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LATINO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: WHAT MATTERS?

María de los Ángeles Torres
University of Illinois at Chicago

and Timothy Ready
Western Michigan University

PILSEN: ENGAGEMENT IN A CHANGING IMMIGRANT PORT OF ENTRY

Since the 1860s, Pilsen has served as a port of entry for many immigrant groups including Germans at the turn of the century, followed by immigrants from major city Ireland, Poland, Lithuania, Czech, and Bohemia, who named it Pilsen after a town in their home country. Italians lived nearby on Taylor Street, where Mexican families moved to as well. Pilsen also has a long history of labor and community struggles (Adelman 1979). The Hull House under the direction of Jane Addams schooled thousands of immigrants in their rights as workers and citizens. As immigrants prospered they moved to better neighborhoods, leaving housing stock and immigrant based organizations for the next wave.

During the 1950s, Mexican families from Texas, Mexico and Taylor Street began to move into the neighborhood (Mora-Torres 2005). As many of them became upwardly mobile, as well, they also moved out to other neighborhoods. Poorer Mexicans immigrant continued to come and settle in Pilsen, as rents were low and jobs nearby. By 1970 a majority of Pilsen residents (55 percent) were Latino, yet the neighborhood’s political machinery was controlled by Italians. Pilsen became an important battle ground for civil, voting and cultural rights (Torres 2006; Cordova 1999). Concerns about the future of the community, particularly the safety and education of its children, became powerful social mobilizers.

These grassroots struggles resulted in an extensive infrastructure of Latino community based organizations providing services to Pilsen residents and providing an infrastructure for civic engagement. Largely because of the concentration of community organizations and agencies that were established, Pilsen became the Heart of the Mexican community in Chicago and remains so today. It is a desirable cultural neighborhood for Mexicans and tourists alike.

POPULATION STABILITY WITH SIGNS OF NASCENT GENTRIFICATION

Although the population of the city of Chicago decreased by 14 percent between 1970 and 2000, the population of the Lower West Side (Pilsen) remained quite stable during the same period at between 44,000 and 45,000 residents (Census, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000). Although its population was stable, Pilsen’s ethnic composition changed from just over half (55 percent) Latino in 1970 to nearly 90 percent Latino by 1990, with most of the remaining population non-Hispanic white. Between 1990 and 2000, Pilsen’s ethnic composition was essentially unchanged.

TABLE 1


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>WHITE</td>
<td>LATINO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Data compiled by the Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Findings from the NSF survey indicate that there has been a small but significant uptick in non-Latino and college educated residents since 2000, especially in the northeast portion of Pilsen. According to the 2005 survey, 36 percent of non-Latino residents had moved into Pilsen in the previous three years, compared to only 16 percent of Latinos. Of these, 76 percent self-identified as white and 14 percent as black. Similarly, 36 percent of residents with at least a bachelor’s degree arrived in Pilsen within the past three years, compared to only 17 percent of those who had not completed high school. Only 6 percent of Latino residents are college graduates, compared to 53 percent of non-Latinos. Forty-four percent of Latino adults have less than a high school education, compared to only 6 percent of non-Latinos.

The population of Pilsen is young. The median age of Latinos in Pilsen is 24.7 years. Citywide, the median age of Latinos is 26.8 years. For non-Hispanic whites in Chicago, the median age is almost 40 (39.6). More than one-third (36 percent) of Pilsen’s
children live below the federal poverty level. Pilsen also has high levels of violence. In 1992, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority named Pilsen one of the “hot spots” in the city for street gang violence (UIC Neighborhood Initiative, n.d.), and gang-related violence remains a serious problem today.

TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS LIVING IN PILSEN THREE YEARS OR LESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOME COLLEGE</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEGE DEGREE</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Same as TABLE 1.

