

Political Parties, NGOs, and Immigrant Incorporation: A Case Study

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This paper is concerned with the institutional contexts in which immigrants and refugees (in Syracuse, NY) are incorporated into civic and political life. We look at both the agencies and organizations that deal with immigrants and refugees in Syracuse and at local party organizations to develop an understanding of how naturalization, registration, voting, and other political activities figure into their missions and activities with regard to immigrant groups. We find that the organizations we survey are providing a wide range of supportive services and often provide opportunities for the development of some political skills. But our research also supports the notion that parties are not serving as instruments of political incorporation as they did in the past. We suggest that the institutional context of incorporation will have a strong impact on the nature of future political involvement.

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Introduction

The foreign-born population in the U.S. has reached a record high, according to Census Bureau estimates released in March of this year: there are now approximately 32.5 million foreign-born residents, up 2% over the 31.8 million reported in the 2000 Census.¹ Journalistic and scholarly interest in the political involvement, partisan tendencies and voting behavior of immigrant groups is a clear reflection of the potential political importance of these groups in many areas of the country. The political science scholarship on these groups has for the most part focused either on the politics of immigration control and immigrant assimilation, the political and socio-economic correlates of individual political participation and party identification or on particular election campaigns where “new voters” may have had an impact.

In this paper we address a different question: how are American civic and political institutions working to incorporate the flood of new immigrants into the U.S. political system? We began with a particular interest in the extent to which party leadership and party organizations at local levels attempt to mobilize these potential new voters. Do the parties have mechanisms in place to encourage and support naturalization? Voter registration on the part of new citizens? Do they conduct get-out-the-vote drives in immigrant neighborhoods? To what extent do they take these new groups into account in their campaign appeals or in their slating decisions? Other research has suggested that despite symbolic statements and unlike parties in the early portion of the twentieth century, present-day parties have often ignored the new groups or, at best, rely heavily on community groups and NGOs to perform these functions. A recent article on new voters

¹ “Foreign-Born residents in U.S. reach record,” *Syracuse Post-Standard*, March 10, 2003, p. A-5.

in the League of Women Voters' *National Voter*, for example, describes the (quite successful) work of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project (SVREP), quoting its president as saying "We do what political parties used to do two generations ago."

We believe that it is important to examine the process of immigrant incorporation by focusing on localities. As Louis DeSipio has recently argued, "Among today's immigrants and naturalized citizens, the primary point of contact with government and political institutions is located at the state and local levels . . . The political incorporation of contemporary immigrants, then, cannot be separated from the political environments of the areas in which they reside" (DeSipio 2001: 88). This paper examines the above questions in Syracuse, New York, a medium-sized city which has experienced recent immigration from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The research will be somewhat exploratory, setting the stage for a planned multi-city project. We collected information, via interviews, from officials of organizations that provide services to and deal with immigrant populations on a daily basis. We asked both about their work with refugee and immigrant populations and about their perceptions of these groups' political orientations and activities. We also talked with Democratic and Republican party leaders and elected officials who represented the areas within the city that are home to significant numbers of immigrants.

Institutions and Immigrant Incorporation

The membership of any political system evolves over time. People who are part of the system – as voters, activists, or leaders – die and are replaced by new generations.

Written and unwritten rules change: eligibility to vote or to serve in electoral office are altered; the idea of particular kinds of people (women, for example) in high office becomes more acceptable; changes in public policy (for example, with regard to campaign finance or the status of nonprofits) pull different actors into the system. Beyond normative and structural factors in political change lie changes to membership from external sources such as immigration. The American polity in particular has seen successive waves of immigration since its founding.

The inclusion of immigrants in the American political system has been a subject of contention throughout the whole of American history. Decisions about controlling immigration have always been controversial and have become even more so since the September 11th attacks. Once immigrants arrived on American shores and worked in American cities, their roles in social and political life were still matters of heated debate. The Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s was famously concerned with limiting immigration and marginalizing immigrant population (they proposed prohibiting immigrants from holding public office and increasing the length of the naturalization period). The ways in which immigrants have been (or might be) included or excluded, the extent to which their roles in the political system have been limited (to voting rather than leadership, for example), the potential for change implicit in the addition of large new groups of citizens or potential citizens –have all been recurrent questions in our political history.

Though an important function of political parties is understood to be the mobilization of mass publics, American parties' overriding interest in winning elections has usually meant that they concentrate their energies on mobilizing those who are

already party supporters. Rosenstone and Hansen, among others, make it clear that parties act strategically to target those whose behavior is predictable (and thus who are already participants in the political system) (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). This produces a “rich get richer” situation where those with resources, for whom political participation is already less costly, are encouraged by parties to participate, and those for whom the costs of participation would need to be subsidized are ignored. But there are clearly times when parties need to expand their base to head off an electoral threat or are otherwise trying to increase the size and solidity of their coalition.² In the late 19th century and early 20th century concerns about the impact of immigration on American society and politics, while producing a number of anti-immigrant spokesmen and initiatives, also generated a number of institutional efforts to “Americanize” immigrants – that is, to acculturate, assimilate, and incorporate immigrants into American society and politics.

The common image of machine politicians providing coal, food baskets, and patronage jobs to immigrants in return for votes – which figured prominently in Progressives’ critical views of party politics in the early twentieth century – did have much truth to it.³ For immigrants (and in-migrants from rural areas) the urban party organizations served as intermediaries between the citizen and the state. Though there are many examples of urban organizations dominated by a particular group (often WASPs or Irish) that ignored newer immigrants’ interests, the organizations’ desire to increase their electoral strength usually pushed them to make some accommodation to these groups. They typically recruited precinct leaders and other party workers who “shared the race, religion, and national origins of their constituents” (Allswang 1977: 28). Thus as new

² For example, Republicans in Oregon in the early 20s successfully mobilized women to counter the Klu Klux Klan’s support of Democratic candidates (see Andersen 1994).

