

Immigrants and Community Organizations in California

Community organizations play an essential role in the life of California's cities, large and small. But declining levels of civic participation—or volunteerism—have been a source of concern for some time. Even more troubling are the persistent differences in civic participation among California's racial, ethnic, and immigrant-generation groups. But why, exactly, does volunteerism matter?

Perhaps most important, volunteerism has a strong relationship to *political* participation. Involvement in community organizations offers skill-building and leadership experiences, reinforces the importance of political participation, and can provide access to both political information and elected officials. Often, low levels of volunteerism mean less visibility for ethnic and immigrant communities and fewer opportunities for these groups to have their interests addressed by local government.

“Our biggest challenge . . . is the diversity of our leadership board. To get some of our ethnic communities involved is a real challenge. . . . Do we come across as being closed to any of these young ethnic professionals? Do they walk into this room and feel that they are in such a minority that it's not a comfortable situation?”

— Chief professional officer, youth-focused organization, Southern California

In *Civic Inequalities: Immigrant Volunteerism and Community Organizations in California*, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Celia Viramontes analyze civic participation in six California cities. Relying on focus groups, interviews, and case studies, the report sheds light on several important dynamics at work in the interaction between immigrants and their communities. For example, although first-generation immigrants generally have low volunteerism rates, many new immigrants have created lively and growing community organizations, including hometown associations (HTAs) and faith-based groups. And although mainstream community groups have been slow to respond to demographic changes in the state,

offering little in the way of outreach to newcomers, some mainstream groups are creating spin-offs, such as the Filipino American Kiwanis Club, that do represent and serve specific ethnic communities. Such dynamics reveal the changing nature of California's cities and point the way toward new possibilities for community involvement among their increasingly diverse populations.

Civic Participation Among Immigrants

Immigrants face personal and social barriers to participating in civic life. They generally see adjustment to their new communities as a protracted process—not only in their initial move to the United States but also in any subsequent relocation within the country. This adjustment process tends to lower civic participation rates. Another factor is a lack of free time, although this problem is cited by native-born Californians as often as it is by the foreign-born.

What does vary by nativity, however, is a lack of information about community organizations—especially such mainstream groups as the Rotary Club. This information deficit points to deeper issues surrounding civic participation for immigrants: Many do not feel linguistically or socially equipped to seek out information on mainstream groups, and most are not connected to social networks that interact with these groups. In addition, many immigrants express a sense of social distance from mainstream civic groups, sometimes because of anxieties over legal status; sometimes because of not feeling welcome to participate.

“A lot of our members are illiterate. They don't have computers at home. We try to be a go-between between the non-English-speaking members and the [local] school . . . they are afraid to show up on campus because they don't know who to talk to, or they don't know who speaks Spanish so they feel intimidated.”

— President, Latino parent organization, Southern California

Despite such barriers, immigrants do participate in community organizations. Churches, and their attendant social

services, are particularly attractive to immigrants. Multiservice organizations—those that provide a variety of social services to a broad clientele—are also popular, especially because they are more visible and provide more outreach among immigrant communities than mainstream groups do.

Perhaps most important in terms of immigrant participation, however, are hometown associations. English proficiency and legal status do not present barriers to joining HTAs, which draw members—usually first-generation immigrants—from the same town or region. Often, but not always, these are Mexico-related groups. HTAs serve a dual function, as members work on issues pertinent to their hometowns—donating money to infrastructure projects, for example—and to their lives in the United States—such as campaigning for drivers licenses for undocumented immigrants. Some of these groups create extensive contact networks, because individual associations come together to form umbrella groups—the Federation of Jalisco Clubs, for example, which represents an entire Mexican state.

These umbrella groups tend to be highly involved in local and state affairs in California. For example, the Federation of Zacatecan Clubs of Southern California gathered more than 10,000 signatures from its individual clubs to support California Assembly Bill 540, which allows undocumented immigrant students access to higher education. Other groups have endorsed California politicians, met with the Legislature's Latino Caucus, and been involved in rallies for immigrant rights. Such activities reveal the potential both for immigrant participation in community organizations and for those organizations to connect to political life in the United States.

"The candidates themselves seek us out, because those who participate in the Jalisco clubs are very involved in their communities. Both [Los Angeles mayoral candidates] Antonio Villaraigosa and James Hahn invited us to participate in their campaigns. . . . as a federation, we cannot participate because of our nonprofit status. But as individuals we do."

— President, Mexican hometown association, Southern California

Challenges for Community Organizations

Large and small, mainstream and ethnic, community organizations face a variety of challenges—including fund-raising, keeping up membership, and creating long-term continuity. Ethnic groups face particularly long odds. Funding challenges,

for example, bring up a host of other issues, as the board chairman of a Korean American organization makes clear: "We don't have a full staff that is English proficient and who can write grant applications. . . . We don't get any grants from foundations. . . . We'd like to receive assistance from other sources, but we don't know how to get it." Linguistic and cultural isolation can make long-term success precarious for ethnic organizations.

For immigrant involvement in mainstream groups, the chief challenge is outreach. Meaningful outreach would not only help to incorporate newcomer populations but may also be crucial in determining the long-term success of organizations in cities with a majority of minority residents. Successful outreach strategies include providing greater language access and modifying programs to appeal to immigrant members. Some mainstream groups, in fact, have become hybrids—organizations with mainstream origins but predominately ethnic membership. A similar phenomenon is the spin-off organization, such as the Glendale Filipino American Kiwanis Club, which is supported by its mainstream counterpart. Hybrids and spin-offs may revitalize mainstream civic groups.

"Here, in this community, there are five Taiwanese Lions Clubs that are addressing concerns in Taiwan. And the fact is we are recruiting new members, but we're not keeping them. . . . Our clubs fulfill the needs of the 1960s. We have to become modern and up-to-date."

— Member, Lions Club, Southern California

The Future of Volunteerism and Community Organizations

To facilitate civic participation, especially among immigrants, local governments can increase their levels of contact with, and sponsorship of, ethnic organizations. Such contact will give elected officials a better sense of their community's needs while providing greater access to the political process for newcomers. Second, mainstream organizations can offer opportunities for general involvement and also for leadership positions for immigrant and ethnic members. Third, the promotion of spin-off organizations may help to foster greater civic participation among immigrants and other ethnic groups. Finally, new organizations, especially those serving immigrants, can benefit from mentoring efforts by larger, well-established organizations on such matters as grant-seeking and the establishment of nonprofit status.

This research brief summarizes a report by S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Celia Viramontes, Civic Inequalities: Immigrant Volunteerism and Community Organizations in California (2006, 164 pp., \$15.00, ISBN 1-58213-119-8). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 [outside mainland U.S.]. A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, non-partisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.

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