Mexican Politicization:
Cultivating Optimism, Fostering Community

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Abstract

This study addresses how Mexican immigrants become politicized in the absence of appropriate opportunities. Drawing from 20 qualitative interviews of Mexican immigrants residing in Idaho, a key contradiction is found between active words and effective inaction. That is, respondents want to participate but do not. To address this contradiction this study identifies key processes that enable and curtail Mexican immigrant community engagement as part of their daily struggle for full incorporation into US society. I argue politicization is the result of the capacity to harness optimism and collective orientation while being able to defy the challenges of isolationism and individualism. The severe anti-worker and anti-immigrant environment in Idaho presents a perfect place to study this because it provides insight into how limited opportunity influences immigrant methods of addressing workplace and community grievances.

Introduction

In the face of economic, social, and political marginalization, how do Mexican immigrants become politicized and sustain the capacity for mobilization? In Idaho, working-class Mexican immigrants arrive to a reception with little to no resources in place to aid in their transition to life in the United States. Immigrants must rely on their social capital (e.g. family, friends and acquaintances from same community of origin) to help navigate the institutions with which they must now interact daily (see, among others, Mines 1981; Massey et al. 1987, 2003; Zavella 2011). In addition, working-class immigrants arrive to minimum and subminimum wage jobs, predominantly within the secondary labor market, where they are subject to exploitation and discrimination. Often the work is seasonal and precarious with virtually none of the protections given to native workers (Chavez 1998; Barerra 1979; Bonacich 1972). Christian Zlolniski describes migrant workers, and the undocumented even more so, as comprising a subproletarian class (Zlolniski 2005 found in Zavella 2011). Additionally, as a right-to-work state, Idaho offers little by way of protections to any workers. Union rates and wages in the state are some of the worst in the country (Hogler 2011; Schwantes 1991).

Nonetheless, as is the case across the nation, some Mexican immigrants in Idaho have been mobilizing and staging demonstrations despite adverse circumstances. These manifestations of resistance stand in defiance to the highly vulnerable position immigrants occupy. What accounts for mobilization within this hostile environment? Similar questions have garnered the attention of many immigration scholars in the social sciences (Bada et al 2010; Pallares and Flores-González 2010; Voss and Bloemraad 2011; Gleeson 2008; Ness 2005; Delgado 1993; Cameron-Ruiz 2000). In their recent book Voss and Bloemraad (2011) ask, “What would possess people who have everything to lose by coming out into the limelight to march, even though the cost could be permanent and definitive exclusion?” In addition to examining this issue, I seek to explore how mobilization under extreme conditions can inform what is known about maintaining politicization between opportunities regardless of context. In other words, can we identify the necessary infrastructure that catalyzes mobilization when needed? Insights gathered within an extreme context are informative for more amicable immigrant settings because they are proven effective even in the absence of favorable conditions. Despite noteworthy political activity occurring in Idaho, community involvement has been limited when compared to the number of political events organized by immigrant activists. Therefore, to highlight the factors creating politicization and allowing for immigrant collective-action, I first identify the circumstances keeping many from participating.

I argue that immigrant incorporation at work and society engenders isolationism and detachment, negating awareness of exploitation and desires to act collectively. My findings show the key to overcoming depoliticization and maintaining politicization is the acquisition of civic skills and development of community. Integrated into the
bottom of the split-labor market, immigrants are intimately aware of exploitation and discrimination. Still, the secondary sector of the split-labor market obscures the ways in which immigrants are divided and inculcates a fatalism about political involvement as they have no means for addressing workplace issues. Beyond the workplace, immigrants get caught up in the welter of providing their own daily needs, strongly reinforced by the dominant culture’s pervasive liberal individual values, leading to further individualism and division. Ultimately, these processes gravely undermine the viability of action for the depoliticized Mexican immigrants interviewed.

In stark contrast, those who are able to act have, in a variety of dynamic ways, acquired civic skills, and thereby confidence, producing a capacity to act politically. Experiences ranging from involvement in a labor union, to a small immigrant run grassroots radio station and even experience with the US legal system work to generate politicization. Importantly, all of these generated some form of community, however minimal, beyond home and work.

I maintain that, through building community, members are able to come together in cooperation for common purposes and consequently political mobilization becomes possible. With time, a reinforcing positive cycle of community and politicization is able to harness desires to participate and maintain politicization between opportunities.

**Immigrant Mobilization: A Background**

The recent struggle for immigrant rights and full incorporation within the United States has been waging since the turn of the century. In the Spring of 2006, in the largest mass demonstrations in US history, millions of immigrants across the country took to the streets in vehement protest of the Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (Pallares and Flores-Gonzalez 2010; Voss and Bloemraad 2011; Bada et. al 2010). Better known as the Sensenbrenner Bill, this proposed legislation sought to criminalize unauthorized immigration as well as implement measures to curtail further unauthorized immigration and punish undocumented immigrants already in the US. The massive response by the immigrant community, particularly the Mexican immigrant community, was unprecedented. Since then the movement for humane immigration reform has been building momentum on the shoulders of thousands of active Mexican immigrants all around the country (Bada et. al 2010; Cordero-Guzman et al. 2008).

