

## HOW A COALITION OF IMMIGRATION GROUPS IS ADVOCATING FOR BROAD SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

New York Immigration Coalition  
New York, NY

*"It's not just about visas and legal status. It's also about what kind of life people have once they get here. What are the schools like for their kids? Do they have access to health care and housing?"*

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**SUMMARY:** In the late 1990's members of the New York Immigration Coalition took the bold step of beginning to use their **collective clout** to be effective, not just on immigration policy, but on issues like **housing, education and health care**. They have found strength in the core issues that knit them together. Director Margie McHugh and coalition members engage in power sharing, voter education, policy development and above all, winning. Their strategies include the following:

- **Focus on Political Action:** The Coalition's board and members made a deliberate decision to expand their policy objectives. They choose issues that widely resonate and that will not divide the coalition.
- **Send Informed Voters to the Polls:** The Coalition's member groups have proven they can deliver voters. Activities include conducting voter education and registration, and engaging in campaigns to turn out informed immigrant voters for city, state, and federal elections.
- **Access the Power in Diversity:** With the cooperation of a wide variety of groups, including allies and supporters, the Coalition can operate effectively on a policy level.
- **Groom Leadership:** In addition to member groups activating their own constituencies, the Coalition itself intentionally integrates new groups into its decision-making structure.

In the following case example, Margie McHugh and her colleagues describe how they are able to leverage power, achieve political change and together, improve the lives of immigrants:

## **POWER IN DIVERSITY**

### **New York Immigration Coalition**

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For Margie McHugh, it was a moment filled with both excitement and trepidation. Heading a fledgling organization dedicated to knitting together a rainbow coalition of immigrant interests was certainly a daunting job. Tapping into the collective voice of the growing immigrant population in New York City held too much potential to let fear of failure get in the way. An April day in 1998 still stands out in McHugh's mind as the critical moment in the evolution of the New York Immigration Coalition.

That was the day that a 20-member group had gathered to discuss a radical proposition, recalls McHugh. "Russian, Latino, Asian, all of the city's major immigrant groups, as well as major institutions involved in the immigration debate, including major religious groups and labor unions were all there." The discussion revolved around the questions of whether and should core constituents involved with the NYIC could build on their policy advocacy and community organizing strengths and become a strong political force through immigrant voter registration, education, and get-out-the-vote activities. In considering these questions, the NYIC had to also consider whether its network, made up of so many separate groups, could actually hold together politically around multiple issues. The second question was whether it could last for any significant period of time, given the ephemeral nature of most coalitions and the obvious potential for battles over control and rifts over policy direction.

"It was easy for us to work together on issues related directly to immigration policy," says McHugh. "The question was whether we could use our collective clout to be more effective on other issues, like housing, education and health care."

If the coalition could come together around those kinds of issues, and build a successful program of voter registration, education, and turnout, it not only had the potential to flex its political muscle from New York City, to Albany, to Washington, D.C., it had the potential to last. Which is why to McHugh—and the individuals assembled that day—it seemed a risk well worth taking. "I just remember feeling euphoric when the board meeting was over. I was walking across 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and I was thinking that we were a young organization, that we didn't have a lot of experience and that we could get into real trouble. But it also meant that our member organizations really saw themselves differently now. Not as providers or coordinators of services, but as directly tied into political change."

### **Struggling for a voice**

Immigrants' struggle for a voice—for political change—in the U.S. is nothing new. Even though it is taken as a matter of historical fact that immigrants built the country, and even though it is generally taken as a matter of contemporary faith that immigration today greatly enriches our institutions, our culture and our economy, immigrants have always had to fight for their place in the local, state and national power structure. Political gatekeepers in the U.S. have never extended a warm welcome to newcomers. And whether in the form of the general backlash

against Irish immigrants in the 1800s, or in such specific and recent initiatives as the 1996 Federal Welfare Reform Law—which stripped legal immigrants of a wide variety of social services—the cost to immigrants of such disenfranchisement has been substantial.

Just how substantial these costs have been was on the minds of NYIC members when they made the choice in 1998 to refocus the organization on political action. Particularly fresh on the minds of coalition members was the 1996 Federal Welfare Reform Law, which had proved devastating to immigrants, especially indigent elderly and disabled immigrants. There had been no strong voice for immigrants' interests when the bill had been fashioned. "What I saw then was a silent population," says a former senior staff member of the Latin American Integration Center and a former NYIC board member. "A population that was never conscious of their rights or of the need to participate." And it was costing them.

### **Building a base**

What was immediately obvious to the coalition was that simply working together on issues would never be enough for the coalition to be truly effective. What it needed was to show policymakers that it could translate policy positions into political clout. One of the NYIC's first initiatives was aimed directly at building and energizing its base. Called *200,000 in 2000: New Americans Pledging to Strengthen Democracy and New York*, the campaign was a push to turn out informed immigrant voters for the 2000 elections in numbers that would get politicians' attention. To McHugh it cut straight to the heart of the matter: "The only way you can win on your issues is if you have people casting informed votes."

"The idea was to get 200,000 immigrants to sign pledge cards saying they would participate in the Coalition's education events to become informed on issues," continued McHugh, "and that they would encourage family and friends to go to our community meetings and vote in the 2000 election." As part of the 200,000 in 2000 campaign, the coalition organized 120 voter education events, covering both key issues and how to be politically active on those issues. "It was done as a series," says McHugh. "We covered the electoral process and how to vote, the structure of government, health care, housing, education and immigration policy."

