations in different urban cities to preserve their national identity and to offer mutual support in case of sickness, economic crisis, or labor problems. Their mutual-aid, benefit, and fraternal

societies were quite successful in the Midwest, Texas, and California. During the 1930s, for instance, Mexicans in Los Angeles actively participated in protecting the human rights of Mexicans who had been repatriated. To that end, they used the structure of the Confederation of Mexican Societies, a coalition of several associations with diverse binational agendas. Among their most important activities, these organizations dealt with issues regarding the educational improvement of the second generation, the creation of Mexican labor unions affiliated to the American Federation of Labor, and the development of a Mexican lobby group to participate in immigration policy debates between Mexico and the United States.¹

In the state of Texas during the 1930s, there were 22 Mexican Blue Cross brigades led by women, a Mexican Benefit Committee to help the repatriated, and the mutual-aid society *Círculo de Conductores y Obreros* in El Paso, among other organizations.² In the Midwest, the *Círculo de Obreros Católicos San José* was one of the pioneer Mexican organizations of the 1920s. This organization had migrants from the states of Jalisco and Guanajuato in East Chicago, Indiana. Later, many other organizations were created, such as the Benito Juárez, Cuauhtémoc, José María Morelos, and Ignacio Zaragoza mutual-aid societies. The membership lists of the Cuauhtémoc Society between 1930 and 1949 reveal the great diversity of the Mexican community. This society kept a membership of 658 regular members from 17 different Mexican states. Not surprisingly, an important share of the membership came from two traditional sending states, Guanajuato and Michoacán. Those two states provided 18 and 17 percent of the total membership respectively. Other highly represented states were Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Nuevo León, Jalisco, and Durango.

This diversity may have prevented the formation of hometown associations because there were not enough people from the same town, municipality or geographical region to support the creation of a hometown association. For instance, the people from the state of Michoacán who registered in the Cuauhtémoc Society came from 50 different cities that were sometimes a hundred kilometers apart within the home state. To add to the diversity of the early Mexican organizations, we know that they also admitted people from different nationalities such as Spanish, Anglo-Saxon Americans, and Polish, among others.³ In 1925, the *Confederación de Sociedades Mexicanas de los Estados Unidos de América* was founded to protect the legal rights of Mexican citizens in Chicago. This confederation was an umbrella organization of about 35 Mexican mutual-aid societies. All these associations functioned as self-help groups, offering support in times of economic hardship caused by unemployment, illness, injury, or burial expenses. They helped new migrants to adjust to the new environment, combat discrimination, and protect their members from the cultural and economic shock created by their uprooting (García 1996). Beyond health benefits and life insurance, these societies offered companionship through the lodge halls and special occasions such as picnics, dances, and patron-saint festivities. Between 1930 and 1960, the Mexican community in Chicago followed different paths of

¹ Historic Diplomatic Archive. Mexico City, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Consular Department, Protection Section, File IV/523 (73-27)/3.

² Historic Diplomatic Archive. Mexico City, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Philanthropic Mexican Societies File, IV/523 (73-11)/4.

³ Calumet Regional Archives, *Richard Santillán Midwest Latino Collection*, CRA 136, Membership Applications, Cuauhtémoc Society, folders 5-9.

organization, creating diverse associations that catered to the needs of the first and second generations of immigrants (Fernández 2005; Innis-Jiménez 2005).

During and after the Depression years, many of these associations disappeared as a consequence of massive deportations of Mexican migrants and other organizational problems. However, formal Mexican hometown associations appeared by the late 1960s, when the contemporary (post-1965) wave of Mexican migrants started to settle in Chicago and the metropolitan area. These new migrant voluntary associations were organized according to their village or town of origin, thus recasting their topophilic identities along with their national allegiance. Some organizations had their origins in successful sports clubs or religious associations (Badillo 2001; Pescador 2004).