Pilsen’s Latino population is almost entirely of Mexican origin. Sixty-six percent of Latino survey respondents are immigrants; 64 percent were born in Mexico. On average, immigrant residents of Pilsen had lived in the United States for 20 years. Among all Latinos, the average length of residency in Pilsen was 18 years. Forty-two percent are homeowners, and 51 percent are citizens. Twenty percent have an annual household income of under $10,000; 57 percent have household incomes of under $25,000. Only 17 percent had incomes of $50,000 or more. In short, Pilsen’s newcomers no longer are limited primarily to low income wage earning immigrants taking the place of those who have prospered. They increasingly include students, artists, and young professionals who are displacing poorer immigrants (Smith 2007; Smith and Holt 2007). It is in this changing context, that we examined notions of place, identity, community and engagement.

These are the themes that guided a comparative study of three Latino neighborhoods; Pilsen, a Chicago neighborhood southwest of the loop area, Garfield in Phoenix and Little Havana in Miami. Surveys of a random sample of residents were conducted in the summer of 2005 and follow up in depth interviews were administered the following summer.

We looked at key questions, identity, social networking and civic engagement. We drew a random sampling in three neighborhoods, Little Havana, Garfield in Phoenix and Pilsen. This study is important because many of the studies done on Latinos use a wide lens and do not take into account interactions among individuals living in neighborhoods. Overall we find that Latinos living in communities have higher levels of sociability, trust and engagement suggesting that politics gets played out in groups.

Still there were distinct differences among the three neighborhoods. While we found high levels of sociability, Garfield was the most social. In regards to inter ethnic relations, Little Havana has higher levels of trust across ethnic groups. It is the most diverse neighborhood. Pilsen also had highest levels of membership in social organizations suggesting a very thick social fabric.

Pilsen is also the most civically engaged. Evidence of this comes from responses to a series of questions about various forms of active involvement in civic affairs within the past two years. Attended a public meeting about a problem in the neighborhood

- Been invited to attend a public meeting about a problem in the neighborhood
- Worked together informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the neighborhood
- Signed a petition about a problem in the neighborhood
- Joined in a protest or demonstration about a problem in the neighborhood
- Contacted an elected or government official by letter or phone or in person about some need or problem.

TABLE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INVOLVEMENT IN ELECTORAL POLITICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PILSEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHURCH AT LEAST TWICE A MONTH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNION OR PROFESSIONAL GROUP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION VOLUNTEER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATTEND A SCHOOL MEETING*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPORTS TEAM MEMBER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHURCH MEETING RESOCIAL ISSUE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Same as TABLE 1.

IN INVOLVEMENT IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

Fifty-two percent of survey respondents in Pilsen are US citizens. Eighty-nine percent of citizens reported that they are registered to vote, and 84 percent voted in the previous presidential election. There is no significant difference between Pilsen and Little Havana in the percentage of residents who are citizens, or the percentage of citizens who are registered to vote, and those who actually voted. No information about citizenship was collected in Garfield.
Eight percent of Pilsen residents report having worked as a volunteer for a political candidate within the previous two years, a significantly higher percentage than in Little Havana (3 percent) and Garfield (2 percent). Fourteen percent of citizens in Pilsen report having worked as a political volunteer compared to two percent of non-citizens, as did 14 percent of Pilsen residents with at least some post-secondary education. Seven percent of high school graduates and 5 percent of residents with less than a high school diploma also worked as political volunteers. Men were more likely to do so than women.

### TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENT INVOLVED IN DIFFERENT MODES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PILSEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invited to Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborated on Neighborhood Problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed Petition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Public Official</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Same as TABLE 1.

Three percent of Pilsen residents voted within the previous two years in an election that took place in another country. The percentage of Pilsen residents who voted in a foreign election is significantly lower than in both Little Havana (5 percent) and Garfield (8 percent). Five percent of non-citizens in Pilsen reported having voted in a foreign election in the previous two years.

After looking at the descriptive data we tested to see if there were statistically relevant factors. We found that three were important to have a more in-depth understanding, and the main points are summarized below in three separate briefs which look at age, place of birth and gender and education combined and age.

### REFERENCES


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Marcelo, Karlo Barrios, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Emily Hoban Kirby. 2007. “Fact Sheet: Civic Engagement Among Minority Youth”. CIRCLE: The Center for Information 7 Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. URL: http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_07_minority_c e.pdf


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