³ For a good, concise survey of this literature, see Allswang 1977.

groups did become involved in politics, it was primarily the parties that performed the function of providing them with connections to local and national government and with civic and political life more broadly.⁴

A number of civic groups also emerged to provide naturalization assistance to immigrants. Some of these were nationality-based clubs and groups, as comprehensively described in the case of New York City by Roy Peel in his 1935 *Political Clubs of New York City*. Fundamentally, these organizations (he studied 750 of them) aimed at integrating new citizens into political parties and thus into the polity. Some of these clubs were essentially either subsidiaries or affiliates of the political parties, but Peel argues that even the primarily social or recreational clubs “gradually, almost unconsciously, acquire political interests and attitudes” (Peel 1935: 262). Other groups, such as the National League for American Citizenship and the National Council on Naturalization and Citizenship, collected information on immigration and naturalization, took positions on issues involving immigration, and provided various resources to help in the naturalization process. Evelyn Sterne reminds us that though parties and unions may have targeted some immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “it was through local institutions such as women’s clubs and men’s mutual aid societies that many immigrant sought to influence, directly or indirectly, electoral politics and the state” (Sterne 2001: 34).

⁴ The machines certainly did not value diversity for its own sake, and came only later to the habit of balanced slate-making, but Allswang points out about Tammany Hall that while they “did not really try very hard to get representatives of the new immigrant groups into elective office, its opponents went so far in the other direction as to make the Hall look good by comparison.” *Ibid.*, p. 75. For a critical view of parties during this period, see, e.g., Erie 1990. For a somewhat more detailed discussion of these issues, see Andersen and Cohen, 2003.

Though there is a great deal of scholarly debate about the extent to which parties have “declined” on various dimensions, there is consensus to the effect that the level of individual identification with the parties has decreased. Election campaigns (and voter decision-making) are more “candidate-centered” than in the past, and parties’ power increasingly derives from their important roles as providers of services and funds to candidates rather than from their grass-roots organizational vigor. At the same time as the role of parties in democratic politics has been shrinking, interest groups are widely being recognized as ever more plentiful and important to elections, grass roots organization and national politics. Campaign finance changes in the 1970’s fed the growth of political action committees that represented narrow (often business-oriented) interests or concentrated on single issues (Loomis and Cigler 1991: 11). Meanwhile, federal funding streams and the trend toward privatization have nourished wide range of nonprofit agencies and community organizations, including those that provide services to and protect the interests of immigrants and refugees.

Given this general context, we should not be surprised to find scholars arguing that political parties no longer serve the important role that they once did either in naturalizing immigrants or including new citizens in political activities. Michael Jones-Correa’s study of Latin-American immigrants in Queens gives evidence of this shift. Jones-Correa’s research indicates that, “Rather than lowering the costs for marginal political players, the Queens Democratic party...raises them.” Jones-Correa explains, “If actors are at the margins of electoral politics, as immigrants are, then they are ignored; if political players rise to the challenge of the machine, they are thwarted. Only if the new political actors succeed in mobilizing themselves on their own does the party

organization attempt to bring them into its cycle” (Jones-Correa 1998: 70). In comparative work on community organizations in New York City and Los Angeles, Janelle S. Wong concludes that, “mainstream political machines and party organizations are not the driving force towards participation in minority immigrant communities today” (Wong 2002: 4).

On the other hand, at the national level political parties are not silent on either questions of interest to immigrants and new citizens, or immigration and citizenship itself. Both national parties discuss immigration in their platforms; their stance on issues related to immigration and their rhetorical choices are similar: they welcome the “newest Americans”, endorse family reunification, and stress the importance of English as a common language. Party platform differences include a commitment by Democrats to restore welfare benefits to legal immigrants and Republicans’ endorsement of more funding for border control. The Democrats broadcast a weekly radio address in Spanish; their website includes a “voter outreach” page which lists leaders and contact information for groups including African Americans, Asian Pacific Islander Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans,, and “Ethnic Americans”. The Republicans launched a monthly Spanish language TV show in May 2002. The first show focused on ways to reduce the school dropout rate amount Latinos and increasing the number of Latinos in college. The GOP also has a Hispanic Training Program for recruiting and training candidates. Examination of the websites of the parties in states (in the fall of 2002) with significant numbers of recent immigrants (California, Texas, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Arizona, New Mexico) suggests both symbolic and material efforts to

reach out to immigrant groups, and suggests also that there may be a good deal of variation among states and state parties.⁵

Despite this symbolic attention, parties at the local level may not be inclined to engage in expensive and time-consuming voter-education, registration, and get-out-the-vote drives aimed at immigrant populations. But if immigrant registered voters are “off the radar screens” of campaigns and party organizations (Minnite and Mollenkopf 2001), other scholars have found that they are definitely on the radar screens of many religious organizations, labor unions, ethnic associations, and service-providing organizations.⁶

Syracuse: Background and Context

Syracuse, which began as three small salt-producing towns in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, grew rapidly with the construction of the Erie Canal in the 1820s and the arrival of the railroads in the 1830s. The city’s salt works supplied most of the U.S. needs until about 1870, when the industry declined and the city began to develop a more diversified economy. Auto parts, china, pharmaceuticals, candles, electrical machinery, air conditioners, beer and shoes are among the manufactures which provided the

⁵ See Andersen and Cohen, 2003.

