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Mexican Hometown  
Associations and Mexican  
Immigrant Political  
Empowerment in  
Los Angeles

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**MEXICAN HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS  
AND MEXICAN IMMIGRANT  
POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN LOS ANGELES**

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# *Mexican Hometown Associations and Mexican Immigrant Political Empowerment in Los Angeles*

## *Introduction*

*L*os Angeles has become a metropolis of Mexican immigrants and their descendants. The Current Population Survey shows that Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans accounted for about 34 percent of the county's population in 1996 (CPS 1996). This figure is expected to continue to rise very rapidly, and by 2010, Latinos (of which about 80 percent are Mexican or Mexican origin) are expected to outnumber non-Hispanic whites (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996).

In recent years, immigrants in general and Latino immigrants in particular have come under vociferous attack in California and nationally. This anti-immigrant sentiment has relentlessly made scapegoats of immigrants for a variety of social ills and created a mood of intolerance against them. Its most concrete expression was the passage of Proposition 187, which sought to deny education and other basic rights to undocumented immigrant children.

This research explores the response of Mexican immigrants to the increasingly hostile environment of their host society. As other authors have pointed out, over the last five years naturalization rates among Mexican immigrants have increased sharply, and these new citizens are becoming an increasingly important electorate (Arvizu 1996; DeSipio 1996). In this research we explore another form of civic engagement, the participation of Mexican immigrants in voluntary grassroots organizations in the United States. Political empowerment is not only a question of voting or electing co-ethnics to political office, but is also constructed through participation in civic organizations.

Our research examined the most significant manifestation of voluntary sector activity among first generation Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, the Mexican home town associations (HTAs). There are now over 170 HTAs (commonly known as clubs) from 18 Mexican states registered with the Mexican Consulate, and many more informal HTAs that have no contact with the Consulate. HTAs are clearly the most numerous and ubiquitous form of voluntary organization among first generation immigrants.

Moreover, the HTAs played an active and visible role during the heated political battle over Proposition 187, suggesting that an in-depth examination of these organizations was worthwhile. There were reports of substantial donations by HTAs to the campaign against the Proposition, and HTA members marched in the October 1994 rally against Proposition 187, Los Angeles' largest street demonstration since the Vietnam War protests.

The examination of Mexican HTAs is also one lens through which to explore the broader issue concerning the kinds of civic culture and voluntary institutions Mexican immigrants are constructing in the United States, and hence their potential contribution to U.S. civic and political life. In a variety of studies around the world, researchers have found that voluntary organizations have contributed to the construction of democratic institutions, and in the case of many Latin American countries, the transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Plaut and Williams 1994; Alvarez and Escobar 1992). Researchers in Mexico have attributed the weakening of the ruling party's (PRI) monopoly over Mexican social institutions and the growth of electoral competition to, in part, the growth of the voluntary sector (Fox 1994; Haber 1996). In the United States, civic associations have long been recognized as an essential element of democracy, and their apparent decline as a threat to the nation's well-being (Putnam 1994).

The magnitude of the foreign and native-born population of Mexican origin in Los Angeles underscores the important influence of this group on the area's civic culture. The extent to which Mexican immigrants build their own civic organizations or join already existing ones, organize around issues in Mexico or focus on their adopted host country, ally themselves with other ethnic and national origin groups or preserve separation based on national origins, maintain Mexican civic culture or adopt U.S. attitudes and behavior, all will shape future civic life in Los Angeles for decades to come. The ways they organize in civil society will also affect the extent to which Mexicans participate in formal democratic institutions, i.e. whether they choose to naturalize or remain non-citizens, whether they vote, and who they will vote for.

In this research report, we explore both the ways HTAs help immigrants adapt to the United States and the ways in which they influence the larger Los Angeles society. We first describe the HTAs, analyzing their internal organization, their activities both in California and their home towns, their relationship with the Mexican government and some salient differences in the HTAs of immigrants from three different states in Mexico. We then document their participation in U.S. politics and social movements, analyzing their attitudes about political involvement, their relationships with local political and community leaders, and their role in empowering immigrants.

The information presented in this paper was gathered through in-depth interviews with club and federation leaders and members, and attendance at meetings and HTA events throughout 1997.

## *Literature Review*

Grassroots organizations based on home community or region are common to many immigrant groups who have settled in the United States, and have played a fundamental role in the economic empowerment and social incorporation of immigrants from a variety of nations into U.S. society. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about immigrant assimilation, ties and loyalties to the old country, as manifested by the maintenance of strong social relationships among immigrants from a particular town or region, actually have in some cases helped immigrants move up the economic ladder and participate in the political process (Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Light 1972; Portes and Rumbaut 1991). Immigrant social networks have clearly been an important resource for immigrants, helping new migrants obtain jobs and housing and learn the ropes of living in their new country (Massey et al 1987; Zabin et al 1993; Mines 1981). These networks constitute what Coleman (1988), Martinelli (1994) and others have called social capital, which is the accumulation of knowledge, experience, and contacts by some members of the network that create a potential stream of returns over time for subsequent entrants belonging to the same networks<sup>1</sup> (Runsten and Zabin 1995). For immigrants, this social capital is very important in determining work trajectories and life possibilities in the United States.

Immigrant associations are built on immigrant social networks, and should be seen as a more formal and institutionalized form of the same social phenomenon (Levitt 1994). The formation of associations seems to facilitate effectiveness and continuity, through a customary delegation of responsibilities and recognized process for leadership succession. Institutionalization also can identify and provide access to specific constituencies—such as recent Mexican immigrants—for other established organizations.

The strength, orientation, and degree of formal organization of immigrant associations in the United States has differed both by nationality and by historical period. Japanese immigrants in the early twentieth century formed associations based on region of origin in Japan which were instrumental in the rapid upward economic mobility of this group. These regional clubs formed crews of agricultural workers and served the function of a labor union by creating a floor on the price of the harvesting services their members performed (Ichihashi 1969). The Jewish *landsmanshaft* in New York were central to Jewish par-

ticipation in the New York labor movement in the early twentieth century, encouraging members to join unions, providing strike benefits, and forming hometown chapters of the Workman's Circle (Soyer 1997). Ethnic associations, commonly based on community or region of origin in the old country, have also been a driving force for small business development for a variety of Asian, Latin American, and European immigrants (Light 1972; Guarnizo 1992; Bonacich 1987; and Waldinger 1987).

In some cases, immigrant associations have taken on the provision of social services for groups excluded from government-provided safety nets. For example, immigrant associations have commonly provided funds for emergency medical assistance, burials, low-cost credit, and help in obtaining housing and jobs (Massey et al 1987; Goldring 1992; Light 1972). Some of the most enduring nonprofit social and health service institutions which exist even today, such as the Jewish hospitals and social service agencies in New York, were started as projects of federations of home town associations of Jews from Eastern Europe (Soyer 1997).

Immigrant home town associations in the United States have at times played a role in influencing U.S. foreign policy vis-a-vis their country of origin, especially when they are official or de facto political refugees. Hometown associations have formed a strong basis of support for larger coalitions representing immigrants of a variety of ethnic group and nations, such as the Dominican Republic in the current era and Eastern European Jews during WWI. This influence developed as a result of the successful construction of broad representative organizations that could speak with one voice on political issues concerning their home countries.

Immigrants have also gained local political power in their host country using the organizational resources created by ethnic associations based on ties to the homeland. A recent example is the rapid political representation gained by Dominican immigrants in New York City politics, which depended on ethnic associations formed originally to help home communities in the Dominican Republic (Guarnizo 1992).

Mexican immigrants have also relied on hometown associations to gain access to political and economic power, although the strength of these organizations seems to have ebbed and waned through the long history of the Mexican diaspora in the United States. Mutual aid societies flourished in California in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and were important in labor organizing, business development, and local politics (Weber 1994; Pichardo 1990). However, little has been written about mutual aid societies since then, and they seem to have diminished in importance until the recent surge of Mexican immigration in the last 25 years (Gonzalez Guttierrez 1993). What has been written has focused largely on their relationship with the Mexican government and their influence on politics and development in their home regions in Mexico, not on their role in the United States (Goldring 1992; Smith 1997).

The potential importance of HTAs in shaping civil society and politics in the United States is illustrated by the *landsmanshaft* created by Eastern European Jews in New York City in the early twentieth century. Estimates show that about 25 percent of New York's Jews, or about one million people, participated in the HTAs during the first two decades of the 20th century. The HTAs, in turn, were for several decades central to larger Jewish and non-Jewish organizations that persist today, and thus influenced U.S. politics in a variety of ways. Most importantly, they were the vehicle for much of the Jewish involvement in the United States labor movement. In addition, the HTAs also built social infrastructure such as hospitals and social service agencies that persist today, and formed part of early efforts to construct a Jewish lobby that has developed substantial capacity to influence U.S. foreign policy (Soyer 1997).

With this and other historical examples, and given the current climate of anti-immigrant hostility, we set out to explore whether or not the Mexican HTAs might be a source of organization and mobilization in the Mexican community in Los Angeles.



