

# Barriers to Immigrant Engagement with Government Policy Actors: Perceptions from Immigrant Nonprofit Organizations in California and New York State

Shawn Teresa Flanigan  
San Diego State University

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*This article presents data from a research project that examines if and how immigrant nonprofit organizations in California and New York State interact with government actors in an attempt to influence policy, and what barriers prevent immigrant organizations from moving from a traditional role of providing social services to a more conscious policy advocacy role. While the challenges of this transition have been documented in other segments of the nonprofit sector, evidence suggests that staff of immigrant community-based organizations perceive additional barriers to advocacy that are specific to immigrant organizations. These include a lack of involvement from immigrant community members due to their background in political cultures where popular democratic participation is not present or encouraged, a lack of staff skills and knowledge about democratic participation, and a chilling on participation due to immigrants' fears.*

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Immigration policy has become an important political issue in the United States in recent years, taking a prominent seat next to homeland security in national and state-level election debates. Both pro-immigrant and anti-immigrant activism recently have become quite visible, ranging from April, 2010 rallies against a new Arizona state law criminalizing undocumented immigrants to the assembly of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps along the US-Mexico border. While a great deal of research and public debate examines immigrant

groups as targets of public policy, we have less information regarding how and why immigrant groups become actors in the public policy process (for some exceptions see Ramakrishnan 2005, Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b).

This article presents data from an ongoing research project that offers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of if and how immigrant nonprofit organizations in California and New York State interact with government actors in an attempt to influence policy, and what barriers may prevent immigrant organizations from moving from a traditional role of providing social services to more conscious and explicit policy advocacy role. While the challenges of this transition from service provision to advocacy have been documented in other segments of the nonprofit sector, evidence from New York suggests that staff of immigrant community-based organizations perceive additional barriers to advocacy that appear to be unique to immigrant organizations (Saidel et al. 2007). Data collected in California illuminate similar perceived barriers. These barriers include:

- 1) A lack of involvement from immigrant community members due to their background in political cultures where popular democratic participation is not present or encouraged
- 2) A lack of staff skills related to democratic participation and a lack knowledge about the US policy system
- 3) The chilling effect of fear on advocacy activity, including fear of government due to immigration status, and past experiences of discrimination leading fear of appearing “un-American” or “anti-American”.

This article presents preliminary data from an ongoing project whose broad research goal is to understand the extent to which immigrant nonprofits interact with and attempt to influence government in order to meet the needs of their communities. While the project is designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from staff and volunteers of immigrant nonprofit organizations, this article presents qualitative information about the variety of ways in which immigrant nonprofit organizations engage with government actors, and staff members’ perceptions of barriers to interaction with government.

This article specifically focuses on immigrant nonprofit organizations’ perceived barriers to interaction with government. A focus on barriers is important due to research indicating that, even in communities with large immigrant populations, immigrant organizations often receive little attention from and are poorly known by those involved in government decision making. Barriers to interaction can contribute to a vicious circle in which immigrant organizations remain out of sight of government policy makers, leading to less access to government funding, less access to those with political power, and a poorer understanding of the political system. This in turn reinforces these organizations’ lack of visibility as voices of legitimate community concerns (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008a). Examining staff members’ perceptions of barriers to interaction with government becomes particularly important as organizations attempt to disrupt this cycle.

### **Defining “Immigrant” Nonprofit Organizations**

I define immigrant nonprofit organizations using Cordero-Guzman’s (2005) definition,

which emphasizes organizations that are founded by members of a specific immigrant group with the primary goal of serving members of the same group. As Cordero-Guzman (2005) states, “An immigrant organization is an organization formed by individuals who are members of a particular ethnic or national-origin group, for the purpose of providing social services primarily to immigrants from the same ethnic or national group. Immigrant organizations differ from other social service providers in that they explicitly incorporate cultural components, and a consciousness of ethnic or national origin identity, into their mission, practices, services and programs,” (894). In other words, as opposed to “mainstream” nonprofit organizations that might provide services to a diverse groups of immigrants in addition to other communities (examples would be Catholic Charities, the International Rescue Committee, or the Salvation Army), the immigrant organizations examined in this article provide services to a specific immigrant group and consciously incorporate cultural and linguistic aspects of that group into their service provision. For example, a Vietnamese immigrant nonprofit organization would serve predominantly (or perhaps exclusively) Vietnamese clientele, would provide many services in the Vietnamese language, and would incorporate Vietnamese cultural customs into its practices. Specifically examining these types of organizations is important because, for many new immigrants, immigrant community-based organizations are their primary services providers and a clearinghouse for gaining information about how to interact with local government in the United States.

