

**EAGLETON INSTITUTE OF POLITICS,
PROGRAM ON IMMIGRATION AND DEMOCRACY**

**IMMIGRANT CIVIC PARTICIPATION:
A CHALLENGE FOR NEW JERSEY AND THE NATION**

Final Report of the Community Forum Held on October 20, 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Immigrant Civic Participation Forum examined the challenge of facilitating the incorporation of immigrants into the civic life of the state and nation through effective public policy and civil society initiatives. Attracting more than 100 participants, the half-day event drew on the work and insights of academics, practitioners, public officials, and community leaders and attempted to develop policy recommendations for consideration by Governor Jon Corzine's Blue Ribbon Panel on Immigrant Policy.

Presenters reported on major initiatives around the country. The pivotal role played by immigrant-service organizations was a recurring theme, as was the importance of creating leadership opportunities for immigrants within all organizations. The Forum included presentations about the following model programs: the Coro Immigrant Civic Leadership Program in New York City, the New Americans Initiative in Illinois, the New York Civic Participation Project, and Project Voice of the American Friends Service Committee.

The Forum looked at immigrant civic participation both as a policy goal in and of itself, and as a means to the attainment of other policy reforms. As one panelist noted, the Forum provided a rare opportunity to focus on the "how" of policy change, in addition to the "what" and "why." In this view, immigrant civic engagement is a catalyst for positive social change.

The Forum was divided into three segments: research perspectives, practitioner perspectives, and New Jersey perspectives. Although no attempt was made to formalize the recommendations to Governor Corzine's Blue Ribbon Panel, the following key points were made by the 13 presenters (See the appendix for the names and titles of presenters and moderators):

Research Perspectives

Not all civic participation is necessarily desirable. Rather than reinforcing the status-quo, participation should be "transformative," and immigrants should not assume that the structures and institutions of American society are neutral (Jane Junn).

Racial and ethnic categories are socially constructed and often perpetuated by political authorities. As important as they may be in mobilizing large groups of people, these

categories often do not reflect the “specificity” and diversity of immigrant populations (Jane Junn).

Immigrant and immigrant-service organizations perform crucial functions related to the incorporation of immigrants into our society and the reform of public policy (Hector Cordero-Guzman).

Immigrant organizations develop and grow generally under conditions conducive to their growth, including an ethnic population of sufficient size within a particular service area, as well as a population with distinct service needs (Hector Cordero-Guzman).

Immigrant organizations give voice to the disenfranchised and open up avenues of civic participation, otherwise unavailable to non-naturalized immigrants (Hector Cordero-Guzman).

Immigrant organizations often face special challenges, including conflicts over legitimacy, technical skill shortages, resource constraints, and neighborhood succession (Hector Cordero-Guzman).

Democratically-run organizations that work to engage immigrants, develop immigrant leadership, and participate in national networks are well positioned to effect systemic social change and policy reform (David Scheie).

Of the 401 immigrants active in 18 organizations around the country surveyed by the Immigrant Participation and Immigrant Reform Project, all reported significant increases in skill levels through their participation in organized community improvement and empowerment efforts. Participating organizations are helping to create leadership ladders and to incubate a new generation of immigrant leadership (David Scheie).

Practitioner Perspectives

Project Voice (American Friends Service Committee) takes a holistic approach to immigrant advocacy predicated on the importance of immigrant base-building as a key element in any comprehensive strategy to effect policy change (Amy Gottlieb).

Project Voice members are less concerned about providing a “voice for the voiceless;” and more concerned about providing an “ear to the earless.” By creating a direct communication channel to public officials and policy makers, Project Voice allows the voices and concerns of immigrants to be heard (Amy Gottlieb).

Immigrant leadership programs, as exemplified by the Coro Immigrant Civic Leadership Program and the New Americans Training Program of the New York Immigration Coalition, which provide practical, short-term training to emerging and early-career immigrant leaders, help build the leadership and networking skills of immigrants in order to strengthen immigrant organizations, create more responsive institutions, and bring about positive policy outcomes. (Aaarti Shahani)

Efforts to promote and facilitate naturalization through state leadership and resources are producing impressive results in Illinois and other states. During the last year, the Illinois New Americans Initiative helped 35,000 people complete their applications for naturalization (Luvia Quinones).

