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From Immigration and Race to Sex and Faith: Reimagining the Politics of Opposition

IN THE SPRING OF 2006, IMMIGRANT RALLIES WERE HELD IN CITIES and towns across the United States.* Some have estimated that more than 3 million joined the protests across the country. Chicago and Los Angeles hosted the largest and most visible rallies on May 1, with estimates of 400,000 and 500,000 marching in each respectively (Bada, Fox, Selee 2006: v). These rallies, and the political coalitions that organized them, have been seen by many as marking a shift in immigrant politics:

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from laying low to coming out of the shadows. Thousands of immigrants marching in the streets politicized U.S. immigration policy and proposed reforms. The rallies, and those who organized them, were trying to counter the growing anti-immigrant sentiment that had been voiced in many arenas over the past half decade. Lou Dobbs' nightly rants against "illegal aliens," the passage of anti-immigrant ordinances and laws in at least 40 locales, numerous politicians calling for a fortification of the U.S.-Mexican border, and the Minute Men Project—which took policing of the southern border into their own hands—made apparent the growing hostility toward immigrant populations across the United States.¹

Anti-immigrant sentiment came to a head in national politics when Congressmen Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI) introduced H.R. 4437, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, into the 109th Congress. The bill contained several important provisions including: mandating construction of 700 miles of fencing along the U.S.-Mexican border; requiring employer verification of workers' legal status; ending the practice of "catch and release"; and newly criminalizing undocumented immigrants and those who assist them. The bill passed the House of Representatives on December 16, 2005 by a vote of 239 to 182.² Sensenbrenner had already established a strong anti-immigration profile by sponsoring the Real ID Act, which tied citizenship or legal residency to the ability to apply for a driver license. The Real ID Act was eventually signed into law on May 11, 2005 as a rider to the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief (H.R. 1268).³ After the Real ID rider passed, Sensenbrenner embarked on a more ambitious anti-immigrant campaign via H.R. 4437. The impending Senate vote on H.R. 4437 catalyzed immigrant rights protests across the country the following spring.

The 2006 rallies were not the first pro-immigrant mobilizations in the United States; as with anti-immigrant politics, there were deep roots to the spring demonstrations. Two earlier campaigns, in particular, had been especially important in paving the way for the massive mobilizations. Earlier fights over driver's licenses and in-state tuition

for undocumented migrants were crucial in building networks and strategies needed to mount subsequent mass mobilizations. Various in-state tuition campaigns crystallized around the failed DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minorities Act) introduced into Congress on October 24, 2007. The proposed bill aimed to give undocumented immigrants access to college and the armed services. Similarly, driver's license campaigns in a dozen states, which aimed to grant state driver's licenses without requiring a Social Security number, created networks that prefigured the 2006 rallies. Initially, the local driver's license campaigns had considerable backing among law enforcement agencies and stood a good chance of being approved. However, after September 11, 2001, support evaporated and many state bills failed to pass local legislatures.⁴

In 2006, immigrant rights activists built on the earlier in-state tuition and driver's license campaigns, but this time their actions caught the media attention in new ways as hundreds of thousands marched in large cities and small towns. Newspapers across the country carried photos of thousands marching in the streets on April 10 and May 1. Photographs from Los Angeles and Chicago were especially stunning, and appeared on the front page of newspapers across the country, thereby bringing new visibility to immigration policy. We wanted to know more about the spring 2006 rallies: What institutions and movements had helped propel the immigrant rallies to national visibility? Who were the organizers? How long had immigrant rights groups been organizing? More specifically, we wanted to examine the coalitions themselves: Who was in and who was out? Was there evidence of the long anticipated Black-brown coalition between African Americans and new immigrants being forged? (Browning, Rogers Marshall, and Traub 1990; Hattam 2007; Haney-López 2005).⁵ To answer these questions we conducted fieldwork in Boston in 2008 and 2009.

WHY BOSTON?

Boston is not the most obvious research site for exploring immigrant rights coalitions. After all, the Boston rallies of April 10 and May 1,