⁶ Labor unions, following years of ignoring immigrants or supporting anti-immigrant legislation through their desire to protect the jobs of their members, have recently begun to shift their position. The AFL-CIO decided several years ago to begin making efforts to organize immigrants (Jencks 2001a: 60). Religious organizations have historically and currently provided immigrants with social services, ways to maintain ethnic ties, and civic skills – though churches vary greatly in the extent to which they take explicitly political positions or even encourage political participation on the part of their members (Wong 2002: 19-23). There are at least three other types of organizations that are important features in the landscape of current immigrant politics and political involvement: local nonprofit (largely service-providing) organizations, ethnic voluntary organizations, and groups explicitly organized to mobilize immigrant or ethnic voters (see Hung 2002). Ethnic voluntary organizations play many roles in immigrant communities, from maintaining homeland (even town or village) ties to raising money for political causes related to homeland politics, to preserving cultural traditions, to protecting the civil rights of group members. (See, e.g., Lin 1998; Wong 2002). Finally, voter education groups often target immigrants, sometimes in response to particular threats such as Proposition 187 in California. (See, e.g, Ramakrishnan 2001; Guarnizo 2001).

mainstays of the Central New York economy in the 20th century. Declines in production, loss of jobs to other areas, and plant closures have pushed the Central New York economy away from manufacturing and toward a more diversified, service-based economy since the 1970s. The largest employers now include Upstate Medical University, Syracuse University, and insurance companies.

Early immigrants to Syracuse included Germans (they constituted about a quarter of the approximately 4000 Syracuse citizens in 1840) and Irish. A surge of Italian immigrants followed in the 1880s, along with Polish and other Eastern Europeans.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Syracuse has again seen steady streams of immigrants. In 2000, the foreign-born constituted 7.6% of the city's population. Of these eleven thousand immigrants, almost 60% had entered the country between 1990 and 2000. These included significant numbers from Eastern Europe (particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina), Italy, China, India, Cuba, Jamaica, Canada, and over a thousand Vietnamese, the latter now joined by growing numbers of Hmong and Burmese. Syracuse is also home to some groups of African refugees – Sudanese, Somalis, and others. Many of the foreign-born in Syracuse are refugees (and their families, who often come later through the family reunification program), since several agencies in Syracuse receive federal funding to help with refugee resettlement. The 2000 Census estimated approximately 8600 Hispanics within Syracuse, but these people are not primarily recent immigrants. About 15% of the foreign-born in Syracuse are from Latin America, while almost 43% are Asian.

Political and Civic Institutions in Syracuse

Organizations Providing Services to Immigrants and Refugees

We conducted interviews with officials of the following organizations which provide services to and/or attempt to organize refugees, immigrants or naturalized citizens. The following paragraphs include brief descriptions of the organizations, their structure, funding sources, staffing, mission, and activities.

Refugee Resettlement Program of the Central New York InterReligious Council. This organization provides a “life support network, through congregational sponsorships, for hundreds of refugees who are forced to flee their homelands in order to survive. Refugees are resettled from Africa, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Many congregations and individuals volunteer time, goods and money to support this justice work of hospitality in Central New York.” The program began in 1980 with a grant from Church World Service; it is now the largest program run by the IRC and currently has a staff of about thirteen, plus four VISTA and Americorps volunteers, and some staff in sub-offices in Albany, Binghamton, and Ithaca. These include people working specifically with Bosnians, Cubans, and Haitians. Prior to 9/11 it resettled about 900 families a year.⁷

Refugee Assistance Program of the Syracuse City Schools. This agency gets federal money (via state block grants) to provide services to the already-“resettled” refugees. Currently there is a bilingual staff of 20, who provide help to both refugees and non-refugee immigrants with health care visits, dealing with the school system, language training, and job placement.

Catholic Charities. The resettlement program is a component of a Catholic Charities neighborhood center, Northside CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) which also operates recreational and educational programs for refugee youth

⁷ This estimate from the Executive Director of the Refugee Resettlement Program, interview 10-7-02.

through funding from the local Department of Aging and Youth and from private grants. The program is implemented in collaboration with the Syracuse Asian Apostolate, and each year over 300 youth are served. Activities include English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, academic enrichment classes, tutoring and homework assistance, recreational activities and special youth support groups (from the website). They receive funding from HHS Administration for Children and Families and from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Metropolitan Development Association. The MDA is a not-for-profit business association focused on economic development and regional cooperation. They have a professional staff of seven people. Together with the Refugee Assistance Program, they administer the Immigration/Refugee Demonstration Project, whose goal is to provide ESL and job skills training, transportation and relocation assistance to the region's growing population of refugees and immigrants. They made almost 600 job placements in FY 2002.⁸

Americanization League. The League was founded in 1916 as a resettlement agency. It currently has three staff members and is funded by the Onondaga County Legislature and given space by the Syracuse City School District. They assist immigrants with the process of obtaining permanent residency, with the naturalization process, and in dealing with the INS.

Southeast Asian Center. The Southeast Asian Center is also a part of the InterReligious Council. From the website: “The center serves the Southeast Asian population in Syracuse, more than 3,400 Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese and Cambodian people. The center provides various supportive community-building activities, programs and services to assist Southeast Asian immigrants in assimilating into the Central New York community.” There are three staff members.

⁸ Assistant to the Executive Vice President, Metropolitan Development Association, Interview 11-4-02.

Spanish Action League. The mission of the Spanish Action League is to “build on the rich cultural heritage of the Latino Community by advancing its independence and growth through advocacy, counseling, and education” (from the website). Funded mainly by the United Way, La Liga has a staff of 25 and although they provide assistance for all residents of Onondaga County, it focuses on serving the West side of Syracuse. The Spanish Action League sponsors cultural events for the Latino community, including annual festivals, concerts and a youth theater program. In addition, they provide a number of services to individuals in need of housing, jobs, health care, or tutoring. They offer written and oral translation, and assistance in obtaining and completing documents needed for government assistance.

We spoke to at least one representative from each of these groups, and we focus here on several aspects of these organizations: their relationships with federal, state and local governmental agencies; their relationships with political parties and elected officials; and the extent to which they facilitated or encouraged immigrants to get involved in civic and political life, including encouragement or help to naturalize, register, and vote.

