

Urban Movements and 'Thin' Political Incorporation: A Comparison of the  
Anti-Wal-Mart and Immigrant Rights Struggles in Chicago

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June 14, 2011

Paper for International RC 21 Conference, Amsterdam, July 7-9, 2011

Session 13: Urban Politics Between Contention and Control

## Abstract

This paper examines the anti-Wal-Mart and immigrant rights mobilizations in Chicago within a comparative frame in order to understand how processes of movement fragmentation and localization play out in certain kinds of U.S. cities. Bringing together classic urban-movement conceptions of “city trenches” (Katznelson 1981) and “grassroots” (Castells 1983) into a shared problematic, I argue that the two movements, despite their differences, exhibit common patterns of fragmentation and incorporation that stem from how local elites work the terrain of urban politics to successfully channel and constrain threatening challenges. The paper also offers an initial reflection on “thin” political incorporation as a way to conceptualize the institutionalizing processes that often characterize movement interaction with U.S. state and local politics.

## Urban Movements and 'Thin' Political Incorporation: A Comparison of the Anti-Wal-Mart and Immigrant Rights Movements in Chicago

Chicago's most dramatic instances of popular mobilization during the first decade of the twenty-first century involved two seemingly very different struggles. One movement centered on a political campaign, beginning in 2004, to refuse to allow Wal-Mart to open stores in the city unless the company agreed to pay its workers a living wage. The second movement emerged in March 2006, when hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters flooded the streets of Chicago to demand a comprehensive immigration reform with a path to citizenship.

On the face of it, these two conflicts appear to have had little in common. The anti-Wal-Mart campaign primarily engaged the city's African-American community (where the proposed stores were to be located), and took the form of a local struggle over economic development and public sector regulation. The spring 2006 mobilization in Chicago, as in other cities that also saw dramatic marches, was centrally propelled by Latino immigrants; it targeted for opposition a punitive piece of national legislation that would have criminalized undocumented residents as well as anyone who might assist them. Yet the two cases exhibit certain characteristics in common: both struggles emerged as national campaigns but played out locally; both efforts were hobbled by significant divisions that emerged between core constituency groups; and both conflicts ultimately, and perhaps surprisingly, strengthened the power of local-state elites.

This paper examines these significant episodes of contention within a comparative context. Building on an earlier study (Sites 2007) that sought to revise classic urban-movement conceptions into a combined problematic of “trenches” and “grassroots” (Katznelson 1981; Castells 1983), this investigation focuses on what the anti-Wal-Mart and immigrant rights mobilizations in Chicago can tell us about processes of fragmentation and localization in certain kinds of U.S. cities. I will argue that, in spite of their evident differences, the evolution of the two movements sheds a common light on how the terrain of urban politics can channel and constrain the impacts of potentially threatening challenges. The paper concludes with a brief theoretical reflection on the “thin” political incorporation that undergirds and often results from movement interaction with U.S. state and local political elites.

### Trenches and Grassroots

Two major works published in the early 1980s represent still-important efforts to explain the fragmenting and localizing tendencies peculiar to urban mobilization in the United States. The first, Ira Katznelson’s *City Trenches*, observed that urban politics in the United States has long been governed by ethnicity, race, and territoriality rather than by class. His historical excavation attempted to unearth how a ‘radical separation’ between the ‘politics of work’ and the ‘politics of community’ became a defining characteristic of the American working class. The answer, for Katznelson, was that working class fragmentation in the United States resulted from a constellation of political developments – early (male, white)

suffrage, a federalized governmental system, nonideological parties – that enabled urban political machines to incorporate immigrant populations on an ethnic, neighborhood basis (as community residents, citizens, and service recipients) even as trade unions organized separately at the workplace on the basis of class. For Katznelson, then, these city trenches, built largely on labor/community cleavages, became central to the steep challenges faced by urban mobilizations attempting to generate transformative social changes. During the 1960s and '70s, for example, such movements, while elevating black community organizations and a black officialdom to new prominence within racially segregated cities, failed to offer a coherent challenge to class and racial structures of power (see also Reed 1999). Instead, black political incorporation built new institutional layers on top of the existing trenches.