## *Internal Organization of HTAs*

**T**he associations of Mexican immigrants based on their region of origin exhibit a range of organizational formality and complexity. The most common and simplest type of association is the informal migrant village network. Scholars have long noted the importance and ubiquity of village-based social networks in helping migrants journey to the United States and find housing and employment, and in gaining access to other resources necessary to construct their new lives. These informal networks are based not only on kinship relationships, but are also very much rooted in the common identity of village of origin. In the host society, villagers see each other at baptisms and other social events and help each other in emergencies. As satellite communities become more established, villagers commonly get together to celebrate the town's traditional patron saint's day fiesta and/or form hometown soccer, baseball or basketball teams to play the sports they grew up with in their home region in Mexico.

A next stage of organizational development consists of the creation of a formal leadership committee that organizes and represents the daughter community. This process is usually initiated by a few civic-minded migrants who compile a list of their compatriots and call together a meeting through word of mouth and visits to migrants' homes. At the meeting, an election of officers is carried out and general concerns and projects are discussed. In many cases migrants come from villages with strong local governance institutions, and migrants simply follow the same customs and procedures used at home.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, local civil authorities at home request the formation of a committee representing the migrant community. Often this request is in conjunction with a solicitation for financial support for some project or event in the home community.

A typical story of how an HTA was formed was recounted to us by one of the founders of the club of immigrants from Pegueros, a small town in the state of Jalisco:

Initially, folks from Pegueros got together frequently for certain events, especially sports events.... I brought my family and the majority of the players did also, and it wasn't just our families, there were a lot of people who came just as spectators, because wherever we go we bring more fans than anyone else. It was from our link with these sports events that it occurred to

us to form an association that would have more diverse goals, above all to take care of other necessities of people from Pegueros. Our first project was the donation of an ambulance to our town.

There are literally thousands of associations of the types just described. Most of these are known only to their members and have no formal contact with larger federations or outside groups either in Mexico or in the United States. They serve an internal function by responding to some of the felt needs of their members. However, their participation in larger movements is limited by their isolation and atomized character.

The Mexican Consulate has actively encouraged the formation of HTAs. In Los Angeles, which has the largest and most active Consulate in the United States, Consular staff have developed an extremely efficient way of promoting clubs. The Mexican government finances visits from municipal presidents from high migration regions in Mexico to visit Los Angeles. Consular staff set up meetings in the Consulate for the presidents to talk with migrants from their municipio. The Consulate has a database of Mexicans living in the United States who have applied for identity cards called *matrículas consulares*, which captures information on birthplace within Mexico as well as address and phone number within the United States. This database is used to inform compatriots of the visit of their municipal authorities to the Consulate. These initial meetings usually draw from 20 to 50 compatriots, some of whom haven't been in contact with each other previously. The Consulate staff and the visiting public municipal officials use these meetings to encourage the formation of a club, by articulating the importance of retaining their national and hometown identity and traditions, helping one another, and building unity among Mexican immigrants in the United States. Municipal presidents often stress the role that immigrants can take in promoting progress in their home towns. They also invite their "absent children" (*hijos ausentes*) to visit, retain ties, and invest in their home communities.

The next level of organization among Mexican immigrant associations is that of the federation. Federations have been organized among clubs from the same state in Mexico for only a handful of Mexican states of origin. The oldest is the Federation of Clubs from the state of Zacatecas, which was formed in 1972 and now has 51 member clubs. The only other large federation is the one from the state of Jalisco, which was formed in 1990 with the aid of the Mexican Consulate and now has 49 member clubs. HTAs from Oaxaca have attempted to form one federation, but have been unable to maintain unity and now there are three smaller federations of clubs from Oaxaca, divided by regional and ideological differences. Several other states such as Nayarit, Sinaloa, and Durango have formed federations, but these have only a few member clubs. No federations have been formed among immigrants from some of the states with the highest population numbers in Los Angeles. Michoacan, for example, is the second most important state of origin for the Mexican community in Los Angeles, but they have few clubs registered with the Consulate, and no federation. This may be explained by the often conflictive relations that the Consulate has had with immigrants from this state, which has been a bastion for the leftist opposition party, the PRD.

TABLE 1

<b>Mexican Immigrants Clubs and Federations in Los Angeles</b>					
<b>State of Origin in Mexico</b>	<b>(1) Mexican nationals registered with Mexican Consulate</b>	<b>(2) Estimated distribution of immigrants by state of origin (from Column 1)</b>	<b>(3) Computed Number of Immigrants in Los Angeles region**</b>	<b>(4) Number of Home Town Associations</b>	<b>(5) State-wide Federations</b>
Jalisco	107,622	29 percent	503,819	49	yes
Michoacan	55,744	15 percent	260,959	11	no
Zacatecas	36,434	10 percent	170,561	51	yes
Guanajuato	19,556	5 percent	91,549	1	no
Mexico City, D.F.	19,173	5 percent	89,756	0	no
Sinaloa	13,566	4 percent	63,508	11	yes
Durango	13,306	4 percent	62,290	4	yes
Nayarit	12,774	3 percent	59,800	9	yes
Guerrero	12,221	3 percent	57,211	1	no
Puebla	10,164	3 percent	47,582	5	no
Edo. de Mexico	10,052	3 percent	47,057	0	no
Oaxaca	8,731	2 percent	40,873	8	three
Others	47,624	13 percent	222,946	20	n.a.
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>366,967</b>	<b>100 percent</b>	<b>1,717,911</b>	<b>170</b>	

\*\* This estimation is derived by multiplying the total number of foreign born Mexicans in the Los Angeles region from the 1997 Current Population Survey times the estimated percentage of Mexican immigrants from each state in Mexico from Column 2.

### Who participates in HTAs?

Historically, Mexican migration to the United States has had its roots in rural areas. Large streams of migrants were first a consequence of the disruptions of the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century and later the result of the Bracero Program, the farm labor contract workers program that brought 500,000 workers to U.S. farms between 1942 and 1964 (Garcia y Griego 1981). Although in the last two decades migration has increasingly originated in urban areas (Cornelius 1992), HTAs are almost exclusively a phenomenon of rural communities. Immigrants born in urban areas usually do not belong to clubs from their urban barrio, but it is common for urban-born immigrants to belong to clubs from

the villages from which they or their parents lived before they moved to Mexican urban centers (Massey et al 1987). Thus, while data from the Mexican Consulate shows that Guadalajara sends the largest number of migrants from any Mexican city or town to Los Angeles, it has no hometown association.

The origins of HTAs in rural rather than urban communities of origin suggest that most participants come from rural backgrounds. Moreover, many came to this country first to work in agriculture, and only later settled in Los Angeles. Mexican immigrants in general have the lowest education levels among national origin groups in Los Angeles (*Los Angeles Times* September 15, 1997), and the rural origins of club members signify that a fairly large proportion of club members and leaders have little formal education.

However, in most cases, the leaders of HTAs are long-time immigrants who have reached a significant level of economic security. Many are owners of small businesses such as insurance and real estate agencies, Mexican restaurants, and other services catering to the immigrant population. A significant proportion are also professionals, including lawyers, social workers, and government bureaucrats. In general, then, club leaders tend to be among the more economically successful immigrants, but many of them achieved this success without the benefits of privileged backgrounds or education. Women participate in the clubs but very few have leadership positions. In the clubs from states with newer migration streams, such as Oaxaca, club leaders tend to be wage workers, since there are very few Oaxacan immigrants who have been able to move up the economic ladder and start businesses. While there are one or two women club presidents among the Zacatecan and Jalisco federations, there are none in the Oaxacan federations. In contrast, the Nayarita federation is led by a woman, and several club presidents in the federation are women as well.

### **Activities of HTAs**

The main activities carried out by HTAs in Los Angeles are fundraising events for philanthropic projects in their home towns in Mexico. Fundraising activities include dances, picnics, raffles, *charreadas*<sup>3</sup>, beauty pageants, and other cultural events, and they take place throughout the year. These events enable the clubs to achieve two major goals. First, they finance specific projects in their home towns, and second, they promote a sense of community among compatriots by fortifying social ties.

Club leaders spend most of their time and energy organizing these fundraising activities. These range from modest get-togethers such as picnics or small raffles, to gala events that require considerable organization, months of preparation, and significant financial investment, but generate commensurate profits.

The beauty pageants are the main large-scale event for many clubs in Los Angeles. In the Jalisco and Zacatecan federations, each club chooses a beauty queen in a yearly

cycle of fundraising events which finance club projects in the home community in Mexico. Candidates for queen are daughters of club members, and winners are chosen not only on the basis of their beauty, but on their ability to raise the most money for the home town by selling raffle and dance tickets or food at club social and sports events.

