

From Civic Association to Political Participation: Mexican Hometown Associations and Mexican Immigrant Political Empowerment in Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the participation of Mexican immigrants in hometown associations (HTAs), the most significant manifestation of voluntary-sector activity among first-generation Mexican immigrants. It focuses on metropolitan Los Angeles, California, the region with the highest concentration of Mexican immigrants and Mexican HTAs in the United States. The research, which assessed HTA participation in U.S. politics and social movements, revealed that Mexican HTAs, while powerful forces for social support in the United States and important philanthropic work in Mexico, have been much less involved in political activity in the United States. Despite this limited political participation, Mexican HTAs are beginning to realize their potential, which might eventually turn them into significant sources of immigrant political empowerment in the United States.

Keywords: 1. mexican migration, 2. political participation, 3. hometown associations, 4. United States, 5. Los Angeles.

De la asociación cívica a la participación política: Asociaciones de migrantes y fortalecimiento político de los inmigrantes mexicanos en Los Ángeles

RESUMEN

En este artículo analizamos la participación de los inmigrantes mexicanos en Estados Unidos, dentro de las asociaciones de migrantes, activismo que representa el caso más importante de trabajo voluntario entre la primera generación de inmigrantes mexicanos. El estudio se concentró en el área de Los Ángeles, California, región que cuenta con la mayor cantidad de inmigrantes mexicanos y de asociaciones de migrantes en Estados Unidos, para evaluar su participación en la política y movimientos sociales de este país. Nuestra investigación mostró que si bien estas asociaciones constituyen una sólida fuente de apoyo social en Estados Unidos, así como de una notable su labor filantrópica en México, su participación es más bien limitada dentro de la política. A pesar de su reducida participación en este ámbito, estas asociaciones están descubriendo su potencial, lo que eventualmente puede convertirlas en fuentes importantes para el fortalecimiento político de los inmigrantes mexicanos en Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: 1. migración mexicana, 2. participación política, 3. asociaciones de migrantes, 4. Estados Unidos, 5. Los Ángeles.

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INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles has become a metropolis of Mexican immigrants and their descendants. In 1996, demographic indicators showed that Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans accounted for about 34% of the county's population (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996). This figure is expected to continue rising rapidly, so that by 2010, Latinos (of which about 80% are Mexican or Mexican-origin) will outnumber non-Hispanic whites (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). Despite this significant demographic shift, the political involvement of Mexican communities in this context is an open question. Throughout the 1990s, immigrants in general, and *Latino* immigrants in particular, came under vociferous attack in California and nationally. This anti-immigrant sentiment has relentlessly scapegoated immigrants for a variety of social ills, creating a mood of intolerance against them. In California, its most concrete expression was the November 1994 passage of Proposition 187, which sought to deny education and other basic rights to undocumented immigrant children.

Several scholarly assessments of Proposition 187 and of the 1990s anti-immigrant sentiment in general (e.g., Martin 1995) provided insight into the reactions of the Mexican-American community, the California media, and the Mexican government. However, the extent of the proposition's political effects on the Mexican population remained elusive. Did initiatives like this one resonant significantly among Mexicans at a grassroots level? And did this anti-immigrant climate trigger any signs of activism toward political empowerment within Mexican communities?

Authors have pointed out that naturalization rates among Mexican immigrants have risen sharply since the mid-1990s, and these new citizens are an increasingly important electorate (Arvizu 1996; DeSipio 1996). However, this article explores another form of civic engagement: the participation of Mexican immigrants in voluntary grassroots organizations in the United States. We consider that political empowerment is not only a question of voting or electing co-ethnics to political office but is also constructed through participation in civic organizations. This article examines the role of these civic organizations in the framework of the ever more harsh environment of the host society.

Our research examined Mexican hometown associations (HTAs), the most significant manifestation of voluntary—sector activity among first—genera-

tion Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles. In 1998 there were over 170 HTAs (commonly known as clubs) from 18 Mexican states registered with the Mexican Consulate, and many more exist that are informal and unregistered. HTAs are clearly the most numerous and ubiquitous form of voluntary organization among first-generation immigrants.

Contrary to their traditional low profile in American society, these HTAs decided to play an active and visible role during the heated political battle over Proposition 187. This suggested that an in-depth examination of these organizations was worthwhile. Indeed, reports indicated that HTAs donated substantially to the campaign against Proposition 187, and HTA members marched in the October 1994 rally against it, the largest street demonstration in Los Angeles since the Vietnam War protests.

Mexican hometown associations also provide a lens through which to explore the broader issue concerning the kinds of civic culture and voluntary institutions Mexican immigrants are constructing in the United States, and, hence, their potential contribution to U.S. civic and political life. In a variety of studies worldwide, researchers have found that voluntary organizations have contributed to the construction of democratic institutions, and in the case of many Latin American countries, to the transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Plaut and Williams 1994; Álvarez and Escobar 1992). Researchers in Mexico have attributed the weakening of the ruling party's monopoly over Mexican social institutions and the growth of electoral competition to, in part, the growth of the voluntary sector (Fox 1994; Haber 1996). In the United States, civic associations have long been recognized as an essential element of democracy, and their apparent decline as a threat to the nation's well-being (Putnam 1994).

The magnitude of the foreign and native-born Mexican-origin population in Los Angeles underscores this group's important influence on the area's civic culture. The extent to which Mexican immigrants build their own civic organizations or join already existing ones, organize around issues in Mexico or focus on their adopted host country, ally themselves with other ethnic and national origin groups or preserve separation based on national origins, maintain Mexican civic culture or adopt U.S. attitudes and behavior, all these things will shape future civic life in Los Angeles for decades to come. The ways they organize in civil society will also affect the extent to which Mexicans partici-

pate in formal democratic institutions, that is, whether they choose to naturalize or remain non-citizens, and whether, and for whom, they vote.

With the example of Proposition 187 in mind, we looked for instances in which the Mexican clubs or federations acted in the political sphere in the United States. We define the political sphere broadly to include not only electoral politics but also other kinds of collective action to promote or defend the interests of club members or *Latino* immigrants in general. This includes participation in political demonstrations, unionization efforts, involvement in community-based organizations or coalitions, parent-teacher organizations, local policy campaigns, and so forth. We explored the extent to which the clubs promoted individual participation of their members by educating them about their rights or encouraging them to become citizens, vote, or otherwise participate on an individual basis. We also examined the range of attitudes of club and federation leaders about the clubs involvement in U.S. politics. We interviewed club and federation members who were active politically in the United States, and we documented both their activities and the reception of their ideas by others in those organizations. Finally, we interviewed local politicians and community leaders who have had contact with the clubs to explore their view of the clubs' role and involvement in U.S. politics.

