

HOW TRANSNATIONALISM FACILITATES THE PARTICIPATION OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN U.S. POLITICS



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ABSTRACT: This study examines the impact of political transnationalism on Mexican immigrants' participation in U.S. politics. The main argument is that involvement in Mexican politics –transnationalism– does not impede engagement in the U.S. political system, as critics claim. On the contrary, it facilitates and complements political participation in the United States. Drawing from the literature on transnationalism and theories of political participation, this study proposes that transnational activities –like lobbying and membership in immigrant organizations– offer opportunities to develop civic-political skills and experience that immigrants may in turn use in the U.S. political arena. By exploring the case of Mexican immigrants and organizations involved in the lobbying campaign on behalf of absentee-voting laws in Mexico (1998-2006), it identifies the abilities and practice acquired by participants and the ways in which they have used them to influence U.S. processes and issues. This work contributes to the literature by shedding light on themes that have not been previously examined from this perspective and by lending support to previous findings –especially the evidence that political transnationalists are habitually not detached from U.S. politics and, in fact, are inclined to participate.

KEYWORDS: Transnationalism, Mexican immigrants, political participation, U.S. politics, hometown associations, Mexican politics

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina el impacto del transnacionalismo político en la participación de los inmigrantes mexicanos en la política estadounidense. Se sugiere que la participación de los inmigrantes en la política mexicana facilita su intervención en los Estados Unidos en lugar de entorpecerla, como alegan algunos críticos. Apoyándose en investigaciones sobre transnacionalismo político y en un modelo de participación política, este artículo sugiere que las actividades transnacionales (por ejemplo, el cabildeo o la membresía en organizaciones de migrantes) permiten desarrollar experiencia y habilidades cívico-políticas que pueden utilizarse en el contexto estadounidense. El estudio se centra en el caso de algunos mexicanos involucrados en la campaña de cabildeo para promover la aprobación del voto ausente (1998-2006) y muestra lo que han aprendido a través del ejercicio del transnacionalismo y las maneras en que lo han utilizado en su actividad política en Estados Unidos. Con esto se contribuye al estudio del tema desde una nueva perspectiva y también se corroboran investigaciones previas al constatar que aquellos que participan regularmente en los procesos y asuntos políticos mexicanos no sólo no ignoran la política estadounidense sino que se involucran en ella de manera sustancial.

PALABRAS CLAVE: transnacionalismo, inmigrantes mexicanos, participación política, política estadounidense, *hometown associations*, política mexicana.

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The debate began after Mexico's Congress approved two constitutional changes affecting the political rights of Mexican expatriates. The 1996 changes eliminated legal hurdles preventing them from casting absentee ballots in Mexican elections while living abroad and allowed them to retain their Mexican nationality while acquiring another citizenship—that is, they could become dual nationals, a status that opened new possibilities for expatriate participation in homeland politics. A discussion arose among observers and practitioners regarding the possible effect of these changes on immigrant involvement in the U.S. political system. Would transnational—i.e., across borders—voting «lead to another era, one of declining Latino electoral power?», a political analyst asked (DA, 2003).¹ Would they «fall into indifference about the politics of their new country?», another one questioned (Elias, 1998). In short, what would be the implications of such changes for Latino politics and Mexican immigrant political assimilation in the United States?

Supporters of transnationalism—i.e., involvement in homeland politics—argue that it increases immigrant political competency in other political arenas. By contrast, critics like Renshon (2005) and Huntington (2004) claim that persistent ties to the homeland impede assimilation and distract immigrants from U.S. political life.

This article addresses the implications of immigrants' transnationalism and centers on how it is likely to affect immigrants' ability to participate in the U.S. political arena. For this purpose, it draws on secondary and primary sources, especially personal observations and interviews with United States-based Mexican immigrant leaders, activists, and others who participated in the lobbying campaign (1998-2006) to implement absentee-voting rights for Mexican expatriates.²

Before proceeding, I must clarify some key concepts. Political participation—transnational or national—is defined according to Brady *et al.* (1995): engagement in electoral and non-electoral activities like voting; running for office; contributing to electoral campaigns (e.g., by donating money, promoting candidates); contacting and lobbying public officials; participating in rallies and marches; following political news and discussing politics; organizing; mobilizing the grassroots; becoming active in community issues, and joining voluntary associations. The terms *transnational participation* or *activities* and *transnationalism* refer here to actions carried out by individuals or organizations based outside

¹ I use initials such as DA to reference sources I interviewed live, by phone, or e-mail. These sources are not included in the reference section.

² Between 2003 and 2006, I attended public and private meetings, forums, and other events in places like Chicago, Los Angeles and Orange County (California), and Mexico City with the purpose of talking to transnationalists and observing the dynamics of political transnationalism. I also had telephone, personal, and electronic communication with dozens of them and asked in-depth questions about their transnational and U.S. political activities. Lastly, I regularly monitored communications between transnationalists on electronic networks and researched other primary sources, including newspapers, private documents, and press releases.



their homelands (or that of their members) vis-à-vis homeland political processes and issues (see Porter *et al.*, for a detailed discussion of these concepts). Lastly, the term *transnationalist* refers to both individuals and organizations who habitually engage in transnationalism.

The main argument is that, rather than being an obstacle, transnationalism is more likely to complement and facilitate political participation in the United States. Evidence from the Mexican case suggests that engagement in homeland politics has provided transnationalists with opportunities to develop resources that augment their capacity to participate in the U.S. political system, thus increasing the likelihood of participation. This study presents new insights into the types of civic-political skills and experience they have acquired and how they have used them in the U.S. political arena. It lends support to the hypothesis that resources acquired in one type of setting may be used in another one (i.e., domestic v. transnational; political v. nonpolitical) and corroborates previous findings regarding the positive impact of transnationalism, including those that suggest that, rather than being detached from U.S. politics, transnationalists are likely to participate in U.S. processes and issues.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT POLITICAL TRANSNATIONALISM?