Innovative elements of the Illinois program include heavy use of the media, a toll-free naturalization hotline, a special web site, and a combination of services provided by a network of 35 community-based organizations.

Progressive unions can mobilize their immigrant membership base as a force for policy change on the local, state, and national level (Amy Sugimori).

The New York Civic Participation project has demonstrated the power of immigrant union members in the Bronx to achieve important community development goals. An example is the renovation of a park to replace open space lost through the construction of the new Yankee Stadium (Angeline Echevarria).

New Jersey Perspectives

The establishment of the New Jersey Blue Ribbon Panel on Immigrant Policy by Governor Jon Corzine in 2007 was an important first step in promoting immigrant civic participation (Albert Alvarez).

To realize the promise of the panel, effective partnerships must be created between the state, community-based organizations, and private philanthropy (Albert Alvarez).

New Jersey doesn't need to "reinvent the wheel." Today's program demonstrates that there are valuable models that can be replicated in New Jersey, especially citizenship promotion as a key driver of civic participation. However, our approach must be sustainable and bipartisan. Lawmakers of both parties need to be given evidence of program effectiveness in an evidence-based format. (Albert Alvarez).

One of the most important arenas for immigrant civic participation is the educational system. Immigrant children are often denied fundamental rights, improperly evaluated, or shortchanged in their educational programs. Immigrant advocates, working either independently or in an organizational context, perform a crucial role in holding school systems accountable. (Elsie Foster Dublin and Charles "Shai" Goldstein).

Local governments can encourage immigrant engagement through multicultural festivals and by creating opportunities for immigrants to participate fully in local programs, such as senior centers and programs. (Elsie Foster-Dublin).

As New Jersey learned at the time of the racial profiling crisis in the late nineties, progressive forces will succeed when they build strong partnerships and networks across racial and ethnic lines. (Charles "Shai" Goldstein).

There needs to be a change in the mindset of the immigrant community. It's important to shake off the notion that immigrants are a minority or are all poor people. People will be more inclined to participate in the larger society, and more successful in their efforts, if they change their self-perception (Martin Perez).

One of the major barriers hindering the effectiveness of Latinos in the New Jersey political arena is the weakness of the two-party system and the engineering of "safe" districts for particular parties. Latinos and immigrants should not allow their votes to be taken for granted by the Democratic Party and should mount legal challenges to the districting system (Martin Perez).

Community-based organizations that understand the injustices and inequities in our society and work for policy change in areas such as health care and education, stand the best chance of engaging immigrants in their work (Daniel Santo Pietro).

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FULL REPORT

Welcoming Remarks

Ruth Mandel, Director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics, welcomed and thanked panelists and audience members on behalf of the Institute and the Program on Immigration and Democracy. As an institution that works to link the study of politics to its day-to-day practice, Eagleton attaches special importance to today's event, which opens a window on an important but poorly understood facet of civic participation. This Forum brings together first-rate scholars with hands-on practitioners and focuses on civic participation in its broadest possible sense. She expressed confidence that the Forum will make an important contribution to the public policy debate in New Jersey.

Ruth gave special acknowledgement to Dr. Nicholas Montalto who conceived and developed today's program, along with two other Eagleton public programs earlier in the year, and who also prepared a well-researched report on the merits of growing the Program on Immigration and Democracy into a vibrant academic center with strong ties to community-based organizations.

Ruth also thanked the Governor's Council on Ethnic Affairs for cosponsoring the program and introduced Dr. Janice Fine, the principal scholar and leader of the Program on Immigration and Democracy, to open the symposium.

Forum Overview

Dr. Fine began by stating that immigrant civic participation is crucial to New Jersey because of the enormous influx of immigrants to the state in recent years. Indeed, when we talk about immigrant civic participation, we are talking about the health of our democracy itself because immigrants constitute such a large proportion of the state's population, now surpassing 20% of the state's population.

Immigrants also make an indispensable contribution to the state's economy. In 2005, foreign-born workers represented 25% of New Jersey's workforce. It is estimated that 58% of all anticipated job openings between now and 2014 will be in occupations, such as retail sales, janitors, and cleaners, with the lowest educational and training requirements; immigrants will make up a disproportionately large share of these job-holders. It is also estimated that 65% of the state's labor force growth will be made up of non-whites and Latinos.

