

The Role of Nonprofits and Latino Political Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

Our study seeks to investigate how nonprofits mobilize Latino residents in Indianapolis, and how *linkages* are created with local political parties. Through this analysis we seek to provide implications for how public policy may be shaped by the growing emergence of nonprofit organizations as tools of civic engagement, beyond voting. This form of immigrant assimilation (*linkages*) is often either overlooked or at best minimized in the civil society literature. It takes the backseat to more transparent forms of assimilation and acculturation, i.e., socio-economic and educational models of assimilation. We seek to examine what (if any) strategies, state and local political parties and nonprofits are utilizing to not only attract these new members of the electorate, but also embed a sense of civic-engagement not only at the ballot box but beyond elections.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the Latino population in recent years in the Midwest (specifically Indianapolis for this study) has created a tremendous opportunity for nonprofit organizations and civic-based groups to act as linkage mechanisms to local and state political parties in order to mobilize potential voters and party activists. In this study, the definition of Latinos or Hispanics are those persons permanently living in Indianapolis and whose ancestry can be traced to any of the Spanish-speaking countries of North, South or Central America (Barreto, 2007). As Barreto (2007) notes, this definition of Latinos is consistent with most scholarly research. Thus, this study will specifically investigate how nonprofits, churches and civic-based groups are serving as linkages to local political parties in Indianapolis, and their subsequent efforts at reaching out and mobilizing the Latino population. We will also include data on various dimensions or behaviors associated with participation in the political process. Dimensions include voting patterns, campaign activities, political party activism and campaign donations. However, the choice of *mobilization* strategies is heavily dependent on “action through and reliance on pre-established community and other association networks” (Bartolini, 2007: 13). After all, voluntary civic organizations are part of what Robert Putnam (2000) calls “schoolrooms of democracy.” In our study, we operationalize *mobilization* as the number of voters a particular nonprofit was able to register.

We decided to generally cluster the various groups of Latinos in Indianapolis under one “umbrella.” We decided this is the most appropriate route given the 9.3% (2010 U.S. Census Bureau) Hispanic or Latino population of Indianapolis. However, a limitation of such a small Latino population means that the linkage between non-profits and political participation will probably only provide baseline data for our study. Half of the Latino population of Indianapolis has arrived in the last eight years (The Indianapolis Hispanic Study, 2000). The Mexican subgroup is the largest with about 2.7% of the total Latino population residing in Indianapolis. However, we acknowledge that as the Latino population increases in Indianapolis, it will be necessary for us to differentiate Mexicans vis-à-vis Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis Cubans and so on to discern any nuances in terms of nonprofits, civic groups and political party linkages.

In light of the huge influx of Latino immigrants within the U.S. in general and most

recently within the Midwest, the viability of political parties in the 21st century in Midwestern cities will depend upon their ability to mobilize Latino voters. The numbers speak for themselves with regard to the huge influx of Latinos residing in Midwestern cities over the past 10 years. Indianapolis exhibited the largest percentage growth in Latinos over the past year of any U.S. city (Indiana Business Center, 2006), and subsequently Kentucky experienced its largest percentage growth in the number of Latino residents from 1990 to 2010, and subsequently has one of the fastest growing Latino populations in the U.S. (Census Bureau, 2010). Moreover, an area of research which has been overlooked is the impact of increasing numbers of Latinos moving into suburban America. Jones-Correa (2002: 3) suggests that the “suburbanization of politics” with the increasing numbers of immigrants holds the possibility of racial and class conflicts. This area of research has “...not been studied by urban ethnographers and political scientists” (Andersen and Cohen, 2005: 191).

Our study seeks to investigate how nonprofits mobilize Latino residents in Indianapolis, and how linkages are created with local and perhaps state political parties. Through this analysis we seek to provide implications for how public policy may be shaped by the growing emergence of nonprofit organizations as tools of civic engagement, beyond voting. This form of immigrant assimilation is often either overlooked or at best minimized in the civil society literature. It takes the backseat to more transparent forms of assimilation and acculturation, i.e., socio-economic and educational models of assimilation and acculturation. We seek to examine what (if any) strategies, state and local political parties and nonprofits are utilizing to not only attract these new members of the electorate, but also embed a sense of civic-engagement not only at the ballot box but beyond elections.

