The Fight for School Equity in Chicago’s Latino Neighborhoods

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Introduction

Latinos in Chicago have a long history of successful community political action. As Latinos began to move to Chicago during World War I, they almost immediately found themselves forming voluntary associations in response to the hardships they faced as newcomers. During subsequent decades, these groups began to cross neighborhood lines and form larger collective organizations.¹ As the city’s Latino population has grown in recent decades—from 3.1% of the population in 1960 to 26% in 2000—so has Latino political representation. In 1983, only one Latino served on the city council; twenty years later, eight of fifty aldermen were Latino. Some of these seats were won only after divisive legal battles to change district lines.² Other legal and redistricting battles eventually also led to the election of Latino state legislators and the creation of the “earmuff” 4th Congressional District (connecting Pilsen and Little Village), held by Luis Gutierrez since 1992.³ Latino representation in the city has also increased in recognition of the community’s electoral power. After being elected in 1983 with strong Latino support, Mayor Harold Washington named at least one Latino to every major board and commission, and put in place an affirmative action plan.⁴ Mayor Richard M. Daley, first elected in 1989 with significant Latino support, gave a large number
of city jobs and contracts to Latinos and supported various Latinos for city council.3

Notwithstanding this increased political representation, Latino parents still felt the need to resort to protests, demonstrations, and most notably hunger strikes in order to get city officials to agree to their demands regarding public schools. In 1994, Latino students went on strike and Latino parents and state legislators staged a hunger strike to demand the city promise to build a new local elementary school. On Mother’s Day 2001, yet another hunger strike was launched by Latino parents demanding the fulfillment of a years-old promise for a new local high school. Given the recent increases in Latino political representation in the city, and recognition by city leaders of the importance of the Latino vote, why were such tactics used rather than more conventional political activities? What do the hunger strikes tell us about the level of, and nature of, Latino political power in Chicago? Were they a sign of weakness, or of strength?

After recounting the details of these two battles for school equity, this chapter discusses their motivations and meaning. I argue that the Latina mothers of Pilsen and Little Village staged these protests not only due to community traditions, but also because they recognized that their position in Chicago society afforded them a unique political opportunity structure where unconventional politics were quite likely to succeed. In addition, while the presence of many elected and appointed Latino officials did not give the community the conventional political power they needed to win the new schools, it emboldened them to take action against a city known more for machine politics than for responsiveness to citizen demands.

The School Battles

In early 1994, parents of students at the predominantly Latino Richard J. Daley Elementary School repeatedly complained about the presence of lead and asbestos, as well as numerous maintenance issues such as a faulty heating system, clogged toilets, a leaky roof, and broken water fountains. The school was also severely overcrowded. Eventually, the building was declared unsafe, and the Board of Education agreed to build a new school by 1995. When school started in September 1994, students went to Daley for three days before being informed that they would be bused to Washington Elementary School, twenty-six blocks away in Englewood, starting the next week. Daley parents complained that Washington School was too far away,
asserting that their children should have been switched to Chavez School, which is only four blocks from Daley. They claimed the Washington neighborhood was unsafe, and that the bus rides were dangerous. Parents of about seventy-five of the seven hundred students announced that they were on strike, and that they would teach the children themselves. The parents set up an outdoor classroom on a vacant lot down the street from Daley, complete with portable chalkboards and a cloth banner naming the site the “Richard J. Daley Elementary School.”

At first, school officials resisted any changes to their plans. Some school officials warned that the parent-led truancy could lead to charges of neglect with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Daley School Assistant Principal Liliana Evers argued that Washington School was safe, and that students were finding the bus rides fun and free of accidents. She urged parents to “give Washington School a chance.” A few days later, the school board offered to let concerned parents join students on the buses, but parents rejected the deal. Eight days into the strike, parents offered the school board a deal—they would send their children to Washington School if they got a promise, in writing, for the long-promised new school, including a date for its opening. They wanted the new school to be built in the vacant lot in which they were holding their strike, but school board officials were reluctant to commit to a specific location. Parents wanted a new school, and they vowed to wage a hunger strike until they got it. Four women began their hunger strike a few days later. Soon afterwards, four Latino state legislators pledged to join the hunger strike: State Senators Jesus Garcia and Miguel del Valle, and State Representatives Ray Frias and Edgar Lopez. These elected officials also began to lobby the Daley School administration and the school board on behalf of the parents. Meanwhile, the number of students on strike continued to increase, and school board officials continued to claim that the strike was unjustified.

