



This is Not How it Ends: Post-Election Immigration Organizing in the United States

Folasade K. Famakinwa

In response to a tense post-election moment in the US, the Metropolitics editorial committee has initiated Rapid-Response Peer Review, with a commitment to quickly reviewing and publishing articles that examine organizing and activism around crucial urban issues. Our first call was for papers related to immigration policy. Below, Folasade Famakinwa reports on what US pro-immigrant organizations and pro-immigrant mayors are doing, urging them to deploy more prosocial programming to strengthen immigrant communities' precarious connectedness. María Barbero analyzes the effects of the US election on immigration discourse, policy, and protest in Argentina. And Petra Molnar and Stephanie Silverman describe the hopeful reforms triggered by recent Canadian court cases that place immigration jurisprudence within a human-rights framework.

Many immigrant populations throughout the United States have been grieving in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump, and understandably so. President-elect Trump ran a campaign that thrived on unfounded representations of immigrants as a domestic threat; he characterized Mexicans as rapists and proposed that Muslim immigrants should be banned from entering the United States. Furthermore, if the people who he is choosing for his cabinet¹ are any indication, it is quite probable that he will move towards implementing a policy agenda that treats immigrants as a dangerous population of which the United States must dispose itself.

It is not hyperbolic to suggest that this election has been emotionally and mentally distressing for many immigrant communities. Some psychologists have even gone so far as to explicitly identify this reaction as a “collective trauma,”² which is defined as a “shared experience of threat and anxiety in response to sudden or ongoing events that lead to some threat to a basic sense of belonging in society.” Indeed, people are panic-stricken, believing that their lives are about to change for the worse in the next six weeks. There is a widespread sense of fear and anger that if President-elect Trump acts on his campaign promises, people will be unable to complete their college education, will have to return to especially adverse circumstances, and will be torn apart from their families. In schools across the country, children of undocumented immigrants³ are exhibiting multiple signs of anxiety about the safety of their families in the next administration. Adults are terrified by the prospect that the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency will come to remove them from their homes, even if they have lived in and positively contributed to their communities⁴ for a long time. Amid uncertainty about what the future holds, extensive work lies ahead for immigrant advocacy groups.

¹ See: <http://immigrationimpact.com/2016/11/18/jeff-sessions-immigration-policy>.

² See: www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/11/how-to-cope-with-post-election-stress/507296.

³ See: www.statnews.com/2016/11/11/kids-post-trump.

⁴ See: www.kentucky.com/news/local/education/article114632473.html.

Organizations take action

Pro-immigrant organizations are now tasked with determining how best to mobilize under the looming threat of an antagonistic policy agenda. The high levels of fear and stress that people are feeling has clearly permeated decision-making spaces throughout many of these organizations, as their post-election narrative is one that focuses on survival. A focus on remaining safe was already apparent in the organizing strategy of pro-immigrant advocacy groups prior to the election; in the past year, many of these organizations have worked tirelessly⁵ to help green-card holders gain citizenship as soon as possible. However, these efforts have intensified in direct response to the election of Mr. Trump. Several organizations have ramped up their efforts to disseminate information that helps their constituents understand the extent to which this election may have grave implications for their lives, as well as what they can do to best prepare themselves in the interim.

For example, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) is an organization that specifically mobilizes African-American and black immigrant populations around issues of racial and economic injustice. They recently published “Seven Tips for Black Immigrants Post-Election,”⁶ where they emphasize carrying appropriate/non-expired documents at all times and using discretion if undocumented. Immigration Equality is an advocacy group that represents LGBTQ and HIV-positive immigrants. In response to the extensive concerns they received in the wake of the election, they published a set of “Trump Administration FAQs”⁷ on their website, which provides answers to questions about how the incoming administration will impact marriages, asylum cases, and individuals’ status as HIV-positive immigrants. Lastly, the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) is an organization that aims to defend the rights of low-income immigrant populations. Given their purview, they published “New Questions and Answers About DACA Now That Trump is President-elect.”⁸ Mr. Trump has threatened to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, President Obama’s most widely praised immigration reform effort, once he takes office. Thus, the NILC has sought to aggressively inform their constituents of the uncertainty of DACA’s future, answering a number of questions on renewing applications, traveling outside the United States, and the prospect of deportation if DACA is actually terminated. A plethora of pro-immigrant organizations are engaging in this work, as there is a palpable sense of urgency in this political climate. These activities represent an intuitive attempt to protect immigrant communities as much as possible given the likely hazardous policies and practices of President-elect Trump.

⁵ See: www.thenyic.org/PressRelease91416.

⁶ See: <http://blackalliance.org/PostElectionTips>.

⁷ See: www.immigrationequality.org/faqs.

