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## Going national: how the fight for immigrant rights became a national social movement

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### ABSTRACT

The immigrant rights movement in the United States evolved from largely localised and grassroots struggles in the 1990s into a coherent and coordinated national social movement in the late 2000s and 2010s. Scaling up in this way is challenging because grassroots organisations tend to lack the resources needed to operate at the national level over an extended period. This paper examines how this movement overcame the obstacle by focusing on role of national organisations in concentrating key resources (money, political capital, discursive power) and developing a national social movement infrastructure. The consequences of this process are shown to be paradoxical: While it enabled potent advocacy in the national political arena, the concentration of resources generated constraints on strategies and tactics, inequalities, and conflicts between different factions of the movement. This article describes the process by drawing on interviews with key stakeholders, tax files, newspapers, foundation documents, and White House visitor records.

### KEYWORDS

Social movements;  
immigrant rights;  
immigration reform;  
inequality; scale shift

## Introduction

From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, immigrant rights advocacy was largely a local affair. Most organisations fought for the workplace rights of undocumented immigrants and pushed cities and counties to accommodate new populations (Coutin 2003; Fine 2006; Gonzales 2014; Milkman 2006; Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). Localities were strategic environments: They allowed resource poor organisations to build up their social capital, pool resources, collaborate on campaigns, and exert pressure in accessible political arenas. National battles in the halls of federal power would require enormous resources that most immigrant rights organisations simply did not have. While immigrant activists could wage local campaigns to create accommodating policies, most lacked the capacity to support lengthy national campaigns to change federal immigration policy. The mismatch between the local spaces of mobilisation and the federal spaces of political power confounded advocates as the federal government pursued stricter policies in the late 1990s and 2000s.

By the early 2010s, the immigrant rights movement had developed into a full-fledged nationwide social movement, as described in the introduction to this volume (Bloemraad and Voss 2020). A coherent leadership group had access to millions of dollars in funding. These resources enabled leaders to develop a sophisticated infrastructure that connected hundreds of advocacy organisations around the country and steering them into campaigns to pass comprehensive immigration reform. The fight for immigrant rights, therefore, morphed from scattered local battles into an integrated and powerful movement. While the movement never achieved its principal goal of comprehensive immigration reform, it did succeed in pushing immigration reform and immigrant rights to the centre of the national political stage.

The paper has three objectives. First, it aims to describe the development of a national social movement. Second, it explains this process in terms of the concentration of economic, political, and discursive resources by leading organisations. Third, it shows that the consequences of this process have been contradictory. While it created a vehicle for making demands in national politics, the accumulation of resources by a small number of professionalised organisations made the leadership risk-averse, unequal, and prone to internal conflicts.

### **Nationalising a social movement: the challenges of scaling up**

Scaling up to the national level is essential if activists are to have an impact where it arguably matters most: the federal government. At the same time, the gains of scaling up are counterbalanced by inequalities between organisations, dependence on elites for essential resources, and conflicts between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ of the movement.

### ***Nationalising and professionalising social movement organisations***

The scholarship on social movements draws attention to the considerable barriers faced by local activists with national ambitions (Routledge 2003; Tarrow 2005; Tarrow and McAdam 2005; Sikkink 2005; Nicholls 2009; Soule 2013; Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). Resource scarcity impedes the ability of small, less formal, and local organisations to create and maintain national networks and organisations (Nicholls 2009; Routledge 2003). Small and less formal organisations may develop a loose sense of solidarity with geographically distant actors but they are not likely to invest time and scarce resources to develop a durable national infrastructure and coordinate sustained activism. Consequently, participation in national or transnational campaigns tends to be limited to ‘partial commitments, verbal compromises, and organisational drift from one issue to another as priorities and agendas change’ (Tarrow and McAdam 2005, 146). This makes it difficult for local, less formal, and grassroots organisations to enter the national political arena and mount campaigns to change federal policy.

In spite of the constraints described above, the immigrant rights movement in the United States evolved from largely localised struggles in the 1990s into a coherent and coordinated national social movement in the late 2000s and early 2010s. How did the movement overcome the imposing obstacles? We maintain that the concentration of resources by leading advocacy organisations made it possible for the movement to shift to the national scale. Such resources come in different forms and from different

sources. First of all, becoming active in national politics requires money (Clark and Heath 2015; Kohl-Arenas 2016). Economic resources enable organisations to grow, acquire staff with specialised and professional skills, plan for long-term goals, lobby high ranking political officials, invest in countrywide organisational infrastructure and enact far-reaching mobilisations. Second, the acquisition of political resources in the form of a good political reputation and strong relations with political elites facilitates ongoing engagement in federal policy. Advocacy organisations that develop strong relations with federal officials can stand a better chance to influence policy while also gaining valuable information about the inner workings of government. Lastly, discursive resources allow actors to produce politically resonant discourses and ensure their dissemination to a broad public (Voss, Silva and Bloemraad 2020). These resources include intimate understandings of the national culture, skills to craft persuasive and resonant messages, and connections to the press (journalists, editors, producers) that permit wide diffusion. Discursive resources have become more valuable as mass communication has become an important part of national level advocacy (Bennett 2005).

The accumulation of resources is strongly associated with organisational professionalisation (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Staggenborg 1988; Walker 2014). In terms of financial resources, McCarthy and Zald note in their seminal article that, 'The larger the income flow to a SMO [social movement organisation] the more likely that cadre and staff are professional and the larger are these groups' (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1234). More resources and greater professionalization has how organisations operate and express the voice of their constituents in the public sphere (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2004a, 2004b; Staggenborg 1988; Walker 2014). 'The proliferating new organisations', Putnam argues, 'are professionally staffed advocacy organisations, not member centred, locally based associations. The newer groups focus on expressing policy views in the national political debate' (2000, 70). These organisations, in other words, have pro forma members or no members at all, with their headquarters located in Washington, DC rather than the geographical strongholds of their members (Putnam 2000).

The new type of professional organisations are effective in raising more money, acquiring greater expertise, exercising influence on the federal policy making process, and reaching out to more people (Putnam 2000). Just as important, formal and professional organisations are more sustainable than small informal organisations. 'A formalised structure ensures', according to Staggenborg, 'that there will be continuity in the performance of maintenance tasks and that the SMO will be prepared to take advantage of elite preferences and environmental opportunities' (1988, 597).

The attributes of these new organisations (highly professionalized and centred in the nation's capital) can weaken ties to grassroots organisations and networks, making it more difficult to recruit and retain activists, especially for risky political campaigns (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2004a, 2004b; Zald and McCarthy 1987). Diminished recruitment and retention capacities can undermine the mobilization of people and result in unsuccessful campaigns (Zald and McCarthy 1987). To make up for deficient grassroots social capital, some national organisations form partnerships with prominent, social capital rich local organisations, essentially contracting out grassroots mobilisation capacities to their local partners.

