

Will Immigrants of Color Be Racial Justice Voters in November and Beyond?

by Mari Ryono, Angelica Salas, and Aparna Shah

In November 2010, the power of the emerging immigrant electorate became evident. Latinos in particular were credited with “saving the West” for Democrats¹ by helping defeat anti-immigrant candidates and delivering victories to California Democrats such as Governor Jerry Brown and Attorney General Kamala Harris. In 2011, immigrant rights activists and voters helped defeat Arizona State Senator Russell Pearce, the architect of the notorious anti-immigrant SB 1070.² “The Latino vote is now seen as a game changer in this country,” said Arturo Carmona, executive director of Presente.org. “Yet there is much work ahead to realize the promise. Collaborating with other communities of color to achieve power equity, justice and a more equitable economy is not only our responsibility as Latinos but required for our collective progress.”³

The 2010 U.S. Census underscores the growth of Latino, Asian and other immigrant populations in the United States. Currently, Asians represent nearly 6 percent of the total U.S. population, while Latinos remain the nation’s largest “minority” group at nearly 17 percent. According to Census Bureau projections, by the year 2050, the population of Asians in the U.S. is expected to triple to over 33 million. Latinos are expected to increase their numbers to over 100 million or, roughly speaking, 1 out of every 4 Americans.⁴ There are more than eight million immigrants with permanent legal residence who are eligible to become citizens in the United States.⁵

There is much to be done, however, to ensure that immigrants become consistent voters. The Voter Participation Center references recent census data in noting that the Rising American Electorate (RAE) – unmarried women, youth and people of color – accounted for 95 percent of the U.S. population growth between 2008 and 2010; yet 71 million of this demographic group did not vote in 2010.⁶ This article adds another critical question to this discussion: What will it take to ensure that immigrants of color not only vote, but become racial justice voters?

Immigrants of color – including Latino, Asian, African and Arab immigrant communities – are certainly ripe to be racial justice voters. They have experienced firsthand the pain and injustice wrought by structural racism – the institutional oppression of people of color as opposed to individual racist acts. From the denial of equal opportunity and a path to citizenship, to racial profiling and discrimination, to the lack of in-language and culturally-relevant materials, and to explicit intimidation and suppression of their vote, immigrants of color understand structural racism because they experience its impacts every day.

The fact that low-income immigrant and U.S.-born communities of color often live in close proximity and in similar conditions demonstrates the fact that immigrants have been impacted by unequal structures in the U.S. Still, African Americans and U.S.-born Latinos may not perceive immigrants as allies, particularly as immigration has consistently and systematically been used as a “wedge issue” to divide Americans. Competition for resources like jobs, housing and education is high. Overestimating solidarity among immigrant and U.S.-born communities of color results in dangerously underestimating the work necessary to build authentic and deep solidarity across difference.

Of course, there is also great diversity within immigrant groups themselves. Take, for example, the “Asian Pacific Islander” category, which includes over 45 distinct ethnicities and over 100 language dialects. According to a recent Pew report summarized by Colorlines.com, “More than a third of all Hmong, Cambodian and Laotian Americans over the age of 25 don’t have a high school degree ... While some Asians may report incomes at or higher than Whites, Cambodian and Laotian Americans report poverty rates as high as, and higher than, the poverty rate of African Americans, according to the 2010 Census. The more complex and far less exciting explanation for Asian Americans’ relatively high rates of education has more to do with immigration

policy, which has driven selectivity about who gets to come to the U.S. and who doesn't.”⁷ Similarly, Nunu Kidane of Priority Africa Network said, “African immigrant voters are often incorrectly categorized or assumed to be part of African Americans; more often, they are entirely left out of discussions on immigrant voters.”⁸

Strategies to bring together diverse immigrant groups and people of color as allies and racial justice voters require deep political education within and across communities. Many organizations like Mobilize the Immigrant Vote (MIV),⁹ Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), and others are doing just that. “The MIV multi-issue platform is a cornerstone of the work,” shares Vanessa Aramayo, director of California Partnership (CAP), a statewide coalition organizing for policies that fight poverty and build power among low-income communities. “The needs of low-income communities of color define the core values for MIV. Together, we work on a wide range of issues and engage immigrant communities to better understand the direct impacts these issues have on their lives and the lives of other low-income people of color.” Adds Kidane, “Priority Africa Network strengthens the capacity of our partner organizations to do culturally-based community analysis and civic engagement while also building alliances among immigrants, African immigrants and African Americans.”

