

Weapons of the (Not So) Weak: Immigrant Mass Mobilization in the US South

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Abstract

Survey research shows that foreign-born Latinos in the USA are among the least likely to participate in political activism. Yet during the spring of 2006, up to five million (mostly Latino) immigrants and their allies took part in a historic national protest wave. This article examines how nativist legislation can spark immigrant large-scale collective action in an unexpected location. The case of Fort Myers, FL illustrates the cognitive mechanisms that help explain *why* and *how* external threats can transform a latent sense of group membership among unconventional protest organizers (e.g. immigrant soccer league members and ethnic small business owners) into a willingness to take action and utilize pre-existing community resources for the purpose of mass mobilization. These findings have important implications for Latino politics, immigration, and social movement scholars.

Keywords

immigrant activism, Latinos in the South, H.R. 4437, Latino identity, social movements

Introduction

Previous research shows that Latino immigrants are among the least likely to take part in political activism (Bloemraad et al., 2011; Martinez, 2005, 2008).¹ Yet during the spring of 2006, an unprecedented wave of immigrant activism captured the nation's attention with a series of mass demonstrations. Immigrants and their US-born allies took to the streets to protest of the *The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005* (H.R. 4437), also known as the 'Sensenbrenner Bill'. In addition to severely increasing border control and interior immigration enforcement measures, the proposed law sought to change the penalty for being undocumented from merely a civil violation to a federal felony. The bill also targeted anyone who assisted 'people without papers' by punishing them with monetary fines and incarceration, potentially criminalizing

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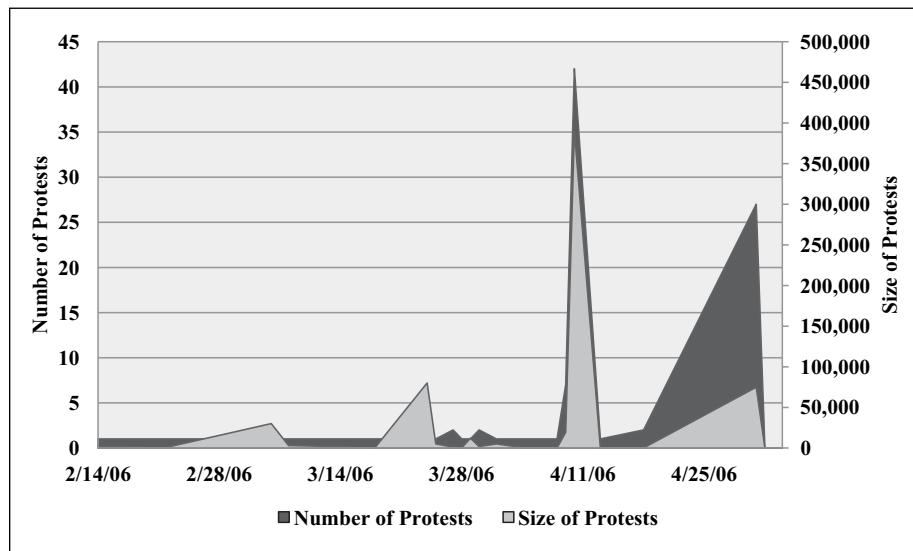


Figure 1. 2006 Southeastern US immigrant protest wave.

Source: Author's 2006 Immigrant Protest Event Dataset. USA states included are: AL, AR, DC, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MO, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, VA.

everyone from priests and family members to employers and social service providers (Gonzales, 2009; Zepeda-Millán and Wallace, 2013). In response, from February to May of 2006, up to five million (mostly Latino) individuals participated in close to 400 demonstrations in almost every state of the union (Wallace et al., 2013).

While massive mobilizations occurred in traditional immigrant gateway cities – such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York – with large immigrant populations, established histories of immigrant activism and a plethora of immigrant rights organizations, rallies also took place in surprising locations that lack these characteristics, such as relatively new immigrant receiving destinations throughout the US South. This fact is important to note given that recent survey research shows that immigrant protests are more likely to emerge in the former rather than the latter type of locations (Okamoto and Ebert, 2010: 539). Moreover, despite the fact that during the national 2006 immigrant protest wave the US South hosted close to 100 demonstrations with over 600,000 participants (see Figure 1), researchers have completely neglected the region in their analyses of the historic rallies.²

Using the case of Fort Myers, FL – where on 10 April 2006, 80,000 to 100,000 immigrants mass mobilized – this article examines the emergence of immigrant large-scale collective action in an unexpected location.³ Investigating the dynamics of immigrant mass mobilization in an unlikely location is vital because, in many respects, these episodes of contention challenge established findings of both mainstream American political behavior and social movement research with regard to *who* participates in political activism, as well as *where*, *why*, and *how* large-scale collective action develops. The research presented in this study finds that H.R. 4437 simultaneously posed an individual and collective threat that transformed immigrants' latent sense of group membership into politicized collective identities that motivated them to take action. This two-dimensional threat moved unconventional political actors – from local soccer league players and nannies to farm-workers and ethnic entrepreneurs – to utilize pre-existing neighborhood assets for the purpose of immigrant mass mobilization.

Data and Research Methods

Newspapers, secondary scholarly sources, and 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with leading members of the coalition of immigrants who organized the Fort Myers protest are the primary data drawn upon in this article. Interviewees were identified in late 2008 through newspaper reports that named several of the protest organizers.⁴ Because immigrant activists are often part of regional coalitions, I also contacted the Florida Immigrant Coalition (FIC), a statewide network of immigrant-serving organizations, to inquire about its role in the local protest. The FIC admitted that they were *not* involved in organizing the Southwest Florida demonstration, but gave me the names of two individuals who they had heard were key protest organizers. Upon compiling an initial list of rally leaders through the aforementioned process, I then used a ‘snowball sampling’ technique to identify other key coalition members and march organizers.