Every year there is also a federation-wide contest for the queen, who is elected from the group of queens from the member clubs. In the federation competition, a series of dances is held throughout the year, culminating in the final gala dinner dance where the federation queen is chosen by a panel of judges. The winner and finalists become the representatives of the immigrant community for their state, and as such participate at a number of festivities both in the United States and in their home state in Mexico. For example, the *Señorita Jalisco* in Los Angeles and her princesses are invited every year to Guadalajara, Jalisco's state capital, to the yearly festival of that city. They are also guests of honor at events carried out by other HTAs in Los Angeles and by the Mexican Consulate. Since most candidates for the queen are U.S.-born or were brought to the U.S. as young girls, participation in the contest is an important educational experience which reinforces their Mexican national, regional, and hometown roots (Smith 1996).

In addition to generating resources for the projects the clubs sponsor in their home towns, the fundraising events serve a second purpose. They constitute important gatherings of individuals from the same home town or the same state, reinforcing social ties among compatriots. These gatherings help immigrants circulate news and information regarding their home towns in Mexico and their communities in California. Thus, while the final, visible "products" created by the HTAs are mostly philanthropic projects directed towards their home towns in Mexico, their fulfillment requires the construction and reinforcement of collective ties that create community in the United States. Gatherings in Los Angeles help consolidate social networks that provide valuable information not only on the material aspects of the migrants' survival, but also on the civic dimension of their new society, such as how to obtain legal residence and citizenship, access to schools, etc. They also provide a forum for discussion of political participation in their adopted country. For example, a young member of Club Pegueros, a HTA from Jalisco, described how his parents discussed Proposition 187, the growing anti-immigrant climate in California, and their voting preferences with their compatriots at a club beauty queen coronation event. In this manner, these events enhance immigrants' insertion in American society, providing a main source of civic education even while they reinforce a strong bond with their towns in Mexico.

These club gatherings also enable the socialization of the U.S.-born children of immigrants. Perhaps surprisingly, the sons and daughters of the founders of these associations usually display a willingness to support these activities in significant ways. The participants in beauty pageants, sports teams, and cultural events such as the *charreadas* (rodeo-like events celebrated in Jalisco) and the yearly Oaxacan *Guelaguetza* (a festival celebrating tra-

ditional indigenous dances, dress and music) are often young people born in the United States. Club leaders promote these events in part to provide their youth with activities that can shield them from the influence of gangs or the youth drug culture, and instill them with the “traditional” Mexican values of close family and community loyalties.

## *The Role of HTAs in Mexico*

**T**he economic and political role of the HTAs in Mexico has been the subject of a number of articles and is not the focus here (see Goldring 1998a, 1998b, 1997; Smith 1998). However, a brief review of their projects in Mexico and their relationship with the Mexican state is necessary to understand the nature of these organizations.

The Mexican government has actively promoted the HTAs and values their contributions to their home communities. After several decades of minimal attention to the Mexican immigrant community in the United States, the Salinas administration in Mexico (1988-1994) reinvigorated the role of Consulate offices, created several new programs, and funneled substantial resources to attend to Mexicans living abroad (Smith 1997; Goldring 1997; Gonzalez Gutierrez 1993, 1995). Indeed, Mexican clubs and federations have flourished during the 1990s partly as a result of a more active role of the Mexican government (*ibid*).

The Mexican government works closely with the HTAs through its “PACME” program (Programa de Atención a la Comunidad Mexicana en el Extranjero), which is part of its Ministry of Foreign Relations and is housed in the Mexican Consulates. PACME staff in Los Angeles have not only actively promoted the formation of clubs, but also encouraged these associations to send financial and material resources to their communities in Mexico. Also known as the “two-for-one” program, PACME commits matching funds from the Mexican government, so that for every dollar raised by the HTAs for approved public works projects in their home communities, Mexico’s federal and state governments invest two dollars.

As a result of this program, Mexican clubs have channeled funds for the construction of public infrastructure (e.g., roads, street and building repair, etc.); the donation of equipment sent from the U.S. to Mexico (e.g., vehicles for social and nonprofit purposes, etc.); the implementation of charity initiatives (e.g., the support of orphanages, the construction of shelters for the poor elderly, etc.); and the promotion of education (e.g., implementing a scholarship program, funding the construction of a school, or sending school

materials). Through this program, the clubs and the government have invested several hundred thousand dollars in projects in home communities.

The Mexican government also has initiated a new program to encourage investments by migrants in productive projects in their home communities, such as small-scale agricultural initiatives or the creation of small industries.<sup>4</sup> Known as FONAES, the program intends to promote development projects in regions with high migration levels by bringing together the initiatives emerging from HTA and Mexican government support. While promising, FONAES is very new and it is too early to attempt any evaluation of its performance.

These programs not only help immigrants send resources home, but they have provided a structure through which the HTAs can interact with local, state, and federal governments in Mexico. The sometimes accommodating, sometimes conflictive interaction between the various governmental bodies and the HTAs is the subject of a number of new scholarly investigations by Guarnizo (1996) and Goldring (1997, 1998a, 1998b). Suffice it to say that new kinds of relationships between rural towns and the various levels of government have been formed, power relations within sending towns have changed, and thus new state-society relations that occur in a transnational sphere have been created.

In an odd reversal, the leaders of Mexican HTAs acquire much more influence in Mexico while living in Los Angeles than they would have if they had stayed at home. A number of scholars have noted the remarkable change of status for immigrants who mostly come from humble backgrounds in Mexico but, as club leaders, are able to meet with the consul general of Los Angeles or even the governor of their home state in Mexico (Smith 1997; Goldring 1992; Guarnizo 1997). As Guarnizo describes in his comparative study of transnationalism, "Mexican and Dominican transmigrants are people who enjoyed formal citizenship rights, but were outside the center of power and decision-making in their societies of origin. Ironically, they have started acquiring substantial citizenship rights in Mexico and the Dominican Republic, respectively, while living outside their own national territory" (1996).

Moreover, the greater the level of organization within the Mexican immigrant community, the greater the political influence at home. The leaders of the strong federations are well known in their states of origin and receive regular media coverage. More importantly, they have personal relationships with their state governors. And in the case of Zacatecas, this influence is particularly significant since the federation, with the aid of the two-for-one program, has become a major source of infrastructure financing for public works projects.

The direct contact between Mexican governmental bodies and the HTAs is by nature political since it represents a changing relationship between the state and civic organizations. In contrast, the political posture of the HTAs in the United States is more difficult to trace because they do not occur in the context of a structured interaction between the government and civic organizations.

## *Comparison of HTA Federations from the States of Zacatecas, Jalisco, and Oaxaca*

This section describes the work of the HTAs and state-level federations in Zacatecas, Jalisco, and Oaxaca. We chose the federations from Jalisco and Zacatecas because they are the largest and they represent immigrants from the traditional sending regions of Mexico. The Oaxacan federations are a contrasting example that documents the experience of more recent immigrants. The organizations formed by immigrants from these three states each have their own internal dynamic and have developed quite different trajectories. There are also considerable differences in the tangible achievements of HTAs in these states. We highlight a number of factors that help explain these differences. Among the most salient are the HTAs' ability to overcome possible differences within their own communities in California and unite in a durable federation; their capacity to build strong working relationships with the Mexican Consulate and their home state and municipal governments; and their ability to generate participation, effective decision making, and delegation of responsibilities.

The *Federación de Clubes Zacatecanos* is the oldest and largest federation of Mexican HTAs in Los Angeles. Started in 1965, it now has 51 member clubs and the legitimacy and power to stand as the accepted representative of the Zacatecan community in California. The Federation provides critical support for its member clubs by providing a direct link with Mexican federal and state authorities, centralizing information of concern to Zacatecan immigrants, and teaching new clubs how to carry out fundraising and public works projects.

In Los Angeles, the Federation organizes a yearly series of fundraising dances in conjunction with a beauty pageant. The culminating event is a gala dance held at a luxury hotel, during which a panel of judges chooses a Miss Zacatecas. The federation also sponsors a baseball league in Los Angeles, and provides youth scholarship prizes and emergency health benefits to Zacatecan immigrants and their children.

The most remarkable feature of this federation is its success in financing and implementing public works projects in Mexico. It is the only federation that has taken significant advantage of the Mexican government's two-for-one program. In 1996 alone, the Zacatecan clubs sponsored over 60 public works projects worth, in aggregate, several hun-

dred thousand dollars. These projects included the construction and repair of roads, repairs to churches and town plazas, the construction of schools, clinics and senior homes, the donation of ambulances, and a variety of other projects in the home towns of Zacatecan immigrants. In fact, this federation's long trajectory as a provider of financial and material support for Zacatecan communities provided the inspiration for the two-for-one program institutionalized by the Mexican government during the 1990s.

The Zacatecan HTAs lead all other Mexican associations in the number, dollar value and scope of their social projects in their home towns. This achievement can be explained by several factors. First, the Zacatecan federation has been able to generate an internal dynamic that has resulted in the strengthening of its organization, which in turn provides substantial support for HTA projects. It is by far the oldest federation, and its long existence has allowed the formation of a cadre of capable leaders that have over the years served as presidents and continue to participate as committee chairs or ordinary members. It has also developed an effective leadership structure, with elected posts for officers governing the various elements of the federation's work. For example, the *Secretario de Proyectos* is the officer in charge of overseeing the clubs' public works projects in Mexico, and the *Secretario de Relaciones* oversees public relations and political action in California. When new clubs are brought into the organization, these officers help them learn how to organize projects and how to carry out fund raising events, thus educating them on how to make their clubs more effective and how to participate in the federation.

