

# POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR AN EMERGING IMMIGRANT CIVIL SOCIETY

By M. Tina Zarpour

## Introduction

This paper highlights the potential role for applied anthropology in understanding immigrant political agency and contributes to policy perspectives on the evolving phenomenon of immigrant integration. Formal types of participation traditionally used to assess civic engagement, such as voter registration, are inadequate tests of civic engagement (Barreto and Muñoz 2003). Based on a study of the participation of Iranian immigrants in San Diego, in United States civil and political society, I suggest additional forms of participation and discuss their relationship to well-being and policymaking.

Knowledge about immigrant civil societies and their expression in a variety of different forms and venues is useful for policymakers in local communities, state governments, and the nation-state. September 11 in the United States, the London and Madrid bombings, mass mobilizations for immigration reform in 2006, Iranian immigrant response to political repression in Iran in 2009, are all events that raise questions such as: What are immigrants' relationships to democratic institutions of the host country? What are the nature and characteristics of immigrant participation and engagement with host country politics and the civil society?

While right-wing politics and public attitudes challenge the idea that immigrant integration is possible, others are appreciative of immigrants' contributions to host country cultures. Many more may also express great concern about how the foreign-born and native-born will adjust to one another and whether the country is changing too much in the wrong direction. In addition, immigrants themselves may also be ambivalent and remain attached to

home countries even as they form new ties and connections to host countries and want their children to succeed in host countries (Mollenkopf and Hocschild 2009). Indeed, recent formulations of transnational theory provide us with ample evidence of these multiple and sustained connections (Levitt and

the Iranian immigrant population in San Diego, I found that ethnic organizations were but one forum for engaging with civil society, as illustrated by the following series of fieldwork vignettes collected during dissertation fieldwork among Iranian immigrants in San Diego, California, 2010-2012:

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Jaworsky 2007). Further, immigrants may want to influence host countries' public policies, but they typically find host country processes confusing, unappealing, and unwelcoming. Seen from this perspective, immigrant political integration becomes an issue of access and social equity. The knowledge base about and for emerging immigrant civil societies needs to flow in both directions—towards immigrant populations and policymakers. My research found that immigrant civil society is a resource for, as informants framed it, to “practice and learn democracy,” especially when coming from oppressive homeland governments, such as Iran.

## Background

Tillie and Slijper (2007), following the work of Almond and Verba (1963) and Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993), argue membership in ethnic organizations has a positive effect on the political participation of ethnic minority communities. However, among

1. On a cool and breezy Sunday afternoon in February 2010, a group of about 40 Iranian American immigrants gather in front of the federal courthouse donning the color green, the color of one of the opposition movements against the Islamic Republic of Iran, holding placards, and chanting “Cairo First, Tehran Next” and a call-and-response chant, “What we want? Democracy! When do we want it? Now!”
2. It is a Sunday picnic in early April, just two weeks after the much heralded Iranian New Year festival rites that take place the first of spring. San Diego Iranian immigrants are gathered by the thousands in a waterfront park, with their multi-colored *sofrehs* (picnic blankets), tents, and Iranian and United States flags. The smell of grilled kabobs fills the air. Large groups of multi-generational friends and families visit, gossip, and promenade arm-in-arm through the picnic grounds. As an expression of “cultural citizenship” (Flores and Benmayor 1997), these Iranians are

claiming their immigrant identity by claiming space to express their political views.

3. It is a Wednesday evening monthly meeting of an Iranian professional association in San Diego. There about 200 individuals in a restaurant's conference meeting room. After the dinner and announcements,

societies encompass how immigrants themselves articulate and participate in civic and political structures within host countries.

In what follows, I provide a few recommendations, considerations, and places to "look for" immigrant civil society that would be useful in the policy arena. One key assumption I am making

“ My research showed that Iranian ethnic grassroots-based organizations (EGBO) in San Diego, though they worked to serve constituents' needs, helped acculturate members to United States society, and contributed to community-building, they also in fact coalesced interests and members to work at multiple levels (local, national, transnational). These organizations were civic in nature, yet they provided a foundation to work in the political realm. ”

this month's selected speaker deliberates on whether Islam is compatible with modernism in Iran. A vigorous question and answer session with the audience of first- and 1.5-generation Iranian immigrants follows.