Thanks to the amnesty granted by IRCA in 1986, thousands of Mexican migrants living in the Chicago metropolitan area were able to legalize their status and could travel more easily between Mexico and the United States. They returned to their communities of origin more frequently and gradually became aware of the sheer economic disparities that many rural towns were facing due to economic restructuring. Each return trip to the U.S meant facing the shocking reality that many of the comforts of modernity such as running water and electricity that they enjoyed on a daily basis were lacking in many of their communities. Many migrants still had family members living in Mexico and wanted to do something to improve those conditions. This is how many clubs started to gather on a weekly basis, to share a friendly soccer match, some home-made ethnic food, and to chat about their towns' most pressing needs. Telephone connections were available in many Mexican rural towns by the mid-eighties and information about collective needs spread faster. This and other technological advances, such as cheaper air transportation, fax machines, the internet, and handheld video cameras helped to coordinate infrastructure development plans between physically absent financial sponsors and local collective remittance beneficiaries (Bada 2003).

As other migrant self-help groups have done in the past century, many hometown associations function as social networks, as well as transmitters of culture and values to the American-born generation. At later stages of development, these grassroots organizations created federations to increase their leverage with their home governments and became involved in collective development projects for their communities of origin, as well as in advocacy concerning political and social issues in their U.S. communities. Although Mexican HTAs have the longest history and are the best known, an increasing number of Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Haitian, and Salvadoran hometown associations have appeared since the 1980s and are actively participating in the improvement of their communities of origin and residence (Levitt 2001; Orozco 2000; Pierre-Louis 2006; Portes/Escobar/Radford 2006; Waldinger/Popkin/Aquiles Magana 2006).

The Journey from the National to the Binational Arena: Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicago

In the beginning, Mexican hometown associations had a clear agenda in mind: they wanted to help their communities of origin to obtain basic services such as water, roads, electricity, and school renovations. They also cared about the beautification of their towns as they embarked on the construction and renovation of kiosks, squares, and

churches. Later, they came to demand more and better services from their state governments, such as help with the repatriation of corpses, localization of family relatives in the U.S., and better treatment during holiday visits. After obtaining some positive responses from the state governments, they slowly developed more sophisticated agendas, such as the implementation of state public policies to deter migration and the restitution of their political rights, both at federal and state levels.

With the track record acquired in their negotiations with municipal and state government to obtain funds for community development, the leaders became more and more interested in the issues affecting their municipalities and some even decided to return and run for political positions in mayoral elections. Others decided to stay active in the United States, which led them to participate more in local issues, such as demanding quality education for their kids and neighborhood safety, as well as getting more involved with unions, churches, and other types of migrant-led organizations. The last decade has seen the emergence of hometown association members and leaders who are increasingly embedded in a developing migrant civil society. It is now common to observe that the membership of hometown associations has multiple and simultaneous affiliations: they are members of Mexican political parties, local school boards, and labor unions. These multiple memberships have allowed them to exercise a binational activism, engaging in the protection of human rights in the U.S. combined with a concern about the effects that economic globalization and neo-liberal strategies have on their communities of origin. Therefore, although the stereotype of migrant organizations only being active in Mexico may have been true in the past, it no longer holds today.

Within the last decade, Mexican hometown associations have been very active in California, Illinois, and Texas. It is in those states that HTAs are most heavily concentrated because the largest clusters of Mexican migrants are still in urban cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. Moreover, the strategic location of international airports, better public transportation, and the existence of community-based organizations and foundations interested in collaborating with migrant-led coalitions have also contributed to the expansion of these organizations. Chicago is a good case study for observing the transformation of Mexican hometown associations. In the next section I will focus on the development of hometown associations in the Chicago metropolitan area at different levels, emphasizing the case of the Federation of Michoacano Clubs in Illinois and the Confederation of Mexican Federations in the Midwest, since these cases are good illustrations of the binational transformation of these migrant-led organizations.