This sharing of responsibilities among a number of officers is an important element in the federation's culture of participation and decentralization of power. We observed other aspects of this participatory culture in federation meetings and in our interviews with some club presidents and federation officers. Concretely, discussion played a significant role in federation meetings, where dissenting viewpoints are aired by a significant number of members. While the president's opinions carried substantial weight, other opinions were heard and debated. Two people were in charge of facilitating the discussions, limiting the time of each intervention, and in general both encouraging participation and keeping the meetings efficient. While at times the discussions reached a confrontational tone, unity was preserved within the ranks of the organization.

The federation also has created specific mechanisms to strengthen itself as an organization, which have strengthened the organization over time. For example, the federation developed a system to process the Zacatecan clubs' requests for matching funds under the Mexican government's two-for-one program whereby the projects are pre-approved by the federation leadership and sent on only with the signature of its officers. This system provides advantages for both the clubs and the government because it uses a common formula for project presentation and evaluation and centralizes information about changing government requirements. Along with making project review and monitoring much more efficient, this system also makes the federation the principal intermediary between the Mexican government and the clubs.

As a consequence of its role as intermediary, in a number of instances the federation has forced the government to negotiate with it directly rather than making unilateral decisions that affect its membership. For example, in 1996, the government proposed changes in the two-for-one program that generated considerable dissent among the clubs. The Zacatecan federation was able to negotiate a compromise by speaking with a unified voice and threatening to withhold projects.<sup>5</sup>

The role as intermediary also helps build support for the federation among the Zacatecan clubs by providing members with exclusive access to services it has negotiated with the Mexican government. For example, when the government offered a health insurance plan for the stay-at-home families of immigrants in Los Angeles, the federation insisted that access to the program depended on membership in a club. In sum, the federation's leaders are very aware that there are ways to structure their interactions with the government in such a way as to fortify their own bargaining power, and have sought to do so in many imaginative ways.

The construction of a carefully negotiated relationship with the Mexican government authorities, and particularly the state of Zacatecas' governor, is the second factor explaining the success of the federation in the execution of projects in the home communities. As illustrated above, over the years the federation has been able to garner support from the state government but at the same time maintain a significant level of autonomy. The Zacatecas state government created a special office in Zacatecas to serve the emigrant community and implement the two-for-one program, showing a consistent willingness and commitment to support the federation's initiatives. The state government also pays the rent on the small office in Norwalk where the federation holds its meetings. In addition, the governor meets at least once a year in California with the federation representatives in order to discuss and evaluate the progress on the clubs' projects in their communities. When the governor comes to Los Angeles, he is accompanied to all his meetings by the federation president, who has tremendous influence over the governor's work agenda during his visit.

In sum, the support of the state government, which is much stronger in Zacatecas than in other states, has been pivotal in consolidating the federation's public works projects in Mexico and in helping the federation develop a very high degree of legitimacy among the Zacatecan immigrants in Los Angeles.

The second largest federation is the *Federación de Clubes Jaliscienses*. Started much later than the Zacatecan federation, it has nevertheless grown rapidly and now has 49 member clubs, up from 22 members in 1995. Many of the Jaliscan clubs are newly formed, and emerged as a consequence of the visits by municipal presidents described earlier. The consolidation of a federation in such a short period of time represents a remarkable achievement. The creation of a federation increases HTAs' chances to access information and resources which would be very difficult to obtain as isolated groups. For example, the federation president has helped HTAs to send ambulances and other material donations to their

home towns, intervening in a number of cases in which problems were encountered with the Mexican customs service. The federation has sometimes been able to overcome the ubiquitous bureaucratic obstacles even more efficiently than the local authorities in their home towns.

Like the Zacatecan federation, the *Federación de Clubes Jaliscienses* organizes a yearly beauty pageant through a series of fund raising dances. The federation also serves several other functions. First, through the monthly federation meetings, HTAs have access to a variety of information, provided either by the Mexican consulate or by the federation president, which they can in turn share with other members of their HTA. The federation has provided trustworthy information about the latest changes to immigration laws, IRS requirements, or new programs instituted by the Mexican government, such as a health insurance program for the families of immigrants in Mexico. Second, the federation president regularly allowed and even invited a number of private sector entrepreneurs that offered club presidents and members a variety of goods and services, aiming to take advantage of this network as a market. These good and services included prepaid phone calls, tequila from Jalisco, musicians' services for clubs' events, or even real estate in Guadalajara (Jalisco's capital city) or Mexico's new resort areas. Third, the federation served as a forum for requests of immediate charity and solidarity, such as a request for funding for an orphanage in Mexico by a visiting nun from Guadalajara, or financial help for a medical emergency of an immigrant from Jalisco.

However, the *Federación de Clubes Jaliscienses* has had less success in promoting public works projects in Mexico. Jaliscan clubs have successfully implemented only a handful of projects under the Mexican government's two-for-one program, even though one of the main stated objectives of the federation is to promote these projects.

In our view, the paucity of projects is due to both internal and external factors. First, the federation has a very centralized leadership structure, with fewer officers than the Zacatecan federation, and more functions concentrated in the position of federation president. Officers are appointed by the president, rather than elected by the at-large membership as in the Zacatecan federation. This centralization of power has limited the effectiveness of the organization, we believe, by stifling new leadership and participation. At the meetings we attended, the agenda was set by the president, who defined the issues to "discuss", and decisions were made with little discussion or airing of alternative proposals. The president's interventions during an ordinary meeting systematically outnumbered any other member and he carried out most of the federation's rather than delegate them among a number of other people. One concrete effect this has had is that no officer is responsible for helping new clubs learn how to develop proposals for public works projects in their home towns, or even organize fund-raising events. A number of club presidents expressed the need for this kind of support from the federation.

Another factor explaining the small number of two-for-one projects is the absence of strong support for the federation leadership by the Jalisco state government. While we were not privy to the tensions between the federation leadership and the governor, it was clear that the level of support for federation projects was qualitatively lower than in the case of Zacatecas. Although the state government had established an office in Jalisco to address issues concerning immigrants, the federation did not work closely with it, and had not been able to use it to facilitate the generation and execution of the two-for-one public works projects.

It should be noted that the governor is presently a member of the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN), the conservative opposition party. Party rivalries may affect the relationship between the Mexican consul (a PRI official) and the governor's office. The federation has no party affiliation but does have tremendous support from the Mexican Consul in Los Angeles and may be affected by these tensions. In contrast, the Zacatecan governor is a member of the PRI, thus eliminating this potential source of conflict.

The Oaxacan immigrant community presents a third very different case. Most Oaxacan immigrants are indigenous people from small, very poor rural villages. Migration from Oaxaca, in the south of Mexico, has a much shorter history than migration from Jalisco and Zacatecas, which are often known as the "traditional sending states" of west-central Mexico because of their long history of migration beginning in the early part of the century (Massey et al 1987). In contrast, there was virtually no migration from Oaxaca until the Bracero Program, and migration to Los Angeles only began in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Zabin et al 1992). Migration from Oaxaca to Los Angeles accelerated in the 1980s when, for the first time, families settled here in large numbers. Most Oaxacan migrants are youth or young families, and club leaders are noticeably younger than in clubs from most other states. As a consequence of their recent arrival, their very low economic position in Mexico, as well as language and other cultural barriers, few Oaxacan immigrants have achieved the same kind of upward economic mobility as their Jalisco and Zacatecan counterparts.

Given these characteristics, it is quite remarkable that they have achieved a significant level of organization. In 1996, there were 16 clubs in two federations in Los Angeles, one in rural California, and many more informal clubs that are not affiliated with any federation. In some cases, HTAs have belonged to more than one federation at a time. The rapid formation of clubs by Oaxacans may be attributable to the immigrants' cultural background, which includes participation in the strong indigenous communal institutions which govern village life in Oaxaca. These communal institutions function to channel household resources into public service in the village, since they involve substantial donations of time and money<sup>6</sup> (Wolf 1959; Zabin 1990).

In several cases, Oaxacan clubs were formed at the request of village authorities, who view the HTA as a way to maintain migrant membership in the home village and to channel migrant earnings back to the community. Even in cases in which the HTA was not formed

at the behest of local village authorities, migrants quickly sought to work closely with and gain the support of their village authorities. In one case, migrants have negotiated with their community that their service on the HTA count towards fulfillment of their communal obligations in their home community.

While communal village cultural traditions have facilitated the formation of HTAs among Oaxacan immigrants, Oaxacans have not been able to create a durable statewide federation. This may also reflect traditions and practices in Oaxaca. There, while village-level organization is very strong, inter-village coalition building has historically been very difficult, due to land boundary disputes, ethnic differences, and social identities based on the very local loyalties of the home village—*la patria chica* (ibid).

