



Political Organizing in Ethnic Immigrant Communities

Cristina Lacomba, University of Washington-Seattle Campus

The borough of Queens, New York City is one of the most diverse places in the world, home to immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Europe. Indeed, nearly half of all Queens residents are foreign-born. Many members of these immigrant communities are politically engaged in both the United States and their countries of origin. How do they navigate their dual role as political participants in two countries at once? My research involves a close examination of Ecuadorian immigrants who are active in civic organizations in New York City and Madrid – two cities with relatively large Ecuadorian populations – to compare how they make collective demands of their governments to change policy both at home and abroad.

Immigrant political experience in their native countries has a lasting impact on how they engage in their new cities, I find, shaping both the types of political redress they seek and their organizational affiliations. Even though my work focuses specifically on Ecuadorian immigrants, the patterns I have observed resemble patterns among other groups living abroad that come from countries where governments exercise control over political activities.

Ecuadorian Organizations versus Multiethnic Community Organizations

Whether they live in Madrid or New York, Ecuadorian political activists have a variety of concerns. Ecuadorians in U.S. have lobbied its government for comprehensive immigration reform; those in Spain have worked on behalf of legislation that would ease the burden of mortgages and unemployment. In addition, Ecuadorian nationals in both countries have lobbied the Ecuadorian government to approve dual citizenship and expand voting rights for emigrants. Participants in my study fell into three categories: those who participated exclusively in multi-ethnic community organizations involving immigrants from many lands and focused on the U.S. and Spanish governments; those who participated exclusively in Ecuadorian organizations that targeted both governments – their new home countries and the government of Ecuador; and those who participated in both types of organizations.

My research uncovered striking patterns:

- Leaders and very active members involved with both types of organizations – multi-ethnic groups and Ecuadorian-only groups – were equally likely to campaign for changes in their new home countries and their country of origin. This was especially true for those who had already been active back in Ecuador.
- Participants in Ecuadorian-only groups in the United States and Spain noted more and greater barriers to cooperating and achieving their goals than participants in the multiethnic groups – barriers that largely seemed to be the result of negative experiences with the Ecuadorian government and its relationship with nationals living abroad. Entrenched Ecuadorian political institutions, partisan divisions, and distrust of other Ecuadorian nationals led many of the most committed activists to move toward multiethnic groups rather than Ecuadorian-only associations for achieving their goals.

Impediments to Organizing among Ecuadorian Activist Groups

Ecuadorians living abroad share language, culture, and many policy goals. But there are more obstacles to forming alliances among immigrants of the same nationality than one might assume.

- As more and more Ecuadorians move abroad, the home government of Rafael Correa has intensified its presence in migrant communities. Such cooptation dampens migrants' ability to lobby for policy changes that might go against Correa's preferences.

- Opportunities for continued participation in the politics of Ecuador revived Ecuadorian party divisions in Madrid and New York City, sparking rifts between group leaders and members. Party polarization in Ecuadorian-only organizations caused many participants to see their leaders as using members to advance their own political positions. In addition, members of such politicized Ecuadorian immigrant associations often worried that the Ecuadorian state exercises surveillance over nationals abroad. Such divisions and distrust rooted in Ecuadorian politics stymied cooperation among Ecuadorians in New York and Madrid.
- Generalized distrust towards the Ecuadorian government and other Ecuadorian nationals sparked worries about corruption in their new-country organizations. Whether real corruption existed or not, the perception of its existence led participants to search for new venues in which corruption was believed to be less prevalent. Often that led them to join multi-ethnic, multi-immigrant organizations that were not exclusively comprised of other Ecuadorians.

The Multiethnic Model for Effective Political Action

Avoiding in-group fighting originating in Ecuador, many of the immigrant activists I studied were better able to cooperate in pursuit of shared goals when they reached out to organizations that included participants from diverse nationalities and ethnic groups. In such groups, the focus could be on improving conditions in their new countries. What is more, involvement in diverse organizations more fully exposed Ecuadorian immigrant activists to the political process in their new countries, affording them new skills and tools to lobby effectively and achieve results.

Observers often assume that immigrants naturally cooperate within their ethnic group. But newcomers from countries like Ecuador where perceptions of political corruption run high and government tries to harness emigrant communities can find themselves mired in old divisions and unable to cooperate effectively to achieve changes in their new countries and the ones they left behind. The need to break free of home-country political practices may drive savvy activists to join multiethnic organizations and build cooperative ties with counterparts from other immigrant communities. In short, my findings suggest that, despite differences in culture and prior political experiences, multi-ethnic organizations are often the key to effective mobilization by immigrant newcomers, maximizing their chances to influence politics and policies in their new home countries.

Research for this brief is drawn from the author's ongoing projects.