For the case of immigrant rights activism, we call these influential local partners *regional organisations* because they assume leadership over broad regional coalitions

and have strong ties with smaller and more informal activist organisations in their metropolitan areas. Partnerships between regional and national organisations provide national organisations with an important gateway into the immigrant rights grassroots. Such a partnership can also benefit the regional organisations. These organisations are rich in social capital, but they are comparatively poor in economic, political, and discursive resources. Partnerships allow the regionals to enter the national political arena and acquire new resources (i.e. new funding sources, relations with federal lawmakers, media exposure). Thus, whereas the social capital of regional organisations allows national organisations to reach into the grassroots, the economic, political, and discursive resources of national organisations allow regionals to enter national political battles. The paper maintains that resource interdependency between the two types of organisations results in a partnership that undergirds the national social movement infrastructure.

### *Consequences of scaling up the movement*

The advantages of well-resourced and professional organisations, however, are counterbalanced by certain disadvantages.

First, the accumulation of resources contributes to oligarchy and the stratification of the social movement (Mann 1986; Rucht 1999). Collective enterprises, according to Michael Mann (1986), involve both cooperative (power to) and distributive (power over) power. 'For the division of labour is deceptive: Although it involves specialisation of the function at all levels, the top overlooks and directs the whole' (Mann 1986, 7). The dominant organisations are in a stronger position to determine the strategy, targets, goals, and discursive frames of the social movement. They can also capture a greater share of the returns on collective action in terms of more foundation support, political access, and media coverage. Moreover, the professionalisation of the movement enhances the prominence of college-educated experts. This results in social distance between middle class staff and precarious constituents and grassroots activists. Growing inequalities can spark conflicts between the 'haves' (rich, professional, national) and 'have nots' (precarious, less professional, local) of a movement. Between these poles, regional organisations sit in a contradictory position because they draw important resources from both national organisations (money, political access, media exposure) and local, less formal groups (grassroots social capital).

Second, organisations that are overly dependent on elite sources for financial and political capital can prioritise the interests of elite benefactors (Kohl-Arenas 2016; Piven and Cloward 1977). Organisations need to hire professionals with expertise in writing grants and cultivating strong ties to program officers in large foundations. These organisations, in Skocpol's terms, 'have a greater need to pay attention to foundations and wealthy patrons' (Skocpol 2004b, 11). Foundations can influence organisations by prioritising funding to reformist organisations and campaigns while pushing further professionalisation (Kohl-Arenas 2016; Skocpol 2004b). Organisations can also become dependent on favourable relations with elected officials for their political capital. As noted above, political access provides organisations a seat at the table during negotiations and scarce and valuable insider information. Access can also be used to leverage more money from foundations, more attention from the media, and more status from other social movement organisations. Similarly, Skocpol observes that, 'they [organisations] must cultivate access to

government professionals in order to be able to claim to their public audiences that they have an impact on public policy making' (Skocpol 2004b, 11). Government officials are very aware of the value placed on political access and use the denial of it to ensure the compliance of organisations. The mere threat of losing access is oftentimes enough to ensure acquiescence.

In sum, organisations need to enter the national political arena if they want to shape federal policy. Entry requires enormous resources to fund campaigns, influence policy decisions, and produce resonant discourses for the national public. This process, by most accounts, makes social movement organisations more effective and efficient. However, these positive results introduce negative consequences such as inequalities, endemic conflicts, and dependence on elite patrons.

## Methodology

This article draws on multiple sources. First, the descriptive account of the movement draws on 25 interviews with executive directors and lead organisers of important immigrant rights advocacy organisations. To identify the concentration of economic, political, and discursive resources, we compiled four databases from a variety of sources, including tax documents, newspapers, Obama administration records, and the Open Society Foundation.

First, to assess economic resources, we developed a funding database. The non-random sample consists of 49 immigrant advocacy organisations derived from three different sources (Lexis Nexis, the Foundation Center, and referrals from colleagues in other organisations). Tax forms (IRS 990) provided information on the 'grants and contributions' most of these organisations received from the early 2000s to the early 2012. Several of the 49 organisations were excluded from our figures because they were either extreme outliers or their tax information was incomplete. The Foundation Center provided data on foundations that have made grants to immigrant advocacy organisations. We have been able to assess investments in the immigrant rights movement and the types of organisations that benefited most.

Second, to assess political resources, we examined access to the White House by creating a White House visitors' database, for each of the 49 organisations identified in our non-random sample. It covers the first five years of the Obama Administration (2009–2014). We retrieved information from the White House visitor webpage<sup>1</sup> and identified organisations by the names of strategic employees. Names were information on them through organisation websites, the newspaper dataset (see below), LinkedIn profiles, and extensive website searches. We employ analysis to examine the political resources of different organisations. This data is also used to perform a network analysis of organisations visiting the White House. In the analysis, each organisation is a node and a tie is assigned between organisations visiting the White House simultaneously. We compare the network of 2009–2011 with the network of 2012–2014.

Third, to assess discursive power, we use a newspaper dataset based on the claim analysis method outlined by Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham (Koopmans and Statham 1999). From the Lexis Nexis database, we extracted articles with the key words 'immigration reform' and 'immigration protest'. All relevant articles on immigrant rights were included, while editorials and opinion articles have been excluded. For the 2000–2014

period 1254 newspaper articles were extracted, from which 5422 claims were coded. The database includes information about the articles (publication dates, newspapers, titles, authors, locations) as well as information on the claim-makers (name, affiliation, claim).

Lastly, we compiled a database of 44 Open Society Foundation (OSF) project documents procured through DC Leaks.<sup>2</sup> OSF was the second most important funder of immigrant advocacy organisations and its project descriptions give valuable information on the beliefs and strategies of some of the leading immigrant rights advocates. We keep with established journalistic rules concerning the use of documents leaked by WikiLeaks. We have ensured that sensitive or compromising information is not used.

## The development of a national immigrant rights movement, 2000–2014

The 2000–2014 period is key in the transition of immigrant rights advocacy. At the beginning of this period, activism was centred in localities and there were no sustainable national advocacy organisations. By the end of this period, there was a professional, well-resourced and nationally integrated advocacy infrastructure. This section describes the process.

### *Creating a national infrastructure*

A basic national infrastructure emerged in the early 2000s. Most organisations were local and focused on organising immigrant workers and pushing for accommodating local immigration policies (Fine 2006; Milkman 2006; Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). Some of these organisations became more prominent in large metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, Chicago, Baltimore-Washington, DC, and New York. They formed region-wide coalitions and led a number of important campaigns. These *regional organisations* were focused on local fights for immigrant rights but they also formed loose connections to one another through itinerant activists and organisations, mutual friends, funders, and so on. These relations permitted the circulation of basic ideas, materials, and organising methods but they were too weak to permit sophisticated and long-term coordination at the national scale.

In 1997, the national social justice organisation, Center for Community Change (CCC), spearheaded the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support. The campaign aimed to push back on a recent law (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act PRWORA) that imposed important restrictions on recipients of welfare. CCC assembled a large and diverse national coalition consisting of welfare, labour, religious, and neighbourhood organisations. It also reached out to the regional immigrant rights organisations. According to CCC's director Deepak Bhargava, prior to this coalition regional immigrant organisations were 'definitely at the periphery of CCC's orbit of grass-roots organisations around the country. They had not been a central relationship for us'.<sup>3</sup> Regional organisations came to the attention of CCC because they were at the forefront of innovative immigrant worker campaigns (Fine 2006). CCC's campaign provided them a platform to raise the issue of immigration among prominent national advocacy organisations and enter the federal political arena.

