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MAKING CITIZEN DEMOCRACY WORK

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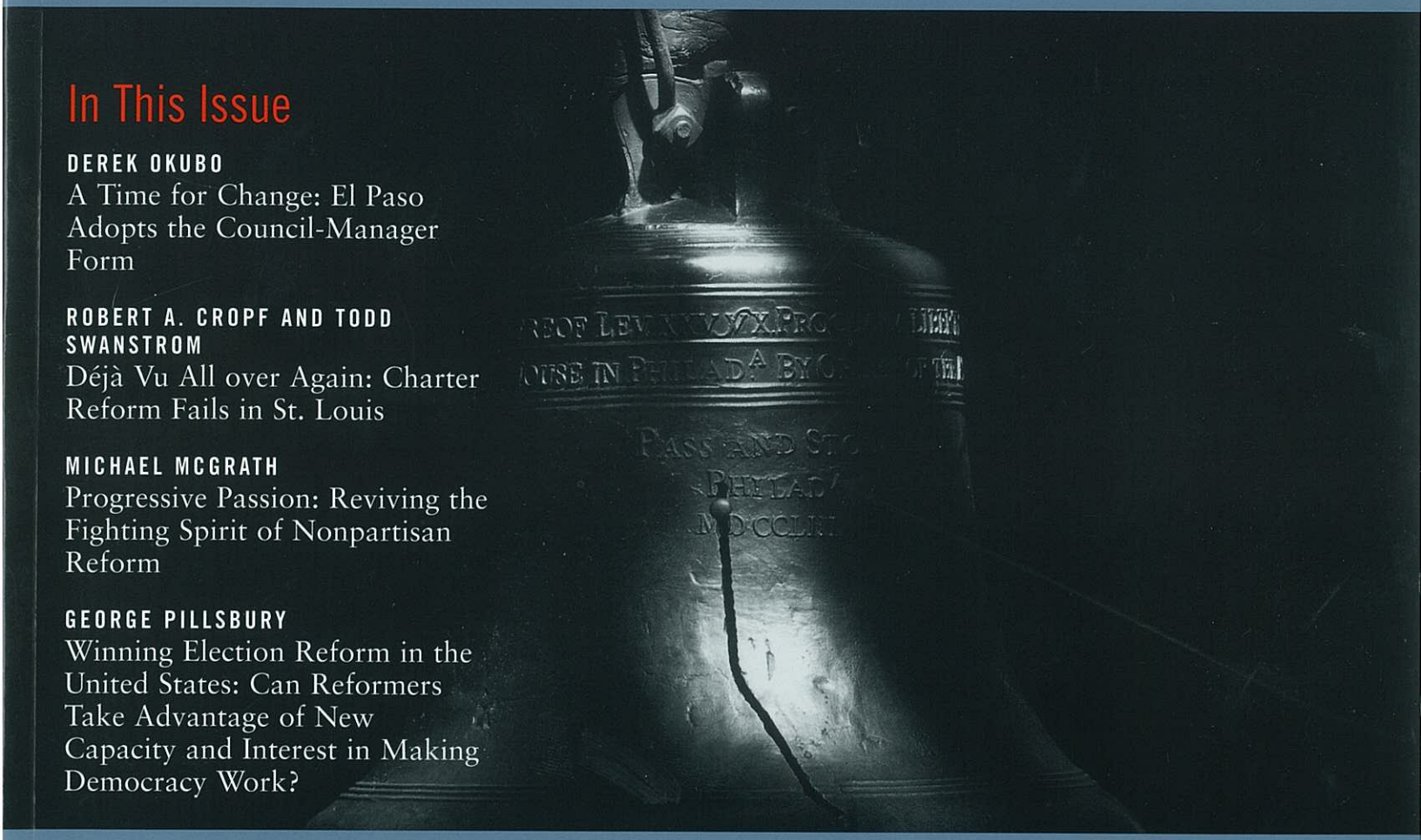

In This Issue

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Immigrants and Civic Engagement

BY CRAIG MCGARVEY

This article was adapted from "Pursuing Democracy's Promise: Newcomers' Civic Participation in America" a report published by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees in collaboration with the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation, © 2004.