Dr. Fine stressed the importance of naturalization. In 2005, 50% of the immigrant population in the state consisted of legal permanent residents, who were eligible or who

would soon become eligible to naturalize. We need to facilitate the citizenship process, ratchet up levels of voter participation, and encourage people to run for public office.

But participation should not be limited to citizens only. Non-citizens should also be encouraged to “enter the public square,” as they are doing around the country. They should learn about local, state, and federal political systems, visit with their legislators, testify at hearings (as many did this past year as part of the Blue Ribbon Panel process), tell their stories, formulate their own requests of government, exert their influence through their participation in community organizations and worker centers, and organize around issues of education, housing, and work. In short, she said, let’s think about participation in the broadest possible terms. Our ultimate goal, Dr. Fine added, is to bring concrete policy recommendations back to the Blue Ribbon Panel.

In concluding her remarks, Dr. Fine welcomed Dr. Anastasia Mann to the Program on Immigration and Democracy. Dr. Mann previously worked for the Russell Sage Foundation and NJ Policy Perspective, where she produced a groundbreaking study on immigrants in Mercer County. Dr. Fine then thanked and introduced the three moderators: Christine Thurlow Brenner, Aldo Lauria-Santiago, and Robyn Rodriguez.

Panel One: Research Perspectives

1. The first presenter, Professor Jane Junn, began with the following observations:
 1. More than 20 million new immigrants will be eligible to naturalize and vote in 2012. Immigrants, however, do not act as a monolithic bloc. As an example, she mentioned how Italian immigrants in Connecticut in the early 20th century became Republicans, while their co-nationals in New Jersey became Democrats. Understanding these twists and turns will require systematic research.
 2. Research has to be ongoing, because immigrants are a “moving target.” If we use census data from 2000, we’re in trouble.
 3. She said that it was very important to “respect the specificity of the immigrant populations,” that generalizations about immigrants in general are difficult to make.
 4. She also cautioned that the categories that we use to classify people in the United States are new to most immigrants when they first arrive in the country. She referred to the “frailty of categories” and reminded forum participants that these categories are “social constructions,” often reinforced by state institutions. As an example, she cited the history of Asian Indians in the United States who have been variously classified through American history first as “Hindus,” later as “whites,” later still as “other,” and now “Asian American.”

Prof. Junn offered the following recommendations:

1. Use multiple methods to do research on immigrant populations.
2. Be careful about your units of analysis.

3. Take seriously the context of structures and institutions. As an example, she mentioned that the Asian population in the United States is not randomly selected, but rather the result of federal policy favoring highly skilled immigrants. If China were on the northern border of the US, she said, popular attitudes towards Asians would be different.
4. In promoting immigrant participation, look at forms of participation that are “transformational.”

2. Dr. Hector Cordero-Guzman, the next speaker on the panel, was one of the principal investigators in a major study of immigrant organizations in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. His work focused on New York City. Dr. Cordero informed the audience that his research does not necessarily represent the views of the Ford Foundation as it was done while he was still an academic.

He reviewed the four major functions of immigrant-service organizations:

- A. Help with the “recruitment” of immigrants into the country and the “entry process,” especially legal issues pertaining to status.
- B. Social services and programs to assist with adaptation and incorporation. This is not a unidirectional process, as it includes work to preserve culture and tradition, while at the same time helping immigrants to acclimate to a new society. These twin goals are not necessarily contradictory.
- C. Articulation of the social service needs of their communities and communicating these needs to metropolitan-level policy makers, in order obtain and manage resources. Immigrant organizations often serve as a training ground for leaders who eventually move into the larger political arena.
- D. Providing linkages to country of origin, by sending resources *to* and serving as resources *for* countries of origin. Immigrant-sending countries are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their efforts to mobilize their diasporas in other countries.

Dr. Cordero also briefly discussed conditions conducive to the formation and sustainability of such organizations, including a client population large enough in size, (otherwise they’ll receive services from broader organizations) and a population with distinctive social service needs, where sensitivity to cultural background is crucial. Sometimes, people ask him if such organizations really exist. In places like New York City, they exist by the hundreds.

There are many challenges associated with the development of immigrant-service organizations, including:

- A. Legitimacy. Sometimes organizations are not considered truly representative of the community or their legitimacy is contested. Some people will ask: who authorized you to speak on our behalf?