In 2000, regional immigrant rights organisations within CCC's broader coalition formed the Immigrant Organising Committee. This was one of the first efforts to formally



link regional and national advocacy organisations. The regional leaders, in conjunction with CCC, set their long-term goal as the legalisation of undocumented immigrants. 'We said', according to one Los Angeles-based organiser Mayron Payes, "What do we have in common?" You need to have something to build around. The issue of a lack of documents became the common issue'.<sup>4</sup> The immigrant rights organisers pushed this network and CCC to invest more resources in this struggle.

They propositioned CCC to say, 'Hey, no one wants to talk about legalisation of the undocumented in Washington, D.C. We need a national organisation to take up this cause and back us up, bring us together, to support us.' It was a big issue for the organisations, not one that CCC had worked on previously. Really, it was kind of them coming to us and saying 'we need what CCC can bring'.<sup>5</sup>

The Immigrant Organising Committee became its own independent entity, renamed the Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM) in 2003. Approximately 15 regional immigrant rights organisations made up FIRM's core leadership circle. The leading regional organisations had regular contact with one another throughout FIRM's existence, as described by the director of CASA Maryland, 'With FIRM, we have been doing weekly conference calls for the last 15 years. That is how we connect with Center for Community Change, which created FIRM and still plays a major role to bring us together'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the basic structure of the national movement was in place: a partnership between professional national organisations (CCC at first, followed by others) and regional organisations through the vehicle of FIRM.

### *Institutionalising a division of labour*

From the mid-2000s onwards, the leading advocates created a division of labour to manage national campaigns for comprehensive immigration reform legislation.

2006 was a watershed year (Voss and Bloemraad 2011; Zepeda Millan 2017). Massive mobilisations across the country fought back the punitive bill from the House of Representatives, 'Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act'. It was also the year that the emergent immigrant rights movement launched its first serious campaign to pass comprehensive immigration reform. CCC, FIRM, National Council of La Raza (NCLR), National Immigration Forum (NIF), and approximately 30 other organisations formed the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform. The organisations developed a division of labour consisting of the following pillars: NCLR focused on the legislative process, legal organisations specialised in the legislative analysis; NIF worked on communication, and CCC and FIRM coordinated grassroots mobilisations. In spite of their growing coordination, these organisations failed to pass the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act in 2006 and 2007.

The coalition and campaign created a durable infrastructure that would be reproduced in the subsequent two campaigns for comprehensive immigration reform. On the heels of the recent defeat, the national leadership met in spring 2008 to discuss the way forward. An Open Society memorandum summarising the meeting reported, 'Bruised but undaunted, leading national and local advocates have come together in multiple retreats and planning meetings to conduct an extensive analysis and to develop a new immigration reform strategy'.<sup>7</sup> Reform Immigration for America (RIFA) was born from these early meetings. It would be the second national coalition to prosecute the campaign for

immigration reform. Another leading foundation, the Atlantic Foundation, reiterated the general enthusiasm for the new campaign.

After that setback [failure to pass reform in 2006 and 2007], Atlantic provided funds for the key advocacy groups we support – including the Center for Community Change, National Council of La Raza, National Immigration Forum and Asian American Justice Center – to regroup and come back with a proposal for strengthening their efforts next time. The result was Reform Immigration for America (RIFA), a strong coalition with resources provided by Atlantic ... and other funders that have enabled the movement to field an unprecedented campaign.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, following a string of defeats, foundations and leading organisations came back and doubled down on comprehensive immigration reform.

Leading reform advocates believed that they had fought a narrow, top-down policy battle in 2006 and 2007, focused mostly on lobbying federal lawmakers. This, many believed, weakened their abilities to mobilise broad national support for immigration reform. The director of CCC remembers that ‘our inability to match the nativist forces toe to toe in 2007 is unquestionably what cost us the bill. I think even people who had a view that the best thing is the insider way behind closed doors realised, uh-oh, we have to have mobilisation capacity that’s like the capacity that the nativists have or we won’t get this thing done’.<sup>9</sup> He goes on to note that,

RIFA was sort of like the 2.0 if you will for this effort. It was much more based on the philosophy that we needed the majority of the House [of Representatives], 60 Senators and one president. It was very much a field-based campaign. That included mobilisations around the country. That included building a massive list of immigrant rights supporters that still exists. It’s a 1.5-million-person activist list to generate calls to Congress. It had a much more equal balance between insider and outsider strategies.<sup>10</sup>

Responding to its deficient mobilisation capacities, the leaders designed RIFA’s infrastructure to be centralised and far reaching. Two Washington, DC,-based organisations assumed leadership roles of the broad coalition: Center for Community Change (CCC) and National Immigration Forum (NIF). The new coalition’s managing director was Rich Stolz, a staff member of both CCC and NIF. The spokesperson, field director, and digital director were also staff members of CCC. The Chairperson was Ali Noorani, the executive director of NIF. In addition to being centralised, the coalition was also broad. Between 2009 and 2012, the coalition connected nearly 800 organisations around the country. These organisations ranged from very small organisations to large multi-issue advocacy organisations.

The centralised leadership adopted and formalised the division of labour from the previous campaigns. Ali Noorani described the division of labour in the following way, ‘The infrastructure of RIFA was a four pillar campaign structure ... Each pillar had a lead organisation that was responsible for drawing together table conversations within that pillar of organisations of the local and/or nation levels’.<sup>11</sup> The pillars included: (1) the promotion of citizenship and voter mobilisation, (2) improved policy strategy with stronger researcher and advocacy components, (3) a potent communication wing to ‘create a powerful narrative to support reform’,<sup>12</sup> and (4) a cohesive network of grassroots organisations to pressure federal lawmakers. Because of its direct ties to regional and local organisations, FIRM and CCC assumed leadership over the fourth pillar, grassroots

mobilisation. They divided the national map into state and regional districts. According to RIFA's director at the time,

There were organisers for each region of the country assigned to provide support and help to drive work in the different states. Their job was to spend a lot of time with the different organisations in the different states. Key organisations were identified in each state, sometimes groups of organisations to organise coalitions within those states, so that whatever primary organisation was working directly with a campaign there was a much larger network in each state of additional organisations.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, RIFA and its regional partners sponsored hundreds of trainings across the country. These trainings were essential for connecting local actors to one another, integrating them into the national infrastructure, generating common norms and identities, and shaping how dispersed advocates talked about immigration reform. Thus, RIFA developed an infrastructure with clear lines of command and control between core national leaders (mostly in Washington, DC), regional organisations, and more local and grassroots organisations. The infrastructure was used to launch another effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform in 2010.