Seeking to explain the mass demonstrations in the Spring of 2006 and immigrant mobilizations more broadly, Bloemraad and Voss (2011) draw from existing political behavior and social movement approaches to suggest a paradoxical mix of threat and faith motivate large-scale mobilizations. Immigrants have reacted to perceived threats stemming from a string of anti-immigrant legislations as well as an increasingly hostile socio-political climate towards Latinos and immigrants. Faith in the political system, it is argued, is exemplified by the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the protests and lack of incidents throughout the Spring of 2006 (Bloemraad and Voss 2011; Segura, Bowler and Pedraza 2011).

Bloemraad and Voss also stress the importance of framing and identity processes in allowing for a diversity of peoples to come together for a common issue. There has been an increase in the sense of shared group identity around the pan-ethnic label of “Latino” that contributed to the mobilizations in 2006 and immigrant rights movement more generally. A shared sense of injustice, discrimination, and marginalization has fostered an increase in Latino unity. In addition to unity based on shared group identity, another source of solidarity has come from framing the immigrant plight in terms of family unity, highlighting the effects of deportations and family separations. By framing the issue as an attack on families, an appeal is made to what is thought of as core American value and extends the issue beyond those who are directly affected (Pallares and Flores-Gonzalez 2010; Bloemraad and Voss 2011).

Scholars argue, in addition to increased solidarity and wider appeal, mobilizations were and are in large part the result of long-standing cooperative efforts and networks of immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations or what are referred to as mobilizing structures (Bloemraad 2006). Bloemraad and Voss identify ethnic media, the Catholic Church, and unions as providing critical leadership. The scope of actors extends to a dense network of community-based organizations, social service providers, schools, families, elected officials, and hometown associations (Cordero-Guzman et al. 2008; Bloemraad and Voss 2011; Flores-Gonzalez and Pallares 2010). Furthermore, they argue through the activities of nonprofit organizations, many immigrants learn about policies that may affect their well-being as well as what they can do individually and collectively to participate in civic and political activities (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008; DeSipio 2011).

This scholarship informs my present study by presenting insights that contribute to a better understanding of immigrant politicization around the country. These findings serve as a reference to my analytical perspective as I
reconcile them with my own findings based on fieldwork with immigrants in Idaho. Despite serving as a frame of reference, investigations raise important questions to be addressed. First, scholars raise the vexing question of whether mobilization in the Latino community can be sustained into a lasting social movement (Bloemraad and Voss 2011). Second, the literature does not fully address the manner in which an awareness of threats can develop in other arenas such as the workplace and how these might influence participation. Finally, what prevents a shared sense of marginalization from becoming the unifying force scholars have found elsewhere? To help address these concerns, I turn to literature on new social movements, shifts in the US labor structure and production politics.

Interesting links have been made within new social movements literature regarding the manner in which a variety of unpredictable actors and circumstances can create the infrastructure for mobilization to occur. Viewed through the lens of cultural politics, these processes are not homogeneous but rather internally discontinuous and uneven. Transforming conceptions of democracy, citizenship, communities is motivated by the dynamics of culture in unpredictable ways (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). The literature above identifies a variety of actors and networks contributing to mobilization, indicating the way in which community creates collective action. Cultural politics allows us to see the process of creating community in novel ways while at the same time highlighting the central role that community and culture takes in sustaining politicization.

Looking at immigrant economic incorporation and dynamics within the workplace is also valuable to our understanding of immigrant collective-action as it is a context informing immigrant behavior. Due to the rise of neoliberal economics, the US economy has transitioned away from manufacturing and towards a service based economy (Ness 2005; Durand, Massey, and Malone 2002) changing with it the dynamics of immigrant incorporation. At the bottom-tier of the split-labor market, new mostly service industry jobs are created but at much lower wages and worse working conditions. As companies seek their competitive advantage through the use of low-wage labor, low-skill immigrant labor is seen as ideal because an undocumented legal status makes them more tractable as they constantly fear deportation. Typically, working-class immigrants also understand less than do native-born workers about established labor standards, and even low US wages represent an improvement over earnings in their home countries They are also known as target earners that gain status in Mexico if not in the US (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002; Ness 2005).

Also informing the way we look at workplace resistance and awareness of exploitation, production politics tells us that firms leverage workers’ labor market vulnerabilities and dependence on their jobs to induce greater willingness to accept conditions and terms at work (McKay 2006). What McKay calls ‘attachment’ is determined externally because of the lack of alternative work opportunities within the secondary labor market or family responsibilities (alienative commitment). Under coercive conditions worker consent is not necessary, making it possible for exploitative working conditions to be less obscured as in a despotic labor regime (Burawoy 1982; Lee 1998). Acknowledging the factors preventing resistance at work, how does awareness of exploitation translate to political behavior in other spheres of immigrant life?