- B. Shortages of technical skills. The community may lack individuals with the necessary skills to manage and grow such organizations in an American environment. There is a tension between validating the home-grown skills of immigrants and tapping the expertise of second generation immigrants who are the products of the American educational system.
- C. Changing demographics. An immigrant population is often highly mobile moving from one community to another in receiving countries. As neighborhoods change, new populations move in, thereby altering the base of such organizations.
- D. Political challenges. Success in attracting government support often creates timidity in challenging the establishment, thereby compromising the independence and integrity of these organizations.
- E. Economic challenges. Resource availability is often “countercyclical” in nature. Community needs are often highest when the resources are lowest, and vice-versa. Our current economic crisis is a case in point. Nonprofit organizations will likely lose resources as needs escalate.

In conclusion, Dr. Cordero said that the reason why these organizations are important, is that they bridge the gap in the discourse on civic participation. They give voice to the disenfranchised and provide a vehicle for them to influence the political system, apart from voting.

3. Dr. David Scheie, President of Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry, and the final speaker on the research perspectives panel, reported on an evaluative study of over 100 organizations participating in the Immigrant Participation and Immigration Reform (IPIR) Civic Participation Survey. The IPIR theoretical framework involves looking at change in the individual lives of engaged immigrants, change in the organizations in which they are active, and change in the networks that link these organizations together in policy reform campaigns. The organizations surveyed by IPIR receive support from the Four Freedoms Fund, the American Dream Fund, or belong to other national networks.

There have been three rounds of annual data collection, the last occurring this winter. David presented findings from the 2007 survey, which involved 401 individuals from 18 organizations (The 2008 survey will have over 700 participants). Respondents were selected by the organizations under guidelines provided by Touchstone.

Using a PowerPoint, Dr. Scheie provided a profile of survey respondents, covering length of residence in the US, state of residence, reasons for migration, citizenship status, gender and ethnic breakdown, motives for, and barriers to, participation.

Among motives mentioned most often were: desire to make things better, satisfaction at being involved with an organization doing good work, the opportunity to have one’s voice heard, and involvement with like-minded people. Dr. Scheie emphasized the catalytic role of organizations committed to immigrant civic participation and actively engaged in social change work.

Not unexpectedly, job and family responsibilities were major disincentives to participation. Men faced more barriers on average than women. Fear of the government was mentioned by 1 out of 7 respondents.

The survey found that respondents were “broadly involved” in civic activities, with an average of four different activities. Many immigrants had affiliations with more than one organization and were drawing other immigrants into civic participation, suggesting a multiplier effect for each person active in organizational work.

Survey respondents reported quite high rates of learning and growth as a result of their participation. Specific dimensions of growth included: making healthy and positive choices, greater openness to feedback and self-improvement, ability to work with others, knowledge of how the system works and how to effect change, and belief in their own power to make a difference.

In order to strengthen growth and participation, most respondents believe that a combination of formal training and hands-on experience is the best formula. Offering workshops alone, without opportunities for civic participation, is not enough. Immigrant “leadership ladders” should be created within organizations

Questions from the Audience

Panelists then considered several questions from audience members.

In answer to a query about measurements for civic participation, Jane Junn encouraged people to be flexible and creative, even suggesting that non-participation in the political process might be a rational choice under some circumstances. Voting alone, without consideration of the “political opportunity structure,” is a narrow perspective. Local political parties are often fearful of opening up to new voters and take steps to weaken their power. Prof. Junn added that it is important to expand the range of options available to new Americans and to count what is meaningful to them.

Another audience member was curious to know what funding could be used to support immigrant civic participation. David Scheie replied that his work is taking place in the context of organizations receiving funding for immigrant civic participation. His hope is that the IPIR will strengthen the case for funding of this type. Indeed, since the project began, the Gates foundation has joined the Four Freedoms Fund collaborative.

Finally, a question was raised about the nature of conflict within and between immigrant-serving organizations, and the underplaying of competition in the narrative. Dr. Cordero-Guzman noted that he could have given an entirely different presentation that might have highlighted this issue. There are both internal and external factors that contribute to conflict. Sometimes, there are cultures of competition, or competition over limited resources, or even competition over who gets credit for a particular achievement.

