Building political habitus: a case study of Salvadorans' political experiences in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area

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Building Political Habitus: A Case Study of Salvadorans’ Political Experiences in the
Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation research examines the ways in which Salvadorans in the metro D.C. area construct their political habitus. Political habitus is a conceptual tool that is defined as the disposition, thoughts, and actions that inhabit peoples’ worldview, and in turn, influences the political choices they make. The notion of political habitus illuminates the political experiences of Salvadorans because it understands the processes that lead to how Salvadorans become political actors and builds on social and structural forces to explain its development. Based on a qualitative methodology, this project argues that historical, organizational, and social structural contexts matter in determining the political paths that Salvadoran actors take. Ideal types of Salvadoran actors are created to provide a multi-faceted coverage of their diverse political trajectories, particularly as they relate to how the Salvadoran civil war affected their organizational development and consciousness. Within these experiences, Salvadorans’ organizing practices are analyzed to suggest that these spaces challenge the building of political habitus. Finally, a dialectical relationship between transnationalism and state-based power creates structural barriers that reconfigure Salvadorans’ political habitus. It is within these structural constraints that Salvadorans (re)build their political habitus to mediate between their individual agency and the challenges they encounter in the process.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCING THE DISSERTATION PROJECT

Introduction

This is a case study of Salvadorans in the metro Washington D.C. area and it is guided by the following research question: Why do Salvadorans with relatively similar resources\(^1\) but varying experiences have dispositions that allow them to act in politically meaningful ways even when some are more active than others? Using the notion of political habitus that I define as the disposition, thoughts, and actions that inhabit peoples’ worldview, and in turn, influences the political choices they make, I ask several underlying questions. First, how do people’s different political habitus influence the politics they practice? Secondly, how do their political habitus influence how they strategize in the political arena? Finally, what sorts of resources do they obtain by being politically involved? In this work, I expand the concept of habitus to include a political dimension because it allows me to explain why people in a given political field are politically active, are neutral about politics, or choose to be politically inactive.

Why Salvadorans?

Salvadorans are important to study because they represent an emerging population whose political experiences have not been examined by scholars. After Mexicans, Salvadorans are one of the largest undocumented immigrant populations in the United States and it is estimated that there are 1.2 million Salvadorans in the nation (ACS 2007). Yet, despite their demographic significance, there is very little known about Salvadorans’ political struggles. Those who have studied the population have looked at their acculturation process (Cordova 1986), their fragmented ties (Menjivar 2000), their

\(^{1}\) In referring to resources, I mean socioeconomic ones and the fact that most have legalized status.
livelihood in the suburbs (Mahler 1995), and their transnational behaviors (Landolt 2000; Landolt et al. 1999). However, an emerging theme amongst this set of works is that Salvadorans are struggling economically and socially with very little mention about their political struggles. With a few exceptions, the scholars who study Salvadorans downplay their political activities because the conventional wisdom suggests that immigrants with low socioeconomic mobility may not be able to invest their free time towards politics (Mahler 2001). While it is certainly true that Salvadorans have a hard time becoming upwardly mobile, there is no reason to discount their political practices. In fact, their political struggles should be examined because the root of their migration was intricately connected to the civil war that many escaped. \(^2\) De la Garza (2004) suggests that immigrants who experienced civil wars may differ in significant political ways from those who left more stable homelands. Perhaps, an in-depth analysis of Salvadorans could shed some light on how their political machinations are tied to their migration experience and what this means for their incorporation process.

Some scholars note that Salvadoran activism has long characterized the population both during and after the war. Particularly, Salvadorans mounted challenges against a repressive state in their homeland and an unwelcoming state in the host society (Coutin 1998; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Popkin et al. 1997). Rodriguez notes this in the following statement:

Unlike Mexican immigration, the large-scale immigration of Central Americans \(^3\) in the 1980s produced a series of organizing activities in support of popular movements in Central America. One level of organizing focused on raising U.S. public opinion against U.S. military intervention in Central America; a second level concentrated on organizing political resources within the evolving Central American immigrant communities (2007:88).

\(^2\) I detail the civil war and its consequences in Chapter 4.
\(^3\) This wave was mostly comprised of Salvadorans (see Rodriguez 2007).
Much of my interest in studying this group stems from Coutin’s (1998) work, which found that in previous decades Salvadorans mobilized to defend their immigrant/legal rights. Coutin (1998) showed that Salvadoran activists had prior experience with organizing in El Salvador and consequently joined the Sanctuary movement in the U.S. to fight for their rights as refugees. Rodriguez (2007) claims that these political activists were instrumental actors during the eighties because they mobilized against U.S. interventionist policy and often aligned with North American and Mexican-American progressives to challenge the U.S. government. Coutin (1998) found that because Salvadoran activists renegotiated immigration laws, they were able to redefine their status in the U.S. from one that depicted them as undeserving aliens to one that entitled them to legal status. While this project is informed by Coutin’s (1998) work, I intend to further the discussion of Salvadoran immigrant politics by incorporating new forms of activism that are occurring in this century. In fact, the post-civil war era is characterized by a range of Salvadorans organizations that have proliferated as the community continues to grow. These organizations range from local ones that deal with immigrant-related issues (such as the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)) to transnational ones that deal with homeland politics (for instance, U.S.-based chapters of the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) and Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) chapters. Moreover, a variety of hometown associations have emerged in the past decades (Orozco 2000) and these create different forms of organizing may have consequences for Salvadoran politicking. I believe that studying Salvadorans’ current organizational efforts helps us further explore their political angle.

4 These are called the Octavo Sector, which means Eight Sector and I know some of these exist in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and D.C.
The Salvadoran case is unique from other immigrant groups because Salvadorans were politically based from the beginning. That is, Salvadorans, despite their limited resources, engaged in claims-making efforts early on and fearlessly tackled political/legal battles. This makes their case noteworthy because it highlights how political concerns can take precedence over economic needs. This challenges the conventional wisdom because it suggests that migrants are not simply interested in addressing their economic situation when entering the receiving society, but also want to become political actors. Related to this, is the fact that Salvadorans who were exiled activists engaged in transnational advocacy work long before there were any discussions on contemporary forms of transnational behavior. As the Salvadoran community seeks permanency, what challenges do they confront and how do they maneuver them? What are the contemporary ways that Salvadorans seek the betterment of their compatriots, whom are either in El Salvador or in the D.C. metropolitan area?

Place Matters

This project focuses on Salvadorans in the metro D.C. area because this space provides an important context from which to study them. The metro D.C. area is an understudied site\(^5\) and yet in recent years, it has become a new gateway for the community. While the majority of Salvadorans live in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the Washington, D.C. metro area has the second largest concentration of Salvadorans.

\(^5\) Price et al. (2005) point out that the scant attention to D.C. as a site of immigration is troubling given that according to the 2000 census, it is the seventh largest immigrant gateway.
according to the 2000 Census.\footnote{This differs from 1990 Census numbers because according to Mahler: 47\% of Salvadorans lived in the L.A. metro area, 11\% in greater New York, 9\% in D.C., 8\% in San Francisco, and 7\% in Houston (1995:5).} Logan (2001) notes that Washington, D.C. is the next great center for new Latino growth and finds that in the area there are about 130,000 Salvadorans and about 400,000 if you include Maryland and Virginia (Council of Latinos Agencies 2002 report). According to Friedman et al. (2005), the DC metro landscape has been transformed from one that was primarily black and white to one that includes immigrants from various countries.

Salvadoran migration to the metro D.C. area began before the 1980’s civil war, but it was still relatively low. In the beginning, the area attracted embassy personnel and women who took up domestic work (Rodriguez 2005; Repak 1995). However, according to Rodriguez “[t]he bulk of Central American immigrants, streamed into the Federal City during the height of the civil war in the isthmus in the 1980s, as refugee centers and solidarity networks assisted immigrants [while] global economic restructuring tangentially opened new job markets in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area” (2005: 21) for Salvadorans to fill. By the 1980s and 1990s, the area witnessed an expansion of construction, domestic, and service-based industries that were ripe for Salvadoran immigrant laborers (Rodriguez 2005). As a global city, the metro D.C. has produced jobs that attract Salvadorans and make them employable. Their high rate of labor force participation benefits from employer’s perceptions of Salvadoran as hard workers (Repak 1995). Moreover, the metro D.C. area has a thriving enclave because Salvadorans have opened small businesses that cater to the increasing population (Landolt 2000). The question I set out to explore is whether Salvadorans can make their way into the political system by living and working in the nation’s capital and its surrounding counties?
Aim of Project

This dissertation seeks to expand the discussion of Latino immigrant politics and in particular, tries to understand how Salvadoran empowerment materializes. As such, I use the notion of political habitus and look at the particularities of the Salvadoran experience. I assess how different factors like a political history and transnationalism inform the type of politicking that Salvadorans engage in. I build on Salvadorans’ historical narratives of the civil war to connect it to their political habitus and the sorts of political actions they currently engage in. I also analyze how their transnational practices inform their political experience and explore what that means for their political habitus. However, I note the ways in which contextual and structural forces affect the building of political habitus and here I pay attention to the role of the organizations and the state in determining whether a political habitus can transform a political actor.

In this work, I examine Salvadorans’ political experiences at the grassroots level and not in the voting booth. I do so because Salvadorans face structural challenges that hinder their ability to vote. Primarily, they have the limited socioeconomic resources and tenuous legal statuses, which hinder their ability to become effective political players within mainstream U.S. society. Yet, Salvadorans have been characterized by their organizing capabilities (Dorrington 1992) and they certainly can bypass these barriers by joining organizations. An in-depth look at their organizational work shows the steps they take to become politically active and the indirect ways they organize for change. I aim to see how their associational life informs their political habitus. Perhaps their political
experiences work in a “cumulative causation”7 sort of way where one political act becomes significant for their continuous mobilization efforts. Furthermore, an analysis of their grassroots efforts generates discussions on their settlement processes.

**Significance of Project**

On one hand, sociological work on immigrant politics is limited because sociologists focus on other facets of the immigrant experience. Sociological research on immigrants tends to address three main questions: first, why migrants leave their country (Massey et al. 2002; Massey et al. 1998; Massey 1999), second, what is their impact on the receiving society (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 1990), and lastly, how children of immigrants are impacted by migration. While these studies are important, they have largely focused on how immigrants survive in the process of adapting to a new homeland and paid more attention to economic survival, cultural transformations, and social impacts. These studies seldom focus on the ways in which immigrants attempt to become political actors. That is, sociologists seldom explore the field of Latino immigrant political mobilization when in fact the recent immigrant marches that occurred all over the U.S. should prove that this topic is worth investigating.8

On the other hand, studies on Latinos depict them in a uniform fashion and standardize their political practices. These works tend to draw their conclusions by focusing on native-born populations and majority Latino groups such as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans (De la Garza 1994, 2004, 1992; Desipio 1996). Within these

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7 I borrowed the idea from Massey (1999) where he uses the term to describe the process by which migration gets reproduced.
8 According to Cordero-Guzman et al (2008), the immigrant marches were the largest mobilizations since the Vietnam War.
studies, the findings consistently point to a disenfranchised Latino populace that lacks political power because they do not have the socio-demographic characteristics that would enhance their participatory levels. While this research contributes to our understanding of Latino politics, it simultaneously leaves out the immigrant experience, which often takes place in the streets and not in the voting booth.

A sociological view can help us understand the processes that affect how migrant communities participate in politics. Moreover, a sociological insight can be bridged with other work to expand the discussion of Latino immigrant politics in the United States. Consequently, we can formulate research that understands how transnational practices, historical legacies, or context-specific factors affect immigrant’s political behavior. In this sense, we create a more dynamic portrait of migrant’s political practices by encapsulating the different facets of the immigrant experience within the larger framework of Latino politics.

When it comes to addressing the overarching question of how politically active are new immigrants, sociological and political science work leave out Salvadorans. As a result, I believe this study can contribute not only to what we know about immigrant politics but also what we know about Salvadorans. This project takes place in the current era and it can help generate important findings about the changes that have taken place within the Salvadoran community. These changes influence mobilization efforts and it is my intention to see how they are played out in the D.C. metro area.

**Contribution**
Although my interest is to develop the conceptual tool of political habitus to understand Salvadoran politicking, the concept is applicable to other groups. A general understanding of the particular cases, processes, histories, modes of incorporation, etc., can inform us of how other groups construct their political habitus. While this case study focuses on Salvadorans, the concept of political habitus can be relevant to other groups in different localities. Similarly, the findings that I draw from the metro D.C. area can be used to study Salvadorans in other settings so that one make generalized claims of how they employ their political habitus on a national scale. My intention with this case study is to expand research and discussions so that comparative analyses can take place.

This case study benefits from inter-disciplinary scholarship that bridges work on social movements, transnationalism, and political science, with sociology of immigration to make the study of immigrant politics relevant in sociologically significant ways. Discussions of how immigrant do politics is timely because immigrants face structural challenges in which they have to contest their right to stay in the U.S. Cordero-Guzman et al. (2008) note that immigrants are mobilizing with their feet and if this is the case, it is pertinent to analyze this process with the range of scholarship that we have in our hands. With this work, I plan to contribute a useful analysis towards understanding the complex process of immigrant politicking.

Overview of Dissertation Project

The remainder of this dissertation discusses the literature review, methodology, the Salvadoran political/migration history and the findings. The literature review in Chapter 2 provides a general understanding of Latino politics, transnationalism, and the
political opportunity structure, as well as discusses the general strengths and weaknesses of these works. These works helped me construct the model of political habitus and so I explain the political habitus model as it applies to Salvadorans. I argue that three elements define the political habitus of Salvadorans and these relate to a political history, transnational practices, and the political opportunities they navigate. I start the model by looking at Salvadorans’ political history because this created a space for mobilization efforts that some continued even after they left their country. Moreover, I reflect on the impact of transnationalism on the Salvadoran community because they are considered transnational actors. Thus, I focus on how their transnational practices come to define their politicized selves. Finally, the last part of the model looks at Salvadorans’ assessments of the political arena in the D.C. metro area. This issue is pertinent because it affects their mobilization efforts and I note how they navigate this challenging structure.

After reviewing the model, I discuss how I conducted the research in the methodology section of Chapter 3 and delved on the sampling frame, data collection, analytical framework and limitations of a qualitative methodology. I also address key issues that helped me reflect on qualitative work. In Chapter 4, a discussion of the economic and political history of Salvadorans contextualizes the forces that led to their migration. I provide an overview of Salvadoran migration to the United States and address the relevance of policy in fueling their migratory wave so that the United States became an attractive place for these migrants.

The last chapters address the findings that resulted from the study. Chapter 5 delineates the different Salvadoran actors that diversify the metro area and the ways in
which they define themselves as political beings. I found that there are three different political actors that range from being overtly political, unintentionally political, and those who individualize their politics and are less apt to engage in political work. These actors build a political habitus that is shaped by their experiences in the organizational realm. The most active ones are involved in organizations and understand their activism in different ways. While some justify their activism with war-based frameworks, others justify it with charity-driven narratives. Those who remain outside of the organizational structure remain in the fringes of politics because they seldom mobilize for a cause.