**Methodology**

Seeking to add to our understanding of these concerns, I spent six weeks conducting twenty open-ended qualitative interviews of Mexican immigrants residing in Idaho. The study was done in Idaho in part due to practicality but also because its socio-political conditions provide unique opportunities for examining Mexican politicization. Idaho is a staunchly conservative state with 28 Republicans in the Senate to just 7 Democrats. In the house there is a ratio of 57/22 Republican/Democrat. And there is a Republican governor as well (idaho.gov). With this political composition come partisan positions in which Republicans oppose any pro-immigrant legislation. As mentioned above Idaho is also a “right to work” state. Anti-immigrant and anti-union conditions point to Idaho having some of the worst conditions for immigrant collective action (Schwantes 1991). Therefore, the manner in which some are able to participate provides insights into key factors driving involvement. Studying one of the worst contexts for Mexican politicization also highlights the limits of disenfranchisement. Working-class Mexican immigrants possess unique cultural capital stemming from their immigrant experience and position in American society. Identifying what their cultural capital looks like and the specific nature of depoliticization impart the most effective strategies for fomenting greater politicization. In other words, if we know the extent of existing depoliticization within one of the worst locations for immigrant collective action then the means through which action is possible become the most logical for generating more involvement.

The interviews conducted encompass life, work and community involvement experiences within both immigrant communities of origin and communities of reception, specifically Idaho. The interviews range from one
to two hours and a few even as long as three hours. Interviews were done in Spanish then transcribed and translated to English. I found participants through a combination of cold calling and snowball sampling.

All but three respondents were over the age of thirty-five and two were over the age of sixty. All participants have lived continuously in Idaho for at least eight years and as long as thirty-five years. When talking about participation, I differentiate between respondents who actively participate in their Idaho community to those who have little to no community interaction. By ‘actively participate’ or ‘active’ I mean they have played a contributing role in the coordinating and carrying out of community events aimed at either solving or bringing awareness to a community issue, as opposed to simply attending political events for immigrant rights. I place this bar high because advocating for an issue conveys deep commitment and the ability to overcome isolation and detachment from coethnic community.

Mobilizing Words, Immobilized Action

During my study a key finding guided my inquiry. Eighteen of the twenty immigrants interviewed identify issues surrounding immigration as their primary community concerns and claim unity and active involvement is the only way to effectively address these concerns (see Appendix A). Despite awareness and desire, actual participation has been limited. Of the eighteen, ten have had no active involvement in any of the political activities, though they affirm being aware of the community events taking place. As interviewees acknowledge, there have been numerous opportunities for participation.

As I have stated, despite the negative circumstances in which immigrants find themselves in, there has recently been a wave of collective political activity in Idaho. As is the case throughout the country, activity is centered on immigrant rights. On May 1st of 2013, in conjunction with national mobilizations, there was a march for family unity through downtown Boise which was attended by roughly two thousand according to news reports (Idaho Press Tribune). In addition to the march there have been other activities including a thirty-mile walk from a labor camp in the rural town of Wilder to the office of Republican Representative Raul Labrador. There have also been more traditional political activities such as petition drives, phone calling to congressmen, and attending town hall meetings. All of these activities were done with the intent of urging the state’s national representatives to support the movement for humane immigration reform.

While these activities have been taking place and are certainly noteworthy, like my interview subjects, the level of support from the immigrant Mexican community has been weak at best. Each public community action has been extensively promoted on local Spanish radio stations. Community organizers and volunteers have engaged in outreach at churches, community gatherings, door-to-door canvassing and placed hundreds of phone calls and still the community response has been well below expectations each time. The lack of community mobilization given the level of outreach is especially puzzling when contrasted with the overwhelming desires to participate collectively expressed by interview subjects. What is keeping immigrants from participating even though they want to? How can we interpret this evident contradiction of mobilizing words and resultant inaction?

Process of De/politicization

In what follows, I examine this key and paradoxical finding. To begin I describe the common manner in which working-class immigrants are integrated into the U.S. labor structure. I then establish how experiences with work and social-political conditions instill awareness to individual and collective issues facing Mexican immigrants. I enter a discussion about the key points of diversion between the politicization for some and depoliticization for others. First, I explore the character of immigrant depoliticization with efforts to understand the scope of the challenge for active involvement. I then demarcate immigrant participation in Idaho by demonstrating who is participating and how they are able to become involved. To conceptualize the process I simplify the factors identified as most relevant (see Figure 1).
Economic Integration: The Split-Labor Market

Economic stability is one reason Mexican immigrants move to the US. Seen as low-skill labor with low human capital, a majority of working-class Mexican immigrants are incorporated to the lowest sectors of the US economy (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002; Ness 2005). With little to no opportunity for advancement a great majority of “unskilled” workers are kept at the bottom of the split-labor market. A very small number of workers may be given access to a limited number of positions with some level of authority (Chinoy 1992; Lynd 1985; Robinson 1984; Reich 1973; Burawoy 1979; Bonacich 1972; Kalleberg and Sørensen 1979).