BACKGROUND

First, our research addresses salient questions that have not (or have not been fully addressed) been dealt with by previous research. Targeted groups (e.g., Latinos and Asian Americans) have generally not been the main focus of nonprofit sector research. However, there is a plethora of research focusing on the salience of the nonprofit sector in providing goods and services which are traditionally provided by the government via the legislative process, especially at the federal level. Nonprofits are playing an increasingly prominent role in delivering basic public goods and services. However, nonprofits have been generally prohibited by federal law to directly advocate for goods and services on Capitol Hill. For example, as Berry and Arons (2005) have suggested, lobbying restrictions should be eased so that nonprofits can become more directly involved in the federal legislative process. This type of involvement will widen the pluralist and more specifically civil society notion, which undeniably nurtures democratization.

Moreover, in general, in recent years, political parties have simply ignored (or marginalized) these newly arrived immigrants. Furthermore, political parties have relied on community groups to perform these civic inculcation functions (United Way of Central Indiana/Community Service Council, 2000; Freedman and Johnson, 2002; Andersen and Cohen, 2005). Tocqueville (1840) and more recently, Berger and Neuhaus (1977) understood the salience of institutions or organizations playing a pivotal role in democratic consolidation. Robert Putnam has posited that “members of associations are much more likely than nonmembers to participate in politics...and express social trust” (Putnam, 1995: 73). Additionally, Putnam theorized that nonprofit membership is good for society in general because it engenders a kind of generalized trust, which in turn facilitates even more positive cooperative

linkages. According to the Nonprofit Almanac (2001) the number of adults that volunteered for a nonprofit between 1989 and 1998 increased from 98.4 million to 109.4 million. In addition, 70 percent of Americans donate money to nonprofits every year; the total annual contributions for all Americans being \$132 billion. A majority of early American institutions, such as schools and hospitals, were founded by religious institutions with missions to serve the poor and underserved as well as to foster a spirit of community. These values also have become a part of the secular philosophy of the country and provide the impetus for many social service programs.

Latinos are more likely (Formicola, Segers, and Weber, 2003) to attend and participate in churches than most Americans, as well as being more willing to support programs offered by many nonprofits, especially human services. Additionally, there are close to 18,000 Latino evangelical churches (membership of approximately 15 million born again/evangelical Christians) in the United States (National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC) website). One of the many goals of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference according to its leader, the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, is “to foster greater political engagement by Latinos, whose turnout at the polls has often disappointed.” In the buildup to the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election Day, the NHCLC organized voter-registration drives, hosted candidate forums and issued a “Latino Christian manifesto” of core Hispanic values (Campo-Flores, 2008: 86).

Latinos in general share the same enthusiasm for nonprofits, especially religious-based involvement within the political realm. Formicola, Segers, and Weber (2003) detail how President George W. Bush Administration’s Community and Faith Based Initiative exhibited considerable appeal for Latinos who were somewhat more willing to embrace the intermingling of religion and government than many Americans. In light of Latino voters’ tendency to not “fit” neatly into the traditional political platforms of neither the Democratic or Republican Party, therein is a dilemma. That is, Latinos generally align with Republicans on religious involvement in government and issues of morality, yet part with most Republicans with regard to governmental spending on social services and immigration issues. Subsequently, in order to galvanize the support of a growing number of Latino voters, voter mobilization strategies must reflect necessary transformations of mainstream (and fringe) political activity at the organizational level. However, mobilization of Latino voters involves more than simply “pandering” to the “community” or simply registering voters. Mobilization includes both political parties supporting Latino candidates for elected office. Such candidacy support not only bolsters Latino civic-engagement, but it also helps mobilize non-Latino candidates, which means increased competition, which nurtures democracy. A cogent, recent empirical study (Barreto 2007) illustrates that ethnicity is quite salient for Latino voters, and in turn plays an empowering role for co-ethnic candidates. Moreover, Sanchez (2006) has investigated how Latino group identity may impact political engagement.

