

Hostile environments encourage political action in immigrant communities

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A new study from North Carolina State University finds that anti-immigrant practices – such as anti-immigrant legislation or protests – are likely to backfire, and spur increased political action from immigrant communities. The study examined political activity in 52 metropolitan areas across the United States.

"U.S. Census data indicate that 60 percent of the foreign-born in the U.S. are not citizens," says Dr. Kim Ebert, an assistant professor of sociology and co-author of a paper describing the research. "Non-citizens can't vote, so we wanted to determine how they are participating in political life."

Specifically, the researchers examined the number of protests from the immigrant community in [metropolitan areas](#) during the year 2000, to investigate the extent to which local conditions affect an immigrant community's willingness to take part in informal political action. The immigrant communities in the study reflect a range of backgrounds, including Latino, Asian American, Middle Eastern and African communities.

"Metropolitan areas that saw high levels of anti-immigrant activity, such as anti-immigrant protests or abusive practices, were subsequently more likely to see protest activity from the immigrant community," Ebert says. "In addition, metro areas in states that passed anti-immigrant legislation often saw a short-term dampening effect on protests – but experienced significant increases in the number of political protests from immigrant

communities in the long term."

Similarly, exclusionary metropolitan areas – those with high levels of housing and employment segregation between immigrant and U.S.-born communities – were also subject to more protests than areas that were better integrated. Moreover, protest was less likely to be used as a strategy for social change in inclusionary metropolitan areas where immigrants had greater access to formal means of political and social participation via citizenship, college education and voting.

"The more people try to create heightened boundaries between 'us' and 'them,' the more mobilized the immigrant community becomes," Ebert says.

The researchers also found that mobilization in the immigrant community was less likely to occur in metropolitan areas with higher immigrant growth rates. For example, many metropolitan areas that saw significant increases in their immigrant populations between 1991 and 2000 – such as Memphis, Tenn., and Greenville, N.C. – did not see any immigrant protest activity. However, traditional immigrant gateway cities with modest growth rates – such as Chicago, Los Angeles and Miami – saw significantly more frequent protest activity from the immigrant community.

The researchers are currently examining longitudinal data from 1990 to 2010 to investigate how political, demographic and social changes influence immigrant organizing.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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