Conventional wisdom in the United States suggests that shedding political ties to the homeland is the only way to ensure political assimilation. Accordingly, the practice of dual citizenship—an increasingly prevalent form of political transnationalism—has become a target of criticism in some U.S. circles. Some participants in a 1997 workshop at Duke University characterized it as a distracting factor:

As a person's affection and commitment are divided among different interests, as is likely to happen with dual citizenship, that affection and commitment will also weaken. Dual citizens will have less time for civic participation in American public life, since they have allegiances (even if secondary) elsewhere. (Pinckus, 1997, 24).

This argument is often illustrated with references to what is believed to have been the experience of the second and third waves of European immigrants. Beginning with the first generation, European immigrants supposedly severed all ties with their home countries to become fully immersed in U.S. political life. However, the literature on political transnationalism suggests that their distance from homeland politics is a myth.

Contrary to popular belief, many early European immigrants (e.g., Hungarians) did not cut political or other bonds to their homelands (Fitzgerald, 2000; Glick Schiller, 1999) and assimilated into U.S. political life anyway. «Italians and



Jews at the turn of the century, like many immigrants today, avidly followed and remained actively involved in the politics of their home countries» (Foner 2000, 357). Today, it is not only Italians and Jews (immigrants and non-immigrants) but others of Polish, Irish and different origins that maintain political ties to their homelands. Some even run for elected office in the old country, like those Italian Americans who sought parliamentary posts in Italy's 2006 elections. Certainly, the high participation rates of contemporary American Jews in U.S. politics, despite persistent involvement in Israeli political life (Shain and Barth, 2003), exemplifies the feasibility of binational participation. These cases suggest that transnationalism does not necessarily hinder domestic political involvement, and might actually have a positive, complementary effect.

Some literature, mostly sociological research conducted since the 1990s, has studied the global increase in the frequency and intensity of transnational practices (political, economic, and social) among diasporas –including those based in the United States and hailing from the Caribbean, Latin America in general (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998), and Mexico in particular (Fitzgerald, 2000; Smith, 1998). Though much of this literature does not generally research the impact of political transnationalism on U.S. political involvement or the nexus between the two, its findings do not suggest that it has led to increased detachment among those who practice it, either (Cano, 2002; Martínez-Saldaña, 2002; Moctezuma, 2002; Zabin and Escala-Rabadán, 1998). For instance, Rivera-Salgado (1999) notes that California-based indigenous migrant organizations from the state of Oaxaca in Mexico, «have developed a binational approach to political action» and built alliances with other types of U.S. grassroots organizations to defend their members' labor and human rights in the United States (1450). This literature inspires a closer look at the connection between engagement in transnationalism and domestic political participation.

To begin with, some research shows that transnationalists are among the least prone to be alienated from the U.S. political system; they generally possess the socioeconomic (SES) and sociodemographic characteristics that are associated with higher levels of political participation. Numerous studies have found that Latin American transnationalists tend to be well established and assimilated (DeSipio *et al.*, 2003; Escobar, 2004; Glick Schiller, 1999; González-Gutiérrez, 1995; Guarnizo *et al.*, 2003; Smith, 1998), especially those affiliated to transnational migrant associations (Portes *et al.*, 2007). Among other traits, their income, educational, and occupational levels are likely to be higher than average; they usually have U.S. citizenship or legal permanent residency and are longtime U.S. residents. A caveat is that Mexican transnationalists, particularly indigenous ones (Zabin and Escala-Rabadán, 1998), are usually not as well endowed in most of these areas. In short, these findings partially explain why transnationalists should not be expected to disengage from U.S. processes, regardless of their transnational practices.



The literature suggests that transnationalism is not an obstacle to domestic political participation, possibly despite SES profile, and might even abet it. Studies on dual citizenship suggest that it facilitates U.S. political participation by increasing naturalization rates, as has occurred among Colombians (Escobar, 2004) and other Latin Americans (Jones-Correa, 2001). Studies of other forms of transnationalism show that «attachment to one's native country does not diminish the probability that Latinos will participate in a range of political acts» in the United States (Hritzuk and Park, 2000, 165). Survey data on Colombians, Salvadorans, and Dominicans in Guarnizo *et al.* (2003) showed that transnationalism heightened their self-esteem and feelings of efficacy, which is likely to increase their political competency in the United States. Portes (2003) emphasizes that «participation in transnational political activities may empower immigrants and give them a sense of purpose and self-esteem that they would not have otherwise» (389, my translation from Spanish). Another survey in McCann *et al.* (2007) revealed that being attentive to Mexican affairs does not diminish the attention Mexican immigrants pay to «American government and elections», but may instead make them more prone to participate (21). Similarly, DeSipio *et al.*'s survey (2003) of Puerto Ricans and immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic, indicated that transnationalism was an important determinant of U.S. political participation –greater even than the demographic variables. Actually, transnationalists were more inclined to participate in U.S. political and civic life than non-transnationalists; they were also more likely to become politically engaged in the United States than in their homeland. Consequently, DeSipio *et al.* (2003) hypothesize that political skills learned in the transnational context are transferable to the domestic arena. Essentially, this literature concludes that there is no contradiction between transnationalism and U.S. political engagement.

Other studies support the premise that Latin American immigrants tend to participate in voluntary associations and that membership in these transnational associations abets U.S. political participation. The literature demonstrates that, historically, they have created and joined social, philanthropic, and political organizations. According to Fitzgerald (2000), for decades and especially since the early 1990s, Mexican immigrants have formed hometown associations (HTAs) and state federations of HTAs. HTAs are social clubs organized by people who come from the same town, somewhat like the Jewish *landsmanshaftn* (Foner, 2000). According to various works (Fitzgerald, 2000; Goldring, 2002; González-Gutiérrez, 1995; Smith, 1998), HTA membership helps immigrants maintain religious, civic, cultural, economic, and political ties to their hometowns. Though it may sound paradoxical, the literature shows that affiliation also helps them integrate into U.S. life in various ways. Escobar (2004) shows that Colombian organizations in New York promote naturalization and offer citizenship classes. González-Gutiérrez



(1995) notes that Mexican organizations lobby on immigrants' behalf and provide some local political representation:

The activities of clubs and federations are not limited to facilitate the arrival of newcomers to California, but they represent the interests and articulate the demands of their members... before civil society and local authorities of the cities where they live. (61)

A study of Salvadoran organizations in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., showed that they educate immigrants about community issues like immigration and education policy and their rights in the United States (Landolt *et al.*, 2003). De la Garza and Hazan (2003) found that immigrant organizations inculcate core U.S. political values into their members. Furthermore, survey data showed that transnationalists affiliated to these organizations were more likely to engage in U.S. elections than non-affiliates (DeSipio *et al.*, 2003). Certainly, affiliating with such groups may be characterized as a type of transnational activity (Guarnizo *et al.*, 2003). In short, affiliation aids transnationalists' involvement in U.S. political life.

