

## COALITIONS: TRANSLATING ENGAGEMENT INTO EMPOWERMENT<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan Fox

Coalitions refer to groups of organizations that come together to pursue shared goals—in spite of possibly different constituencies, strategies, and tactics. To understand immigrant civic engagement, one needs to explore both how different kinds of immigrant organizations work together, as well as how they collaborate with non-immigrant allies. The breadth of participation in the 2006 marches reflected a de facto coalition between Latin American immigrants and U.S. Latinos. A survey of Chicago May 1 protest participants revealed that most reported that they were U.S. citizens.<sup>2</sup> A survey of Los Angeles participants reported that 38 percent were English-dominant. Both marches also involved relevant minorities of non-Latino participants.<sup>3</sup>

One reason that “context matters” greatly for immigrant civic engagement is that coalition possibilities vary widely across cities and regions. “Immigrant-friendly” U.S. institutions are much stronger in some areas than in others. Notably, the presence of the Catholic Church, labor unions, and the Spanish-language broadcast media maps very unevenly across the U.S. landscape. Most importantly, the breadth and density of immigrants’ most consistent coalition partners, the institutions of *U.S.* Latino

civil society, vary greatly across cities and states—as does U.S. Latino capacity for political representation.<sup>4</sup>

The *Ya Es Hora* citizenship campaign, which followed the 2006 marches, is an especially notable example of a cross-sectoral coalition between U.S. and immigrant-led institutions that mapped unevenly across the United States. This unprecedented effort brought together organizations with complementary constituencies and skills, notably Spanish-language broadcast media, the **National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials**, trade unions such as SEIU, and city-based immigrant rights coalitions.<sup>5</sup>

The uneven terrain of the context for reception of immigrants is highly relevant because, while immigrants have clearly demonstrated their capacity to build their own social and civic institutions, their capacity to take the next step and create political space, legitimacy, and voice in the policy process requires building coalitions with established U.S. institutions. The creation of this shared space at the city level, in turn, can reshape the environment within which immigrants decide when and how to become more involved with civic life.