### **Methodology**

Both qualitative and quantitative data are being collected from staff members and volunteers from immigrant nonprofit organizations across California through semi-structured interviews. The data currently being collected in California are supplemented in this article by data gathered in a related pilot study conducted in New York State (Saidel et al. 2007). The interview protocol begins by gathering information about the activities of immigrant organizations based on the functions of immigrant community-based organizations identified by Cordero-Guzman (2005) in his study of immigrant organizations in New York City. The protocol is designed to offer participants the opportunity to add other activities that may be missing, which may prove particularly important considering that immigrant nonprofit organizations in California and rural New York State may be operating in environments that differ substantially from New York City. The protocol then includes a series of questions about the ways in which employees of immigrant community-based organizations interact with government officials, the ways in which they attempt to influence policy makers, and interview participants’ perceptions of motivations for – and barriers to – engagement in policy advocacy. This section of the protocol is adapted from a survey used in the Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project (SNAP) Study conducted by Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Watch, Tufts University, and the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, which generated Jeffery Berry and David Aron’s (2003) book *A Voice for Nonprofits*. Berry and Aron used a nationwide survey to understand policy advocacy activities of nonprofit organizations. Using this interview protocol allows one to compare the behavior and perceptions of immigrant community-based organizations in California with immigrant

community-based organizations in New York State, as well as with more than 1,700 other mainstream nonprofit organizations throughout the United States surveyed by the SNAP project (OMB Watch 2002).

Interview participants were solicited using a purposive sample of employees of local immigrant nonprofit organizations, all of whom held management positions in organizations providing health and human services to low-income individuals and families. Participating organizations were purposively selected to reflect the geographic diversity of California and New York State, and diversity in the countries or regions of origin of the individuals served. To the extent possible, the goal is to gather a sample that represents a spectrum of organizations in terms of age, budget size, and ratio of volunteers to paid staff. This study intentionally targeted a diverse sample based on the logic underpinning “Most Different Systems Design” in comparative methodology (Przeworski and Teune 1970). This methodological framework asserts that by showing how different cases share similarities in the dependent variable, one can offer evidence as to why certain factors may have explanatory power as independent variables (Landman 2003). In analyzing the behavior of immigrant nonprofit organizations, I hypothesize that in spite of their vast differences in geographic location, country or region of origin, age, budget size, and staff professionalization, immigrant nonprofit organizations share key characteristics due to their broader “immigrant” identity and the shared challenges faced by the populations they serve.

This article presents data from interviews with fifty-seven staff members from twenty-five immigrant nonprofit organizations. Twenty-four of these interviews were conducted in New York State (representing nine organizations), and thirty-three were conducted in California (representing sixteen organizations). Interviews were conducted in rural areas, small cities, and large metropolitan areas. The organizations vary widely in terms of age, budget size, and number of paid staff. The organizations were founded between five and forty-eight years ago, with budgets ranging between \$10,000 and \$5.1 million during the last fiscal year. While some organizations are all-volunteer organizations, others have up to 160 full-time staff. The organizations defined themselves as representing Afghan, African, Arab, Asian, Chinese, Filipino, Iraqi, Japanese, Latin American, Persian/Iranian, Russian, Somali, Sudanese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, and former Yugoslavian communities or regions of origin. Variations in age, place (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b), financial resources (Saidel 2002), and staff capacity (Saidel 2002) almost certainly have an influence on organizations’ ability and motivations for interacting with government. It is possible that differences in race, class, and ethnic or national group also influence organizations’ frequency and type of interaction with government (Strolovitch 2007). However, while the sample size is not yet large enough to parse out the specific influence of the factors mentioned above, preliminary findings indicate that the immigrant identity of the organizations in the study leads staff of these organizations to share certain perceptions of barriers in their interaction with government. These shared perceptions endure in spite of diversity in terms of geographic location, financial resources, staff capacity, and demographic characteristics.