⁸ See: www.nilc.org/issues/daca/daca-after-trump-q-and-a.

Figure 1. Activists discuss pro-immigrant mobilization with a representative of the New York Immigration Coalition



© Susie Charlop

Mayors step up

Multiple city-government officials, too, have identified the election of Mr. Trump as an acute stressor for their constituencies, and have already begun to fight back by proclaiming that their localities will remain “sanctuary cities,” even if undocumented immigrants are actually threatened by the incoming administration. In particular, mayors in large cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Philadelphia have pledged to protect⁹ their immigrant populations from mass deportation. They suggest that this will entail continuing not to act as proxies for the federal ICE agency. For example, in Rhode Island, Providence mayor Jorge Elorza has stated that the city will not hold immigrants that may have committed civil infractions for federal officials. Furthermore, Mayor Bill de Blasio has already gone so far as to suggest that he would destroy a database¹⁰ with detailed information on New York City’s undocumented immigrant population if the Trump administration tried to access its records. Such immediate and intensifying rhetoric from a number of government officials in large cities indicates that they view Mr. Trump’s election as a severe risk that can cause great harm to the immigrant communities that they serve.

⁹ See: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/38176eb6b993497cbf2fd3068d0850f4/mayors-sanctuary-cities-say-theyll-fight-trumps-plans>.

¹⁰ See: www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/politics/new-york-undocumented-database.

More than survival

As humans, we are designed¹¹ to instinctively do whatever is necessary to protect ourselves when we perceive that we are facing danger. Thus, it is expected that pro-immigrant advocacy groups would begin to urge their communities to exercise greater caution and gird themselves with accurate knowledge during a potentially dangerous time. Also, it is expected that mayors of large cities, who are largely Democratic, and whose immigrant populations are a viable contributor¹² to their economies, would quickly defend this group against the impending threat of the federal government. However, a perspective that centers only around survival is a limited one. That is, it is the responsibility of these entities to remind their constituents that they deserve to thrive, and not just survive. Yes, it is crucial in the current political moment for immigrant advocates to ensure that such communities are able to simply remain in the United States. But they must also do what they can in the future to ensure that this population is not rattled so much by the incoming administration that they are not actually living. Operating in “survival mode” under constant threat comes with physical consequences¹³ that cannot be overlooked; chronic stress can result in a number of circulatory and cardiovascular problems.

At a time where immigrant populations may be deliberately excluded from receiving federal policy support, it is of the utmost importance to have prosocial programming in place to fill this void. Pro-immigrant activist groups should keep pursuing these initiatives to continue building a robust infrastructure within immigrant communities. There are many existing successful community-development programs that should be brought to scale as soon as possible. For example, in Philadelphia, the Nationalities Service Center¹⁴ hosts a vast array of community-development initiatives for immigrants and refugees, from workforce-development services that help clients find gainful employment to psychosocial support groups that foster mental health and wellness. Going forward, pro-immigrant organizations could facilitate emerging community philanthropy initiatives like “giving circles,” whereby groups of people come together to pool resources in any form (e.g. money, gifts), and collectively decide how to allocate such resources. Giving circles could be a mechanism by which the most severely vulnerable members of immigrant communities can receive immediate relief. Advocacy groups could also build on the recent successes of immigrant worker-owned cooperatives by extending this mutual-aid philosophy to childcare. Babysitting cooperatives could help offset childcare costs in low-income immigrant neighborhoods. These types of social investment strategies could help increase and sustain a sense of connectedness and resilience in immigrant communities, despite a broader hostile political context.

The work of positioning immigrant populations to be able to continue to flourish under the Trump administration should not simply be left to advocacy groups. The local assurance that many cities will retain their “sanctuary city” status, while promising, is in its current state largely absent of measures to ensure that the quality of life of undocumented immigrants will not be compromised during the next four years. Accordingly, local city officials can intentionally support pro-immigrant groups by allocating them greater discretionary funding. Local officials must also provide their human-services agencies with greater resources to support immigrant communities during this potentially tough time. If President-elect Trump follows through on his campaign promises, having a culture of community development intact will be more necessary than ever.

¹¹ See: www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response.

¹² See: www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/07/us-cities-immigrants-economy/398987.

¹³ See: www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response.

¹⁴ Website: <http://nscphila.org/about-us>.

Folasade K. Famakinwa is a Master in Social Policy student at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice, and a former Coro Fellow in Public Affairs in New York City. She is especially interested in the nexus between community organizing and policy advocacy in low-income communities of color.

To cite this article:

Folasade K. Famakinwa, “This is Not How it Ends: Post-Election Immigration Organizing in the United States”, *Metropolitiques*, 7 December 2016. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/This-is-Not-How-it-Ends-Post.html>.