The activities portrayed above are either overtly political, primarily civic, or a combination of both. Yet, an anthropological perspective would consider these various activities together rather than compartmentalize them. What do they have in common? I believe these events are all indicators of a civil society emerging among a population of immigrants. Broadly defined, civil society is composed of those institutions outside of government and business, the so-called "intermediary institutions" such as professional associations, ethnic organizations, religious groups, labor unions, and citizen advocacy organizations that give voice to various sectors of society and enrich public participation in democracies. Immigrant civil

here is not only that participation in the civic sphere leads to political integration, but also that any group-level political discourse, even as it pertains to homeland issues, reflects an immigrant civil society.

### Participation in Diaspora and Homeland Political Issues

This type of participation involves political practices confined to those groups that are barred from direct participation in the political system of the homeland. It can pertain to the domestic or foreign policy of the homeland and includes both opposition to and support for the existing political regime and its foreign policy goals. One of the main issues in the dialogue between migrants and their countries of origin concerns their own legal, economic, and political status in the homeland (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). This is an especially salient issue for Iranians abroad who

comprise a mixed migration status community: while some arrived in the United States seeking better educational and work opportunities and maintain the ability to return to Iran as they wish, still others, fleeing the 1979 revolution that brought the Islamic Republic of Iran to power, entered the United States with the status of refugees and have thus far never been able to return to Iran.

During my research, I encountered civically and politically active Iranians attending rallies in support of the Green Movement of Iran. Despite a sense of unity related to a shared opposition to the Iranian regime, the political spectrum participating in the rallies included the "far left and the far right." While the San Diego Green Movement rallies and demonstrations taking place between 2009-2010 intended to create unified solidarity among the Iranian diaspora community, it had the reverse effect of creating tension and conflict. As informant Mitra reported from her participation in the 2009-2010 rallies, "That's why I am so disappointed—not everyone is on the same side. The ultimate goal is the same, but the route is so different. When things were really heated, [we] see a demonstration. On one side is monarchists, religious elements, nationalists..." Other informants were involved in what they termed as "activist organizations," sometimes transnational in scope.

For this study, I defined an activist organization as one that primarily defines itself as supporting some kind of political or social recognition and change in Iran. Fati, a female first generation informant in her 50s, actively worked for the promotion of Iranian women's rights and equality through the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation (IWSF), a transnational organization, with which she had been involved with for a couple of decades.

### Ethnic Organizations

In addition to being positively correlated with political integration (Tillie and Slijper 2007), informants' participation in ethnic organizations potentially influence their social well-being. Mem-

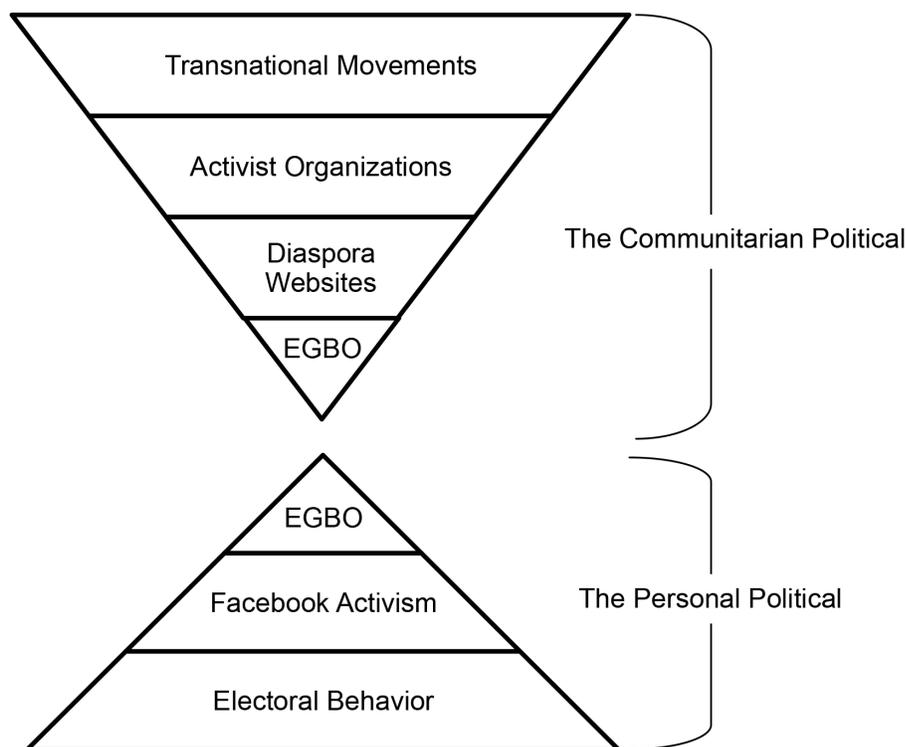
bers of these organizations derive many benefits from their involvement in ethnic organizations. For Mohsen, who has been in the United States less than five years, finding community and reclaiming identity was one purpose of such an organization. For Ramin, a long-time resident, Iranian ethnic organizations provided an opportunity to expand social networks and participate in something larger than himself. Beyond the social and community-building aspects of ethnic organizations, Iranian ethnic organizations impacted immigrant well-being during my research vis-à-vis political integration on a different scale.