### **Types of Engagement with Government Actors**

Els de Graauw (2008) makes it clear that nonprofit organizations can play an important role

**Table 1. Reported Frequency of Interaction with Government Actors**

Type of interaction	Number of staff reporting 1-4*	Number of staff reporting 3 or 4*
Testifying at legislative or administrative hearings	40	6
Lobbying on behalf of or against a proposed bill or other policy pronouncement	35	11
Responding to requests for information from those in government	47	26
Working in a planning or advisory group that includes government officials	46	26
Meeting with government officials about the work we are doing	50	27
Encouraging members to write, call, fax, or e-mail people in government	50	27
Releasing research reports to the media, the public, or people in government	40	10
Discussing obtaining grants or contracts with government officials	50	30
Interacting socially with government officials	52	21

\*N=57 staff. Scale: 0= never, 1=low frequency, 4= high frequency

in voicing immigrants’ needs to government officials and engaging in advocacy on immigrants’ behalf. Policy changes such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and the Great Society programs of the 1960’s, as well as a more general push for privatization in social services, have led to an expanded role for nonprofit organizations as service providers to immigrant communities (de Graauw 2008). The immigrant nonprofit organizations in this sample offer evidence of a wide range of engagement with government actors, from being explicitly apolitical to having a strong activism orientation. However, for the purposes of this study engagement with government is defined quite broadly, including not only formal advocacy activities such as testifying at legislative or administrative hearings and lobbying on behalf of or against a proposed bill, but also more informal and reactive activities such as responding to requests for information from those in government and discussing obtaining grants or contracts with government officials. Because of this broad definition, none of the organizations in the sample reported having absolutely no interaction with government actors.

Interview participants were asked to assess the frequency with which they interacted with government, assigning a rating between zero (for never) to four (for high frequency)

**Table 2. Reported Barriers to Interaction with Government Actors**

Type of barrier	Number of staff reporting 1-4*	Number of staff reporting 3 or 4*
Tax law or IRS regulations	36	18
Organization receives government funds	44	24
Organization received foundation funds	33	10
Staff (or volunteer) skills	44	21
Organization's limited financial resources	53	46
Advice from attorneys or accountants	38	20
Your board or staff's attitude toward involvement in the policymaking process	41	13
Your constituents' attitude toward involvement in the policymaking process	40	15

\*N=57 staff. Scale: 0= not a barrier, 1=low barrier, 4= high barrier

to a variety of different types of interaction. While the sample is too small for robust statistical analysis as of yet, descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, fewer of the staff interviewed reported a high frequency of interaction with government through formal advocacy channels such as testifying at hearings, lobbying in regard to a specific bill, or releasing formal research reports on policy topics. A greater number of staff reported a high frequency of more informal or reactive types of interaction with government officials, such as discussing grants or contracts, meeting with officials about their work, serving on a board or group that includes government officials as members, or responding to government's requests for information. Other types of interaction staff mentioned that were not included in the initial interview protocol were interaction with government officials at press conferences and ribbon cutting ceremonies.

### **Barriers to Engagement with Government Actors Broadly Cited by Nonprofit Organizations**

Many types of nonprofit organizations may face barriers to engagement with government actors (Berry and Arons 2003). This study seeks to understand the ways in which barriers faced by immigrant nonprofit organizations are similar to those faced by other types of nonprofit organizations, and also seeks to shed light on barriers that may be unique to immigrant nonprofit organizations. Interview participants were asked to assess the size of common barriers to interaction with government, assigning a rating between zero (for no barrier) to four (for a high barrier.) While the sample is still too small for robust statistical analysis, descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Other types of barriers staff mentioned that were not included in the initial interview protocol were immigration laws, immigration status, language barriers, and the activities of other local immigrant organizations.

### *Tax law or IRS regulations*

In conjunction with granting nonprofit organizations tax-exempt status, federal law limits the degree to which 501(c)(3) organizations can engage in certain types of political behavior, specifically legislative lobbying (Berry and Arons 2003). However, many types of nonprofit political activity are permitted under federal law, including many of the activities mentioned earlier such as providing invited testimony at legislative or administrative hearings, working in planning or advisory groups that include government officials, engaging in administrative advocacy when meeting with government officials, and releasing nonpartisan research reports to the media, the public, or people in government (de Graauw 2008). In spite of these safe and legal avenues for political activity, Berry and Arons (2003) find that many nonprofit organization staff misunderstand the limitations the tax code places on their political activities and thus have a fear of engaging in activities that could be construed as lobbying and result in a loss of their tax-exempt status. In a similar vein, more than 60% of the staff of immigrant nonprofits interviewed for this article viewed tax law and IRS regulations as a barrier to interacting with government officials. Out of these individuals, half rated tax law and IRS regulations with a 3 or 4, indicating they perceived this to be a high barrier to engagement with government officials (see Table 2). One interview participant notes,