The largest and oldest Oaxacan federation in Los Angeles is the *Organización Regional de Oaxaca* (ORO), composed mostly of HTAs from Zapotec communities from the central Valley of Oaxaca. ORO at one time had 20 clubs but by 1997 there were only eight member clubs. Although in the past the federation included clubs from the mountain region of Oaxaca, most split off and formed a new federation of mountain communities, called the *Organización de Comunidades Serranas de Oaxaca* (OCSO), which had seven migrant associations in 1997. The third federation of Oaxacans, is the *Frente Indígena Oaxaqueña Binacional* (FIOB) a coalition of mostly Mixtec communities from the Mixteca region of Oaxaca. In the United States, FIOB members are largely concentrated in rural California, since most Mixtec migrants are farm workers. The FIOB also has active members in Oaxaca and in Baja California, where many Mixtecs work harvesting tomatoes.<sup>7</sup>

The main activity of the *Organización Regional de Oaxaca* is the yearly celebration of *La Guelaguetza* in Los Angeles, a festival that exhibits the diverse indigenous cultural manifestations of the state of Oaxaca, including traditional dance, music, and indigenous dress. While a considerable number of immigrants participate in this event as performers, organizers, or food vendors, and as much as five thousand people attend the yearly all-day celebration, it hasn't been enough to galvanize all the Oaxacan HTAs into one single federation. In fact, during the last two years OCSO has organized an alternative celebration of the *Guelaguetza* that is quite similar to ORO's, revealing significant fractures within the organized Oaxacan community. Apart from the *Guelaguetza*, OCSO's main activities are basketball tournaments and village dances.

While ORO and OCSO both are mainly devoted to promoting cultural and sports events and teaching young Oaxaqueños about their traditions, the FIOB is a much more self-consciously political organization. During its various reincarnations (it has changed names a number of times as membership has changed), it has mobilized street demonstrations to protest abuses of immigrants, worked with legal aid organizations to press claims of labor law violations, carried out community education projects, and supported incipient labor organizing. For a short-lived period, it was able to entice ORO to join as part of its official coalition. However, the differing orientations of ORO and FIOB, which the leaders articulate as cultural vs. political, have prevented ongoing unity. While the FIOB takes a con-

frontational stance when the governor of Oaxaca visits, mobilizing street demonstrations decrying broken promises, ORO takes a more conciliatory and even passive stance vis-a-vis the Oaxacan state government.

Due to these fractures, the interests of the Oaxacan immigrant community are not presented with a strong unified voice. As a consequence, the state government of Oaxaca pays noticeably less attention to its constituency in Los Angeles than do the state governments from Zacatecas and Jalisco. To our knowledge, no two-for-one projects have been executed in Oaxaca, although clubs have presented proposals for such projects. Neither the federations nor the state government have followed through on these proposals.



## *Political Participation in Los Angeles*

The central focus of our research was to explore the role the Mexican HTAs play in their host society. With the example of Proposition 187 in mind, we looked for instances in which the clubs or federations acted in the political sphere in the United States. We define the political sphere broadly to include not only electoral politics, but other kinds of collective action to promote or defend the interests of club members or Latino immigrants in general, including: participation in political demonstrations, unionization efforts, involvement in community-based organizations or coalitions, parent-teacher organizations, local policy campaigns, etc. We explored the extent to which the clubs promoted the individual participation of their members by educating them about their rights or encouraging them to become citizens, vote, or otherwise participate on an individual basis. We also examined the range of attitudes of club and federation leaders about the clubs' involvement in U.S. politics. We interviewed those individuals within the clubs and federations that were active politically in the United States and documented both their activities and the reception of their ideas by other people in the clubs and federations. Finally, we interviewed local politicians and community leaders who have had some kind of contact with the clubs to explore their view of the clubs' role and involvement in U.S. politics.

### **Political activity of clubs and federations**

Our initial hypothesis was that the clubs' involvement in the fight against Proposition 187 was a turning point signaling greater political participation by the HTAs in Los Angeles on immigrant rights issues. The federations and most independent clubs all ended up supporting the campaign against this initiative. Their support took various forms including: donating funds to "Taxpayers against Prop. 187," the main professional political campaign against the proposition; participating in the October, 1994 street demonstration, which was Los Angeles' largest demonstration since the Vietnam War; promoting the vote among their affiliates, and; using the media to influence public opinion (see for example *La Opinión*, "Carta Abierta al Gobernador Pete Wilson," September 23, 1993, signed by clubs and federations in Los Angeles).

However, this kind of political involvement by the clubs proved to be more the exception than the rule in the years that have followed. In fact, Proposition 187 is thus far the single event that pushed these hometown associations and federations beyond their traditional boundaries of action. This is true in spite of the continued attacks on immigrants since Proposition 187's passage. These attacks have included Proposition 209, aimed to end affirmative action in California, and the federal Welfare Reform Act, which cut off a number of government services for legal immigrants. Another visible event was the 1996 beating of two Mexican undocumented workers by Riverside policemen, caught on video by a television broadcast news crew and aired nationally and internationally. While these events mobilized wide sectors of the Latino community and even the Mexican government through the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles, the Mexican clubs and federations remained mostly on the sidelines, and these issues were not even mentioned in their internal meetings.

There are several possible reasons for the unique response of the clubs to Proposition 187. First, it is clear that club and federation leaders did not spontaneously decide to join together to respond politically to Proposition 187. Rather they participated only after being urged to do so by Latino elected officials. Our interviews revealed, in fact, that some of the clubs were quite hesitant at first to participate in the fight against Proposition 187. Some were concerned about jeopardizing the club's 501(c)(3) status, and others felt vulnerable because they were not citizens and thought they might jeopardize their applications if they spoke up. Still others felt immune to the effects of the Proposition because they were legal residents.

U.S.-born Latino local politicians met with club leaders and helped to persuade them of the importance of fighting Proposition 187 by arguing that it was a broad-based attack on all Latino immigrants, not just undocumented ones. The current president of the *Asociación Nayarita* noted how, at first, a typical reaction of club leaders was that Proposition 187 wouldn't affect them because they were legal residents. "But when some local political leaders took the reins and brought us all together, and got us to see the enormous danger we faced, then everyone united and the majority of organizations worked quite hard."

This was, to our knowledge, the first and only time Latino elected officials have contacted the clubs and federations to ask for support for a specific cause. The Mexican consulate played a key role by convening a meeting between club leaders and Latino politicians, since in many cases, relationships between these groups had not yet been established. Since then, to our knowledge, Latino elected officials have not made the same type of "call-to-arms" to the clubs. The lack of interest displayed by Latino political leaders toward the clubs is explored in a later section.

In addition, it may be the case that Proposition 187 hit a nerve that no other threat to immigrants has touched in as profound a way. Proposition 187 threatened to directly impact undocumented children as well as take away services from their parents. Other leg-

isolation may have been perceived as less threatening. For example, Proposition 209 was seen to attack U.S.-born minorities with aspirations for professional jobs rather than immigrants clearly stuck in unskilled occupational niches; and the provisions affecting immigrants in the Welfare Reform Act were buried under a sea of reforms affecting a wider segment of the population. The Riverside beating hurt a small group of people, and since most club and federation presidents have regularized their immigration status, this issue may have seemed somewhat distant to them.

Moreover, while the fight against Proposition 187 enabled the formation of initial contacts and incipient ties among federations of different Mexican states, and between them and Latino associations and politicians in Los Angeles, these contacts did not develop into permanent working relationships. Instead, both U.S. Latino organizations and the HTAs still count on the Mexican Consulate to remain the chief intermediary between them, and to convene meetings when the Consulate sees a need to bring these groups together. And although the Consulate did voice its concern through the media with respect to both the Riverside beating and the Welfare Reform Act, it did not repeat the role of convenor that it played during the battle against 187.<sup>8</sup>

The potential political clout of the HTAs is also limited by the lack of unity amongst the federations. In the case of the two largest federations, the *Zacatecanos* and the *Jaliscienses*, a friendly rivalry exists, but contact is mostly limited to the leaders' attendance of each others' yearly gala dance and mutual presence at events in the Mexican Consulate. Occasionally discussion has arisen about forming a confederation of all the state federations, an idea promoted by the Mexican government, but no action has been taken. One federation leader told us "the time isn't right."

Historical evidence suggests that the political influence of other immigrant groups was dependent upon their ability to build federations that could speak with one voice. For example, Jewish immigrants in New York City built several federations in the 1920s and 1930s, of which HTAs were an important segment. While not all HTAs joined, and no federation lasted for very many years, during their existence these federations created a strong voice for Jewish causes including defense against anti-Semitism and support for Zionism, and they sowed the seeds of the modern Jewish lobby (Soyer 1997). The extreme parochialism of the Mexican HTAs clearly limits their political role.

### **The role of HTAs in promoting the political participation of their members**

Perhaps the most important role of the HTAs in the political sphere has been the steady and consistent encouragement of club leaders for naturalization among members. While the promotion of citizenship is never the central focus of federation or club meetings, leaders supported the naturalization process and commonly announced where members could get help in becoming citizens. For example, the Federation of Zacatecanos sponsored a citizenship fair and several Oaxacan associations invited immigration experts to club meetings to inform members about the naturalization process.