In Chapter 6, I address the organizational work because it is here where I see how political habitus is negotiated. The organizing practices of these actors’ forces them to maneuver their political habitus with the challenges that organizational work entails. For instance, seasoned activists have a strong political ethos but have to confront internal issues that deeply divide them in the organizational sphere. One of such issues is the fact that even as they maintain a political habitus grounded on solidarity with the community, their organizational work is service-oriented rather than grassroots. Moreover, seasoned activists feel challenged by government entities that neither gives them enough funding nor support. In contrast, philanthropic volunteers do not profess a political habitus but their practices suggest otherwise. They have to negotiate hometown work with the Salvadoran government and in doing so, symbolically become the apparatus by which the state can take advantage. Since the organizing practices of seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers are infused with internal and external challenges, critical observers are more likely to criticize these efforts rather than partake in them.
Finally, Chapter 7 addresses the common link between the participants and how they share a similar worldview that I label the transnational consciousness. The transnational consciousness is important in redefining their political habitus because it is used as a critical tool from which they understand their politics, their practices, and embark on new political experiences. In this discussion, I also address the role of the governments and look at Salvadorans’ perceptions of government entities. It is within these narratives that the role of policy becomes instrumental in structuring their political lives. I look at how policy challenges their livelihood and what this means for their political habitus. Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter where I review some of the findings, their implications for research, and suggest directions for future work.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The notion of political habitus and the model that I approach this study with is formulated through different literatures that I integrate in this chapter. In particular, this literature review focuses on the political world of Latinos, the transnational practices that they sustain, and what type of opportunities they have as challengers within the confines of the U.S. nation-state. Broadly speaking, the literatures on immigrant politics, transnationalism, and the political opportunity structure help contribute a significant dimension to understanding how immigrants practice their politics. That is, immigrant politics has benefited from the work of political scientists who address Latino political behavior, but I point out that there are inherent challenges in how political behavior is conceptualized and that immigrants are missing from this literature. I argue that one of the most recent contributions to the study of immigrant politics has been the transnational work in which we find several case studies of how politics is practiced. More specifically, the work on transnational politics helps us understand that immigrants can navigate several political spaces. Nevertheless, it is important to note the challenges they face particularly as the state holds a strong grip over their actions. I delve on the concept of political opportunity structure because it points to the ways immigrant politics can still be accountable to the confines of the state. In what follows, I present an overview of the literature that informs this project and then formulate the political habitus model based on these works. Since these literatures adds an important dimension and helped me study Salvadorans, I lay out some of the ways that Salvadorans experience these issues.
Latino Politics

The study of Latino politics has given us many insights on Latinos’ electoral participation. Political science work on Latinos was instrumental in challenging the conventional approach that studied white and black political behavior. These political scientists laid out the importance of Latino political power and created work that distinguished Latino voting behavior and looked at different group patterns (De la Garza 1994; De la Garza 1992). For instance, De la Garza et al. (1994) constructed a Latino Political Ethnography Project of five Latino neighborhoods and found that institutional forces severely hinder Latino voting. One of the areas they found problematic was that there were no outreach efforts to enhance the Latino vote and this led to the exclusion of Latinos in the political arena.

Socio-demographic characteristics tend to serve as markers for determining groups’ political participation. Scholars have found that Latinos’ low incomes, low educational levels, and young age hinder their political power (Hero and Campbell 1996; Desipio 1996). Desipio (2001) claims that because Latinos do not have favorable socio-economic characteristics they will remain politically marginalized. He argues that the “[i]nclusion of U.S. citizen nonvoters as voters requires mobilization to overcome the anti-participatory impacts of youth, low levels of formal education, limited incomes, and other socio-demographic characteristics that disproportionately influence Latino voting” (Desipio 1996:68). Other work finds that Latinos have a significant amount of non-citizens, and this weakens their political participation and affects their voting rates (Desipio 1996). Based on these measurements alone, Latinos seem overwhelmingly disenfranchised from politics.
However, other scholars have contested the significance of socio-demographic characteristics and highlighted other variables that make a difference (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). De la Garza and Desipio (1994) for instance, claim that outreach efforts by political parties or organizational building amongst Latinos help them overcome their low socioeconomic resources and raise their political potential. On a more general note, Jones-Correa (1998) contends that socioeconomic status does not fully explain immigrants’ lack of political participation because it fails to account for the costs that migrants face when making the decision to naturalize and participate in American politics. In his view, immigrants reduce these costs “[b]y pursuing a politics of in-between, Latin American immigrants can emphasize cultural loyalty while minimizing the institutional political constraints they feel acting on them from the two polities” (Jones-Correa 1998:6). Garcia argues that using the socioeconomic model to explain Latinos’ political behavior does not account for the fact that higher status Latinos are not significantly more electorally active than those who are in lower status occupations (Garcia 2003:126). As these studies point out, the focus on socio-economic resources may not fully capture Latinos’ political behavior. Particularly, if we want to include the Latino immigrants’ experience into the discussion, we may want to expand the socioeconomic model. In this light, Verba et al. (1995) make a compelling point that the socioeconomic model is empirically valuable but theoretically weak. Therefore, in order to depict the political lives of immigrants, we need to ascertain what other factors account for their political behaviors to add to the socioeconomic framework.

To assess political behaviors, a common measurement is voting trends. Yet, this leaves out immigrants who lack the right to vote and/or those who participate in non-
electoral activities. We know that Latinos as a whole have legal/illegal statuses that prevent them from voting. Yet, this does not preclude them from participating in non-electoral activities (Bedolla 2005). Milkman’s (2000) work, for instance, found that immigrants, who lack citizenship status and are poor, effectively mobilize and form unions. In a recent paper by Cordero-Guzman et al. (2008), the authors argue that to defend their rights, immigrant participated in grassroots efforts and marches throughout major cities. These studies point towards new ways to conceptualize immigrant politics. Rather than confining immigrant’s political behavior to voting rates, it is imperative to consider their mobilization efforts.

One way to assess Latinos’ mobilization efforts is to look at the role that organizations play within Latino immigrant communities. Several scholars note how organizational work helps activate a marginalized population to participate (Desipio 1996; Diaz 1996). Ramakrishan and Bloemraad note that “[w]hen noncitizens cannot directly access the political system through their votes, or face obstacles to electoral participation because of language barriers, they are more likely to need collective organizations to engage in representational politics” (2008: 31). As such, organizations can enhance the mobilization efforts of Latino immigrant communities because they advocate on their behalf and encourage the population to make collective demands. In fact, organizational involvement, even within non-political organizations, serves to activate political participation because it fosters community involvement and political discussions (Verba and Nie 1972).

These issues inform us of how we can expand discussion on Latino politics to include immigrants. We can build from Portes and Rumbaut’s (1990) work to address
the particularities of each migrant group. In their work, Portes and Rumbaut (1990) suggest that immigrants are entering the U.S. with different skills, political histories, and reasons for migrating and these issues determine their incorporation in the states. Consequently, exploring the particularities of each group can inform us of differences and similarities within immigrant’s political experiences. Instead of uniformly analyzing immigrant political efforts, Guarnizo (2001), claims that these discussions can benefit from a range of determinants that account for this behavior. He favors looking at how migration history and the political culture that they bring with them, impacts the politics that immigrants practice. Furthermore, he argues that migrant’s participatory behavior should be assessed in relation to how the receiving society incorporates them. Following Guarnizo’s (2001) claims, I suggest that one way to build on Latino politics scholarship is with case studies. These case studies can inform us of group specific indicators and address related processes that determine their political experiences. Furthermore, these case studies can include the emerging practices that alter the political experiences of a group. Within transnational scholarship, such case studies have led to discussions of migrant political practices in a nuanced way. These case studies detail the multiple ties that migrants sustain and the implications of these ties. It is through this work that new migrant experiences are illuminated.

Transnationalism

The transnational perspective is defined as “a series of economic, socio-cultural, and political practices and processes which transcend the confines of the territorially bounded jurisdiction of the nation-state and are an essential part of the normal lives of
those involved” (Smith and Guarnizo 1998:5). Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc (1992) are pivotal scholars in the emergence of transnational studies because their work addresses the multiple linkages that immigrants sustain and the consequences this has for contemporary migrants. For transnational scholars, potent forces like globalization and racism discourage settlement in the receiving society and force migrants to form transnational ties. At the same time, the sending state creates nation-building projects, like dual-citizenship, to attract migrants to their country of origin and this maintains a transnational way of being for the migrant actor. Consequently, transnationalism entails a highly global activity and personifies the immigrant as “both here and there” so that he/she belongs to more than one place and engages in practices that expand national boundaries.

The notion of transnationalism is not only critical of hegemonic forces like capitalism and nationalism, but its premise defies conventional assimilationist tendencies to suggest a less rooted process of incorporation that extends beyond the nation-state. The transnational literature has made headway because it challenges notions of citizenship, voting, and even the extent to which socio-demographic characteristics can restrict a group. It also rejects the taken-for-granted notion that political behavior is confined to nation-state boundaries. This work looks at how migrants organize and are involved in political processes that span borders. For instance, this literature depicts Latinos as seeking recognition in multiple political systems to empower themselves. This is important because Latino immigrants often maintain multiple linkages precisely because of their immigrant status in the receiving state. That is, as immigrants, they often lack the right to vote in the host society so the only natural place to practice this right is

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9 For the debate on transnationalism in the past and present see Foner (2001).
in the sending society. With the advent of dual-nationality policies\textsuperscript{10}, immigrants have found a sense of empowerment because even after leaving their homeland, they can still vote\textsuperscript{11} from afar. Emigrants are courted by their home country government and are sought as potential voters and/or people who can influence the votes of others. In fact, emigrants serve as intermediary diplomats of sorts because they have the most direct access to lobby both receiving and sending governments (Mahler 2000; Berg and Tamagno 2006).

Several studies have demonstrated how Latin American groups benefit from their transnational practices. Itzigsohn (2000) finds that Dominicans influence who is elected in the Dominican Republic and who is elected in their local communities in the states. Popkin (2003) suggests that because state-led initiatives cater to immigrants and attempt to politicize them, they have simultaneously helped them become important political actors who can in turn, use their leverage to cement local development projects. Finally, Escobar (2004) suggests that Colombian immigrants capitalize on their previous political experience to assimilate in the U.S. and she sees this process as complimentary to assimilation. Additionally, the transnational literature highlights an important organizational component that is overlooked by other work- the hometown association. Hometown associations (or HTA’s) help migrants pursue their political, social, and economic goals in their home country but they do so from abroad. Within the literature, common examples of Latino groups involved in HTA work are Dominicans, Colombians, and Mexicans. These groups tend to use these associations to promote social exchange,

\textsuperscript{10} According to Desipio and Pantoja (2004), the Salvadoran government recognized dual-nationality in 1983. But Baker-Cristales (2005) claims that in practice it has not led Salvadorans to become transnational political actors because many do not have the resources to travel to El Salvador in order to exert their vote.\textsuperscript{11} This does not apply to all groups. It applies only to immigrants whose sending society has developed mechanisms for them to vote from their homeland.
exercise political influence, and pursue low-scale development projects in their native homelands (Orozco 2004; Escobar 2004; Levitt 2001). These associations serve as agents of community building and give immigrants the opportunity to build their social capital while pursuing transnational goals. Landolt (2001) notes that HTA’s bring together individuals who would ordinarily not meet and thereby, serve as an alternative space to collectively organize and collaborate.

Although these transnational activities are important, some scholars see the limitations embedded in the process. Some scholars challenge transnationalism as a way of life because it is not clear if it is a first generation phenomenon (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004) or if later generations will be equally transnational. Along the same lines, critics argue that transnational accounts lack generalizability (Portes et al. 1999). Finally, others note that engaging in transnational work may hinder immigrant’s political incorporation in the host society (Desipio et al. 2003; Levitt 2001).

There are some indications that point to transnationalism benefiting political activity in the receiving state. In recent years, attempts to produce generalizations about transnational practices have led to insightful findings. For instance, the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute conducted a study in which they compared the transnational civic and political ties of several groups such as Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Salvadorans to assess if the strength of their transnational ties affects their naturalization rates in the U.S. (Desipio et al. 2003). They found that out of all the groups, Dominicans maintain stronger transnational ties from which they benefit from (Desipio and Pantoja 2004). These authors suggest that despite the high levels of transnational activity amongst the groups, transnational politics is the exception rather than the rule for these

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12 This finding also complements other work on Dominicans (see Levitt 2001; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991).
Latino migrants. However, they claim that the potential does exist of capitalizing on transnationalism to engage in U.S. politics. The authors note that “[w]hile the presence of these transnational ties does not eliminate the traditional importance of demographic characteristics in predicting U.S. political engagement, transnational political behaviors have a greater impact on U.S. organizational and political behaviors than did demographic variables or immigration characteristics” (Desipio et al. 2003:27). These authors claim that the connection between transnational ties and political engagement may be due to two things- for one, transnationalism helps migrants learn various skills that they can use to engage in collective action, and, two, migrants will use these transnational skills to tap into U.S. and homeland institutional resources to address the needs of their communities. Portes et al. (2008) support these conclusions in a recent project titled “The Comparative Immigrant Organizational Project.” They found that organizations simultaneously engage in transnational practices and partake in mainstream politics so that both processes are complementary. However, they note that group differences exist such that Dominicans and Mexicans connect better with U.S. political structures than Colombians do. These findings elucidate two important points on transnationalism. On the one hand, not all Latinos are transnational in the same ways and on another, transnationalism does not trump Latinos’ political incorporation in the U.S.

Despite these assessments, two aspects of transnational politics are still debatable. The first one is the overarching question of who benefits from transnational practices while the second one entails how transnational activities juxtapose nationalistic frameworks. In addressing the first part, some scholars claim that elites, such as government entities and immigrant entrepreneurs, benefit more from transnationalism
than do ordinary migrants (Berg and Tamagno 2006; Portes et al. 2001). Yet, ordinary migrants support their homeland by sending remittances and carry the weight of the state on their backs as they sacrifice their livelihood in the U.S. to procure a better living for those in the homeland. Regardless of their contributions, migrants who lack citizenship rights in the receiving state are often disenfranchised in their own country. The second part of the debate argues that the political system in the homeland is still confined to nationalistic frameworks of who can vote and where, even when it is benefiting from transnational actors. This argument brings back the role of the state within transnational discussions. This is an important step because states can alter or restrict transnational activity. Therefore, how the receiving state reacts to migrant communities is an important dimension that can complement transnational work. The social movements literature provides key insights on how states matter and frame collective efforts. Some scholars who take this direction look at the concept of the political opportunity structure to explain how challengers respond to the opportunities or constraints of the receiving political system.

**The Political Opportunity Structure**

Despite the utility of transnational studies in explaining the mobilization efforts of migrants, most of this work does not address the ways that states can open and at the same time hinder participation. Cordero-Guzman et al. (2001) claim that work on transnationalism overlooks the role of the state and fails to explain how citizenship and membership rights are structured by state policies. Graham (2001) points out that how nation-states open up avenues for transnational political activity for nationals living
abroad is critical to study but that this issue warrants more research. The transnational literature in essence does little to explain the political and legal constraints that immigrants are bounded by through state policies. Moreover, it fails to understand how immigrants challenge these nationalistic frameworks.

Since the transnational literature does not capture how states matter, other literature can fill that gap. In particular, social movement work has focused on the role of the state vis-à-vis its challengers. A useful concept within this literature is the idea of the political opportunity structure (POS). Danese claims that the political opportunity structure refers to the receptivity or vulnerability of a given political system to the action of a contesting group, and the degree to which these actors enjoy formal access to institutions and resources (1998:717). Although social movement scholars apply the concept to challengers that are native-born (McAdam et al. 1996), the concept is useful when one is trying to determine the prospect for immigrant mobilization because it looks at the opportunities and the constraints that the political system offers such groups. Yet, the concept is still hard to empirically grasp.