During two weeks of intensive fieldwork in January 2009, I traveled throughout Southwest Florida to interview the vast majority of Fort Myers coalition leaders, including several members of each of the local movement’s factions. Since most of these individuals had *not* previously taken part in political activism and were *not* members of professional social movement organizations (SMOs), interview questions focused on *why* they decided to participate in political activism and on *how* they were able to mass mobilize their traditionally non-politically active immigrant communities.

Context

The context under which episodes of contention emerge is important to take note of because the dominant paradigm in social movement theory suggests that an open ‘political opportunity structure’ (POS) – including a sizable base, supportive electorate, influential elite allies, and established SMOs – is fundamental to the movement building and mobilization processes (Clemens and Minkoff, 2004; Tarrow, 1998). If this is so, then by all accounts the POS that scholars have contended as vital for the rise of large-scale collective action was constricted, if not outright closed for Southwest Florida immigrants.

Over the last two decades, the state of Florida has become a new destination for Mexican migration (Durand et al., 2005: 5). According to a study of ‘the fastest-growing metropolitan areas’ in the nation for Latinos, the Southwest Florida Cape Coral–Fort Myers region ‘rose in rank from number eight in the 1990s to number one’ between 2000 and 2004 (Frey, 2006: 7). Most of these migrants are undocumented Mexicans (Greene, 2003a; Polopolus and Emerson, 1994) who have gone into labor intensive and low waged agricultural (Hirschman and Massey, 2008: 17), construction (Mormino, 2005: 66–67), and service industries (Crummett and Schmidt, 2003: 2). That the region is a new destination for Mexican migration is important to highlight given that recent quantitative evidence contends that the foreign-born are less likely to protest in these locations (Okamoto and Ebert, 2010: 539).

In the early 2000s, the political climate in which many Latino immigrants in the area lived and worked was a hostile one. For instance, a 2004 opinion poll revealed that 77 percent of Latinos in the state felt that discrimination against them was a problem, one in four of whom felt it was a ‘major problem’ (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004: 3). These sentiments were not unfounded since the state is home to some of the most militant nativist activists in the country and even has its own anti-immigrant political party (Beirich et al., 2008). At the individual level, most of these new immigrants were poor, worked in some of the most exploitative sectors of the economy (Bowe, 2007; Greene, 2003a) and, since many of them lacked proper legal documentation, they were void of a formal political voice. In addition, a second-generation electorate (such as Mexican-American

voters in California) and a political infrastructure (e.g. elected officials and SMOs)⁵ that could serve as representatives for the community were virtually nonexistent.

Moreover, in the early 2000s not only was the Florida state legislature and executive branch controlled by Republicans, but some of the state's local politicians were also the same growers who benefitted from immigrants being a seemingly docile and exploitable agricultural workforce (Greene, 2003b; Mormino, 2005: 215–218). At the national level, every branch of the federal government was also dominated by the GOP (the 'Grand Old Party', i.e. the Republicans), the more anti-immigrant of the two major US political parties. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that prior to the 2006 marches scholars had found that Mexican immigrants in Southwest Florida were among the least politically active in the state (Griffith et al., 2001: 85–89). Researchers contended that a dearth of unity within the community was partly to blame for their political invisibility (McDuff, 2004). Thus, in the spring of 2006, all doors of political expression seemed to be shut for Mexican immigrants in the Sunshine State.

That the 2006 protest wave, including the Fort Myers demonstration, developed under a hostile context brings attention to the claim that movements often emerge not in response to open opportunities, but in reaction to external threats. These critics assert that 'political opportunity' theorists underestimate the importance that grievances play in the mobilization process (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003: 5–9; Klandermans, 2004: 362) and argue that a 'group may decide to risk protest, even if opportunities seem absent, if the cost of not acting seem too great' (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001: 181–183; see also Snow et al., 1998). In short, 'external threat' scholars believe that it is 'changes in taken-for-granted subsistence' that best explain the provocation of collective action (Buechler, 2000: 59; Ayoub 2010).

The relationship between threat and mobilization is imperative to note because political scientists have found that the presence of nativist legislation increases Latino *electoral* participation (Pantoja and Segura, 2003; Pantoja et al., 2001). Much less, however, is known about what motivates Latinos (US- or foreign-born) to take part in contentious politics (but see Martinez, 2008). In terms of the predominantly Latino 2006 protest wave, researchers assert that the marches were a response to H.R. 4437 (Barreto et al., 2009). This argument is in line with Okamoto and Ebert's (2010) important study that finds a positive correlation between nativist legislation and immigrant protests, which they speculate may be related to how the former impacts immigrant identity. Unfortunately, these authors' quantitative data does not allow them to further investigate this possibility. Consequently, Okamoto and Ebert call for future research to 'explore the process and mechanisms' underlying the relationship between threat, identity and immigrant contention (2010: 52). Bloemraad et al. (2011) agree and assert that 'a more nuanced account' of the role that 'threat and perceptions of threat' played in the 2006 protests is needed to advance our theoretical understanding of this unprecedented series of demonstrations (2011: 29). The case of Fort Myers helps us begin to move in this direction.