As several interviewees indicate, it is workers who are most willing to put personal and company goals before their coworkers whom are given these positions. Bottom-tier workers view them with resentment, as they become the new face of exploitation. Sergio, now a restaurant worker, says he has experienced this at almost every job he has been at. When asked about the problems he has had with supervisors he states:

“No, the bad experiences have been probably with the supervisors who were my own people. You can sometimes feel the pressure that since they are the ones in charge they want to put out more work. Perhaps because they earn more and benefit more… One’s own people are the ones who pressure you most and go at you the hardest… Bosses will look for people who are willing to pressure people more and produce more. If they see that it is convenient for them they will get you as a supervisor.”

Figure 1. Process of de/politicization
Immigrants are caught in a system that explicitly rewards individualism, conformity and a willingness to exploit your peers. In order to make it, many are forced to adhere to these standards (Chinoy 1952; Lynd 1985). Another respondent states, “The only way immigrant workers are treated equally to native workers is by giving extra effort, starting no trouble and being in agreement with the bosses agenda.”

The split-labor market affects all working-class immigrants to varying degrees—whether workers conform and their ambition allows them to obtain marginal authority over their co-workers, are passive and merely endure their situation, or they resist conformity and challenge exploitation (Chinoy 1992). Subjected to similar conditions and experiences, workers reside along this continuum of possible outcomes. Encountering these experiences, workers develop noteworthy awareness of their circumstances.

**Awareness**

The Mexican immigrants I interviewed articulate thorough descriptions of the issues they face, demonstrating an acute understanding of their position in the United States. The level of awareness present among most all respondents is one of my most significant findings. This may surprise some given what has been written regarding the absence of worker class-consciousness (among others, Adorno 2001; Marcuse 1964) and the manner in which the capitalist mode of production obscures and secures surplus labor-extraction (Burawoy 1982).

Working class individual and collective experiences endured while living in the US has resulted in what can be deemed as Mexican immigrant cultural capital. By being affected in multiple spheres (economic, social, and political) Mexican immigrants are constantly negotiating their exploited and marginalized reality. Without a viable means of addressing issues individually, working-class Mexican immigrants see collective action as their only recourse.

Upon arriving immigrants interact with their new environment and quickly become intimately aware of the unfavorable conditions facing them. As I suggest in the previous section, work-related issues are the most immediate. Because of the lack of alternative work opportunities within the secondary labor market and their precarious status as immigrants, the complete obscuring of exploitative working conditions is not necessary to secure worker commitment (Burawoy 1982; Lee 1998). At work, immigrants are discriminated against, given the most laborious jobs with the least compensation, provided little to no prospects for advancement, and face difficulties having their issues addressed when they bring them forward. Precarious conditions and the inability to address issues inspire resentment in many immigrants who feel like employers are abusing and taking advantage of them. Feelings of being exploited continue even after workers find stable employment. Miguel, a father of five and factory worker of over twenty years states:

“Well I feel like I have been… I think it is the feeling of all workers, that they are exploited: that they are not paid sufficiently according to their work and that they are abused in that aspect. I have felt this a lot because to begin at such a minimum wage and from there they cannot raise you each year a quarter or fifty cents. For the years you have been working there what you earn is too little. If the company feels they pay us a lot I think they are wrong because in reality one is leaving everything there. One’s life is staying there and they do not provide little else other than staying alive.”

Perceptions of exploitation and being undervalued are enhanced when others, who they feel are less deserving, pass them over for jobs. Sergio’s experience in a hospital kitchen is exemplary. When speaking about his supervisor’s treatment he says:

“The thing is that this person doesn’t let you advance. In my case she says it is because I don’t speak good English. I feel like I am a really good worker, like I do a good job and that is why they have me there (in the dish room). She says it is the language. She gets frustrated because she doesn’t understand me. I don’t know. I get along with everyone.”

[Interviewer] “Do you think this experience is unique to you or do others face the same treatment?”

“No there are others who she also treats like that and they are also Hispanic. There is another coworker who… she uses the excuse that I don’t speak good English but my coworker speaks very good English, he writes and reads it also, but she won’t give him a chance to get another position. Clearly it is not about
English. If it were about English why wouldn’t she move my friend? There have been opportunities. So it is not about English.”

Statements like these are common and speak to the discrimination and racism many feel directed at them from their employers. This discrimination has tangible ramifications for workers who feel their wages and work positions are affected as a result. In combination with a labor structure that offers few opportunities for advancement, racism and discrimination from management all but consigns immigrant workers to the most undesirable work. Futility is not a surprising result given a prolonged period under these circumstances. Beside issues at work, immigrants contend with the threats seen as coming from an anti-immigrant political atmosphere. For those who are undocumented the potential of being deported and separated from loved ones is a real and active threat and they are reminded constantly by news reports. Asking for opinions of the biggest issues facing the Mexican community elicits a variety of responses. Consistently however respondent issues revolve around and stem from immigration situations and problems with status. For Alicia and others it is the treatment and conditions undocumented workers endure,"

“We are very exploited sometimes by the miserable wages they pay us, the humiliations we have to endure, and many other things they do to us. We are discriminated and treated badly. They cannot find anything else to do to us. All because of not having a piece of paper.”