A second major work of the early 1980s, Manuel Castells' *City and the Grassroots*, also sought to explain the uncertain relationship between urban-based mobilizations and broader social change. Despite the limits of his larger theorization, Castells' analysis of neighborhood mobilization by Latino residents in San Francisco's Mission District in the 1960s and '70s offered an important insight: 'the grassroots', in U.S. urban politics, are often sticky. In other words, there is a tendency for urban mobilizations to become locally contained, or circumscribed, regardless of their broader ambitions, and this process of localization is profoundly intertwined with the institutional structures of the state. Although Castells himself did not develop this point as effectively as he might have, subsequent theorists have emphasized that the U.S. federal system tends to loosen the bonds between local and

national politics. The result is that if the scale of movements is typically connected to the scale of state authority (Miller 2000), urban mobilizations may often struggle to spread beyond the local polity when local states respond in ways that bind movement organizations to the interest-group politics of the city. In effect, urban newcomers, whether mid-twentieth-century black migrants from the South or immigrant groups before and after, have found themselves enmeshed in complexly layered modes of pluralistic incorporation (Gerstle and Mollenkopf, 2001).

Trenches and grassroots, therefore, have long comprised important institutional foundations in U.S. cities. Recent bouts of economic and political restructuring, in turn – the sorts of new local-state autonomies and interurban economic competition spurred by processes of neoliberalization – have deepened those foundations in key respects (Peck and Tickell 2002; Sites 2003). The result is that urban-based mobilizations, when channeled by local institutions that rest upon and reinforce the class and ethno-racial trenches of the city, can end up reinforcing forms of political incorporation with relatively meager returns for community members.

#### Case I: The Struggle Against Wal-Mart

Chicago's conflict over Wal-Mart began in earnest in 2004, when the company sought construction approval from the City Council to build its first two stores in the city. The corporation's proposal was opposed by an ad hoc coalition comprised of local community organizations allied with labor unions (including the

local United Food and Commercial Workers, the larger Chicago Federation of Labor, and their national parent federation, the AFL-CIO) that have long fought Wal-Mart's low-wage, anti-union practices. As the conflict developed, both the corporation and the oppositional coalition launched major campaigns – sending representatives into churches and schools and sponsoring rallies in rival efforts to build 'grassroots' coalitions capable of swaying the votes of council members (Sites 2007).

The company gained considerable support within the city's African American community. Beyond the lure of employment opportunities, Wal-Mart promised a range of concessions (from the hiring of minority contractors to assisting organizations that worked with unemployed ex-convicts) and assembled a network of black ministers and politicians to speak in support of its development projects. The city's longtime mayor, Richard M. Daley, also spoke in favor of the company, and his influence over the City Council suggested that a significant percentage of its members (including a number of black aldermen) would also be leaning in a supportive direction.

The campaign of resistance to Wal-Mart pushed back on several tracks. In one effort, Chicago Jobs with Justice, along with the UFCW and a number of local community organizations, pressured Wal-Mart to sign a Community Benefits Agreement that would permit unionization and other steps – but the company refused. A second community-labor coalition led by Illinois ACORN and the Grassroots Collaborative (a citywide coalition of community organizations and labor unions which had led a successful living-wage campaign) proposed a Big Box Living Wage Ordinance that sought, in effect, to raise the pay-scale floor of big-box retailing

to a living wage with benefits (Warren 2005). However, the significant divisions within the black community weakened the anti-Wal-Mart campaign, and major frictions emerged between national union representatives and community organizers over coalition leadership. After the City Council voted to permit Wal-Mart to open its one outlet in Chicago, the opposition attempted to pass the Big Box Living Wage Ordinance. African American council members who supported Wal-Mart demanded, in turn, that union leaders open up more jobs for minorities in the construction trades in order to gain their support, and this helped to defeat the ordinance. Over the year and a half that followed, anti-Wal-Mart activists regrouped sufficiently to push a new big-box living wage law through the city council. Yet after much uncertainty Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley vetoed the law, and proponents were unable to hold together enough political support to override the mayoral veto (Sites 2007).

