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# Vamos JUNTOS: Immigrants' Organization Asserting Power Through Learning?

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## **Abstract**

Through the textual analysis of the curriculum of ICE Out of PA campaign, this roundtable explores politicization processes of adult learners in an immigrants' rights organization in Philadelphia, PA.

*Keywords:* politicization, social movement learning, migrants' rights, textual analysis.

In this paper through analyzing the online platform, ICE Out of PA campaign and curriculum designed and implemented by JUNTOS organization supporting Latinx immigrants in Philadelphia, PA. I analyze the learning pedagogies, and outreach strategies followed in their campaign. My question is “How consciousness-raising and politicization happen through learning in an immigrants' rights organization?”, in simpler terms I want to examine how JUNTOS politicize their members and target audience through learning? What tools are they using, in an aim to assert their power in the public sphere during a challenging political moment, especially for immigrants, in the US after 2016 election? And if and how action based on learning is utilized as a way of asserting power? I am looking through prefigurative lens to analyze how JUNTOS worked around the challenges post-2016, and utilized the opportunities that came with it.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this paper, I employ Curnow et al. (2019) and Curnow & Kohan's (2021) framework of “politicization as a collective learning process” (Curnow et al., 2019, p.724), where Politicization is defined as a communal learning process that includes not only the intellectual and cognitive processes of creating a political understanding, but also alterations in the practices of a group, methods of knowing, and the identities they hold (Curnow et al., 2019, p.724). In this theorization of Politicization, four main questions are asked (Curnow & Kohan, 2021, p.3):

- What they know? (Political concepts)
- How they know it? (Political epistemologies)
- What they do? (Political practices)
- Who they are? (Identity)

Looking at the theorization of Politicization, I realize Curnow et al. (2019) and Curnow & Kohan's (2021) are asking how people become activists? However, I am asking how organizations and social movements (in this case JUNTOS) bring their members and target audience to political consciousness and create spaces for politicization?

In my analysis, I utilized three concepts. The first one is Prefiguration, meaning: “the organization of current activity to resemble how that activity would be organized in ideal political futures” (Uttamchandani, 2021, p. 54). I am using prefiguration to understand how

JUNTOS are setting up their mission, campaign and curriculum in ways that embrace their political values and ambitions.

The second is Narrative Frames, one of the tools used by social movements in their effort to assert their power in a contested public sphere (Tivarange & Kirshner, 2021, p. 131). Narrative frames question and challenge current realities and dominant stories in opposition, affect peoples' perspective or understanding of a problem, suggest alternative configurations, visions and stories that are shared by the movement's members and supporters (pp.130-131). Finally, the Public Spheres where JUNTOS is politically situated "are fiercely contested spaces in which power shapes agendas and rules for engagement, including who gets to deliberate and whose voices are amplified" (p. 131).

### **Background on JUNTOS and Immigrants in Philadelphia**

As an organization JUNTOS started in 2002 to support Mexican immigrants in Philadelphia (Atlas, 2010, p.191). JUNTOS now is positioning itself as "a community-led, Latinx immigrant organization in South Philadelphia fighting for our rights as workers, parents, youth, and immigrants" (JUNTOS, 2022) which reflects a political transitioning the organization underwent since its starting, living through the different political moments especially during and post 2016 elections.

Philadelphia, a key destination for immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was once a hub of manufacturing and a space of religious tolerance (Takenaka & Osirim, 2010, p.2). There was a 4% decline in Philadelphia's overall population during the 1990s, but the city's immigrant population increased by 30%, from 104,816 to 136,000 and immigrant population growth in the 2000s was among the highest for large cities (p.2). However, major demographic changes and challenging economy have shaped immigration in the 2010s, as compared to other major cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago, Philadelphia saw a far higher rate of population loss (22% between 1970 and 2000) (p.2). Immigrants were seen as a solution to the city's economic and population decline by policymakers, and in 2003, a group of immigration supporters founded a non-profit called the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians in response to this idea (p.3).

In the introduction to the curriculum Juntos as an organization explains how after the 2016 elections they understood that there is a new political moment that was not safe for immigrants, even with the attacks on immigrants, and the deportation system not being new, but attacks were happening on a grander scale, expansion in detention center across Pennsylvania and with less disguised ferocity (Juntos CRZ Curriculum, 2018, p.2). At the same time, their members, supporters and community were afraid and participation to their events decreased (p.2). Pennsylvania hosts seven detention centers, and with this expansion the detaining of immigrants become incentivized as profitable, and immigrants are caged away from their communities and support systems, having to face the difficulties of their cases alone (Juntos, ICE Out of PA, 2022). Juntos came up with a solution to go to people in the safety of their homes and neighborhoods, to educate, train and equip them with the knowledge about their rights and skills to protect their communities and spaces (p.2). Juntos planned not only to work with leaders, but to reach out to even more volunteers in the neighborhoods targeted by ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency) (Juntos CRZ Curriculum, 2018, p.2). An

opportunity also came up at the time that more and more people, who were allies to the cause of immigrants, wanted to be part of the movement and help (p.2).