In fact, some works confirm that Mexican immigrants are increasingly engaged in U.S. civil society and that transnationalism has played a role in fueling such involvement. The proceedings of a conference held at the Woodrow Wilson Center in November 2005 document the shared conviction among participants that while immigrants remain «simultaneously engaged as part of Mexican society», they also «contribute to civic and political endeavors in U.S. society» (Bada *et al.*, 2006, v). Jonathan Fox defines this as a process leading to «civic binationality», ... active civic engagement in two countries» (Bada *et al.*, 2005, vi).

Yet there are still some gaps in the literature regarding the implications for U.S. politics. One of the questions that remain unexplored concerns the extent to which transnationalism helps develop civic-political skills that transnationalists can use to participate in U.S. political processes. Also, while survey research has been conducted on Latin American immigrants who engage in transnational partisan and electoral actions (DeSipio *et al.*, 2003) and pay attention to homeland politics (McCann *et al.*, 2007), no case studies have been done on those who engage in other types of transnationalist activities, like lobbying. This study seeks to address some of these gaps.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Using the above findings as building blocks for this research and drawing from the literature on political participation, I propose that transnationalism does not impede participation in U.S. politics because it provides opportunities to develop



resources—especially civic-political skills and practice—that are essential to political participation on either side of the border. My general proposition draws on Verba *et al.*'s (1995) premise that the more involved individuals are, the easier it is for them to participate because they gain experience. A corollary is that the political experience individuals acquire from participating in one setting may be transferred to another setting. Indeed, the hypothesis of transferability proposed by DeSipio *et al.* (2003), which I incorporate into my proposal, follows this logic. To explore the occurrence of transferability I also draw on the resource model of political participation developed by Brady *et al.* (1995): what members learn in voluntary civic organizations (social clubs or philanthropic associations) is not only useful but critical for political participation. Membership in such organizations offers an opportunity to learn civic skills (e.g., decision-making, voting, communicating, and organizing) that are essential to political participation, thus increasing the likelihood of political engagement. Based on these theoretical pillars, I propose that transnationalism provides opportunities for transnationalists to develop resources they may also use in the U.S. political arena.

My research suggests that transnationalists develop other types of resources that are also transferable. For instance, transnational membership organizations are valuable resources for political mobilization. Email networks, which have become major medium of communication among Latino and non-Latino transnationalists, are other key resources that help mobilize affiliates on either side of the border. This article, however, focuses only on civic-political abilities and experience and the case of Mexican transnationalists involved in the absentee-voting campaign.

MEXICAN PARTICIPATION IN TRANSNATIONALISM:
THE CASE OF THE ABSENTEE-VOTE CAMPAIGN (1998-2006)

The study of Mexican transnationalists involved in the campaign for absentee voting provides an excellent opportunity to generate new insights and confirm (or contest) previous findings about the impact of transnationalism. This campaign represents the most significant case of Mexican transnational collective action pursuing a single objective and was carried out in both Mexico and the United States. It can be reasonably described as demanding considering the staunch opposition to expatriate absentee voting in Mexico and the fact that it lasted over eight years, required international traveling and a wide array of political activities. On the one hand, this case can help identify the types of civic-political skills transnationalists probably acquire and assess the degree and ways in which they are likely to transfer them to the U.S. political arena. On the other, it can help ascertain whether transnationalism indeed distracts such busy individuals from U.S. processes and issues or if, on the contrary, it abets and comple-



ments their domestic participation. Moreover, while other works have already documented this and other cases of involvement in Mexican politics (Martínez-Saldaña, 2002, 2003; Rodríguez-Oceguera, 2005) and the legislative process of absentee-voting laws (Ross and Martínez-Cossio, 2004; Martínez-Saldaña and Ross-Pineda 2002), this research is the first to focus on their implications regarding immigrant political participation in the United States.

The fact that the U.S. Mexican-origin population has traditionally exhibited low rates of political participation (de la Garza 2004) also makes this study relevant for practitioners and policymakers, especially if we consider that, with 28.4 million people in 2006, Mexicans represent the greatest portion (64.1%) of the total (44.3 million) Latino population and the largest United States-based diaspora. Furthermore, a sizable (40.1%) portion is comprised by Mexico-born people, which adds to their significance because immigrants are more predisposed to engage in transnationalism than United States-born citizens. Nevertheless, transnationalists represent a very small percentage of the Mexican and Latin American immigrant populations (DeSipio *et al.*, 2003; Guarnizo *et al.*, 2003). In short, this research expects to make a small contribution to the theoretical and empirical understanding of the impact of transnationalism and U.S. political participation among Mexican immigrants.

A PROFILE OF THE TRANSNATIONALISTS INVOLVED IN THE ABSENTEE-VOTE CAMPAIGN

This eight year-long campaign involved United States-based Mexicans (mostly first generation immigrants) and their organizations as they tried to persuade Mexican lawmakers and two presidents to enact legislation implementing absentee-voting rights for expatriates. Between 1998 and 2006, they engaged in various activities that sought to impact Mexico's political processes. The campaign involved several organizations primarily led by the *Coalición por los Derechos Políticos de los Mexicanos (CDPME)*. Created by Mexican immigrants in 2001, CDPME operated as a virtual coalition of transnationalists who advocated absentee voting (in fact, some had done so since the mid-1990s). According to Primitivo Rodríguez-Oceguera, the CDPME coordinator in Mexico City, CDPME membership has been fluid. In the mid 2000s there were nearly 400 individual affiliates and 68 leaders of social organizations from 19 U.S. states like California, Illinois, Texas, and Arizona, with a dozen more supporters in Mexico (PRO, 2003, 2006). CDPME affiliates included many community and labor activists, HTA and federation leaders, as well as entrepreneurs, professionals, journalists, and academics. As I illustrate below, these identities often overlap. Additionally, most of them fit the socioeconomic and sociodemographic profile of other Latin American transnationalists and are highly politicized (see Appendix A for biographical information on selected transnationalists). For instance, Raúl Ross-Pineda, the CDPME co-founder



who spearheaded the campaign in Mexico City, has lived in Chicago for nearly thirty years. He is a political analyst and author, former labor activist, and founding Director of *MX Sin Fronteras* magazine (RRP, 2003-2006).³