We might note here that we were struck with the extent to which the people and organizations who work with refugees and immigrants in Syracuse form a dense organizational network. Business interests, organized through the Metropolitan Development Association, work closely with the service-providing groups to identify, train, and support potential new employees. But they were also drawn into the letter-writing and lobbying campaign initiated by the refugee resettlement agencies – two dozen businesses agreed to write letters or make calls to Washington objecting to the post-9/11

restrictions on refugees.⁹ These campaigns also involved state agencies involved in resettlement and the national nonprofits which are responsible for resettlement programs on the ground. The MDA is working with the IBEW – International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers – trying to get immigrants into apprenticeship programs, and describes the union as welcoming toward this idea.¹⁰ All the organizations deal regularly with the local Congressman’s office; they consult with one another, refer people to one another and set up cooperative endeavors (such as the MDA having the School District’s Refugee Assistant Program purchase vans and hire drivers to get immigrants to jobs).

Syracuse Elected Officials and Political Parties

Syracuse is governed by an elected mayor and a nine-member Common Council, five of whose members are elected from districts and four of whom (plus the Council President) are elected at large. Currently the mayor is a Democrat (who stepped into office when the former mayor, a Republican, left to take a federal job, then was elected in 2001). Since 1969, Democrats have held the office of mayor except for the years 1993 - 2001, and currently the Democrats have a Common Council majority. The Onondaga County Legislature, on the other hand (which consists of 19 members, only four of whom come from the city of Syracuse), is dominated by the Republicans; the elected County Executive is also a Republican. The State Assembly representatives from Syracuse are Democrats; the State Senators are Republicans, as is our member of Congress. In general, the city leans Democratic but particular election contests (like the one in 2002 for a redistricted Assembly seat) are still somewhat competitive.

⁹ Catholic Charities staff member, interview 11-4-02.

¹⁰ Assistant to the Executive VP, MDA, interview 11-4-03.

We interviewed the chair and the treasurer of the Onondaga County Republican Party; the Democratic county legislator who represents the immigrant-heavy 16th district (includes the downtown, the University area and the Near North Side, home to several waves of immigrants including – most recently – Vietnamese); the Republican county legislator who represents an adjacent district; and the vice chair of the Onondaga County Democratic party (who also ran the GOTV campaign for a successful Democratic Assembly campaign in 2002).

In the next two sections we examine the extent to which political parties and community organizations work to move newcomers through the processes of naturalization, voter registration, and participation in electoral politics.

Naturalization

Naturalization is often seen as the first step to political incorporation. Once an immigrant is a citizen, he or she can vote, and is therefore considered part of the political constituency. Theoretically, once you become a citizen, elected officials and political parties can no longer afford to ignore you, because you are now a voter, or at least a potential voter. As recently as the 1920s, local political parties frequently took the responsibility of helping immigrants (potential new voters) to naturalize. This “help” often verged on fraud – accounts of judges signing naturalization papers for thousands of people in a few days are common.¹¹

It is certainly not necessary to be a citizen to participate in a whole range of local civic and political activities – writing letters to officials, meeting to solve neighborhood problems, or joining protests, for example – nor is naturalization sufficient to constitute

¹¹ See, for example, the instances cited in Ueda 2001: 298.

“incorporation.” Nonetheless, as a traditional marker of commitment to the polity, we were interested in how parties and NGOs in Syracuse viewed the process of becoming a citizen – whether they encouraged and facilitated the process, and what they (and what the refugees and immigrants) saw as the benefits and drawbacks of working toward citizenship.

Catholic Charities, Refugee Resettlement, and the Refugee Assistance Program all conduct ESL and citizenship classes with money from state grants. All of these organizations, as well as the Americanization League, help people through the naturalization process, assisting them in filling out applications for citizenship or to obtain green cards, helping them deal with the INS or obtain legal assistance. This process has become much slower and more complicated in recent years, what with INS backlogs and post-9/11 security concerns and slowdowns.¹²

The staff members of the various organizations rarely described the push toward naturalization as having a political aspect. Citizenship was portrayed most often as a means of providing financial security, allowing travel back to the home country, or permitting people to bring more family members to the U.S. The founder of the Refugee Resettlement Program explains, “it's become more important to become a citizen. Especially as far as welfare is concerned. If they don't become citizens it becomes financially difficult for them later on.”¹³ The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 weakened the civil and social rights of non-citizens in a number of ways. It allowed for the summary removal of people that INS inspectors believe hold fraudulent documents. The sudden and retroactive nature of IIRIRA, along

¹² Staff member of Americanization League, interview 2-25-03.

¹³ Founder of the Refugee Resettlement Program, Interview 11-13-02.

with the welfare reform legislation passed at the same time, sent many aliens who were eligible scrambling to apply for citizenship. Foreign-born residents of Syracuse are no exception to this.

Becoming a citizen is also a pragmatic decision for those who wish either to bring their families to the U.S., or to be able to visit their homeland. “Once they get citizenship, they can bring more people--parents, children, siblings. But those categories all have long waiting lists. If they have a green card, they can bring a child under 21 not married, and a parent, but people who have a green card are placed on a waiting list that's much longer than a [list for becoming a] citizen.”¹⁴

Thus naturalization, which is encouraged and supported by all these agencies and organizations, is seen – both by staffers and, they suggest, by the immigrants themselves – as primarily a move to bring greater financial security, family reunification, and a greater number of civil and social rights. No one talks about becoming a citizen even in part for purposes of voting or having a say in collective decision-making. A staff member of the Americanization League, reflecting on this situation, said “The elected officials around this community are very good. I’d like to see some of them once in a while show up and say something at the Naturalization Board. I mean a new citizen is a potential voter.”¹⁵

Engaging in electoral politics

Just about all the groups we studied offer voter registration materials, much as they offer brochures about the Syracuse bus system, the county parks, cultural activities,

¹⁴ Director, Refugee Assistance Program, interview 11-13-02.