Latinos are the fastest growing population group in Marion County, Indiana (Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, 2006). Latinos in Indianapolis have been “serviced” by churches and other civic-based organizations as far back as 1967. For example, St. Mary’s Catholic Church began offering masses in Spanish in 1967 (Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, 2006). Likewise, La Plaza, a civic-based organization in Indianapolis, had its start in 1971, after merging with several other organizations, including the former Hispanic Center (Center for Urban Policy and the Environment 2006), and began offering similar services.

Unlike most medium to major-sized American cities, Indianapolis' Latino population is widely dispersed throughout the city. That is, Indianapolis does not have a "barrio" (an identifiable Latino neighborhood with more than 50% Latino residents) (Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, 2006). This scenario has major social, political and economic implications for service providers and political parties. The distance between Latino residents means that linkages to services by both civic organizations and political parties may be that more difficult because of the lack of a critical mass of residents in one major geographical location. That is, instead of having centrally-located service providers and political party neighborhood offices, satellite locations will have to be dispersed throughout the city, meaning higher overall costs. However, such dispersion of residents and services does not automatically diminish the effectiveness of developing linkages between these vested actors. Moreover, civic organizations and political parties (beyond registering people to vote) can help provide routes to desperately needed labor in industries such as light manufacturing, hospitality in hotels/motels, the new convention center, maintenance, construction, landscaping, and farming. These sectors are all experiencing rapid growth in Indianapolis and Marion County (Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, 2006).

Our study will complement the extensive work that nonprofit, civic-based groups like La Plaza and Alliance for Community Education in Indianapolis are currently doing. La Plaza's current education programs include: the El Puente Project (which educates teachers and administrators about Latino culture, as well as educating Latino students and parents about American culture and the American educational system); the Alliance for Community Education offers certification training in Microsoft applications and other computer-related training) (Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, 2006). However, unlike the above "independent" activities, our study will investigate any linkages between these nonprofit, civic-based groups and local political parties as they both attempt to inculcate educational, political and economic opportunities (beyond the salience of voting) in Latinos in Indianapolis. Moreover, a brief summary of the nonprofits illustrates that the primary focus of their work tends to be geared towards English language indoctrination. Worthy as such activities are our investigation seeks to extend such linkages and address the implications.

Given the large increases of Latino immigrants in recent years, not just in Indianapolis, but nationally, most have expressed a preference for Catholicism as their religion of choice (over 40% according to the New Immigrant Survey, 2008). Thus, what role does Catholicism play in assimilating newly arrived immigrants? As well, are roles different for nonprofits when attempting to assimilate such groups with diverse religions? Social capital theory (Putnam, 1995 and 2000) would suggest nonprofits (including churches) play a role in fostering assimilation by enabling immigrants to gain entry into the United States, obtain employment, obtain housing, learning English and so on. Such quality of life issues are addressed by most human service and health care related nonprofits, and subsequently are undergirded in the American Judeo-Christian belief system.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This study is based on primary and secondary analysis of quantitative data gleaned from various nonprofit organizations in Indianapolis, Indiana and surrounding communities. The purpose of this methodology will allow future researchers to build upon the existing civil society

literature, and more specifically the nonprofit, voluntary organization and democratization literature. However, this study is only preliminary with regard to the connections between Latino voter mobilization and nonprofits. Thus, this examination seeks to assess connections between Latino voter mobilization and nonprofits. The contribution of our study views democracy-building activities as more than linear, institutional parameters. Our study will afford students of democratization a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the nonprofit sector in the area of democratization.

Our study will employ a quantitative methodology to examine strategies employed by nonprofits and political parties to link and mobilize the growing Latino population in Indianapolis, Indiana. Data collected through direct mail surveys, telephone calls and other contacts (such as the Internet) will be gathered to determine the frequency and type of contacts employed by these entities to mobilize Latinos. We had a sample of 43 nonprofits in Indianapolis, with most providing completed surveys.