Panel Two: Practitioner Perspectives

1. Amy Gottlieb, Director of the Immigrant Rights Program of the New York/New Jersey Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), commended the organizers of the Forum for creating an opportunity to talk about how policies are changed, rather than the policies themselves. She went on to explain the genesis, purpose, and operation of Project Voice, an initiative launched in 1998 to gain coherence, common purpose, and stronger impact for the 19 AFSC offices in the United States engaged in immigrant rights work. In all its work, both immigrant and other social justice-related activities, AFSC “accompanies people in their struggle” and challenges the status quo. There are four components of Project Voice:

- A. Base-building
- B. Alliance-Building
- C. Documentation
- D. Policy impact

Ms. Gottlieb added that one problem with the 2006 immigrant rights demonstrations was that base-building had not been given sufficient attention by organizers of the marches. Base-building requires a commitment that must be sustained over a long period of time. One of the challenges for AFSC is coordinating the local community work to maximize impact on the national level. When it all comes together, the work provides enormous satisfaction to participants, even if policy wins are few and far between.

She gave the example of a two-day Washington advocacy trip in March of 2007 by 100 immigrants who had gone through their training program and local campaigns. Participants derived a great deal of satisfaction at being able to tell their stories to members of Congress and policy makers, and learning more about the legislative process. One of Ms. Gottlieb’s colleagues from San Diego had a good way to describe the process. “We’re not so much giving voice to the voiceless, as we are giving an ear to the earless.”

People in Washington welcome AFSC’s involvement in the national discussions about immigration policy because of their strong and active base. AFSC has a national policy person who distills the essence of all this work into concrete policy recommendations.

AFSC also believes immigration policy can’t be constructed simply by looking at the United States alone. Organizing has to be viewed through a transnational lens.

Finally, Ms. Gottlieb commended the IPIR Project of Touchstone Center, of which AFSC is a participating organization, for helping program participants to become more self-reflective and purposeful in their work.

2. Luvia Quinones, Citizenship Specialist of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), a statewide coalition of about 100 organizations, spoke about the New Americans Initiative, an effort to promote and facilitate naturalization for

Illinois' immigrant population. The program operates with a \$3 million budget from the Illinois legislature -- an appropriation which has received broad, bipartisan support. During the last year, the program helped 35,000 people complete their applications for naturalization.

An important feature of the New Americans Initiative is its integration with the ICIRR's New Americans Democracy Project, which promotes voting and other forms of political participation among Illinois' naturalized immigrants. Ms. Quinones explained that ICIRR has specific policy goals for each broad segment of the immigrant population: comprehensive immigration reform for the unauthorized population, naturalization for the eligible permanent resident population, and voting for naturalized immigrants and their children.

Ms. Quinones explained that Illinois has had a refugee-focused naturalization initiative for the last 15 years. When the NAI was created, a decision was made to focus on that segment of the newcomer population with the lowest naturalization rates, namely working class, Latino immigrants.

Unlike the pre-existing program, NAI makes ample use of paid and free media to promote naturalization, as well as in-person presentations in the community. They also have a web site and a toll-free number to answer queries from the public. A network of 35 organizations provides services free-of-charge. Naturalization rates in the state have increased by 56% since the program began, and more than 260,000 people have received information about citizenship through the toll-free number or the web site.

NAI enjoys bipartisan support. Its \$3 million budget has stayed constant over the last three years, even though other programs have been slashed or eliminated. Even the Republican legislators signed a letter asking the Governor to maintain current levels of funding. Every year, 100 new citizens travel to the Illinois state capital to meet with the governor and state legislators and to learn more about the governmental process.

Ms. Quinones mentioned that other states, including Maryland and Washington, are beginning to use the Illinois model. The State of Washington just appropriated over \$300,000 for their program.

3. Aarti Shahani, Director of the Coro Immigrant Civic Leadership Program, provided an overview of the Coro immigrant leadership training program. With offices in six major cities around the United States, Coro typically offers leadership training to early career professionals from Ivy League schools. The organization wanted to reach out to New York City's emerging immigrant leadership sector, and about four years ago partnered with the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) to launch the Immigrant Civic Leadership Program, which seeks to enhance the capacity of leaders working to strengthen New York's immigrant communities.

Participants explore strategies for shaping public policies that affect New York City as a whole as a whole and immigrant communities in particular. The program also challenges

participants to examine their individual approaches to leadership in order to build and sustain their organizational and personal visions for change.

Early in the history of the program, a conflict emerged between Coro, which operates in a bipartisan manner, and NYIC, which wanted to involve immigrant leaders in political campaigns. A “friendly separation” occurred, and now both organizations run their own immigrant leadership programs.