...as an example, a couple of months ago for this charter amendment for affordable housing, I brought it up with the board chair and I would think “Ok, this is easy, it’s a done deal because you know (*our organization*) is all about affordable housing and the struggle to resolve tenant’s rights and illegal eviction. So I thought it was no problem. He said “That’s going to jeopardize our standing in terms of our tax status,” and I go “Wait a minute, where are you getting this information from?” So what I had to do for him and for the board is that I did research about a lot of the regulations, and I went to the IRS website, and went to some of my colleagues who work in this type of field. I presented them (the board) with information so that they could see, not just so they read it for themselves, but like a mini presentation, like an advocacy workshop, to let them know that it’s ok for us to be engaged in this type of advocacy in regards to policy. And then afterwards, they said okay, but they’re still not sure ... they’re still very cautious...

### *Receives Government or Foundation Funds*

Some scholars express concern that government funding of nonprofit organizations may have a chilling effect on the political activity of these organizations (Berry and Arons 2003). Resource dependency theory guides the argument that nonprofit organizations may be reluctant to “bite the hand that feeds them”, so to speak, and that organizations receiving government funding may be overly compliant with government agencies and less inclined to try to shape government policies (Froelich 1999, Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Research on this topic has produced conflicting results. While some studies indicate government contracting stifles the political activities of nonprofit organizations (Smith and Lipsky 1993), others show that government funding is positively correlated to advocacy behavior (Donaldson

2007). Still other research suggests that reliance on government funding is not a strong predictor of advocacy activity in either direction (Chaves et al. 2004, Child and Grønbjerg 2007, Leech 2006). While less often discussed in the literature, there is also a concern that foundation funding may inhibit the political activities of nonprofit organizations by dissuading certain types of advocacy activity or advocacy on particular topics. Immigrant nonprofit organization staff in this sample saw both government funding and foundation funding as a barrier to engagement with government actors, though staff rated government funding as a high barrier (24 staff rated as 3 or 4) much more often than they rated foundation funding as a high barrier (10 staff rated as 3 or 4) (see Table 2).

### *Staff and Volunteer Skills*

A lack of staff and volunteer skills can also serve as an important barrier to engagement in advocacy activities, and more than 75% of interview participants from immigrant nonprofit organizations cited this as an important barrier (see Table 2). Often this lack of skill is characterized as a lack of knowledge about the intricacies of the policy process or a lack of knowledge about effective advocacy strategies. While interview participants from immigrant organizations mentioned lacking these skills, a lack of other important skills was mentioned as well, such as a lack of knowledge about democracy in general and the US policy system specifically, and a lack of strong English language skills. The lack of these particular skills is sometimes mentioned in literature on immigrants and political participation (Berry and Arons 2003, Ramakrishnan 2005, Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b), and will be discussed in more depth later in the section of the article focusing on barriers specific to immigrant organizations.

### *Limited Financial Resources*

Limited financial resources can be a barrier to nonprofit organizations' ability to engage with government actors on a variety of grounds. Organizations that have more resources have more access to policymakers for at least two reasons. First, an organization with substantial resources, such as the American Red Cross or the United Way, will be of more interest to government officials than a smaller organization with a small budget. This is because larger organizations typically have greater capacity and therefore can serve more constituents and better complement or supplement the activities of government than can a smaller organization. Second, the status and expertise that comes with financial resources gains nonprofit organizations greater access to policy makers, which is crucial to political influence (Berry and Arons 2003). Because greater revenue allows nonprofits to hire staff with policy expertise and pay for communication with government actors, scholars suggest advocacy activity will be positively related to the amount of revenue nonprofit organizations receive. Studies show that correlates of financial resources such as the number of full-time staff have a positive relationship with advocacy activity (Child and Grønbjerg 2007).

In addition, nonprofit organizations must make difficult decisions about how to best allocate scarce resources, and those with fewer resources are more likely to allocate funds and staff to programs and services as opposed to political activity (Berry and Arons 2003). Organizations with more revenue and a larger number of staff are likely to have an excess

capacity that allows them to allocate staff time and financial resources to a wider range of activities, including advocacy (Child and Grønberg 2007). In line with scholars' arguments, many of the staff interviewed for this article indicated that limited financial resources were a barrier to engagement with government actors. Only four interview participants did not cite limited financial resources as an important barrier, and of the 53 staff members that indicated limited financial resources were a barrier, 46 rated this barrier as high (rated as 3 or 4) (see Table 2). Indeed, Berry and Arons (2003) note that a lack of discretionary income to support advocacy groups can be an important limitation in immigrant communities. As one interview participant notes,

It's like when you receive funding from a government, it's limited toward just that program. You know, if it's the after school program, we receive money from DCYF (*Department of Children, Youth, and Families*), you're only limited to spend that on the after school program, so we can't do this and we can't do that, it's just in one pot. And we have to spend that money just in that pot, not outside that pot.

