



# The awakening of the sleeping giant? An examination of the role of Ethnicity in the 2006 immigrant rights protests

Jessica Lavariega Monforti<sup>a</sup>, Adam J. McGlynn<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Pace University, 1 Pace Plaza, New York, NY 10038, USA

<sup>b</sup> East Stroudsburg University, 200 Prospect Street, East Stroudsburg, PA 18301, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s many have referred to the Latino community in the U.S. as a “Sleeping Giant.” Recent events including the 2012 presidential election demonstrate that Hispanics are engaged in social and political activism and we posit that this activism can be traced back to the 2006 immigrant rights demonstrations. However, this activism has yielded little success in terms of policy change. Using survey data gathered during a symposium on political activism and civic engagement in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex we employ regression models to examine the factors that influence the perceptions of Latino political activism and its impact. Our results demonstrate that ethnicity played a key role in how the marches were perceived. Further, we find that different variables drive perceptions about the marches for Hispanics and Caucasians, respectively. We conclude the study by discussing the impact of ethnicity in perceptions of political activism.

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## 1. Introduction

From February through May 2006 immigrant rights demonstrations occurred throughout the U.S., as more than one million immigrants and immigrant-rights advocates took to the streets and boycotted to protest the passage of HR 4437, “The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005” (The Sensenbrenner Bill) in the U.S. House of Representatives. The major provisions of the bill sought to criminalize undocumented immigrant status, and the act of assisting an undocumented immigrant to stay in the U.S. It also served to authorize local law enforcement agencies to implement immigration laws, and significantly limit due process for non-citizens.

The immigration protest marches of 2006 represent a contemporary event that brought about a new attitude among Latinos toward political participation and civic involvement. However, despite this strong showing of Latino political activism, nine years later, comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) has yet to be enacted. This is despite consistent efforts from the Hispanic community and elected officials over this period to enact CIR because of the pervasive impact one’s immigration status has on their livelihoods in everything from employment (Sanderson, 2014) to one’s access to health insurance (Durdan & Dean, 2013). Additionally, the recent wave of unaccompanied minors coming to the United States from Central America further highlights the nation’s immigration issues and the importance of understanding why the United States government has not addressed CIR. In this work we present evidence of ethnicity being a defining factor in people’s interpretation of the marches, which could account for the limited impact Hispanic political

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 570 422 3271.

E-mail addresses: [jlavariagamonforti@pace.edu](mailto:jlavariagamonforti@pace.edu) (J. Lavariega Monforti), [amcglynn@esu.edu](mailto:amcglynn@esu.edu) (A.J. McGlynn).

activism has had on public policy and one of the reasons we have yet to see CIR enacted. We believe this work demonstrates the need for greater study into the role of ethnicity on people's opinions of CIR and Latino policy issues at large.

This study provides background information about the protests nationally and then refocuses on a group of residents interested in community activism in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. At the heart of this study is the question of whether ethnicity drove political opinion on the immigrant rights marches? Our work provides a different perspective from other work on political activism, as we focus on the views of individuals who are civically engaged and thus have a unique perspective as to the factors influencing the perceptions of the marches. In this work our hypothesis is that ethnicity will influence respondents' perceptions about the marches and their opinions on the marches' impact on elections and voting behavior. Thus, the contribution of this work is assessing whether opinions about activism are mitigated by ethnicity; rather than a more traditional proposition that opinions about a policy will be the driving force behind attitudes toward and participation in political activism.

## 2. Civic engagement and identity politics

Central to the understanding of any impact of ethnicity on the perceptions of the marches is the history of Latino/a political activism and the role identity plays in such activism. There is a long history of civic engagement in U.S. politics among Latinos and Latino immigrants (Barreto & Muñoz, 2003; Jones-Correa, 1998; Sierra, Carillo, DeSipio, & Jones-Correa, 2000). According to Dalton (2008: 76), "citizenship norms are shifting from a pattern of duty-based citizenship to engaged citizenship... this shift is altering and expanding the patterns of political participation in America." As well, contrary to stereotype, a number of non-citizens are civic-minded and invest time in their communities despite their undocumented status (Leal, 2002: 370).

Research shows that the formation of ethnic identity is a consequence of the interaction between subjective identification and objective conditions, and that identity is constantly being transformed by political conflicts and social change (Omi & Winant, 1986). Additional research demonstrates it is essential to highlight that ethnicity rivals other factors, such as socioeconomic status, as the principle analytical tool for understanding political participation (Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Lien, 1994; Nelson, 1979; Welch, Comer, & Steinman, 1975). Further, as Amenta, Caren, and Olasky (2005) find, limited protest is likely to be ignored if those people and institutions with power do not see any benefit in including challengers or are hostile. Therefore, "in the face of more difficult political circumstances, more assertive or bolder collective action is required to produce collective benefits (521)." This work applies these theories by assessing whether identity and group consciousness is a factor in how political activism is perceived.

## 3. The DFW metroplex and mobilization

In response to the passage of the Sensenbrenner legislation, immigrant advocacy organizations, Spanish-language television and radio, students, and various church-related organizations began to mobilize an opposition. Spanish-language media outlets, such as Univision, Telemundo, Azteca America and various Spanish-language radio stations across the country, aided in mobilizing people for the protests. In a survey conducted at a May 1st rally in Chicago, Davis, Martinez, and Warner (2010: 82) found that among Catholics at the march, "Seventy-nine percent of those who frequently attended church received encouragement from church leaders to attend the march..." Additionally, in cities nationwide, students organized school walk-outs and protest demonstrations in opposition to this legislation. The most significant marches occurred on April 9, 2006 in 102 cities including the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, where 500,000+ marched in opposition to the bill and for CIR. These activities are notable because they represent the first, large-scale response to immigration reform in contemporary times.

According to the U.S. Census, Texas has one of the largest Hispanic (largely Mexican-origin) populations in the country in terms of both numbers and percentage of state population. The Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex is the fourth largest metropolitan area in the U.S. and has one of the ten largest Hispanic populations in the country. Approximately 36% of Metroplex residents are Hispanic/Latino, and they comprise the largest minority group in the area (U.S. Census, 2000). Other work has examined the 2006 marches from a local perspective (Cordero-Guzman, Martin, Quiroz-Becerra, & Theodore, 2008; Martinez, 2008) and Texas requires the same level of attention, if not only because of its large number of Hispanics but also for myriad other reasons including its role as a border state, its unique position as a Republican-dominated state with a preponderance of Hispanics and because no state saw more new residents than Texas, from 2000 to 2010, the vast majority of whom were Latino. Additionally, recent scholarship has demonstrated the value of examining the Metroplex in understanding immigration issues as seen in Ravuri's (2014) work showing how region of origin and property ownership help predict return migration to Mexico for undocumented immigrants.

Protests and boycotts took place on numerous occasions, consistently across the Metroplex. The first immigrant rights protests in the Metroplex were organized by students. Examples of student-led participation in opposition to anti-immigrant legislation can be found in the student walk-outs that took place across the Metroplex in Arlington, Dallas, Duncanville, Ennis, Fort Worth, Grand Prairie and Haltom City.<sup>1</sup> Many students said they were motivated to act because of worries about undocumented relatives, and because they felt they needed to add their

<sup>1</sup> Smith, D. (2006, April 29). Tarrant activists set to show support. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, p. B1. See also Smith, D. (2006, April 30). Speaking up: Children of immigrants add their voices to a chorus of change. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, p. B1.

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