Some, such as Lorena, cite the effects deportations are having on kids,

“There are many kids who stay behind when they deport their fathers and even when they deport their mothers. Those kids are left with people who aren’t their parents. Those kids suffer because they aren’t with their parents. Some older kids remember their parents and can be traumatized by having to be removed from their parents and have adoptive parents.”

For Cristina it is about family more generally:

“The security of the family is number one, it is the nucleus, the factor of humanity. And it is exactly what the immigration laws in the US are destroying. They are destroying the most important nucleus of a society which is the family. Without it the only thing we can see is a society in decay. We are talking about more than 11 million immigrants in the United States. So many families have already been affected.”

Pedro expresses concern for discrimination:

“Discrimination is a very important point because particularly in this state one says that no there is no discrimination but discrimination is at all levels. At any moment one is being discriminated and whether one does not feel it or one acts like they did not see it, it is affecting you: police who stop you because you are brown or white people who treat you badly because they think you are undocumented. These things happen.”

The issues presented by respondents are part of their lived reality. The lived reality of working-class Mexican immigrants comprises their cultural capital. Working-class immigrants are vulnerable in all spheres: economically within the secondary sector of the labor-market; socially due to racism and xenophobia; and politically due to immigration status and immigration enforcement policies. The immigration situation affects parents (worker/nonworker), kids and extended relatives. Each sphere of vulnerability is affected by and is closely tied to their economic integration. As Massey et. all (2002) and others suggest, immigrant vulnerability make working-class Mexican immigrants the ideal candidates for the U.S. economic structure dependent on cheap and accessible surplus labor (Piore 1979). As long as vulnerabilities and this form of economic integration persist, so too should the makeup of their cultural capital.

Knowing the problems facing them, immigrants acknowledge and desire collective action as the means of having them addressed. As I have stated above however, awareness and desires have not been enough. Awareness should lead to ethno-class consciousness in which workers see each other in common circumstances. Let us first examine what keeps immigrants from being able to act on stated desires as it is the dilemma vexing the majority of respondents and Mexican immigrants. Exposing the limits of depoliticization allows us to better understand what
exactly those who do become active are overcoming, while underscoring the factors allowing them to do so and providing prospects for reproducing enabling factors.

Depoliticization

As we have seen, immigrants are aware of their exploitative economic integration into the bottom of the split-labor market. However, there are limits to general workplace awareness of exploitation. Immigrant economic integration sufficiently obscures the divisions created among workers. Many workers fail to recognize the collective conditions they share with coethnics and instead attribute differences and conflict to regional rivalries or character flaws. Others who do recognize shared concerns and seek to have their issues addressed are met with unresponsiveness by management, coworkers and even union representatives. Describing the role of the union at work Miguel, a union steward, states:

“What happens is that the union has always been like an intermediary between the workers and the company but he (the union representative)... He does not inspire confidence in his clients. A lot of people end up keeping quiet or they defend themselves how they can. What happens is that there, there is a lack of confidence in the delegate and we accept the union simply as our representatives in the negotiation of the contract.”

Without the capacity to address issues even in unionized workplaces workers are made aware that there is virtually no recourse for confronting individual or collective grievances. With no prospects for advancement and no incentive beyond not getting fired, workers focus on their own tasks which makes worker solidarity difficult to achieve. Much has been written on the split labor market and its adverse effects for all workers (Chinoy 1992; Kalleberg 2011; Bonacich 1972; Schor 2008) but it seems it is particularly damaging for Mexican immigrants, as they have much less recourse against it (Barrera 1979; Bonacich 1972, Chavez 1998) and are resigned to their situation.

Entrenched divisions among Mexican workers continue beyond the workplace and into social life. The ‘every person for themselves mentality’ that is created at work is constantly reinforced in a society in which liberal individualism, the personal pursuit of wealth, material goods, and social status, is the way of life (Bellah 2008). Adopting this mindset leads to a continual disassociation with the collective framework acquired within their communities in Mexico. It also leads to continued isolationism and detachment from the community in which they live. I asked participants how their perspective towards community involvement has changed since migrating. Miguel states:

“When I came I had a perspective that was more left. With time I have become more individualist. One is made mentally more conformist and individualist in the sense that one has to fight for one’s own things without thinking about how people organized and participating can accomplish much more.”

Living in the United States has caused a change in Miguel’s behavior. He implies he had a more collective orientation in Mexico before coming to the US. These changes are symptomatic of the process immigrants undergo within their new work and social environments.