Many individuals who participated in the absentee-vote campaign (either through the CDPME or other groups) were affiliated, formally or informally, to one or more transnational associations. Such groups may be characterized as voluntary civil associations with a political dimension given their role as representatives of the interests of their members in the United States and Mexico, their transnational activities, and their support for the absentee vote. They include HTAs and federations, community organizations, and immigrant labor groups, among others. For instance, besides being CDPME core member, Luis Pelayo is the leader of the Concilio Hispano, a Chicago-based community organization. Another example is Florencio Zaragoza, key CDPME affiliate and head of Fundación México. The Fundación is a non-profit organization founded in 1998 and based in Tucson, Arizona; it provides immigrant representation and promotes community service and affairs at the local, state, national, and transnational levels.

Other transnationalist individuals like José Luis Gutiérrez belonged, at one time or another, to HTAs created mainly for social and philanthropic transnational purposes. HTAs' main function is to raise funds known as collective remittances among members to help pay for public works in their Mexican hometowns (e.g., the construction of schools, cemeteries, soccer fields, roads, health clinics, potable water projects; Goldring, 2002; González-Gutiérrez, 1995; Smith, 1998). As a consequence of their role in the provision and allocation of funds for public works, HTAs and their leaders are propelled onto the political realm of their towns, municipalities, states, and/or country of origin, even though the organizations are meant to function as social clubs. One example is the Chicago-based Club Morelia, formed by José Luis Gutiérrez and other immigrants from the city of Morelia in the state of Michoacán.

Some involved Mexican transnationalists also belonged to other kinds of organizations that can be more clearly construed as political. They are often identified as federations, fronts, or councils and represent the political arm of numerous HTAs and other umbrella associations. Federations represent HTAs from the same Mexican state, and are sometimes identified by the U.S. state in which they are based—like the powerful Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en Illinois (FEDECFMI), which comprises HTAs from the state of Michoacán. Fronts comprise associations of migrants from one state of origin based in particular U.S. regions. An example is the Midwest-based Frente Binacional de Michoacanos (FREBIMICH), a civic-political organization created in 2004 to represent people from Michoacán residing in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Nevada, Texas, California, and other states. Another type of front represents organizations of diverse indigenous ori-

³ Created by Mexican immigrants in 2005, this Chicago-based magazine focused on immigrants and binational issues. It ended its publication in 2007.



gin, especially from Oaxaca state. A notable example is the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB, formerly the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional). This community-based migrant worker front was led by Rufino Domínguez at the time of the campaign and headquartered in Fresno, California (see Rivera-Salgado, 2002 for more on these organizations). Councils, or confederations, often represent federations from different Mexican states in a particular U.S. region, like the Los Angeles-based Consejo de Federaciones Mexicanas en Norte América (COFEM), which comprises federations from 16 different Mexican states, or the Confederación de Federaciones de Mexicanos del Medio Oeste (CONFEMEX) based in Illinois.

But there were other types of associations organized specifically around the absentee-voting issue, independently of the town or state of origin of their members. Several such organizations were created after 1998; some, like CDPME, have persisted and some disappeared or coalesced with others. They include the Coalición de Mexicanos en el Exterior Nuestro Voto 2000; Coalición Internacional de Mexicanos en el Exterior (CIME), with members in Texas, Chicago, New York, and New Jersey; Consejo Electoral Mexicano del Medio Oeste; Comité Nacional Pro Voto México 2000; Campaña Nacional por el Voto Ausente; Migrantes Mexicanos por el Cambio (MIMEXCA), founded by business leaders in California in 1998, and the Organización de Mexicanos en el Exterior (OME), founded in 2003.

A peculiar kind of organization that may also be categorized as both transnational and political and whose members became involved in the absentee-voting campaign is the Consejo Consultivo del Instituto de Mexicanos en el Exterior (CC-IME). The CC-IME is unique because it is highly institutionalized and led by the Mexican government (Cano and Délano, 2004). The IME, an office for immigrant affairs housed in the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) in Mexico City, was created by Mexican president Vicente Fox under pressure from U.S.-based Mexican transnationalists. The CC is the advisory board of IME, and it is composed of over 100 transnationalists who represent the diaspora as advisers (*consejeros*) to the Mexican government. Participation in CC-IME is voluntary, and the majority of its members have to compete to be nominated and elected by communities of Mexican-origin across the United States.⁴ CC-IME members lobbied for the absentee-vote as members of other coalitions, but they also took a stand as representatives of CC-IME's political affairs commission (interestingly, the Mexican government became their target at a given point, since Fox appeared unable or unwilling to take a firm stand in favor of absentee-vote legislation). Overall, these different types of organizations, their leaders, and other activists engaged in various types of transnational political activities with the purpose of enabling the participation of Mexican expatriates in Mexican elec-

⁴ I observed one of these processes at the Mexican consulate in Santa Ana, California, in 2003.



tions. The following section illustrates the kinds of skills and experience they gained through their participation in such organizations and the transnational campaign itself.

TRANSNATIONALISM FACILITATED PARTICIPATION IN U.S. POLITICS

One major consequence of transnationalism was that the Mexican participants acquired resources that are essential to political participation on either side of the border. Specifically, their participation in both transnational organizations and the absentee-vote lobbying campaign allowed them to acquire and practice civic and political skills. Table 1 illustrates the two types of participation (i.e., in organizations and political activities) and the kind of skills that were developed and could later be used in U.S. politics. As members of transnational organizations, individuals had the chance to learn and/or practice civic skills fundamental to political participation, including fundraising, how to speak in public, vote, lead meetings, and make decisions. In some cases, members could even receive leadership training in courses sponsored by their organization. Additionally, by participating in the absentee-vote campaign, they were able to develop their skills in the demanding context of national politics and beyond the realm of community issues. Transnationalists have thus become more experienced and sophisticated political actors than they initially were, regardless of the country in which they participate. The following subsections illustrate how they acquired such skills and how these affected their participation in U.S. politics.