INNOVATION

Our research will provide innovation within the study of nonprofit linkages by examining the interface of politics and the role of nonprofits in civic engagement, on a local level. Specifically, innovation is provided mainly in the form of approaches and methods; few if any studies have examined the role played by nonprofits in mobilizing Latino voters in Indianapolis. In the future, we hope to further investigate the linkages in other Midwestern cities. We will develop a new multi-dimensional measure of Latino political participation in Indianapolis. While providing considerable innovation in examining the impact of this recent demographic change, as well as an innovative approach, this study will build upon previous studies (e.g., Gronbjerg, 1993; Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld, 1998) by purporting that governmental entities, in the form of political parties, exhibit a symbiotic relationship with nonprofit organizations within the Latino community. Subsequently, political parties are dependent upon nonprofits, especially churches within the Latino community, in order to mobilize Latino voters successfully. Baum and Oliver (1991) demonstrated how nonprofits need to foster institutional linkages with governmental entities in order to sustain their operations.

In building upon the importance of institutional linkages for the growth and viability of organizations, this study proposes that success in mobilizing Latino voters depends in part on citizen involvement, i.e., active participants, engaged in organizational and electoral activities, for the purpose of influencing public policy. Effective political mobilization is dependent upon a nonprofit's or political party's ability to establish community linkages. In tandem with Baum and Oliver's definition of an institutional (in our case, the Latino community) linkage, this study views a linkage as a direct and *regularized*, i.e., on-going relationship between a political party and community based organizations (i.e., nonprofits) within the Latino community.

FINDINGS

Collaboration (institutional linkages) between political parties and Latino-based nonprofits to mobilize the Latino population, beyond voting, was our dependent variable. We measure *mobilization* as the number of people that the nonprofits were able to register to vote. It is important to note that the nonprofits were in compliance with 501c federal regulations. Mobilization is measured as an ordinal variable, i.e., low, medium and high levels of attainment

in mobilization efforts. Our study used the independent variables (mission, longevity, geographic location, religious or secular-based, and funding sources of the nonprofits), to investigate the linkages. The mission is the goal of the political party/nonprofit; the longevity is how long the nonprofit has been in existence (longevity adds to the credibility and legitimacy of the group); the geographic location (proximity, or physical location) of the political party and nonprofit enhances the one-on-one contact. Moreover, religious or secular-based nonprofits may influence the attractiveness of the potential voter to get engaged in the political process. Likewise, the funding sources of the nonprofits may (or may not) allow such groups to engage in particular get-out-the-vote opportunities. Our study revealed (see Table 1) that a nonprofit's geographic location to the Latino community was the strongest indicator (although not statistically significant) of the linkages that are developed between nonprofits to mobilize the Latino community. At first glance, location, location, location might be commonsensical in terms of developing enduring relationships however that may not always be the case. For example, a nonprofit's mission and/or longevity might actually foster more enduring relationships, as well as a level of legitimacy in the eyes of the clientele (the Latino population). Our study also revealed strong, positive correlations (significant at the .05 alpha level) in terms of a nonprofit's years in operation (longevity) and "streams" of revenue, that is, the various sources of revenue tended to be more enduring or embedded as the years of operation increased for a nonprofit. Also, there was a positive, significant correlation between a nonprofit's objective(s) and assistance by government institutions (e.g., local and state legislatures). This strong relationship may suggest that as long as the government views the nonprofit as acting in accordance with 501c (nonprofit organizations) rules and regulations that increases the nonprofits' chances of garnering some level of local and/or state financial support. As well, our study found that Catholic-based nonprofits tended to see higher traffic (in some cases) and higher retention levels of servicing the Latino population. The religious variable played a role, because many Latinos are Catholic in their religious orientation, and may feel more of an affinity towards those nonprofits that are Catholic-based.

In terms of the other independent variable (funding) in our study, there was no discernible evidence to suggest that funding was either augmented or hampered by the nonprofits' mission statement. That is, there appears to be other reasons why perhaps a nonprofits operating budget, and the like may vary from year to year, including budget constraints because of difficult economic times, like a recession, which tends to impact nonprofits more so than most commercial (for profit) firms. The quantitative evidence suggests that there are transparent linkages which help to mobilize the growing Latino population in Indianapolis.