Coro tends to attract people with an established track record of at least a few years in their various professional fields. The program focuses on the development of interpersonal skills, as well as the ability to be self-reflective in analyzing personal effectiveness in organizational development work. Participants must commit 13 days over a six-month period. Roughly half the time is devoted to individual skill development, while the other half is devoted to strategizing for organizational and social change, often in the context of specific issues impacting immigrants. The last class looked at the question of why the New York driver’s license campaign for undocumented immigrants collapsed. Another technique involves use of a “360° degree survey,” requiring 12 to 15 people in each participant’s personal universe to analyze and evaluate leadership style.

The program enables people to emerge from their “silos,” to see their work in a larger context, to interact with people in different sectors, to participate in a learning community, to recharge and reenergize, and to become more effective leaders.

4. Amy Sugimori, Executive Director, and Angeline Echeverría, Director of Organizing Support, for La Fuente, New York Civic Participation Project (NYCPP), gave an overview of the project, which aims to encourage civic activism among immigrant union members, often on the neighborhood level.

NYCPP began after 9/11 as a way of creating linkages between a coalition of progressive labor unions and the immigrant rights movement. The unions understood that their organizations were immigrant-based, and that immigrant union members and their families could be activated to address a broader set of issues, beyond the traditional concerns of unions. The key to success would be to give priority to the issues and problems facing immigrants on a daily basis and often in the neighborhoods. “What motivates civic participation are the issues, what you care about.”

NYCPP currently sponsors three local immigrant committees in New York City. Ms. Echeverria described the work of the Bronx Committee, which was concerned about the loss of access to parks and green space resulting from the construction of the new Yankee Stadium. Starting with a project to renovate a playground, the Committee, with the assistance of a group called “New Yorkers for Parks,” developed a vision for a new park which eventually turned into a multi-million dollar project. In the process, the committee members learned how to negotiate the power structure and deal with entities, such as the local community board and the Parks Department. Three NYCP members actually became members of their local community boards.

The NYCPP has expanded into Long Island, and Ms. Echeverria hopes to do the same in New Jersey.

Questions from the Audience

Two questions focused on the Illinois New Americans Project. One questioner inquired about sustainability of funding. Another wanted to know how the program got off the ground in the first place. With regard to the first question, Ms. Quinones shared her worries about the next round of funding, especially because of the drop in applications caused by the sharp increase in federal naturalization fees. With regard to the latter question, she referenced the relationship between the ICIIR executive director and Congressman Guttierrez, a strong champion of the program; the political influence of ICIIR as a coalition of over 100 organizations; and its nine-year track record of acting as a conduit for state funding to community-based organizations through the Illinois interpretation and translation project

Another audience member wanted to know how to engage more affluent immigrants who could form an important part of the constituency for policy change. Ms. Shahani mentioned that CORO's leadership training program helps to reconnect immigrants with a past that they might have forgotten and reenergizes their participation in policy change work.

Finally, another questioner wanted to know how stepped-up local and state immigration law enforcement has impacted on the civic participation of immigrants. Ms. Gottlieb said this is always a problem, but she has been struck at how neighborhood-based work with trusted community organizers can be successful despite these fears. This is certainly what happened in Morristown in the struggle against 287g. In New York, it used to be that immigrants would not come to a meeting in Manhattan, fearing that the law enforcement presence there was more pronounced, but would go to meetings in the outer boroughs.

Panel Three: New Jersey Perspectives

Prof. Robyn Rodriguez introduced the third panel, mentioning that immigrant civic participation is taking place despite a climate of heightened enforcement and even despite divisions within immigrant communities. She said that there are six key questions to consider:

- What research findings seem most relevant and actionable in New Jersey?
- Are there any inconsistencies between research and practitioner perspectives?
- Which program models seem deserving of replication in New Jersey?
- What role should state government and private philanthropy play in promoting immigrant civic participation?
- To what extent could a New Jersey Office of Immigrant Affairs facilitate civic participation?

- What specific recommendations should be brought back to the Blue Ribbon Panel?

A member of the audience posed another question: how we can better link people's everyday work activities with neighborhood organizing and initiatives civic participation?