Juntos put into action the Community Resistance Zones and training & outreach program using an accumulative approach. Community Resistance Zones (CRZ) are safe geographical spaces and neighborhoods located in South Philadelphia, the immigrant center of the city, starting with a three-mile area, that is targeted by ICE and the police (p.2). Outreach and training of volunteers started with leaders, who trained 250 volunteers, who trained 2000 allies and community members how to stop ICE and police raids, leading to the recruitment of 500 volunteers to be resisters (p.3). The widening of the scope of participation would then lead to creating a bigger Community Resistance Zone (p.2).

### **Analysis of the CRZ Curriculum:**

The Community Resistance Zones curriculum included four workshops to train on volunteers on:

1. Fighting for your rights;
2. Orienting first-time facilitators how on running meetings;
3. Storytelling to build power and overcome immigrant stigma and victimization;
4. How to talk to communities and neighbors.

Below is how I read the curriculum, and how I applied the concepts and theoretical framework to the lessons and content of the curriculum:

**Politicization.** JUNTOS is helping its leaders, volunteers, allies and community to build political concept development through the accumulative dissemination of their narrative frames, and creating space for political practice through collective learning, individual and collective action of organizing workshops to include more people in the campaign and protecting the neighborhoods. This was built into the curriculum throughout the different lessons and workshops: "This curriculum has been designed to ensure there is an effort made to collectively teach and learn" (p. 14). "Today you will learn how to prepare for an interactive workshop that draws on everyone's experiences to learn most effectively, what important components to include and how to prepare for it. In the end you will all build your own "Know Your Rights" workshop and plan it" (p.15).

**Prefiguration through learning and action.** JUNTOS through CRZ curriculum and outreach & training of volunteers worked on converting immigrants from victims of targeting to resisters with the mindset of: "I know my rights when it comes to the police and ICE and I'm ready to defend myself and my neighbors." (p.3). Through creating the curriculum and training & outreach approach for supporting leadership and protection in the immigrant community, JUNTOS also created an actionable way for those who wish to stand with immigrants (p.3). JUNTOS embraced their own values of "centering directly impacted people in our organizing" and "No to reform of an unjust system" and decided to embody in their everyday organizing and practice a future vision where immigrant communities are agents of change, powerful and able to defend their rights against oppression, are able to access learning on how to organize regardless of their immigration status. In addition to having the toolkit available online for other immigrants' and allies' organizations to use and adapt it to their contexts and needs.

**Immigrants' Rights Narrative Frames.** JUNTOS worked on the design and implementation of several campaigns including ICE out of PA that break the power of

hegemonic apparatuses like ICE and the police when it comes to the experience of immigrants and poor people of color. CRZ also broke the stereotypical narratives of immigrants, especially poor people of color, as helpless, attacked and illegal to community members who are integral to the city, can campaign among their neighborhoods, rejecting the attacks and caging by ICE and the police, and identifying the immigration system criminalizing them as broken. In the CRZ curriculum, Juntos identified small support actions that members, neighbors and allies can take to signal their homes and neighborhoods are safe: “by placing a sign in the window: Like “Assata Welcome Here” posters in the 1970’s or red doors that signaled outposts on the underground railroad” (p.3). The building of alternative narratives through a lesson on storytelling, tapping on the agency of immigrants to tell their stories, equipping them by the tools to organize similar storytelling workshops in their communities: “Too often, the narrative around immigrant stories is told by others who do not have this experience or it is done in a way that robs people of their power and instead victimizes them” (p.30). CRZ curriculum and campaign also opens the space for a spectrum of political identities to be included. The “rads” or radicals who can be involved as resisters protecting the neighborhoods during raids. While the moderates and “reasnobles” can be trainers, volunteers and community organizers (Ko & Curnow, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

JUNTOS represent a more political model of an immigrants’ rights organization, especially in comparison to other models I have come across or had educational or professional experience with in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Germany, which usually employ a more charitable, service-based approach to supporting refugees and immigrants. Juntos utilized the polarized and anti-immigration political climate during and post-2016 to embody in prefiguration actions of learning and organizing that represent its values, to resist, to spread alternative narrative about immigrants, and to create safe zones in Philadelphia, asserting its power in the public sphere. One of doing that was through JUNTOS’ creating CRZ curriculum and campaign through which they can activate and influence the political concept development, practice and identity of their leaders, volunteers, community, and allies through a collective accumulative approach of learning and community action.

For coming research activities, I’d like to take a look at the politicization process from the point of view of JUNTOS members as a space for learning, and how the organization with the changing context, challenges and opportunities are modifying their pedagogies and strategies to adapt, implement its mission, and stay true or change its values.

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