### ***Consolidating a national and professional leadership***

The national leadership was fully consolidated with the most recent coalition, Alliance for Citizenship (A4C). Created in December 2012, it was a successor of RIFA and adopted its legislative goal of passing comprehensive immigration reform. But while A4C adopted the same strategy as RIFA, it developed a different infrastructure. Rather than federalise the movement (consisting of a central command centre with regional districts), it concentrated more power in the hands of a number of professional advocacy organisations. The number of affiliated organisations at its peak was 49 – much less than the over 800 organisations that had been part of RIFA. The leadership of the coalition in 2013 was made up of established national organisations. The only non-D.C. organisation to make it into the leadership rank was National Immigration Law Center (NILC), headquartered in Los Angeles. A4C was also highly professionalised. For instance, A4C's Development Manager, Operations Manager, and Deputy Campaign Manager for Policy and Legislation were employed by professional consulting firms that had little experience with local grassroots organising. While A4C continued to partner with regional organisations vis-à-vis FIRM, there was less interest to cultivate grassroots mobilisation capacity.

Thus, the immigrant rights movement created a national infrastructure with a clear division of labour that connected its national and professional leadership to regional advocacy organisations. This structure and the organisations became the preeminent force within the immigrant rights movement.

### ***Concentrating economic, political, discursive resources***

The transition into a powerful national social movement was made possible through the acquisition of economic, political, and discursive resources. These resources enabled the leading organisations to build an infrastructure, lobby politicians, and exert its voice in the media.

### Concentration of economic resources

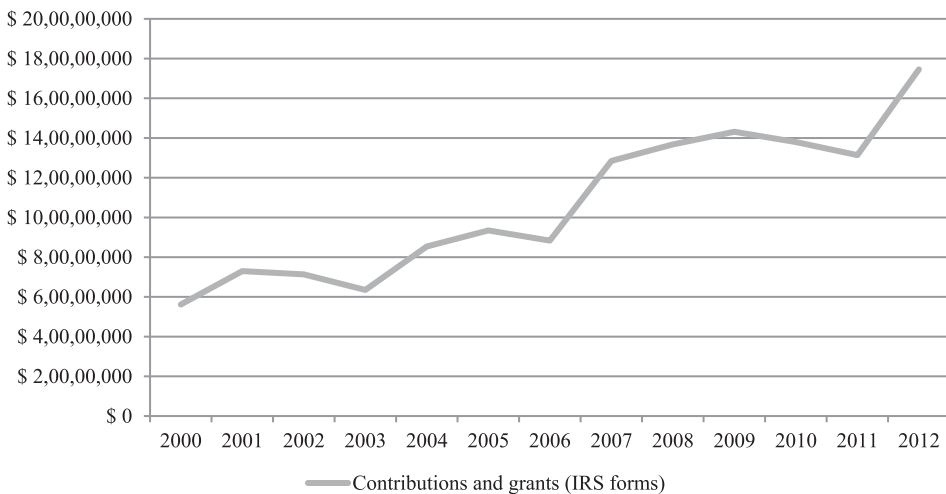
Substantial investments by some of the country's largest foundations enabled advocacy organisations to build the infrastructure needed to move onto the national political stage. In 2008, an Open Society report stated that 'Funders are coming together again to ensure that the investments made last year serve as the foundation to build upon for the long haul until reform is achieved'.<sup>14</sup> As can be seen in Figure 1, IRS data point to a substantial increase in funding ('contributions and grants') to the organisations in our sample, increasing from \$56 million in 2000 to \$174 million in 2012.

Funders did not only write checks. They were actively engaged in strategy sessions, workshops and meetings with the executive directors of advocacy organisations. 'The credit for our movement', observed the CCC director, 'goes to immigrant leaders who had the courage to step out of the shadows. *But the growth and speed of the movement was significantly aided by a small number of visionary philanthropies*' (cited in Preston 2014, emphasis added). Twenty foundations were responsible for two thirds of grants and the Ford Foundation and Open Society<sup>15</sup> were the two most prominent among these.

The financial bounty enabled national organisations to undertake costly communication research (e.g. focus groups, public opinion surveys), run training in localities across the country, and lobby national politicians and develop relations with political elites. They could also use their financial sources to hire highly skilled and well-educated staff to perform these important functions.

### Concentration of political resources

The leaders of the movement accumulated political capital by developing strong relations with the Obama administration and the Democratic leadership of the House and Senate. The Obama administration enacted a vigorous community outreach program early in its first



**Figure 1.** Growing contributions and grants to immigrant rights organisations. Source: Tax forms (IRS 990).

Note: Excluding NAL, NGA and NCIC because there is no IRS data available for them. Excluding UWD and NBIRC because IRS data falls outside the period under investigation. And excluding ACLU, SPLC and SEIU because these large multi-issue organisations bias the results with their extraordinary high revenues.

**Table 1.** Meetings at the White House attended by immigrant rights organisations.

	Number of meetings in WH	Total number of times NGO's visited the WH	Organisations present during meetings		
			1 NGO	2 NGO's	> 2 NGO's
2009	34	47	24	8	2
2010	80	138	55	13	12
2011	95	152	69	12	14
2012	82	135	65	7	10
2013	107	188	76	16	15
2014	105	194	73	15	17
Total	503	854	362	71	70

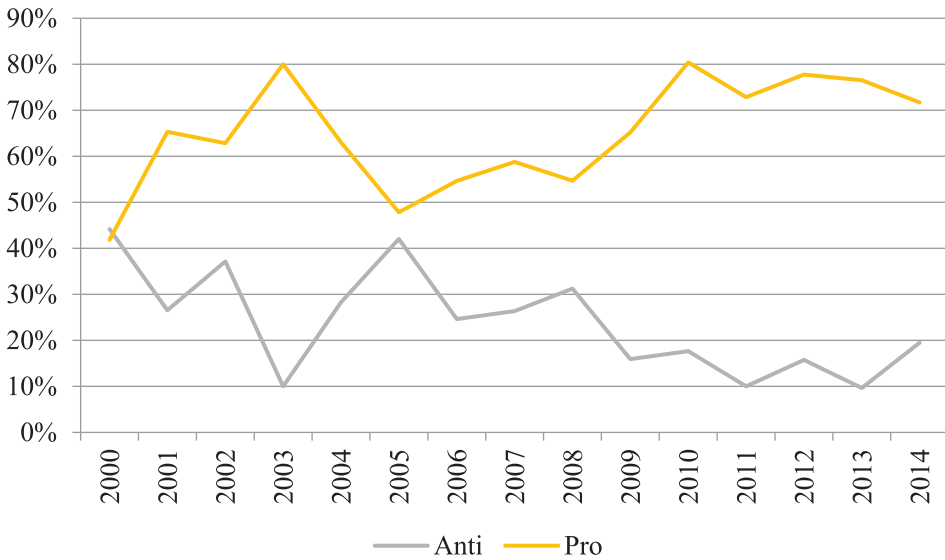
Source: White House Visitor Records.

term. It created the Office of Public Engagement to 'create and coordinate opportunities for direct dialogue between the Obama Administration and the American public while bringing new voices to the table and ensuring that everyone can participate and inform the work of the President'.<sup>16</sup> This was by no means a symbolic gesture. The Office of Public Engagement's director, Valerie Jarrett, was a Senior Advisor to the President. The Office hired staff with direct ties to prominent immigrant advocacy organisations including the Center for Community Change, National Council of La Raza and the United Farmworkers Union. Moreover, advocacy organisations enjoyed frequent access to important White House officials, including President Obama (see, Table 1). Based on the White House Visitor Records, there were approximately 854 individual visits to the White House during 2009–2014 and 503 meetings involving the organisations in our sample. The Bush administration had supported immigration reform but granted limited direct access to advocacy organisations.<sup>17</sup>

Good relations with important political officials provided a seat at the table and some influence over policy and legislation. White House access had secondary benefits because it improved the status of advocacy organisations, which could then be leveraged into more foundation support and media exposure. Lastly, access and political capital provided leading organisations with scarce and highly valued information about the internal machinations of government and the preferences of government officials.