A few days later, after almost eight hours of negotiations, a deal was announced between the city and the school board to build a new school, including a promise to give parents a role in the design and location planning. Instead of sending the striking students to Washington School, the school board agreed to set up temporary accommodations on the Daley School grounds and pledged that students would eventually go to “mobile” units at one of the various neighboring schools as soon as possible. At the school council meeting the next day, the deal was almost killed. Teachers refused to support it, and the council’s first vote on the issue was 5-4 against. Parents attending the meeting reacted to the vote with shouts
and screams; one woman, who was involved in the hunger strike, fainted and had to be resuscitated. Finally, after a closed session, another vote to reject, and unheard whispering among city council members, the plan was approved on a 6-4 vote. The new school opened for business in 1995 under the temporary name of Whitney-Corkery. Two years later, the school was renamed Emiliano Zapata Academy.

Just a few years later, Latino parents staged another hunger strike, in order to bring political pressure on the school board to build a new school in their neighborhood. In 1998, the district had promised to build three new high schools in the city, including one in Little Village. Land was purchased at the corner of 31st and Kostner Avenues, but political conflict and budget problems delayed actual construction. Although the site was initially intended for a high school, in late 2000 Chicago School Board President Gery Chico announced plans to add a grammar school to the site to relieve overcrowding at local elementary schools. The plan was immediately attacked by United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) President Juan Rangel, who charged that high school gang members would be a danger to young elementary children if the two buildings shared the same site. The criticism from Rangel was notable, as UNO had been one of Washington’s staunchest allies in the Latino community. Rangel was joined in his criticism of the plan by Ald. Rafael Frias, state Rep. Edward Acevedo, and state Rep.-elect Susana Mendoza. Others defended the plan, including Ald. Ricardo Muñoz, who noted that the eighteen-acre site was so large that the two schools could be as much as two blocks away from each other. School Board President Gery Chico noted that high schools and elementary schools already shared campuses on ten sites in the city, but opponents countered by noting the high amount of gang activity in the Kostner Avenue neighborhood.

By 2001, while two selective-enrollment high schools had been built in wealthier neighborhoods, Little Village was still waiting. The Little Village Community Development Corporation (CDC) helped lead a 2001 campaign, including a hunger strike, which forced the Chicago Public Schools to begin building the new high school they promised the community. The Little Village CDC was formed in 1998 to improve housing and support local businesses. However, in the summer of 2000, its volunteers kept coming back with a different priority. “Everywhere our block club organizers went, people would ask them, ‘Whatever happened to the new school we were promised?’” said Jaime de Leon, the corporation’s director of community initiatives. For a year, the CDC staff and a small group of
parents and community members fought for the school. They unearthed the history of the school board’s promises for a new school in Little Village. They gathered signatures on petitions. They pleaded at school board meetings. They disrupted public events. They met with Chicago Public Schools officials. They went to Springfield. However, no real progress was made. Chicago Public Schools budgeted $5 million for site preparation in 1999 and $25 million for construction in fiscal 2000 for the new high school, but plans were delayed by budget constraints and opposition from Pilsen Ald. Danny Solis (25th), who wanted funding for a new high school in his ward. The school was eventually taken off of the schools’ capital improvement program as delays and shifting budgets meant the school board no longer had the funding available to make good on its 1998 promise.14

Frustrated by more conventional efforts, the Latino community turned to the tried-and-true strategy of a citizen hunger strike. The hunger strike began small, with just eight parents (mostly women) camped out at the vacant lot at 31st and Kostner—the site approved for a high school by the Chicago school board in 1998—on Sunday, May 13, 2001 (Mother’s Day). Protestors claimed the three-year delay was due to politicians ignoring the needs of Little Village residents, although Public Schools Chief Paul Vallas insisted that the board’s hands were tied by lack of funds. The tent city was called “Camp César Chávez,” and was decorated with an American flag between two Mexican flags. Two weeks into the hunger strike, the mothers were joined by Juan Andrade, head of Chicago’s United States Hispanic Leadership Institute (USHLI). Vallas called the hunger strike “blackmail.”15

