TWO STEPS FORWARD

The Slow and Steady March toward Immigrant Political Mobilization

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Abstract

In this essay, I contend that one can understand neither the development of mass action among contemporary immigrants, nor the sporadic nature of that action, without attending to the historic role of parties and community-based organizations in shaping immigrants' political mobilization. I draw connections between the mass immigrant-rights demonstrations that took place during the spring of 2006 and what we know about how immigrants' political participation in the United States is structured by (1) the declining influence of political parties, and (2) the critical function of community-based organizations. These organizations were the focus of my recent book, *Democracy's Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institutions* (2006). Why haven't activists been able to sustain the momentum that brought hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters out into the streets during the spring of 2006? Although they, along with the Spanish-language media, played a critical role in organizing mass demonstrations against punitive immigration legislation in early 2006, labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions face severe constraints in terms of engaging in sustained, consistent political mobilization and, therefore, mainly achieve limited mobilization. However, voter registration data from the National Association of Latino Elected Officials suggest that the demonstrations may have spurred interest in more traditional types of political participation among immigrants and their supporters. Thus, while it is true that, for the most part, political participation does not take place overnight, there may be ways for U.S. civic institutions to speed up that process through direct mobilization and the provision of information that helps immigrants to feel more comfortable and confident taking part in the political system. Trusted community-based institutions represent a vital potential force in promoting political inclusion for immigrant newcomers who contribute to so many other aspects of American life.

Keywords: Immigrants, Demonstrations, Marches, Political Participation, Civic Institutions

Du Bois Review, 4:2 (2007) 457–467.
© 2007 W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research 1742-058X/07 $15.00
doi:10.1017/S1742058X07070257

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

INTRODUCTION

On May 1, 2006, I gathered with hundreds of thousands of other immigrant-rights supporters in Los Angeles to call for fair immigration reform. As the huge crowd moved from MacArthur Park to a rally at the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, I felt a rush of excitement at the swell of people around me. The cheers and chants were deafening as I scanned the crowd of men and women; children and grandparents; and White, Black, and Brown faces. The energy of the crowd was palpable, and I began to wonder whether commentators were indeed right that we were witnessing the birth of a new social and civil rights movement. After all, the march in Los Angeles was by no means an isolated event. Throughout the nation, immigrants and their supporters were holding some of the largest demonstrations in national history.

The crowd that stood before Martin Luther King, Jr., as he delivered his "I have a dream" speech was estimated at from 250,000 to 500,000 (U.S. Department of State 2008). To compare, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that at least that many people attended immigrant-rights demonstrations in Los Angeles in May 2006, and similarly large crowds gathered in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Tens of thousands of people joined demonstrations in Sacramento, San Francisco, Denver, New York, and Houston, as well (Watanabe and Becerra, 2006).

Attempts to replicate the huge immigrant-rights demonstrations since the spring of 2006 have failed. Turnout at pro-immigrant demonstrations held during September 2006 in Washington, D.C., and in Los Angeles was sparse by all accounts and led organizers and their supporters to question the movement's momentum. In Washington, less than 5000 demonstrators arrived for a Labor Day weekend rally (Brulliard 2006). In Los Angeles, only 200 people attended a pro-immigrant rally held the same weekend (Prengaman 2006). What happened to the thrilling throngs of people crying out for fair treatment, respect, and the opportunity to live a decent life in the United States?

Many marchers were outraged over a U.S. House measure that would have criminalized persons in the country without legal documents, as well as those who tried to aid them. Organizers of the demonstrations supported legislation in the U.S. Senate that would have allowed some undocumented immigrants to become citizens. Frustration over failure to advance the latter bill in the months following the spring demonstrations may have kept many people from joining demonstrations in September. Organizers' internal divisions over strategies and poor timing—including the start of the school year and events marking the attacks of September 11, 2001—also undermined the demonstrations. Finally, the spring demonstrations had prompted a backlash from anti-immigrant groups and set off a wave of state and local legislation aimed at restricting illegal immigration, which may have intimidated protesters.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the immigrant-rights movement should have faded in the public eye. In contrast to earlier immigrants from Europe, those of today, who hail mostly from Asia and Latin America, find themselves on the periphery of the U.S. political system. In *Democracy's Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institutions* (2006), I have suggested that low rates of participation in U.S. politics among immigrants are not due to individual apathy, lack of assimilation, or even a preoccupation with the homeland, as some popular and scholarly accounts have claimed. Rather, I contend that shifts in the U.S. institutional landscape explain immigrants' relative lack of political participation in the contemporary era. Local political machines and party organizations formerly exhibited a consistent and committed interest in political mobilization at the neighborhood level but are no longer