Al Alvarez, Policy Advisor to Governor Jon Corzine, argued that the Governor's 2007 Executive Order creating the Blue Ribbon Panel on Immigrant Policy was an important first step. The panel report will foster an environment conducive to immigrant civic participation. Alvarez also contended that the state can't do everything by itself, especially in the current challenging economic climate. The fact that we are taking a systematic approach to this question is a good start. To realize the full potential of the panel, however, will require the active participation of a "triumvirate" of players, including community-based organizations, the state, and private philanthropy. This kind of partnership would be a spur to participation. Hopefully, action on the panel's recommendations will create a more receptive, responsive, and efficient government.

Alvarez also said that New Jersey doesn't need to "reinvent the wheel." Today's program demonstrates that there are valuable models that can be replicated in New Jersey, including citizenship promotion as an important driver of civic participation. However, we have to develop an approach that is sustainable and bipartisan. Lawmakers need to be given evidence of program effectiveness in an evidence-based format.

Elsie Foster-Dublin, Council President, Highland Park, emphasized the connection between immigrant civic participation in school settings and educational outcomes for immigrant children. Too many immigrant children, she argued, were not being properly tested in the schools.

Foster-Dublin spoke about the challenges facing immigrant students from the 18 English-speaking countries in the Caribbean. She gave her own story as a case in point. In many of these countries, students graduate at age 16. Even though she had mastered all American high school subjects, she was put back two years in school because she was considered too young to graduate. Kids are functioning at a higher level, but not given credit for their level of education. Schools have to do a better job at placement testing. Not every parent has the time to fight for their children's' needs. Immigrant organizations are needed to advocate in the educational arena.

Elsie also called attention to how local governments can promote immigrant civic participation. She cited the example of Highland Park's annual Unity Festival which now attracts the participation of 72 different ethnic groups.

Charles "Shai" Goldstein, Executive Director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, has been able to initiate a new bilingual educational advocacy program dealing with parents and helping to empower parents to deal with local school boards. NJ is one

of the few states that mandate bilingual school advisory councils. They need to know that school districts, according to the Supreme Court, can't inquire about immigration status.

Martin Perez, President of the Latino Leadership Alliance of New Jersey, emphasized the importance of countering the stereotype of immigrants as "poor people" and underscoring the vital contribution of immigrants to the local and national economy. Immigrants should not allow outside people to categorize them as just poor people. He gave the example of French Street in New Brunswick, which has been transformed from a dilapidated area into a thriving "little Mexico." Similar positive developments are occurring all over the state.

Mr. Perez argued that CBOs that help immigrants with their adjustment to American society should work themselves out of existence. "If they're effective as organizations, they won't exist in the future." Eventually, immigrants will speak for themselves, and not necessarily through these organizations. Eventually, there will be no minorities any more. The Latino Leadership Alliance doesn't consider itself to be a minority organization. In places like Newark and Perth Amboy, Latinos are in the majority.

Martin also stressed the importance of a bipartisan approach. Right now, the Democratic Party in New Jersey takes the Latino vote for granted, whereas the Republican Party seems to not care about Latinos. Latinos need to shake off their self-perception as a minority, recognize their growing strength, and work to build allies in both parties. A strong, two-party system in New Jersey, he felt, is in the best interest of the immigrant population. In every county in NJ, both parties should be powerful. "That way we'll be the decision-making group." Mr. Perez also referred to flaws in the redistricting process, which allow the political parties to create safe districts and suggested the need for future legal challenges.

Daniel Santo Pietro, Executive Director of the Hispanic Directors Association of New Jersey, spoke about the work of the community based organizations affiliated with his Association. These organizations clearly understand the needs of the communities they serve. They are dedicated to addressing poverty and inequity issues and through their involvement with issues such as education and health care, they are in the best position to mobilize the immigrant population. This kind of involvement catches immigrant's attention.

Goldstein then added that for empowerment to take place, all the progressive forces have to work together. The Latino Leadership Alliance was created around the time of the police profiling crisis and benefitted from the support received from other civic rights organizations.

Questions from the Audience

One member of the audience asked if Gov. Corzine will establish a systematic process to encourage immigrant civic participation regardless of immigration status, or will the needs of the unauthorized population be disregarded?