The immigrant members of the Women's Leadership Group of the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee (TWSC) in Alexandria, Virginia, came together regularly to discuss community concerns and the needs of women. Using a technique of popular education to bring issues to the surface, they drew pictures of community life as they experienced it.

Catalina's drawing of her children playing in the street struck an immediate chord among the group and sparked conversation about the lack of recreational space for young people in their neighborhood.

With TWSC's encouragement, the women moved from problem identification to analysis and strategies that could lead to positive change. They decided to document the conditions, creating a map of all of the playgrounds and outside barbecue grills available to the nine thousand Arlandia residents. They found two of the former (both small), one of the latter. They made a similar map of adjacent, middle-class neighborhoods of single-family homes. The contrast was dramatic.

Next came research. The women studied the budget of the Alexandria Parks and Recreation Department; in the study they received support from TWSC staff, but the research was their responsibility. They found $75,000 that had been set aside but not yet used for tennis courts.

Armed with this information and their maps, the women sought a meeting with the director of parks and recreation. As a result of their ongoing advocacy, over the next few years Parks and Recreation made more than $100,000 in improvements to Arlandia: a new playground, two new public grills, and a multipurpose playing court.

TWSC is one of a growing number of nonprofit groups, charities, and organizing efforts that are dedicated to the goal of engaging recent immigrants in American civic life. This democratic experience of participating with others to solve community problems strengthens immigrants, the communities in which they live, and the democracy itself.

Through civic participation organizations, newcomers

- Educate themselves, developing their human capital through acquisition of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior
- Build networks of trusting relationships with those from like and unlike backgrounds, developing the "bonding" (with the former) and "bridging" (with the latter) social capital that sociologist Robert Putnam has argued to be essential to healthy communities
- Contribute to positive outcomes of social change
- Integrate into American society, a process by which they reinvigorate the democracy by participating in it (as did the ancestors of the native born)

Based in community centers or churches, unions or worker centers, neighborhoods or broader communities, civic participation efforts include nationally affiliated networks and locally created organizations. Some are ethnicity-centered, some not. Some

blend provision of services or advocacy with their civic participation work. All share a commitment to engaging and empowering immigrants and others through collective problem solving in the democratic process.

The Demographic Imperative

There is scarcely a state, city, town, or person in the United States unaffected by the demographic changes our country has experienced owing to immigration in recent decades. The foreign-born population increased by almost 1.6 million, or approximately 5 percent, in 2001 alone, continuing the record-breaking volume of the 1990s, when more than 13 million immigrants entered the country.

Approximately 34 million of us, about one in nine, were born outside the United States. Although the traditional receiving states of California, Texas, Illinois, Florida, New Jersey, and New York continue to attract large numbers, newcomers are now everywhere. In the thirty-seven states never before considered as immigrant destinations, the foreign-born population during the 1990s grew at twice the rate of these six historic gateways.

As has been true throughout the history of immigration to the United States, some of these new neighbors have come here to escape persecution in their homeland. Some have sought to reunify with family members. All have come to make a better life for their families through hard work.

Like those who preceded them, newcomers have become integral to the economy, where they are making important contributions. Immigrants accounted for half of all new entries into the U.S. labor force in the 1990s, fueling growth in many industries and, according to a 1997 National Academy of Sciences study, adding approximately $10 billion annually to the U.S. economy.

Immigrants are reinvigorating communities. In their book *Comeback Cities,* Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation and former executive director of Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and foundation consultant Tony Proscio specifically cite newcomer consumers and investors for their contribution to the renewal of the American inner city. "Immigration is the single most important factor for dividing winning cities from losing cities," says Grogan.

"Immigration is the single most important factor for dividing winning cities from losing cities," says Paul Grogan.