In this article, we explore how HTAs both help immigrants adapt to the United States and influence the larger Los Angeles society. We first describe the HTAs, analyzing their internal organization, their activities in both California and their hometowns, and their relationship with the Mexican government. We then document the clubs' participation in U.S. politics and social movements, analyzing their attitudes about political involvement, their relationships with local political and community leaders, and their role in empowering immigrants. The information we present is part of a research project on Mexican HTAs and comes from in-depth interviews with club and federation leaders and members as well as attendance at HTA meetings and events throughout 1997 and 1998.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grassroots organizations based on home community or region are common to many immigrant groups that have settled in the United States. These organi-

zations have played a fundamental role in the economic empowerment and social incorporation into U.S. society of immigrants from a variety of nations. Contrary to conventional wisdom, ties and loyalties to the old country, manifested in the maintenance of strong social relationships among immigrants from a particular town or region, have helped some immigrants to move up the economic ladder and participate in the political process (Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Light 1972; Portes and Rumbaut 1991). Immigrant social networks have been an important resource, helping new immigrants obtain jobs and housing and learn the ropes of living in their new country (Massey *et al.*, 1987; Zabin *et al.*, 1993; Mines 1981). These networks constitute what James Coleman (1988), Alberto Martinelli (1994), and others have called social capital, the accumulation of knowledge, experience, and contacts by some members of the network, which creates a potential stream of returns over time for subsequent entrants belonging to the same networks (Runsten and Zabin 1994)¹. For immigrants, this social capital is very important in determining work trajectories and life possibilities in the United States.

Immigrant associations are built on immigrant social networks, and they should be seen as a more formal and institutionalized form of that social phenomenon (Levitt 1997). The formation of associations seems to facilitate effectiveness and continuity, through a customary delegation of responsibilities and a recognized process for leadership succession. Institutionalization can provide other established organizations with identification of and access to specific constituencies, such as recent Mexican immigrants.

The potential importance of HTAs in shaping civil society and politics in the United States is illustrated by the *landsmanshaften* that Eastern European Jews created in New York City in the early twentieth century. Estimates show that about 25% of New York's Jews, or about one million people, participated in these HTAs during that period. The HTAs, in turn, were central to larger Jewish and non-Jewish organizations that persist today, and thus they influenced U.S. politics in a variety of ways. Most importantly, they were the vehicle for much of the Jewish involvement in the U.S. labor movement, encouraging members to join unions, providing strike benefits, and forming home-

¹The use of the term social capital by these scholars differs from its use by Putnam (1994), who emphasizes the social trust that is created by diverse forms of civic engagement and bemoans its loss in contemporary U.S. society. Hometown associations also constitute social capital as Putnam defines it.

town chapters of the Workman's Circle. In addition, the HTAs also built social infrastructure that persists today, such as hospitals and social service agencies, and they formed part of early efforts to construct a Jewish lobby that has developed substantial capacity to influence U.S. foreign policy (Soyer 1997).

Similarly, Japanese immigrants in the early twentieth century formed associations based on region of origin in Japan, which were instrumental in the rapid upward economic mobility of this group. These regional clubs formed crews of agricultural workers and functioned like a labor union by setting a floor on the price of the harvesting services their members performed (Ichihashi 1969). For a variety of Asian, Latin American, and European immigrants, associations based on community or region of origin in the country of origin have also been a driving force for small-business development (Light 1972; Guarnizo 1992; Bonacich 1987; Waldinger 1987).

In some cases, immigrant associations have taken on the provision of social services for groups excluded from government-provided safety nets. For example, immigrant associations have commonly provided funds for emergency medical assistance, burials, low-cost credit, and help in obtaining housing and jobs (Massey *et al.* 1987; Goldring 1992; Light 1972). Some of the most enduring nonprofit social and health service institutions that exist even today, such as the Jewish hospitals and social service agencies in New York, started as landsmanshaften projects (Soyer 1997).

Immigrant hometown associations in the United States have at times played a role in influencing U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis their country of origin, especially when official or *de facto* political refugees are involved. Hometown associations have formed a strong basis of support for larger coalitions representing immigrants from a variety of ethnic groups and nations, such as the Dominican Republic in the current era and Eastern European Jews during World War I. This influence developed as a result of the successful construction of broad representative organizations that could speak with one voice on political issues concerning their home countries.

Immigrants have also gained local political power in their host country using the organizational resources created by ethnic associations based on ties to the homeland. A recent example is the political representation gained by Dominican immigrants in New York City politics. The rapidity of gains

made by this group depended in part on ethnic associations formed originally to help home communities in the Dominican Republic (Guarnizo 1992).

Mexican immigrants have also relied on hometown associations to gain access to political and economic power, although the strength of these organizations seems to have waxed and waned through the long history of the Mexican diaspora in the United States. Mutual aid societies flourished in California in the first three decades of the twentieth century and were important in labor organizing, business development, and local politics (Weber 1994; Pichardo 1990). However, little has been written about mutual aid societies since then, and they seem to have diminished in importance until the surge of Mexican immigration in the last 25 years (González Gutiérrez 1993). What has been written has focused largely on the relationship of these societies to the Mexican government, and their influence on politics and development in their home regions in Mexico, not on their role in the United States (Goldring 1992; Smith 1995).

Internal organization of HTAs

The associations of Mexican immigrants based on their region of origin exhibit a range of organizational formality and complexity. The most common and simplest type of association is the informal migrant village network. Scholars have long noted the importance and ubiquity of village-based social networks in helping migrants journey to the United States and once there, to gain access to housing, employment, and other resources necessary to construct their new lives (González Gutiérrez 1993; Goldring 1992). These informal networks are not only based on kinship relationships but are also deeply rooted in the common identity of the village of origin. In the host society, villagers see each other at baptisms and other social events and help each other in emergencies. As satellite communities become more firmly established, immigrants become accustomed to getting together to celebrate the traditional fiesta in honor of their hometown patron saint, and they may form soccer, baseball, or basketball teams so that they can play the sports they grew up with in Mexico (Quiñones 2000).

A next stage of organizational development consists of the creation of a formal leadership committee that organizes and represents the daughter community. A few civic-minded migrants usually initiate this process, compiling a list of compatriots and calling a meeting through word of mouth and visits to homes. At the meeting, the migrants elect officers and discuss general concerns and projects. In many cases, migrants come from villages with strong local governance institutions and simply follow the customs and procedures used at home.² Sometimes, civil authorities in the community of origin will request that migrants form a committee to represent the hometown. Often these authorities accompany that request with a solicitation for financial support for a project or event in the hometown. One of the founders of the club of immigrants from Pegueros, a small town in the state of Jalisco, recounted its story, which is typical of the formation of HTAs:

Initially, folks from Pegueros got together frequently for certain events, especially sports events. I brought my family and the majority of the players did also, and it wasn't just our families, there were a lot of people who came just as spectators, because wherever we go we bring more fans than anyone else. It was from our link with these sports events that it occurred to us to form an association that would have more diverse goals, above all to take care of other necessities of people from Pegueros. Our first project was the donation of an ambulance to our town.

