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Immigration Debate Wakes A 'Sleeping Latino Giant'

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Drawing on fear of restrictive immigration proposals that have awakened hundreds of thousands of Latinos to political activism, organizers are using popular Spanish-language radio and networks of community organizations to mobilize protests in Washington and scores of other cities Monday.

The demonstrations are planned to expand on a groundswell that attracted about 30,000 largely Hispanic protesters in the District last month, about 100,000 in Chicago and as many as 500,000 in Los Angeles, a surprising display of political muscle from a population that makes up a substantial portion of the nation's 12 million illegal immigrants.

Jaime Contreras, president of the National Capital Immigrant Coalition, predicted that Monday's demonstration at the Washington Monument would draw 100,000 people and that nationally the turnout, in more than 60 cities, would number "in the millions."

"The sleeping Latino giant is finally awake," Contreras said. "This will be the largest demonstration by immigrants ever held in this country."

The movement has emerged as a loose coalition of immigrants rights groups, unions and religious and student organizations.

Organizers are eager to draw other immigrant groups, including Asians and Africans, into Monday's protest. But it is the involvement of so many previously apolitical elements of the Latino

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In Chantilly, Elsea Pineada and Esperanza Fernandes stir ingredients for making tamales for a fundraiser for disadvantaged families in El Salvador. (By Gerald Martineau -- The Washington Post)

The Immigration Debate



Immigration reform proposals before Congress have sparked a nationwide political debate.

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community that might prove a watershed in the political and cultural evolution of Hispanics, whose influence has lagged behind their growth into the nation's largest minority.

The mobilization has drawn into the political mainstream the organizations that have sustained daily life in the Latino community -- churches, Spanish-language radio and social groups.

"I'm not sure anybody totally understands this phenomenon. . . . But we are happily stunned," said Cecilia Muñoz, vice president for policy at the National Council of La Raza, a civil rights organization based in Washington. "We're all very aware that this is history in the making, and the country will be transformed by it."

The protests will come as Congress begins a two-week recess. The Senate made progress yesterday in resolving differences that have stalled immigration change legislation, but a vote to cut off debate today seemed destined to fail, probably dooming the chance for a final vote before tomorrow's recess.

With the legislation in play, organizers of Monday's demonstrations can sustain the urgency of their appeal for support.

According to a count maintained by the New American Opportunity Campaign, a coalition of national groups based in Washington, there have been more than 30 pro-immigration rallies across the country this year with at least 1,000 participants -- and often the number was far higher.

The movement has attracted informal immigrant social groups -- including at least 10 in the Washington area -- whose previous focus has been exclusively on raising money for charitable projects back in Central America.

Thousands of Hispanic youths, coordinating their actions by text-messaging on cellphones, have staged walkouts at high schools across the country, including several in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs.

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December that would make it a felony to be in the country illegally or to provide assistance to illegal immigrants.

"We've always been separate and marginalized," said Carlos Rivas, 46, a burly construction worker born in El Salvador who lives in Fairfax City. "But I think the racism in this country has grown so much it's time to say, 'Enough!' . . . Our community needs us to show that we're here, and we're not criminals."

Rivas said Monday's demonstration is his first foray into political activism.

Several years ago he joined a group of Salvadorans who host parties to collect contributions to build homes for the poor or people with disabilities in El Salvador. Now that Rivas and other members of the association have decided to become involved in U.S. politics, the network of contacts they developed through their years of community work is coming in handy.

Early Sunday morning, they gathered in a friend's back yard in Chantilly to prepare hundreds of chicken tamales to sell in their neighborhoods. It was a typical fundraiser for the group -- except that this time they also planned to hand out a flier advertising the march with each tamale.

While the women gathered around vats of boiling cornmeal, the association's president, Francisco Castro, sat down at a picnic table and began calling acquaintances on his cellphone from a list written on a yellow pad.

"Hey, brother, how's it going?" Castro asked, raising his voice over the cumbia music on the stereo. "Yeah, we have the tamales for you. But I'm also calling because I want you to commit to convincing 10 people to come to this march. And do you think you could also lend us one of your vans so we can give people rides?"

There was no need to explain the march.

Over the past two months, Spanish-language radio hosts have emerged as a driving force behind the immigration rallies. Once relatively rare, the number of Spanish-language media outlets across the nation has grown greatly over the past decade.

Pedro Biaggi, host of the morning show on Washington's 99.1 El Zol, is virtually unknown among non-Latinos. But the boyish, irrepressible Puerto Rican has achieved celebrity status among the area's large Central American immigrant audience after only a few months on the Spanish-language FM station.

"I have five hours to do jokes and stupid skits -- and normally that's my job, to help people forget their troubles," Biaggi said. "But this is a case without precedent. Never have we Latinos felt as insecure and persecuted as we do now. I'm Puerto Rican. But I'm brown, too. I am my audience, and I feel totally

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