Two major problems with the POS concept are the lack of a rigorous definition and secondly, it is based on case studies. Social movement scholars look at how groups mobilize and if their success will depend on the configuration of political power in the system (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005). As such, they define the POS as how open it is for the challengers and look at the role of allies, mobilization tactics, and repressive mechanisms that can alter the state’s willingness to enact change. Yet, in this sense the concept solely focuses on institutional mechanisms that lead to collective action and simultaneously leaves out groups’ agency in their own mobilization efforts. Moreover,
the POS concept does not grasp the collective efforts, particularly those of immigrant groups, which are not conducive towards a social movement but nevertheless attempt to create change. Certain case studies illuminate how the POS concept has been applied. For instance, Koopmans and Statham’s (1999) work on Germany and Britain argued that Germany’s rigid citizenship laws force groups to invest their efforts in homeland politics. Thus, Germany’s POS closes door to immigrants and create a migrant population that looks towards the homeland to engage in politics. However, the authors do not account for how immigrants respond to the POS and challenge the nation-state. Similarly, Soininen’s (1999) work argues that as Sweden’s immigrant policy changed, this had repercussions on immigrant’s political membership. Yet, the author does not address immigrant’s role in this process. Finally, Hooghe (2005) claims that elite veto power in Belgium excludes immigrant groups from entering the system and because of this, they cannot become effective political actors. All these case studies are informative but they emphasize the institutional role while diminishing the agency of immigrant groups. A way to extend the POS argument is to look at how groups counter the political opportunities that are closed off to them. Bousetta (2000) claims that we need to analyze the role of ethnic actors, the context in which they operate, and their position within this context to fully grasp their participatory role within the confines of the POS.

Until recently, the other limiting factor about the POS concept is that it fails to incorporate the role of policy. Certain sociologists have begun to pave the way by looking at how citizenship regimes matter and structure the opportunities for immigrant mobilization (Koopmans and Statham1999). Others note that state policies can enhance immigrant organizing (Bloemraad 2005). For example, Bloemraad (2005) adopts the
concept of the POS to explain how Vietnamese can benefit from certain policies that give them material and symbolic resources from which they are able to form and sustain their organizations. Indeed, Bloemraad has provided an informative reconceptualization of the POS to study immigrant political action. She argues that through state policies, the state configures political opportunities for immigrants (Bloemraad 2005). She claims that state-based policies directly influence how immigrants understand their role within the political system and these understandings shape immigrants’ responses. In this vein, policies can symbolically define immigrants’ experience in the political realm but also alter the material basis from which immigrant’s respond to the state. Mettler (2002) outlines a useful way of conceiving of policy as creating a feedback effect in which: first, policy determines resource accumulation, secondly, what resources are available determine perceptions of the state and outlines the mechanisms that groups can take, to finally, see if those resources are indeed attainable.

In migration scholarship, the POS concept has relative utility because through its emphasis on policy, institutional configurations, and the role of social movements, it assesses how the political system provides or closes access to immigrants. Generally, the concept disregards migrant characteristics because it focuses on the institutional configurations that matter in structuring immigrant’s possibilities to engage in the politics of the receiving state. Perhaps, POS can complement other terms that migration literature uses such as the mode of incorporation concept. The modes of incorporation was proposed by Portes and Rumbaut (1990) as a useful categorization for migration scholars to look at how structural, individual, and community level forces contribute to the successful adaptation of a group in the receiving society. While this framework can be
useful in identifying the factors that create a “good” or “bad” mode of incorporation that migrants have to adapt to, it does not assess how U.S. policies affect migrant’s incorporation. Moreover, the mode of incorporation concept does not address the mobilization or organizing efforts that counter these policies.

Summary

The discussion so far focused on some of the scholarship that has created this project. I have highlighted how we can move beyond socioeconomic models to address immigrant politics in a more dynamic way by incorporating the role of the state and the ways in which their politics plays out within a transnational social field. Political habitus is a conceptual tool that I think can add to these works. Particularly, in the section on Latino politics, I mentioned that socio-economic indicators might be less relevant for immigrants because they tend to mobilize as a group and engage in non-electoral efforts. These conditions suggest a reformulation of the study on immigrant politics to give space to group experiences and new ways of conceptualizing their political practices. Recent attempts to study immigrant political behavior (Levitt 2001; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Bloemraad 2005, 2006, 2008; Itzigsohn 1999, 2000, 2002, 2008; Portes 2001, 2003) have expanded the discussions of how Latin American groups engage in politics and the consequences that this has on their political lives. Yet, even with these studies we know very little of what drives them to mobilize and assume a political role so that a discussion of what informs their agency and sense of political purpose is still missing. With the concept of political habitus, we can begin to address such issues particularly since a key aspect of the concept is that it helps us explore the ways in which experiences demarcate
the path to political action. I make the argument that we should explore the particularities of a group. With that purpose, I use the concept of political habitus to capture Salvadorans’ political experiences and to specifically account for how Salvadorans construct their political lives. Since the impetus for the project was to understand the political dynamics of immigrants, and more specifically, Salvadorans, I outline the notion of political habitus in the following discussion.

Introducing the Notion of Political Habitus

Political habitus is informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus but applied to the political sphere. The notion of habitus comes from Bourdieu who defines it as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (1977:82-83). Borrowing for Bourdieu (1977), Jay MacLeod (1987) describes habitus as “the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one’s social world” and as a shared and “deeply internalized’ way of viewing and acting in social settings. The concept of habitus was originally used to understand how individuals and groups respond to educational settings. However, Bonilla-Silva (2006) expanded it in his work when he discussed how the “white habitus” leads to a color-blind racial ideology that generates unequal racial outcomes, particularly to the detriment of blacks. I believe it makes sense to apply habitus to other settings so we can come to understand the nuanced ways that individuals inhabit, create, and reproduce the social structures that impact their quality of life. I believe that applying the concept of habitus to the world of politics can help us understand how people become political actors and how it shapes their activism.
I use the notion of *political habitus* and define it as *the mediating ways in which individuals come to act, think, and have dispositions that become meaningful for the political choices they make*. Political habitus captures how people view themselves as political actors and make sense of political institutions. As such, an individual’s political habitus can be shaped by past or present experiences but also mediated by the structural location that he/she is placed in. In other words, political habitus is a useful tool that connects people’s subjective beliefs about their political drive to the institutional processes that mark their political world. Political habitus evolves as people experience different things but it is also challenged by an evolving structure that can force them to remake themselves as political actors (McClelland and Karen 2009). In this sense, political habitus is a dynamic conceptual tool that forms a feedback loop between individual agency, political actions, and the context and structural elements that determine these processes. By suggesting this disposition is a dynamic process, I explore the ways in which political habitus is shaped, redefined, and negotiated by Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area. In my formulation of political habitus, I adopt Crossley’s (2003) view of habitus and apply it to the political sphere. Crossley suggests that habitus is:

> a disposition [that] involves a particular way of perceiving and understanding the world, an ethos, and an inclination to fight and the know-how to do it (2003: 61).

As I conceive of political habitus as programming Salvadorans’ political behavior, I pay attention to how their experiences reaffirm their political habitus. Such experiences can give rise to a strong political ethos and explain how they come to be political actors.

**Political Habitus and Salvadoran Experiences**
Having introduced the concept of political habitus, in this discussion I explain Salvadoran’s political experiences to tie them to the political habitus they construct. I address some of the experiences that are relevant for this case study. The first experience that is significant for Salvadorans is their political history. These historical roots engender a Salvadoran political actor and set the precedent for their organizational work and activism. By paying attention to this history, this becomes an added dimension to the study of immigrant politics because it suggests that historical precedents determine present-day outcomes. For Salvadorans, the civil war was instrumental in fueling organizational work and contributed to their migratory wave. I explore how this war-based experience constructs their political life and defines their political habitus. I aim to find if Salvadorans’ past affects their present lives in the political sphere. More specifically, do Salvadorans reconfigure their political habitus when they enter a new society? With this in mind, I set out to see if the Salvadorans in my sample were all activists in El Salvador and follow-up with this in the D.C. metro area.

The D.C. area offers a ripe opportunity in which to study their current practices and assess how politically active they remain. While prior work has looked at how Salvadorans engage in community-based politics in Los Angeles and Houston (Popkin et al. 1997; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Dorrington 1992; Rodriguez 1987), the Salvadoran community in D.C. is very well placed to generate important findings about the political habitus they form and what sorts of resources (or capital) they in turn develop. As Benitez puts it:

The Salvadoran community in the Washington, D.C. area has potentialities, unique characteristics, accumulated experience, and a new generation of young leaders to engender new local and transnational forms of sociocultural expressions
and grassroots political processes and practices in the transnational social space (Benitez 2005:160).

By doing a case study of their political practices in the area, one can generate important findings and expand the discussion of their political incorporation.

Political habitus is a dynamic concept and can capture how the past defines the present conditions of Salvadorans but it also speaks to emerging processes that migrants go through. In the Salvadoran case, it would be too simplistic to state that Salvadoran history impacts all Salvadorans equally. Rather, it is best to include diverse experiences that come to matter because these shape political practices. In fact, one of the experiences that Salvadorans are known for are their transnational practices. Salvadoran migration is moving towards a transnational affair whereby “…persons, although they move across international borders and settle and establish social relations in a new state, maintain social connections within the polity from which they originated” (Glick-Schiller 1999:96). Thus, one notices that even while they initially migrated for political reasons (that were worsened by economic conditions), they have created substantial networks to construct a transnational migratory culture. Salvadorans have a unique experience in how they were able to forge this transnational culture. As Salvadorans escaped the civil war, they incorporated in the U.S. as sojourners and never let go of their ties to their homeland. In effect, two conditions constructed their transnationalism—on the one hand, they maintained a strong sense of obligation to the ones who stayed behind and on the other hand, because they were ill treated by U.S. laws, felt temporary migrants who would return to El Salvador when the civil war ended. These factors led them to develop transnational ties early on and some managed to continue them.
Salvadoran’s political practices are impacted by their transnationalism (Orozco 2000; Itzigsohn 2000; Portes 2002; Mahler 1999). For instance, Landolt (2000) argues that Salvadorans engage in political projects in the homeland as they try to organize and fundraise to reconstruct the places they left behind. In response, the Salvadoran government tries to retain their political loyalties by devising strategies to engage them.\footnote{Benitez (2005) notes that the Salvadoran government has established the Fund of Social Investment for Local Development which gives matching funds to the projects of Salvadorans working abroad that want to rebuild their towns in El Salvador.}

Furthermore, Itzigsohn’s (2000) work shows that Salvadorans are engaged in a transnational political field that involves the Salvadoran government, the dominant political parties\footnote{The dominant right-wing party is called the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the left-wing party is called the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN). I explain these in more detail in the history chapter.} in El Salvador, the hometown associations, as well as, U.S.-oriented migrant organizations that are formed in the states. According to Mahler (2001), after the civil war the Salvadoran economy became heavily dependent on remittances and to retain these monies, the Salvadoran government invests in the affairs of the Salvadoran communities that are abroad. In doing so, the Salvadoran government is constructing an important space in which Salvadorans can enhance their political role in their homeland.

If such transnational politicking occurs, it becomes important for my project to make sense of how that affects the political habitus of Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area. Do Salvadorans accrue any resources in the process of penetrating these social spaces? By understanding the consequences of their transnational practices, I am able to assess their incorporation process in the states. As a result, learning to understand how transnationalism shapes the political habitus of Salvadorans helps me analyze if and how their transnational practices become a tool that redefines their political habitus.
Moreover, I can understand how their transnational practices help them maneuver the U.S. and Salvadoran systems. These issues certainly add to the literature on transnationalism because they address the benefits and limitations of becoming a politicized body in multiple spaces.

Apart from these experiences, how is political habitus negotiated in the D.C. metro area? Although I suggest that transnationalism and a war-based experience can fuel Salvadorans’ political habitus, there are constraints they encounter in the process. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to their structural position within the D.C. metro area. Schrover and Vermeulen (2005) note that immigrant communities interact with the political opportunity structure they inhabit. Consequently, the political opportunity structure of the metro D.C. area affects Salvadoran’s ability to turn their political habitus into effective political action.¹⁵ By looking at the political opportunity structure, we can understand how political habitus is mediated by the structural position that Salvadorans find themselves in.

In this specific case, the POS can be discussed in relation to how the state configures policies that condition Salvadorans’ political power.¹⁶ In this way, Salvadorans have to navigate structural constraints that come about through state-based policies. In my work, I want to look closely at temporary protected status (or TPS) because I believe that how the U.S. and Salvadoran government negotiate this policy says a lot about the openings and closings that are available within the D.C. political opportunity structure. Moreover, the TPS discussion illuminates how Salvadorans

¹⁵ Because this work takes place in D.C., I am unable to assess the political opportunity structures in the sending nation and that is something that would be equally important to assess (see Vertovec 2003).
¹⁶ Bloemraad suggests that when immigrants are directly affected by a policy, this opens up the opportunity for action because immigrants are taught the importance of politics, become the targets of political mobilization by mainstream actors, and increase their sense of political legitimacy (2006: 682).
negotiate constraints and build a political habitus. The facts about TPS are important to outline so that I provide an overview of the policy in the following discussion.

TPS originated from lawsuits that were mounted against the U.S. because it defined refugees as people who escaped Communist countries and this did not apply to Salvadorans. Salvadorans were escaping a political system that in theory was democratic but in practice was authoritarian and repressive. According to Gzesh (2006), after many attempts to legitimize Salvadorans as refugees, Congress finally passed TPS legislation in the 1990s. This legislation gave the U.S. President authority to grant TPS to certain groups in need of a temporary safe haven. The first TPS legislation contained one provision explicitly designating Salvadorans for TPS (Gzesh 2006). Through TPS, Salvadorans had the right to work, obtained temporary legal status, and can apply de novo for political asylum. Yet, many initially did not take advantage of the opportunity because they were wary of the process and/or did not have the proper documentation to apply. Initially, there were 187,000 of the estimated 1 million Salvadorans in the United States who applied for the program and even fewer renewed their status in later years (Mahler 2001:127). TPS was supposed to expire in 1992, at which point Salvadorans could be deported, but the INS acknowledged that it was incapable of deporting large numbers of Salvadorans (Mahler 2001: 127). The Bush administration reasoned that undertaking mass round-ups, holding deportation hearings and paying for migrants’ passage to their homeland would be too costly for the nation. In effect, in

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17. To obtain TPS, people have to report to US Citizenship and Immigrant Services (USCIS) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), pay a processing fee, and receive registration documents and a work authorization. Requirements for seeking TPS are: a passport, continuous physical presence in the US since TPS went into effect, timely registration, being admissible as an immigrant (see Wasem and Ester 2006).

granted previous TPS holders what it called deferred enforced departure (DED) and this would end in December 1994. Ironically, TPS/DED permitted large numbers of undocumented migrants to obtain Social Security numbers, driver’s licenses, and other forms of identification that were sufficient to obtain employment even if their TPS was suspended (Mahler 2001). By this point, the Salvadoran civil war ended but Salvadorans remained in the US because the natural disasters in El Salvador\textsuperscript{19} helped extend TPS for a longer period. As of 2007, the Department of Homeland Security has extended TPS until September 9.\textsuperscript{20}

The discussion of the temporary protected status policy offers a useful avenue from which to address the political opportunity structure. At one end, TPS policy allows for Salvadoran claims making to take place. At another end, it forced the U.S. to negotiate with Salvadorans a middle-ground law that is still in effect today. The TPS policy has structured the lives of Salvadorans in important ways. Politically, TPS activated them, but socially, it marginalized them. Mountz et al. claim that TPS shapes the experience of its holders because “[b]y granting TPS to asylum applicants within the context of a sizeable bureaucratic backlog, the US government indefinitely prolongs their experience of displacement, denies these individuals many rights afforded other refugees and asylum applicants, immigrants, and the native born, and actively shapes their identities” (2002: 336). These issues point to a needed discussion of the impact of TPS on Salvadorans’ organizational and political work. The D.C. metro area is a useful space

\textsuperscript{19} In 1998, Hurricane Mitch struck El Salvador and in 2001, it suffered from two major earthquakes.
\textsuperscript{20} See http://www.miracoalition.org/issues/federal/temporary-protected-status/updates/tps-extended-for-salvadorans
from which to discuss policy negotiations because in it, Salvadorans have challenged their legal identity.