Rural communities have been similarly transformed. For example, the increase in the Latino worker population from 4 percent in the early 1990s to almost 25 percent in 2000 reversed economic decline in the dairy town of Yuma, Colorado, creating new businesses and increasing car sales, consumer loans, and property values.

Elections and Beyond

Immigrants are also reinvigorating the political landscape. Between the elections of 1996 and 2000, as the number of naturalized citizens grew, the foreign-born voting group increased by 20 percent. These immigrants and refugees are establishing themselves as important swing voters, representing great diversity of political outlook across class and generation and within generic ethnic categories.

Beyond casting ballots, newcomers are increasingly active broadly in electoral politics, from registering voters to running as candidates. Approximately one hundred immigrants and refugees now hold state-level elected office across the country.

But the contributions of newcomers in civic participation do not necessarily start or end with elections. Through collective problem solving, immigrants are making a difference at the community and policy levels.

To take an example, newcomers—one in four of California's population—have joined actively with the native-born in the PICO California Project of the Pacific Institute for Community Organization, which draws together seventeen PICO affiliates from throughout the state to add the voices and concerns of regular Californians to statewide policy improvement. Organizing in more than seventy cities and more than half of the state senate and assembly districts, the California Project represents approximately 350 congregations and four hundred thousand families.

Each of the seventeen PICO affiliates is a collaboration of congregations promoting civic participation among residents. While continuing to work together locally on issues, through the California Project members collectively identify statewide concerns and develop skills and strategies to move policy in the state capital of Sacramento.

In 1999, health care was the issue that bubbled up from members and coalesced for the project. An increasing number of participating families lacked access to basic care and were among the seven million uninsured Californians. The health care campaign was launched when more than three thousand PICO members visited the State Capitol on May 2, 2000.

Since that time the statewide policy improvements in which PICO members played a role have included simplification of Medi-Cal reporting, bringing health coverage to five hundred thousand additional families and children, an increase of $50 million to build and expand community clinics, a commitment to use the $400 million annual state share of the tobacco settlement for programs in health care, a $10 million increase in annual funding for primary care clinics, and approval by the federal government of the state's waiver request to add three hundred thousand uninsured parents to the Healthy Families program.

In their separate education campaign, members of the PICO California Project helped to add $50 million to after-school programs in low-income California neighborhoods and won $30 million for the country's first teacher home-visit program. They worked with the state treasurer to increase California's low-income housing tax credit by $20 million and, targeting one hundred thousand infrequent voters in a get-out-the-vote campaign, helped pass a statewide proposition for $2.1 billion to fund affordable housing.

To accomplish these goals, PICO California Project members have learned, among many other skills, how to develop and maintain strong working relationships with elected representatives on both sides of the aisle and at all levels of government.

An Age-Old American Story

The story of such immigrant civic participation is the story of America. It was immigrants and their descendants whom Alexis de Tocqueville was observing in the early nineteenth century when he wrote, in *Democracy in America,* that "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations . . . of a thousand different types. . . . Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention."

The Progressive Era, during which so many of the twentieth century's voluntary civic associations were created, coincided with the last great wave of immigration to the United States (almost twenty-seven million newcomers arrived between 1870 and 1920). Some of these associations (for example, the settlement houses) were intended to assist immigrant integration. Others were created by immigrants themselves. Not all were related to or favorable toward newcomers. But clearly the explosion of creativity in civic life was associated with the dramatic demographic and accompanying economic changes taking place in America at the time.

We may well be in the midst of another such explosion in civic creativity. There is no denying that rapidly increasing diversity has stretched our social

fabric. Discrimination, injustice, and miscommunication across cultures create cynicism and isolation that can be passed to future generations. Immigrants face formidable structural barriers to participation, in particular long working hours, low pay, and lack of formal education slowing their acquisition of English. The post–September 11, 2001, political climate has severely set back newcomer integration.

But stressful times can stimulate social inventiveness. From local community activism to electoral campaigns, immigrants at the beginning of the new century are participating in civic life in ways that are as dynamic and diverse as the newcomers themselves.