In 1995, the Mexican consulate in Chicago recorded 35 Mexican HTAs in the metropolitan area. By that time, there were already 6,000 Mexican soccer leagues across the United States supported by the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (Thelen 1999). By June of 2006, the Mexican consulate listed 285 HTAs in its database, representing 16 states of origin and the Federal District. These associations are organized into 17 federations and one Confederation of Mexican Federations. The numbers of Mexican HTAs continue to swell and it is estimated that in 2006 there were 815 Mexican hometown associations registered in 46 Mexican consulates.⁴ The vast majority of the leaders

⁴ Gordon (2005); Vázquez Mota (2005); SEDESOL (2006); and "Mexico: HTAs, Fertility, Labor," in: *Migration News*, 13 (2006), 4 = <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=3224_0_2_0> (02.11.2006).

and board members of these associations are naturalized citizens or legal permanent residents.

The last decade has witnessed a vigorous development of these migrant-led associations. In contrast, membership in many conventional U.S. voluntary associations has simultaneously declined by roughly 25 to 50 percent since the 1970s (Putnam 2000). In an era where the Elks fraternal organizations, Red Cross, PTAs, Lions, and Kiwanis are facing difficulties keeping their rosters alive, the Mexican HTAs in Chicago are spreading across the Midwest with great vitality and high expectations for civic, political, and binational social action. In a recent survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, 4,000 Mexican migrants visiting several consulates to request a *matrícula consular* card were interviewed and 14% of them declared that they were members of HTAs (Suro 2005).

If we consider the sharp decline in civic participation structured around membership-based organizations, from labor unions to social clubs and political organizations, then the rate of participation of Mexicans in HTAs is an inspiring sign. According to a recent survey of Latinos in the Chicago Metropolitan area, it has been observed that civic engagement in the United States is positively correlated to remittance behavior for both first and second generation Latinos, which is also related to engagement in binational social action (Chun 2005).

Nevertheless, Elizabeth Theiss-Morse and John R. Hibbing have recently argued that civic participation in voluntary associations in the United States should not be directly associated with an increase in political participation because many voluntary groups consider political democracy to be messy, inefficient, and conflict-ridden. Members of these groups are quite homogeneous and tend to display a distaste for formal politics. The authors therefore argue that these associations have not usually been credited as promoters of public policy changes. Voluntary associations confine their concerns to practical fundraising projects that support non-controversial goals. The authors conclude that “voluntary groups perform wonderful services and have undeniable value to society, but their effect on democratic politics is tenuous and possibly negative” (Theiss-Morse/Hibbing 2005: 244).

While this argument could hold for many voluntary associations concerned exclusively with national issues, it does not hold that well for binational organizations. The case of Mexican hometown associations and their successful attempts at creating public policy initiatives to address community development in their communities of origin offers evidence of their potential as agents of social change. Between 2001 and 2002, for instance, several hometown associations demanded an extension of the governmental matching fund program for migrants to the federal level, the so called “Programa 3 x 1 para migrantes”. Thanks to the successful lobbying efforts of several hometown federations, the program was officially federalized in 2002. Before that year, very few state governments had formally agreed to implement state-level programs involving federal, state, municipal, and collective remittance funds to address the development needs of many rural towns in high expulsion regions (Escala Rabadán/Bada/Rivera-Salgado 2007).

In the last decade, the activities of Mexican hometown associations and state federations in the Chicago area have diversified. While they continue to address development in Mexico, they are also increasingly participating in domestic issues. Their leaders have played key roles in local institutions such as labor unions, block clubs, Parent

Teacher Associations (PTAs), and the Illinois Office of New Americans Policy and Advocacy. Probably the most significant factor in this change is a new leadership more attuned to interests in the United States, which has promoted more active binational civic engagement.