At the same time we must acknowledge the reality that being relegated to unstable low-wage work places immigrants, especially those with families, in survival-mode as immediate physiological needs take precedence. Some have cited the lack of individual resources and time for the inability of immigrants to act collectively (DeSipio 2011). For many Mexican immigrants, living paycheck to paycheck becomes a normal facet of life in the US especially as the allure of material goods works to trap them in debt. When asked to elaborate what things he feels he is fighting for individually Miguel says:

“The routine of life in the US: bills, family, work, the house. One is absorbed with the routine of work and is pressured by economic situations that one is barely getting through. Because of all of the hours that one has to put into working to get the family ahead one is not left with time to participate in other things…”

Life described by Miguel suggests working-class Mexican immigrants are becoming typical overworked Americans as described by Schor (2008) where increased productivity leads to increased consumption not leisure. Absorbed by work and consumption, worker isolation becomes a normal lifestyle. As division and isolationism take hold among
working-class immigrants, committing time, effort, and acting in solidarity with a community in which you personally have little investment in is difficult. Particularly when inter-worker animosity is generating and entrenching factionalism.

Seeking to explain the lack of involvement by the immigrant community respondents, active and inactive, suggest lack of participation is due to a lack of unity. Based on the lack of support for pro-community events this conclusion is understandable and even logical. However, I suggest lack of support stems from a bigger problem: the absence of community which is caused by isolation and detachment. Respondents on the other hand argue that the lack of Mexican unity has mainly to do with deficiencies in Mexican culture such as jealousy, feelings of superiority and, as many put it, “forgetting where they came from.” Several active participants share their difficult and largely unsuccessful experiences of trying to get people involved. Vicente shares his thoughts on his attempts to organize field workers upon his arrival to difficult working conditions,

“That is the saddest thing I have seen in this country is that us Mexicans are the most sectarian people of the world. We put it as a very bad sickness. We are very sectarian. What does that mean? Here are some from one state, here are those from others and we separate ourselves. Instead of uniting ourselves we scatter. All of that happens too much. I ask, why in Mexico are we more united and here we cannot unite when we are outside of our country? It can’t be, we are very sectarian. We separate ourselves: those from Zacatecas over here; those from Oaxaca here; those from Jalisco here; those from Sinaloa here; those from Michoacán here; Guanajuato here. Instead of coming together we separate ourselves. It was very difficult to work in that time with the community.”

Vicente’s comments exemplify the prevailing idea among respondents that it is part of Mexican culture to become divided. Rather than citing cultural deficiency, I argue, “forgetting where they came from” and the factionalism Vicente and others describe are also symptomatic of the labor structure they are integrated into and the new culture influencing them. Essentially, the split-labor market and hostile political reception creates divisions among Mexican workers (Borjas 1987) which then extend and develop beyond the workplace as they get caught up in the welter of providing their own daily needs, strongly reinforced by the dominant culture’s pervasive liberal individual values.

In sum, while immigrants have a notable understanding of their workplace exploitation, having no viable means of resolving issues leads to futility of general political engagement. Integration into the normal cultural and political realities of the US stressing liberal individualism alongside longer work hours (Schor 2008) sufficiently creates division and isolation between workers. Unable to address workplace grievances, divisions and individualism are reinforced in society. With everyone isolated and detached community becomes difficult to achieve. Therefore, despite knowing they are being exploited and desiring collective action, continued isolationism and individualism are shown to be more probable. And yet as I have alluded to previously, a notable number of immigrants facing these same circumstances are able to act collectively and maintain politicization. Understanding how active immigrants are able to overcome detachment and isolationism is the key to resurrecting the immigrant community and inducing further collective action.

**Politicization**

I argue that two different but potentially complementary factors, civic skills and community, are the means through which politicization not only occurs but also is maintained. For active immigrants the acquisition of civic skills (i.e. knowledge and an understanding of the US system and their rights within the system) allowed them to gain the confidence and optimism necessary to become politically involved. Acquired in a variety of ways, civic skills prove to be effective means of overcoming futility and restoring faith in the system by providing immigrants an avenue to engage US political and societal institutions in cooperation with others. Maintaining politicization is possible when, in confluence with civic skills, community or a culture of common goals, attachments and interdependency is established among peoples with shared backgrounds. The dynamic nature and politicizing capacity of acquiring civic skills and building community is exemplified by the immigrant run grassroots radio station in Burley, Idaho KBWE Radio Voz de Magic Valley. Unexpectedly, the community events: fundraisers, cultural celebrations, and dances—coupled with relevant programming aimed at informing listeners about interacting with US institutions in daily life—created the infrastructure needed to easily mobilize community members for political action. Similarly, new social movement theorists have documented various mobilizations arising from non-linear, unexpected and novel circumstances.
Utilizing a cultural politics framework, new social movements theorists maintain that culture is enacted to challenge or unsettle dominant political cultures. To the extent that social movements shake the boundaries of cultural and political representation and social practice, calling into question even what may or may not be seen as political (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). Therefore in exploring the political in social movements, politics are more than just a set of specific activities (voting, campaigning, lobbying) that occur in clearly delimited institutional spaces such as parliaments and parties; it must also be seen to encompass power struggles enacted in a wide range of spaces culturally defined as private, social, economic, cultural, and so on. Cultural politics therefore seeks to move beyond static understandings of culture and the politics of representation and similarly transgress the narrow, reductionistic conceptions of political culture, citizenship, democracy and community (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). Reconceptualizing these notions necessitates that what elicits the political also be reevaluated and seen in ways that allow for alternative and perhaps unconventional methods of producing politicization.