Theorizing Threat, Identity, and Immigrant Mass Mobilization

Social movement scholars have found that the existence of a collective identity is a necessary precursor to participation in movement mobilizations (Friedman and McAdam, 1992: 156; Snow and Soule, 2010: 125) because it helps people see themselves as 'linked by interests, values, [or] common histories' (Della Porta and Diani, 1999: 109). Students of contentious politics assert that the more one identifies with a group, the more likely one is to take part in collective action on behalf of that group (Hunt and Benford, 2004: 437; Klandermans, 2003: 687). Thus, examining how collective identities develop, are made salient and politicized among the foreign-born is of the utmost importance when attempting to explain their participation in political activism. As I

argue in the remainder of this section, racialized anti-immigrant sentiments can serve this purpose.

According to Rumbaut (2008: 3), throughout US history nativism has often led to ‘the rise rather than the erosion’ of distinct identities among immigrants and their offspring. The same is true today in the case of Latinos, the ethnic group who made up the majority of participants in the 2006 protests (Chavez, 2008; Zepeda-Millán and Wallace, 2013). For example, sociologists have shown that anti-immigrant sentiments help create and sustain a collective identity among Latinos in general (Massey and Sanchez-R, 2010), and people of Mexican descent in particular (Jimenez, 2010; Telles and Ortiz, 2009), irrespective of their citizenship status or generation. But while several studies have suggested that nativist government policies are key factors in the politicization of Latino identity (Barreto et al., 2009; Sanchez and Masuoka, 2010), these scholars fail to explain exactly *why* or *how* anti-immigrant legislation can motivate Latinos to participate in contentious politics.

The case of Fort Myers begins to help fill this lacuna by illustrating the type of nativist threats that encourage Latino immigrants to mass mobilize. While they had previously been targeted at the local (Varsanyi, 2010) and federal levels by both state and ‘negative civil society’ actors (Arnold, 2011: 88), what was different about the Sensenbrenner Bill was that it would have directly and indirectly severely impacted undocumented immigrants *and* those who assisted them. As such, I argue that the politicized collective identity that leads Latino immigrants and their descendants to participate in protests is situational and must be activated. A two dimensional anti-immigrant threat is the key mechanism in this cognitive process. My research shows that when nativist attacks impact immigrant community members *directly* as individuals (materially) and *indirectly* as part of a larger collective (ideationally) (Nagel, 1995: 955), their latent sense of group membership (McClain et al., 2009) can be transformed into the politicized collective identity that provokes their participation in mass mobilizations.

Unconventional Political Actors

Scholars have found that immigrants are often assisted by churches, unions, community organizations and agencies that function as liaisons between them and their new societies (Bloemraad, 2006; Wong, 2006; Zuniga and Hernandez-Leon, 2005: xix). I find that these brokers can also be individuals who are central nodes in different types of immigrant networks and who possess important skills and resources. Many of the key organizers of the Fort Myers march were local community members who, over the years, had assisted recent migrants in adapting to their new country of residence. These individuals were often non-traditional political actors, such as immigrant owners of small restaurants, bakeries and grocery stores who sold items ranging from spices and clothing to international phone cards and remittance services. They were also immigrant presidents and founders of neighborhood soccer leagues, agricultural and construction workers, Spanish-language radio DJs, and owners of local ethnic newspapers.

These immigrants often migrated with vital social and personal attributes and skills, including civic and political organizing experiences gained in their countries of origin – many of the same characteristics that studies have found to be correlated with political participation in the USA, but that scholars have argued most Latino immigrants generally lack (De la Garza and DeSipio, 1997: 108; Garcia, 2003: 98, 183). In fact, that several of the key protest organizers had citizenship and some degree of college education is important to note because quantitative evidence suggests that these ‘internal group resources’ actually ‘discourage collective action’ in immigrant communities, which is contrary to what one might expect (Okamoto and Ebert, 2010: 548, emphasis added).

Nonetheless, the personal skills, resources, local networks and social statuses that many immigrants in Southwest Florida developed over the years were key resources used by them to mass mobilize their communities; communities made up of individuals who, according to the studies cited above, are among the least likely to participate in protests. However, before we examine this mobilization process it is imperative to investigate *why* these unconventional political actors decided to take part in such high-risk political activism. Understanding what motivated them to participate in collective action is of the utmost importance for both scholars and activists since the former are often concerned with predicting future social unrest, while the latter are mainly interested in creating it.

Motivation for Action

Group Threat and Collective Interests

Across Southwest Florida, coalition members continuously stated the potential punitive impacts of H.R. 4437 as a fundamental reason for deciding to organize a march. For instance, Rosalinda, an apartment manager, remembered that if passed the bill would have criminalized ‘anyone that had anything to do with undocumented people ... You [couldn’t even] give your brother a plate of food because that made you a criminal.’ As a result, she felt that ‘there was no way we could just sit back as human beings and let someone else be treated like the scum of the bottom of your shoe.’ Moreover, since Latinos, and Mexicans in particular, have become the ‘face of illegal immigration’ (De Genova, 2004; Ponce, 2012), many immigrants in Southwest Florida also felt their identities under attack. Consequently, the racialized tone of the immigration debate triggered a sense of group solidarity among them. As Ramona, a domestic worker, explained,

More than anything, I think that the law woke up in our people a feeling of not letting ourselves be humiliated, that we were worth something ... It was as if they saw us as less, a great feeling of racism ... that helped awaken the sleeping giant the people had inside of them. So in reality, it was a good thing. They did us a favor because it united us.

Capturing how a feeling of linked fate (Dawson, 1995) can motivate immigrants (both with and without citizenship) to act collectively, she added,

Thank God that I already had my [citizenship], but everyone [without it] around me was scared to go to work ... Being so close to them, I felt their pain. I would put myself in their situation ... It made me feel as if I was the one living what they were going through. That’s what motivated me to act.