There are literally thousands of associations of this type. Most are known only to their members and have no formal contact with larger federations or outside groups in either Mexico or the United States. They serve an internal function by responding to some of the members' perceived needs, but their insularity and atomized character limits participation in larger movements.

The next organizational level among Mexican immigrant associations is the federation, connecting clubs from the same state in Mexico. Clubs from only a handful of Mexican states have federated. The oldest is the Federación de Clubes Zacatecanos, formed in 1972; in 1998, it had 51 member clubs. The Federación de Clubes Jaliscienses, the only other large federation, formed

²Hometowns have various local governance institutions and rules depending on whether they are *ejidos* (Mexican land reform communities), *comunidades agrarias* (indigenous agrarian communities), *cabeceras municipales* (county seats), or some form of a variety of smaller administrative units.

in 1990 with the aid of the Mexican Consulate; in 1998, it had 49 member clubs. HTAs from Oaxaca have attempted to federate but have failed to maintain unity. As a result, three small federations, divided by regional and ideological differences, represent Oaxacan communities. Federations for other states, including Nayarit, Sinaloa and Durango, have only a few member clubs. The states with the highest immigrant populations in Los Angeles have no federated representation. Michoacán, for example, the state with the second largest Mexican immigrant population in Los Angeles, has no federation and only a few clubs that have registered with the Consulate. The often-conflictive relations that the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles used to have with immigrants from Michoacán, a bastion for the leftist opposition party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), may explain this (see Table 1 for a summary of Los Angeles-based HTAs according to state of origin and level of organization).

TABLE 1. *Mexican Immigrant Clubs and Federations in Los Angeles.*

State of Origin in Mexico	(1) Mexican nationals registered with Consulate	(2) Percentage of Mexican immigrants by state of origin (from column 1)	(3) number of immigrants in Los Angeles region*	(4) number of hometown associations	(5) federations
Jalisco	107,622	29%	503,819	49	yes
Michoacán	55,744	16%	260,959	11	no
Zacatecas	36,434	10%	170,561	51	yes
Guanajuato	19,556	5%	91,549	1	no
Mexico City	19,173	4%	89,756	0	no
Sinaloa	13,566	4%	63,508	11	yes
Durango	13,306	3%	62,290	4	yes
Nayarit	12,774	3%	59,800	9	yes
Guerrero	12,221	3%	57,211	1	no
Puebla	10,164	3%	47,582	5	no
Edo. de México	10,052	3%	47,057	0	no
Oaxaca	8,731	2%	40,873	8	three
Others	47,624	13%	222,946	20	n.a.
TOTAL	366,967	100%	1,717,911	170	

*Calculated by multiplying the total number of foreign-born Mexicans in the Los Angeles region (as reported in the 1997 Current Population Survey) by the figure in column 2, which is the estimate of Mexican immigrants from each state in Mexico as a percentage of all immigrants registered with the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles (column 1).

Who Participates in HTAs?

Historically, Mexican migration to the United States has had its roots in rural areas. Large streams of migrants were a consequence of, at first, the disruptions of the Mexican Revolution, and, later, the Bracero Program, which brought 500 000 Mexican contract workers to U.S. farms between 1942 and 1964 (Garcia y Griego 1981). In the past two decades, migration has increasingly originated in urban areas of Mexico (Cornelius 1992), but HTAs are almost exclusively a phenomenon of rural communities. Urban-born immigrants do not usually belong to clubs representing their urban *barrio*; instead, they belong to clubs representing the villages where they or their parents lived before moving to Mexican urban centers (Massey *et al.* 1987). Thus, data from the Mexican Consulate shows that, of all Mexican cities and towns, Guadalajara sends the most migrants to Los Angeles, yet it has no hometown association.

The origins of HTAs in rural rather than urban communities suggest that most participants come from rural backgrounds. Moreover, many came to the United States to work in agriculture and only later settled in Los Angeles. Mexicans immigrants in general have the lowest educational levels among national origin groups in Los Angeles (McCarthy and Vernez 1997), and the rural origins of club members signify that a fairly large proportion of members and leaders have little formal education.

Nevertheless, many HTA leaders have resided in the United States for a long time and have reached a significant level of economic security. Many own small businesses, such as insurance and real estate agencies, Mexican restaurants, or other services catering to immigrants. A significant proportion are also professionals, including lawyers, social workers, and government bureaucrats. In general, then, club leaders tend to be among the more economically successful immigrants, but many of them achieved this success without the benefits of privileged backgrounds or education. In the clubs representing states with newer migration streams, such as Oaxaca, club leaders tend to be wagedworkers, since few newly immigrants have had time to move up the economic ladder and start businesses.

Women participate in the clubs but very few have leadership positions. Although one or two women hold club presidencies within the Zacatecas and Jalisco federations, there are none in the clubs within the Oaxacan federa-

tions. However, a woman has led the Nayarit Federation, and women are presidents of several of its clubs.

Activities of HTAs

The main HTA activities in Los Angeles are fundraising events for philanthropic projects in hometowns in Mexico. Fundraisers take place year round and include dances, picnics, raffles, *charreadas* (equestrian events much like rodeos), beauty pageants, and cultural events. These activities enable the clubs to achieve two major goals: financing specific projects in hometowns and promoting a sense of community among compatriots by fortifying social ties.

Club leaders spend most of their time and energy organizing these fundraising activities, which can range in complexity from modest get-togethers, such as picnics or small raffles, to gala events requiring considerable organization, months of preparation, and significant financial investment, but which generate commensurate profits.

Beauty pageants are the main, large-scale event for many Los Angeles clubs. In the Jalisco and Zacatecas federations, each club chooses a beauty queen as part of an annual federation-wide contest. Contestants are daughters of club members, and winners are chosen based on not only their beauty but also on their ability to raise money for the hometown, by selling raffle and dance tickets or food at club social and sports events. The clubs hold a series of dances throughout the year, culminating in a final gala dinner-dance, during which a panel of judges chooses the federation queen from among those the member clubs have already crowned. The winner and finalists represent their home state's Los Angeles community, and as representatives, they participate in festivities in both the United States and Mexico. Since most contestants are U.S.-born or came to the U.S. as young girls, this is an important educational experience that reinforces their Mexican national, regional, and hometown roots (Smith 1998).

In addition to generating resources for the projects the clubs sponsor in their hometowns, the fundraising events constitute important gatherings of individuals from the same community or state, reinforcing social ties among compatriots. Although most of the HTAs' final, visible "products" are philan-

thropic projects directed toward their hometowns in Mexico, those projects require the construction and reinforcement of collective ties that create community in the United States. Gatherings in Los Angeles help consolidate social networks that provide valuable information not only on the material aspects of immigrant survival but also on the civic dimension of their new society, including, among other things, how to obtain legal residence and citizenship or access to schools. As such, these gatherings also provide a forum for discussion of political participation in their adopted country. For example, a young member of Club Pegueros, the HTA representing people from a small town in Jalisco, described how at a club beauty-queen coronation his parents and their compatriots discussed Proposition 187, the growing anti-immigrant climate in California, and their voting preferences. In this manner, these events enhance immigrants' insertion in American society, providing a main source of civic education even while they reinforce a strong bond with hometowns in Mexico.