Apart from challenging their legal status, Salvadorans have played an important role in challenging U.S. foreign policy towards El Salvador and U.S. domestic policy towards immigrants. In doing so, overtime Salvadorans have learned to navigate the political system. Because of this, the D.C. metro area serves as a diplomatic space where Salvadorans can directly confront the federal government. Another aspect that makes the area noteworthy are the spaces that connects them to their homeland government. In 1994, the president of El Salvador launched a consular program that would make embassies and consular offices more transparent within the Salvadoran community of the metro area (Landolt et al. 1999). Consequently, these spaces allow Salvadorans to make demands. Moreover, Salvadorans have the numbers in the D.C. area from which to build a powerful political voice. One of every four Latinos is from El Salvador (Garcia 2003:64) and this makes D.C. a very important center of Salvadoran concentration. This demographic significance makes them potential political players who can spearhead the Latino voice since they do not have to compete for political power with other Latino groups. In fact, the D.C. metro area has become a place in which there are political figures of Salvadoran origin representing the local and state levels of government. Yet, Salvadorans have not been able to penetrate the political spaces easily. Their political power is weak because they have not become an influential voting bloc. Many are still

21 In recent years, the Central American Free Trade Agreement required the back and forth politicking of the Salvadoran and U.S. government and this presented an opportunity for supporters and challengers to act. I witnessed demonstrations in front of these offices to protest U.S.-El Salvador trade relations.

22 To the best of my knowledge, there are no other localities that have a significant amount of Salvadoran representatives in politics.
bounded by a “permanent temporariness” that affects their ability to be politically active. Nevertheless, Salvadorans have been effective at building organizations. Since organizations have played a prominent role in negotiating policies, this organizational structure is important to consider because it serves as an alternative and intermediary space from which Salvadorans can react to the opportunities and constraints of POS in which they are situated.

In building from these aspects, I am refining the POS to address some of the specificities of this case study. I conceptualize the POS model as consisting of people’s reactions toward the policies that the state constructs and which affect Salvadorans. In particular, I am interested in seeing what legal issues do Salvadorans grapple with and how does this shape the structural forces within which they navigate through. The perceptions of Salvadorans towards migrant-related policies shape their political habitus because they address the structural constraints that they encounter. Using this particular context, I attempt to understand the perceptions that Salvadorans have towards these policies in order to show the relative importance of the state as an agent that opens and closes doors to its newcomers. I suggest that through Salvadoran’s perceptions of policy, we can learn about the opportunities and constraints that Salvadorans confront and the organizing practices they build to address these concerns.

**Conclusion**

To wrap up what I have tried to discuss in this chapter is that political habitus can inform us of Salvadorans’ experiences in many ways and this adds to the distinct

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23 Comes from Bailey et al. (2002) and it “describes both the static experience of being temporary and the secretion of strategies of resistance in the acquired knowledge that such temporariness is permanent” (139).
literatures that address immigrant politics. We are still limited by models that do not take into account the particularities of groups. Moreover, what these studies (i.e. political science, transnational, and political opportunity work) suggest is that studying immigrant political behavior is a complex endeavor. As is the case, immigrant politics can entail grassroots efforts and practices that go beyond the state. If Jones-Correa (1998) is right in suggesting that migrants engage in a ‘politics of in-between,’ how exactly do they navigate different political systems and redefine what it means to be a political actor. What happens when the state regulate immigrants’ political practices? With this project, I intend to highlight how Salvadorans exert their agency by engaging in various practices that come to define them as political actors, but also mediate their structural position within the confines of national and transnational spaces. I investigate these issues through a qualitative approach that I discuss in the next section.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

This study sets out to understand why Salvadorans have dispositions that allow them to act in politically meaningful ways. As such, I use the notion of political habitus to embark on a project that understands why people in a given political field are politically active, are neutral about politics, or choose to be politically inactive. In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative approach that I used to study Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area. I discuss how the data were collected, the sampling frame, the research site, and address how the data were analyzed. I also note the challenges and issues that informed this project. Lastly, I point out the strengths and weaknesses of using the qualitative approach by drawing on my experiences in the field.

Data Collection

The data for this project comes from sixty in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended interviews that I conducted with community leaders, members of Salvadoran organizations, and Salvadorans who were not currently affiliated with organizations. I used interviews because as Weiss (1994) claims, they help us learn about the settings and persons that may be unfamiliar to us and provide a window to understand social processes with more depth. These interviews were conducted in different phases. For instance, the first thirty were gathered in the summer of 2007, and the last thirty were collected in the summer of 2008. While all of the interviews were recorded, some were transcribed in Spanish and later translated to English. In doing the transcriptions, I reached a point of saturation in which respondents mentioned similar issues and gave
similar responses. When this occurred, I listened to the taped interview and decided to take detailed notes rather than transcribe the whole interview.

The interviews were conducted in various settings ranging from an individual’s private domain to public spaces, like coffee houses and restaurants. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. All of the participants were given informed consent forms that disclosed their rights to anonymity and confidentiality. During the interview, the participants were asked a set number of questions that covered the history of their migration, the role of the civil war in their lives, and their organizational involvement. Similarly, they were asked about the role of the Salvadoran and U.S. governments in their organizational lives, what the internal organizational structure was like, and the distinctiveness/similarities of the particular organization to others in the area. These themes were broadly construed to allow room for the participants to express themselves and narrate their story. I tried to stay away from defining rigid questions with a yes or no answer and relied heavily on open-ended responses. In many instances, I continued the flow of the conversation and when they were covering a question that I had yet to ask, I asked them to explain or elaborate on that point. I asked for clarification on particular topics that I was not sure about or probed for more detail when the answers were too short and to the point. Yet, I was lucky in that many of the participants liked to talk and this made our conversations flow smoothly.

The interview process was a learning experience in itself. I found that having a basic guide with questions is helpful, but when the interview takes place, it is also important to allow interviewees to tell their story, voice their opinions, and respect the

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24 Some of the respondents participated in more than one organization so I asked them to first talk about the one they were heavily involved in, and then, they shared information about their other participatory work.
experiences they narrate. This allows for new questions and new topics to take place. In my case, I had a general idea of the themes I wanted to cover ranging primarily with the civil war experiences, transnational practices, and the extent to which the Salvadoran and U.S. government hinders or challenges their organizational work. However, even when I wanted to cover these basic themes, I did not limit myself from exploring other themes that were important to the participants. At times, I would simply say “what else would you like me to know about you” or “is there something that I didn’t cover that you want to address?” I found that having a basic idea of what interests you in the project and memorizing the sorts of questions you want answers to is the starting point. But, each interview takes a personality of its own so it is hard to gauge what you will find until the data are collected and analyzed. Finally, I found that the post-interview informal discussions generated other insight on the respondents’ experience. As Cornelius (1984) finds, these post-interview sessions are useful in that they can narrate more rich data. Moreover, these informal sessions helped me recruit prospective interviewees for the study.

**Sampling**

This project is a case study of Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area and I was interested in studying people who were linked or had knowledge about the organizational structure in the area. In order to tap the members of the community, I first looked for organizations that existed because they provide valuable information about the settlement process of immigrants (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005). Moreover, my project aimed to study Salvadoran’s political ethos and organizations served as a starting point to study
this behavior. Since organizations play a central role in disseminating information and advocating on behalf of immigrants (Mountz et al. 2002), I used these to recruit people.

In order to access Salvadorans for my sample, I first familiarized myself with the organizational structure of the area and used different mechanisms to do this. In some instances, I used directories that were available online. In fact, the consulate office offers a valuable guide to Salvadoran organizations throughout the U.S. but the information is a bit outdated. I also generated my initial contacts through Landolt’s (2000) dissertation in which she mentions some well-known organizations in D.C. and the surrounding counties. By the time I conducted my work some of these organizations no longer existed. Nevertheless, Landolt’s (2000) work helped me obtain important names of prominent organizations in the area. When I entered the research site, I set out to find who directed them, where the organizations were located, and if anyone within the organization was willing to be interviewed. Moreover, informal contacts helped guide me in the field and pointed out other organizations that dealt with cultural, charity work, and other issues. As such, I was able to find organizations that have a lower profile and are not mainstream organizations. For example, hometown associations comprise part of the organizational structure of the metro area but are less visible within mainstream society.

25 Landolt’s (2000) work provides a brief description of some of these organizations:

- **Clinica del Pueblo**- this is the longest organization in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood and provides health/social services
- **CASA Maryland**- originated in the Sanctuary movement and aimed to provide social services for refugees including shelter, legal aid, food and clothing
- **Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN)**- developed a transnational strategy to support the political party in El Salvador
- **Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)**- is involved with political issues like CAFTA and social justice issues globally
- **Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN)**- transnational advocacy organization
- **Asociacion Salvadorena Americana del Norte de Virginia (ASANOVA)**- focuses on incorporating Salvadorans to the political and social spheres and lobbying US politicians on various issues like education and immigrant policy

Salvadoran American National Network(SANN)- that seeks to empower and integrate immigrants and refugees into U.S. society. This organization serves as a lobby group and is an umbrella of the other organizations.

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Through informal contacts, I was able to find these alternative organizations and recruit some members.

This study does not encompass all of the Salvadoran organizations in the D.C. metro area and it is therefore inclusive of only those that I gained access to. Therefore, even though there might be other organizations in the area, if the interviewees or my informal contacts did not mention them or I could not access someone from that organization, then these are left out of the study. However, I found that people who were involved in one organization were not limited in their knowledge about the other ones in the area. This helped me draw comparisons between what they said, what others said about them, and what the organization’s public voice articulated. I even found that interviewees worked in one but often collaborated in multiple organizations. For instance, many of the participants worked in a nonprofit organization and volunteered in a cultural, political, or social organization. When this occurred, I asked the participant to convey these experiences to me and tell me about their different organizational experiences. Although their narratives about the organizational structure were insightful, in the end, I was only able to capture enough detail about ten organizations. In this way, the study is limited to understanding the nonprofits and hometown associations better than understanding the organizational structure as a whole, which includes soccer clubs, business and professional associations, and political groups.

**Sampling Techniques**

I generated my sample of interviewees through a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling. I purposively sampled some of the organizations by
using the different mechanisms that I alluded to and this allowed me to access potential recruits. However, this proved to be a less successful way of “getting access” to the participants because in some cases, they would not respond to my emails, had time constraints, and/or were wary about the purpose of the project. Moreover, I generally found that they maintained a level of distance with me when they were interviewed. Perhaps, had I volunteered for some of these organizations then I would have been able to build rapport before the interview (Salzinger 1991). Yet, my own time and money constraints did not allow me to volunteer and so the interview was the only option I had to meet them and for participants to meet me. As a result, I found that purposive sampling was helpful but limited in its scope and thereafter snowball sampling was a more effective recruitment strategy.

With the snowball sampling technique, I was referred to others who “put in a good word for me” and allowed me to “gain entry” to their personal lives. This technique increased the level of trust and comfort that the participants felt when I interviewed them. Cornelius (1982) discusses the snowball sampling technique as a useful way to gain access because it allows the researcher to establish rapport and credibility with the initial contacts that thereafter produce referrals that can be tapped. One of the helpful ways that I generated a snowball effect was by tapping on the friendship networks that my uncle had in the area. He introduced me to other community brokers and from then on, I was able to find participants more willing to be in the study. This technique proved to be feasible because those I had previously interviewed entrusted me to gain access to others. I finally reached a dead-end with the snowball technique when each potential
interviewee, recommended by a previous interviewee, was someone who I had already interviewed (Cornelius 1982).

By employing a snowball sampling technique, I learned that the role of referrals is essential because they helped legitimize me to others. Once I told them that I needed to interview sixty people, they would generate contacts that would then give me other contacts to interview. This became an easier way to gather data and a valid approach to studying immigrant behavior (Heckathorn 2006). Sometimes, the sampling technique has to be feasible for the project at hand, for recruiting, and for the researcher, and the snowball strategy was effective in all three ways.

**Sample Characteristics**

Since I was able to sample mainly community brokers, this makes the sample population distinct from the overall demographic profile of Salvadorans in the metro area. Most of the participants were well educated and had at least a high school education, while others attended college in the United States. On average, the participants in this study had been residents in the metro D.C. area for about twenty-one years. Many had migrated as early as 1979 and reflect the civil war wave that migrated in the early to late eighties. The majority of the participants worked in modest-paying occupations as professionals or in the nonprofit sector while some owned their businesses. As a result, their incomes generally ranged from modest to high incomes. Lastly, more than half of the interviewees were married and the rest were single or separated.

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26 In Appendix II, I provide a profile of these participants.
These sample characteristics point to a more privileged group of Salvadorans in contrast to what the national data shows. As a group, Salvadorans are disadvantaged because they have low socioeconomic characteristics. Salvadorans have very low educational attainment levels with almost 60% of the population obtaining less than a high school degree (ACS report 2004). Most Salvadorans are foreign-born with 50.9% of Salvadorans arriving before 1990 and 49.1% have arrived since then (ACS report 2004). Salvadorans are a young population and have above average household sizes. Furthermore, they have one of the highest percentages of people who work in service-based occupations (ACS report 2004). Salvadorans in D.C. resemble the national trends and compared to whites and blacks, they are underrepresented in public administration jobs despite the preponderance of such employment opportunities in the area (Council of Latinos Agencies 2002 report). These low human capital characteristics make Salvadorans vulnerable to scapegoating and they are challenged by anti-immigrant policies. However, these same conditions have led to a resurgence of organizations that advocate on migrants’ behalf. To ameliorate the low socioeconomic characteristics of the group and their ensuing problems, organizations have expanded their services to help Salvadorans incorporate better and withstand the anti-immigrant climate they perceive.

There are aspects about the sample that point to a selectivity bias that I want to address. For one, the sample is mainly comprised of men with an overwhelming forty-three of the sixty being males. I found that this sample is reflective of an under-

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27 Interestingly enough, Landolt (1999) claims that despite Salvadorans’ usually low rates of self-employment, they are the most prominent ethnic entrepreneurs in the D.C. area.

