CHAPTER 23

Political Mobilization and Activism Among Latinos/as in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

It is a sunny Sunday on April 9, 2006 in Dallas when we arrive downtown to attend a massive rally in favor of immigrants’ rights. Organized by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and many other Latino organizations, the march has attracted around 500,000 people, the largest march in the city’s history. The rally, like many others organized across the country, came at a moment of fierce political struggle in Washington and against a House proposal to further criminalize undocumented immigrants and people who assist them. The demonstrations represent the largest effort by immigrants in recent memory to influence public policy, and many immigrant advocates have described them as the beginning of a new, largely Hispanic civil rights movement. While we wait in front of the Cathedral Santuario de Guadalupe, a major symbol for Mexicans and other Latinos, the crowd chants and waves U.S. flags in response to a call by LULAC and other organizations to display symbols of patriotism and avoid the use of Mexican flags that could antagonize their opponents. Under the heat of the sun, dozens of ice cream and other street vendors also wait for the march to start, carrying their own banners and selling their merchandise in the meantime. Security agents can be seen on top of the downtown skyscrapers watching the marchers, many of whom, following the recommendations of the organizers, wear white T-shirts to symbolize the peaceful tone of the rally.

After a long wait and when Mass at the Guadalupe church ends, people finally start marching amid a happy explosion of chants and the waving of flags and banners. “Si se puede” (Yes we can),
“Latinos unidos jamás serán vencidos” (Latinos united will never be defeated), “Hoy marchamos mañana no compramos” (Today we march, tomorrow we won’t buy) are some of the most common slogans people enthusiastically chant. Although well planned and organized, the march does not have a central or charismatic leader and, instead, has a bottom-up, grassroots quality that surprises organizers and opponents alike, it is clearly a march in which working-class people are the main protagonists taking over the streets, bringing their children and families along, and chanting to make their feelings and demands heard in a peaceful but resolute manner. Indeed, the march is marked by a rather festive tone, with many families pushing baby strollers and walking with their relatives and friends. Many people carry banners distributed by LULAC that read “Justicia y dignidad para todos los inmigrantes” (Justice and dignity for all immigrants), whereas others have brought their own home-made signs to express their own feelings and messages.

A young woman wearing shorts and a white hat carries a sign that reads “We are not delinquents! We are only here to work! We only ask for legal status,” whereas a large banner carried out by several people declares “We don’t want to be separated from our family. We support the economy in this country so don’t kick us out.” The mix of creativity and humor shows up in a huge, two-sided banner that says “Immigrants work 2 hard 2 serve you!” with pictures in the corners of “Burro Bueno,” “Taco Bells,” “Wendys,” and so forth, and the opposite side depicts a landscaper and a construction worker asks “Who will mow your lawns and build homes?” Some banners use classic Latino religious symbols, including several that portray the Virgin of Guadalupe; others that are carried by pastors of Protestant congregations depict brief passages from the Bible urging people to be compassionate toward immigrants: “If being an immigrant is a crime may God forgive US all.” Showing that the march is not just about parents mobilizing on behalf of their families but also about children and teenagers mobilizing on behalf of their undocumented immigrant parents, a boy in his early teens walks alongside his parents with a white T-shirt that exclaims “We do pay taxes. Don’t mess with my dad!!” We also see several groups of teenagers in the rally speaking and chanting in English and Spanish and often using their cell phones to call and coordinate with relatives and friends, revealing the creative use of this modern technology for political purposes.

What explains this march? What caused such an unprecedented crowd to take to the streets of downtown Dallas, a city known for its conservative political environment? What does this and other political demonstrations organized around the country on behalf of immigrants’ rights say about Latino grassroots social movements and protest politics today? And how does this movement fit with the history and tradition of Latino political mobilization in the past? This chapter seeks to address these questions and provide an explanation of the main issues that have driven activism among Latinos in the United States over the past few decades. Rather than focusing on the history of Latino grassroots groups, which is well examined in other places, I will focus on the building of a pan-Latino grassroots movement in the past 15 years. My purpose is to examine pan-Latino grassroots community politics since the 1980s, the themes that have ignited such movements, and the concepts and theoretical frameworks that have been used to study protest politics among Latinos in the United States. I also seek to discuss the emergence of the new movement for immigrants’ rights and outline the continuities and differences with earlier civil and political struggles on behalf of Chicanos and other Latino groups in the 1960s and 1970s.

I argue that we cannot understand this movement solely as a progression of the civil rights movement and demographic growth of Latinos per se. Instead, economic globalization and the emergence of a transnational immigrant labor are crucial to understanding the timing, demands, political strategies, and nature of this movement. Thus, we might be witnessing the infancy of a new movement at the turn of the 21st century to redefine the very nature of citizenship in which