Foundations and Civic Participation

Strong community organizations with well-designed programs serve as the crucial portal of engagement for these newcomers, organizations built upon the democratic belief that sustainable social improvement can be achieved only when those experiencing problems are involved in learning how to solve them. In the country's changing demographic landscape, such institutions have drawn increasing interest from foundations with many priorities.

- Foundations with categorical interests in improvement of health, education, youth, employment, and other key issues are successfully using strategies of active engagement (parents in their children's schools, health *promotoras* in the community) to achieve positive outcomes.
- Foundations seeking systemic policy reform in these areas are finding immigrant civic participants to be important allies who care greatly about the issues and play an important role in winning policy change.
- Foundations with interest in improving intergroup relations, building community, and reviving civic life are actively involving our foreign-born population (11 percent and growing), drawing on their strengths and assets to address these persistent community challenges.
- Foundations devoted to the preservation of worker, civil, and human rights are augmenting their efforts by engaging immigrants in the struggle, promoting both the responsibilities and the rights of newcomer participation in community life.
- A growing number of foundations interested in improving social conditions of any kind are recognizing that communities at large as well as newcomers have a stake in immigrant civic participation; they are realizing that, in the absence of engagement and integration, the isolation of newcomers can only lead to greater problems.
- Irrespective of funding priorities, many foundations are increasingly recognizing immigrants and refugees as a key population to which they must respond. Many are asking important questions about how grantee organizations are engaging newcomers in their work and integrating this growing population into the broader community.

Foundations with historic interest in newcomers have led the way in supporting civic participation. For example, the Hyams Foundation's commitment to immigrants and refugees goes back to its origins in the 1930s, when one of the Hyams sisters started a settlement house in East Boston modeled on Chicago's Hull House.

Hyams developed the Immigrant and Refugee Leadership Development Initiative (IRLDI), with a special focus on immigrant communities within its civic participation and community organizing portfolio. The initiative's ultimate aim is "to build power among immigrants and refugees in order to improve the lives of immigrants in Boston through greater access to services, sustainable employment, affordable housing, and other areas critical to create a thriving community."

To reach this goal, IRLDI sought to build the capacity of immigrant-led organizations to strengthen leadership in immigrant communities. Civic participation is both an intended outcome and a strategic approach of the initiative.

The initiative's guiding principles for participating organizations include development of leaders committed to civic participation, broad demonstration of the benefits of civic participation, inclusion in training of experiential opportunities to exercise leadership, involvement of emerging leaders in planning and implementing projects, equal inclusion of participants from varying educational and economic backgrounds, and exploration of cultural barriers to (and opportunities in) leadership development.

Similar principles guided the initiative's work with participating organizations. Building capacity through engagement, IRLDI asked each of the six original grantees (representing Chinese, Latino, Somali, and Vietnamese constituents) to develop its own capacity-building work plan involving board and staff members. Consultants, acting as organizers, facilitated this collective internal work, helping to build relationships, participation, and ownership, modeling leadership development as staff and board leaders developed. The consultant-organizers played the same role in drawing the six organizations together for collaborative learning sessions.

IRLDI's first phase, from 2000 through 2002, focused on the internal leadership development and organizational change necessary to engage and build grassroots community leaders. In 2003, phase two turned attention to constituent leadership development. Hyams, which has committed $450,000 to the initiative, is building from this experience to tackle a next challenge: recruitment and retention of organizers of color.

Learning Together

Backed by grant-making organizations such as Hyams, civic participation organizations are built upon the democratic belief that sustainable social improvement can be achieved only when those experiencing problems are involved in learning how to solve them.

Through the experience of making and implementing plans together, immigrants educate themselves, developing skills and knowledge, and building self-esteem, individual voice, and personal identity. As they learn, participants deepen their analyses of problems, while sharpening and strengthening their strategies of solution. The group working this year to stop the closing of the local health clinic will be negotiating the budget with city council next year, and registering voters and campaigning for statewide reform of health care delivery the year after that.