These club gatherings also enable the socialization of the U.S.-born children of immigrants. Perhaps surprisingly, the sons and daughters of the founders of these associations usually display a willingness to support club activities in significant ways. The participants in beauty pageants, sports teams, and cultural events, such as the *charreadas* and the annual Oaxacan *Guelaguetsa* (a festival celebrating traditional indigenous dances, dress, and music) are often young people born in the United States. Club leaders promote these events in part to provide their youth with activities that can shield them from the influence of gangs or the drug culture and to instill in them the "traditional" Mexican values of close family and community loyalties.

The Role of HTAs in Mexico

The economic and political role of the HTAs in Mexico has been the subject of a number of articles (see Goldring 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Smith 1998). Although it is not our focus here, a brief review of HTA projects in Mexico and their relationship with the Mexican state is necessary to understand the nature of these organizations.

The Mexican government has actively promoted the HTAs, and it values their contributions to their home communities. After several decades of minimal attention to the Mexican immigrant community in the United States, the Salinas administration (1988-1994) reinvigorated the role of consular offices, created several new programs, and funneled substantial resources to attend to Mexicans living abroad (Smith 1998; Goldring 1997; González Gutiérrez 1993, 1995). Indeed, Mexican clubs and federations have flourished during the 1990s partly as a result of a more active role of the Mexican government (Smith 1998; Goldring 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Guarnizo 1996; González Gutiérrez 1993, 1995).

The Mexican government works closely with the HTAs through programs such as PCME (Program for Mexican Communities Abroad), which is part of its Ministry of Foreign Relations and is housed in the Mexican Consulates. PCME staff members in Los Angeles have not only actively promoted the formation of clubs but also encouraged these associations to send financial and material resources to their communities in Mexico. Also known as the "two-for-one" program, PCME committed matching funds from the Mexican government, so that for every dollar raised by the HTAs for approved public works projects in their home communities, Mexico's federal and state governments invested two dollars.

As a result of this program, Mexican clubs have channeled funds for infrastructure to their hometowns (for example, for road construction and street and building repair); donated equipment from the United States (such as vehicles for social and nonprofit purposes); implemented charitable initiatives (such as support for orphanages and construction of shelters for the elderly poor); and promoted education (through scholarship programs and funding school construction or school materials). Through the PCME program, the clubs and the government together have invested several hundred thousand dollars in Mexican communities.

The Mexican government also initiated the Fondo Nacional de Apoyo para las Empresas de Solidaridad (National Fund for Support of Solidarity Enterprises, Fonaes), a program to encourage migrants to invest in productive projects in their home communities, such as small-scale agricultural initiatives or the creation of small industries. Its goal is to promote development projects in regions with high migration levels by combining the initiatives emerging from the HTAs with Mexican government support.

These programs not only help immigrants send resources home, but they also provide a structure through which the HTAs can interact with local, state, and federal governments in Mexico. Indeed, the sometimes accommodating, sometimes conflictive interaction between the various governmental bodies and the HTAs has been the subject of a number of scholarly investigations (Guarnizo 1996; Goldring 1997). These have examined the formation of new kinds of relationships between rural towns and the various levels of government, changes in power relations within sending towns and regions, and the consequent creation of new state-society relations that occur in a transnational sphere.

This point is illustrated by the fact that the leaders of Mexican HTAs acquire much more influence in Mexico when living in Los Angeles than they would have if they had stayed at home. Scholars have noted the remarkable change of status for immigrants, most from humble backgrounds, who, as club leaders, are able to meet with the consul general of Los Angeles or even the governor of their home state in Mexico (Smith 1998; Goldring 1992; Guarnizo 1996). As Luis Guarnizo describes in his comparative study of transnationalism, "Mexican and Dominican transmigrants are people who enjoyed formal citizenship rights but were outside the center of power and decision-making in their societies of origin. Ironically, they have started acquiring substantial citizenship rights in Mexico and the Dominican Republic, respectively, while living outside their own national territory" (1996:8).

Moreover, the greater the level of organization within the Mexican immigrant community, the greater the political influence at home. The leaders of the strong federations are well known in their states of origin, and they receive regular media coverage. More importantly, they have personal relationships with their state governors. In the case of Zacatecas, this influence is particularly significant because the federation in Los Angeles, with the aid of the two-for-one program, has become a major source of infrastructure financing for public works projects.

The direct contact between Mexican governmental bodies and the HTAs is by nature political since it represents a changing relationship between the state and civic organizations. In contrast, the political aspects of HTAs in the United States are more difficult to trace because that political dimension does

not occur in the context of a structured interaction between the government and civic organizations.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LOS ANGELES

Political Activity of Clubs and Federations

Our initial hypothesis was that the clubs' involvement in the fight against Proposition 187 during the 1990s was a turning point signaling greater political participation by the HTAs in Los Angeles on immigrant rights issues. The federations and most independent clubs all supported the campaign against this initiative. Their support took various forms, including donating funds to "Taxpayers against Prop. 187" (the main professional political campaign against the proposition), participating in the October 1994 street demonstration, promoting the vote among their affiliates, and using the media to influence public opinion (for example, on September 23, 1993, *La Opinión* newspaper printed "Carta Abierta al Gobernador Pete Wilson" [Open Letter to Governor Wilson], signed by Mexican clubs and federations in Los Angeles).

However, our findings showed that this kind of political involvement proved to be more the exception than the rule for the clubs in the years that have followed. Thus far, Proposition 187 is the sole event that pushed these migrant associations beyond their traditional boundaries of action. After Proposition 187's passage, the HTAs failed to act in response to three events portrayed as reiterated attacks on immigrants by different sectors: Proposition 209 to end affirmative action in California; the federal Welfare Reform Act, which cut off a number of government services for legal immigrants; and the 1996 beating of two Mexican undocumented workers by Riverside policemen (a television news crew caught this on videotape, and it aired nationally and internationally). While these developments mobilized wide sectors of the Latino community, and even the Mexican government through the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles, the Mexican clubs and federations remained mostly on the sidelines, and these issues were not even mentioned in their internal meetings.

There are several possible reasons for the unique response of the clubs to Proposition 187. First, our research found that club and federation leaders did not spontaneously decide to band together to respond politically to the proposition. Rather they participated only after Latino elected officials urged them to do so. Our interviews revealed that some of the clubs initially hesitated to participate in the fight. In some cases, members feared jeopardizing a club's legal status as a nonprofit organization. Non-citizens felt vulnerable and feared their application for citizenship might be denied if they spoke up, while legal residents hesitated because they viewed themselves as immune to the proposition's effects.