The immigrant demonstrations that occurred throughout the country also inspired Southwest Florida migrants to take action. For example, a soccer league president remembered, ‘When we saw there were protests in big cities we started thinking about doing the same ... When we saw them, we identified with them, we even chose to do our march the same day as them. We wanted to be part of what was going on’ (interview with Tacho). The feeling of being part of a bigger group that existed across the nation helped minimize their sense of isolation and reaffirmed their desire to act in solidarity with other immigrants. This phenomenon demonstrates the mental and material power of imagining oneself as part of a larger collective that is geographically separated, but cognitively united by similar experiences of state and cultural repression, a shared racialized identity, and the inspiration that this mental geographic remapping created during the unprecedented protest wave.

Individual Threat and Personal Interests

These unconventional activists were responding not only to a broad threat against their communities and identities, but also to a direct threat to themselves and their personal interests. For example, Hortensia, a local mechanic, bluntly confessed, ‘I would have been affected … for the main reason that 95 percent of my customers are illegal.’ A farm labor contractor added, ‘I’m an American citizen … but in the area where I work, in agriculture, 99.9 percent of the workers are undocumented so without those people working for me I wouldn’t have the opportunity to work either’ (interview with Moises).

Since H.R. 4437 targeted their customer-base, immigrant small business owners were also threatened by the bill. Studies show that immigrant entrepreneurs are often dependent on their co-ethnic community members – who many times are undocumented – not only as a source of cheap labor, but also as their primary pool of clients (Efrat, 2008: 697–698; Shinnar and Young, 2008: 246). My findings indicate that the small business owners who formed the coalition that organized the Fort Myers protest were well aware of this dependence.

Despite these motives, it is difficult to determine which of the two modes of threat – collective (e.g. against their Latino group identity) or individual (e.g. against their material interests as businessmen) – was the more important of the two types of motivating factors; both existed simultaneously and worked together to provoke these immigrants into taking action. For instance, David, a foreign-born business owner, explained, ‘I was [undocumented] before so I couldn’t let that happen to our community. Plus, all of my businesses have only been possible because of the community. So if the community does badly, I do badly.’ Yet while both identities (as businessmen and as Latino immigrants) previously existed together, before the passage of H.R. 4437 the two had not been concurrently targeted.

Noting these personal motives is not to say that claims of group solidarity as a motivating factor were false or nonexistent. Studies on the role of collective identity in social movements find that people possess multiple identities that are more salient at different times and under different circumstances (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; Fantasia, 1988). For some of the immigrant entrepreneurs, the direct and personal threats the bill posed to their identities as businessmen *combined* with the broader attack on their racialized identities was what pushed them over the hump from moral and ethnic solidarity to a concrete willingness to act.

It is important to remember that these immigrants were not solely businessmen in their communities or crew leaders in the farm fields; they were also often neighbors and soccer teammates of their employees and coworkers. As a result, their relationships often extended beyond their workplaces. These individuals served as central nodes in their communities and were seen as local leaders and confidants by immigrants to whom they felt accountable. Tacho, a crew leader and president of a local soccer league, best exemplifies the simultaneous dependence on and loyalty to one’s workers as their manager, fellow immigrant, and neighbor. He recalled that the morning of the demonstration the supervisors and owner of the farm he worked for called him into the main office to interrogate him about the protest. According to Tacho,

I told [them], ‘You know what? Because of those people you’re talking about, you eat, I eat, and all of you eat … In the 10 years [that I’ve worked here] I’ve seen that this company isn’t anything without the fruit of those workers’ labor, *undocumented* [labor]’ … [To which a supervisor replied], ‘Well we don’t care, we want them all here [working] … You have to be on the side of the company’ … They told me they needed me there [too], but I said, ‘Don’t count on me, I’m going to Fort Myers,’ and then I walked out … All they cared about was their pockets … We care about money too, but we also have to see those workers as people.

These actions reveal a different way of understanding the identities of some immigrant ‘bosses’ and the relationships they have with their immigrant workers. A different social relation between them seems to have transpired by collectively affirming their dignity. The draconian and far-reaching nature of H.R. 4437 was an unprecedented individual and collective threat against many of these non-traditional political actors. It attacked their personal interests, heightened the salience of their racialized identities, and in the process created the motivation for them to mobilize their communities. Their first endeavor was to form a coalition to coordinate a local protest.

Coalition Formation

The informal coalition that organized the Fort Myers march was composed of three factions: the *Concilio Mexicano de la Florida* (the *Concilio*), a group representing over 300 mostly Mexican small businesses; the *Coalición de Ligas Hispañas del estado de la Florida*, a regional coalition of Latino immigrant soccer leagues with over 10,000 players; and a collective of a handful of independent immigrant activists who called themselves *Inmigrantes Latinos Unidos de la Florida* (ILUF).

According to one of its founders, ILUF formed as a result of small rally in Arcadia, FL organized by Eduardo, an undocumented farmworker, and Fidelia, an immigrant radio DJ. The demonstration was in response to the 2005 REAL-ID Act, a bill that sought to prevent undocumented immigrants from obtaining drivers’ licenses (interview with Fidelia).⁶ Since Mexican and immigrant activism in the area was virtually non-existent, the few independent advocates in the region had over the years heard about each other through word of mouth or ethnic news outlets. For instance, because Marcos, a Mexican-American lawyer, had previously received local media attention due to his speaking out against the abuse of immigrant workers, Fidelia and Eduardo asked him to speak at the 2005 rally (interview with Marcos). In addition, when Eduardo contacted the Mexican Consulate in Miami to ask for their support, the consulate suggested he contact a woman named Ana Maria because of her long history of helping immigrants in the area. After the small Arcadia rally, Eduardo, Fidelia, and Ana Maria decided to form an unofficial group they eventually named ILUF.