Binational Civic and Political Participation of Hometown Associations from the State of Michoacán

Although HTAs from Chicago are a slightly more recent phenomenon—at least in their institutional consolidation—compared to their counterparts in Los Angeles, they have also succeeded in increasing their binational activities and visibility.⁵ To offer an idea of the road traveled in the last 10 years, I will focus on HTAs from the state of Michoacán, which are among the most successful in the Chicago metropolitan area. The Federation of Michoacano Clubs in Illinois is an example of leadership and civic participation on both sides of the border. These HTAs were established around the late 1960s and the first federation was formed more than three decades later. Throughout these years, the emerging Michoacano organizations were able to fight corruption and disinterested governments as a scattered force in their municipalities, demanding more attention and resources for their communities from local governments.

In the last two decades, Michoacano remittances and civic influence flew back and forth along the channels that run between the two countries. For example, migrants utilized the mass media to criticize their state government, both for its authoritarian politics and for forcing them to become exiles in search of jobs. The improvement in the communication channels between Michoacán and Chicago coincided with the political transition in Mexico, which opened the door to the first opposition government in the state of Michoacán in 2001. After more than two decades of hard work to get recognition, Michoacano migrants have been able to forge a strong network of more than 100 HTAs established mainly in California, Illinois, Nevada, Washington, and Texas (Reynoso Acosta 2005). Since the creation of the first Federation of 14 Michoacano HTAs in the metropolitan area of Chicago in 1997, the number of HTAs affiliated to this federation has doubled and there are now two federations in California and two in Illinois.

In 2004, during the state congressional mid-term elections, several current and former migrant candidates ran for seats in the state legislature. The Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) agreed to include Jesús Martínez Saldaña—a former professor at the California State University at Fresno—and Reveriano Orozco—a migrant representative from Nevada—in its proportional representation list. Mr. Martínez Saldaña won a seat in congress, with Mr. Orozco as his substitute, and now serves on the migrant affairs commission in the legislature. He is not a lonely migrant in the State Congress, however. There are at least seven former migrant legislators among his colleagues, who also obtained seats after returning to Michoacán to run their campaigns for different districts.

Besides supporting the inclusion of migrant candidates in the mid-term state elections, between 2001 and 2004 the government of the state of Michoacán made increasing

⁵ For a general profile of Mexican HTAs in Los Angeles, see Escala-Rabadán (2004).

efforts to extend its presence beyond its geographical borders in several domains, including health, education, and job training, especially in California and Illinois. Several government agencies are now offering services such as job training, government-sponsored migrant medical insurance (i.e., a medical treatment service for returning migrants), and distant-learning high school education for the Michoacano migrants.. Increasingly, more mayors are interested in visiting migrants from their communities in the United States to invite them to cooperate in infrastructure projects.

In 2004, in order to increase the presence of Michoacanos in the Midwest, the state government made a donation to the Federation of Illinois to buy a building for the Michoacanos to have a headquarters. The house is called *Casa Michoacán* and is located in Pilsen—one of the most important historical Mexican neighborhoods in the city of Chicago—and it offers a space to hometown clubs, grassroots organizations, and local university programs interested in binational issues. The building has a permanent staff member representing the General Coordinating Office for Michoacano Migrant Attention and offers some services to the community in Chicago. In recent years, the information flow between Michoacán and Chicago has improved, with better coverage from local newspapers. In the capital city of Morelia, at least three local newspapers publish special daily sections on migrant affairs. For instance, *La Voz de Michoacán* has *Al Otro Lado*, *La Voz de los Migrantes*. In Chicago, many Spanish language newspapers regularly report on the meetings of HTAs with Mexican government officials.

The Formation of the Confederation of Mexican Federations in the Midwest

The majority of HTAs and federations in Chicago have made great inroads in capacity building, extending their network both within and outside their traditional webs of relations. They have been able to transform their initial bonding social capital into network bridging. In 2003, many of the Mexican hometown federations created the Confederation of Mexican Federations in the Midwest (its acronym in Spanish is CONFEMEX), an umbrella organization representing 9 federations of Mexican migrants. CONFEMEX has a binational mission—to work with the Mexican immigrant community to achieve a more dignified life for immigrants and their families, both those in Chicago and the ones who remained in their places of origin. In the Chicago metropolitan area 179 HTAs belong to this confederation. CONFEMEX holds elections every two years and on April 2005 they elected a woman, Marcia Soto, a former President of *Durango Unido* to serve as President of the organization.