The anti-Wal-Mart coalition, however, continued the struggle. In an aggressive bid to alter the balance of power on the Chicago City Council, local labor unions, led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), backed a large number of anti-Wal-Mart candidates in the 2007 aldermanic races with money and campaign workers. Although a number of these candidates won, the unions nevertheless still fell short of achieving an anti-Wal-Mart majority in the council. After a period of relative deadlock, Wal-Mart made a renewed push for council approval, this time asking for permission to build a number of new stores. Eventually, the newly designated president of the Chicago Federation of Labor – who was also, in fact, the former director of the UFCW, the union with the most to



lose if Wal-Mart won – stepped in to negotiate an agreement: he promised to end the opposition if Wal-Mart agreed to hire union labor merely to build (but not work in) its stores.<sup>1</sup> No longer pressured by labor, and faced with a demoralized community opposition, the City Council approved two new Wal-Mart stores in summer 2010, and the anti-Wal-Mart campaign in Chicago was clearly over (Simpson et al. 2011).

The key lesson of this struggle is that Chicago's historical legacy of trenches and grassroots stickiness continues to influence the impacts of urban mobilization. One aspect of this legacy is that union workers and minority community residents are often positioned on opposite sides of local development issues. On the labor side of the equation, the political reality is that white construction unions, rather than minority-membership service unions, continue to dominate the Chicago Federation of Labor. Meanwhile, on the community side, while blacks (and to some extent Latinos) in U.S. cities have been historically excluded from many of the economic benefits of redevelopment, minority political and community leaders are often incorporated into development regimes as junior partners in exchange for concessions that are largely symbolic (Reed, 1999). In effect, the recurring co-optation of minority-community leadership into a pluralist game of urban politics, even a game that offers diminished returns, poses significant obstacles to the sort of coalition-building effort exemplified by the anti-Wal-Mart campaign. In this instance, the longstanding labor-community trenches have shaped an institutional terrain that facilitated further divisions within both camps, as racial and political cleavages weakened the capacity of coalition partners to pressure local state

officials with a single voice.

A second dimension relates to the failure of Chicago's campaign to capitalize on the broader nature of the anti-Wal-Mart struggle. For progressive activists, one appeal of the anti-Wal-Mart campaign was its potential to mobilize workers, community residents, environmentalists, feminists and others; these activists tended to see the conflict in Chicago as an early episode in a longer-term, national (or perhaps even global) confrontation with an increasingly irresponsible and unjust corporate order. For the city's political elites, by contrast, the anti-Wal-Mart campaign was a destabilizing local conflict that threatened the leadership strata of many pillar institutions – city government, the black community, the labor federation – of the local governance regime. These leaders responded assertively and, along with Wal-Mart, drew upon and intensified the fragmenting capacities of racial division, revanchist localism, and pluralist political advantage. In response, the anti-Wal-Mart coalition was not without resources or political support, but the longstanding institutional separation of labor and community politics – and the incorporation of key labor and community leaders into the regime itself – made constructing a durable, far-reaching alliance on such a local terrain a steep (and ultimately unachievable) challenge.

#### Case II: The Struggle for Immigrant Rights

The other major struggle in Chicago during the past decade was the immigrant rights movement. In the spring of 2006, hundreds of thousands of

protestors marched in downtown Chicago – and equally large numbers in many other U.S. cities – to demand an immigration reform with a path to citizenship. This unprecedented mobilization of migrants, social service organizations, labor unions, churches, and students was sparked by the recent passage of the Sensenbrenner bill (H.R. 4437) by the U.S. House of Representatives, a legal measure that proposed to criminalize undocumented immigrants as well as people who might try to assist them (Wayne 2005). A heterogeneous array of Chicago-based groups – some of them were longstanding Latino immigrant rights organizations while others included hometown associations (HTAs) known mostly for development and service activities focused on Mexico – came together to organize the demonstrations. One unintended, and perhaps surprising, result was that the 2006 marches would propel so many of these groups more deeply into Illinois state and local politics.