TABLE 1

How participation in transnationalism facilitates participation in U.S. politics

TYPE OF TRANSNATIONAL PARTICIPATION	HOW TRANSNATIONAL PARTICIPATION BENEFITS PARTICIPATION IN U.S. POLITICS
<i>Participation in transnational organizations like Mexican HTAs, federations of HTAs, and other civic or political associations</i>	
Transnationalists practice and/or acquire civic skills as members of such organizations.	Civic skills are essential to political participation in any country (either the homeland or country of residence).
Civic skills include: organizing and leading meetings, fundraisers, or other group events; communicating in writing; speaking in public; voting; leading people and organizations; donating money; and persuading other people to support certain issues.	Transnationalists with civic skills are better prepared, and likely more inclined, to participate in political events like elections, advocacy campaigns, grassroots mobilizations, or running for office in any country.
Civic skills are essentially the same as those required for political participation.	E.g., transnationalist HTA federation leaders deal with Mexican mayors and state governors regarding the supply and allocation of remittances for public works in their Mexican hometowns.



	The skills they have developed in this capacity are used to participate in Mexican politics and are just as useful in U.S. politics. Transnationalists have, for example, used similar skills in their immigration reform campaign.
<i>Participation in transnational political activities (e.g., the absentee-vote campaign in Mexico)</i>	
Transnationalists practice and/or acquire political skills.	Political skills practiced and/or learned during transnational activities can be used to participate politically in any country.
These include: voting; crafting policy proposals; talking to constituents; donating to political campaigns; mobilizing the grassroots to write and persuade legislators to support suggested policies; wielding influence; contacting, petitioning, lobbying and negotiating with public officials; demanding accountability from public officials.	E.g., Mexican transnationalists developed political skills as a result of their participation in the absentee-vote campaign in Mexico (1998-2006).
	They have been able to use similar skills in the United States, as in the case of their immigration reform campaign.

Participation in transnational organizations helped in the development of civic-political skills needed to participate in U.S. politics

Guadalupe Gómez was born in Jalpa, Zacatecas, but has lived in Orange County, California, for over thirty years. Of rural origin, he became a business owner and prestigious community leader at the local, state, national levels in both countries. Beginning as secretary of the Club Deportivo Santa Juana (HTA), he developed skills conducting meetings and fundraisers, communicating with others, and competing for elected office (GG, 2003, 2006). Eventually, he moved up. He held several posts in the powerful Federación de Clubes Zacatecanos del Sur de California (FCZSC), became FCZSC (2000-2005) and COFEM president (2002), and co-founded the Frente Cívico Zacatecano (FCZ) (GG 2006; Moctezuma, 2003). Gómez also gained experience in lobbying, negotiating with and demanding accountability from Mexican municipal, state, and federal government officials while participating in the allocation of remittances under the «3 × 1» program operating in Zacatecas.⁵ He learned to communicate with Mexican public officials on hometown issues and act as an intermediary between Mexican state and municipal representatives and their U.S. counterparts on various issues, including trade and other exchanges. Membership in CC-IME, to which he was elected in 2003, has allowed Gómez to become an even more experienced and resourceful political actor.

⁵ Under this program, each government level matches each dollar donated by federations to fund public projects (Goldring, 2002).



Membership in CC-IME has provided transnationalists like Gómez with ample opportunities to improve their political resources, including their leadership and organizational abilities. Since the role of *consejeros* is to advise the Mexican government on migrant policy, they must remain informed about community issues; talk to their constituents; analyze and discuss alternative public policies; lead working groups; negotiate consensus, and draft proposals. They thus become more politicized and are better prepared to mobilize the community and assume leadership roles on both sides of the border. In fact, according to some IME officials (CGG, 2003, 2006; GC, 2006), helping them prepare for such roles is one of IME's main goals. The operating structure of CC-IME, especially the regular meetings organized in Mexico and elsewhere, provides a space where advisers from different parts of the United States and Mexico who might not have known each other before can meet, exchange ideas, and even organize for political action in either country.

The benefits of belonging to transnational associations are often compounded, since transnationalists like Gómez may participate, either simultaneously or subsequently, in several organizations. As indicated before, many of those involved in the absentee-vote campaign were affiliated to more than one organization (e.g., Concilio Hispano, CC-IME, and CDPME); at least ten leaders and activists affiliated to CDPME were also listed as CC-IME advisers in the 2003-2005 board.

Participation in the absentee-vote campaign helped the development of skills essential to U.S. politics

Following the 1996 removal of constitutional obstacles preventing expatriates from casting absentee ballots, the process to implement the vote became paralyzed in Mexico and, in 1997, transnationalists began organizing a lobbying campaign on behalf of absentee voting (Martínez-Saldaña and Ross-Pineda, 2002). Many of them were lobbying for the first time in their lives and had to learn along the way. Their eight-year campaign trained them in key political tactics, including how to

- build political coalitions;
- represent their interests before legislative committees, cabinet members, and political parties;
- organize grassroots campaigns to address public officials via letters and e-mails and persuade them to support absentee-voting;
- organize public events to mobilize supporters;
- provide new information and craft legislative proposals to influence lawmaking;
- write op-ed pieces for newspapers



- corner officials at public events, the corridors of Congress or their ministries to persuade them to support their proposed policies.⁶

In short, this campaign allowed transnationalists to learn and/or practice types of political skills that are also needed in U.S. politics. Some concrete illustrations follow.