28 During the time I was interviewing, Salvadorans were contesting policies that criminalized immigrants and threatened to deport them. Thus, even those in my sample felt threatened that by looking “Salvadoran” they would be severely affected or would know someone who would be targeted by such policies.
representation of women within the leadership base of the community. Perhaps, the leadership base is comprised of men because the area has experienced a male-driven migration. However, I am more inclined to believe that the patriarchal roles that affect the family structure may play out in the organizational structure. As a result, women have not penetrated the organizational niches because men still guard them. Apart from the gendered outcomes of an unequal organizational structure, I want to point out that the sample is narrowly constructed because it includes executive directors, staff members, and volunteers. In doing so, this study does not capture the population that is out of touch with the organizational world. In many ways, I sampled the population that I see as the gatekeepers of the community because I interviewed the leadership base but did not access the overall community. Yet, I do not think that these gatekeepers represent a power elite because they lack direct access to decision-making within mainstream political brokers. I do think that these gatekeepers serve as community brokers and that while they may have different resources compared to the everyday Salvadoran, their experiences can highlight the beginning path to gaining political influence. That is, even as I recruited the community brokers and left out the ‘typical’ Salvadoran, we can learn that Salvadorans’ struggles vary and that each dimension contributes to our understanding of migrant’s lived experiences.

Nonetheless, even as the project is not framed around new immigrants’ experiences, who are the most marginalized, it does attempt to provide an overview of what structural changes have affected the community so that the old immigrants are helping the new immigrants ease their way into society. While I do not want to undermine the experiences that many Salvadorans face when they lack legal status and
are economically struggling, by looking at the community brokers, I can contribute to a wider understanding of Salvadorans “who have made it” and thus attempt to create a more fluid picture of the population at hand. In particular, I find that there are few accounts on the post-civil war organizational experiences of Salvadorans. Most studies have either looked at the organizational experience that Salvadorans engaged in during the civil war period or focus on how politically immobile Salvadorans are in the post-civil war period. Recent studies on Salvadorans’ struggles claim that because of factors such as: lack of time, low human capital resources, fear that organizing will damage their residency claims, or suspicion of politics, Salvadorans are less likely to get politically involved (Bailey et al. 2002). Yet, these accounts are accurate in as much as they focus on a specific segment of the population and perhaps my project can show that politicking matters for certain Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area, even as they face barriers in the claims-making process.

**Research Site**

The D.C. metro area encompasses the District of Columbia and several counties in Maryland and Virginia. Though in the past it has not been an immigrant destination, in recent years this has changed. Singer (2004) characterizes the D.C. area as an emerging gateway because it has experienced fast immigrant growth in the last twenty years. For example, the area is now home to the second largest Salvadoran population after Los Angeles (Benitez 2005; Guarnizo et al. 2003) and Salvadorans comprise the largest Latino group in the area. According to Singer (2007), by 1980s the majority of the Latino groups were South American and Caribbean immigrants, whereas by 2006,
Central Americans became the majority group. Within this Central American group, 32% are from El Salvador. In fact, the area is comprised of 19.9% of immigrants (Singer 2007) and 12.6% are of Salvadoran origin (Singer 2003).

Salvadorans who migrated to the metro D.C. area can be distinguished by region and legal status. According to Benitez (2005), there were two large waves of Salvadoran migration in which: the first wave were from eastern regions of El Salvador while the second wave migrated in the post-civil war era and are from diverse places within the country. These two waves are also distinguished by their legal statuses such that the first wave has been able to procure legal documents whereas the second wave is largely undocumented or relies heavily on TPS (Benitez 2005). In particular, the post-civil war migrants made use of chain migration and used pre-established networks to choose the area as their destination. However, because of restrictions in immigration law, most post-civil war migrants have tenuous legal statuses. In this study, however, I was not able to capture the second-wave migrants because most of the ones I interviewed were first wave migrants.29

Even as Salvadorans make the metro area their home, there have been certain challenges they have tackled. The area serves as a symbolic space for Salvadorans to express their cultural identity—either through the different business ventures they maintain, the organizations they sustain, and the many cultural events that take place. Yet, I find that what makes the area significant was an event that occurred in 1991 and it was known as the Mount Pleasant riots.30 This event served as a transition point for the

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29 This is due to the snowball sample technique and the fact that my uncle facilitated many of these contacts.
30 It also marked the clashes that existed amongst the immigrant community and the native population, who were primarily lower-class African Americans. The riots came about after an African-American police
Salvadoran community and was a sort of wake-up call that prompted the community to react to the marginal conditions that they were undergoing. As a result, the riots forced Salvadorans to challenge the ways they were mistreated in the capital of the United States. Amidst the chaos, an advocacy group known as the D.C. Latino Civil Rights Task Force was established and the organization sought to empower the Salvadoran community. Through the organization, Salvadorans built a voice within the local government and institutional spaces. Because of this event, Salvadorans became political actors to demand better treatment and services from the power structures and gained greater visibility as a group. They not only sought to address the educational, health, and other needs that they had as an emerging immigrant community, but also learned that a strong Latino community had to be civically engaged and participate in local and national politics. The aftermath of the riots was beneficial to Salvadorans because it generated a space in which they could exercise a unified voice that would make demands for a better quality of life. This would have implications for the general organizational structure that evolved as it shifted from refugee-assistance to tackling immigrant related needs. That is, the riots stirred the community to restructure their nonprofits so that these could gain visibility in the area and could fight for justice for immigrants.

Data Analysis

Once I gathered the data and finished interviewing sixty people, the analysis took place. I used Nvivo software to manage the transcriptions and the coding process. The interviews were coded based on themes that emerged and then I looked for patterns to
draw comparisons. In looking for patterns, I organized the data based on who shares these patterns and who differs and created categories for each. Then, I looked for what informs those similarities and differences and created typologies. These typologies describe the people, their experiences, and their thoughts and opinions. I divided the analysis in three parts by looking for common patterns between the actors and the organizational work, the actors regardless of their organizational work, and recurring themes. In doing the analysis, there is a constant back and forth between the data, coding, and memoing process. I wrote memos to understand and reflect back on the data and made theory notes to link the data to the literature review and the research questions. At this point, I was able to develop a theoretical proposition and created models to facilitate the interpretation process. While these models are ideal types\(^{31}\), they helped me understand the data. Finally, I continuously researched the organizations to learn more about them and looked at particular events or news stories that the participants alluded to. Most of this extra information was covered in Latino newspapers that serve the area (Benitez 2005). This extra work helped substantiate the information from the interviews and confirmed the respondent’s thoughts and opinions.

When I present the material, I do not disclose the names of the participants nor give the names of the organizations for several reasons. The organizational structure is relatively well known by the community so that disclosing the names of the organizations would be a vehicle by which the participants in the study could also be identified. The issue of privacy is very important for the community because the common remark that I

\(^{31}\) These ideal types are not meant to categorize people so that their complexities are discounted but rather to facilitate meaning-making and connect back the different experiences to the overall research questions. Weber describes how ideal types help us create a mental picture that one can use to construct a useful interpretation of society (see Freund 1968).
would hear was that although Salvadorans were a large group, within the organizational circles, most people knew of each other or had close ties to one another. As a result, the participants remain unidentified because they expressed several critiques and concerns about the political and ideological divisions within the community and shared very personal war memories. Additionally, because I established a familiarity with many of them, I did not want to expose them in a negative light and so rather than identifying them, I utilize an abbreviation, make note of their gender, and identify what kind of participant they are, when I quote them. Some of these quotes have been translated into English and the idiomatic expressions that are inherently Salvadoran are lost because there lacks an English equivalency to a Salvadoran phrase or word. In selecting the quotes, I tried to be mindful about generating narratives from several participants to highlight their various points of view. In the next discussion, I highlight the theoretical richness that qualitative work can entail but note the challenges and limitations inherent in the approach.

**Theoretical Approach**

**Grounded Theory**

Glaser and Strauss (1967) offer many insights about grounded theory and claim that at the core of this approach is theory building from data so that the data leads the researcher to discover the theory. As I approached my work, I discovered that grounded theory was very useful in helping me untangle the findings and build theory from them. When I first approached the field, I set out to see how Salvadorans derive political resources and what these political resources consist of. Initially, I created a model that
tried to understand how political capital (or resources) explains Salvadoran activism. This model did not emerge from the data but rather was pieced together by different literatures to attempt to understand what Salvadorans can capitalize when they engage in politics. In doing so, I did not enter the field with a clean slate but rather had preconceived notions of what I was trying to find out. However, after analyzing the data, I learned that the interviews were not speaking directly to my initial inquiry but rather were taking me on a different path. I learned that I did not have enough information on what those resources were and how they were used but rather the data pointed me towards a different direction that I had to undertake from the ground up. What emerged from the data was what I refer to as political habitus because this idea reflected the experiences of the participants and the extent to which it informs their political behavior. Thus, it was no longer adequate for me to discuss political resources without discussing the root of that and so a new model emerged that seemed to be a better fit. The new model made note of what shapes people’s dispositions towards the politics they practice and so I decided to focus on the notion of political habitus because it helped me understand what sparks Salvadorans’ politicking. In my attempt to ‘make sense’ of the data, I understood that different elements help explain the political habitus of Salvadorans. Thereafter, I developed typologies to better explain the inconsistencies and different experiences. In this regard, I have let the data inform the theory and have structured the analysis from the ground up. In doing so, I found that “[t]his methodological approach allows for an in-depth, focused, and subtly nuanced exploration of individual and group experiences, within the context of the local [and] particular settings in which they are lived” (Davidman 1999: 80).
Methodological Challenges

Feminist Epistemology

Part of the process of doing research entails reflecting back on what happened in the fieldwork, what sort of choices one makes, and what informs those choices. In this work, I was influenced by a feminist approach to qualitative work because it allowed me to break the relations of subject versus researcher and intimately connect with the research site, the participants, and the project at hand. In this section, I discuss the ways in which a feminist epistemology helped me understand my role in the field and elaborate on how my identity became meaningful.

Feminist researchers underscore the subjective nature of qualitative work and make claims to how inherently value-laden it is without apologizing for that. They suggest that from the moment we pick the research topic to the time we inhabit the field, there is a personalized nature that is embedded in this methodology (Collins 1998; Menjivar 2000). This is not to presume that qualitative work is no more value-laden than quantitative work but it does suggest that when we do qualitative work, it takes on a role of its own in our lives because rather than dealing with numbers we are dealing with the everyday experiences of people and interacting with them and those experiences. As such, it becomes problematic for the qualitative researcher to remain detached and distant with the population that he/she is studying.

In an attempt to break from a positivistic and objective nature of research, feminist epistemology suggested different strategies to implement in our work. Feminist qualitative work argues that empathy and immersion is an adequate and alternative strategy when doing our research and that we can simultaneously appreciate someone
else’s world and reach a level of understanding that is based on the participant’s constructed meaning of that world. Therefore, following a feminist standpoint, the discourse we produce with our studies is both reflexive and engaged. During my time in the field, I began to acquaint myself with the participants and created social ties that allowed me to interact with many of them outside of the interview. Therefore, their personal stories somehow felt more meaningful to me and I tried to detach myself from being strictly a researcher to someone they could confide in. Davidman (1999) finds that in doing this kind of research, it is inevitable for the personal to interact with the sociological. Because of this, I do think that this research is both a reflection of me but also an attempt to integrate the experience of others in sociologically meaningful ways.

I find the feminist approach has helped me understand my role in the field and appreciate the bond that I established with others. Nevertheless, when one leaves the research site, the project takes precedence and the commitment developed with others is as vital as the validity of the project. I think this is the part where one has to disconnect from the community, tackle the project at hand, and be rigorous with the research. This rigor takes different steps and in my work, it involved transcribing, coding, and analyzing. These basic steps are necessary and remind you that the story is not about sixty people’s lives but a research on how people make sense of their lives and what that tells us about social processes. As such, even as I empathized with the community, I nevertheless was systematic when it came to coding, creating memos, making models, and theory building. I understood that the project was more than a journalistic account and that the research part comes across with how one substantiates the findings. That is, as I developed the findings from the project, I compared them to other work and looked
for alternative interpretations. When I found that other works supported many of the claims that I made, I was confident that I systematically produced a thorough account of Salvadorans.

**Negotiating the Insider and Outsider Statuses**

I discuss my experience in negotiating the insider and outsider status because it influenced my work and addresses who we are in the field and how that matters. The change in the social status and backgrounds of many sociologists has engendered concerns with the ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ dichotomy.\(^{32}\) It is no longer that easy to distinguish between the insider (i.e. the participant), and the outsider (i.e. the researcher), because identities shape the research as well as the researcher. Sociologists have argued that ascriptive categories like race, class, and gender matter in our studies and should be discussed (Chung 2007; Collins 1998). They contend that a researcher from a particular race, for instance, is just as much as insider to a particular group vis-à-vis sharing the same race, as he/she can be an outsider by having the status of a researcher. Collins (1998) suggests that people of color are placed in a particular position as outsiders within. She suggests that one’s racial identity is constructed by power differences and minorities have various lenses from which to understand the dominant group and situate themselves in comparison. In a concrete sense, the minority scholar has to juggle oppositional roles by maintaining distinct insider/outsider repertoires. The minority scholar is part of the privileged sphere of academia whose role as a researcher will be contested by whites. But, the minority scholar can be advantaged because certain shared experiences can lead

\(^{32}\) Although Merton (1972) discussed these roles he found them to be complementary.
them to identify with others and in turn, articulate that information in the best possible way to those who lack that insider access.

In my particular case, the issue of identity and its multiple constructions came to affect my qualitative work. Because of my identity as a Salvadoran who was raised in the United States, I felt that this research allowed me to be involved in the complex web of being an insider and outsider. The insider status allowed me to access gatekeepers and build rapport amongst the population so that they eventually felt comfortable to introduce me to others. The process of building rapport helped me bond with the participants and in many ways, I had to resocialize myself to act and present myself as more Salvadoran. This insider status was facilitated by a number of aspects including: a shared indigenous knowledge of Salvadoran history, similarities in the migration experience, and cultural elements such as the use of slang to express ourselves. Finally, the insider status came across in the interviews when the participants referred to “we” as demarking a Salvadoran identity and the use of “our” as conveying a shared history and patriotism. Moreover, many of them saw me as an example and my experience as an insider emulated what De Andrade recalls in her work that: “[t]he participants perceived me as a member of the next, upcoming generation, and they viewed the interview as an opportunity to express their hopes and expectations about how my generation would engage in [author’s identity] cultural life” (2000:283). However, precisely these generational and age differences also made me feel like an outsider.

My experience as a 1.5-generation immigrant differed from many of those whom I interviewed and certain differences juxtaposed our similarities. On the one hand, I had not lived through the war, had not lived extensively in El Salvador, and could barely
recall what it meant to come to the U.S. as an immigrant and the challenges that the journey itself entails. Similarly, there were language and cultural differences that emerged between us and I could not relate to the struggles that sometimes having a legal limbo status meant for a lot of Salvadorans. My 1.5-ness was coupled with my gender identity as I experienced what it was like to interview mostly men. Herein, I do think that gender is constantly negotiated in terms of where the proper place to meet is and what is the proper attire to wear (Arendell 1997). Finally, being an outsider to the D.C. metro area meant that I had to rely on the participants to better acquaint myself with the geographic spaces, the politics, and the history of the site.