In one unusual case, the president of the *Club de Damas de Tecuala, Nayarit*, stated that her main objective for the club was to promote citizenship. This focus reflects the activist orientation of the small group of women who now lead the Nayarita federation. The president of the Nayarita federation and the president of the *Club Sonora* (a club of immigrants from all over the state of Sonora) actually process citizenship forms as part of their professional work, and both articulated the importance of increasing the number of citizens among Mexican immigrants so as to gain political power in California.

The widespread consensus among HTA leaders about the importance of attaining citizenship is in some senses contrary to expectation. After all, these are the very organizations that represent the maintenance of ties to the old country. The president of the *Asociación de Clubes Nayaritas* articulated the ambiguous feelings Mexicans have held about citizenship in an interview in 1997 when she said, “One of the big problems is that we can’t convince people to become U.S. citizens, they don’t want to... But as an association, we have to say to people, ‘become citizens, you’re not betraying your nation, you keep your roots inside of yourselves and nobody can take your roots away, no one can change our love for where we were born. But think about your kids and your grandchildren, they are the ones who need you to pave the way so that they don’t have so many problems in the future, especially the ones who were born here, they’re not going to live in Mexico.’”

The generalized acceptance of the idea of becoming citizens among the club members we talked to reflects a dramatic and widespread transformation of attitudes among many Mexican immigrants. Mexican immigrants have traditionally been much more resistant to becoming U.S. citizens than other immigrant groups. However, in the last several years, there has been a tremendous increase in naturalization rates.

This change is due to a number of factors. First, the continued threats to immigrants have heightened the costs of remaining in the status of permanent resident. Second, the huge cohort of immigrants that obtained amnesty through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act has now become or will soon become eligible for citizenship. Finally, the Mexican government’s new policy of allowing “double nationality” lets Mexicans retain most of the rights of Mexican citizenship even after they have naturalized, and gives official government sanction, and almost encouragement, to the idea of U.S. naturalization for Mexican immigrants. In this context, club leaders who encourage naturalization add to a larger chorus of voices and conditions that have changed naturalization trends among Mexican immigrants, and it is impossible to isolate their impact in particular.

Certainly, becoming a citizen is the initial step towards a more active involvement in the immigrants’ host society, and encouraging citizenship is the first challenge facing club leaders or members who envision the need for a broader participation of HTAs in American society. As one club leader stated, “We need you to become citizens so that you can vote, and vote for laws that help us. We’re the largest minority population and we don’t have any political power.” However, becoming a legal citizen doesn’t turn an indi-

vidual into a concerned, civic-minded participant in the political process. Notably absent from normal club and federation is discussion or action concerning U.S. politics beyond encouragement of citizenship.

### **The attitudes of HTA leaders and members towards political participation in the United States**

The limited activity of the clubs in the sphere of U.S. politics can in part be explained by leaders' lack of consensus over the extent to which the clubs should remain social and philanthropic organizations rather than engage in political activity, either in the U.S. or in Mexico. In addition, leaders have different views on how much the clubs should orient their work towards Mexico or the United States. There is in fact a wide spectrum of attitudes about these two issues amongst the HTA participants we interviewed. Moreover, while some perceived conflict between these multiple objectives, others felt that they were compatible.

Most club presidents stated that the main work of the clubs was to help their origin communities in Mexico and to provide a way for their compatriots to maintain social links in this country. While they were not actively against the idea of participating politically in California, this was simply not the primary mission of the clubs. Thus while the president of the Jaliscan federation spoke of the important role of the federation in the fight against Proposition 187 and "everything else that is an attack on us," like the others, he has not participated actively on any U.S. political issue since Proposition 187. Another reason for the lack of participation for some clubs is simply lack of time. One Oaxacan club leader, who saw the necessity of working on issues affecting the immigrant community, stated that getting involved in these issues would mean working with other organizations, and dedicating even more time than is needed just to work with his own home town association.

Some club leaders were adamant that their clubs should not get involved in politics. This was the prevalent attitude of the Club Pegueros, a Jaliscan club whose members in general are middle class long-time immigrants. One member said, "We leave to one side anything having to do with the government or the church, we just concentrate on what has to do with our families." Others carried from Mexico their profound distrust of the political process and politicians. As one club leader stated, "Politicians are all a gang of thieves (*una bola de ladrones*)."

A minority of club leaders and members thought the clubs should be much more actively involved in politics in the United States. One member of the 1996 leadership committee of the Zacatecan federation who was proposing a shift in focus for the clubs from Mexico to the United States stated, "I have my life here, my work is here, my house is here, my children were born here and they feel like Americans. So we have to worry about what's affecting us here and about those of us who are here." The leader of the *Asociación Guerrerense* put this situation in the following terms: "We have to confront politics here. The fact that we're from Mexico has nothing to do with it; I still have the right to defend

my community. We shouldn't be afraid of politicians, we have to leave this idea behind, we have to rise up, not with arms but rather with our voices, everyone together, and with the truth. We have the right to be heard and to be respected, and not treated like a doormat." The leader of the Nayaritas stated, " Proposition 187 opened our eyes to the necessity of getting involved in issues that affect the community here....at least in my opinion, we need to be even more united here in political questions, we need to be involved, because our existence here depends on it. We can see this with the new immigration laws. And if we don't unite and show our voting power, we'll never get the representatives that we need, that would help us in the Hispanic community."

However, the voices that represent the position favoring greater club political participation in California come only from the small federations or isolated clubs. They represent a small proportion of the HTAs and their range of influence is quite limited. As we pointed out earlier, a trait of all the federations is their isolation from one another. As a result, the opinions of the "activist" leaders have a restricted audience, and thus remain marginal.

In the large federations, differences in attitudes about the appropriate orientation of the clubs have at times led to serious conflicts and divisions. For example, divisions between Oaxacan leaders who envision a "cultural" as opposed to a "political" mission have undermined attempts to form a state-wide federation of Oaxacan HTAs. On one side, most leaders of ORO maintain the position that the main purpose of the clubs is to preserve the customs of their indigenous communities in Oaxaca, which they promote through events that celebrate traditional dances and music. Club leaders in the FIOB, on the other hand, are much more interested in working to defend the rights of indigenous Oaxacan immigrants. Although ORO and FIOB did merge for a short period in the mid-1990s, their unity was short-lived because of these very different orientations.

There have also been conflicts within the Zacatecan federation over similar issues. In the Zacatecan case the federation has managed thus far to stay intact. However, significant tensions exist between a "traditional" and a "political" group. In 1997, the election for the leadership of the Zacatecan federation was contested between these two factions.<sup>9</sup> The winner of the 1997 election was a supporter of the traditional viewpoint that the main mission of the federation should be helping the clubs carry out their philanthropic work in Mexico through the customary beauty pageants and dances. In contrast, the losing "political" faction articulated a much more activist agenda, including a greater emphasis on political empowerment both in the United States and Mexico. Although the reasons for the election outcome are multiple, it is certainly clear that the losing candidate's desire that the federation play an active political role did not resonate with a majority of voters in the election.<sup>10</sup>

The losing candidate was one of the strongest advocates for the federation's involvement in California politics. Until the election, he had been the secretary of public relations for the federation, had developed excellent contacts with local elected officials and the statewide network of Latino elected officials, and had actively supported several Latino candidates in Orange County. He envisioned the federation as a potential voting block strong enough to

have a voice in local politics. In a number of federation meetings, he proposed that the federation engage in a political mobilization and endorsement process similar to that used by organized labor. This would enable the federation to send a unified message to politicians that the estimated 20,000 Zacatecan voters supported the rights of immigrants. In making his case during one meeting, for example, he argued that the federation should mobilize its members to fight against Senator Simpson's attempt to block the Mexican government's proposal to allow Mexican immigrants to have double nationality.

### **Politically active club leaders**

The HTA leaders and members who shared an activist agenda, while small in number, were politically engaged in a number of arenas. A number of examples illustrate the nature of their political involvement. The leaders of the *Asociación Nayarita* campaigned actively for the candidate Ruben Zacarias, the son of immigrants from Nayarit, who was appointed superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1997. The Nayarit women were able to gather more than 1,700 signatures in his support, and also attended the debates and wrote letters to promote his candidacy. They were also active in the fight against Proposition 209, organizing meetings to educate immigrants about the proposition. These leaders also participate in the *Comite Mexicano Civico Patriótico*, an association of Mexicans from all states that is closely tied to the Mexican Consulate.

The president of the *Club Sonora* served as mayor of the city of Bell Gardens, in southeast Los Angeles, for five years. He also runs an immigrant rights center, processing naturalization forms for immigrants and supporting them in disputes with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. He is further trying to form an organization for all Latinos in the Los Angeles area, including Central and South Americans, that would put forth political candidates to run in local elections.