From 1998 to 2005, transnationalists had to organize dozens of forums and meetings in both countries in order to achieve three main goals: 1) raise awareness and educate other immigrants, supporters, opponents, academics, and Mexican public officials on absentee voting and political representation in Mexico, 2) start a debate on the issue, and 3) mobilize the grassroots (Martínez-Saldaña, 2003). The first forum was sponsored by the *Campaña por el Voto Ausente en el 2000* (a CDPME predecessor) in Sacramento, California in 1998.⁷

Transnationalists also had to court and pressure Mexican officials on both sides of the border. For example, in June 2001, CIME (another CDPME predecessor) organized an event in Chicago to commit Mexican lawmakers to the inclusion of absentee-voting rights legislation in the discussion agenda of their respective parliamentary commissions (Ross and Martínez-Cossio, 2004). Meanwhile, individual representatives like Ross-Pineda, Luis de la Garza, and Carlos Olamendi frequently lobbied in Mexico City and worked with various Mexican government officials, including José Francisco Paoli, Under Secretary for Development at the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB); representatives of the main political parties and the Electoral Federal Institute (IFE), and legislators in key commissions (e.g., the Senate's Commission on Border Issues). The purpose was to provide them with information on expatriate policy preferences and legislative proposals.

Other key players went to their home states to promote absentee-voting initiatives on that level. Jesús Martínez-Saldaña, FREDIMICH and FEDECOMI leaders including José Luis Gutiérrez, and FCZSC and FCZ leaders like Gómez drafted legislation proposals and lobbied state governors and legislators. Transnationalists also took large delegations of expatriates to lobby in Mexico. Olamendi, for example, led a delegation of a couple dozen people who met with Fox, members of his cabinet, lawmakers, and party and IFE officials in Mexico City during March 2002 (CO, 2003; Cano, 2002).

Several other tactics were also implemented, including crafting legislative proposals to be submitted to Mexican officials. In August 2003, I witnessed a Mexico City meeting between several CDPME leaders (including Ross-Pineda, Rodríguez, and Martínez de la Garza), and Santiago Creel, then Minister of the Interior (SEGOB), who received their latest legislative proposal. CDPME leaders also wrote numerous letters to legislative commissions, and, along with CC-IME and

⁶ See Schmidt *et al.* (2008) for details on lobbying practices.

⁷ I attended some of these events, beginning with one in Los Angeles in 2003.



federation leaders, mobilized Mexican expatriates in the United States to pressure key legislators via letter and signature campaigns (e.g., the March 2005 letters to the Mexican Senate). They also tried to influence the media by writing op-ed articles and organizing and funding six press conferences to advocate absentee-voting. They succeeded after an eight-year uphill struggle.

Thanks to their campaign, federal legislation was approved in June 2005, allowing Mexican expatriates to vote in the 2006 presidential elections. State campaigning also led to the approval of legislation in Michoacán (2007) and Zacatecas (2003), enabling expatriates to participate in these states' electoral processes. Evidently, transnationalists had become savvy enough to effectively push legislation through reticent members of Congress, the Executive, and political parties.

Following their success, I personally observed the impact transnationalism had had on some individuals' confidence as political actors. In August 2005, CDPME organized a commemorative ceremony at a national monument in Mexico City. Joined by Mexican government officials, legislators, ordinary Mexicans, and the media, transnationalists brimmed with pride over what they described as a huge triumph for Mexican immigrants. Their speeches and comments conveyed a great sense of confidence: they could –and should– effectively influence other political outcomes on either side of the border (PRO, RRP, JMS, 2005). Their sense of political efficacy clearly appeared to have been heightened.

Energized, confident, and more capable, Mexican transnationalists immediately launched campaigns to promote absentee voting in the United States: they now wanted to influence the outcome of the Mexican presidential elections scheduled for July 2006. COFEM, CC-IME advisors, federations, HTAS, and others used their resources (e.g., skills, contacts, electronic networks, and infrastructure) to organize campaigns in communities across the United States in order to inform expatriates of the new legislation, facilitate voter registration, and get out the vote. Over 100 Mexican associations organized a dozen campaigns to promote absentee voting. In November 2005, FCZSC and other federations, along with the Spanish-language TV network Telemundo, conducted information campaigns and registration drives in public spaces in Santa Ana and Los Angeles, California, two of the largest Mexican settlements in the United States (GG, 2005). A day before the January 15, 2006 registration deadline to vote in Mexico's election, COFEM, the Federación Californiana de Michoacanos, Federación Bajacaliforniana, and others rushed to register as many immigrants as possible (Truax, 2006a). Barely a month later, COFEM and others launched yet another effort: the Campaign for Unity and Fraternity, intended to mobilize Mexican federations and immigrants on behalf of migrant rights (Truax, 2006b). This time, however, it was U.S. politics they tried to influence.



*Transnationalists use their skills to participate in U.S. politics:
the immigration reform campaign in the 2000s*

While immersed in the absentee-vote campaign and Mexico's electoral process, some transnationalists used similar skills to influence U.S. political processes. Since the early 2000s, Olamendi, de la Garza, Pelayo, and other members of the Latino Coalition had crafted immigration reform proposals and worked with U. S. Republican legislators to promote them (CO 2003, 2006; LP, 2003). In May 2003 and with the support of the Washington-based Latino Coalition, Olamendi organized a conference in D.C. to reactivate the momentum for immigration policy reform, which was initiated in 2001 by the U.S. and Mexican presidents but extinguished after the September 11, 2001 attacks (Canto and Bunis, 2003). By early 2006, CDPME leaders were discussing the need to achieve a consensus on U.S. immigration policy reform and lobby U.S. legislators accordingly. In May 2006, after attending a political event co-organized by Olamendi and featuring Senator John McCain (R-Az) in Irvine, California, CDPME members and other transnationalists gathered to discuss and revise another proposal drafted in the spring of 2006.⁸ The draft was then circulated via email among other CDPME affiliates for their consideration and input.