Promising research shows that immigrants support a racial justice and progressive agenda when organizers lead with values and culturally-based concepts in communities’ primary languages. In 2011, MIV chose tax and fiscal reform as a priority racial and social justice issue. The MIV Take Back the American Dream Campaign demonstrated high rates of support across race for progressive tax and fiscal reform. Ninety-two percent of immigrant voters of color surveyed supported progressive tax and fiscal policy when phone callers spoke first about shared values of opportunity, fairness and responsibility to the common good.¹⁰


Leaders with the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) identified responsibility to the “common good” (“el bien común”) as the value that tested the strongest with Spanish-speaking voters. In the historically conservative Vietnamese community in San Jose, 72 percent of voters

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supported progressive tax and fiscal policy. “We had to choose culturally-appropriate language,” said Patricia Diaz, the executive director of the Services Immigrant Rights and Education Network (SIREN). “For example, we didn’t use the word ‘rich’ because many in our community think of themselves as soon-to-be-rich even when they are the working poor. Instead, we had to talk about increasing the tax rate on ‘millionaires.’ This is an example of how knowing your community and how to bridge concepts makes all the difference.” Alex Tom with the Chinese Progressive Association commented on how they bridged cultures and translated the concept of the American dream to Chinese Americans in San Francisco during the MIV campaign. “We found that the language of the ‘Gold Mountain,’ a common name for San Francisco and the United States among Chinese, really tapped into the hopes and dreams in our community and created a strong bridge for the need for progressive tax and fiscal reform.”

Community organizers and the funders who support them can play a critical role in ensuring that the highest quality data and technology is used for reaching out to immigrant voters of color. This is a key to ensure that civic engagement initiatives advance racial justice. For-profit data and technology companies are designed to meet the needs of traditional political campaigns that largely target older, White, affluent, U.S.-born voters. These companies have honed their systems in impressive ways, but are not yet providing sufficiently tailored services that organizations targeting low-income immigrants of color need, such as distinguishing between Pilipino and Latino voters, or training limited-English or computer-proficient community leaders how to manage their voter data.

Significantly, the immigrant vote will only be a racial justice vote if the movements and organizations that represent them have strong and deep alliances with the African American community. Voting rights is



a particularly effective vehicle for building greater solidarity among immigrants and African American communities because of the historic significance of the struggle for voting rights within the African American community and the current systematic exclusion of African Americans from the democratic process. “Black Americans understand both the violent history and modern-day manifestation of voter suppression in this country,” says Dorsey Nunn, executive director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. “Americans may celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day, but there is no large-scale effort to register incarcerated citizens to vote. Black, Brown and Asian communities are seen as a threat to the current power structure. It is no coincidence that California saw both Proposition 187 (denying services to immigrants) and Proposition 184 (‘three strikes and you’re out’) in 1994. Black Americans know what it means to be excluded from the American Dream. We have that in common with the immigrant experience.”

This work does not happen overnight, but through deep political education and working together side by side. For MIV, this has meant incorporating the history of the struggle for African American voting rights as essential context for the current struggle for immigrant voting rights; engaging immigrants and U.S.-born African American communities in deep conversations on issues such as the housing crisis and criminal justice; identifying opportunities for joint engagement such as MIV partners joining the “We Are The 99%” social justice delegation of the Los Angeles Martin Luther King Jr. parade¹¹; and building intentional long-term relationships with other statewide and national organizations that represent U.S.-born communities.

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The need for explicit alliance building is even more necessary given the changing demographics in this country, the problematic zero-sum view of power, and systematic conservative strategies to divide communities of color across race, ethnicity and immigration status. How does it feel to African Americans to read the

headlines about the exploding Latino and Asian populations in this context? What is the impact on African American political power if a local district historically represented by African Americans is redrawn with a new majority Latino population? These are questions with which immigrant communities and philanthropic investors must seriously grapple.