The president of the *Asociación Guerrerense* had been active in the Republican party until Proposition 187 gave him pause. A successful restaurateur, he knew Pete Wilson and had been a guest at the Bush White House in 1988. However, he was angered when "Wilson's people said, 'We're going to blame the Mexicans.'" He joined the fight against Proposition 187 and helped organize fundraising events. He is also head of the *Comite Pro-Ayuda Mexico*, a committee of prominent Latinos including Congressman Esteban Torres, County Supervisor Gloria Molina, actor James Edward Olmos and others. The committee raises funds in response to natural and human-caused disasters in Mexico.

These activist leaders all thought that a major limitation of the clubs is their parochial focus on local problems, which impedes a wider vision of Mexican immigrant empowerment. As the president of the *Asociación Guerrerense* said, "I don't like the idea of dedicating myself only to Guerrero, or San Luis Potosi, or Zacatecas, because we Mexicans are very jealous." Similarly, the president of the Nayarit association stated that there isn't much solidarity between the federations.

As a consequence, the club leaders with a strong commitment to California political issues carry out most of their political activity in other organizations. While their experience and leadership qualities helped them gain leadership of their home town associations, even these individuals were incapable of mobilizing their home town clubs into greater action on political issues in California. Some of them tried to do so, but as the president of the Club Sonora said, “involvement in the clubs is just a social activity related to their little villages in Mexico; in my case I do it just to pass the time.”

In sum, several of the small federations and isolated clubs are headed by community activists who have tried to broaden the work of their clubs to address the empowerment of Mexican immigrants in the United States. However, they have not been able to garner the participation of a broad base of their constituency. In contrast, the larger federations, which have large memberships who actively participate in federation events, are headed by leaders who generally stay within the traditional sphere of the clubs—supporting community improvement projects in their home towns in Mexico through social fundraising events in Los Angeles.

### **Links with Latino Politicians and Community Leaders**

In order to understand how the HTAs are perceived by political and community leaders in their host society, we interviewed leaders of U.S. organizations and institutions with whom the clubs had forged links. We especially looked for political leaders for whom the HTAs form a natural constituency, i.e., Latino elected officials and community leaders, especially those working in areas of Los Angeles with high concentrations of Mexican immigrants. In general, we found that there were very few direct links between the clubs and non-Latino civic or political leaders.

The interviews we conducted with HTAs generated a list of political and community leaders in California with whom they had had contact. We found that relationships had been established with a number of Latino organizations such as the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO), the Mexican American Bar Association (MABA), California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), a Mexican-American dominated union local (Laborers’ International Union of North America Local 652), several parishes of the Catholic Church, and a number of local politicians such as Grace Napolitano (California Assemblywoman 58th District), Mike Hernandez (L.A. City Councilman), Gloria Molina (L.A. County Supervisor), and Lou Correa (defeated candidate for state assembly in the Norwalk area).

In some cases, relationships were forged because of common origins in Mexico. Lou Correa, for example, had known of the Zacatecan federation since his childhood because his father had been involved in his own HTA. At that time, Zacatecan children heard about the federation because it offered trips to Disneyland for the top students among *Zacatecanos* in Los Angeles. Mr. Correa was reintroduced to the federation when he was running for office and, during his campaign, he attended several events put on by the

Zacatecan federation and spoke with some club presidents at the federation's monthly meetings. However, he does not see the federation as a political force yet, stating that many of them still do not vote. In his view, club members are still concerned about basic issues such as getting a job and supporting their families, and have not made the link between those issues and politics. The key, he asserted, will be HTA leaders who can educate and politicize their members.

This general perception about the apolitical nature of the clubs was repeated by other Latino politicians who had no familial ties to the clubs. Mike Hernandez' chief aid stated, "The idea is to politicize them," but commented that this hasn't yet happened. He considers that a major defect of this type of organization is their parochialism, stating that they focus on their very small home town rather than on issues that unify them with other Latinos.

A complementary but slightly different perspective was presented by Neli Paredes of NALEO. NALEO has been very active in promoting citizenship among Latino immigrants, not only processing forms but also carrying out major media and educational campaigns. Several federation presidents, including those from the Zacatecan and the Jalisciense federations, contacted NALEO and received information and advice that they then transmitted to their membership.

Paredes is a native of Sinaloa and until recently the secretary of the *Fraternidad Sinaloense*, so she works in and with both worlds. In her opinion, neither the clubs nor the Latino political leaders have adequately reached out to each other. She stated that while Latino politicians knew of the clubs existence, they "don't give them [the clubs] the real importance that they deserve." In her opinion, Latino politicians haven't known how to approach the clubs to offer them things that would attract their interest. She attributes this "insensitivity" to the fact that the political leaders are U.S.-born Latinos who feel socially distinct and distant from immigrants. In Paredes' opinion, the clubs also have shown too little interest in becoming involved in local and state politics. She recounted how she personally had to convince club presidents that their nonprofit tax status was not in jeopardy if they spoke up as community leaders against Proposition 187. Since the Proposition was passed, she hasn't seen much political action on the part of the clubs.

We also explored the extent to which HTAs have been involved in other struggles or have developed links with community and other institutions in Los Angeles. Labor organizing seemed like a natural avenue for the HTAs because it is quite common that social networks from particular towns channel migrants into particular occupations and employers. The example of the successful battle to form a union among Mexican drywall workers throughout Southern California in 1992 provided an example of the way in which home town solidarity could provide the glue unifying workers (Dwyer 1994; Ochoa 1993). This dramatic organizing campaign was significantly aided by the informal HTA and social networks among immigrants from the town of El Maguey, Guanajuato. According to a number of its leaders, solidarity among workers from this town provided the critical mass

that galvanized support for the strike among the broader work force. The drywaller campaign was one of a handful of successful organizing drives among Latino immigrant workers that many labor activists hailed as the growing resurgence of labor organizing and the centrality of Latino immigrants for this resurgence (Ochoa 1993; Vadi 1994).

The potential grassroots force of the HTAs caught the eye of union organizers involved in an innovative labor organizing campaign called the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project (LA MAP) that was active from 1995-1997. Conceived of by a group of veteran union organizers, LA MAP was an attempt to launch a major multi-union campaign to organize immigrant workers in Los Angeles' huge manufacturing corridor. Part of the strategy was to work with Latino community groups to develop long-term relationships that could form the basis for mutual support and an ongoing labor and community alliance. LA MAP organizers saw the clubs both as a way to access networks of workers working in particular factories, and to develop potential allies which could garner public and political support for specific organizing campaigns. As UCLA researchers, we helped LA MAP develop relationships with some of the club leaders in the Jalisco federation.<sup>11</sup> Establishing working relationships with club leaders was difficult, however, since many are small businessmen who did not immediately perceive a common interest with the LA MAP project. Furthermore, although we did find some concentrations of club members in particular firms and industries, there were very few in manufacturing, and none in the targets that LA MAP had selected to organize. At the end of 1997, LA MAP folded after failing to secure sufficient funding from the AFL-CIO and affiliate unions. Since it was never able to implement its program, the strategy of building relationships between HTAs and unions was never fully tested.

The only other relationship between labor and HTAs that we uncovered was the ties that several Zacatecan clubs have developed with the Laborers' Local 652. This relationship differed in a significant way from the one established between the drywallers from El Maguey and the Carpenter's union. While in both cases the ties among immigrants from the same home regions led to their concentration in the same industry and employer, the drywallers worked in an industry that had been de-unionized and in which wages had dropped dramatically. In response to these conditions, the workers organized themselves to demand better treatment, and did so in a very militant fashion. While they eventually joined the Carpenter's Union, the workers themselves ran the campaign. In contrast, the Zacatecan immigrants in Laborer's Local 652 did not enter the union through an organizing drive, but rather obtained their jobs in a sector of the construction industry that had already been organized. In fact, Local 652 had not conducted an organizing drive for many years.<sup>12</sup> Since they were not actively involved in organizing campaigns, union officials had not thought of the clubs as a way to generate solidarity or contact potential new members in the context of a campaign. In fact, interviews revealed that the main link between the HTAs and the union was that clubs used the union hall for their events for a minimal fee, and union representatives were invited to attend the yearly Zacatecan federation gala dance.

Finally, we explored the relationships between the HTAs and representatives of the Catholic Church in Los Angeles, which has the country's largest Hispanic ministry. In the Santa Monica area, where immigrants from some towns in the states of Jalisco and Oaxaca have settled, two HTAs have made the Santa Anita Church a center for some of their activities, such as the celebration of the saint patron of their villages. We interviewed the parish priest of Santa Anita to see whether the Church had made any attempts to forge a closer connection with these clubs. Father Adalberto Blanco, himself a Mexican immigrant, was very aware of the existence of the clubs. He encouraged the participation of the clubs in the Church and felt that they provided a significant opportunity for the Church to reach into the immigrant community. He stated, "From the pulpit we try to reach them all, but what we say from there is very general, and the message needs to be made concrete at a grassroots level in such a way that it filters and reaches those who need to get it."