But these were not the only transnationalists involved in U.S. politics at the time. Others were engaged in the organization of rallies and other political events. Key examples are the hundreds of marches and rallies for immigrant rights that took place nationwide between February and May 2006 in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Dallas, but other instances can be dated back to 2000. In 2006, these groups supported comprehensive immigration policy reform (i.e., reform centered on the legalization of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States) and protested against the Sensenbrenner bill approved by the House of Representatives in December 2005.⁹ The CONFEMEX and leaders like Fabián Morales, Luis Pelayo, and José Artemio Arreola formed the March 10th Committee, which became one of the detonators of the rallies and marches that gave momentum to the 2006 pro-immigration movement in Chicago (FM, 2006; JAA, 2006; LP, 2006). The March 10th Committee organized several events related to immigration reform, including marches, press conferences, a forum series in June 2006, and a national convention in August 2006 (JAA, 2006). Francisco Zamora-Horta of Casa Guanajuato in Atlanta helped plan rallies, boycotts, and a mobilization campaign to urge fellow transnationalists to contact public officials, the media, and churches in support of comprehensive immigration reform (FZH, 2006). De la Garza participated in city council hearings against anti-immigrant bills in Farmers Branch (Dallas, Texas; LDLG, 2006). Lastly, and among other examples, FIOB members took to the streets of California to support immigrant

⁸ I attended this meeting.

⁹ Sensenbrenner rejected legalization and called for stricter border controls and law enforcement.



rights. Years later, in 2009, transnationalists are enthusiastically using their acquired skills to promote immigration reform under the Barack Obama administration.

Back in 2006, as participants in rallies and marches chanted «Today we march, tomorrow we vote», some transnationalists organized campaigns to promote naturalization, voter registration, and voting in the United States. The COFEM, FCZSC, and others joined the We Are America coalition led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to promote naturalization and the electoral path to new U.S. immigration policymaking (*La Opinión*, 2006). This coalition launched the Summer for Democracy campaign as part of a national effort to increase civic participation among immigrant communities in the United States. Likewise, the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC), a coalition formed by 75 immigrant organizations and co-founded by FEDECMI, launched the Familias Unidas national campaign in March 2005 (JLG, 2005). Its purpose is to promote immigration law reform as well as naturalization and political participation in Illinois, New York, California, Massachusetts, Texas, and Florida. NALACC tactics are similar to those used in the absentee-voting campaign and include «visiting members of Congress and the White House, marches, vigils, home gatherings, press conferences, signature campaigns and petitions, alliance-building, voter registration and mobilization, and letter, postcard, and fax campaigns to policymakers» (JLG, 2005; my translation from Spanish).

THE ISSUE OF TRANSFERABILITY

To be sure, the occurrence of transferability also manifests in the fact that some transnationalists developed civic-political skills in other contexts. In some cases, they acquired them before their transnational involvement in U.S. or Mexican processes. Some CDPME members had been politically active before leaving Mexico. Ross-Pineda, Olamendi, Domínguez, and de la Garza, among others, had been leaders or activists in labor unions, social movements, and/or party politics before moving to the United States. Conversely, others were U.S. labor or community activists and/or participated in the United States before becoming transnationalists (Martínez-Saldaña, 2002). Ross-Pineda, Arreola, and Jorge Mújica are among them. Gómez, for example, said that «even before engaging in transnationalism, he voted in the United States» (JG, 2006). Moreover, evidence from the absentee-voting campaign suggests that some of the political tactics they used in the transnational arena must have been learned in the United States. Certain lobbying tactics (e.g., letter campaigns) used to persuade Mexican policymakers are quite usual in the United States and relatively uncommon in Mexico. However, regardless of the setting where they acquired their skills and expe-



rience, it appears transnationalists have used them to influence political processes and issues on both sides of the border.

TANSNATIONALISTS' PARTICIPATION IN U.S. POLITICS

While transnationalists appear committed to political participation in the United States, their participation varies in degree and form, as shown in the previous section. HTAS indeed foster political integration, but other organizations are much more active in U.S. politics and have a high degree of sophistication. Some federations and fronts are even registered as political action committees (PACS) in the United States. The FCZ, co-founded by Gómez in the late 1990s as the political arm of FCZSC, became a PAC with the capacity to support both Democrat and Republican candidates for local, state, and national office (GG, 2006; Moctezuma 2003). FReBIMICH has campaigned for U.S. Representative Luis Gutiérrez (D-IL) and local and state officials (JLG, 2004). Another PAC, the Chicago-based Mexicans for Political Progress (MXPP), was recently formed by a group of transnationalists including Fabián Morales, just in time to back Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich's reelection (JLG, 2006).

Individual participation in U.S. politics also varies in degree and form. In 2006, I gathered some anecdotal evidence by emailing transnationalists involved in the absentee-vote campaign, and the responses showed they participate in several ways. U.S. naturalized citizens said they voted and also participated in other ways in U.S. elections. Several non-U.S. citizens said they contacted and lobbied public officials, participated in rallies, and engaged in community activities and organizing. All followed the news and discussed both nations' politics regularly, often via electronic networks.

Some transnationalists participate differently. For instance, despite his high level of transnationalism as CDPME leader, Ross-Pineda is not very active in U.S. political groups (RRP, 2006). In fact, rather than portray himself as a political actor in either country, he sees himself as a promoter of the rights Mexican migrants in the United States. Accordingly, he engaged as an activist in the debate about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s and has worked with the Chicago-based American Friends Service Committee. He also participated in the elaboration of CDPME proposals for immigration reform in both the United States and Mexico. Furthermore, as a political analyst and author, director of *MX Sin Fronteras*, and creator and manager of electronic networks and a website serving the transnational community, Ross-Pineda has raised political awareness on binational issues among Mexican immigrants.

By contrast, some individuals are highly involved on all levels. Olamendi is an example. With strong ties to the Republican Party, he has campaigned for GOP candidates like California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2003 and former



president George W. Bush in 2000. He also campaigned for former Mexican president Fox in 2000 (CO, 2003). Besides being a core member of CDPME, Olamendi has been member and/or founder of numerous U.S. PACS and political and business associations, including The New Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration and Security Reform—in fact, he has worked closely with Senators McCain and Ted Kennedy (D-Ma) on this issue (CO, 2006). Another example is FEDECEMI leader José Luis Gutiérrez, a Chicago-based community advocate who has been active in local, state, and national electoral politics (JLG, 2004). He co-founded NALACC in 2005 while remaining involved in the absentee-voting campaign. More recently, in April 2006, he was appointed Director of the Office of Immigrant Affairs of the Governor of Illinois (JLG, 2006).