U.S.-born *Latino* politicians from the local level met with club leaders to persuade them of the importance of fighting Proposition 187. These politicians argued that it was a broad-based attack on all *Latino* immigrants, not just undocumented ones. The 1997 president of the Nayarit Federation noted that club leaders initially responded that Proposition 187 would not affect them because they were legal residents, "but when some local political leaders took the reins and brought us all together, and got us to see the enormous danger we faced, then everyone united and most organizations worked quite hard."

It appears that this was the only time *Latino* elected officials have contacted the clubs and federations to ask for support for a specific cause. The Mexican Consulate played a key role by convening a meeting between club leaders and *Latino* politicians because, in many cases, these groups had not yet established any relationship. Since then, to our knowledge, *Latino* elected officials have not issued a similar "call-to-arms" to the clubs. Below we explore *Latino* political leaders' lack of interest in the clubs.

It may also be that Proposition 187 hit a nerve, which no other threat to immigrants has touched in as profound a way. This proposition threatened to effect undocumented children directly as well as to cancel services for their parents. Other legislation may have been perceived as less threatening. For example, Proposition 209 was seen as attacking U.S.-born minorities with aspirations for professional jobs rather than immigrants stuck in unskilled occupations. In addition, the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act that affected immigrants were buried under a mound of other reforms affecting a wider segment of the population. The Riverside beating hurt a small group of people,

and because most clubs and federation presidents have regularized their immigration status, this issue may have seemed somewhat distant to them.

Moreover, while the fight against Proposition 187 fostered initial contacts and incipient ties among the federations representing various Mexican states, and between them and *Latino* associations and politicians in Los Angeles, our interviews and observations showed that these contacts did not develop into permanent working relationships. Instead, both U.S. *Latino* organizations and the HTAs still count on the Mexican Consulate to act as their chief intermediary, and to convene meetings when the Consulate sees a need to bring these groups together. The Consulate did voice its concern through the media about both the Riverside beating and the Welfare Reform Act, but it did not play the role of convener that it had taken during the battle against 187.³

Lack of unity among the federations also limits the HTAs' potential political clout. A friendly rivalry exists between the Zacatecas and Jalisco federations, the two largest, but contact is mostly limited to the leaders' attendance at each others' annual gala dances and their mutual presence at Mexican Consulate events. Discussion has occasionally arisen about forming a confederation of all the state federations, an idea the Mexican government promotes, but no action has been taken. One federation leader justified this by arguing that "the time isn't right."

Historical evidence suggests that the political influence of other immigrant groups was dependent on their ability to build federations that could speak with one voice. For example, Jewish immigrants in New York City built several federations in the 1920s and 1930s, of which landsmanshaften were an important segment. Although not all HTAs joined and no federation lasted for very many years, as noted earlier, they created a strong voice for Jewish causes, including defense against anti-Semitism and support for Zionism, and they sowed the seeds of the modern Jewish lobby (Soyer 1997). The extreme parochialism of the Mexican HTAs clearly limits their political role.

³One possible reason for the Consulate's less active role in encouraging relationships between *Latino* groups and the HTAs was the change in consular staff responsible for the PCME program. The PCME director for Los Angeles during the Proposition 187 controversy had held his post for several years, was a strong champion of the HTAs, and had developed strong relationships with both their leadership and leaders of *Latino* political groups. In recent years, this post has changed hands several times, and this turnover has meant a significant loss of continuity.

The Role of HTAs in Promoting the Political Participation of Their Members

Our research indicated that perhaps the most important role of the HTAs in the political sphere has been that club leaders have given steady and consistent encouragement to their members to get U.S. citizenship. Although promotion of naturalization is never the central focus of federation or club meetings, leaders supported the naturalization process and routinely announced where members could get help in becoming citizens. For example, the Zacatecas Federation sponsored a citizenship fair, and several Oaxacan associations invited immigration experts to club meetings to inform members about the naturalization process.

In one unusual case, the president of the Club de Damas de Tecuala, from the state of Nayarit, stated that her main objective for the club was to promote naturalization. This focus reflects the activist orientation of the small group of women who used to lead the Nayarit Federation. Its president and the president of the Club Sonora (representing immigrants from throughout the state of Sonora) process citizenship forms as part of their professional work, and both articulated the importance of increasing the number of Mexican immigrants who become U.S. citizens so as to gain political power in California.

The widespread consensus among HTA leaders about the importance of attaining citizenship is, in some senses, contrary to expectation. After all, these are the very organizations that represent the maintenance of ties to the old country. In a 1997 interview, the president of the Asociación de Clubes Nayaritas (the federation of clubs representing Nayarit) articulated the ambiguity Mexicans feel about citizenship:

One of the big problems is that we can't convince people to become U.S. citizens. They don't want to... But as an association, we have to say to people, "become citizens, you're not a betraying your nation, you keep your roots inside of yourselves and nobody can take your roots away, no one can change our love for where we were born. But think about your kids and your grandchildren, they are the ones who need you to pave the way so that they don't have so many problems in the future, especially the ones who were born here, they're not going to live in Mexico.

Despite the difficulties pointed out by several club member activists, the generalized acceptance of the idea of becoming citizens among the club mem-

bers to whom we talked reflects a dramatic and widespread transformation of attitudes for many Mexican immigrants, who have traditionally been much more resistant to becoming U.S. citizens than other immigrant groups. However, in the last several years, naturalization rates have increased significantly for several reasons. First, continued threats to immigrants have heightened the costs of remaining in the status of permanent resident. Second, the huge cohort of immigrants that obtained amnesty through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act has now, or will soon, become eligible for citizenship. Finally, the Mexican government's new policy of allowing "dual nationality" lets Mexicans retain most of the rights of Mexican citizenship even after they have naturalized, and it gives official government sanction to (and almost encourages) U.S. naturalization. In this context, club leaders who promote naturalization add to a larger chorus of voices, yet because many conditions have altered naturalization trends among Mexican immigrants, it is impossible to isolate the influence of the HTA leaders in particular.

Becoming a citizen is the initial step toward more active involvement by immigrants in a host society. Thus, encouraging naturalization is the first challenge facing club leaders or members who envision a broader participation of the HTAs in American society. As one club leader stated, "We need you to become citizens so that you can vote, and vote for laws that help us. We're the largest minority population, and we don't have any political power." However, becoming a legal citizen does not turn an individual into a concerned, civic-minded participant in the political process. Notably absent from normal club and federation activities is discussion or action concerning U.S. politics, aside from the promotion of naturalization.