The soccer leagues and ethnic businesses united in a much different manner. When word got out about the potential negative impacts H.R.4437 would have on their community, several Mexican merchants throughout the region began to independently discuss the need to unite and to do something about the bill. They felt that established Latino groups in the area did not represent their interests and were ignoring the severity of the legislative threat. As a result, one of these merchants explained, ‘We realized that the Cubans and the Puerto Ricans had their own [organizations] and it was time that Mexicans came out and showed our faces too’ (interview with Moises). Spanish-language media outlets played an important role in connecting these small business owners and in linking them with the region’s immigrant soccer league coalition.

Because local Spanish-language newspapers report on the results of soccer league games, these ethnic news outlets are extremely popular in immigrant communities. Moreover, due to their popularity, immigrant businessmen use these local print media as their primary way of advertising to Latino immigrants (Shinnar and Young, 2008: 253; Teixeira, 2001: 2069). Since team captains and league presidents are the ones who report weekly game results to these media outlets, they also have personal relationships with reporters and newspaper owners. These relationships eventually helped unite local immigrant businesses and soccer leagues leaders because as they went around the state dropping off their weekly papers, print media owners also informed Latino small businesses about the Sensenbrenner Bill and invited them to a meeting that was being planned regarding the legislative threat (interview with Marcos).

The informal coalition that formed as a result of these meetings ultimately came to have the regional Latino immigrant soccer leagues (which had over 10,000 players at the time) and over 300 Latino small business owners across the state of Florida supporting it; the vast majority of which were Mexican (interviews with David, Tacho, and Marcos). After discussing it with other *Concilio* leaders, Marcos, who had known ILUF from their small Arcadia rally in 2005, contacted the group and invited them to join forces. By late February, the *Concilio* was heading the Fort Myers protest coalition and began to utilize its resources to promote the one-day demonstration and strike.⁷

Activating Pre-existing Community Resources

According to Scott (1990), ‘the practices and discourses of resistance’ cultivated by the oppressed cannot exist ‘without tacit or acknowledged coordination and communication within the subordinate group.’ For this to occur, ‘the subordinate group must carve out for itself social spaces insulated from control and surveillance from above’ (1990: 118). Scholars of contentious politics have also noted the significance of these ‘free spaces’ that are ‘defined by their roots in community, the dense, rich networks of daily life; by their autonomy; and by their public or quasi-public character as participatory environments which nurture values associated with citizenship and a vision of the common good’ (Evans and Boyte, 1986: 20; Ayoub, 2013). Despite migrants in new immigrant-receiving destinations being socially and geographically isolated from the broader public (Zuniga and Hernandez-Leon, 2005), my findings support the notion that ‘subordinate communities residing in the most highly segregated places’ can still ‘find the privacy and cultural resources’ to develop an oppositional consciousness and actions (Morris and Braine, 2001: 29).

Whereas some scholars assert that SMOs and support from external actors are vital for mobilization (McAdam, 1982; McCarthy and Zald, 1977), Morris (1984) contends that the ‘basic resources that allow marginalized groups to engage in sustained protest are well-developed internal social institutions and organizations’ that ‘provide the community with encompassing communication, networks, organized groups, experienced leaders, and social resources’ (1984: 282). As illustrated below, even without formal institutions and professional SMOs, under the context of a severe nativist threat, the pre-existing assets that foreign-born communities have within them are sufficient to produce large-scale immigrant collective action.

Individual agency as a community resource

Without the personal skills and agency of individuals, the development of social movements would not be possible. For example, Southwest Florida immigrant organizers drove literally hours from their homes (to as far north as Tallahassee and as far south as Homestead) to speak to crowds (ranging in size from less than a dozen to several hundred) to educate them about the potential negative effects of H.R. 4437 and the need to protest against the bill. Ana Maria best described these efforts. She said,

We had different meetings in different places ... We would get groups of people together ... to educate [them] about what was going to happen if they didn't come out and speak up ... I would drive and stop [in places] wherever I saw [Latino immigrants] and with a megaphone would just start saying out loud, 'Your attention please!' ... Then I would tell them what was going on. People would come up to me and say, 'Hey, where I live there's a lot more people. Why don't you come [speak there?]' ... I would tell them that I'd go if they got me 50 people together. Then I'd try to show them how to talk to others about [H.R. 4437] so that they could then go [and do the same] ... We ended up having meetings in people's houses on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays ... We would even ... just show up at construction sites and start speaking to the workers through the megaphones.

At these meetings, Ana Maria would ask, 'Are you willing to stop working for a week? Are you willing to invite 50 people to make 250 flyers and give them out in one week?' According to her, 'the people themselves would commit to it.' Different coalition members would go to various immigrant neighborhoods, churches, flea markets, restaurants, grocery stores, agricultural fields and, as Ana Maria mentioned, even construction sites to spread the word about the march.

One of the construction workers she spoke to was Isaías. Isaías 'got the message' from various sources including Spanish language radio and newspapers. The call for action resonated with him so he eventually went on to 'speak to a lot of people in the construction industry.' He explained, 'A lot of people know me in construction. I spoke to them about the law and how it was going to affect us and [about] the better bills that we could fight for.' According to Isaías, 'I'd go talk to them during their lunch and break and we'd agree on a meeting place for later. That's how I spoke to tons of people. We frequently had meetings at the park on Sundays. A lot of times we'd meet at soccer fields too. There'd be like 300 to 400 people at the meetings.'