¹⁵ Americanization League staff member, interview 2-25-03.

or social services. For example, the Americanization League has “voter registration forms here for them to fill out if someone asks for it.”¹⁶ But none of the organizations see voter registration as an essential part of their mission.

Meanwhile, it is an unusual local political party these days that engages in much political education and community organizing. But if modern American parties at all levels are correctly seen as, fundamentally, organizations geared toward winning elections, they might be expected to welcome the opportunity to create new groups of supporters and add to their constituency base. For this to happen, several conditions need to be met. First, the parties must be in a competitive situation – a party with a consistent majority will have no incentive to invest resources in cultivating new supporters, and a party in a consistent minority position may be too demoralized and disorganized to engage in this activity. Second, the new groups have to be visible to the parties – because their numbers are large and growing and/or because community leaders have attained visibility and party leaders are familiar with them. Third, the party leaders must perceive the group as being in general sympathy with the party philosophy; and fourth, the party must see the advantages of attaching the group to its coalition as outweighing any potentially negative reactions of its core constituency to the new group.

The first condition is met. Syracuse – the Syracuse and Central New York area has recently experienced a series of fairly competitive elections. The last mayoral/council election, in November 2001, produced something of a Democratic landslide: not only the mayor, but eight of ten Common Council members are Democrats. Recent articles in the press indicate that the Republicans are regrouping to attempt to regain some of the seats, arguing that the city shouldn’t be conceded to the opposition. The Syracuse

¹⁶ Ibid.

representatives to the county legislature, on the other hand, are predominantly Republican, although the traditional Republican dominance in the county cannot always be taken for granted – in particular the growth of “non-enrolled” (registered but with no party) voters worry both sides. Politicians we talked with said that registration should be more of a priority, as should moving registrants from “non-enrolled” to party status.¹⁷

Are immigrant groups visible to politicians and party leaders? The answer seemed to be mostly no. Lack of numbers was suggested as an explanation:

Because it's not a huge population, it's not going to make a huge difference. And politicians are aware of that. In parts of the country where there are a lot more refugees than there are here...like in Minnesota, where the Hmong and the Laos are involved in much more political activity. Politicians are not going to bother with 500 people. But if there are 20,000... I think they are more likely to become active in a bigger community. They recognize that they have more power. And they'll be more educated, more college graduates in a bigger group.¹⁸

But interestingly, state-level shifts in this regard may be percolating down to the local level. A local Republican leader, while acknowledging that the party had not taken any initiatives to help immigrants naturalize, pointed to Governor Pataki's efforts to create a good relationship with the Hispanic community and talked about first efforts to reach out to the Hispanic community in Syracuse. Seeing this experience was important – in the next campaign, said one Republican, “We have to have materials ready that are Spanish language materials.”

In part because of the national and state attention to the growing Hispanic vote, and in part because the Syracuse Hispanic community has worked to organize itself, they are more visible to the parties than, say, the Vietnamese “It's been tough” with regard to Asian community, said one. “I don't know of any Asian organization . . . The Asian

¹⁷ Chair of Onondaga County Republican Party, interview 2-12-03.

¹⁸ Founder of Refugee Resettlement Program, interview 11-13-02.

community hasn't really jelled the way the Hispanic community has."¹⁹ One measure of political party attention to the Latino community – the Spanish Action League has a yearly Latin American Festival, and a number of individuals and organizations bought tables at this event, including the Syracuse Republican Committee, the McCall for Governor (D) organization, the Democratic President of the Syracuse Common Council, the Green Party, a Democratic Common Councilor, and a Republican State Senator.²⁰

The Democrats we talked to were aware of the Spanish Action League and the Southeast Asian Center, as well as the various other agencies providing assistance to immigrants, and sometimes attended citizenship classes or visited the organizations' headquarters, though more with the intention of making some contact than with urging people to naturalize, register, or vote.²¹ We were not told about any ongoing programs or initiatives in this regard.

Because these communities are not well known to the parties and politicians, they are probably unable to make informed judgments about the new groups' political preferences. The Vietnamese, for example, were described Republicans in philosophy. "Despite the fact that they are poor and the Republicans are not well known for having support from poor communities, the fact is they are Republicans;" added to this is their unhappiness with the Clinton administration for lifting the embargo on Vietnam.²² She continued,

Political parties don't try as hard as they should, in my opinion to get to this community. There are almost 5000 people here, many of them are citizens, many of them feel very grateful to this country for allowing them to come here, and so

¹⁹ Chair of Onondaga County Republican Party, interview 2-12-03.

²⁰ Director, Spanish Action League, interview 2-7-03.

²¹ Vice Chair, Onondaga County Democratic Party, interview 2-26-03.

²² Director of Southeast Asian Center, interview 10-8-02.

would vote. But candidates don't stop around here. It's an untapped population, in terms of politics.²³

Do politicians fear a backlash if they court immigrant groups? One seasoned observer, a staff member of Catholic Charities, said he thought Syracuse was “better than most places,” but “you’re always in danger of raising up the red-neck kind of America for America group. You don’t know who they are, how big they are, so they don’t risk it.”²⁴ In this view, the parties’ reluctance to go after the immigrant vote may be partially based on a fear of alienating other members of their coalition. A Republican leader said that dealing with new Asian groups is a challenge – though national studies, he said, have indicated these groups’ sympathy with Republican positions, “We have not quite figured out (neither have the Democrats) how we are going to address this. It is sort of new to us. We have always had a very strong ethnic background that is very strongly Italian.”²⁵

Republicans admitted that they hadn’t done a very good job with voter registration and should do more – booths or tables in malls were mentioned -- but acknowledged that their get out the vote efforts were limited to regular voters.²⁶ Though some candidates took registration materials with them in their door-to-door campaigning, registration was generally viewed as a “party thing,” not the responsibility of candidates.