### *Concentration of discursive resources*

Communication was a central pillar of the national immigrant rights movement. National leaders developed a sophisticated strategy consisting of message development, message training to thousands, and fostering relations with producers, editors, and reporters. The communication strategy allowed the advocacy organisations to disseminate their mobilisation frames and messages to the broad public. 'The Communications Pillar', according to one Open Society document, 'is working through mainstream and ethnic television, radio, online and print media'.<sup>18</sup> As shown in Figure 2, of 5422 claims included in the newspaper database, organisations (pro- and anti-immigrant non-profit organisations, unions, religious organisations, businesses) accounted for 32.7% of claims made between 2000 and 2014. Whereas pro- and anti-immigrant claims enjoyed similar levels of influence at the beginning of the decade, the gap between them grew substantially since the mid-decade. By 2014, 71% of all claims made by these organisations were favourable to immigrant rights while only 19.5% were against immigrant rights and comprehensive



**Figure 2.** Pro- and anti-immigrant rights claim (%) by non-business organisations. Source: Lexis Nexis.

immigration reform. The increasing prominence of pro-immigrant claims overlaps directly with the national consolidation of the immigrant rights movement.

In sum, the concentration of economic, political and discursive resources allowed the movement to build national infrastructure, lobby national officials, and develop a commanding voice in the national debate. The immigrant rights movement, for the first time, became an important player in the national political arena.

## Movement stratification

The downside of resource concentration was the stratification of the social movement.

### *Stratification of economic resource*

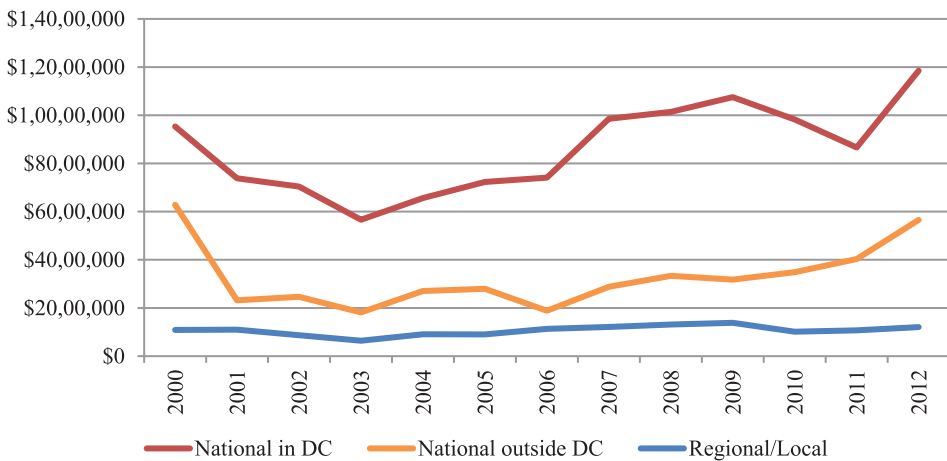
Organisations with established relations to big funders stood a better chance to capture resources and become leading organisations. Foundations like Open Society worked directly with leading organisations like CCC and NIF to devise strategy and set priorities. With Deepak Bhargava serving on the board of Open Society, CCC could influence the funding choices of the foundation. One assessment of Mr Bhargava's role in Open Society noted that 'His multifaceted role provided unique and thoughtful insights that enabled us to quickly understand complex dynamics and marshal resources, beyond what other funders could or would do, in support of immigrant rights'.<sup>19</sup> Ali Noorani, director of the NIF, reflected on these close relations.

As a managing organisation for RIFA, we had a budget management responsibility. As a function of that, we ended up in a place where we would be communicating quite a bit with the funders and either answering their questions, where dollars needed to go, and other times re-granting or contracting dollars out for campaign related purposes.<sup>20</sup>

The top foundations displayed a preference for large grants that typically benefited professional national organisations.

Relations between organisations and funders contributed to inequalities. Drawing on IRS 990 over the 2000–2012, the top five organisations of our sample captured close to 70% of contributions and grants. Moreover, national organisations located in Washington, DC had greater chance of obtaining grant revenue than others. The average annual revenue (2000–2012) for a national organisation headquartered *inside* D.C. was \$12.6 million, a national organisation headquartered *outside* D.C. had a revenue of \$3.9 million, and a regional or local organisation \$1.2 million. As seen in Figure 3, after 2006, the gap between national organisations (D.C. versus non-D.C.) grows considerably. This period overlaps with the creation of RIFA and increased collaboration between national organisations and major funders. There were also inequalities in the salaries of executive directors. By 2012, the average salary of an executive director of a local organisation was \$52,000, which compared poorly to national organisations *inside* Washington, DC (\$316,000) and outside Washington, DC (\$200,000).

Major financial resources allowed national organisations to hire more professional staff, reduce uncertainties, and develop long-term strategic plans. Enhanced capacities made these organisations more competitive in seeking out large grants from foundations, placing them on a virtuous cycle of growth and prosperity. Small and local organisations, by contrast, depended on small grants from a limited range of funders. This resulted in resource scarcity and uncertainty, making it difficult to stabilise, plan beyond short-term needs, and acquire more funding from a more diverse pool of funders. Locked into this structural path, they had great difficulty scaling up to national politics on their own. Either they continued to engage primarily in local politics or they connected to national politics through the mainstream immigrant rights movement. Regional organisations were better off than local grassroots groups because national organisations connected them to new funding



**Figure 3.** Geographical attributes and average grant-contribution per organisation. Source: Tax forms (IRS 990).

Note: Excluding NAL, NGA and NCIC because there is no IRS data available for them. Excluding UWD and NBIRC because IRS data falls outside the period under investigation. And excluding ACLU, SPLC and SEIU because these large multi-issue organisations bias the results with their extraordinary high revenues.

opportunities, allowing them to escape the penury and uncertainty of smaller grassroots organisations.