SOME CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to find how political transnationalism impacts the ability of Mexican transnationalists to participate in U.S. politics. It proposed that transnationalism facilitated involvement in U.S. politics by contributing to the development of civic-political abilities and experience that could be transferred from the transnational arena to the U.S. context. Transnationalist participation in civic organizations and the absentee-vote lobbying campaign partially supports this idea: participants developed and practiced skills like lobbying, organizing, and communicating, which they subsequently seem to have employed in the U.S. political context. Said skills could therefore be said to have facilitated and even increased their ability to participate politically in United States. Evidence of their activities regarding the immigration reform debate suggests they have also implemented these skills in the U.S. political arena.

This study makes some modest but significant contributions to the literature. It corroborates previous results regarding the human capital of immigrants engaged in transnationalism and their increasing level of political participation. Above all, this case study supports existing survey data regarding the role of transnationalism as a key variable for political participation. I found no evidence to support the idea that Mexican transnationalists are likely to disengage from U.S. politics, as critics claim, or that Latino political power is bound to decline as a result of their transnationalism. On the contrary, I found that transnationalists are not much different from other U.S. citizens: the greater their involvement and exposure to political processes and issues, the more engaged they are likely to be regardless of the arena.

Hence, this study offers some answers for policymakers and practitioners who are concerned about transnational practices. Transnationalism seems to serve as an educational tool that complements ongoing Latino efforts to increase this group's political participation in the United States. In other words, it is a



positive development that Mexican immigrants are able to participate in homeland politics, for such engagement aids in the development of individual civic-political skills and collective political capabilities.

Nonetheless, this study has limitations. For methodological reasons, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these findings are representative of «busy» transnationalists. Further research ought to be conducted, interviewing more transnationalists, using other qualitative and quantitative techniques, and approaching the issue from a comparative perspective. Moreover, the transferability hypothesis requires additional research that focuses, for example, on transnationalists' political experience before and after immigration and transnationalism.

APPENDIX A PROFILES OF SELECTED TRANSNATIONALISTS

Aragón, Julio Cesar. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. longtime resident; lives in Providence (RI). President of the Asociación Social, Cultural y Deportiva Mexicana de Rhode Island; founder of the Political Affairs Bureau; CC-IME member; CDPME affiliate.

Arreola, José Artemio. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. longtime resident; lives in Chicago. Community activist; SEIU leader/school janitor; leader of the Federación de Clubes Michoacanos en Illinois (FEDECFMI) and FREDIMICH; CC-IME member; CDPME affiliate.

De la Garza, Luis. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. resident for about 30 years; lives in Farmers Branch, Texas; bilingual (Spanish-English). Engineer and business entrepreneur; member of the Organización de Mexicanos en el Exterior (OME); National Council of Mexican American Professionals and Business Leaders (Texas). Former CIME-Texas president; CEO of the Centro Comunitario Mexicano; Secretary for Foreign Relations for the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC); member Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI); member of CC-IME and the Alianza de Inmigrantes Mexicanos en el Extranjero (former CC-IME advisors); CDPME core member.

Domínguez, Rufino. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. resident for over 20 years; lives in Central California; bilingual (Spanish-English). Partial college education; community organizer; former migrant farm worker; General Coordinator of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB, formerly the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueno Binacional); former head of California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA); editor of El Tequio bulletin; creator/manager of the FIOB website; host of the «Indigenous Awakening» TV show in Central California; 2001 recipient of the Leadership for a Changing World Award; CDPME affiliate.

Gómez de Lara, José Guadalupe. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S.-longtime resident; lives in Orange County, California; bilingual (Spanish-English). Business-owner; member and former president of the Federación de Clubes



Zacatecanos del Sur de California (FCZSC); FCZ co-founder; COFEM former president; CC-IME member; CDPME affiliate.

Gutiérrez, José Luis. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. resident for over 20 years; Chicago-based; bilingual (Spanish-English). College graduate; community activist; Club Morelia founder; FEDECFM president (2001-2005); FREDIMICH official; NALACC co-founder; appointed Director of the Office of Immigrant Affairs of the Governor of Illinois; CC-IME member; CDPME affiliate.

Martínez-Saldaña, Jesús. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; longtime California resident/binational residency; former assistant professor of Chicano/Latin American Studies at California State University at Fresno; state legislator for Michoacán state since 2004 and president of the Migrant Affairs Commission; CDPME core member.

Mújica, Jorge. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. resident for over 20 years; lives in Chicago. Founder of the Coalición Internacional de Mexicanos en el Extranjero (CIME) in Chicago; labor activist; OME member; representative of Mexico's Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD); CDPME affiliate.

Olamendi, Carlos. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. resident for about 30 years; lives in Laguna Niguel, California; bilingual (Spanish-English). Restaurateur/CEO of COR International; member of the Latin American Trade Forum; Mission Hospital board; Hispanic 100 Club; Lincoln-Juarez Club; National Council of Mexican American Professionals and Business Leaders; New Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration and Security Reform; Coalición Internacional de Mexicanos en el Extranjero (CIME). Appointed to the President's Advisory Committee on the Arts (John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts) by President George W. Bush, and economic advisor to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's transition committee; CC-IME advisor; CDPME core member.

Pelayo, Luis. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. resident for nearly 30 years; lives in Chicago. College graduate; president of Pelayo and Associates; founder/president of Concilio Hispano; community activist; CC-IME advisor; CDPME core member.

Rodríguez-Oceguera, Primitivo. Mexico-born; former migrant and community activist in Chicago; bilingual (Spanish-English). Postgraduate degree; historian and political analyst; former advisor to the Under Secretary of Human Rights at Mexico's Foreign Relations Department (SRE); Mexico City-based CDPME coordinator.

Ross-Pineda, Raúl. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. resident for about 30 years; lives in Chicago; bilingual (Spanish-English). Political analyst and author, founding director of *MX Sin Fronteras* magazine; former director of the Mexican Agenda for the local American Friends Service Committee; CC-IME member and CDPME co-founder/core member.

Zaragoza, Florencio I. Mexico-born; legal resident/U.S. citizen; U.S. longtime resident; lives in Tucson, Arizona; bilingual (Spanish-English). College graduate; president of Fundación México and MX; CDPME core member.



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