Another important issue that I had to negotiate was my family tie because it was ever-present in my field experience. My uncle is a well-known figure within the community because he actively supports the FMLN, is a union organizer, and has embarked on numerous community projects while contesting government policies that he considers to be unfair. He is a visible public figure and many of the participants immediately questioned if I was related to him. I was honest and open about my ties but tried to separate myself from any political or ideological agenda. Instead, I presented myself as a researcher who was interested in how others perceive and negotiate their worldviews and put them into practice. I found that having a family tie worked to my advantage in some cases and a disadvantage in others. To my benefit, I enjoyed the privilege of accessing certain circles because, as a gatekeeper, my uncle facilitated those openings for me. To my detriment, I was not able to successfully get participants who overtly supported ARENA or had tendencies that went more towards the right. As such, I had to maneuver my way to gain a right-wing perspective. I attended political
campaigns, reached out to government officials, attended receptions sponsored by
government entities, and informally conversed with figures that are known to support
ARENA. However, I was not able to schedule a one on one interview with anyone who
participated in the ARENA sub-committees that service the area.

The Qualitative Methodology and its Limitations

Evaluating Strengths and Weaknesses

I chose a qualitative methodology to do this project because I wanted to
contextualize the experience of Salvadorans in D.C. and reach a level of understanding
beyond what the numbers tell us. A qualitative study allows for an in-depth description
of the processes that take place and it is useful because it can relate experiences that
cannot be adequately captured by numbers. Moreover, because I wanted to study
political behavior, I knew that I would be limited by what the existing data measures. In
these studies, larger groups are often analyzed and Salvadorans are not sampled because
they are still a small group and are highly concentrated in certain regions. Additionally,
because Salvadorans are an emerging group, they appear disenfranchised in these
quantitative analyses because these measures often miss the immigrant political
experience. With a qualitative approach, I am able to add a different angle to explain the
political behavior of immigrants. Namely, a qualitative approach allowed me to study
Salvadorans’ disposition to practice their politics. Although this is a case study, it tries to
get an in-depth understanding of the Salvadoran experiences and in doing so, creates a
model that can inform future quantitative studies.
Within the qualitative methodology, there are weaknesses and strengths that should be addressed. One of the weaknesses in this study is the fact that the results cannot be generalized to Salvadorans in other areas because I cannot draw conclusion from sixty respondents since they do not represent the overall population. Yet, even with the selective sample in this work, I challenge the idea that a general sample of Salvadorans is enough information to know about the group. In looking at Rumbaut’s (1996) work, Salvadorans are generalized as a group that occupies the lower socioeconomic stratum, are highly undocumented, low educated, and suffer from high poverty rates even while they have a high labor force participation rate. This study frames the discussion differently by suggesting that within marginalized groups there is progress and immigrants are not necessarily all struggling and suffering because of their low human capital characteristics. Rather, this study tries to show how immigrants, who at one point or another had similar struggles to face, overcome them and are paving their incorporation route. Moreover, I look at Salvadoran’s experiences as a positive contribution to the scholarly world because in studying them, I find that Salvadorans’ complexities provide a colorful painting of immigrants’ experiences beyond the generalized accounts.

Another limitation with this approach is the sample size. With a small sample, one runs into the problem of leaving out the missing voices. As I mentioned early on, this project does not incorporate non-professionals nor is it divided equally by gender and so the participants seem much more privileged than the average Salvadoran. Yet, I think this study is no different from others that have in large part captured the more permanent and thereby privileged migrants. In fact, Cornelius (1982) writes about doing research on
immigrant populations and finds that most studies tend to encompass a higher proportion of long-term residents in the U.S. and this is partly due to the challenges embedded in capturing the newcomers. Even as small as the sample is, I find that sometimes we sacrifice breadth to reach depth in our work (Whyte 1984). As a result, in doing the sixty interviews, it was more important for me to understand the participants in this study by “digging deep” into their lives rather than achieving breadth with more interviews. At the same time, this case study definitely pushes me to continue with future work that can certainly capture other identities and related experiences.

Despite these limitations, the strength of this methodology is that it paints a picture of Salvadorans that adds context to the numerical data that is currently available. This qualitative method has been used by some of the most important authors who have written about Salvadorans (Menjivar 2000; Mahler 1995; Landolt 2000; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001) and this makes me feel confident that meaningful experiences can be captured through a qualitative approach. Additionally, while the participants do not represent the larger population, each account adds a dimension about the immigration experience and furthers our knowledge about the differences and similarities that exist within groups. Finally, while most depictions of Salvadorans show them struggling to achieve the American dream, I show the other side of those who are attempting to “make it” and analyze how they do it through their political experiences. Since I am interested in analyzing processes that have been largely studied by qualitative work, I am also confident that this work contributes to a wider discussion of immigrant politicking.

The Ethnographic Dilemma
Most of the work that discusses immigrants tends to draw heavily on ethnographic accounts and I was highly conflicted by my inability to do that. One of the challenges of studying a population that is not in your backyard per se, is that one cannot be rooted in the field of study for a year or longer (Goffman 2001). Because of this, I chose to conduct interviews rather than immerse myself in the field. However, I had been researching the site and going back and forth since 2004 when I volunteered for a community-based organization for a month. Within this allotted time, I learned about the area, met a few contacts, and started developing a sense of what I would later study. Moreover, once my actual data collection started, I knew the research site, how to use its public transportation, and where the neighborhoods were located. However, I realized that one of the disadvantages of studying a large immigrant population is that there was too much going on. Even if I wanted to participate as an observer in the different community affairs or volunteer in various organizations and/or support many causes, I was limited by a lack of time. As a result, my immersion in the field was shortened by my own time and money constraints. Nevertheless, the time I did spend in the field was beneficial because it allowed me to attend various social, political, and cultural events.

I think that not doing ethnography was a benefit for me because it allowed me to maintain some distance. Ethnographers sometimes are immersed in the field for long periods and often are critiqued for “going native.” However, I think that this concern is misguided. I found that “going native” takes on a different aspect when one shares the same identity as those who are being researched. In my experience, the issue was not that I would “go native” but rather how easy it was for me to blend in. I maintained a distance that was geographical so that I could have some time to better reflect on the
project. I know that several things like my identity as a Salvadoran, a preference for D.C., my family and friendship ties, could have clouded my research had I stayed in the area for a while. Instead, I believe the brief intervals that I was in the area helped me maintain some distance and dilute some of my subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the steps that I took to conduct a qualitative study of Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area. In it, I have discussed who the population under study was and how I was able to access them. At the same time, I discussed how the data were collected and analyzed. I noted that grounded theory helped me reformulate the model to better understand the findings. Moreover, I have also reflected on some of the methodological challenges that I have encountered. Since I approach this work through a feminist lens, this has helped me reflect on my identity in the field. I discuss how I was conflicted by my inability to stay in the field for a lengthy time. Yet, in retrospect, this was necessary to maintain some distance and produce a less biased project. Finally, I point out the drawbacks and gains of doing a qualitative project. I suggest that even with its limitations, qualitative work can highlight meaningful experiences and help us understand how these experiences are constructed. To better understand the Salvadoran case in the metro D.C. area, I discuss their political and migration history in the next chapter before addressing the findings of this project.
CHAPTER 4: POLITICAL HISTORY OF SALVADORAN MIGRATION

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the historical forces behind Salvadoran activism. Salvadoran activism is sparked by the repression that took place before and during the civil war. In the first part of this chapter, I will show how this context emerged and how Salvadoran society simultaneously goes through repression, rebellion, and activism. I delve into the pre-1970’s conditions that paved the way for the civil war in order to show that Salvadoran society was struggling economically, socially, and politically. Then, I explain the emergence of the civil war and focus on why it occurred and the impact that it had on the people of El Salvador. I look at the role that oppositional groups played and herein a discussion of the FMLN as a vehicle that contested the state will be addressed. Additionally, I reflect on the role that the U.S. government played during the war and after the peace accords were signed. The U.S. involvement in El Salvador made it the number one country to migrate to and I present migration data. Thereafter, the discussion focuses on Salvadoran migrants and their struggles in the U.S.

Pre-1970 Roots to Emergence of the Civil War

El Salvador’s political history is a story of struggle against repression, inequality, and poverty. As a primarily agricultural country, El Salvador has dealt with a long tradition of unequal land distribution coupled with military dictatorship and busts in its agro-export economy. Since the 19th century, the economic system has been primarily dependent on exporting coffee and many laws ensued to ensure coffee production.
Coffee was such a valuable commodity that it solidified the power of the economic elites but “also became the axis around which the contemporary class structure evolved” (Menjivar 2000:38). For instance, in 1856 the Salvadoran government decreed that 67% of Indian communal lands had to be coffee plantations or the state would cede them (Landolt 2000). By 1882, communal lands were taken away from the hands of the peasantry so that only fourteen families could own them. These fourteen families became the elites of Salvadoran society and had such overarching power in the economic, social, and political life of El Salvador that they formed an oligarchy that reigned through military force. When peasant uprisings occurred, the state instituted laws that allowed the rural police to arrest peasants who remained in the plantations. By 1912, private landowners created the National Guard to curtail peasant activity and protect their interests.

The 1930s depression affected the coffee export economy because coffee prices fell and landless peasants lost their jobs or suffered reduced wages. Peasants disenchanted with the oligarchic regime formed organizations. Thus, Salvadoran workers who were reformists, communists, or anarchists, organized and formed unions to fight the injustices. These efforts led the oligarchic regime to fight back with its most treasured weapon, the National Guard. The National Guard repressed activists and killed landless peasants. The state justified its repression by arguing that the rebels were communists and agitators and that its job was to maintain order. In one of the most memorable acts of Salvadoran history, the state showed how far it would go to ensure its hegemony.

In 1932, Farabundo Martí led a peasant uprising to contest the repressive conditions and falling wages that occurred in this period. The uprising was unsuccessful

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33 Martí was the son of a landowner and was affiliated with the Socialist party and founded the Salvadoran Communist Party (see Arnson 1982). He was assassinated because he was the conspirator of an armed
in achieving its goals because the government retaliated by indiscriminately massacring peasants and political opponents. During La Matanza (The Massacre), it was estimated that 30,000 peasants died and this left a tremendous imprint on the Salvadoran population (Mahler 1995). The state used La Matanza to terrorize people who dressed, spoke, or practiced indigenous culture. After the Matanza, being Indian became a death sentence because the state implemented a forced assimilation process to eradicate the indigenous culture and implement an exclusively white and Spanish-based culture. The Matanza also traumatized the population into submission and diffused mobilization efforts. In this period, the military operated with impunity and consolidated its power by suppressing unions and organizations. Militaristic power continued for the next fifty years and made El Salvador one of the countries with the longest military rule in all of Latin American history (Menjivar 2000). Meanwhile, the state continued to reinforce the El Salvador’s rigid class structure by failing to improve the social and economic conditions that plagued the nation.

By the 1940s, several things like—the Matanza event, the drop in coffee prices, and the appropriation of peasant lands—forced Salvadorans to migrate to nearby countries for survival. In this period, the first wave of immigration to Honduras took place. Meanwhile, the Salvadoran economy was partially alleviated from its falling coffee prices by its exports of sugar and cotton. Although El Salvador enacted an import-substitution model that led to a small group of middle-class entrepreneurs and North American investment, the increasing mechanization of labor displaced urban and rural workers. As unemployment grew, the government cut back on social services to spend

revolt against the dictatorial regime of Hernandez Martinez, who was a general in power and was overthrown in 1944 (see Ucles 1996).
its money on the military. By the late 50s, even as El Salvador continued to industrialize and attract foreign investment, this did not create a vibrant local industrial sector because the foreign capital was not invested back into El Salvador nor were there links between the new industries and the local market. El Salvador became increasingly dependent on foreign aid, while the majority of the society suffered economic ills. In the 60s, a key event occurred that affected Salvadoran society.

As factories depended on machinery rather than workers, unemployment grew particularly in the agricultural areas. Before this time, rural workers dealt with the circumstances by migrating to Honduras but when war with Honduras broke out, these peasants faced economic hardships. When peasants internally migrated to the cities of El Salvador, these spaces became over-populated and offered a lower quality of life. Salvadorans lived in conditions that resembled extreme poverty. In 1961, 61% of the population earned 21% of the national income, while the richest 5% received 32% of the income, and the top 1% of the population accumulated 18% of total earnings (Dunkerley 1982). By 1971, 20.2% of the workforce was unemployed and 40% were underemployed (Menjivar 2000).

In 1973, an oil embargo caused inflation and furthered the drop in coffee prices in the country. Even with industrialization, many urban dwellers earned poverty-level wages. Much of this was the result of the government’s inability to supply the industrialists and landowners with credit to invest into El Salvador. This made owners of these companies cut back the wages of their workers and in doing so, aggravated the already high poverty levels of the population at large. Moreover, the country’s debt grew because it failed to retain multinational companies and expand the private sector. As
discontent rose amongst the civil society, the government once again continued to quell fierce opposition with repression and failed to institute any social reforms that would ameliorate the depreciating living conditions. Not only were Salvodorans infuriated by their economic troubles but there were no political openings from which to demand significant changes. That is, government forces continuously restricted organizing and free speech by using repressive tactics.

In the seventies, three events sparked a long awaited civil war (Landolt 2000). The first event occurred in 1972 when the military regime refused to grant electoral victory to the centrist party of Jose Napoleon Duarte.34 As protests ensued, the state terrorized grassroots organizers, political party leaders, and exiled Duarte and other reformists. This led to a wave of political exiles to the US, Europe and neighboring countries and marked the beginning of a widespread consensus that democratic reforms would not occur without an armed insurrection. By 1977, there was a second attempt to democratize the political system but it also failed. However, by this point a guerilla force named The Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN)35 began to antagonize the military/government forces. According to Brockett (2005), these were critical times in Salvadoran’s organizational work because as people tried to gain democratic electoral reform, they faced more violence and repression from government forces. By this point, the state repressed the population, tried to shut down political

34 Duarte later on became the president of El Salvador in 1984 in what many saw as the first elected president.
35 McClintock (1998) explains that the FMLN consisted of five coalitions of guerrilla groups and each maintained its own leadership base, practices, and ideological views. Moreover, they formed alliances with the FDR (Democratic Revolutionary Front), which was a center-left party. For more on FDR see McClintock (1998).
opponents, and exerted total political control.\textsuperscript{36} One of the ways this was done was by using a para-military organization named ORDEN\textsuperscript{37}. ORDEN committed some of the merciless acts in Salvadoran history. For example, ORDEN officials killed a popular priest named Rutilio Grande, because he openly criticized the government. The “Operation Rutilio,” as it was called, led to house searches, arrests, abuse against women, and theft (Armstrong 1983). This angered many because it became clear that government forces acted against its own citizenry to ensure their dominance.

In 1979, the FMLN declared a civil war against the government. In this period, El Salvador witnessed some of the most horrific casualties of war and unjustified acts of terrorism against civilians. One such act occurred in 1980 when the National Guard assassinated another popular religious figure named, Monseñor Romero.\textsuperscript{38} This tragic event was followed by the El Mozote massacre where 900 civilians were slaughtered.\textsuperscript{39} Montgomery summarizes the decade of the seventies and suggests that “[b]etween July 1, 1977, and October 15, 1979, El Salvador was buffeted by a rising spiral of mass demonstrations and protests, government repression, left-wing kidnappings, occupations of public buildings, labor strikes, and death-squad murders” (1982:72). During the 1980s, the FMLN launched several offensives that made the army’s retaliation also grow. Coupled with these internal events, industries left El Salvador because of the instability of the country. As El Salvador was facing an economic crisis that was aggravated by the civil war, the U.S. partially rescued the country by offering its financial support.

\textsuperscript{36} The problem with El Salvador is that the oligarchy had control of the state, which in turn meant that the state could use its military power to force the population into submission and also exclude them from the political process. McClintock (1998) claims that because the population endured so much repression, people felt forced to take up arms and endure a civil war.