On May 21, about seventy-five protesters took their demands to City Hall, disrupting a press conference being held by then-California Governor Gray Davis in front of Mayor Richard M. Daley’s office. The protesters chanted, “Daley, Vallas, keep your promise,” until Davis left, then delivered a letter to Daley’s office that demanded a new high school at the Kostner site.16

The hunger strike ended on June 1, after participants had gone without solid food for nineteen days. Although it ended without a political victory on the school issue, organizers called it a success because it had mobilized the community. Started by only eight people, other hunger strikers eventually joined in, bringing the total number of participants to fourteen, not including the last-minute addition of Andrade. The hunger strike was called off after participants began to suffer health problems, including one woman who had to be hospitalized. On June 2, the next day, Little Village residents paid tribute to the hunger strikers and launched a second phase
of their effort to demand a new public high school: pickets at City Hall and weekly rallies in Little Village.  

The second phase seemed to go nowhere for a while, but in August, after the mayor replaced Paul Vallas with Michael W. Scott and Arne Duncan, the new schools team promised that the new high school would be built. New Board President Duncan announced plans to move forward with two new high schools for the Latino neighborhoods of the city, one each in Pilsen and Little Village. Although only $5 million was allocated to each site in the 2001–2002 capital improvement budget, and each school was expected to cost at least $30 million to construct, the announcement was seen as a victory for the community.  

The Little Village CDC continued involvement after the promise was renewed, organizing a committee headed by Jaime de Leon to advise the district to ensure that the new high school would meet residents’ needs. After the promise for a new school was renewed in August 2001, Latino activists continued their involvement, meeting with the CPS staff and architect to help design the new school. The Little Village CDC conducted meetings, surveys and focus groups to find out what parents, students, and the community wanted from the new school. Design plans were approved in November 2002; in late September, 2003, the Chicago Board of Education approved $60 million in construction funds for the 31st Street and Kostner Avenue site. Little Village Lawndale High School opened in the fall of 2005, with four hundred students.  

Although the hunger strike comprised only a few weeks of the multi-year battle for the new school, it was crucial to the community’s success. “The hunger strike was the pinnacle of the organizing,” according to de Leon. The importance of the hunger strike to the school is evident in various features of the architecture and landscaping. Honoring the fourteen hunger strikers are fourteen flowering trees. Symbolizing the nineteen days of the strike are the nineteen-degree angles of the entryway, a walkway, and six glass partitions. Inside the school’s courtyard is a unique solar calendar that shows the sunlight slowly fading from May 13 to June 1, the days that coordinate to the 2001 action. George Beach, the architect who designed the school, said that the hunger strike was a constant theme during two years of design meetings with local residents. “They constantly talked about their struggle and how to sort of bring that into the school so the students know what transpired to make the building—so they would not forget.” The hunger strike is also noted prominently in the school’s current website.
Chicago Latino Community Activism

In the early 1970s, Latinos in Chicago (Mexicans and Puerto Ricans) came together in a spirit of *latinismo* and formed larger, stronger organizations to fight for better conditions, including the Spanish Coalition for Jobs. In the face of job discrimination by Illinois Bell and Jewel supermarkets, unsuccessful meetings and negotiations led to protests and demonstrations until Latinos’ demands were finally met. Padilla notes:

> [T]he Illinois Bell and Jewel controversies provided both material and symbolic benefits to the Spanish Coalition constituency…these successes demonstrated that adoption of a “Latino ethnic identity” could alter institutional racist practices.23

Latinos in Chicago have since continued to turn to community organizations for political power. Traditional routes to equal treatment and representation have been supplemented as needed with protests, boycotts, and demonstrations. But given the increased number of Latino elected and appointed officials in Chicago in recent decades, why did the fight for improved educational facilities turn to protest politics?

