

Immigration: From Protest to Politics

Perspective in *Sonoma Insights*, Winter 2007

Huge and unanticipated demonstrations by Latinos across the country last May prompted President George W. Bush to address the nation on immigration reform.

Bush had avoided direct involvement in a Congressional debate until House passage of HR 4437 (the “Sensenbrenner bill”) triggered the mass marches of Latinos and allies outraged at the prospect of undocumented immigrants being designated felons.

The sight of a mass movement forcing the hand of a reluctant President invites comparison with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Much as the civil rights movement in the South decades ago emerged from networks among NAACP chapters, black colleges, and black churches, so the recent immigrant rights movement was organized in a similar fashion.

Networks of communication among neighborhood and community organizations, Catholic parishes, “community of origin” clubs, Spanish-language radio deejays, and labor unions mobilized the throngs of demonstrators who embraced the call to wear white T-shirts as a symbol of unity and nonviolence in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez.

As these networks had developed with little fanfare, the magnitude of the immigrants’ response – over a million people marching peacefully in the streets of American cities between March 27 and May 1-- astounded the public, the organizers, and the participants themselves.

There was an authenticity apparent in working people marching with dignity and resolve in their own behalf, more reminiscent of the civil rights movement than recent anti-globalization and anti-Iraq war protests. There were no banners or speeches from the farther shores of left-wing politics, addressing topics peripheral to the march’s issues, and no black-clad anarchists smashing windows at Starbucks.

Locally, the May Day march and rally in Santa Rosa’s Julliard Park had a festive atmosphere, with families enjoying Aztec dancers, a drumming troupe, and a mariachi band. The speakers on stage were all local activists who spoke to the issues at hand. People looked happy, not angry, impressed with the turnout (estimated at 10,000, the largest demonstration on record in Sonoma County) and the unity they had created among themselves.

Demographic shifts that take place slowly under the public’s radar can produce sudden political impacts when a window of opportunity opens. The migration of five million Southern blacks to the North and West in the decades after the 1920s (when immigration from Europe was cut off by law) transformed a disenfranchised people into a significant voting force – one that tipped the balance in close Presidential races to Democrats Harry Truman in 1948 and John Kennedy in 1960, thus becoming a vital part of the realignment

of American politics toward a Democratic majority that lasted from the New Deal through the Great Society.

Similarly, the shift over the last twenty years of immigrants from Mexico and Central America to areas outside their traditional destinations in the Southwest -- to the Midwest, Northeast, and Upper South -- has created new potential for Latino political clout nationally.

In 1964, Bayard Rustin, the key organizer for the 1963 March on Washington, wrote an influential essay, "From Protest to Politics," in which he argued it was time -- after the 1964 Civil Rights Act and with passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in view -- for the civil rights movement to shift from marches and demonstrations to electoral politics, in alliance with labor and within the Democratic party.

Controversial at the time, Rustin's advice soon became conventional wisdom as newly enfranchised voters rapidly succeeded in electing thousands of black candidates.

The popular slogan of the recent demonstrations, "Today We March; Tomorrow We Vote," suggests activists agree electoral action is the next step. Latinos have lagged behind other groups both in registration among eligible voters and in turnout for elections. Organizers hoped to register one million eligible Latinos before the November 2006 balloting, as well as move eight million green-card holders toward citizenship by 2008.

The growing political potential of Latinos presents a dilemma for President Bush and his party. The intransigence of conservative House Republicans over legalization of undocumented immigrants eroded the relatively good relationship with Latinos that Bush has struggled to build since his days as governor of Texas.

If Bush supports a "comprehensive" immigration act emerging from the newly Democratic House and Senate, that may help retain for Republicans the forty percent of the Latino vote Bush got in 2004.

If he resists, Latinos and other immigrant groups are likely to abandon Republicans nationally for an emerging Democratic majority, as they did in California when Republican governor Pete Wilson supported the punitive Proposition 187 in 1994.

How the immigration debate plays out between Congress and the White House in the months ahead will shape American politics for years to come.