Chicago's Latino political alignments over the preceding two decades had been profoundly shaped by the city's legacy of machine politics as well as the challenge to those politics by insurgent Mayor Harold Washington in the 1980s. Latino activists and community organizations were major contributors to Washington's victory and reform efforts, but by the 1990s, with the emerging dominance of Mayor Richard M. Daley, many independent Latino politicians were ousted or absorbed into the institutional networks of the local Democratic Party political machine. The Hispanic Democratic Organization (HDO), a political action committee founded in 1993, relied on city employees and patronage benefits to elect pro-Daley candidates at the city and statewide levels (Pallares 2010). As immigrant rights issues became more prominent by the end of that decade,

nominally independent advocacy organizations, such as Centro Sin Fronteras and the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), sought to influence state and local Democratic Party officials in a different way. These groups led a series of marches and town hall meetings in Chicago in the early years of the new decade, often linked to specific pieces of immigration-reform legislation at the state level. Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, as part of an aggressive effort to court Latino voters for his upcoming reelection campaign, began to pursue closer ties with the state's immigrant organizations as early as 2004, promising expanded immigrant-related services in hopes of boosting minority-community political loyalty and voter turnout (Rogal 2004).

Meanwhile, Chicago-based migrants affiliated with the transnationalist hometown associations continued to focus their political energies mostly on development and political projects related to Mexico. The city's HTAs had been growing rapidly since the 1990s, and while their leaders, encouraged by the Mexican government, were beginning to pay somewhat greater attention to U.S. domestic politics, the divide between the Chicago-focused immigrant rights groups and the Mexico-oriented migrant organizations remained deep and wide. As late as summer 2005, in fact, a major rally in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood sponsored by Centro and ICIRR drew significant numbers of immigrant rights supporters, but CONFEMEX, the HTA confederation, did not formally participate, seeing its primary political interests as continuing to lie south of the border (Vonderlack-Navarro and Sites, in process).

It was the threatening implications of Sensenbrenner that first brought together activists from both sides of immigrant/migrant divide. In early 2006, CONFEMEX leaders joined with the major immigrant rights organizations in Chicago to form the March 10<sup>th</sup> Coalition, and proceeded to work together to plan a major protest for that date. The ensuing turnout – an estimated 100,000 people marched from Chicago’s Near West Side to the city’s Loop in support of immigrant rights (Ávila and Olivo 2006) – gained attention throughout the country, and set the stage for the even larger May 1<sup>st</sup> protests that took place in many U.S. cities.

Following the 2006 marches, most of the major sponsoring organizations scrambled to take advantage of the unprecedented attention they received from state and local politicians. Illinois Democratic Party leaders and immigrant advocacy organizations, in particular, worked quickly to draw CONFEMEX, the domestic political neophyte, further into the orbit of state and local activism. Shortly after the marches, the confederation entered into a newly formalized partnership with ICIRR, which enjoyed close political ties to Illinois Democrats, especially Blagojevich. For ICIRR and for Democratic state politicians, what made CONFEMEX especially attractive was the confederation’s highly mobilized membership, which had played a pivotal role in the March 10<sup>th</sup> turnout and was now seen as a fresh conduit to a newly emerging portion of the state’s growing Latino voting bloc (Interview with ICIRR Board President Juan Salgado, January 9, 2009, Chicago, IL). In effect, ICIRR, with CONFEMEX as a partner, began to see itself as a more reform-oriented, state-level successor to Daley’s HDO machine, which was now embroiled in corruption scandals and would soon be forced to shut down.

Soon after the May 1<sup>st</sup> marches, ICIRR and HTA federation leaders began the work of forming a political action committee called Mexicans for Political Progress. The committee would focus its efforts on providing financial aid and volunteer labor for the election campaigns of Governor Rod Blagojevich and Chicago-based Congressman Luis Gutierrez, along with other statewide candidates. CONFEMEX would also continue to work extensively with ICIRR's citizenship campaigns, which were contributing to major increases in naturalization rates among the state's Mexican immigrants, along with voter registration drives (Olivo 2008). In exchange, Blagojevich began to implement a number of state initiatives, including health services, public education programs, and immigrant welcoming centers (CONFEMEX press release, March 28, 2007).