### *Stratification of political resources*

A handful of organisations, according to the White House Visitor Records, had more contact with the most powerful White House officials working on immigration policy. NCLR was the most prominent organisation in terms of the quantity and quality of access. Of NCLR's 115 White House visits, 73 were with prominent officials, and 36 of those were with President Obama. NIF, CCC, CAP, and SEIU also had regular visits with prominent White House officials.

Geography played a major role in differentiating political access. National organisations headquartered in Washington, DC, had the highest average number of visits, accounting for two-thirds of all visits. National organisations outside of Washington, DC, enjoyed some access but it paled in comparison. Leading organisations were not only meeting more, but the White House served as a focal point for bolstering the leadership network. As can be seen in Figure 4, the national network grew stronger as organisations gained political access, both due to an increase in the number of meetings as well as an increase in the average number of organisations present. At the same time, the most central organisations reinforced their position: Out of the 10 most central organisations in 2009–2011, 9 are the most central in 2012–2014. The increased political access was unevenly distributed between grassroots and national organisations, as national organisations reinforced central positions in the network by being present at more meetings with others. Some regional organisations like CHIRLA or CASA Maryland enjoyed some access but they still trailed D.C.-based organisations.

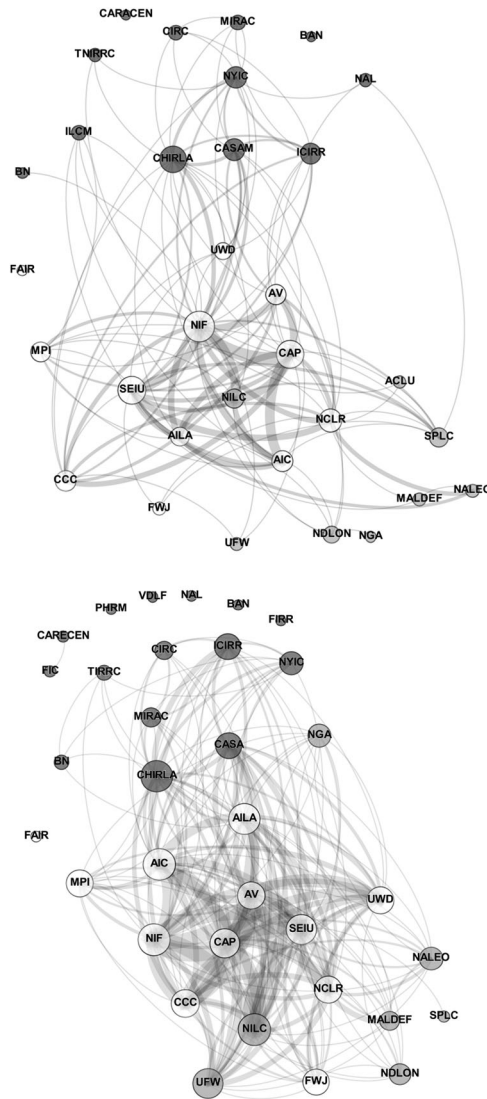
### *Stratification of discursive resources*

The national leadership was important in assuming responsibility over the communication strategy and apparatus of the movement. In 2008, the organisation America's Voice was charged with the communication pillar. Its executive director Frank Sharry and his associates assumed primary responsibility over communications. They produced effective messages and trained many organisations and activists in their use. Even when regional and local organisations spoke in the media, they were often working off centrally produced scripts.

Geographically, the claims of national organisations based in Washington, DC, became increasingly prominent from 2008 onward (see Figure 5). In 2005 and 2006, national organisations headquartered in Washington, DC were on the margins of public debate, accounting for only 7.2% and 11% of claims. This changed in the following years as the growth of D.C.-based organisations accelerated and surpassed local and regional organisations. By 2013 and 2014 Washington, DC-based organisations assumed a dominant role in the media, establishing themselves as the principal representatives of the movement.

Thus, from the late 2000s onward, the articulation of claims was directed from above. Well-endowed organisations and people, most of whom were not precarious immigrants, assumed responsibility in representing immigrants to the press. They crafted what to say, directed how to say it, and dominated interventions in major news outlets.



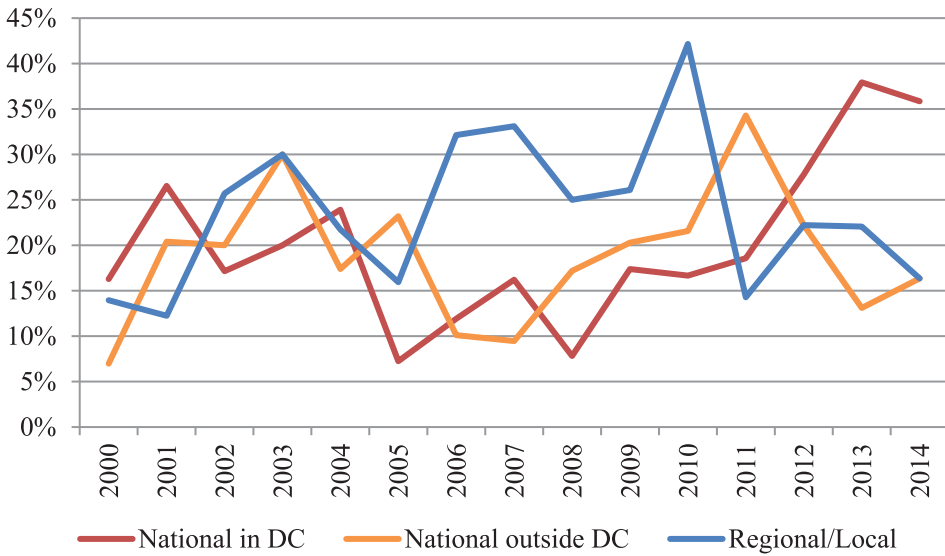


**Figure 4.** Network of organisations meeting together at the White House (2009-2011 and 2012-2014). White: National organisation with HQ in D.C. Light grey: National organisation HQ not in D.C. Dark grey: Regional or local organisations. Source: White House Visitor Records.

## Consequences of stratification

### *Constraining the movement*

White House access was an important source of political capital. It provided organisations with the sense of having an important ally for the cause. Access also provided valued and scarce insider information, which could then be used to develop strategies while bolstering status positioning within the national social movement. Organisations leveraged their insider status to acquire more money, press exposure, and political capital.



**Figure 5.** Proportion of claims by pro-immigration organisations for different types of immigrant rights organisations. Source: Lexis Nexis.

The White House was cognisant of the value placed on access. They distributed access differentially in order to blunt criticisms. ‘I do believe that access and differential access, some of it is intentional. Much of it is intentional’, remarked Tom Saenz the director of Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). ‘It is intended by the White House to signal power and influence’.<sup>21</sup> If leaders pushed too hard on the administration, they risked losing access and depleting a major source of political capital. The director of CASA described the delicate dance in the following way:

Some people thought that confronting the President is losing an ally, a partner who can fight for immigration reform. They saw that the people who are responsible for this crisis were the Republicans only. That is the internal conversation that we have when we say, hey, listen, each of them has a specific responsibility. The Republicans are totally anti-immigrant. They make a decision not to pass an immigration reform, but the President is deporting our families and our people, and he had the power to stop that. He had the power to switch that. That was the conversation back and forth about, don’t touch the President because if you touch him, we lose a partner, we lose an ally.