Many instances of unexpected mobilization have been documented in the new social movements literature. For example, Rubin maintains that it was the “fostering of a new and hybrid political culture that enabled COCEI to secure its power even as neoliberal economic restructuring and the demobilization of popular movements dominated policymaking elsewhere in Mexico and Latin America” (in Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998). Starn documents what started as rondas campesinas (peasant rounds) or community efforts to combat cattle rustling in highland Peru and resulted in political demonstrations against things like hikes in interest rates in the Agrarian Bank (in Escobar and Alvarez 1992). Scarritt (2013) chronicles the revitalization of one Peruvian village after Evangelical Christianity took hold and transformed into a movement. Like these there are other examples (among others Lind, Garcia, and Findji in Escobar and Alvarez 1992) which highlight some of the unforeseen ways in which mobilization can occur.

From my own findings the example of immigrant run grassroots radio station in Burley, Idaho KBWE Radio Voz de Magic Valley exemplifies the politicizing effects that cultivating optimism and fostering community can have. This Magic Valley town of only 10,000 accounted for 600 of the roughly 2000 people at the May 1st 2013 march in Boise. The radio station was able to accomplish this after having been on air for only one year. I went there and interviewed 3 people, one of whom helped put the station together. Remembering a conversation he had with the person who first posed the idea he says:

“I remember asking, “what do you want a radio station for?” “Well a radio station can be very beneficial because you are able to educate people, especially those who work in the fields. You can tell them not to let ranchers abuse them and where to go for help… There will be people who will help us and unite with us. Perhaps lawyers, and we will be able to inform people and help them in however we can.” “but this is going to be a Mexican radio station for the community?” “Yes, yes, that is what we need here. We don’t have a voice here and with a radio we are going to have a voice.”

The radio station has been able to engage the community in a variety of ways including providing information and education. The station is run by volunteers in the community who are slotted one hour per week to run their own programming. Educators, lawyers, labor activists and others use the medium to inform listeners about issues and have live discussions with guests and audience. One of the persons I interviewed is part of a group of women who produce a program dedicated to women’s issues. She says,

“We give information about women’s issues, things like abuse, women’s shelters, and other things we find useful for women as moms, students or whatever. We try to provide support.”

In addition to providing information, the radio station holds fundraisers, dances, and cultural celebrations. These community-building activities are non-political and are well supported by the community. The radio station has also provided an avenue for community members to get relief in event of a personal tragedy.

“A young woman, a single mother, had her trailer burn down. She was not there when it burnt down. She was only left with the clothes she had on, her kids, the clothes they had on and her car. That was all she had left. Everything else had burned. That lady came here… we had only had the radio for three months when this happened. She came here and she told us her story. We let her sit there in front of the microphone, put her on the air and had her tell her story. She began telling her story and it was sad because as I said she was left with nothing and she is a single mother. As soon as she began to talk, within fifteen minutes people began to come like if they were going to the theater or the dance. People would come in and give her 15, 10, 20, 5, some in envelopes… in three days after having her trailer burn down the woman recovered everything, everything. She came back and thanked everyone.”
Through powerful displays of solidarity people have come to form strong bonds with each other. At the same time, the radio station has been able to create a meaningful relationship with the community. By building community through activities and education, the radio station and community volunteers are able to mobilize people to stand in solidarity for their collective interests.

As community becomes established and members are able to come together in cooperation for common purposes, whether for a grassroots radio station or to protect each other’s livestock, political mobilization becomes possible when needed. As community develops, relationships strengthen and become widespread leading to potentially more politicization. A reinforcing positive cycle of community and politicization is able to harness desires to participate and maintain politicization between opportunities.

Optimism through civic skills

For many, fear is seen as one of the greatest obstacles to immigrants becoming involved (Delgado 1993; Ness 2005; Bloemraad and Voss 2011). In the case of active immigrants in Idaho, acquisition of civic skills is the common thread in all of their stories. This specific form of education, rights acquisition, is pivotal for immigrants overcoming the uncertainty of being involved. Key experiences provided confidence and allowed them to overcome the apprehensions they felt from being in a foreign environment. Despite the common result there are a variety of ways in which immigrants gained these skills. For one active immigrant, it was involvement in the union at work. For others, it was the training they received at a grassroots radio station (noted above). And still for others, it was the fortunate experience of becoming residents and then citizens shortly after arriving. Pedro, another active immigrant, says it was his experience with the American legal system that removed the apprehensions he had as an undocumented immigrant. He says:

“The lawyer explained to me the process. I had to do this. I had to do that… If I did everything they asked I would be okay. After doing everything I learned that I don’t need to be scared about getting involved or when I see police. I know I have rights as a person and immigrant and they cannot arrest me if I am obeying the laws. That is why I am not scared about going to the marches or things like that. I try to tell others there is nothing to fear but they don’t really believe me.”