As another participant explains,

I mean we would love to go out in the field and give presentations and educate people so that they get excited about their rights and they can rally together or do something together that can hopefully in the future change policy but again, it's a time and money issue.

#### *Advice from Attorneys or Accountants*

Advice from attorneys and accountants is sometimes cited as a barrier to policy advocacy by nonprofit organizations; in other words, attorneys or accountants may sometimes advise nonprofit organizations *not* to engage in advocacy due to concerns about preserving IRS 501(c)(3) status or other legal or financial concerns. While many staff members interviewed for this article cited advice from attorneys and accountants as a barrier (see Table 2), a careful analysis of the interviews shows that this question almost universally was misunderstood. The interview participants in this study felt that an absence of advice from attorneys and accountants was a barrier to engagement with government actors, and often expressed that if they could afford to seek counsel from attorneys and accountants they might be able to engage in greater and more effective advocacy.

#### *Board, Staff, and Constituent Attitudes toward Involvement in the Policymaking Process*

Finally, the attitudes of board members, staff, and the constituents being served by a nonprofit organization can serve as barriers to engagement with government actors. Board members, staff, and constituents may not see policy advocacy as a priority when faced with a high level of need for programs and services in the community. Board members and staff may be particularly inclined to move activities that engage government to the sidelines when faced a limited budget, high work load, and competing demands on time and resources.

One interview participant describes an attempt to shift this attitude in his employees,

I've been giving the opportunity to staff to go to a lot of trainings that are being given, ...and they all say, "Look, this is taking me away from my job," but I say "You have to change your mind-frame, this is part of your job, understanding policy and understanding advocacy strategies, that's part of your job. Whether you're an administrative officer, whether you're the program coordinator, whether you're the volunteer/internship coordinator, because a lot of times you're going to run across some issues that are going to impact services that you're responsible for. So, you can't just wait until these issues come up and say, 'Oh, what do we do?', you have to know." These are the steps we need to follow to make sure that our needs are met and heard by the policymakers so we can change policy.

An exception can be when engagement with government may result in increased revenue, as can be seen in Table 1 by the high level of interaction with government officials for the purpose of discussing obtaining grants or contracts. However, numerous staff members interviewed for this article mentioned board, staff, and constituent attitudes toward involvement in the policymaking process as a barrier to engagement with government actors. While they mentioned some of the issues above, staff members also mentioned that immigrant constituents' background in cultures where democratic participation is not encouraged or is actively oppressed was an important barrier to their desire for the organization to be involved in policy advocacy. This is a factor that is mentioned in the literature (Berry and Arons 2003, Ramakrishnan 2005, Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b), and the role of immigrants' political culture will be discussed in greater depth in the next section of the article detailing barriers to engagement specific to immigrant nonprofit organizations.

### **Barriers to Engagement with Government Actors Cited by Immigrant Nonprofit Organizations**

As can be seen above, immigrant nonprofit organizations perceived many barriers to interaction with government that are similar to those reported by the broader community of nonprofit organizations that were included in Berry and Arons' (2003) study of nonprofit advocacy. However, in addition to these barriers, staff of immigrant nonprofit organizations in California and New York reported several other categories of barriers that appear to be specifically related to their immigrant identity. These perceived barriers included:

- 1) A lack of involvement from immigrant community members due to their background in political cultures where popular democratic participation is not present or encouraged
- 2) A lack of staff skills related to democratic participation and a lack knowledge about the US policy system
- 3) The chilling effect of fear on advocacy activity, including fear of government due to immigration status, and past experiences of discrimination leading fear of appearing "un-American" or "anti-American".

### *Political Cultures of Democratic Participation*

Political culture, and particularly immigrants' backgrounds in cultures where democratic participation is not encouraged or is actively oppressed, can be an important barrier to policy advocacy and democratic participation in immigrant communities (Berry and Arons 2003, Ramakrishnan 2005, Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b). Several interview participants described differences in political participation among immigrant groups that they attributed to culture. For example, a staff member from a Chinese-identified immigrant organization made the following observation about differences in political activity between Chinese immigrants and Latino immigrants.