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a vital presence in U.S. communities, generally, nor immigrant communities, in particular. Such efforts have been replaced by centralized campaigns by the Republican and Democratic national headquarters, where technicalization—in the form of direct marketing, mass media campaigns, and "microtargeting" of the most likely voters—has become the norm.

In the absence of strong, local-level party activity, the influence of groups that do community-based work—labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social-service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions—may be even greater than was the case during the first great wave of migration to the United States from Europe. Indeed, as I predicted in my book, these types of community organizations led the mass demonstrations of spring 2006. In Los Angeles, marchers were drawn into the streets by social service and advocacy organizations such as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, the Korean Resource Center, the Central American Resource Center, unions, and religious organizations such as the Dolores Mission Church. In Washington, D.C., a host of similar organizations—including CASA of Maryland and Mexicanos Sin Fronteras, both immigrant advocacy organizations—and the League of Korean Americans of Maryland (an ethnic voluntary association) passed out flyers, tacked up posters, and knocked on doors to get people out for the largest march of April 2006. These groups worked closely with disc jockeys on Spanish-language radio stations to rally turnout for the demonstrations. Given the turnout, many elected officials, mainstream party organizers, and academics were genuinely surprised by the demonstrations and their magnitude.

Immigrants themselves were once vital to U.S. politics. Political scientist Kristi Andersen notes that "a half million potential voters disembarked in this country every year between 1890 and 1910," and the Democrats actively recruited these new potential supporters (Andersen 1979, pp. 22, 25). The golden age of political parties coincided with the height of European immigration to the United States. From 1850 to 1930, the foreign-born population in the United States increased from 2 million to 14 million, and by 1890, immigrants accounted for nearly 15% of the entire U.S. population. From that year until 1910, party machines governed 75% of major U.S. cities (Reichley 1992, p. 174). Another political scientist, Steven Schier, writes that "nineteenth-century immigrants arrived to find important political groups eager to satisfy their material needs. Political party organizations, especially the many urban political machines, needed immigrants' votes and did their best to get them" (Schier 2002, p. 16). As goods and services were exchanged for votes, political party machines became the mediating institution between immigrants and the U.S. political system.

That role, while a historic fact, is somewhat exaggerated in popular accounts. In reality, parties often worked in concert with local organizations such as unions and churches. Parties mobilized some groups of European immigrants when it was to their (the party's) advantage, but failed to mobilize others when no obvious benefit existed (Erie 1988; Stone 1996). Parties acted strategically, such that party competition, not commitment to inclusion, drove outreach to immigrants. Nonetheless, parties clearly played a critical part in bringing European immigrants into the political system until the middle of the twentieth century.

Thus, it might be natural to assume that, in the current era, characterized by a polarized electorate and billions of dollars spent by candidates and parties to fight for the median voter, political parties would go after immigrants. After all, some theories suggest that strong incentives to build winning coalitions would compel parties to reach out and absorb new groups, including immigrants, into politics. But, despite the parties' historical involvement in immigrant political mobilization and their

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seeming incentives to mobilize immigrants, it is unlikely that even the limited pattern of mobilization experienced by European immigrants in the early twentieth century will be repeated.

WHAT HAPPENED TO POLITICAL PARTIES?