Each of the events was devoted to a discussion of what voters should expect of candidates when it came to such issues. "It taught people what questions to ask candidates," says McHugh. And it taught them how to translate their view into votes. "Immigrants constitute a large percentage of the state and city populations," says a director at the coalition. "But just having that population doesn't do anything for you, you have to show that it translates into political power." The education drive was complemented by a parallel push to expand the languages in which votes assistance was provided on Election Day at polls across the city.

### **Coalescing around issues**

While the coalition was in the process of proving they could deliver voters in significant numbers, it was also discovering resilience and strength in an expanded menu of policy initiatives. Rather than acting as a force for fragmentation, coalition members were continually discovering core issues that helped knit them together. By participating in information booths at a get-out-the-vote rally, a NYIC Board Member says she began to understand the unifying power of issues ranging from better schools to improved access to health care. "We had tables next to

the Russians and it was funny because some of the Russians looked as Hispanic as I did Russian. At that moment I realized that maybe I am closer to immigrant causes overall than just Hispanic causes."

Coalition members had come to realize that there were a host of issues around which collaboration for disparate immigrant groups was natural, and not just issues directly related to immigration policy. "It's not just about visas and legal status," says McHugh. "It's also about what kind of life people have once they get here. What are the schools like for their kids? Do they have access to health care and housing?"

At the same time, the NYIC realized that there were some issues of acute interest to immigrants that they could not coalesce around, that in fact had the potential to fracture the coalition. While virtually all the groups in the coalition could agree on the issue of bolstering bilingual education, for example, the issue of vouchers stayed off the NYIC's policy plate.

### **Becoming a force for change**

On one issue coalition members had no trouble agreeing: reforming immigrant policy and administration. Part of NYIC's early work included supporting a national effort to beef up application processing at the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. McHugh says the national push—in cooperation with a wide variety of groups from coast to coast—highlighted the strength of the NYIC. "Being part of a coalition allows you to do many things at one time, there are a number of cards you can play. Some of our members have the policy expertise and some have long-standing relationships with key lawmakers." Working with national partners, the NYIC was able to operate at several levels. On one hand, the coalition was in on high-level meetings with policymakers in Washington, D.C. On the other it organized street-level demonstrations to put the issue of immigration reform on the national radar screen. "So you had all these groups. Some were doing sophisticated policy analysis. Some were pulling together the demonstrations. Some had the political clout to get us into high level meetings," says McHugh.

It's the same strategy--illustrating the same strength in diversity--which the coalition has used on non-immigration issues says McHugh. "Many of our members were telling us that the number one issue facing their communities was how poorly the public school system was doing in serving families, yet not one of the organizations felt they had the organizational clout or the expertise to make things better." So the coalition went to work, getting up to speed on the entire subject of education policy in New York. "In the last five to seven years. We've been able to develop and take action on a wide-ranging education reform agenda," McHugh says. For example, the coalition pulled together a report on New York City's summer school programs during which coalition members acted as "the eyes, ears and brains" for the effort, McHugh says. On the strength of such policy research, and on the strength of the organization's growing political clout, "we now have greater confidence in taking a position and advocating on key policies and reforms," says McHugh. "We're now comfortable taking a position, and various coalition members all bite off a different piece." Some do legal and policy work; some organize bus rallies to Albany. In all cases, McHugh says, "We send informed voters to the polls."

### **The cohesive power of winning**

Ultimately, the grassroots mobilization and the strategic approach to allies, issues and tactics is about one thing above all: winning. "We decided we're not just in this to feel good about ourselves. That falling on our swords might be noble, but it doesn't do much good. We really are in this to achieve change and if we're really serious about winning then we have to figure out how to work together and how to build our collective power," says McHugh.

It sounds simple, but few coalitions have actually been able to practice it successfully. Part of the key has been the coalition's continuing effort to groom its own members as activists and leaders. "We deliberately try to elevate the power and the role of our member groups," says McHugh. "The stronger they and their constituents are, the stronger our collective efforts are."

The operating ethic of the coalition is straightforward: groom leadership, share leadership, give leadership away. "It's been a big challenge in the immigrant movement in general," says a director at NYIC. "How do you nurture new leaders and how do you integrate new groups into the decision-making structure? But we have invested a lot of time into elevating emerging groups so that they are on equal ground with more established interests."

### **It's about clout**

Ultimately, the coalition's leaders understand that whatever power they have is derived from an energized and active grassroots constituency focused on issues of mutual concern. It is that element, says an NYIC Board member, which gets policymakers' attention.

The impact of this dynamic was illustrated quite dramatically a few years ago, a coalition Board member describes, during a day of rallies and group lobbying in Albany—a regular staple of NYIC's political strategy. On this day, a group of thirty-five activists had made an appointment with a key Assemblywoman within whose district the NYIC had worked to add some 2,000 voters to the rolls. When they arrived, the Assemblywoman wasn't there. "So I told everyone in that room, 'This is a person in power and she is not interested in listening to you.' And someone else said, 'I worked on her campaign, but no more. I'm never voting for her again.'" Within days of the missed appointment, the Assemblywoman had sent flowers to the head of the contingent and personally apologized for not meeting with the group.

A small incident, perhaps, but clearly illustrative of the power that arises when politicians understand that there is a new political force, one that has the expertise, the clout and the commitment to hold policymakers accountable. How that power has been used is at the heart of the coalition's success and its ability to thrive. It is not power for power's sake, says a NYIC Board member, but power to make positive change. "It's not about who has the power, it's about getting our problems solved, whether the problems are related to immigration policy or better access to decent health care." It is an approach to power—and power sharing—that has proved to be a perfect formula for sustaining a rainbow.

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