Faced with criminal charges, this experience actually became the catalyst for Pedro’s community involvement. Learning about his rights and how the legal process works empowered Pedro to the point that he is now inviting others to participate without fear. Education training like the kind Pedro received enables politicization by providing knowledge to conquer fear and uncertainty of becoming politically involved. As the diverse list of examples demonstrate, gaining confidence and the skills necessary to participate and overcome detachment can come in a number of very distinct ways. Active immigrants articulate statements of hope and confidence in creating change through community involvement, thereby, suggesting that gaining civic skills has led to a restoration of optimism.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to increase the understanding of how mobilization in the Latino immigrant community can be sustained. I argue politicization is the result of the capacity to cultivate optimism and foster community. I find that optimism through the acquisition of civic skills is an effective means of overcoming isolationism, detachment and futility. Civic skills provide immigrants with the knowledge and confidence needed to mobilize high levels of awareness and desires to participate collectively in a foreign society.

Confidence is also drawn from the flexibility of a non-linear and somewhat unpredictable process of building community. Fostering community is the crucial step in developing and sustaining collective action. Examples from the new social movements literature and our own case of a small Idaho town demonstrate the variable but highly compelling potential of community. Having built community, by whichever dynamic means, a sense of attachment and social responsibility among members potentially allows awareness and the desire to be mined into mobilization at a communal level. As community develops and relationships among members strengthen, initiating politicization becomes easier and more widespread. Over time a reinforcing positive cycle of community and politicization is able to maintain politicization between opportunities.

In this article, I have also explored how workplace experience in a highly hostile environment affects immigrant awareness and participation. I draw links to the effects of economic integration into the bottom of the
split-labor market and the adoption of the values associated with liberal individualism. I maintain that by doing so we can begin to understand why immigrants have become detached from each other, why there is no real community and thus very little participation despite awareness of threats (i.e. exploitation, discrimination and deportation). It also sheds light on what prevents a shared sense of marginalization from becoming the unifying force others have noted (Voss and Bloemraad 2011).

Trapped within the bottom sector of the split-labor market immigrant workers have little to know opportunity for advancement. Although workplace oppression is visible to all, inter-ethnic divisions are largely obscured and function to isolate workers from each other. Unable to address workplace issues even in a unionized workplace, much less within non-union, workers are resigned to a futile existence. Divisions and detachment from others are reinforced in society as individual interests and material advancement prevails. Within this context collective participation becomes difficult.

Despite this, the difference between those who become politicized versus depoliticized is narrow. This is due to the unique nature of their depoliticization. It is not that immigrants are not aware of the issues facing them and extensive education is needed. Nor is the fear of participating so crippling that immigrants are paralyzed against it. Depoliticization is about the removal of hope and the isolation of individuals from community or support. Because consciousness and collective desires continue to exist in spite of an extreme socio-political context with few resources, there are real possibilities of transcending this gap.

Although I maintain the development of community and politicization is a non-linear process with various possibilities, I also contend there are strategies which if implemented can potentially serve as catalysts. In the absence of a national or state immigrant integration policy, as in Canada (Bloemraad 2006), I suggest community organizations focused on immigrant rights implement programs aimed at aiding transitions into life in the US. Not explicitly political, the program would also incorporate established community building strategies such as community gardens, soccer leagues and cultural events (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2010).

Efforts should be taken to provide immigrants information about worker and immigrant rights. Language training, computer skills, filling out applications, as well as workshops regarding worker and immigrant rights are just some examples of the resources organizations could provide. With this training, immigrants could develop the understanding necessary to live and participate with confidence. As I identified earlier, one of the reasons active immigrants have been able to become involved is because they have gained the confidence and sufficient understanding of the American system. Training could instill both at an early stage in the transition to life in the US. I contend that providing immigrants with confidence and creating attachments with community members and community organizations would do a lot to mitigate the barriers preventing members of the Mexican community from taking their stated desires for unity from mere statements and desires to fruition and reality.

My research brings up many further questions that need addressing. Questions remain as to how gender influences politicization and how it compares to the community as a whole. Many have considered gender in looking at immigrant civic and political participation (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003). However, based on my findings, new issues arise as to how gendered expectations of behavior and civic skills affect the capacity to act politically. This is particularly important given the central role of community.

At the outset of my research I also sought to explore whether pre-migration experiences influence post-migration mobilization. Unable to discern the extent of influence, it has been left out of this article. If young adults with limited socialization in Mexico were found to lack collective desires, it might suggest a greater significance of pre-migration experiences for older immigrants. Likewise, the importance of unique pre-migration experiences would be accentuated if more respondents from urban Mexico were interviewed and found to have a shorter process to politicization than immigrants from rural Mexico. It would also lead to a more nuanced understanding of the strategies and resources needed for populations with differing cultural capital.
References


Appendix

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<th>INTERVIEWEE</th>
<th>MEXICO COMMUNITY OF ORIGIN</th>
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Totals: 5 Urban  14 Rural  1 Rural/Urban  8 Active  12 Inactive  1 * Attended march

19 Yes  18 Yes  1 No opinion  2 No