Women's participation in leadership positions in hometown associations and federations is still rare. This has to do with issues related to labor division combined with the patriarchal structure that still prevails in many communities of origin.⁶ However, migrant women have played important roles in the preservation of the informal extra-territorial communities and the sense of togetherness among people from the same communities. For instance, women have encouraged and organized spaces to foster conviviality, such

⁶ The majority of hometown associations have rural origins because social infrastructure needs are greater in the rural countryside than in urban localities.

as informal get-togethers on Sundays, Mother's Day, and pot-luck style parties with family and friends from the same town. These social encounters foster necessary spaces for dialogue and deliberation, which in turn lead to the establishment of more formal hometown associations that engage in the implementation of community development projects (Zamudio 2005). Sometimes women support their husbands when they participate as active members of hometown associations and commit time and energy during the fundraising events, taking care of the kids, preparing food, and devising selling strategies to maximize profits.

In 2004, CONFEMEX became one of the founding members of the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC), a network of 90 Latin American and Caribbean migrant-led organizations working to improve quality of life in their communities, both in the United States and in their countries of origin. Through this alliance, CONFEMEX has actively participated in domestic issues such as immigration reform, drivers' licenses bill SB67 (allowing migrants to obtain a driver's license in Illinois), consular identification card bill SB 1623 (which validates this document as an official form of identification in this state), education reform, day laborers' rights, civil rights, and economic development in Latin America.

In only three years of existence, CONFEMEX has been able to forge alliances with other organizations advocating for migrant labor rights. The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights recently granted them funds to participate in The New Americans Initiative, a three year outreach campaign sponsored by the Illinois government aimed at helping 348,000 legal permanent residents currently eligible to become citizens. CONFEMEX, through their network of 179 HTAs, mobilized their constituents to advertise citizenship literacy classes to help many residents overcome barriers and obstacles to obtaining citizenship.

In 2005 and 2006, some CONFEMEX members attended the annual conference of the Rainbow/Push Coalition and Citizenship Education Fund, thanks to the relationships that some members have established with African-American organizations, to discuss the ways in which immigration laws affect employment, citizenship, and human rights. In fact, the Latino Chapter of the Rainbow/Push Coalition in Chicago was established in the early 1980s and has tried to establish more permanent relations with the African American community. For instance, within the last decade, this chapter has actively worked on issues of bilingual education, trying to convince Black parents of the benefits of providing their children with a second language. Other issues that have attracted Black-Latino common platforms have been minority access to higher education, the fight against police brutality, and support for unity candidates for Police Commander Positions in some districts.

After Hurricane Katrina displaced thousands of undocumented migrants, NALACC immediately mobilized its network to demand a temporary protected status for all undocumented victims of the hurricane. In fact, CONFEMEX was among the first organizations advising the Mexican Secretary of Social Development regarding fundraising strategies to help Mexican victims of Katrina through activities organized in Chicago by Mexican HTAs. In 2005, one representative of CONFEMEX was invited by a non-governmental organization working on social development to visit El Salvador to advise local groups on strategies to improve the collective remittance infrastructure projects financed by Salvadoran migrants in the U.S.