At coalition meetings, members would distribute flyers for people to pass out. According to Ramona, the domestic worker cited earlier, 'We'd give the flyers out everywhere: laundromats, in the evening at nightclubs, on cars ... at restaurants' and other places. During the day she would go to work, 'but at night I'd go to all the places I knew [Latino immigrants lived] ... Sometimes I'd show up and I wouldn't see any flyers, but other times I'd show up to a place and it was already all full [of them].'

Other examples of immigrants who migrated with valuable personal attributes were two of the radio DJs who helped advertise the march. One of them was a journalist in South America before coming to the USA and another had a degree in radio and television broadcasting (interview with Fidelia). These DJs possessed important media and public speaking skills utilized to promote the protest. Many of the college-educated members of the *Concilio* were extremely clever in their messaging. Explaining the strategy they used when promoting the march on the radio, one coalition member recalled, 'We spent a lot of time on what [H.R. 4437] was. In other words, why [immigrants] should be mad ... Then we started to fill them with pride' by reminding them of everything they contribute to this country and how much they sacrificed to come here. Coalition members would end their speeches by encouraging people to participate in the demonstration (interview with Marcos).

Another individual resource that protest organizers possessed was the 'certifier' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 34) status they held in their communities, which helped them legitimize their cause. One of the immigrant disk jockeys who promoted the march explained how this dynamic played out:

To say that the businessman Gustavo, who everyone knows, was not only supporting [the protest] but was also one of the main organizers – that gave a lot of people confidence. To know that the lawyer Marcos was participating and was one of the main promoters; to see that Ismael and his magazine *Aguascalientes* were promoting; to see that the sports newspaper *Los Caracoles* and its owner Mr. Filemon were supporting; to see that Mr. David, someone with [citizenship] and an owner of several restaurants was involved and giving support; Tacho who runs the biggest soccer league in Florida was involved; to see that Javier with the largest Mexican boot store in all of Florida ... to see that Zebedeo was on the radio talking about all of this without fear; to know that all the commercials were sponsored by ... the same merchants who were part of their community ... [All of this] gave people the confidence to participate ... because they knew we were all going to be there ... and that immigration [officials], the police, or whoever [wouldn't be able to] take everyone away. (Interview with Zebedeo)

The effort that people exerted to make the march happen was not limited to those in the coalition. Individual immigrant community members and march participants also contributed to making the demonstration a success. People would show up to meetings or call coalition members and say,

'I have a lunch truck so I'm going to take it with water, ice, and sodas at this certain spot and I'll donate everything for free.' Someone that sold corn 'just showed up [to the protest] and started making and giving them out to people' (interview with Moises). The day of the rally several neighborhood residents gathered at a local church (that was not involved in organizing the protest) to make over 2,000 plates of food to distribute to marchers (interview with Fr. Samuel). One rally participant recalled that during the actual march, 'There wasn't even anyone directing it, the monster was moving on its own. The stage was set and people would just jump on and talk about the movement. They'd say "*Ya basta* [Enough] with the abuse! *Ya basta* with them ignoring us! *Ya basta* with them not passing immigration reform!" Then they'd get off and someone else would jump on the stage. The people would respond to them by saying, "Yes! No!" ... By then there was no agenda, there was no program, everything just happened on its own' (interview with Moises).

Thus, the agency of individual community members, who possessed skills and experiences that they either brought with them from their countries of origin or acquired while living in the USA, was a fundamental pre-existing community asset that proved vital to the development of immigrant large-scale collective action. But, as illustrated below, local economic resources were also essential to the Southwest Florida immigrant mass mobilization process.

Economic Community Resources

Edwards and McCarthy (2004: 118) point out that the resources crucial to the emergence and sustainment of collective action are not distributed equally within societies. Because of this, they note that 'middle-class groups remain privileged in their access to many kinds of resources' and that the mobilization of poor groups is 'quite rare in advanced industrial democracies' (2004: 117). When marginalized people do attempt to initiate collective action, resource mobilization theorists have argued that external assets from external actors are key (Buechler, 2000: 35–36; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). While funders, activists, and academics have debated about the negative and positive effects that resources from external sources can have on the development of social movements, all acknowledge their importance (Bothwell, 2000; INCITE!, 2009; Jenkins and Eckert, 1986). Yet movement resources do not only come 'from above'; they can come 'from below' as well. Local communities have often provided key economic support for various forms of movement activities in their neighborhoods (see Beifuss, 1985: 48; Cameron, 1993: 128; Piven and Cloward, 1978: 209). These types of economic resource were also fundamental to organizing the Fort Myers demonstration.

The more than 300 small ethnic-owned businesses involved in the *Concilio* invested thousands of US dollars in organizing the march. A Mexican clothing storeowner remembered, 'We all chipped in. For example, I spent more than US\$1,000 on the event. Other ... smaller stores would give 100, 200, 150 [US] dollars. All my friends around here gave money' (interview with Omar). *Concilio* members drove across the state to gather support and donations from as many Latino storeowners as they could find. As one of them recounted, 'There were lots and lots of small businesses that helped ... They participated by giving food, trash bags, transporting people, [etc.]' (interview with Zebedeo).

Much like in other parts of the country (Ramirez, 2011, 2013), advertising the march on local Spanish language radio stations throughout the region was fundamental to spreading the word about the rally. Local Southwest Florida merchants also played a vital role in making this happen. As one storeowner explained, 'Yes, they [the radio stations] helped, but how did we pay for publicity? All the local merchants of each community did. We'd go and ask them for money. Not all of them were able to give, but the majority of them, mostly Mexican, supported.' *Concilio* members convinced local businesses and radio stations that it was in their best interest to back the

demonstration. Zebedeo remembered ‘telling them why we wanted to do the march and how all of their clients were undocumented and that if they all got [deported], they wouldn’t have any more customers.’ Protest organizers also gave the small businesses some incentives to support. For instance, the commercial that promoted the march and played all across the region would end by listing the names of businesses that had sponsored the ad and endorsed the protest. In addition, storeowners were told, ‘If you give us US\$300, we’ll also make you 100 T-shirts. If you give us US\$500, we’ll give you 150 T-shirts with your store’s logo and the *Concilio*’s logo, and then we’ll put a nice quote in Spanish and English’ on the back (interview with Zebedeo).