In summary, though party politics is reasonably competitive and though fears of a backlash seem muted, it is clear that those we talked with who are associated with the community organizations believe that the parties almost completely ignore the immigrants and refugees. Asked whether parties see these groups as an “untapped

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Catholic Charities staff member, interview 11-4-02.

²⁵ Onondaga County Republican Chair, interview 2-12-03.

²⁶ Ibid.

resource”, one said “I don’t see it. I think it would be an opportunity . . . I have not seen it, no, not on either side.”²⁷ As Rosenstone and Hansen argue, parties reach out to those who vote. A Democratic county legislator, when asked about this, agreed: “I guess when a politician says a constituency” [as people the respond to and are concerned about, “reach out” to], “our constituency that we have embedded in our mind are those people who are out there voting.” And, as Table 1, suggests, the registration and voting rates of the areas with significant concentrations of immigrants are lower than those of the city as a whole.

Table 1: Voting and Registration Rates

	<i>Percent of those over 18 registered, fall 2000</i>	<i>Average percent of registrants voting, 94-00</i>
City of Syracuse	53.71%	44.73%
Immigrant census tracts	39.41%	36.52%
Vietnamese areas	39.80%	39.30%
Hispanic areas	38.05%	26.75%

Another local Republican officeholder told us that when the party has done voter registration drives aimed at registering new voters, it has introduced a great deal of uncertainty into the outcome – in fact that they have sometimes lost in those areas – so they don’t generally do it. So a party organization doesn’t “reach out” to new voters casually. They need to build up a relationship with a community and be relatively certain of their support. This takes a lot of time and effort and may not be seen as worthwhile.

²⁷ Catholic Charities staff member, interview 10-29-02.

The language barrier adds to the challenge: “I think there are a lot of potential voters, and it's easier to go after ones that speak English if you speak English.”²⁸

Since the parties don't see their function as having educative or mass-mobilizational aspects, it seems to us that there are three situations where reaching out to immigrant groups is likely. One is where a particular district is competitive, the level of non-enrolled voters is low and turnout is high. This is unlikely to be the case in present-day Syracuse. The second is where a group has such large numbers in a particular geographical area that parties' continuing to ignore them is risky. It will be interesting to see if this kind of situation pushes the parties in nearby Utica, for example, to begin involving the Bosnian community, but it does not characterize Syracuse. Finally, the immigrant community, once it has reached a certain numerical threshold, may organize itself; leaders can be easily identified and gain the reputation of being able to mobilize the community; there are associations or clubs that politicians can visit; there are “obvious” people or organizations that elected officials feel they need to consult about local issues. In this situation, parties begin to reach out to the community even if some of the other conditions are not met.

Other Mechanisms of Incorporation

Though naturalization and voting have often been considered by scholars as the most important indicators of political incorporation, there are many additional or alternative ways in which immigrants develop what we might call civic efficacy – a sense that they can get societal institutions to recognize their interests, and the knowledge of how to accomplish that. We suggest that steps toward incorporation can occur as a result

²⁸ Director, Refugee Resettlement Program of IRC, 10-7-02.

of explicit policies or actions of institutions or individuals, or they can occur as unintended consequences of unrelated activities or policies. In the following sections we discuss some of these intentional and unintentional mechanisms of incorporation.

Dealing with politicians and officials

Well before any of them arrived in the U.S., all refugees and many immigrants have had to deal with the U.S. federal government. Once they are here, they must master – and/or get help dealing with – a variety of federal, state, and local regulations and agencies. All of the organizations we studied engaged in lobbying at the federal and state levels on behalf of refugees and immigrants, and all dealt regularly with public officials, especially with the office of Syracuse’s member of Congress, Republican Jim Walsh. The lobbying supports funding for their programs, increased quotas for immigrants, and reform of immigration laws.

For the most part, relationships with public officials are portrayed positively.

We have used [the Congressman's] constituent services pretty regularly, and quite truthfully, we would use whoever was in that position. But he has been very helpful...with a number of small immigration concerns, they just get bottled up in the bureaucracy, he's been instrumental in helping with that²⁹

Responses about city officials were varied. Two people who had been involved with the same organization (the InterReligious Council of CNY) describe the same city-sponsored event in very different ways:

The city tries, *tries* to be good to this community. They give us grant money, which is very good. As far as the city and the mayor, for example, and its not just this mayor, it's all of the mayors...It looks good for the city to say they support a minority community. They don't know anything really about the community, but when they need the community to make them look good, to make them look very diverse, then they contact us.

²⁹ Director, Refugee Resettlement Program of IRC. 10-7-02.

They have a thing every year called Asian day, to celebrate I guess the contribution of Asians in Syracuse and it is the most appalling display and we have to participate. The people in this community like it, for me it's just insulting and offensive to put people on display like that. They do it not for the people, not because they really care, they get to say "well we celebrate Asians in this community" you know, it makes them look very I don't want say tolerant, but inclusive, and they're not³⁰.

There's a refugee day every year, and I didn't go this year, but a lot of refugees go. Sometimes they have Vietnamese or Laos children dancing and they have various people who play musical instruments, a little fuss made over them, a little reception for them. It's quite nice.³¹

Generally, dealing with politicians and “politics” is viewed as an unpleasant necessity: Conclusions – “politics is important, and we’re not good at it, but when it’s there we try to take advantage of it to help our people.”³² We might thus assume that immigrants who receive assistance from these organizations learn that government bureaucracies are complicated and that public officials are basically well-meaning – but the organizations are not consciously teaching individual or collective strategies for inducing policy change or even better service provision. Several of the organizations did report having engaged in lobbying efforts around issues having to do with immigration policy – for example, protesting the post-9/11 reduction in quotas -- and involving members of the immigrant communities with these activities,³³ but such exercises in mass political pressure do not seem to be common.

Organizing the community

³⁰ Director of SEAC, interview 10-8-02

³¹ Founder of Refugee Resettlement Program, interview 11-13-02.

³² Director, Refugee Assistance Program, interview 11-13-02.