In this sense, the organizations' strategy to channel their activism into Illinois interest-group politics seemed to be bearing fruit. Yet by early 2007, when Congressman Gutierrez co-sponsored the Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act or STRIVE Act (HR 1645), the bill's emphasis on heightened security provisions and guest-worker programs as the price for a narrow path to citizenship divided local activists and seriously weakened the March 10<sup>th</sup> Coalition, which was now involved in planning the one-year-anniversary march for May Day 2007 (Olivo 2007). Competition between the groups for state funding and political connections further divided them, even as the availability of these benefits furnished powerful incentives for even more aggressive interest-group behavior. The result was a growing turn away from protest mobilization by all groups, with CONFEMEX and ICIRR, in particular, focused

intensively on naturalization and voter mobilization.

Yet, by 2008, the onset of economic downturn began to take its toll on Illinois' well-oiled Democratic political machine. Facing serious fiscal problems, Springfield legislators refused to fund much of the governor's immigrant-related budget, and even Blagojevich himself was forced to cut deeply into his own citizenship programs (Sacchetti 2008). As corruption rumors surrounded Blagojevich, federation leaders also grew concerned about their political action committee's close ties to the governor. Soon after they withdrew support for Mexicans for Political Progress, Blagojevich himself was arrested on criminal charges in December 2008 for soliciting illegal campaign contributions, and he was impeached by the Illinois Senate shortly thereafter (Coen and Pearson 2008). By early the following year, internal conflicts within CONFEMEX fractured the confederation, as several member federations pulled out. Meanwhile, the immigrant rights marches dwindled, and path-to-citizenship immigration reform had fallen well off the national agenda.

In retrospect, it is clear that fragmentation and circumscription of Chicago's immigrant rights movement – its channeling into trenches and sticky grassroots – were closely related to powerful tendencies in state and local politics. Even before the 2006 marches, the city's most important immigrant rights organizations were tightly tied to state and local Democratic Party politicians (Cordero-Guzman et al. 2008). Recognizing that Latino voters were already becoming an ever-growing electoral bloc, party leaders in the 1990s attempted to fashion organizational vehicles such as HDO that might transform those voters into steady political

supporters of the existing governance regime – or, at a minimum, prevent a resurgence of the black-brown coalition that had once provided a core base of support for Washington, the reform mayor. By the 2000s, Democratic politicians at the statewide level looked increasingly to immigrant organizations such as ICIRR as an important access point to the area’s newest political participants. If the mass eruption of the anti-Sensenbrenner movement in spring 2006 briefly shifted the focus of all such organizations to urban mobilization strategies to reshape national-level U.S. politics, aggressive post-2006 courting by Illinois Democratic officials tended to quickly reorient attention to state and local politics.

Labor’s relatively muted influence within the movement further encouraged this political process. Although unions with significant immigrant memberships (e.g. SEIU as well as UNITE-HERE, the hotel and restaurant workers union) co-sponsored a series of marches with Centro and ICIRR during the early 2000s and also provided much of the infrastructural support for the May 1<sup>st</sup> 2006 mega-march (Fink 2008), labor remained a subsidiary presence within the local immigrant rights movement. As CONFEMEX and ICIRR pushed more deeply into state and local politics after the 2006 marches, emphasizing immigrant identities as emerging voters rather than organized workers, union influence diminished still further.

## Conclusion

The two major movements that emerged in Chicago over the past decade, while not always playing out in parallel ways, nevertheless help us to understand



how urban mobilization is often shaped by recurring patterns of political incorporation and pluralist competition. Both struggles took place on an institutional terrain that was not only governed by relatively stable political elites but that was also deeply marked by trenches and grassroots features inherited from earlier generations of political struggles.