While the *Concilio* paid for some of their advertisements, it also received a lot of free publicity from many local radio stations and print media outlets. Ethnic magazine and newspaper owners donated sections of their papers to inform the immigrant public about what was discussed at coalition meetings, why it was important to attend, what to wear and how to behave at the rally. DJs would allow activists to take the airwaves, sometimes for hours at a time, to promote the protest and answer callers’ questions. This free airtime and print publicity were not given completely for altruistic reasons. As business owners, *Concilio* members had considerable influence over local radio and newspapers because these media outlets were financially dependent on the advertisements of Mexican businesses as their primary source of revenue. According to a *Concilio* member, because he spends thousands of US dollars a year on advertisements in these print media outlets, ‘I didn’t ask anybody. It was more like, *you’re gonna put* [this flyer promoting the march] in, right?’ and the newspaper owners would do it (interview with Marcos).

While Latino businesses contributed substantial financial resources to the movement, individual immigrants were also a vital economic asset leading up to the mobilization. Not only did the non-business owner members of the coalition donate their own time and money to pay for the gas they used to drive around the state to organize people, make and pay for flyers out of their own pockets, etc. (interviews with Isaías, Ana María, and Ramona), but the economic power of the immigrant population as a whole itself was also an important weapon in the movement’s arsenal. Immigrants felt that they were the driving force behind the local economy. Consequently, the very point of the 10 April 2006 Southwest Florida work stoppage and rally was to demonstrate how important immigrants were to the financial wellbeing of the state. Since agriculture is so vital to the Florida economy, growers were especially vulnerable to a work stoppage given that the fields were in the peak of harvest season (Figueroa, 2006; Roka and Cook, 1998: 33), which meant that literally billions of US dollars of crops could potentially rot if not picked. Thus, in exchange for calling-off a weeklong strike, coalition members used this leverage to pressure several local Chambers of Commerce to send a letter to their members requesting that they not fire or punish any workers who participated in the protest (interview with Marcos).

Hence, despite high levels of individual poverty found throughout immigrant communities (Rector, 2006; Suro et al., 2011), my evidence indicates that *collectively* immigrant neighborhoods can in fact muster sufficient economic resources needed for mass mobilization. No external economic support (e.g. from private foundations or national immigrant rights groups) was used to fund or coordinate the Southwest Florida protest. Estimated at 80,000–100,000 people, the rally demonstrates that immigrant communities possess *pre-existing* economic assets that are capable of being successfully utilized for large-scale collective action.

Community Social Resources

Immigrant communities also possess resources that come in the form of local autonomous social spaces where community members congregate and interact with one another. These ‘social spaces play a vital supporting role’ in sustaining immigrant culture and ethnic identity (Frazier and

Reisinger, 2006: 267–271). One of the ways Latino culture has manifested itself in new immigrant-receiving destinations is through the creation of immigrant soccer leagues. These soccer leagues ‘create a cultural space that is familiar, entertaining, practical, inexpensive, transnational, and ephemeral, where immigrants gather to reaffirm their sense of identity and belonging’ (Price and Whitworth, 2004: 168). Soccer matches are truly a family and community affair. Not only do some of the same types of ethnic businesses described above sponsor many of the teams, but women in the community also regularly sell food on the sidelines and take part in their own all female teams, children watch or participate in their own youth leagues, and spectators socialize with each other and share information about jobs, housing, and news from their home countries (Steigenga and Williams, 2009: 114). Thus, soccer leagues are ‘vital yet under-appreciated nodes of immigrant social networks and place-making activities’ (Price and Whitworth, 2004: 168).

Case studies examining the tactics of immigrant rights organizations have demonstrated that soccer leagues can also be used for political means. For example, as in this study, soccer league leaders have been found to play vital roles in getting team members to take part in activism. Leagues have served as key recruiting grounds for immigrant rights SMOs and union organizing drives, and soccer games have been central places where activists distribute important information about the rights of immigrants and campaigns that they could join (Fine, 2006: 55–56; Gordon, 2005: 118). Hence, local community soccer leagues can serve as the ‘social spaces insulated from control and surveillance from above’ that Scott (1990) contends subordinate groups ‘must carve out’ for themselves in order to coordinate and communicate their ‘practices and discourses of resistance’ (1990: 118). As I demonstrate below, this seems to be the case with regard to the role the leagues played in the Fort Myers protest.

To understand how central soccer leagues are to Southwest Florida immigrants, it is imperative to point out that immigrants in the region often live far apart from each other. Because of this, soccer leagues are central socializing spaces for immigrants. As one league president described, ‘Here we live differently, we don’t have complete neighborhoods like in other places. Here we hardly see each other. On weekends the only time we gather, besides church,⁸ is the soccer field’ (interview with Tacho). Another league founder added that soccer ‘is one of the ways we’ve been able to unify, bring our people together and organize them’ (interview with Moises).