³³ Catholic Charities staff member, interview 11-4-02; also mentioned in Refugee Assistance Program interview.

Research on minority participation, particularly African-American participation, has suggested the importance of group identify or group consciousness for motivating political involvement (see, e.g., Chong and Rogers 2002). Though findings with regard to other groups, such as Asians and Latinos, as mixed, certainly organizers continue to use group consciousness as a platform for encouraging political action. One recent example: the 80-20 Initiative was an attempt to mobilize Asian-Americans in the 2000 election. A small group formed a PAC in 1999 and then worked to develop as large an email list as possible and invite these additional people to join. They maintained a website and sent out semi-monthly messages to raise political knowledge and build cohesion. By November 2000, 80-20 had over 300,000 valid email addresses and had raised \$400,000. In August of 2000, members of the group met, argued, and decided to support Al Gore in the presidential election. The 80-20 Initiative made reasonably good progress toward its goal of getting 80% of Asian-Americans to vote as a bloc for Gore (Davis, Elin and Reeher 2002: 205-210).

Certainly late 19th and early 20th century history is replete with examples of dense networks of immigrant-based organizations – mutual aid societies, cultural groups, merchants’ organizations, and so forth. Though organizations like these may not have had specifically political goals, they may have imparted political skills (see Verba, Brady and Schlozman 1995) and they certainly helped both to create a sense of community and to build community capacity for collective action. The older immigrant groups in Syracuse have organizations which, in fact, maintain some connections to politicians and parties – the Lincoln

Republican Club (Italian-American) and the Italian-American Athletic Club, for example – less active than in the past, but still a factor on the North Side³⁴.

Several of the new immigrant groups in Syracuse do appear to be on the road to positioning themselves as a force in community politics, but most are not there yet. A county legislator who seemed to have a good knowledge of the activities and programs of the Southeast Asian Center and of the nationality groups involved in the Center, described its members as “active, but . . . not political. They are active within their community.” Reflecting on this, he wondered why there wasn’t a better relationship between the political establishment and these groups, particularly the Asians.³⁵ Recently the Vietnamese community developed an association “designed to be a political force in the city, but it petered out.”³⁶

A one-hour Bosnian-language radio show was launched recently, to be broadcast both in Syracuse and in the larger Bosnian community of Utica. The Spanish Action League and the Southeast Asian Center publicize and encourage the patronage of Spanish- or Asian-owned businesses – restaurants, manicurists, gift shops, car repair shops, and so on. Both organizations hold social and cultural events such as dances and festivals. The director of the SEAC says she hopes that as the community becomes more established, the center will become independent, no longer part of the parent organization (IRC).³⁷ Though both “La Liga” and the SEAC provide services to immigrants (as do the other agencies we studied), they

³⁴ County Legislator, interview 2-21-03.

³⁵ County Legislator, interview 2-25-03. It should be noted that the Vietnamese have been arriving in Syracuse since the late 1970s.

³⁶ Director, Southeast Asian Center, interview 10-8-02

³⁷ Ibid.

go a step beyond this. They deal with immigrants as individuals and families, like the other agencies, but they are attempting to build stronger *communities* as well.

Learning political skills

Many of the organizations we studied are involved in helping to develop “life skills” in the immigrants’ new home: how to deal with the DMV and get a drivers’ license, how to purchase a home (and getting HUD money), job skills, dealing with the health care system, learning about public transportation, and so on. The Metropolitan Development Association even sponsors ESL right at the workplace, for companies who employ a significant number of immigrants.

We were interested in the extent to which teaching these skills might spill over into teaching political skills or abilities which might be helpful to people who want to work with their neighbors, have an impact on local policy, or cast informed votes.

There was some talk about teaching skills like public speaking and encouraging people to follow the news. A Catholic Charities staffer who worked with Sudanese refugees said he had provided some assistance but was impressed with the level of proficiency already existing:

And then they formed a group, a social agency in New York City and they already all did a first event on Sudan, I helped them do that. We did that soon after they came. The second event they planned on their own, I had nothing to do with that. They totally planned it, got speakers together, money, so they come pretty well skilled, I mean, some of them know how to organize themselves and be on top of issues. They invited a representative of the Sudanese Liberation Army from Washington, D.C.³⁸

³⁸ Interview with Catholic Charities staff member, 11-4-02.

The same young men, because so much attention was focused on them as “The Lost Boys”, were helped to develop their English and public speaking skills in order to talk to community groups about their experiences.³⁹

But more generally, there was a sense that immigrants were not given the information and incentives necessary to get them involved in local political life. A couple of interviewees commented on the relative irrelevance of the questions on the citizenship test. The questions are things like how many branches of government are there, how many chief justices, what is the executive branch, what are three freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights – all important, but nothing relating to how citizens can have get involved or have an impact on public policy. One politician commented that “I don’t think there is that opportunity for immigrants to get involved in local government. They are afraid to. . . I don’t think they are educated as to how the system works.”⁴⁰

Drawing on previous experience

Recent research has focused on the relationship between homeland experiences and orientations and political attitudes and behavior in the U.S. (see, e.g., Guarnizo 2001). We found some interesting suggestion of the ways that previous experiences shape Syracuseans’ current political and civic involvement.

Two people who had worked closely with Sudanese refugees spoke of the relationship between their backgrounds and their current activities:

A lot of the Sudanese young men became active and have remained active in Sudanese politics. Interested in it. They'll bring speakers here, Sudanese who are nationally known, will come talk about the peace process, what's happening. [But] I don't know of any refugee who has gotten, after being

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ County legislator, interview 2-25-03.

here many years, gotten active in US politics, especially local politics. I don't see them becoming interested in that.⁴¹

Most Americans separate politics from their own life. But the Sudanese...it's almost forced on them. A lot of refugees' politics and their life are inextricably intertwined, so there's no problem teaching them how to do analysis.⁴²

He argued further that they had “transposed” some of the skills acquired in their previous lives to American politics:

For instance they were right on top when the Sudan Act passed Congress. The bill went through with all kinds of pieces to it in terms of America's position vis-a-vis Sudan and down the line in terms of money, pressure on the government. The guys were right on top of that in terms of reading about that bill, knowing about it. They're on the Internet, so most of them read it there, they don't read newspapers that much.