Our people, they aren't so interested in doing anything that might upset government, it makes them kind of nervous. I mean the Latinos, well I am sure you have seen them. Anything that happens, bam, they can have 5,000 people in the streets. Easy. They are really organized. They even had Cesar Chavez, and they have their own holiday you know, Cesar Chavez Day. Well, we can't get people out like that. And sure, there are more Latinos, but there are a lot of us here too. Forget big protests, even just a trip to a government office to talk to someone, our people don't want to go.

Author: "Why do you think there is that difference? What do you think causes it?"

I don't know really, but it is something about culture. I think it is culture. The Chinese, we have a thing about respect, you know, and not being disrespectful, and there is a lot of hierarchy, and you have to respect that hierarchy. And deep down you might be really upset about something and think it is wrong, but you really can't challenge the respect and hierarchy. It sounds funny to Americans I think, but it is almost like your hands are tied. It is almost as if there isn't as choice, really. So sometimes especially the older people and the newer people, I think they see some kinds of politics as disrespectful to the government that welcomed us here.

Scholars such as Hamlin (2008) would likely attribute this interview participant's observation of the difference between rates of advocacy activity among Chinese immigrants and Latinos to political culture, noting that many Latinos come from nations where powerful labor movements and other forms of social protest are prevalent. Ramakrishnan (2005) also discusses the important function of political culture, making special note of the role that backgrounds in communist and repressive regimes can play in political participation. Ramakrishnan asserts that in some cases that one's background in repressive regimes may actually encourage greater political participation. Immigrants from repressive regimes may have a stronger appreciation of their ability to participate in political life, and those with refugee status may have greater experience interacting with government and a greater stake in policies regarding certain public benefits. These

positive effects on political participation were not mentioned by interview participants for this study.

However, Ramakrishnan also notes the dampening effect that backgrounds in communist and repressive regimes can have on political participation, and these themes did arise in the interview data for this article. Immigrants escaping regimes with histories of political oppression may be mistrustful of government, and may not have had sufficient experience with pluralist politics to understand fully how to participate in their new society. In fact, some immigrants from communist regime where voting and political participation were mandatory may see their lack of participation as a means of exercising their newfound freedom (Ramakrishnan 2005). As one interview participant explains,

You know, under communism you learn to keep your head down, to stay out of trouble, out of the public eye. That's how you survive. So sometimes people are afraid. Or sometimes they are just tired. They already went through so much before coming to this country. So they say, "Democracy? Enjoy your democracy, I am glad you have it, but I am going to focus on running my little store, and having a safe home, and taking care of my kids. You go protest, but I'm going to enjoy some peace and quiet."

#### *Skills and Knowledge of Democratic Participation*

Closely linked to the role that political culture plays in immigrants' political participation is the amount of skills and knowledge of the democratic process that immigrant organizations possess. Staff of immigrant organizations repeatedly mentioned that their staff, volunteers, and service recipients often did not have knowledge of the political process or the types of advocacy activity that might influence that process. Many staff reported that constituents and staff were not aware of some of the basic options for activity that were available, such as writing a letter to a public official or attending a public meeting. One interview participant explains,

When you say constituents' knowledge, they are taken from a different culture and they don't know what to lobby is, and they don't volunteer their time and take responsibility toward this campaign of elected officials. These are barriers, absolutely. I don't know if it is an attitude really, but they just don't know the value of what it means to lobby, what it means to go out and to interact, to make their own contribution, to volunteer your time.

While perhaps not traditionally thought of as a skill of democratic participation, an absence of English language skills among both staff and constituents also was cited by interview participants as a very important barrier to engagement with government and the policy process. As the language of public discourse in the United States, English proficiency becomes of critical importance for individual immigrants in interacting with government, as well as for organizational leaders who might otherwise seek to meet with government officials, speak at public hearings, apply for government grants, or interact with government policy actors in a variety of other ways (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b).

While staff members from immigrant organizations cite a lack of skills and knowledge related to democratic participation as a barrier to interacting with government, scholars emphasize that immigrant nonprofit organizations have a tremendous opportunity to educate staff and service recipients about democratic practice. Many scholars and practitioners assert that nonprofit organizations serve as “incubators of democratic citizenship competencies,” (Saidel 2002, 4), allowing individuals to gain important organizational and communication skills that prepare them for political participation. Civic participation in a variety of organizations provides individuals with skills necessary to navigate and interact with government, and can shape patterns of political participation such as voting, letter writing, and donating to political causes (Verba et al. 1995). Research indicates that for immigrants, associations based on shared national origin can play a particularly important role because it is within these communities of practice that newcomers develop the skills necessary for political and civic engagement (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2008, de Graauw 2008). One interview participant discusses his organization’s efforts to educate constituents about their options for political participation.