The continued need for such unconventional political action is in some measure a reflection of the lack of political power of Latinos in Chicago. On the other hand, the continued success of such actions reflects the power of the community to achieve positive results. Michael Jones-Correa’s description of Latino politics in Queens, New York, provides a good parallel to that of Chicago and insight into how and why the women of Pilsen and Little Village acted as they did in these instances.24 In Queens, Latinos are marginalized by politicians because those who are active participants “tend to be Democrats in any case, regardless of the way they are spurned by the local party organization.”25 Because Queens is overwhelmingly Democratic, there is no effective competition from the Republican Party, leaving Latinos little choice but to either abstain or vote Democratic despite discontent with Democratic politicians. The same could easily be said of Chicago. Explaining the gendered approach to politics, Jones-Correa notes that “while mainstream immigrant organizations, dominated by men, are oriented toward their home country, activist women attempt to circumvent the obstacles to local participation placed there by the once supposedly helpful political party structure.”26 Elsewhere, he clarifies: “While men are likely to keep a sojourner mentality, and
organizations dominated by men will focus on the home country, activist immigrant women are more likely to turn to the problems of the immigrant community in this country.”27 Again, the parallel to Chicago is clear: such a gendered approach to politics explains why women took the lead in both school equity battles. The legitimacy of Latino parents’ concerns was likely heightened by the right of non-citizens to vote in Chicago school board elections, a right extended to all community residents and parents of children in schools in 1988.28

Another insight from Jones-Correa is that Latin American immigrants are creatures of habit in how they engage in politics:

“The forms of mobilization immigrants choose are almost ritualistic in nature. Like others mobilizing collectively, immigrants are not calculating tacticians who seize every available opportunity to act; instead, they choose the form and timing of their collective action from a narrow repertoire.”29

This explains the frequent use of hunger strikes by the Latino community of Chicago. It is part of their political repertoire.

The political opportunity structure surrounding these school battles was impacted not only by the ethnicity of the affected communities, but also by the gender and family identities of the mothers involved. In other words, that this occurred in the Latino community, and that the primary actors were Latina mothers, created a unique political context which must take into account the various categories of difference involved. The “multiple marginalizations” of individuals—in this case, as non-Anglos, as women, and as members of an economic lower class—locked these women in an “interlocking prison from which there is little escape.”30 In other words, the political context faced by the Latina mothers of Chicago was impacted by their ethnic identities, their gender identities, their class identities, and their identities as mothers. But, to paraphrase Hancock, it is not just an arithmetic problem. Women as mothers can arguably have more power—a different political opportunity structure—than women in general. The traditional commitment of Latinos to school policy increased their credibility.31 Their identity as mothers increased their power and legitimacy because they were not acting self-interestedly, but out of concern for others: their children and the community. As noted by Little Village CDC Board President Elena Duran:
We didn’t want an Olympic sized swimming pool; we were not asking for a shopping mall, we were not asking for extraordinary things, frivolous things. We wanted education for our kids. 

Would the hunger strikers have had the same success if they had been predominantly men? Arguably not, as starving (and fainting) women cues certain social responses that are unique to women. Would the need for a hunger strike have existed if the affected community had been Anglo and higher income? Again, arguably not. Here, then, is the intersectionality and the unique political opportunity structure. In part it was imposed from above, but the positive aspects were generated from below by the involved women. That the second hunger strike initiated on Mother’s Day suggests an understanding of that structure and how it could best be manipulated.

Traditional (what Hancock refers to as unitary or multiple-strand) research would conclude that the political opportunity structure here was quite dire. Latinos have less political power than Anglos. Women have less political power compared to men. Members of lower socioeconomic classes have less political power than those of higher classes. But the unique intersectionality of these categories in this instance created a positive political opportunity structure, due to the way in which these poor Latinas were able to manipulate and benefit from their position in Chicago society.

The approach by the Latina mothers of Chicago—protest rather than conventional politics—is not only a reflection of their lack of institutional power, but also a reflection of the different conception of ethics and rights held by men and women. Gilligan argues that while men are taught “to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self fulfillment,” women instead are taught “to care”—to “alleviate the ‘real and recognizable trouble’ of this world.” Other feminist theorists have expanded on Gilligan’s “ethic of care” theory to argue that women do not “treat people as self-interested maximizers of private or existing desires.” Such “ethic[s] of justice” approaches, while perhaps appropriate to the experiences and understandings of men, do not adequately explain the behavior of women in the political arena.

Actions done for the good of the community are often not even considered political, masking the extent of women’s militancy. Naples notes that the low-income, community activist women she interviewed did not consider community work political, because “politics, in their view, was designed to serve those in power, not the low-income communities.” The involvement by these women with the PTA and block associations, their
participations in public hearings, demonstrations, and local coalitions and advocacy programs, was understood by the women as “civic” activities or “citizen activism,” but not as political activity. This suggests that women seeking improvements in their communities are unlikely to turn to elected officials or more traditional political routes, and more likely to seek change through “civic” (as opposed to “political”) means.