Torres goes on to note that the White House would signal its displeasure by excluding critical organisations from meetings.

Interviewer: Did the White House signal that?  
 Torres: Oh, yeah. Of course!  
 Interviewer: They signalled that if you push on them, then you’ll lose access?  
 Torres: They don’t say exactly that but we know when the next meeting, they don’t invite me, or the next meeting, they move a different strategy. We know that. They don’t need to say it.<sup>22</sup>

National advocacy organisations could and did criticise the White House. But there were limits on how far they could push without losing political access. Consequently, leadership largely held back on criticising President Obama in the press. Most criticisms published in

**Table 2.** Public criticism of the executive branch and the immigration and custom enforcement (ICE).

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Barack Obama	0	2	2	4	2	24	34
Generic White House	1	2	0	0	0	5	8
ICE	1	4	2	2	1	0	10
Total	2	8	4	6	3	29	52

Source: Lexis Nexis.

news outlets were concentrated in 2014 (see Table 2), the year that the most recent effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform failed. The leadership pivoted in this year (following the lead of left-wing activists) and began to call for the president to use his executive authority to provide millions of undocumented immigrants with temporary relief from deportation. Prior to the pivot, the leading advocates took a cautious stand in their public statements.

Large investments by a handful of foundations allowed them to influence the objectives and priorities of immigrant rights organisations. Foundations exercised influence over the movement by favouring organisations working on comprehensive immigration reform over those mobilizing against enforcement and deportation. Foundations certainly funded the latter but viewed this as a niche more than a central component of the general immigrant rights movement. ‘The nature of enforcement issues’, according to one Open Society report, ‘requires specific, targeted interventions, and each of these organizations occupies an important niche that the broader-based, and often more moderate, immigrant rights organizations cannot fill because of their top-line goal of securing comprehensive federal reform’.<sup>23</sup> Recognizing the importance of this ‘niche’, foundations supported organisations involved in these campaigns but most funding went to organizations invested in the fight for comprehensive immigration reform. ‘[T]he CIR work’, according to one foundation document, ‘was where most of the resources and attention were focused’.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly enough, Open Society also suggested that rather than it constraining the strategic options of organisations, perhaps organisations had undue influence over the foundation. A 2016 analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the immigrant rights movement suggested that CCC influenced the foundation’s spending priorities.

We must also ask ourselves what the impact was of having a board member (Deepak Bhargava, executive director of Center for Community Change, a co-chair of the A4C Working Group) also be relied upon as an expert in the field advocating for CIR, as well as an interested party when it came to investments that were ultimately made.

The report’s author goes on to state that, ‘It leads me to wonder whether our focus on CIR made us lose sight of other opportunities that presented themselves at the time’.<sup>25</sup>

### **Engendering conflict**

The stratified organisational structure engendered conflict because it presented different factions of the movement with contrasting motivations and constraints. The national leadership was dominated by well-resourced and highly professionalised organisations. Most staff were fairly removed from the urgent needs of immigrant communities, while also depending on elites for essential resources. There was, therefore, less urgency and greater constraints for confrontational and disruptive tactics. By contrast, local and

more informal organisations were rooted in immigrant communities where stopping deportations were urgent. Their distance from federal officials also provided them with the political freedom to pursue confrontational tactics. The incentive structure at the two ends of the immigrant rights movement precipitated important conflicts, which erupted during the last two pushes for comprehensive immigration reform. Inequalities exacerbated conflicts because critics of the national leadership often claimed that the leadership was using its prominent position to capture a disproportionate share of resources flowing into the movement. Thus, the stratified organisational structure generated powerful conflicts that fractured the movement during two of its most important campaigns (2010 and 2013/2014).

During the push to pass comprehensive immigration reform in 2010, a big conflict erupted between the leadership and undocumented youth (Dreamers) (Nicholls 2013; Terriquez and Lin 2020). Radical Dreamers protested the national leadership's strategy, resented their control over the direction of the immigrant rights movement, and denounced the leadership as the 'non-profit industrial complex'. They believed that there was an opportunity to pass legislation to legalise the status of Dreamers and there was an urgency to do so. During the spring of 2010, disgruntled Dreamers broke off from the national leadership and launched their own campaign to pass a bill that would grant undocumented immigrants' legal status. In a powerful statement explaining this move, Dreamers denounced the leading non-profit organisations as much as the federal government and their political adversaries.

The nonprofit organisations and politicians pushing for Comprehensive Immigration Reform continued to try to dictate what our actions should be. *We felt that a barrier in achieving legalisation was the Nonprofit Industrial Complex.* The Nonprofit Industrial Complex is a network of politicians, the elite, foundations and social justice organisations. This system encourages movements to model themselves after capitalist structures instead of challenging them (Perez et. al. 2010, emphasis added).

In the eyes of these dissenting Dreamers, the leadership had become a part of the problem. Dreamers created their movement within a movement and fought for legislation to legalise undocumented youth. While they were unable to win legislation, they were able to push the Obama administration to enact Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which provided youth with temporary relief from deportation.

A second conflict emerged during the push for comprehensive immigration reform in 2013 and 2014. The leadership, in concert with Senate allies and the Obama administration, created the Alliance for Citizenship to coordinate the campaign for immigration reform. The National Day Laborer Organising Network (NDLON) was open to comprehensive immigration reform but also believed that pressure needed to be placed on the Obama administration to stop mass deportations. It launched #Not1More as an 'open source' campaign (Nicholls, Uitermark, and van Haperen 2016), encouraging local activists to affiliate through the simple application of the hashtag to their protest actions. The hashtag provided a general frame to channel many different local struggles into the single fight against deportations. NDLON was a national network of 66-day labour hiring centres in localities across the country. While being a national organisation, it was strongly embedded in the most precarious and vulnerable immigrant communities. Stopping deportations and fighting restrictions were crucial matters and NDLON had

grown frustrated with leadership's incapacity to hold the Obama administration accountable for its policies. While NDLOM had a strong motive to launch a campaign targeting the Obama administration, it was not constrained by the need to maintain White House access. The organisation participated in two meetings at the White House in the early years and was never invited back after they publicly criticised the administration in 2010. Its #Not1More campaign spread like wildfire and captured the hearts and minds of the movement's passionate left flank. In mid-2014, the mainstream leadership pivoted and joined the effort because comprehensive immigration reform failed in the summer of that year. The campaign ultimately pressured the Obama administration to pass an executive order, Deferred Action for Parents of Childhood Arrivals (DACA), on 17 November 2014. The executive order would have extended relief to an estimated four to five million undocumented immigrants and repeal the administration's vaunted Secure Communities program. DACA was reversed by a federal judge.