My research showed that Iranian ethnic grassroots-based organizations (EGBO) in San Diego, though they worked to serve constituents' needs, helped acculturate members to United States society, and contributed to community-building, also in fact coalesced interests and members to work at multiple levels (local, national, transnational). These organizations were civic in nature, yet they provided a foundation to work in the political realm. Additionally, Iranian organizations in San Diego afforded perhaps one of the few forums where Iranians from different religious backgrounds, classes, ethnicities, and generations interacted. EGBOs were the crux in which the personal, political, and communitarian hinged, meaning that EGBOs were the place where group level and individual level political action merged and emanated, as Figure 1 illustrates. Members initially joined an EGBO to serve personal needs, but later used them as a steppingstone to engage with other kinds of political/civic practice.

### Digital Communities

Another arena for participation of Iranian immigrants in civil society is "digital diasporas" (Laguerre 2010). Given their potential in fomenting a transnational civil society for dispersed migrants, I used virtual ethnography to observe several digital sites where political discourse took place. First, I found at least three different uses of the social networking site Facebook. There was an

**Figure 1. Voluntary Organizations as the "Crux" between Personal and Community-Level Political/Civic Action**



explosion of Facebook groups during the height of the 2009 Iranian election crisis and protests, including some devoted to a young woman protester named Neda Agha Soltani, killed by gunfire during one of the protests in Tehran. The image of Neda's face lying in the streets quickly became an icon of the Green Movements protests and circulated around the world. Whereas the great majority of Facebook activism involved little effort on the part of the user to instigate political participation and thus did not translate to sustained movement, this was not always the case.

For Mohsen, Facebook activism came not from clicking "like" on particular groups, but through news and information-related posts. These posts on his Facebook wall were real-time connections to events happening in Iran, and he saw the impact of his posts when friends and relatives in Iran thanked him for disseminating news and information that they might otherwise not have been made aware. He did concede that these efforts might have been small but saw them as contributing overall to regime change in Iran:

But I was never doing anything about it. And still I'm not doing anything. But the only thing I can do is post these things in on Facebook. You know, those days [height of post-Iranian election events in summer 2009] on Facebook some people were changing their names to I don't know, Mohsen Irani, Mohsen Tehrani, they don't give their pictures, don't give their information. Mine I didn't change it. From the first day still is the same thing. My name and family. And I'm posting. The only thing I am doing is the posting the news I'm receiving. Posting there to, for the people who are interested in it. And, just wish that it helps and it brings another person to the, to this, to think it, to think and to act. I am not there. If I was there maybe I was more active. But here whatever I can do is that. And yes I get more active in political issues when I, when

this happens in Iran. Give me some hope that something can happen in Iran, regime can change in Iran. It's not a dream. It can be done. Maybe takes time, but can be done.

and to perhaps introduce topics for consideration by users and members, it was not utilized for any *engaged* discussion of political topics that I observed. In other words, Facebook was used as a tool of civic engagement but not as a

differences not found in face-to-face interactions among migrant Iranians. Secondly, online political discourse was much more strident and divisive than was heard and experienced in face-to-face life. In this regard, users cited IC as helping Iranians in the diaspora to learn "how to tolerate each other" and respect free and open speech. Within this discourse about "learning," tolerance and openness was the idea that individual and personal growth about tolerance would be inscribed onto a (future and imaginary) national body politic—the idea that individuals learning democratic ideals would only help a future Iran. Therefore, digital communities provided far more than a "façade" of civic and political participation. Thus, the various modes of engagement described above spoke to how the Internet could create "community" for immigrant populations and to the multiplicity of ways for people to participate in politics online through virtual communities.