\textsuperscript{37} Incidentally, ORDEN means order.

\textsuperscript{38} The archbishop of San Salvador who had publicly urged the U.S. to halt their military aid to the armed forces in order to stop the violence (see McClintock 1998; see Brockett 2005).

\textsuperscript{39} This event reminded civilians of the 1930s Matanza.
In the latter parts of the 1980s, there were attempts to achieve a more democratic political process. For the first time, political openings seemed plausible because elections seemed more inclusive. Yet, even with these “open” elections, right-wing governments kept winning these. As such, this period can be characterized as one of “electoral authoritarianism” where elections seemed to be open to democracy and civic participation, but the military and right wing governments controlled the outcome (Montgomery 1982). Nevertheless, between 1981 through 1989, Napoleon Duarte became El Salvador’s most centrist president. However, even he could not control the military’s power and hegemony. Although Duarte gave disenchanted groups the right to unionize and engage in social movements, the civil war continued to plague the lives of civilians. The FMLN and the army continued to fight against each other and both developed new strategies and tactics to do so. Yet, neither was able to win the civil war so that in the end, the last recourse for both groups was to achieve a truce.

Amidst El Salvador’s ‘peace talks’ between the army and the guerillas, violence continued. In fact, some of the most publicized events occurred at this time. For instance, the killing of six Jesuit priests and two servants by the Atlacatl Battalion, a U.S. trained armed force, led to international public outcry. Additionally, when three American nuns were disappeared and later found dead, the U.S. community became increasingly concerned because the culprits were trained at the infamous School of the Americas and were given amnesty to the U.S. Despite the peace talks, the ordinary civilian in El Salvador continued to fear for his/her life as people were constantly victimized, disappeared, tortured, harassed and/or left dead on the streets. Overall, the

Among those who were killed was a prominent sociologist named Segundo Montes.
armed conflict in El Salvador lasted twelve years and took the life of 70,000 people until a peace accord (known as the Chapultepec Peace Accords) was signed.

**FMLN as the Oppositional Force**

Montgomery (1982) credits the FMLN for taking a prominent role in negotiating the peace settlement, but who was this group and how did it emerge as the fiercest oppositional force to the state? The roots of the FMLN date back to 1932 when the communist leader, Farabundo Marti, becomes the symbolic martyr that gave the group its official name. Since this period, leftist oriented groups espousing communist ideology had been activists in other groups long before the founding of the FMLN. By the time the FMLN emerged, it also took part of the anti-Capitalist and anti-Imperialistic social movements that were already taking place in Latin America in the 60s and 70s. The fact that these social movements were successful attempts at securing leftist-oriented political power meant that the FMLN now had allies. As such, the FMLN could rely on the military and economic aid of its allies to ‘liberate’ El Salvador. According to Bracamonte and Spencer (1995), these allies helped put pressure on the different leftist groups that were already in place in El Salvador and convinced them to become a single and coordinated force. It is from here that the FMLN emerges thereafter as the single challenger who leads the opposition to the state. In 1980, the FMLN was officially established as the umbrella organization for five distinct leftist-oriented groups. The FMLN build solidarity with ordinary Salvadorans because it emphasized the plights of

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41 See Mahler 1995
the working-class and the poor. Because of their strategic alliance with the peasants around class issues, the FMLN gained popular appeal to fight off the armed forces.

The 1980s was a critical year for the FMLN for several reasons. For one, when Jose Napoleon Duarte came to power he promised to enact political and social reforms but proved to be no less corrupt than the military government that had been in place throughout the history of the country. This gave the FMLN an advantage to argue that the government still required serious contenders to defeat its practices and they were the ones who could do it. Secondly, because El Salvador underwent an economic crisis with the advent of the 1986 earthquake, the state diverted its attention away from the FMLN to focus on repairing the country. This gave the FMLN the opportunity to improve its tactics and strategies, recruit more members, and fear less repression from the state. Lastly, despite Duarte’s corruption, he did open spaces for groups to organize and the FMLN took advantage of this to build bases that would help them defeat the armed forces.

As the only oppositional force to contradict the state, the FMLN had to contend against three main actors—the military, the landed elites, and the government—to enact its battles. Since the military had superior weaponry and used it against civilians, the FMLN could only combat these actions by taking up arms. During this period, frequent disturbances occurred throughout El Salvador. Particularly in the countryside, outright warfare was an everyday occurrence because the landed elites used the military to defeat the FMLN. The landed elites were the most powerful segment in the countryside and the FMLN challenged their rule by organizing peasant mobilizations. Even though these activities were clandestine, they helped build solidarity amongst the peasants and FMLN.
As the FMLN continued its fight, their hardest battle was in the voting booth. The FMLN lacked the military force to win the government so the only way to challenge the state was to force it to recognize leftist groups and legitimize them through fair elections. In order to become a legitimate threat against the state and force it to reform, the FMLN launched an offensive in 1989. The plan of the FMLN was to terrorize important political and military leaders and at the same time incite the urban population to stand up against the government. Although the offensive was not successful, it managed to stir up the lives of the affluent and gained international attention. In the aftermath of the offensive, pressures to go to the negotiation table took place.

While the FMLN’s strategies forced the government to the negotiation table, the state reached an agreement because of their own economic interests. During the offensive, the state terrorized the population at large and these acts led to a significant amount of human rights violations. When these events were publicized, they made the Salvadoran government look bad in the eyes of the international world. They also forced the United States to rethink their position in funding the civil war. Since the U.S. looked like an accomplice to the atrocities, the U.S. decided to pressure the Salvadoran government to initiate peace negotiations with the FMLN, otherwise it threatened to cut back its financial support to the Salvadoran government. The Salvadoran government felt threatened to negotiate because they knew they could not continue a war without having funding for it and reluctantly joined the negotiation table. In this regard, the FMLN knew that it had the upper hand in the negotiation table and could now force the government to make concessions. Bracamonte and Spencer suggest that “[t]he FMLN recognized that it was not in a position to challenge the military on the battlefield, but the
new political situation and the negotiations would allow the FMLN to make great gains against the armed forces without firing a single bullet. The FMLN would use the negotiations to make greater political and military gains than it ever could on the battlefield” (1995:35). These negotiations led to a peace accord in 1992 whereby the FMLN gave up all of its weapons to become a legal political party.

Although in the inception of the war the FMLN found many supporters, as the civil war waned, the FMLN suffered a backlash. The Salvadoran government used media outlets to taint the image of the FMLN and this had enduring consequences in the minds of those who saw the FMLN as the antagonizers. Yet, even though the FMLN’s image depicted them as terrorizing the civilian population, actual evidence showed that more civilians were killed at the hands of the armed forces than by FMLN forces. By the early 90s, people renewed their confidence in the electoral process and believed that El Salvador was becoming democratic. At this time, a newly formed right-wing party called the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) was winning supporters and promised to democratize the political process. ARENA served as the opposing force to the FMLN in the political sphere and thereafter won all of the presidential elections. However, Ucles (1996) argues that ARENA managed to consolidate its power through sneaky tactics and electoral frauds against the FMLN. At the same time, Bracamonte and Spencer (1995) claim that the FMLN’s political force weakened because it was unable to consolidate

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42 People were convinced that the atrocities committed were the fault of the FMLN rather than the military and the FMLN began to feel highly scrutinized and alienated from the public when their attacks caused innocent deaths or perturbed the everyday life of people. Yet, “the number [of deaths] was never as large as 10 percent of the number of civilians killed at the hands of the security forces” (McClintock 1998: 59-60).

43 The Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) was founded in 1981 and has continued being the dominant right-wing party of El Salvador as well as the ruling party. According to Brockett (2005), Roberto D’Aubuisson helped form the party but he was the most notorious leader of the Salvadoran death squads, the author of the assassination of Archbishop Romero, and the most charismatic political figure of ARENA.
majority support for its presidential candidates even though it gained political strongholds in the government.

In the post-civil war era, the FMLN has struggled to become the political challenger of ARENA in the presidential seat but has had some successes in the municipalities and the National Assembly. Since many political refugees were associated and/or were sympathizers of the FMLN, the party has embarked on projects that have challenged the state from within and from abroad. That is, the FMLN has committees in the diaspora who follow the command of the party in El Salvador and challenge ARENA by mounting protests, marches, letter-writing campaigns, and other tactics that put pressure on the state from abroad. These FMLN committees in the states are very useful for the party in El Salvador because they can lobby officials in the United States on behalf of what the FMLN party deems necessary for the country.

The FMLN has been trying to gain electoral control in recent elections because they feel that in order to change El Salvador, they have to win the presidential seat. They continue to oppose neo-liberal policies that they see as detrimental to the country. Some of their most publicized challenges to the state have been their opposition to the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), their resistance to privatization and dollarization, and the campaigning of Schafik in the 2004 elections. These efforts have been unsuccessful and have not managed to enhance the political weight of the FMLN. Recent attempts have changed this dynamic because now the FMLN has the possibility of

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44 While Schafik died of natural causes after the elections, many claim that he did not win because ARENA embarked on a vicious campaign and claimed (among other things) that if the FMLN won, the remittances to El Salvador would be halted.
Its candidate, Mauricio Funes, is a progressive reformist very much in favor of changing the political regime that has long dominated the country. He appeals to many conservatives because he is in favor of keeping the current economic system of El Salvador but opening up the political spaces so that ARENA does not continue dominating them. In March 2008, Mauricio Funes won the presidential seat and due to this victory, the twenty-year rule of the ARENA party ceased.

The Role that the U.S. Played During and After the Civil War

The U.S. influenced El Salvador during the civil war era and in the aftermath of the war. The U.S. financed the armed conflict because it adopted a policy of containment. With its cold war politics, the U.S. sought to suppress communism in Latin America and prevent another Cuba, so it funneled aid to the Salvadoran government to defeat the guerillas. The U.S. became an accomplice of the military-oligarchic structure that had been in place in El Salvador. Between 1980 and 1987, the U.S poured so much military assistance and money that the Salvadoran army quintupled in size (Montgomery 1982). In 1984, the US military aid to El Salvador was at its highest point totaling $197 million. In 1987, U.S. aid to El Salvador was more valuable than the country’s exports (McClintock 1998: 221). In total, the U.S. spent over one billion dollars supporting the war (Mahler 1995:29). Menjivar (2000) notes that at a certain point, U.S. aid to El Salvador was more than the aid given to end the Vietnam War. Inevitably, the amount of

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45 Arena has mounted a defamatory campaign against the FMLN by claiming that if the FMLN wins, it would contribute to the leftist-orientation of many Latin American nations and therefore, El Salvador will become the enemy of the U.S. According to a CISPES report, ARENA has also enacted political violence against FMLN leaders and supporters.

46 By this point, I had finished collecting the data so I was not able to see the impact that this victory had on the community in D.C.
aid that the U.S. government loaned El Salvador strengthened the combat capability of
the Salvadoran military and improved its effectiveness. In fact, the famously known
School of the Americas was responsible for training Salvadoran soldiers to conduct some
of the most infamous killings in Salvadoran history. The scale of power that the U.S.
gave the Salvadoran army provided the tools for harassment and killing of the population.
While these efforts sought to defeat and weaken the leftist opposition, they resulted in
overwhelming human rights abuses because anyone who was not for the government was
against it. This made any civilian in El Salvador a likely target of repression and
assassination.

Upon pressures from the international community and the Sanctuary movement, the
U.S. decided to seek a peaceful solution to the armed conflict and pressured the
Salvadoran government to the negotiation table. When the FMLN offensive took place,
the Bush administration learned that despite all the military capability and money it had
funneled to El Salvador, the civil war could not be won militarily and needed to be
negotiated politically. Moreover, several human rights abuses were garnering
international outcry so that the United States’ image was being tainted. In 1993, the
United Nations published a report about the human rights violations enacted by the
Salvadoran government against the population and which had been under the radar until
then. This report substantiated the critique that organizations and activists had against
the U.S. government when they claimed that the U.S. not only covered up the atrocities
of the Salvadoran government but also funded these human rights violations. These

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47 This was a religious movement in the U.S. that offered sanctuary to Salvadoran immigrants, who were
being displaced by the war. These activists fought to legalize Salvadorans’ status because they deemed
Salvadorans as political refugees.
48 Immediately after the report was published, ARENA issued an amnesty law that pardoned those who
were responsible for the human rights abuses.
organizations and international agencies played a vital role in forcing the U.S. to curtail their financial assistance to the Salvadoran regime. Moreover, by the mid-90s, the U.S. was uninterested in its Cold War politics and shifted their focus to domestic issues, including the massive flow of Salvadoran immigrants. In fact, during the peace talks, the United Nations played a more important role in serving as a mediator of this peace-building process than did the U.S. (Call 2002).

In the post-civil war era, El Salvador maintains cordial relations with the U.S. because of the Salvadoran emigrants. Mahler notices why this relationship is sustained with the following quote:

"During the war, the Salvadoran government curried favor with the U.S. government, owing to its dependency upon U.S. economic and military aid. After the war, the same government embarked on a transnational strategy of rapprochement with and advocacy for its hermanos lejanos [far-away brothers] (2000:222)."

Since the Salvadoran government is dependent on remittances, it has now become a sort of advocate on behalf of the migrants and interjects for them when it comes to legal issues.⁴⁹ Anytime the U.S. has tried to deal with its immigration problem and attempted to deport Salvadorans, the Salvadoran government argues that it is not ready to receive the deportees because it is trying to rebuild the country and recover from the civil war. Since U.S. aid to El Salvador declined in the post-civil war period, immigrants became the source of revenue for the Salvadoran economy because of their remittances (Garcia 2006). The Salvadoran government believes that as long as it remains an ally to U.S. interests, the U.S. will not deport Salvadorans. As such, the Salvadoran government

⁴⁹ Examples of this are Cristiani asking for TPS extension, Sol established consulate offices that became assistance centers for asylum applicants, and Flores created the office for hermanos lejanos. In recent years, Saca has lobbied for TPS to be extended to 2010.
implemented neo-liberal policies that help the US. For instance, the Salvadoran government changed its national currency to the dollar and adopted a free trade agreement with the U.S. Additionally, with the advent of the war on terrorism, the Salvadoran government sent troops to Iraq. The Salvadoran government claims that by appeasing to what the U.S. needs and wants, it is better able to negotiate legal claims for Salvadoran immigrants.\textsuperscript{50} However, scholars are wary of the government-to-government relationship because it creates unequal relations between and negatively impacts immigrants (Mahler 2000; Baker-Cristales 2004).

**Salvadorans Migrate to the U.S.**

Menjivar (1993) claims that because a core-periphery dependency relationship existed between El Salvador and the U.S., as the economic situation worsened and the political situation became more closed off, El Salvador’s instability pushed the population at large to mobilize with their feet. The linkages that the U.S. formed with El Salvador (through its interventionist policy and military aid) paved the way for the U.S. to become the first destination for Salvadoran immigrants. While these push forces certainly explain the massive flow of Salvadorans immigrants in the 1980s, Salvadoran migrants had long established ties to the U.S. In fact, the 1965 Immigration Control and Reform Act allowed skilled Salvadoran laborers to migrate to areas like San Francisco to work in shipyards and other industries (Rodriguez 2005). Thus, when the war broke out, Salvadorans migrated en masse because there were people in the U.S. who they could count on.