Because of the sport’s importance to community members, league founders and presidents feel they are held in higher esteem and have a certain responsibility to their fellow immigrants. Again, it is worth quoting one of these individuals at length:

The reason why I got involved [with the protest] was because despite my family and me not having any problems with our [citizenship], there are people here who make an honest living working very difficult jobs to earn their bread ... I have lived and worked with these people ... for 18 years in the soccer league ... [These are] people who always come and ask me for advice and about my opinion on things ... I don’t consider myself a community leader, but because I know these people so well, I feel obligated to them. (Interview with Tacho)

Thus, given their important roles in their communities, it should come as no surprise that once all the various soccer league presidents throughout the region decided to join and support the protest, ‘the soccer leagues [became] the seedbeds of the movement’ (interview with Tacho).

Their ability to mobilize a large number of immigrants in the region is easier to comprehend once one understands how the leagues are structured. Being league president put these people in contact with networks of team captains who were in charge of their distinct teams, which are themselves part of their own networks made up of individual players, their friends and family members. In 2006, throughout Southwest Florida several leagues had from a few hundred to over a thousand

members. For instance, in the small city Palmetto, ‘We had more than 76 [adult male] teams, 10 for veterans, 12 women’s teams and more than 1,500 players in this league alone’ (interview with Tacho). Tacho, the president of the more than 10,000-member Southwest Florida immigrant soccer league coalition, stated that after meeting with all of the region’s league presidents and convincing them to support the march, they each went back to their respective communities to organize the various teams in their leagues to participate. He recounted,

When I met with the soccer coaches I warned them that this could potentially change things in the league ... [and even] cause a raid on the soccer field because they [immigration officials] knew I was there and was helping direct things [for the march] ... I asked them if they were in agreement, that I’d represent them and that if they didn’t agree that it was OK, we didn’t have to participate. So we spoke about it and everyone was in favor and said they wanted to participate.

A league president, who was undocumented, confirmed this and explained that at his weekly meeting with team representatives they discussed the plans for the protest and the need for everyone to take part in it. As a result, he recalled that whether documented or undocumented, ‘All of the community and all of the players supported’ by attending the march with their families (interview with Daniel).

It is important to note that these soccer players, as well as their friends and family members who watched them play every week, were the same people who were hearing on the radio and reading in their local newspapers about the punitive provisions of H.R. 4437 and the need for them to come out and protest against it. Oliver and Myers (2003) contend that ‘social influences between groups increase and deepen information flows beyond the information presented in the mass media’ and that the ‘messages delivered to individuals by their personal contacts and by the media can also reinforce each other during the critical time when the individual is presented with an opportunity to decide whether or not to act’ (2003: 184–185). This is what happened in Southwest Florida with regard to the immigrant soccer league members. They not only heard calls for action from their local Spanish radio and print media outlets, but highly respected people with whom they had personal relationships then reinforced those invitations. This finding is consistent with other research that demonstrates that Latinos are more receptive to calls for political mobilization by co-ethnics and people they know (Barreto and Nuño, 2009; Michelson, 2005: 98). However, the more important finding here is the fact that ‘from Central to Southern Florida’ another local pre-existing asset, soccer leagues, ‘were the seedbeds of the movement.’

Conclusion

In sum, the massive Fort Myers protest was not a case in which a social movement community (e.g. SMOs, professional organizers, and outside funders) ‘parachuted in’ with external resources to appropriate local institutions in pursuit of an outside political agenda. Rather, the demonstration is an example of a *community in movement* using its various indigenous assets for its own self-defense and desire to demonstrate its dignity and discontent. Contrary to what previous studies would have predicted, this episode of contention illustrates how even among unlikely political actors, in unexpected locations and under a hostile organizing context, immigrant large-scale collective action can still emerge.

The case of Fort Myers shows that in spite of a closed political opportunity structure, nativist legislation that severely and simultaneously threatens the collective identities and personal interests of key immigrant community members can rouse these individuals into taking action and mass-mobilizing their co-ethnics. Furthermore, regardless of the economically impoverished

locales where many immigrants reside, the Southwest Florida protest illustrates that immigrants have pre-existing individual, economic, and social community resources that can be activated for the purpose of large-scale collective action. Thus, given that the assets needed for the rise of migrant mass mobilization continue to exist within these communities, the current state of immigrant activism in the region may best be understood as a ‘movement in abeyance’ (Taylor, 1989). Such movements have the potential to rise up again when needed and if the conditions are ripe.

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Notes

1. Nonetheless, immigrants have been fundamental to the revitalization of the US labor movement (Milkman, 2006; Turner and Hurd, 2001) and sometimes participate in other forms of community (Das Gupta, 2006) and religious (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2008) organizing.
2. Neither Voss and Bloemraad’s (2011) edited book nor the special issues on the 2006 marches in the *American Behavioral Scientist* 52(4) (2008) and *Urban Affairs Review* 44(5) (2009) include case studies of protests in the US South.
3. 10 April 2006 was one of two national days of action during the protest wave. The other national day of action was 1 May 2006.
4. See <http://www.smfws.com/articles2006/2006aprilmayjune/art04162006e.htm> (consulted 6 October 2009).
5. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), an established SMO, is based 35 miles outside of Fort Myers. Despite the Sarasota/Manatee Farmworker Supporters reporting that the CIW was a key organizer of the Fort Myers rally, my interviews with the protest organizers and a lead CIW member revealed that this was not the case – see <http://www.smfws.com/articles2006/2006aprilmayjune/art04162006e.htm> (consulted 20 March 2014).
6. Before the bill became a law people without papers were able to obtain drivers’ licenses in Florida.
7. According to Ana Maria, one of ILUF’s founders and leaders, the *Concilio* easily dominated and led the coalition because of all of its financial resources.
8. Interestingly, according both to protest organizers and to the local Fort Myers Catholic Church, unlike in other cities such as Los Angeles local churches did *not* play an important role in the organizing or mobilizing processes in Southwest Florida.

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