*Attitudes of HTAs Leaders and Members toward Political
Participation in the United States*

According to our research findings, the limited activity of the clubs in the sphere of U.S. politics can be explained in part by leaders' lack of consensus over the extent to which the clubs should remain social and philanthropic organizations rather than engage in political activity, in either the United States or Mexico. In addition, leaders have different views on whether the clubs

should orient their work toward Mexico or the United States. A wide spectrum of attitudes about these two issues exists among the HTA participants we interviewed. Moreover, while some perceived conflict between these multiple objectives, others felt that they were compatible.

Most club presidents stated that the main work of the clubs was to help their communities of origin and to provide a way for their compatriots to maintain social links to Mexico. Although they did not actively oppose participating politically in California, they simply did not view that as the primary mission of the clubs. Thus, although the president of the Jalisco federation spoke of its important role in the fight against Proposition 187 and "everything else that is an attack on us", he, like the others, has not participated actively on any U.S. political issue since Proposition 187. Another reason for the lack of participation is lack of time. One Oaxacan club leader, who saw the necessity of working on issues affecting the immigrant community, stated that getting involved would mean working with other organizations and dedicating even more time than is already required just to work with his own hometown association.

Some club leaders were adamant that their clubs should not get involved in politics. This was the prevalent attitude of the Club Pegueros, whose members, in general, are middle-class, long-time immigrants from Jalisco. One member said, "We leave to one side anything having to do with the government or the church; we just concentrate on what has to do with our families." Others brought with them from Mexico a profound distrust of the political process and politicians. As one club leader stated, "politicians are all a gang of thieves (*una bola de ladrones*)."

A minority of club leaders and members thought the clubs should be much more actively involved in U.S. politics. One member of the 1996 leadership committee of the Zacatecas federation, who was proposing a shift in focus for the clubs from Mexico to the United States, stated, "I have my life here, my work is here, my house is here, my children were born here, and they feel like Americans. So we have to worry about what's affecting us here and about those of us who are here." The leader of the Asociación Guerrerense noted:

We have to confront politics here. The fact that we're from Mexico has nothing to do with it; I still have the right to defend my community. We shouldn't be afraid of politicians, we have

to leave this idea behind, we have to rise up, not with arms but rather with our voices, everyone together, and with the truth. We have the right to be heard and to be respected, and not treated like a door mat.

The Nayarit leader stated:

Proposition 187 opened our eyes to the necessity of getting involved in issues that affect the community here... at least in my opinion, we need to be even more united here in political questions, we need to be involved, because our existence here depends on it. We can see this with the new immigration laws. And if we don't unite and show our voting power, we'll never get the representatives that we need, who would help us in the Hispanic community.

However, the voices that represent the position favoring greater political participation in California come only from the small federations or isolated clubs. They represent a small proportion of the HTAs, and their range of influence is quite limited. As we pointed out earlier, a trait of all the federations is their isolation from one another. As a result, the opinions of the "activist" leaders have a restricted audience and thus remain marginal.

In the large federations, differences in attitudes about the appropriate orientation of the clubs have led, at times, to serious conflicts and divisions. For example, divisions between Oaxacan leaders who envision a "cultural" mission and those who support a "political" mission have undermined attempts to form a federation of HTAs representing communities throughout Oaxaca. On one side, most leaders of ORO (Organización Regional de Oaxaca) maintain that the main purpose of the clubs is to preserve the customs of their indigenous communities, which they promote through events that celebrate traditional dances and music. Club leaders in the FIOB (Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional), on the other hand, are much more interested in working to defend the rights of indigenous Oaxacan immigrants. Although ORO and FIOB did merge for a short period in the mid-1990s, their unity was short-lived because of these very different orientations.

Conflicts within the Zacatecas federation have arisen over similar issues although the federation has managed, thus far, to stay intact. However, tensions exist. In 1997, two factions contested the election for the federation's leadership. They disagreed over a number of issues, including the degree to which the federation should be involved in political issues facing immigrants

in California. The winner of the election was a supporter of the traditional viewpoint that the main mission should be helping the clubs carry out their philanthropic work in Mexico through the customary beauty pageants and dances. In contrast, the losing faction articulated a much more activist agenda, including a greater emphasis on political empowerment, both in the United States and Mexico. Although multiple reasons led to the election outcome, the losing candidate's desire that the federation play an active political role clearly did not resonate with the majority of voters in the election. In 1998, the federation also almost collapsed when the same two factions supported opposing candidates for governor in Zacatecas.

Politically Active Club Leaders

The HTA leaders and members who shared an activist agenda, while small in number, were politically engaged in numerous arenas. Several examples illustrate the nature of that involvement. The leaders of the Asociación Nayarita campaigned actively for the candidate Rubén Zacarías, the son of immigrants from Nayarit, who became Superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1997. The Nayarit women were able to gather more than 1 700 signatures in his support, and they also attended the debates and wrote letters to promote his candidacy. They were also active in the fight against Proposition 209, organizing meetings to educate immigrants about the proposition. These leaders also participate in the Comité Mexicano Cívico Patriótico, an association of Mexicans from all states with close ties to the Mexican Consulate. The president of the Club Sonora served as mayor of the City of Bell Gardens, in southeast Los Angeles, for five years. He also runs an immigrant rights center that processes naturalization forms, and he supports compatriots in disputes with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. He tried to form a Los Angeles-wide organization for all *Latinos*, including Central and South Americans, which would present political candidates to run in local elections. Additionally, the president of the Asociación Guerrerense was active in the Republican Party until Proposition 187 gave him pause. A successful restaurateur, he knew Pete Wilson, then governor of California, and he had been a guest at the Bush White House in 1988. However, as he pointed out, he was angered when "Wilson's people said, 'We're going to blame the

Mexicans.” He joined the fight against Proposition 187 and helped organize fundraising events. He is also head of the Comité Pro-Ayuda México—a committee of prominent *Latinos*, including Congressman Esteban Torres, County Supervisor Gloria Molina, actor James Edward Olmos, and others—which raises funds in response to emergencies and natural disasters in Mexico.

These activist leaders all thought that a major limitation of the clubs is their parochial focus on local problems, which impedes a wider vision of Mexican immigrant empowerment. As the president of the Asociación Guerrerense pointed out, “I don't like the idea of dedicating myself only to Guerrero, or San Luis Potosí, or Zacatecas [which we tend to do] because we because we Mexicans are very jealous [about our hometowns].” Similarly, the president of the Nayarit association noted that there is little solidarity among the federations.

As a consequence, the club leaders with a strong commitment to California political issues carry out most of their political activity in other organizations. Even though their experience and leadership qualities helped them gain elected positions in their hometown associations, these leaders were incapable of mobilizing their clubs for greater action on California political issues. Some tried to do so, but as the president of the Club Sonora said, “involvement in the clubs is just a social activity related to their little villages in Mexico; in my case, I do it just to pass the time.”

In sum, community activists head several of the small federations and isolated clubs, and they have tried to broaden the work of their organizations to address the empowerment of Mexican immigrants in the United States. However, they have not been able to garner the participation of a broad base of their constituency. In contrast, the larger federations, with many members who actively participate in federation events, have leaders who generally stay within the traditional sphere of the clubs-supporting community improvement projects in their Mexican hometowns through social fundraising events in Los Angeles.