Hometown Associations' Involvement in Mexican Elections and the Immigrant Rights Spring Movement of 2006

During the campaign to register Mexican voters to exercise their newly acquired right to participate in Mexican elections through absentee ballots in 2006, CONFEMEX registered 1,400 people in three days with support from the Massachusetts-based Solidago Foundation. The electoral participation of Mexicans in the metropolitan area of Chicago was quite important if we consider the many constraints faced in submitting an application to participate in the electoral process.⁷ The total number of registered voters in the counties of Cook, DuPage, Hill, Lake, McHenry, and Kane was 3,439, representing 10% of the total Mexican electorate registered in the United States. In the county of Los Angeles, the place with the highest concentration of Mexicans abroad, the response rate reached more than 5,000 voters representing 15% of the electorate living abroad (Instituto Federal Electoral 2006). Mexico experienced a very close and highly contested presidential election in 2006. Absentee ballot legislation will provide fertile ground upon which to observe the political will of the Nation-State to modify the law in order to make the voting process in the next presidential election easier for Mexicans living abroad.

One issue that united Mexican migrants with different political affiliations in the last decade was the demand for the right to vote absentee in Mexican presidential elections. Unfortunately, the legislation that granted Mexicans abroad the right to vote prevented political parties from campaigning abroad. Therefore, in the absence of official political campaigns, prospective voters in Chicago decided their party preferences thanks to the presence that Mexican political parties managed to establish in some cities. In Chicago, the former ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), organized a group called *Vanguardia Migrante* in 2003 to establish close contacts with both sympathizers and members living abroad. During the last decade, the PRD has offered support to several groups organized in Chicago and Aurora. The National Action Party (PAN) has had some presence in Chicago since 1995 but in 2002 the party decided to add a special structure to its by-laws aimed at offering official membership to their followers abroad. The new structure was established to implement special strategies to recruit new members living in the United States with the full support of the National Executive Committee. This closer contact encouraged the celebration of a National Assembly of the PAN in the city of Chicago in 2005 that prompted several visits from federal legislators to Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Dallas right before the 2006 presidential campaign.⁸

⁷ Basically, potential voters needed a valid voting card to register and many did not have one. They also had to travel to the nearest consulate or have access to the Internet to obtain a registration form and pay the postage to send the application. The law asked applicants to submit the application via certified mail, which costs an average of \$9 USD. In the final computation, Felipe Calderón from the PAN won the largest number of votes from absentee ballots: 19,016 (57.42%) followed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador from the PRD with 11,090 votes (33.43%). For more on absentee ballots, see Rivera-Salgado (2006).

⁸ "Celebra PAN asamblea fundacional en EU. Formaliza estructura para captar militancia y promover su partido entre inmigrantes mexicanos," in: <<http://www.terra.com.mx/noticias/articulo/153318/>> (30.10.2006); "Boletín den prensa", in: <<http://www.lagrilla.com.mx/diputados.html>> (04.01.2007). The National Action Party now includes Mexicans living abroad in its by-laws. These now read as follows: "The Mexican nation extends its existence beyond the State's borders and therefore embraces the

It is worth noting that many of the most active hometown leaders in the area of Chicago had undergone previous political training in their home communities. Due to the long history of one party rule in Mexico, it is only natural that many of these leaders were affiliated to the PRI. Some were active party members in their youth, belonging to the Revolutionary Youth Front (its acronym in Spanish is FJR). While in the US, some leaders decided to keep their previous political preferences while others have decided to switch party preferences towards the most likely winner in their home state or municipality.

Nevertheless, hometown association leaders are not the only ones with previous political training. There are some migrant community activists in other organizations who used to be active members in both the opposition and the former ruling party before their arrival in the U.S. On this basis one might argue that many of their leadership abilities, organizational skills, and their interest in political participation were not acquired in the U. S. but were transplanted from Mexico, an observation that is consistent with the history of other migrant organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bodnar 1985: 121). This observation contradicts previous explanations of the origins of hometown associations. Some scholars have argued that Mexican hometown associations encourage migrants to integrate into their host society because over time these associations acquire the democratic values of the United States. This argument wrongly assumes that Mexican migrants lack these attributes upon their arrival (De la Garza/Hazán 2003; Leiken 2002).