Electoral Reforms

In 1880, the introduction of the Australian ballot (printed with all of the candidates' names, and marked in secret) and nonpartisan elections for local offices reduced party control over election procedures and outcomes. Parties were further weakened at the local level by the introduction of direct primaries in the 1900s. After World War II, reformers also took aim at the political party machines' greatest resource, local patronage. Finally, local party decline is attributable to several other factors, including the federal government's expanding role in social and economic redistribution programs, growth of nonparty political organizations such as interest groups, and the rise of candidate-centered campaigns. These changes coincided with regional trends, including suburbanization, which moved people to outside the cities and traditional machine territories.

When parties rebounded at the end of the twentieth century, it was due to expansion and institutionalization of the national committees, not a revitalization of state and local party organizations. The Democratic and Republican National Committees acquired permanent headquarters and larger professional staffs. They focused on sophisticated production facilities aimed at saturating major media markets and launching direct-mail campaigns aimed at the most likely voters.

Thus, it is not that parties are no longer active—they are quite active at the national level—but they do not engage in broad-based, face-to-face mobilization anymore. Face-to-face mobilization is directed at the parties' bases, likely voters with strong party identification, not at newcomers whose party loyalties are unproven. At the local level, political parties exist, but they are often on the defensive, entrenched and fearful, protecting the status quo and their existing coalitions from encroachment by immigrant newcomers (Jones-Correa 1998).

Selective Mobilization

When deciding whom to mobilize, party leaders focus their efforts strategically to expend the least effort and resources to achieve the greatest effect. This "best bang-for-the-buck" approach may seem rational from an economist's point of view, but it has grave consequences for immigrants, who, because of their general lack of economic and educational resources, fail to meet the criteria that distinguish the "most likely voters"—the Holy Grail for party advisors intent on maximizing turnout by focusing on those with the time, money, and education to turn out consistently in elections.

This is not to suggest that a return to the political machines of old, which were often associated with corruption and cronyism, is the appropriate remedy for lack of immigrant mobilization by major political parties. Rather, I seek to draw attention to changes in the institutional landscape over time and how the decline of major mobilizing institutions has interacted with the rising number of immigrants since 1965, many of whom would no doubt benefit from the intense, local, face-to-face mobilization that helped to bring previous waves of immigrants into the political system.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

BUT WHAT ABOUT RECENT PARTY OUTREACH TO LATINOS/AS?

In 2000, researchers and pundits proclaimed that the Latino population, long considered a sleeping giant in U.S. politics, was beginning to stir, and the Democratic and Republican Parties were going to heed the realities of demographic change (Tumulty 2001; DeFrancesco Soto and Merolla, 2006). For the first time in history, Latinos outnumbered Black Americans, becoming the country's largest minority group. Today, Latinos make up 14% of the U.S. population (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001). Voter-registration rates for Latinos had been rising consistently for the previous twenty years, as had their share of the electorate. In fact, the campaigns utilized the Spanish-language media more than ever before: both presidential candidates used Spanish in their speeches, and Latino and Latina cultural symbols were very visible at the conventions. Latino leaders initially welcomed the parties' long-awaited efforts to reach out to the group. But disappointment in the parties' limited efforts set in quickly. In both 2000 and 2004, the parties' nationalized campaign strategies focused on winning the electoral vote in specific battleground states, reducing efforts to woo Latino voters because the majority of these voters are not concentrated in most of the battleground states (DeSipio and de la Garza, 2005). Florida, New Mexico, and Arizona do contain significant Latino populations, but the vast majority of Latinos live outside those states (Wong 2006, p. 73).

Only 20% of all U.S. Latinos, but 40% of all non-Latino Whites, lived in states considered battlegrounds in 2000 and 2004 (Wong 2006). Consequently, Latinos are about one-half as likely as are non-Latino Whites to live in the states that were the focus of the past two presidential campaigns. As a result of these demographics, the vast majority of the parties' resources were directed toward states that are disproportionately White, leading Adam Segal of the Hispanic Voter Project at Johns Hopkins to observe in late September 2004:

> Most of the Hispanic voters across the nation will never see or hear a paid advertisement by the campaigns and will likely never see the candidates at events in their states. Limited resources force the campaigns to make trade-off decisions based on each upcoming election. This short-term strategy unfortunately does little to contribute to broader, long-term national political gains for the Hispanic community (Segal 2004, p. 3).