The good news is that many are doing so. In 2011, a historic convening of immigrant rights groups was held in Montgomery, Ala., to protest the passing of anti-immigrant HB 56.¹² “Our youth leaders participated in a convening of Asian Pacific Islander youth in Montgomery,” said Dae Joong Yoon of the Korean Resource Center and the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium (NAKASEC). “Our young people had the opportunity to walk in the paths of African American civil rights leaders and learn about the history of fighting against racism and voter suppression in this country. It was a transformative experience.”

“Since the Alabama actions in fall of 2011, a coalition of African American leadership from the civil rights movement and leaders in the immigrant rights movement have been in discussion about how to better support each other,” said Xiomara Corpeño of CHIRLA. “Immigrant leaders with the Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM) joined the Alabama NAACP for a one-week march to commemorate the historic Selma to Montgomery March of 1965. African American and immigrant leaders have supported each other in engaging with U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder on issues of racial profiling and voting rights. In Alabama, this closeness has fostered an organic mutual understanding of our linked destiny to fight for rights; and on a national level, it has meant a higher-level conversation about how to work intersectionally as well as coordinate actions where united fronts are vital.”

Mobilize the Immigrant Vote outlines the following as best practices to leverage immigrant voting and civic engagement as vehicles to advance racial justice: 1) community-based strategies that address the complexities and contradictions of diverse experiences; 2) values-based messaging that is in-language, in-culture and based on original research targeting immigrant communities of color; 3) year-round education and building of readiness to engage communities on tough

issues; and 4) relationship-building among immigrant communities and with U.S.-born communities to set the stage for struggling together and building unity. Electoral organizing has been both a historic battleground for racial justice and an arena dominated by White men and institutions that deny the existence of structural racism. Will immigrant communities of color be racial justice voters? With our collective commitment, analysis and action – including bold leadership in the philanthropic sector – we will.

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full text of the law is available at <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/sb1070s.pdf>

- ³ Email communication with Aparna Shah, July 2012.
- ⁴ Armas, Genaro C. "America's Face is Changing." *CBS News*. CBS News, 11 Feb. 2009. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-201_162-607022.html>
- ⁵ Czekalinski, Stephanie. "Immigrant Groups Encourage Green-Card Holders to Naturalize, Vote." *The Next America*. National Journal, 01 May 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.nationaljournal.com/thenextamerica/politics/immigrant-groups-encourage-green-card-holders-to-naturalize-vote-20120424>>
- ⁶ "The Rising American Electorate." *The Voter Participation Center*. The Voter Participation Center, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.voterparticipation.org/the-rising-american-electorate/>>
- ⁷ Hing, Julianne. "Asian Americans Respond to Pew: We're Not Your Model Minority." *Colorlines.com*. Applied Research Center, 21 June 2012. Web.
- ⁸ Unless otherwise cited, quotes throughout article are from email communications between speaker and Mari Ryono, May/June 2012
- ⁹ MIV is a coalition of organizations anchored by the California Partnership (CAP); the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA); the Coalition of Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA); the Korean Resource Center (KRC); and the Services, Immigrant Rights and Education Network (SIREN). MIV invests in year-round, multi-issue education that makes connections with unique issues and the daily lives of diverse communities.
- ¹⁰ "Taking Back the American Dream in Low-income Immigrant Communities of Color." Oakland, Calif.: Mobilize the Immigrant Vote, 2012. Print. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/h6y17j4ynns99p9/miv-2011-fall-report.pdf>
- ¹¹ In 2012, the Community Coalition convened a multiracial "Occupy King's Dream" delegation of grassroots social justice organizations for the Los Angeles Martin Luther King Jr. parade. www.cocosouthla.org
- ¹² HB 56 is the "Hammon-Beason Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act" signed into law in Alabama in June 2011. The full text of the law is available at http://blog.al.com/ht/2011/07/read_the_full_text_of_alabamas.html.

¹ Hing, Julianne. "Latino Voters Save the West for Democrats." *Colorlines.com*. Applied Research Center, 03 Nov. 2010. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <http://colorlines.com/archives/2010/11/latinos_save_the_west_for_democrats.html>

² SB 1070 is the "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act" signed into law by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer on 23 April 2010. It became one of the most anti-immigrant laws in recent U.S. history and became a rallying point for both pro-immigrant and anti-immigrant activists. The