Links with Latino Politicians and Community Leaders

In order to understand how U.S. political and community leaders perceive the HTAs, we interviewed leaders of U.S. organizations and institutions with whom

the clubs had forged links. We especially looked for political leaders for whom the HTAs form a natural constituency, that is, *Latino* elected officials and community leaders, particularly those working in areas of Los Angeles with high concentrations of Mexican immigrants.

The interviews we conducted with HTAs generated a list of political and community leaders in California with whom they had had contact. We found that the HTAs had established relationships with a number of *Latino* organizations, including the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO), the Mexican American Bar Association (MABA), California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), a Mexican-American dominated union local (Laborers' International Union of North America Local 652), several parishes of the Catholic Church, and a number of local politicians (see Table 2).

In general, we found very few direct links between the clubs and both *Latino* and non-*Latino* civic or political leaders and organizations. Our research revealed that these links were few in number and not very strong, being limited to mere formalities in the case of *Latino* politicians (for example, by inviting

TABLE 2. *Links with Latino Politicians and Community Organizations in Los Angeles.*

HTAs State	<i>Latino</i> Elected Officials	Organizations
Zacatecas	- Assemblywoman, 58 th District - LA County Supervisor - Assemblyman, Norwalk Area	- National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO) - Mexican American Bar Association (MABA) - Laborers' International Union
Jalisco	Councilman, 14 th District	- NALEO - League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Oaxaca (ORO)	---	California Rural Legal Assistance Association

them to their gala dances as guests of honor), or to requests for information on naturalization procedures in the case of *Latino* organizations.

In some cases, relationships were forged because of common origins in Mexico. A state assembly member, for example, had known of the Zacatecas federation since his childhood because his father had been involved in a Zacatecan HTA. At that time, Zacatecan children heard about the federation because it offered trips to Disneyland for the top students from Zacatecas living in Los Angeles. While campaigning for office, the assembly member was reintroduced to the federation when he attended several of its events and met with club presidents at the federation's monthly meetings. However, he does not see the federation as a political force because many of its members still do not vote. In his view, club members are primarily concerned about basic issues, such as getting a job and supporting their families, and they have not made the link between those issues and politics. The key to changing this situation, he asserted, would be HTA leaders who can educate and politicize club members.

Other politicians without familial ties to the clubs also made this observation about the apolitical nature of the organizations. The chief aide of a prominent *Latino* elected official stated, “[our] idea is to politicize them.” He commented, however, that this has not yet happened. Since clubs focus on their small hometowns rather than on issues that unify them with other *Latinos*, the aide considers parochialism to be a major defect of the HTAs.

An NALEO representative presented a complementary perspective. She is a native of Sinaloa and, until recently, the secretary of the *Fraternidad Sinaloense*, so she works in and with both worlds. NALEO has actively promoted naturalization among *Latino* immigrants by not only processing forms but also carrying out major media and educational campaigns. Several federation presidents, including those from the Zacatecas and Jalisco federations, contacted NALEO and received information and advice, which they then transmitted to their members. Nevertheless, in her opinion, neither the clubs nor the *Latino* political leaders have adequately reached out to each other. She noted that while *Latino* politicians know of the clubs' existence, “they don't give [the clubs] the real importance that they deserve.” She believes that *Latino* politicians have not known how to approach the clubs, much less to work out a mutually beneficial relationship. She attributes this “insensitivity” to the fact

that the political leaders are U.S.-born *Latinos*, a group that feels socially distinct and distant from immigrants. In addition, the clubs have shown little interest in becoming involved in local and state politics. She recounted how she personally had to convince club presidents that if they spoke out as community leaders against Proposition 187, it would not jeopardize the clubs' nonprofit tax status. Since the proposition passed, she has not seen much political action on the part of the clubs.

We also explored the extent to which HTAs have been involved in other struggles or have developed links with community and other institutions in Los Angeles. Labor organizing seemed like a natural avenue for the HTAs because hometown social networks frequently channel migrants to particular occupations and employers. The successful 1992 battle to unionize Mexican drywall workers in Southern California is an example of how hometown solidarity can provide the glue unifying workers (Dwyer 1994; Ochoa 1993). The informal HTA and social networks among immigrants from the town of El Maguey, Guanajuato, significantly aided this dramatic organizing campaign. According to a number of its leaders, solidarity among workers from this town provided the critical mass that galvanized support for the strike in the broader workforce. The campaign was one of a handful of successful organizing drives among *Latino* immigrant workers, which many labor activists hailed as a sign of a resurgence of labor organizing and *Latino* immigrants' centrality to it (Ochoa 1993; Vadi 1994; Milkman and Wong 2000).

The potential grassroots force of the HTAs caught the eye of union organizers involved in an innovative labor organizing campaign, the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project (LA MAP), which was active from 1995 to 1997. A group of veteran union organizers created LA MAP in an attempt to launch a major multi-union campaign to organize immigrant workers in the huge Los Angeles manufacturing corridor. Part of the strategy was to work with *Latino* community groups to develop long-term relationships that could form the basis for mutual support and an on-going labor and community alliance. LA MAP organizers saw the clubs as a way to both access networks of workers in particular factories and develop potential allies who could garner public and political support for specific organizing campaigns. Establishing working relationships with club leaders was difficult, however, since many are small businessmen who did not immediately perceive a common interest with the LA

MAP project. Furthermore, although we found some concentrations of club members in particular firms and industries, there were very few in manufacturing, and none in the targeted factories that LA MAP had selected to organize. At the end of 1997, LA MAP folded after failing to secure sufficient funding from the AFL-CIO and affiliate unions. Since it never implemented its program, the strategy of building relationships between HTAs and unions was never fully tested.

The only other relationship between labor and HTAs that we uncovered were the ties that several Zacatecas clubs developed with the Laborers' Local 652. This relationship differed in a significant way from the one established between the drywall workers from El Maguey and the carpenter's union. In both cases, the ties among immigrants from the same regions led to their concentration in the same industry and employer. The drywall workers, however, were in an industry that had de-unionized, resulting in a dramatic drop in wages. In response, the workers organized to demand better treatment, and they did so militantly. While they eventually joined the Carpenter's Union, the workers themselves ran the campaign. In contrast, the Zacatecan immigrants in Laborer's Local 652 worked in a sector of the construction industry that had already been organized so they did not enter the union through an organizing drive. Indeed, Local 652 had not conducted an organizing drive for many years.⁴ Since they were not actively involved in organizing campaigns, union officials did not view the clubs as a way to generate solidarity or contact potential new members in the context of a campaign. Our interviews revealed that the main link between the HTAs and the union was that clubs used the union hall for their events for a minimal fee, and union representatives were invited to attend the annual Zacatecas federation gala dance.