In addition, the shift in party mobilizing tactics to the use of sophisticated media, direct-mail, and "microtargeting" techniques at the expense of local outreach means that, in a handful of battleground states, both parties target only the most likely Latino voters—those in high-turnout precincts, or those who have exhibited a consistent history of voting. Only the *most advantaged* segment of the Latino community—citizens with a strong history of turning out to vote in the past—was targeted by the two parties. Despite unprecedented amounts of money spent by both campaigns on Spanish-language media and increased symbolic outreach directed toward Latinos, neither party's efforts led to mass mobilization or mass participation by Latinos in the last two presidential elections (DeSipio and de la Garza, 2005).

In the 2006 congressional elections, there was a noticeable increase in Latino turnout, as compared to previous midterm elections. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that Latino turnout may have been as high as 60%, an increase from 58% in 2002 (Pew Hispanic Center 2007). [In contrast, however, American University's Center for the Study of the American Electorate reported that turnout among the general public barely shifted over the same period, with only a modest increase (Gans

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2006).] Exit polls showed that Latinos made up approximately 8% of the electorate, also a significant increase since 2002 (CNN 2006). Yet few would attribute these trends to the efforts of the political parties. Rather, surveys conducted around the time of the election revealed that the national debate over immigration spurred Latino turnout.

Asian American turnout (to include all people of Asian origin living in the United States on a permanent basis, including immigrants and noncitizens) also increased, but this was most likely due to a new wave of high-profile Asian American candidates in close elections around the country. In fact, immigrants from Asia receive far less attention from the parties than do Latinos, even though Asian American likely voters typically include a much larger proportion of undecided "swing" voters than do their Latino counterparts. By July 2003, only 3% of Latino likely voters remained undecided about the two presidential candidates, while fully 20% of Asian Americans were undecided about their candidate choice as late as August 2004. In addition, Asian American voters grew at a tremendous rate between 1996 and 2004—22% compared to 19% for Latinos, and just 4% for non-Latino Whites (Passel 2004). But, in large part because of selective mobilization strategies that focused on the most likely voters in battleground states, the two parties failed to mobilize most Asian Americans.

Political parties are not the primary force behind immigrant mobilization today. I argue in *Democracy's Promise* that community organizations have stepped into the breach.

A NEW FORCE FOR IMMIGRANT MOBILIZATION: COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Why were community-based organizations so critical in the mass demonstrations that took place in the spring of 2006? The organizations which I have examined—labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social-service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions—have long played an important role in helping to integrate immigrants into the political system. From the 1890s to the 1920s, when major migrations to the United States occurred and nativism flourished, community organizations, including ethnic voluntary associations, proliferated at both the national and local levels. They often worked directly with political parties that had a strong presence at the local or neighborhood level to mobilize immigrants.

Community organizations have certain strengths and incentives for politically mobilizing minority immigrant groups; three stand out: (1) the desire for organizational maintenance, (2) trusted leadership and expertise, and (3) transnational connections.

Organizational Maintenance

Community organizations seek to expand their membership and constituencies to build a base and to increase effectiveness. In contrast to political parties, community groups are often interested in the power of numbers of *individuals* rather than in absolute voting power alone. Thus, community organizations have an incentive to reach out to noncitizens, and others who may not be obvious potential voters, as a means of increasing the organizations' influence, clout, and ability to achieve policy goals. Immigrants represent a sizeable bloc of potential constituents. These organi-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

zations often provide key services: English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, health care, and legal services. The provision of these things also builds a connection between the organization and its constituency, so that the organization is positioned to mobilize people around relevant issues.