Civic participation organizations also work intentionally to help newcomers build trusting relationships with those from different backgrounds. When the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment was started in South Los Angeles in 1990 by Karen Bass, an African American who had grown up in the neighborhood, two things were clear. The coalition wanted to build a base of membership through neighborhood organizing, knocking on doors. Coalition members knew that the people opening those doors represented a dynamically changing demographic: longtime African American residents, joined by an increasing number of newcomers, among them Latinos from Mexico and Central America and blacks from Central America and the Caribbean.

The issue that first drew these diverse residents together—reduction in the number of "nuisance" motels and liquor stores in their neighborhoods—was further complicated by ethnic relations. At the time, many of the motels were owned by Pakistanis, many of the liquor stores by Koreans. Some black residents viewed Korean merchants as ruthless. (The then-recent killing of a young African American by a Korean merchant, and the subsequent acquittal of the perpetrator, had enraged the community.) Some Latinos hired by local merchants felt exploited.

To get beyond emotion to analysis, beyond race to systemic issues, a great deal of education of the multicultural membership was necessary. Members studied the history of the neighborhood: as blacks

had first entered South Los Angeles, it was their businesses that current residents wanted to close down. Latino workers were reminded that they were also exploited by Latino employers. Economic analysis enabled members to understand that a motel making a marginal profit might be tempted to rent rooms by the hour; a liquor store in a similar situation might be tempted to sell alcohol to minors.

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Broad outreach and adaptability were also necessary. Before launching its campaign, to minimize ethnic tensions the coalition created a task force with Asian leadership in the city. The morning after the task force held its first meeting, Los Angeles erupted into the flames of civil unrest that followed the Rodney King verdicts. Once the smoke settled, the goal of the campaign evolved into providing alternatives to rebuilding. Coalition members worked with owners and the city to develop incentives, including waiving fees (as much as $100,000) for connection to the sewage system for liquor stores that would reopen as laundromats.

Not every issue taken on by the coalition has successfully drawn immigrants and African Americans together. Karen Bass cautions that, even if the issue is right, constant attention must be paid to counter discriminatory attitudes. Latinos don't tend to think of Caribbeans as immigrants, for example, and African Americans don't tend to think of them as blacks. As they work together, she says, "People need to learn the facts about race, racism, and demographics." These topics, along with economic and social analyses of Los Angeles, constitute the evolving popular education program that the coalition couples with its organizing campaigns.

Raising the Barn

Americans have two dominant cultural metaphors for our democracy. One is the town hall meeting, where our ancestors gathered to deliberate and make public decisions. The image carries an implication of cultural homogeneity; people participated because their grandparents had. But if your grandparents grew up in the mountains of Laos, and mine in the mountains of Mexico, what then?

The metaphor for American cultural diversity is the barn raising. On the frontier, people who had come from many backgrounds gathered to build one another's barns. I was motivated to help you because I needed your help on my barn. Together, we raised good barns. We also learned how to build barns, and we learned to know one another through the shared experience.

Newcomer civic participation is barn-raising democracy. The problem the immigrant wants to solve motivates participation in collective problem solving. Together, civic participants improve community conditions. Through the shared experience, they educate themselves and build trusting relationships with one another, becoming a part of the broader society.

A few fundamental principles are in play:

- *Engagement is paramount.* Newcomers are encouraged to engage in all aspects of community problem solving.
- *Participation starts where the newcomer starts.* More than likely, this begins with working on issues that affect their daily lives, not in a voting booth or a political campaign (though elections are the way to get there).
- *Education informs all.* Learning is at the core of program design.
- *Relationship matters.* Building relationships with people from different backgrounds is a central program component.

Democracy is its own integrating force, and the community organizations putting these principles into action represent democracy at work. The global conditions that have changed the country's demography so dramatically are not going away. As this change continues, simultaneously testing our ideals and increasing our assets, foundations with many interests have reason to consider investment in newcomer civic participation.

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