Finally, we explored the relationships between the HTAs and representatives of the Catholic Church in Los Angeles, which has the country's largest Hispanic ministry. In the Santa Monica area, where immigrants from certain towns in the states of Jalisco and Oaxaca have settled, two HTAs have made the Catholic Church a center for some of their activities, such as the celebration of the birthday of the villages' patron saints. In our interviews with the

⁴Although the AFL-CIO is now putting much greater emphasis on organizing, this local is still quite typical in its focus on servicing current members rather than organizing new ones.

parish priest, he pointed out how he had encouraged the participation of the clubs in that church, and felt that these associations provided a significant opportunity for the Catholic Church to reach into the immigrant community. He stated, "from the pulpit, we try to reach them all, but what we say from there is very general, and the message needs to be made concrete at a grassroots level, in such a way that it filters and reaches those who need to get it."

This priest was not just talking about religious messages. Indeed, the Catholic Church in the Los Angeles area was one of the leading voices against attacks on immigrants, and it has been promoting their naturalization and electoral involvement. For example, this church in Santa Monica had sponsored naturalization workshops in its community center and had circulated printed materials on these issues among its parishioners. However, even though the priest considered the relationship with the HTAs "promising", ties between the HTAs and this church's community outreach efforts are still limited. Club Pegueros, the Jalisco HTA, has had close ties to this church for many years, but it has consistently hesitated to get involved in these outreach activities. The Oaxacan club, while more inclined to adopt an active role in that sphere, was just beginning to establish links with this church. We found few examples of this bond in the case of other clubs in the Los Angeles area.

Incipient Political Participation among Mexican HTAs

Although the focus of our research was California politics, it is clear that the federations are only beginning to realize their potential influence in the political arena in Mexico. The 1998 governor's race in the state of Zacatecas shows that, with genuine electoral competition in Mexico, the clubs and federations in the United States are perceived as having a significant influence on outcomes, thus illustrating the fluid nature of the federations' attitudes about political participation, and the difficulty of predicting the future. In 1998, Ricardo Monreal, a candidate from the left-center opposition party, the PRD, won the governorship in Zacatecas in a hotly contested election. This was the first time in that state that a candidate affiliated with the leftist opposition triumphed over the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had ruled nationally for 60 years. Both PRD and PRI candidates campaigned vigorously in

Zacatecas and the United States, and both courted the Zacatecan federation in Los Angeles.

This action reveals that Mexican state-level political actors are aware of the influence that HTAs and federation leaders have on the electorate in their hometowns. The tensions between the Zacatecas federation's "traditional" and "political" factions, who supported the PRI candidate and the PRD candidate respectively, almost divided the federation. It stayed intact, but Monreal's victory gave new strength to his supporters in the political faction, who went on to create a new organization, the Frente Cívico Zacatecano (Zacatecan Civic Alliance) designed as the political arm of the federation. This organization hopes to promote the participation of Zacatecan immigrants in the political arena in both Mexico and the United States.

The Zacatecan Civic Alliance has already become involved in an important political initiative in Mexican politics. Along with an array of other associations on both sides of the border, it campaigned throughout 1998 and 1999 to guarantee the right to vote for Mexican citizens abroad. Although the Mexican senate eventually rejected this initiative, based on its potential effect on politics in Mexico, this campaign enabled the creation of new relationships among immigrant associations from other states of origin. These ties are still incipient and their future uncertain, but they are a first step in overcoming the parochialism that has limited the political capacity of the HTAs. In addition, the Zacatecan Civic Alliance has reactivated its ties with several *Latino* elected officials in California. Given the growing stature of *Latino* elected officials, this could help generate a stronger political voice for Mexican immigrants in California in future years.

CONCLUSION

This article reveals that Mexican immigrants have constructed dynamic and broad-based grassroots social organizations in Los Angeles that are rooted in immigrants' loyalties to their hometowns in Mexico. The Mexican HTAs, while powerful forces for social support in the United States, and political empowerment and philanthropy in Mexico, have been little involved in political activity in California. Their active mobilization during the fight against Proposition 187

was an exception to their usual mode of behavior rather than a turning point in their orientation. Despite the prevailing anti-immigrant sentiment in California during the 1990s, the HTAs have not played a significant role in developing a collective response to attacks on Mexican or *Latino* immigrants.

As a rule, the clubs have retained their focus on funding public works in their hometowns and maintaining social ties with their fellow villagers living in Los Angeles through fundraising events. Although the clubs' achievements demonstrate significant social and economic empowerment for the communities they represent in both Los Angeles and Mexico, the clubs fell short of participating more visibly in politics in their host society. While becoming major players vis-à-vis their hometowns, their states, and the Mexican federal government via the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles, HTA activities remained mostly circumscribed to Mexican spheres. This reflects a persistent distance from non-*Latino* political and community leaders in Los Angeles and U.S. political institutions in general, which remain impermeable to the HTAs. This is true even though many club leaders are successful businesspeople who have had to negotiate with a variety of U.S. institutions in order to succeed.

We hypothesized that major challenges like Proposition 187 would galvanize the HTAs, helping them put aside their differences and enabling them to come together as part of a broader movement to defend immigrant rights. However, they have retained their local focus, and the few politically active club leaders and U.S. *Latino* political leaders view the clubs' parochialism as a major impediment to political participation in California. Even though a minority of club leaders has developed relationships with local *Latino* elected officials and community leaders, such ties are rare and have not found broad support among club members. HTA leaders continue to count on the Mexican Consulate to be the intermediary between them and U.S. *Latino* organizations, allowing the Consul to convene meetings when he sees the need.

In general, U.S. *Latino* politicians and community leaders, who ostensibly seek to represent both U.S.-born and immigrant *Latinos*, have made few overtures to the Mexican clubs. In part, this reflects their perception that the clubs remain oriented toward Mexico. On the other hand, we came across no politician or community leader who had systematically or diligently tried to involve the clubs in a particular campaign, other than during the campaign against Proposition 187, when there was substantial response. Thus, while involving

the clubs in local political issues is clearly not an easy task, it is probably not an impossible one. The experiment has yet to be carried out.

The significant increase in naturalization rates among Mexican immigrants, including club members, may change the passive posture of *Latino* politicians toward the clubs. Club members are becoming eligible voters, and politicians will have greater interest in courting them. Despite their limited political participation, the Mexican HTAs have potential as a political resource because they are already organized, and they reach wide sectors of the Mexican immigrant community. This potential will not be realized without changes in attitudes and actions both within the clubs and among community and political leaders who seek to represent a Mexican immigrant constituency. This will depend on the ascendance of club leaders who are politically aware, committed, and savvy; and it will require dissolving the marked insularity of the clubs and federations. It will also depend on U.S. *Latino* political and community leaders who choose to carry out the painstaking work of building relationships with first-generation immigrant groups and broadening those groups' vision of their role in the United States.

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