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The third use of Facebook I found was to aid the civil and political work of on-the-ground organizations. The Facebook group page for Human Rights for Iran (HRI), a student university group, extended the reach and effort of the organization. Facebook was used to communicate with members, disseminate information, and coordinate events and meetings. What was posted on Facebook and discussed was actually broader than what transpired during in-person meetings. Other efforts such as online petitions and letter writing campaigns were introduced through Facebook. One was a letter writing campaign to prevent a United States war with Iran, with the HRI's president reminding members, "The cause is bigger than any one of us, but together we will be the legs that [bring to] life the slumbering giant." The most frequent kind of posts came in the form of links to headlines and news stories from major journalistic outlets, trending topics like Iran banning university women from certain courses, the effects of United States sanctions, and the jailed United States hikers. Over the one-year period I tabulated posts, the news stories of interest included posts related to the anti-war on Iran movement, the detrimental effect of United States sanctions on the citizens of Iran, and the political situation in Syria, for example.

While Facebook was a useful medium to disseminate information and bring together like-minded people to participate in political and social causes,

locale for political discourse. Political discourse in an online format actually took place in other forums, like Iranian.com (IC), which was another focus of the virtual ethnography. The discussion boards on IC were an incredibly rich source for engaged, lengthy, and often-times heated political discussion. Part of the explanation in their different uses lay in the different formats. Facebook was a social networking site, and IC was a self-described community website for the diaspora, for "the Iranian expatriates who care about their identity, culture, music, history, politics, literature, and each other, as well as friends and family living in Iran." (Iranian.com Archives 2013) Its byline was "nothing is sacred." This motto, according to the "Frequently Asked Questions" page, "reflected our view that religious, political, cultural, or commercial considerations should not prevent the publication of any material" (Iranian.com 2013). Diaspora websites enabled the creation of a cyber-community connecting dispersed populations and provided interactivity to members. Members used discussions forums to disseminate information, reinforce or recreate identity, connect to and participate in homeland relationships, festivals, socioeconomic development, and the like (Brinkerhoff 2009).

Through following political talk and politically-oriented discussion on IC, I found that: First, IC provided a forum for the "safe" expression of a diverse range of political, ethnic, and religious

### Conclusion: Learning Democracy, Political Belonging, and Immigrant Well-Being

My research corroborates Tillie and Slijper's (2007) assertion that political participation is not limited to one kind of behavior. The typology of civic and political practice described here are "expressions of cultural citizenship as a mode of belonging" (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012:195). It is through participation in diaspora or homeland politics, through ethnic organizations, and digital communities that Iranian immigrants learned "participatory democracy" and the civic skills for broader political integration. Yet, at least among the Iranian immigrants I researched, this often took place within the context of an "exile consciousness." Despite differences in immigration status, Iranian immigrants shared the presence of an exile consciousness, an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said and Belmont 2000:173). Exile consciousness manifests itself as longing for a home one

cannot be a part of anymore as a full political member or citizen. While policymakers need to understand the role of homeland politics in host country political integration, it is worth pointing out that the presence of transnational efforts or an exile consciousness, as evidenced among Iranians by an ever-present debate about the Iranian regime, should not be viewed as a deterrent to political integration into host societies. On the contrary, even if these particular expressions of citizenship and belonging reference the homeland, in actuality they enact democracy and create an immigrant civil society and political "community" where community signifies the existence of a diversity and multiplicity of voices.

It has been the goal of this paper to expand the knowledge base on the variety and diversity of immigrant politics and civil society. I have asserted that Iranian ethnic organizations contribute to immigrant well-being on an individual and communal level by promoting positive social relations and leading to expanded political integration. On a broader level, I also make the argument that the definition of immigrant well-being needs to consider the political and civic piece within the idea of full social integration. Understanding immigrant civil societies, as well as how immigrants articulate with host country civic and political structures is part of "paying attention to the social history of the environments where human experience takes place" (Freidenberg 2013:3) and helps to ensure equitable access to resources.

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