Trusted Leadership and Expertise

A second strength of community organizations in working with immigrants is that an organization's leaders often have close ties to immigrant communities and are ideologically committed to immigrant and minority rights. Because leaders have or develop strong social and cultural connections to immigrant communities, they are more effective in terms of mobilization. They can engage in culturally sensitive strategies and reach out to immigrants in their native language. One Filipino American community organizer with whom I spoke emphasized the importance of linguistic skills and cultural knowledge for achieving successful mobilization:

> Once you have the language access and once you can talk to actual members in the community and go into their neighborhoods and meet with them—that's where these organizations have an advantage. They tend to be staffed by . . . people who have consciously tried to maintain their language heritage, or who have learned on their own, or who have hired other folks—first-generation immigrants who do have language capacity. They've made that a priority.

Years of providing immigrants with services and information can endow an organization with expertise based upon firsthand experience with the day-to-day challenges faced by immigrant communities, and a strong legitimacy in the eyes of the community, which helps it to mobilize immigrants. Indeed, it would be difficult for parties to reach out to immigrants today without working closely with established community organizations.

Transnational Connections

Finally, immigrants have been the agents in creating new transnational philanthropic organizations, and in instituting transnational practices within existing organizations. These transnational connections may serve to encourage political participation in the United States, rather than acting as a barrier.

One of my key findings has been that political involvement in the homeland does not deter immigrants from participating in politics in the United States. I have conducted analyses that account for differences in income, education, length of residence in the United States—and a host of other potentially intervening factors—which show that, among Latinos and Asian Americans, homeland political activity does not negatively affect political participation in the United States. Most often, the relationship between the two is statistically insignificant. In one case, even after taking into account education, income, and other relevant factors, I found that Asian American immigrants who were active in homeland politics participated in *more* political activities in the United States than those who were not active in homeland politics.

These findings contradict the assumption made by Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut in their seminal study of immigration, that "political concerns of the foreign born today seldom have to do with matters American. Instead, they tend to center on issues and problems back home" (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996, p. 108). In

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contrast, I find evidence that, for some groups, including Asian American immigrants, transnational political activity goes hand-in-hand with political participation in the United States.

SLEEPING GIANT OR RISING ICEBERG?

Implications and Limitations

Why haven't activists been able to sustain the momentum that brought hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters out into the streets in the spring of 2006? Although activists, along with the Spanish-language media, played a critical role in organizing mass demonstrations against punitive immigration legislation in early 2006, community-based organizations also face obstacles to sustained, consistent political mobilization—with limited participation as the result. First, for most of these organizations, the primary mission is not political mobilization, but instead to provide much needed social services, networking, labor advocacy, or even spiritual ministering. Consequently, most organizations cannot engage full time or consistently in political activities. Second, most confront serious limitations in terms of financial resources, which place consistent mass mobilization out of reach, as comments by a leader of a nonprofit that focuses on voting rights in the Latino community illustrate:

> We work within a very specific moment of the political process. That determines a lot of our organizing, but it's also required because our community is so large, and, money-wise, there's no way to sustain ourselves. There's a whole question of continuity, because we don't have the money to work continuously (cited in Wong 2006, p. 97).

Although community-based organizations may face challenges to mass mobilization and may not be able to achieve sustained mass mobilization among immigrants, they are often rich in human capital and legitimacy, unique resources that help them to mobilize immigrants. They do foster action and involvement, with visible consequences for the political system and policy making. New York City's Chinese Staff and Workers' Association has sent immigrant women working in garment factories to testify before Congress for antisweatshop laws. One-Stop Immigration, a social service provider mainly for Latino immigrants in Los Angeles, has sent immigrants to Washington, D.C., to march for amnesty legislation. In 2003, local unions nationwide organized the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, which toured the country and culminated with demonstrations in Washington, D.C. These organizations are clearly laying the groundwork for political participation among immigrants.