The same person described the Sudanese culture (more specifically the Dinka culture) as quite politically sophisticated in terms of having an oral tradition based on group interaction, discussion, and democratic decision-making.⁴³ Similarly, we were told of Liberians and other West Africans who “meet . . . about the problems of Liberia. They meet constantly. . . . And there are people here from the Ivory coast who are meeting all the time.”⁴⁴

On the other hand, the Bosnians, a much larger group (perhaps 1500 in Syracuse but over 6000 in nearby Utica) were described as “having the political skills” but being fundamentally mistrustful: “all their leaders have disappointed them.” A colleague who has tried to organize a soccer team in the community had to “fight for even a small modicum of trust.”⁴⁵

The Vietnamese, particularly those with military or governmental experience, were described as having organizational skills and being “political” – though these skills have not been used to create a strong political presence for the community in Syracuse.

⁴¹ Catholic Charities staff member, interview 10-29-02.

⁴² Catholic Charities staff member, interview 11-4-02.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Americanization League staff member, interview, 2-25-03.

⁴⁵ Catholic Charities staff member, interview 11-4-02.

Conclusions⁴⁶

In the past, political parties did much of the work of “incorporation” in order to increase their base of support. They encouraged naturalization, helped with (or in some cases fraudulently carried out) registration, and made voting a condition for receiving favors. Though not all local party organizations at all time periods engaged in this kind of activity, when they did it was a form of quite deliberate political incorporation.

This activity took place in a more general context of a national project of Americanization. Before the Second World War, temporary immigration was seen as problematic and was the source of policy prescriptions specifically designed to encourage immigrants to naturalize, rather than working for a few years and then returning to their home countries. Temporary immigrants were considered to be parasitical on the U.S. economy, benefiting from their jobs without making an effort to assimilate and participate in U.S. society. “Americanization” was a policy undertaken to combat these and other pathologies of early 20th century immigrant life in the United States. Beginning in 1916, agencies including the Bureau of Education, the Council of National Defense, the Department of the Interior, and the Committee on Public Information headed a national campaign to inculcate American social and political values into immigrants.⁴⁷

Since World War II, the policy context with regard to immigration has changed. Like European nations, the U.S. has moved toward an immigration model that does not

⁴⁶ Any conclusions we may draw from this research must obviously be very tentative. The particular conditions obtaining in Syracuse – particularly the fact that a significant portion of its immigrants are refugees, but also its particular social, economic and political situations – may differ in significant ways even from cities of similar size in the Northeast. We are currently planning a multi-city study which will examine political incorporation by focusing on local institutions.

⁴⁷ Americanization was also directed at native born minorities including African Americans and Native Americans. (King 2000, 92.)

merely condone temporary migrants but encourage them, for example by engaging in selective recruitment of workers with particular skills. The Immigration and Naturalization Service defines temporary workers as “non-immigrants” who have “specialty occupations” or who “perform temporary services or labor when persons capable of performing such services or labor cannot be found in this country (such as agricultural laborers)”. In addition, the U.S. stance toward illegal immigrants has been one of benign neglect. Although the 2001 terrorist attacks led to increasing scrutiny of immigration laws and how they are enforced, the general stance towards illegal immigration has not been as rigorous as that of our European counterparts. In large part this may be attributed to the simple fact that the U.S. economy depends on the poorly-paid work done by immigrants, much as was the case in Europe following WWII. And since 1996, important rights and benefits immigrants could once count on have been withdrawn, and with the exception of a proposal early in the Bush II administration to grant amnesty to a group of undocumented Mexicans, few have been extended. Since the United States does not consider itself to have an official guest-worker policy, the political incorporation of the people who make up this class, along with many of their more permanent immigrant counterparts, is not central to the political concerns of either political parties or national political institutions.

The refugees who are the primary clients of most of the organizations we studied in Syracuse are, in this sense, an “easy case.” They are recognized as having escaped political or religious persecution and in that sense are “officially” welcomed to the United States. In Syracuse (and New York State may direct more resources here than other states) refugees are provided with quite a few material supports and services, as we have

seen. The agencies tap into a number of funding streams to provide English classes, (narrowly construed) citizenship classes, transportation to work, legal assistance, and youth programs. Certainly “ordinary” immigrants cannot necessarily count on the same kinds of helpful intermediation between their families and the state.

But among all these services and supports and programs, specifically political education is absent. The agencies and organizations that we studied see as their goals the “incorporation” of the new residents into the local economic system, as employees, drivers, students, and homeowners. But they do not have as an explicit goal the creation of “good citizens” – registered voters, informed members of the polity. The staff members we talked to are quick to point out the already-existing political skills and sophistication of some of their clients. Catholic Charities, for example, builds on this by encouraging their clients to bring in speakers, organize community events, and to follow current events. The organizations may occasionally (if inadvertently) educate immigrants about dealing with various levels of government bureaucracy. And there are organizations, such as the Southeast Asian Center and the Spanish Action League, which are beginning to work to increase the political capacity of individuals and groups in those communities.

Who incorporates you and for what purposes will shape the nature of your civic and political involvement. The intentional parts of the incorporative processes managed by organizations like the Refugee Assistance Program or Catholic Charities sees immigrants as workers and consumers, and provides them with help meeting basic needs in that context. What is asked of immigrants in return, essentially, is their contribution to the local economy and their help in meeting the NGOs’ quota of successful job

placements. If the political parties were providing these services, they would want votes in return, and this would impel them to see and treat the immigrants as (potential) voters and political activists.

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