While many hometown associations and groups affiliated to political parties were getting ready to participate in the campaign to register as many voters as possible in Chicago for the Mexican presidential elections by the end of 2005, they suddenly had to face a new threat to the Mexican migrant community. On December 16, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the controversial Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (a.k.a. H.R. 4437 or Sensenbrenner bill). The bill stirred a new national immigration debate, which concentrated heavily on discussions regarding the management of new flows, national security, and the presence of undocumented aliens throughout the country. This bill is considered one of the most anti-immigrant bills in the last decade since the Illegal Immigration Reform the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Acts were approved during the Bill Clinton administration.

Mexican migrant organizations understood that it was extremely important to orchestrate an immediate response to the Sensenbrenner bill even though this meant adding to their workload with the Mexican election campaign. In fact, for many immigrants living in the United States, regardless of legal status or country of origin, this law became a unifying force in demanding dignity, respect, and in reaffirming their membership of the United States as productive law-abiding workers, not as criminals. In an unprecedented response to the attack from federal legislators, millions of Latino migrants organized 259 different marches in 43 states with an estimated attendance ranging from 3.3 to 5 million

millions of Mexicans who for whatever reason, some of them painful, live in other countries . The decision to migrate is a fundamental right of all citizens. The right of Mexicans abroad to belong to the nation must be recognized by the State in all its legal dimensions. No Mexican abroad should be without a nation in order to preserve his dignity and his human rights.” (Translated by the author.)

participants, depending on the source recording the event (Bada/Fox/Selee 2006). In February, March and April of 2006, many marches were organized in big cities like Chicago, Dallas, Houston, and Los Angeles, where the majority of HTAs are concentrated.

The engagement of HTAs with the organization of immigrant rights marches was a new development in the scope of their local activities. For instance, during the pro-legalization march of Chicago in September of 2000, few HTAs participated and they did not play a role as organizers. They were only represented as members of the network coordinated by the Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights. However, during the spring 2006 protests, Mexican HTAs displayed their newly acquired strength in mobilizing their constituents for domestic issues. For the first time, they flexed their political organizational skills and were key organizers of the March 10th Movement Committee along with labor unions, radio personalities, the Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Catholic Campaign for Social Justice, religious congregations, and traditional Latino organizations. More than 100,000 people attended the historic March 10th demonstration, which was the first and largest demonstration during the initial wave of protests.

The leadership of the March 10th movement quickly understood that their demands needed the support of other minorities. In Cook county Latinos represent 22.5 percent of the population, African Americans 25.8 percent and Asians 5.4 percent. Together, these three communities account for just over half of the total population in the county.⁹ The Latino leadership knew that it was very important to bring all minorities together in order to have a successful and representative protest.

The March 10th protest was so encouraging that Latino labor coalitions and immigrant-led labor organizations decided to have their organizational meetings at *Casa Michoacán* in order to discuss the planning strategy for the May 1st march and the economic boycott. The first planning meetings in Pilsen were almost entirely in Spanish. But in a creative and sophisticated adjustment, immigrants from Ireland, Cambodia and elsewhere were able to receive instant English translations through special headsets (Avila/Martínez 2006).

During the spring months of 2006, millions rallied in the streets and downtowns of more than 158 cities, carrying the important message that civic participation is not only exercised through the voting booths. In these marches, one of the most popular slogans read: “Today we march, tomorrow we vote”. This is how these seemingly disenfranchised residents expressed themselves and demanded respect for their human and worker rights (Bada/Fox/Selee 2006). In the case of Mexican migrant organizations, the weave of mobilizations offered them an opportunity to develop strategies to mount a campaign to encourage legal permanent residents to acquire U.S. citizenship, and also promoted formal electoral participation in U.S. elections, while making sure that legal status was not an impediment to participating in immigrant rights advocacy organizations.

While Mexican HTAs’ civic and political participation in the U.S. is still in the initial stages and it is too early to predict its future direction, the development of new strategies for participation suggest not only their willingness to intervene both “here” and “there”,

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, in <http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en> (04.01.2007).

but, most of all, the emergence of a migrant civil society working simultaneously in Mexico and the United States.

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