This priest was not just talking about religious messages. Indeed, the Catholic Church in the Los Angeles area has been one of the leading voices against attacks on immigrants, and has been promoting citizenship and electoral involvement among its members. Santa Anita has sponsored citizenship workshops in its community center and circulated printed materials on these issues among its parishioners. However, while the priest considers the relationship with the HTAs "promising," there are still very limited ties between the HTAs and the Church's community outreach efforts. The Jaliscan club, Club Pegueros, has been close to Santa Anita for many years, but has consistently been reluctant to get involved in these community outreach activities. The Oaxacan club, while more inclined to adopt an active role in that sphere, is just beginning to establish links with this church. To our knowledge, there are not many examples of this bond in the case of other clubs in the Los Angeles.



## *Conclusion*

*T*his research reveals that Mexican immigrants have constructed dynamic and broad-based grassroots social organizations in Los Angeles that are rooted in immigrants' loyalties to their home towns in Mexico. The Mexican HTAs, while powerful forces for social support in the United States, and political empowerment and philanthropy in Mexico, have been less involved in political activity in California. Their active mobilization during the fight against Proposition 187 was an exception to their usual mode of behavior rather than a turning point in their orientation. Even though anti-immigrant sentiment seems to continue to grow, the HTAs have not played a significant role in developing a collective response to attacks on Mexican or Latino immigrants.

As a rule, the clubs have retained their focus on funding public works in their home communities and maintaining social ties with their fellow villagers in Los Angeles through their fundraising events. Although their achievements demonstrate significant social and economic empowerment of these communities both in Los Angeles and in Mexico, the clubs fall short of adopting a more visible political participation in their host society. While becoming major players vis-a-vis their hometowns, their states, and the Mexican federal government via the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles, HTA activities remain mostly circumscribed to Mexican spheres. This reflects a persistent distance from non-Latino political and community leaders in Los Angeles and American political institutions in general, which remain impermeable to the HTAs. This is despite the fact that many club leaders are successful businessmen and have had to negotiate with many U.S. institutions in order to succeed.

We hypothesized that major events like Proposition 187 would galvanize the HTAs, helping them put aside their differences and enabling them to come together as part of a broader movement to defend immigrant rights. However, they have retained their very local focus, and their parochialism is seen by both the few club leaders that are politically active and U.S. Latino political leaders as a major impediment to their political participation in California. While a minority of club leaders has developed relationships with local Latino elected officials and community leaders, those leaders are few and far between, and they have not found broad support among club members. HTA leaders continue to

count on the Mexican Consulate to be the intermediary between themselves and U.S. Latino organizations, allowing the Consul to convene meetings when he sees the need.

In general, U.S. Latino politicians and community leaders, who ostensibly seek to represent both U.S.-born and immigrant Latinos, have reached out very little to the Mexican clubs. In part, this reflects their perception that the clubs remain oriented towards Mexico. On the other hand, we came across no politician or community leader who had systematically or diligently tried to involve the clubs in a particular campaign, other than during the campaign against Proposition 187 when in fact there was substantial response. Thus, while involving the clubs in local political issues is clearly not an easy task, it is probably not an impossible one. The experiment has yet to be carried out.

The tremendous increase in naturalization rates among Mexican immigrants, including club members, may change the passive posture of Latino politicians towards the clubs. Club members are now becoming eligible voters, and politicians will have a stronger interest in courting them. Despite their limited political participation, the Mexican HTAs have potential as a political resource because they are already organized and they reach wide sectors of the Mexican immigrant community.

This potential will not be realized without changes in attitudes and actions both within the clubs and among community and political leaders who seek to represent a Mexican immigrant constituency. This will depend on the ascendance of club leaders who are politically aware, committed and savvy; and it will require dissolving the marked isolation of the clubs and federations. It will also depend on Latino political and community leaders in the United States who choose to carry out the painstaking work of building relationships with first-generation immigrant groups who are broadening their vision of their role in the United States.

## Endnotes

Since the fieldwork for this article was completed in 1997, a number of interesting developments have occurred. They illustrate the fluid nature of the federations' attitudes about political participation, and the difficulty of predicting the future. In 1998, Ricardo Monreal won the election for the office of Governor in the state of Zacatecas in a hotly contested election. This was the first time that a candidate affiliated with the PRD (the opposition left-of-center party) triumphed over the party that has ruled nationally for sixty years, the PRI. Both candidates campaigned vigorously in Zacatecas and in the United States and both courted the Zacatecan federation in Los Angeles. The tensions between federation's "traditional" and "political" factions, who supported the PRI candidate and the PRD candidate respectively, almost resulted in the federation's division. The organization stayed intact, but the victory of Monreal gave new strength to his supporters in the political faction. In the aftermath of the election, they created a new organization designed as the political arm of the federation, called the *Frente Cívico Zacatecano*, or Zacatecan Civic Alliance. This organization hopes to promote the political participation of Zacatecan immigrants in the political arena in both Mexico and the United States.

The Zacatecan Civic Alliance has already become involved in an important political initiative in Mexican politics. Along with an array of other associations on both sides of the border, it is campaigning to guarantee the right to vote for Mexican citizens abroad. The importance of this campaign is two-fold: first, if successful, it will have a significant impact on politics in Mexico, and might even affect the outcome of the coming presidential elections in year 2000. Second, it has enabled the creation of new relationships among immigrant associations from other states of origin. Specifically, the Zacatecan Civic Alliance is now working with the *Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional* on the "vote abroad" issue. While these ties are still very incipient and their future uncertain, they are a first step in overcoming the parochialism that has limited the political capacity of the HTAs. In addition, the Zacatecan Civic Alliance has reactivated its ties with several Latino elected officials in California. Given the growing stature of Latino elected officials, these ties could help generate a stronger political voice for Mexican immigrants in California in the coming years.

1. Thus use of the term social capital by these scholars differs from its use by Putnam (1994), who emphasizes the social trust that is created by diverse forms of civic engagement, and bemoans its loss in contemporary U.S. society. Home town associations also constitute social capital using his definition of the term.
2. Home villages have various local governance institutions and rules depending on whether they are *ejidos* (Mexican land reform communities), *comunidades agrarias* (indigenous agrarian communities), *cabeceras municipales* (county seats), or a variety of smaller administrative units.
3. Equestrian events that are much like rodeos.
4. This program, called FONAES, is the investment and credit component of the Mexican federal government's anti-poverty program, and has been in existence for a number of years. However, it is now possible for immigrants to have access to the subsidized credit and equity investment previously available only to Mexicans residing in Mexico. With this innovation, the Mexican government is actively promoting the use of immigrant earnings for the creation of business which can, it is hoped, create new, stable jobs in a specific locality. While the Mexican government has promoted investment by immigrants in the past, they have previously only courted wealthy immigrants for investment in enterprises like tourism resorts or hotels. The novelty of FONAES is that it targets more modest immigrants who are interested in initiating small businesses in their home town.

5. The Mexican government wanted to devolve control over two-for-one matching funds to municipal presidents and to put the two-for-one projects in direct competition for government funds with other municipal projects. There was strong disagreement within the federation about how confrontative a stand it should take in protest of this change. The federation president's position, which was very conciliatory, eventually prevailed, but even so they were able to exact certain concessions from the Governor to preserve the federation's influence (see Goldring, 1997).
6. Concretely, male heads of households in these communities are required to perform unpaid communal work known as *tequio* and to serve as unpaid officials in a series of positions (called *cargos*) throughout their working life, which may range from village police to village president. With widespread migration, tensions arise because many men who would normally serve *cargos* are not present, and quite commonly migrants are quickly named to posts when they return to the village for a visit.
7. The FIOB has a web page at <http://www.laneta.apc.org/fiob/>.
8. One of the reasons for the less active role of the Consulate in encouraging relationships between Latino groups and the HTAs is the change in personnel of the Consular staff responsible for the PACME program. During the Proposition 187 controversy, the PACME director for Los Angeles had held his post for several years, was a strong champion of the HTAs, and had developed strong relationships with both their leadership and leaders of Latino political groups. In the last two years, this post has changed hands three times, and this turnover has meant a tremendous loss of continuity.
9. In 1998, the federation also almost collapsed when the same two factions supported opposing candidates in the Governor's race in Zacatecas.
10. The election itself was quite contested, and there were accusations of irregularities in the voting by the losing faction. While no direct intervention by the Mexican Consulate was in evidence, the losing faction attached significance to the fact that the election was held in the Consulate offices with a Consular staff member present. Moreover, soon after the elections, the governor of Zacatecas arrived on an unplanned visit to Los Angeles, allegedly to assure that the election dispute did not fracture the federation. It has not done so, but there has been a significant withdrawal of the losing faction in the regular activities of the federation, depriving the organization of some of its most capable leaders, who had previously accepted working with the other faction.
11. The Jaliscans were of special interest since they are the largest group of immigrants and many live in and around Huntington Park where LA MAP had offices.
12. Although the AFL-CIO is now putting much greater emphasis on organizing, this local is still quite typical in its focus on servicing current members rather than organizing new members.

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