Mr. Alvarez said that the Blue Ribbon Panel consists of stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds. There are four major subcommittees covering all major policy issues. One requirement for the Panel is to come back with a detailed proposal pertaining to the formation of an Office of Immigrant Affairs. The question is not so much whether we will have an office, but what kind of office, and when will it get off the ground. Clearly, the state needs to be more efficient with current resources, perhaps by creating a bank of information and encouraging models for best practices, and when dollars become available, the ability to fund some programs, maybe along the lines of immigrant civic participation and citizenship drives.

Another question pertained to sustainability. How can such an office survive a future change of administration?

Mr. Alvarez stressed the importance of a bipartisan approach. To implement an Illinois-style model, you need buy-in from members of the legislature. The rationale for this work must be presented in an evidence-based format, showing how immigrant integration is synonymous with responsive government.

Elsie Foster-Dublin concurred with Mr. Alvarez on this point. She also talked about the importance of school-based initiatives, mentioning that the fact that there are scores of languages spoken in the Highland Park school system. She also spoke about the need to bring the different groups together, to celebrate the community's diversity, and to give everyone a space at the table. This led to the creation of the September Unity Festival, which facilitates the integration process. Following on this work, the Human Relations Commission did a study to understand the special needs of immigrants in the community. One result is that she now presides over a Department of Community Services in Highland Park which has managed to bring in 70 to 80 Asian residents into the senior day care centers. No questions are asked about legal status. Local governments can play an important role in promoting immigrant civic participation.

Before concluding the program, moderator Robyn Rodriguez summarized a few key points made at this session:

1. It is important for immigrants to take advantage of the rights they have. As CBO's and community members, we need to establish programs to help immigrant parents engage around issues of educational policy.
2. We need to be creative about the means we use to educate immigrants about their rights. This work can take place in organizations, churches, worker centers, etc.

3. Some kind of policy intervention related to the lack of recognition of immigrant educational credentials might be warranted.
4. Symbolic events like unity festivals can open doors to other forms of civic participation.
5. Political parties both enable and disable immigrants to participate. So we need to focus on structural problems that impede formal participation. Organizing around the electoral process might not be as straightforward as we might think.
6. We need to think about immigrant civic participation in broad and creative ways. Immigrants face multiple forms of marginalization, barriers are real and formidable, and so our effort must be commensurate with the challenge.

This report was prepared by Dr. Nicholas V. Montalto, Visiting Associate at the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Appendix

Immigrant Civic Participation: A Challenge for New Jersey and the Nation

Community Dialogue and Policy Forum
October 20, 2008

9:00 – 9:30 **Continental Breakfast**

9:30 – 9:40 **Welcome and Greetings**

Ruth B. Mandel

Director, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Forum Overview

Janice Fine

Eagleton Institute of Politics Faculty Associate, Program on Immigration and Democracy;

Assistant Professor, School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

9:40 – 10:35 **Research Perspectives on Immigrant Civic Participation**

Moderator:

Aldo Lauria-Santiago

Chair, Rutgers Department of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Panelists:

Hector R. Cordero-Guzman

Program Officer, Ford Foundation

Jane Junn

Director of Immigration Research, Program on Immigration and Democracy,

Eagleton Institute of Politics and Associate Professor of Political Science, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

David Scheie

Founder, Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry

10:40 – 11:30 **Promising Practices in Immigrant Civic Participation**

Moderator:

Christine Thurlow Brenner

Faculty Associate, Program on Immigration and Democracy and Assistant Professor, School of Public Policy and Administration, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Panelists:

Amy Gottlieb

Executive Director, Immigrant Rights Program, American Friends Service Committee

Luvia Quinones

Assistant Director, New Americans Initiative, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Aarti Shahani

Director, Coro Immigrant Civic Leadership Program

Amy Sugimori

Executive Director, La Fuente, New York Civic Participation Project

11:30-11:45 **Break**

11:45 – 12:30 **Public Policy Conversation:
Strategies for Promoting Immigrant Civic Participation in New Jersey**

Moderator:

Robyn Rodríguez

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Panelists:

Albert Alvarez

Policy Advisor, Office of Governor Jon Corzine

Elsie Foster-Dublin

Borough Council President, Highland Park

Charles “Shai” Goldstein

Executive Director, New Jersey Immigration Policy Network

Martin Perez, Esq.

President, Latino Leadership Alliance of New Jersey

Daniel Santo Pietro

Executive Director, Hispanic Directors Association of New Jersey

and panelists from earlier sessions and members of the audience

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