People would say “Hey, well I can’t vote, I’m not of age, or I don’t have papers”, and I go, “But you can participate. What you can do is you can call the people who can vote, you know, you don’t need to be out there and registering people, because you can’t. For that you have to be a citizen, but you can call people, my boss, my neighbor, my uncle, call them, , or you can put signs in your front lawn, you can tell people the importance of registering to become a citizen, you can help in that way.” And same thing with advocacy.

### *Immigrant Fears and Chilling of Democratic Participation*

A final barrier specifically tied to immigrant identity that many staff of immigrant nonprofit organizations mentioned was fear, both on the part of staff and on the part of the community being served. While a variety of fears were mentioned, most centered around two major categories: fear of government due to immigration status, and past discrimination leading to fear of being viewed as “anti-American”. More than 65% of immigrants in the United States are not eligible to vote, and because of this inability to access traditional avenues of participation Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008b) suggest that community organizations have a particularly important role to play in the political representation of immigrants. However, while these organizations have the potential to be quite politically valuable, the actual policy influence of these organizations is often diminished due to many immigrants’ inability to vote and undocumented immigrants’ understandable reluctance to be involved in public advocacy efforts (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008b). Fear regarding one’s personal immigration status or the immigration status of family member or household member was often cited by interview participants as a barrier to engagement with government actors. As one staff member explains,

Immigration status is also a barrier, the undocumented. You know, not to go out, not to fully engage. Because of fear.

Hamlin (2008) notes that organizations such as labor unions are pressured to think of new and innovative strategies for political mobilization when working with undocumented immigrants, especially when political activity traditionally has focused on voting and political donation. One staff member explains how he advises undocumented individuals on how they can participate in advocacy efforts in spite of their immigration status,

I've got five or six calls already today, saying "Hey, should I go to this or should I go to that", and I say, "If you have any fear, don't go. Don't go. I just did a seventy-five mile walk this past week...there were people that were asking us, that were saying, "You know, I'm thinking about doing this walk but my immigration status", and I go, "Don't even go. If your immigration status is in any doubt, don't go. Don't go, because it's gonna jeopardize your status most importantly, but also the group". And I've been doing this for twenty-two years and I've never had anybody that's been arrested, because I give them advice. Some individuals in some organizations might say "Don't be afraid, go out there," and I go, "That's easy for you to say, but if you're the one that's deported and you have your family back at home, that's a horrific situation."

Another staff member explains how her executive director works specifically with youth in advocacy as a means of circumventing the fears of undocumented adults.

The parents are really afraid, lots of times they are afraid because their status is in question. But the kids mostly were all born here, so lots of times (our executive director) works on advocacy with the kids. They even went to Arnold Schwarzenegger in Sacramento, the president of the board let them (the parents) know what we're doing, and said "We're going to drive to see Arnold in Sacramento." So, it's just letting the kids know, why they need to write to him (the governor), this is what we need and the kids are the future of the country, so (our executive director) is real passionate about the kids.

Other interview participants described being fearful that policy advocacy would be perceived as "ungrateful" after being welcomed in a new country, or even perceived as anti-American. This was most often mentioned by participants from Arab and Iranian organizations, as well as African and Asian organizations that served Muslim populations. Interview participants sometimes mentioned fears commonly cited by non-immigrant nonprofit organizations, but with an added "anti-American" concern. One interview participant described his concerns regarding IRS regulations in this way,

You will lose your tax exempt status if you are aggressively out there lobbying and denouncing, and you might be blackmailed as being a left-winger or anti-American or I don't know. This is definitely a fear, because listen,

we've been around for 26 years, but I am still very, very careful not to be caught by the IRS doing inappropriate things to advance our agenda. So it's a big barrier. It's a fear.