And, because community-based organizations mobilize those who traditional theories of political participation, particularly socioeconomic theories, contend are the least likely to participate—day laborers; garment workers; those with few resources, who do not speak English, and who are not citizens—the work of these organizations compels us to reconsider theories that emphasize economic resources and to acknowledge the fact that institutional sources of mobilization may matter as much as the individual resources that political parties bank on.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Political parties have not taken a long-term approach to mobilizing Asian Americans or Latinos, especially the immigrant members of those communities. In contrast to the past, parties have not been mobilizing immigrants on a mass level in the communities where they live. Instead, they primarily engage in selective mobilization of the most likely voters because parties are preoccupied with the short-term demands of the next election. An alternative strategy, one that focuses on helping noncitizens and low-propensity voters to navigate the political system and participate, might have long-term benefits. Given the deeply polarized electorate that currently characterizes the nation, political parties should consider expanding their future base by nurturing participation among immigrants, even those who have not yet become citizens.

Community organizations such as labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions have stepped into the breach left by political parties, but many of their efforts face significant challenges, such as lack of financial resources and competing priorities dictated by organizational mission. Consequently, it is difficult for such groups to engage in sustained mobilization.

Interestingly, the passage of time, a passive force, is one that probably counts for the mobilization of the greatest numbers. My research reveals that one of the single most important determinants of whether or not immigrants take part in politics is their length of residence in the United States.

For example, data based on a 2000–2001 survey of Asian Americans show that, for naturalized Asian Americans, registration rates increase with the length of U.S. residency (Lien et al., 2004). Those citizens who had lived in the United States for twenty-one years or longer were actually more likely to be registered voters (93%) than were U.S.-born Asian Americans (85%). A similar pattern holds for Asian American voter turnout in 2000. Of the registered Asian Americans who had lived in the United States for fewer than ten years, less than 30% indicated that they had voted, compared to more than 50% of those who had lived there for twenty-one years or more. Again, Asian immigrants who were long-term residents were even more likely to have voted in 2000 than were native-born Asian Americans. My research shows that the relationship between time spent in the United States and political participation is quite robust among Latinos as well. I found a positive, statistically significant relationship between length of residence and the likelihood of Latino and Asian immigrants to register to vote, to vote, and to participate in political activities other than voting. And this positive relationship holds true across groups and even after controlling for age, income, and education.

Why does time matter? Further analysis shows that time is a proxy for experience with the political system. If immigrants are more comfortable with and knowledgeable about the political system, then they are more likely to participate. With the passage of time, the United States has seen the number of Latino and Asian American voters increase. But Latinos and Asian Americans are still underrepresented in the U.S. electorate. Asian Americans represent over 5% of the population, but they made up just 2% of voters in 2004. Latinos now make up about 14% of the population, but they represented only 8% of voters in 2004. Existing research tells us that, without the intervention of external mobilizing agents, an increase in political participation for contemporary Asian American and Latino immigrants is likely to be slow, but also very steady, over time.

The inability of activists to build sustained political mobilization among immigrants following the spring 2006 mass demonstrations may be disappointing to many

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X07070257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

immigrants and their advocates. But I believe that the events of the spring of 2006 conveyed a critical message about immigrants' political potential and the responsibility of U.S. civic institutions to support that potential. Although the work of labor organizations, workers' centers, advocacy and social service organizations, ethnic voluntary associations, and religious institutions in organizing the demonstrations may not have launched a new social movement, their efforts may be critical to speeding up the normally "slow-and-steady" process of political incorporation for immigrants. Recent data analysis of Los Angeles County voter-registration files by the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO) shows:

- In Los Angeles County, the site of the largest immigrant-rights demonstrations, Latinos increased their share of the total electorate in Los Angeles County by 5% from March 2006, the first month in which there was a mass demonstration in Los Angeles, to August 2006.
- Nearly 11,000 naturalized U.S. citizen Latinos registered between March 2006 and November 2006.

These data, while not conclusive, suggest that the demonstrations may have spurred interest in other types of political participation among the marchers as well. For the most part, increases in political participation do not take place overnight. Yet there may be ways for U.S. civic institutions to speed up that process through direct mobilization and the provision of information that can help immigrants to feel more comfortable and confident taking part in the political system. The ethnic media can play a similar role. These trusted community organizations represent a vital potential force in promoting political inclusion for immigrant newcomers who contribute to so many other aspects of American life.

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