There were organizations that linked and mobilized Latinos by distributing handbills, delivering speeches, and having discussions with the Latino community. As well, some of the nonprofits linked up with other similar organizations, to not only maximize their legitimacy, but also increase their leverage with local political parties, as a way to illustrate to the political parties that they (nonprofits) have a captive audience of new and existing voters (Latino population). A couple of the nonprofits sought to build grassroots involvement in legislative processes that affects non-public schools. Therefore, such groups have to maintain a healthy, positive relationship with political parties and policymakers. Furthermore, such groups have to maintain "effective representation of non-public school agenda items to public policy members

at events such as state board meetings, legislative hearings and superintendent meetings” (Indiana Non-Public Education Association).

TABLE 1. PEARSON CORRELATIONS

		Mission	Longevity	Geographic	Religion	Funding	Collaboration
Mission	Pearson Corr.	1	-.194	-.044	-.014	.182	-.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.332	.828	.944	.363	.970
	N	27	27	27	27	27	26
Longevity	Pearson Corr.	-.194	1	-.030	.061	-.182	.067
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.332		.868	.734	.303	.713
	N	27	34	34	34	34	33
Geographic	Pearson Corr.	-.044	-.030	1	.090	.134	.287
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.828	.868		.614	.451	.105
	N	27	34	34	34	34	33
Religion	Pearson Corr.	-.014	.061	.090	1	.176	.016
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.944	.734	.614		.319	.928
	N	27	34	34	34	34	33
Funding	Pearson Corr.	.182	-.182	.134	.176	1	.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.363	.303	.451	.319		1.000
	N	27	34	34	34	34	33
Collaboration	Pearson Corr.	-.008	.067	.287	.016	.000	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.970	.713	.105	.928	1.000	
	N	26	33	33	33	33	33

Lastly, our study did not reveal robust relationships between nonprofits and local political parties as a “bridge” to foster stronger ties with the growing Latino population in Marion County (more specifically Indianapolis), Indiana. One reason that nonprofits do not engage in this “entangling alliance” is the fear that they will be perceived as actively involved in politics, which will violate their 501c status. Nevertheless, indirectly nonprofits and political parties are engaging in forging relationships to connect the growing Latino population. Strategies such as nonprofit meetings about how to get civically-involved, as well as linkages between nonprofits and information-sharing are making inroads to connect the Latino population. A couple of quotes that captured the essence of organizational links and mobilization efforts in the political process can be summarized as follows. “We link and mobilize our clients in the political process

(beyond voting) with member to member communication via handbills, speeches, and discussions.” “We link and mobilize our clients in the political process (beyond voting) by building grassroots involvement in legislation that affects non-public schools.” These quotes glean from qualitative interviews and amplify the linkages we found between nonprofit organizations and voter mobilization.

Our justification or rationale for running a series of correlations, as opposed to more complicated models that incorporate multiple causes in a single statistical model, was mainly because correlations provide baseline data (illustrating a relationship between linkages and mobilization efforts) for future research. Moreover, since our sample size was relatively small, we felt that more complicated models might muddle our results, which would increase the bias in our study.

CONCLUSIONS

Nonprofits are categorized as 501c organizations, thus have to be in compliance per federal regulations (as previously stated), which precludes the organizations from engaging in the political process, like political parties. Thus, there are particular variables which distinguish nonprofits from political parties in the political process, which gives nonprofits a unique opportunity in the political process. For example, longevity and location of nonprofits certainly play a significant role in developing trust and legitimacy for the growing (which has more than doubled in the last decade) Latino population of Marion County, Indiana. Therefore, social capital is a valuable resource that nourishes nonprofits and provides a linkage to the historically marginalized Latino population. This independent sector involvement in politics, especially with regard to voter registration, is nothing new within America’s political traditions and culture. In tandem with African American churches and other 501c nonprofits such as the N.A.A.C.P. during the modern Civil Rights movement, as well as Christian Evangelical churches during George W. Bush’s presidency, “nonpartisan” nonprofits have historically played pivotal roles in mobilizing and galvanizing American voters (Formicola, Segers and Weber, 2003). However, it is quite naïve to suggest that such linkages are the “catchall” in terms of formulating enduring long-term civic relationships. That is, other factors must also be considered, variables such as partnerships with multiple nonprofits to share mobilization costs, as well as creating more neighborhood satellite offices of nonprofits and political parties. Lastly, further investigations into the areas of the role of political efficacy and trust in the political system should reveal more information as intermediate variables which help embed the linkages.

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