Thus, the stratified structure of the immigrant rights movement created factions with contrasting incentives and goals. The national leadership was constrained and somewhat removed from the urgent matter of deportations. Local and more informal groups were embedded in immigrant communities (cf. de Graauw, Gleeson and Bada 2020). Deportations were a constant threat to their lives and they had fewer political constraints. They believed that they had no other choice but to confront the government, nativist adversaries, *and* the movement's leadership. Thus, rather than going into the battles for immigration reform as a unified front, the organisational structure immediately fractured ties, with the most dynamic and militant factions removing themselves partially or completely from the reform effort.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the process by which local struggles for immigrant rights became a national social movement (cf. Bloemraad and Voss, 2020). This was by no means a natural or easy process. As the literature on social movements makes clear, smaller organisations face important resource impediments when scaling up. In the case of the immigrant rights movement, scaling up was especially challenging because the federal government was assuming greater powers in the area of immigration enforcement in the very period when the struggle for immigrant rights was gaining momentum. Many local organisations lacked the resources to invest in national infrastructure and for years they were entrapped in the local political arena, far from the centre of real political power.

Considering these barriers and challenges, it is remarkable that the immigrant rights movement has developed a sophisticated, durable, and national infrastructure. We suggest that national advocacy organisations have played a key role by investing substantial resources in a national infrastructure. By doing so, they have lowered the risks and uncertainties posed to local and regional organisations. Additionally, they have laid down basic rules of collective action while generating a common discursive strategy for activists across the country. Their ability to concentrate and deploy powerful resources has allowed national organisations to become the leviathan of the immigrant rights movement, in form and function.

Such investments altered national organisations. CCC, for instance, had never been an immigrant rights organisation. But, within the span of several years, its resources and

identity had become tied to the issue. It had become one of the most prominent immigrant advocacy organisation in the country. Former CCC organiser, Mary Ochs, observed, ‘The Center since, Deepak [Bhargava] has been there, is largely known for its immigration work and not very much for anything else ... They’ve tried to work on other things, but that’s really become the big signature’.<sup>26</sup>

The growing affluence, professionalisation, and centralisation of the movement have resulted in a paradox that afflicts many contemporary social movements fighting for the rights of a marginalised people. To give voice to the marginalised in the halls of power, efficacious national organisations can play an important role in transmitting claims. In doing so, however, these organisations require professional staff and elite connections that take them further away – both physically and in terms of priorities – from the marginalised communities they are supposed to represent. Creating a national voice can consequently alienate marginalised people from the means to express their own authentic claims, demands, and hopes into the public sphere. The fate of the mainstream immigrant rights movement is symptomatic of contemporary American civic life. Theda Skocpol explains that, ‘early-twentieth-first-century Americans live in a diminished democracy, in a much less participatory and more oligarchically managed civic world’ (Skocpol 2004a, 12). There is, consequently, more advocacy than ever but the conditions that enhance advocacy alienate the most precarious people from the means to create and articulate their own voices in the public sphere.

## Acronyms

Acronym	Full name
A4C	Alliance for Citizenship
ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
AFB	American Farm Bureau
AIC	American Immigration Council
AILA	American Immigration Lawyers Association
AV	America’s Voice
BAN	Border Action Network
BN	Border Network
CAP	Center for American Progress
CARACEN	Central American Resource Center
CASA	CASA de Maryland
CCC	Center for Community Change
CHIRLA	Center for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles
CIRC	Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition
DACA	Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals
DREAM	cf. Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act
FIC	Florida Immigrant Coalition
FIRM	Fair Immigration Reform Movement
FIRR	Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights
FWJ	Farm Worker Justice
HIJC	Hawaii Immigrant Justice Center
ICE	US Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ICIRR	Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights
ILCBC	Immigrant Legal Center of Boulder County
IRNI	Immigrant Rights Network of Iowa
ILCM	Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota
IOC	Immigrant Organizing Committee
MALDEF	Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund

MICAP	Migrant and Immigrant Community Action Project
MIRA	Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition Inc
MIFN	Minnesota Immigrant Freedom Network
MPI	Migration Policy Institute
NAL	New American Leadership
NALEO	National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund
NBIRC	New Bridges Immigrant Resource Center
NCIC	National Capital Immigration Coalition
NCJIC	National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support
NCLR	National Council of La Raza
NRIS	Northwest Refugee and Immigrant Services
NDLON	National Day Labor Organizing Network
NGA	National Guestworker Alliance
NIF	National Immigration Forum
NILC	National Immigration Law Center
NJIPN	New Jersey Immigration Policy Network
NYIC	The New York Immigration Coalition
OSF	Open Society Foundation
PRWORA	Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act
Puente	Puente Human Rights Movement
RIFA	Reform Immigration for America
RMIAN	Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network
SEIU	Service Employee International Union
SLVIR	San Luis Valley Immigrant Resource
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center
TIRRC	Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition
UFW	United Farm Workers
UWD	United We Dream
VdIF	Voces de La Frontera
Tonatierra	Tonatierra Community Development Institute

## Notes

1. <https://open.whitehouse.gov/dataset/White-House-Visitor-Records-Requests/p86s-ychb#-column-menu>.
2. <http://soros.dcleaks.com/view?div=us>.
3. Personal interview Deepak Bhargava, executive director of Center for Community Change.
4. Personal interview Mayron Payes, organiser of Center for Community Change and former organiser of Center for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.
5. Personal interview, Deepak Bhargava, executive director of Center for Community Change.
6. Personal interview Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA de Maryland.
7. Open Society Foundations. 2008. 'Special Funding Request for Immigration Comeback Strategy'. August 25.
8. LaMarche, G. (2010, March 18). A growing drumbeat from activists energises drive for urgent immigration reform. *The Atlantic Philanthropies*.
9. Personal interview, Deepak Bhargava, executive director of Center for Community Change
10. Personal interview, Deepak Bhargava, executive director of Center for Community Change.
11. Personal interview Ali Noorani, executive director of National Immigration Forum.
12. Open Society Foundations. 2008. 'Special Funding Request for Immigration Comeback Strategy'. August 25.
13. Personal interview Rich Stolz, co-director of Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.
14. Open Society Foundations. 2008. 'Special Funding Request for Immigration Comeback Strategy'. August 25.
15. This consists of two organisations associated with financier and philanthropist George Soros: the Open Society Foundation and the Open Society Institute
16. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/engage/office>.
17. Personal interview Clarissa Martinez De Castro, Deputy Vice President of NCLR.

18. Open Society Foundations. 2009. 'Grant Recommendations for the 2009 Immigration Reform Campaign'. April 29.
19. Open Society Foundations. 2016. 'Open Society U.S. Programs Board Meeting'. May 4–6.
20. Personal interview Ali Noorani, director of the National Immigration Forum.
21. Personal interview Thomas Saenz, executive director of Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
22. Open Society Foundations. 2013. 'Open Society U.S. Programs Board Meeting'. September 3–4.
23. Open Society Foundations. 2016. 'Open Society U.S. Programs Board Meeting'. May 4–6.
24. Personal interview Gustavo Torres, executive director CASA de Maryland.
25. Open Society Foundations. 2016. 'Open Society U.S. Programs Board Meeting'. May 4–6.
26. Personal Interview Mary Ochs, former organiser Community Change, personal interview.

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