However, others framed this fear as being specifically tied to having a Middle Eastern or Muslim identity. As one interview participant explains,

I think most of us in the community are really just trying to lay low. We know there are things that are unjust, but when it comes to being political, a lot of people think this is too dangerous a time for that. I mean even my husband, he is an educated man and he is not even Muslim, but when he flies, he shaves off any little hint of a 5 o'clock shadow just so he won't be seen as an Arab with a beard and therefore maybe some kind of radical. This is just one person in their personal life. So you can imagine the concerns that come when people think about being visibly politically active. A lot of people decide it is safer just not to do it, so you aren't seen as some sort of enemy of the U.S.

Ramakrishnan (2005) discusses the important role that political threat can play in mobilizing immigrants to become politically active, focusing on the threat that California's Proposition 187 posed to immigrants in 1994. One interview participant described the role political threat has played for immigrant organizations in the Latino community,

Now you have a lot of organizations that didn't exist before and you have us working on broader based coalitions, not only with Latinos, but with other communities, and that's important. And, many of us have been victims of attacks or stereotyping and dehumanizing the people, and so what's happened is, there's been a response. And you've seen the response in the massive demonstrations we had in March and April of 2006, with three and a half million people marching. Those groups forming, like these two groups that I mention right here, all three of these groups, would not have, these are all direct results of what's going on, whether it's (participant lists several immigrant advocacy organizations), it's all a response to what's been taking place.

Most studies of political threat examine the political behavior of whites who perceive themselves as threatened by a minority group, and Ramakrishnan's (2005) study focuses solely on voting behavior and the specific threat of California's Proposition 187 ballot measure. These differences might explain why the Middle Eastern and Muslim staff in this study did not report political mobilization in response to antagonism toward their communities. The question of what factors cause political threat to lead to political mobilization versus leading to fear of political action is worthy of future research. Whatever factors are at play, political threat does not seem to overcome the chilling effect that fear has on Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrant organizations in this study.

## **Conclusion**

Preliminary results from this ongoing study indicate that immigrant nonprofit organizations have regular interaction with government actors, in many of the same ways that “mainstream” nonprofit organizations engage with government. Interviews indicate that immigrant organizations operate in similar resource environments as “mainstream” nonprofit organizations, where resources are often scarce and uncertain, and where reliance on short-term grants and contracts is high. Immigrant organizations face numerous barriers to their interaction with government actors. Many of these barriers to advocacy are similar to those faced by other nonprofits, such as perceived IRS restrictions on lobbying, lack of sufficient financial and human resources to devote to advocacy, and a lack of staff member and volunteer skills. Immigrant organizations also operate under similar political restraints to other nonprofit organizations, where a need for government support and funding makes many staff members hesitant about advocating too vocally and potentially “biting the hand that feeds them”.

However, an important contribution of this study is that staff members of immigrant nonprofit organizations perceive their organizations as facing many unique challenges that act as additional barriers to policy advocacy and interaction with government. Many immigrant community members may come from cultures where political activity is not encouraged or is even repressed, and this can lead to a lack of involvement in policy activity by the communities that immigrant nonprofits serve. Some staff of immigrant nonprofits may lack knowledge of the US policy system, and simply may not know how to engage in policy advocacy. While many nonprofits may feel that their voices are silenced in the political process, several interview participants mentioned experiencing a unique fear of dissent due to fears of being perceived as anti-American or fearful of engaging in advocacy activity due to their immigration status.

One value of preliminary data is that it serves to guide hypothesis development, and based on these results it seems useful to consider the particular barriers to interaction with government by increasing the sample size from specific communities of interest. By specifically comparing organizations that serve communities from non-democratic countries to those that serve communities for more democratically active countries, one can examine the extent to which the political cultural and background of the community may influence the activities of the organization. A specific examination of organizations serving Middle Eastern and Muslim communities, specifically pre- and post-September 11, 2001, can grant insight into the chilling effect that fear of appearing “anti-American” may have on interactions with government. An comparison of organizations that serve largely undocumented immigrants with those that serve most documented individuals would grant insight into the extent to which the immigration status of service recipients influences the behavior of the larger organization. As this study continues, it will examine differences in more depth in order to understand how these barriers might impede advocacy, and the means by which politically active immigrant nonprofits have overcome these barriers.

**Shawn Teresa Flanigan**, PhD is an associate professor of public administration in the School of Public Affairs at San Diego State University. Her research focuses on the role

nonprofit organizations play in meeting the health and social service needs of minorities and marginalized groups, with a specific interest in the developing world and low-income populations in the United States. Her most recent publications have focused on the role of power and identity in nonprofit health and social service provision to diverse populations in locales experiencing ethnic and religious conflict. She can be contacted at shawn.flanigan@sdsu.edu.

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