This distinction between the motivations, ethics, and understandings of politics between men and women is illustrated by the Chicago school battles described in this chapter. The Latina mothers were motivated to work to improve the educational situation in their community due to a concern for their children. While perhaps clearly a political issue to outside observers, the women interpreted the situation as a non-political community problem, to be solved with local meetings and actions. In fact, their willingness to act, and their determination over time, illustrates that they not only felt strongly about the issue but also expected to win, an expectation that likely would not have persisted had the problem been understood as a political one requiring action by elected officials.

In the two school equity battles reviewed here, Chicago Latinos were able to achieve their goals not through conventional methods, but through protest politics coordinated by community organizations. Of what use, then, is increased political representation? Research on Black political representation suggests that the symbolism of those Latino officials, perhaps combined with the right of non-citizens to vote in school board elections in Chicago, provided important psychological support to the activists in these struggles. In other words, the existence of a substantial number of elected and appointed Latino public officials encouraged members of the community to believe that city officials would be responsive to their demands, while their right to vote in school board contests gave them an additional sense of legitimacy in the arena of school policy.

Gay notes that “research on minority political leadership at the local level suggests that descriptive representation can favorably affect attitudes towards public officials and institutions.” Building on Fenno’s claim that constituents value accessibility and the availability of two-way communication between themselves and their representatives, Gay theorizes that descriptive representation improves citizens’ attitudes about such accessibility and communication. She found that both white and Black citizens were more likely to contact same-race members of Congress, evidence that those attitudes translate into substantive political behavior. Similarly, Williams argues that descriptive representation sets in motion a “spiral of
trust” which has real implications for political life. Abney and Hutcheson find that having a same-race mayor increases trust among city constituents. Mansbridge argues that descriptive representation can be necessary to overcome distrust between legislators and constituents and ensure adequate communication. Swain argues that descriptive representation increases minority trust in government. Burrell notes: “When citizens can identify with their representatives they become less alienated and more involved in the political system.” What all of these researchers conclude in common, albeit about Blacks rather than Latinos, is that descriptive representation has substantive effects; increased trust, communication, and political behavior increases the political voice of minorities beyond any substantive representation elected officials might otherwise be delivering.

Applying these findings to the local Chicago context suggests that members of the Latino community were more likely to approach and make demands of school officials because of the presence of Latino leaders. While Latinos in Chicago may not have enough traditional political power to achieve their goals without going to extremes (e.g. hunger strikes), they have enough to be empowered to take such extreme action when they believe it to be necessary, and also enough for it to be successful. In Chicago, although the Daley administration was not delivering the school policies favored by the Latino community, the parents in Pilsen and Little Village were empowered to act, first using traditional means and then turning to protest politics when those initial efforts were unsuccessful. It is impossible to know whether the same actions would have been undertaken given less descriptive representation, but it is consistent with the theories reviewed here that the Latinos of Chicago might have been more likely to suffer quietly, or to give up more quickly, in an atmosphere of less trust and weaker feelings of political efficacy.

Conclusion

The Latino community in Chicago can point to significant advancements and successes in the last few decades. After years of being denied a proportional share of political power, based on population size, they won lawsuits and redistricting battles that led to notable increases in the number and strength of city and state elected and appointed officials. The resulting presence of Latino members on the city council and in the state legislature in Springfield have led to tangible gains for Latino residents, including more
jobs and more city contracts. In the face of unfulfilled promises from city officials to do something about overcrowded schools in Pilsen and Little Village, community activism and determination led to renewed promises and promises kept, resulting not only in the desired outcome (new and expanded schools), but also a renewed sense of community power—the same lessons learned by those who fought for jobs at Illinois Bell and Jewel in the 1970s. While in some ways the continued need for such tactics as hunger strikes and pickets is evidence that Latino political power in Chicago still lacks sufficient strength, the school equity battles also indicate the power of the community to successfully exploit available political opportunity structures.

Endnotes


The Fight for School Equity in Chicago’s Latino Neighborhoods

25. Ibid., 80.
27. Ibid.,181.