Several of these features played an important role in shaping the two movements in Chicago. Most centrally, the enduring separation between unions and community organizations continued to weaken both sides of the coalition, reducing labor's ability to ground urban movements in a broader class-based mobilization while encouraging community groups to position their leadership claims within a local political arena in which race, ethnicity and interest-group competition contributed to further coalitional fragmentation. In the immigrant rights movement in Chicago, labor was never able to play more than a supportive role; state and local political elites, in turn, found it relatively easy to forge alliances with immigrant and Latino community leaders, who soon gave up their one independent resource (the capacity to launch protest marches) in order to participate wholeheartedly in interest-group and electoral mobilization within a balkanizing political arena. In the anti-Wal-Mart struggle, Chicago's unions anchored a well-sustained challenge to the city's mayoral-led development regime, but their inability to push a durable legislative victory through the City Council (in part because of the influence of black politicians and community leaders favorable to Wal-Mart) encouraged the more aggressive unions to launch an electoral strategy to strengthen their influence over the legislative chamber. When this effort to reshape the City

Council fell short, the willingness of the more conservative labor federation to cut their own subsequent deal with Wal-Mart (to protect the special interests of their most privileged union members) left even those community groups who were most sympathetic to labor feeling deserted and sold out.

Labor/community trenches within each movement, then, played an important role in its evolution. These trenches, in turn, made the challenge presented by each movement relatively easy to manage for local-state elites, who benefited over time from the fragmenting and localizing impacts of institutional participation on would-be challenger groups. Yet it was not simply the trenches *within* each movement but also the trenches *between* the two movements that were so fateful for how the politics of urban mobilization played out in U.S. cities. That the anti-Wal-Mart campaign and immigrant mobilization emerged as distinct movements – one a struggle for economic justice and the other a struggle over political inclusion – was, to some extent, itself a symptom of an arbitrary (though historically embedded) distinction between economic and political rights. Both struggles, at root, emerged from structural forms of economic and political disadvantage that, within a neoliberalizing social order, have been profoundly intertwined. Wal-Mart's economic success as a neoliberal corporate exemplar in the United States has been highly dependent upon the post-1970s political forces – national-state deregulation, inter-urban competition, labor-law evisceration, and so forth – that have helped to produce a flexible, low-wage and relatively disempowered working class. Immigration law “reforms,” in turn, have dramatically expanded the nation's undocumented population, supplying an especially pliable

migrant workforce that further contributes to labor-market flexibility while also introducing new forms of political disenfranchisement (Fernandez-Kelly and Massey 2007). U. S. cities such as Chicago are positioned at the epicenter of these related political-economic developments, though their trench-divided political communities produced distinct urban mobilizations that sought to challenge them. Each of these mobilizations, however, as we have seen, became deeply shaped by the local political system, which in different ways relied upon ethnic-based mechanisms of inclusion and dispersion to dispel a potentially much more threatening challenge.

For theorists of urban political incorporation, of course, such processes are part-and-parcel of politics in the American city: Local political systems turn urban politics into ethnic and racial politics, as newcomers to the city turn demographic growth into political influence by mobilizing into electoral blocs, gaining representation, and eventually becoming part of governing coalitions (Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1984; Mollenkopf and Sonenshein 2010). Yet just as such theorists may have overstated the benefits to community members (as opposed to leaders) from the historic incorporation of black urban voters in the 1960s and '70s, we might remain somewhat skeptical toward the expected returns to Latino immigrants for their emerging electoral participation in the U.S. city today. Beyond the inevitable limits of pluralist representation even under the best of circumstances, there are particular barriers faced by contemporary U.S. immigrants that further diminish the political benefits of electoral mobilization. Indeed, voting rights for Mexican immigrants in Illinois (where only 38% of Latinos are eligible to

vote) continue to be unevenly available, and depending on the future of national immigration policy they may remain so (Pew Hispanic Center 2010).

If so, the growing involvement of the Mexican immigrant community in state and local politics in Chicago could yield a particularly *thin* form of political incorporation. Such a phenomenon would encompass familiar processes of immigrant self-organization, interest-group constitution and electoral-bloc mobilization. Yet restricted capacities for legal participation would ensure ongoing political marginalization and disengagement for many community members even under a rubric of interest-group inclusion. In effect, Chicago's Latino "community," like African Americans several decades ago, would come to incorporate in an internally stratified fashion – thereby further proliferating the city's trenches.

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<sup>1</sup> There was considerable controversy about this so-called agreement. On one side, Wal-Mart issued a statement that it had made no such deal. On the other side, it was rumored that the new leader of the Chicago Federation of Labor had been told that his ascension was contingent on his making such a deal. The full story remains unclear.