\textsuperscript{50} The embassy and consulate offices in the U.S. have become more accessible to the Salvadoran emigrants and help them fill out the paperwork to extend their temporary protected status.
Before the outbreak of the civil war, Cordova and Pinderhughes (1999) characterize Salvadoran migration to the U.S. in three waves. The first wave of Salvadoran migration occurred in the mid 1880s when Salvadorans worked in coffee processing centers in San Francisco. In the second wave, urban middle classes moved to port-of-entry cities during World War II because U.S. shipyards recruited laborers for war-based industries. The final wave of Salvadorans occurred in the 1960s when young professionals migrated. Altogether, these three waves created the initial ties from which Salvadorans could capitalize on when they migrated en masse in the 1980s. This recent wave is the most significant demographically because it was the largest. Menjivar (2000) notes that from 1945 to 1970, Salvadoran migration increased from 45,000 to 100,000, but that in the 1990s, it grew five times bigger (Menjivar 2000). The Department of Homeland Security (2001) estimated that between 1971 through 1980, there were about 34,000 Salvadoran immigrants while between 1981 through 1990, Salvadoran immigrants increased to about 214,000. What these figures show is that up until the 1980s, the migration of Salvadorans to the U.S. was very low because Salvadorans migrated to nearby places within Central America to escape the deleterious conditions. However, when the civil war broke out, they migrated to the United States in part because the linkages were already in place. Salvadoran migration continues to expand such that they constitute the fourth largest Latino population (Mahler 1995). Moreover, it is estimated that there are over two million Central Americans in the United States but over half are from El Salvador (Davy 2006). Logan (2001) claims that the largest new Latino groups are in fact Dominicans and Salvadorans whose population size has reached over 1.1 million.
Apart from the linkages formed by the different waves and the government-to-government relations, I believe the legal history also paved the way for migration to seem somewhat feasible. Salvadorans were able to challenge federal policies because the U.S. refugee laws created an opening for them. This pathway was by no means easy because Salvadorans were consistently denied asylum claims and perceived as undeserving aliens. However, because their migration stirred uproar within activists in the U.S., some Salvadorans were able to navigate through the legal loopholes and fight for legality. For instance, even though Salvadorans did not qualify as refugees, those that arrived in the early 80s were able to apply for permanent residency through the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Moreover, others were able to regularize their status through the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA). These opportunities allowed them to bring their relatives to the states and thereby create ongoing migration networks. For most however, their only opportunity to be legal was the temporary protected status (TPS), which gave them employment authorization. Yet, this status treats them as disposable people because they can be deported if the U.S. president wishes to terminate TPS for Salvadorans. Yet, most Salvadorans see TPS as the only alternative to remaining undocumented and getting a legal work permit. Moreover, TPS serves as a viable strategy because it allows them to support their families (both in the states and in El Salvador) while temporarily staying and working in the states.

In recent years, migration networks have expanded and Salvadorans are continuously attracted to the U.S. in the hopes of a better life, but the legal openings that perhaps existed for some are not there anymore. As a result, within the Salvadoran

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51 In Appendix I, I outline these and other legal acts that are pertinent to Salvadorans.
population different legalities emerge. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) is setting stricter restrictions on immigrants. Recent arrivals are particularly disadvantaged because their claims to remain in the U.S. have been met with ambivalence while the opportunities for legalization are either becoming stricter or altogether diminishing. Scholars worry that with these stricter immigration controls, Salvadorans will face a legal limbo (Menjivar 2000; Miyares et al. 2003; Bailey et al. 2002).

Nevertheless, these legal battles diversify the group and blur the Salvadoran experience. As a result, Salvadorans can be categorized in three groups based on their legal conditions. The first group is the early Salvadoran arrivals that fought and won refugee rights and thereafter, attained legality. The second group is TPS holders and these individuals can work but they cannot become permanent residents or citizens. Finally, the third group is recent migrants who have less of a safety net to fall back on because many of them are undocumented but their family members back home heavily rely on them.

**Salvadoran Activism in the U.S. Before and After the Civil War**

Salvadoran’s first political activities in the U.S. consisted in lobbying the U.S. government to end the military aid and to gain legal status for Salvadorans fleeing the war. The legal battles they mounted transformed the U.S. as a place for Salvadorans to exert their activism. Salvadoran activists challenged U.S. immigration policy to treat

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52 Salvadorans, who arrived before the 90s, have had more legal avenues from which to regularize their status than those who are recent arrivals. I say this because the asylum laws that Salvadorans renegotiated have allowed some of the early entrants to regularize their status while the recent laws do not look promising in terms of legalizing the undocumented.
them fairly and to provide them with some protection under the law. In essence, Salvadorans migrants in the early periods of their arrival had more than just economic survival on their minds and mounted several challenges against the U.S.

Salvadorans were involved in the judicial process and were involved in several class action lawsuits. Examples of these are—*Noe Castillo Nunez, et al., v. Hal Boldin, et al.*, *Orantes-Hernandez, et al., v. Smith, et al.*, *Orantes-Hernandez et al. v. Richard Thornburgh and El Rescate Legal Services, Inc., et al.*, *v. Executive Office for Immigration Review, et al.*—these cases highlight Salvadoran’s commitment to be recognized as political asylees. By demanding fair laws, Salvadorans wanted the legal system to recognize them as deserving immigrants and not treat them as undocumented aliens. This was especially important because various U.S. administrations viewed Salvadorans as economic migrants and refused to believe that they faced persecution or death if returned to El Salvador. In contrast to how the U.S. responded to Cuban refugees, the U.S. government refused to accept Salvadorans as legal entrants because in doing so, the U.S. would have to admit that it was funding the political violence that caused the displacements (Landolt 2000). In 1981, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) accused the United States of engaging in a systemic practice of deporting Salvadorans regardless of their merits for asylum status (Garcia 2006:89).

When the war ended in El Salvador, Salvadorans tackled other incorporation issues. Salvadorans became key players in the Los Angeles labor movement and served as union organizers (Baker-Cristales 2004). According to Baker-Cristales, “[t]hese community organizers brought with them the organizing expertise they had gained during the war in El Salvador, and they founded several nonprofit agencies that provide legal

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53 In Appendix I, a description of these lawsuits is provided.
and social services to migrants…” (2004:28). As Salvadorans made the U.S. their permanent home, organizational work shifted from refugee rights to address other needs. For instance, Salvadoran settlers became more interested in purchasing homes, starting or running businesses, obtaining loans, and gaining access to higher education (Baker-Cristales 2004). In the last decade, Salvadorans have been part of various battles like opposing proposition 187 (Menjivar 2000), participating in immigration marches, and protesting against CAFTA. Similarly, Salvadorans have been involved in fights to legalize street vendors and to sustain day laborer centers (Menjivar 2006). Since immigrants can also take advantage of technological innovations to connect with their homeland, some Salvadorans are involved in hometown associations that aim to rebuild the towns in El Salvador.

Post-Civil War El Salvador

Post-civil war El Salvador does not seem promising for the majority of Salvadorans. El Salvador’s economy has transitioned into a neo-liberal one that has privatized many of its industries. Neo-liberal policies in El Salvador have resulted in the privatization of different industries and this has had disastrous consequences for the population at large. The agricultural sector is practically non-existent so that rural farmers suffer from the highest poverty rates compared to workers in other industries. Urban workers occupy service sector jobs because this industry is expanding, but they earn low wages doing this type of work (Lauria Santiago and Binford 2004). Since 1976,

54 Although many Salvadoran entrepreneurs are actually in favor of CAFTA and have voiced their support for the treaty because it can enhance their commercial ventures. However, a small number of entrepreneurs are wary of the effects that CAFTA will have on El Salvador’s economy (see Washington Hispanic 5/27 article: http://www.washingtonhispanic.com/Passissues/paper5_27_5/html/historias.html#2)
the percentage of income earned by the poorest groups continues to decline while the percentage of income earned by the richest groups continues to rise—the top 10% of the population earns 40.5% of the income while 48% of the population lives in poverty (Towers and Borzutky 2004). Alongside poverty and employment issues, the basic services that Salvadorans use have risen in price so that people are generally paying 41% of their minimum wage salary to have access to water, electricity, and a telephone line (Towers and Borzutky 2004). According to a report published by the Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD), Salvadoran society is impacted by sub-standard levels of employment because the wages are below the minimum wage, offer no benefits, and cannot support a family or cover basic necessities. The report claims that in 2006, 43% of the Salvadoran labor force was under-employed while 7% were unemployed (PNUD 2008). El Salvador’s GDP is $43.94 billion (CIA 2009) and the economy is dependant on remittances. Remittances are more valuable than any of El Salvador’s exports and comprise 15% to 17% of El Salvador’s GDP (Towers and Borzutky 2004, CISPES et al. 2009). These economic conditions further migration and emigrants become the largest export that the country can count on.

These economic issues worsened because of the natural disasters and the high crime wave. In the post-civil war era, El Salvador suffered earthquakes and other natural disasters that have made the recovery process more challenging. The economic policies that it adopts seem to enrich the rich and this negatively influences the social fabric of Salvadoran society. El Salvador has one of the highest crime rates in the world and the increasing victimization of individuals creates instability amongst the civilians. According to Mahler (2001), Salvadorans feel more threatened now than during the war.
because of the high murder rates, gang activity, and other crimes that plague Salvadoran society. Additionally, there are instances of politically motivated violence\textsuperscript{55} that still affect the population. These forces are propelling a different wave of migrants who are relying increasingly on social networks to determine their destination. As Salvadorans continue to migrate, they constitute the second largest undocumented population after Mexicans (INS 1995).\textsuperscript{56}

Much more striking is that Salvadorans who migrate are obliged to send remittances to support their country and their family members. Baker-Cristales (2005) claims that the amount of money Salvadorans remit is greater than the foreign aid and investment that El Salvador receives from the U.S. Acosta (2006) suggests that remittances to El Salvador are among the largest within developing nations.\textsuperscript{57} Salvadoran migrants are expected to remit in order to provide a better quality of life for their relatives back home and the Salvadoran government capitalizes on this in order to keep the economic situation afloat. This creates a situation in which the population of El Salvador and the Salvadoran government become dependent on remitters so that in order to sustain this level of dependency, Salvadorans are encouraged to migrate.

**Conclusion**

The causes of the civil war are beyond the scope of this work, but I have tried to outline some of the most important economic, political, and social issues that led to the

\textsuperscript{55} Examples are the activists in Suchitoto who were arrested for protesting against the privatization of water. Some of the most dreadful laws have been the tough laws against gangs and El Salvador’s version of the Patriot Act in which terrorism is used as an excuse to allow state authority to reign.

\textsuperscript{56} Comes from Benitez (2005)

\textsuperscript{57} For a discussion on the effects of remittances on Salvadoran society see Acosta (2006) where he claims that the areas with the highest emigration rates are also the ones that depend the most on remittances.
war. The roots of the war are tied to the concentration of land and the rigid class structure that this created between the elites and the peasants. Even as El Salvador industrialized, it went through periods of economic busts and booms that generated more poverty, unemployment, and a low quality of life for the majority of Salvadorans. At the same time, those with wealth benefited from the military-oligarchic system. In El Salvador, people not only lacked mobility opportunities but were consistently undermined by state power. In fact, the state used its militaristic power to repress civil society who could not speak out or demand reform. Anytime there were attempts to challenge state authority and create political openings, the civil society found that the political spaces were overrun by an authoritarian regime whose iron hand helped them remain in power. When new challengers joined the political world, the same old politics was practiced as new rulers enriched themselves and maintained order by quelling the masses with military force. When militant actions against civilians got out of hand and civil society demanded accountability from the state, their concerns remained unheard. Since the masses continued to feel terrorized, they decided to fight back and in the 1980s, El Salvador’s long-awaited civil war came to fruition and lasted twelve years.

These political and economic forces propelled Salvadorans to migrate and the U.S. becomes the number one destination for several reasons. For one, the U.S. had long established ties with El Salvador and because it funded the civil war, the number of migrants to the U.S. increased because people feared for their lives. Secondly, U.S. policies towards immigrants becomes a highly contested terrain in which immigrants are given a chance to become activists and mount legal battles to remain in the U.S. Lastly,
because the Salvadoran government cements friendly relations with the U.S., it also becomes an ally to the expatriates and advocates for their rights. These factors create migration networks that government-to-government relations build, but that migrants sustain.

These experiences shape Salvadoran activism at home and abroad. I show that Salvadoran activism in the 1980s is rooted in the experience of refugees who contested many of the immigration laws that were passed in those years. This experience changed when the civil war ended in the 1990s because Salvadorans were settling in the U.S. As migration networks expand, the Salvadoran population has diversified such that Lauria-Santiago and Binford (2004) note:

\[\text{[d]uring the war the United States became a magnet for many people fleeing government repression, combat, and economic dislocation; after the peace settlement, Salvadorans continued to move north, as migration and a transnational diaspora became central features of Salvadoran life...}(1).\]

Overtime, the Salvadoran community has become more dynamic because of this. While some are interested in tackling incorporation issues, others lead hometown associations to embark on projects that help their homeland. In the post civil war era, we see the Salvadoran community evolve, the Salvadoran and U.S. governments playing a role, and immigrants tackling different political battles. As these changes take place, they set the stage for this project because they affect the people in D.C.

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58 According to Mahler (2001), there are clear examples of this: In 1987, President Duarte made a direct appeal to President Reagan to not deport Salvadorans who violated IRCA. Similarly, in 1992 President Cristiani met with President Bush to discuss the termination of TPS, which ended in the Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) policy. This policy however was terminated by the Clinton administration in 1995. Yet, the Salvadoran government responded by recreating consulates as advocacy centers that helped Salvadorans file for asylum cases. 1997 marked a transition poing because President Sol not only lobbied U.S. congressional members to halt its deportation, but also launched a campaign to unify various organizations in order to promote a positive image of Salvadorans in the U.S. In October 1999, the Office for Attention to the Community Abroad was incorporated into the Ministry of Foreign Relations in El Salvador.
CHAPTER 5: THE ACTORS AND THEIR POLITICAL HABITU

Introduction

In this chapter, I construct a typology of the different actors that emerged in the study. These actors were sorted based on their experience with the war and the type of organizational work in which they are involved. In particular, I was interested in seeing if actors had organizational experience before migrating and if this experience was fueled by the war. Moreover, I wanted to see if the war was the culprit by which some of these actors end up being critical and/or develop a social and political consciousness. Finally, I wanted to see what organizational work they were currently involved in to ascertain what drives them to do this. Initially, I hypothesized that those who do political work must have a political conscience while those that do social/cultural activities must have a social consciousness but what I found is more complex. In the following discussion, I discuss the three actors that define the organizational structure of the D.C. metro area and focus on what comes to define their work but also what resources they accrue in the process. I show that each actor builds a political habitus that is shaped by different experiences, beliefs, and political attitudes.

Several scholars noted that the experience of Salvadorans is atypical to the experiences of other Latin American migrants (Menjivar 2000; Coutin 2000; Landolt et al. 1999). Specifically, Salvadorans began migrating en masse to escape a civil war and crossed multiple borders to enter the United States. In the midst of this, they experienced trauma, fear, and other psychological issues that stemmed from the war-like conditions that they were desperately escaping (Jenkins 1991). Once they entered the U.S., they had to enact different legal battles to gain legitimacy for their right to stay indefinitely.
Salvadorans simultaneously fought for legal rights while seeking to improve their quality of life (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Coutin 2000; Menjivar 2006). It is within this backdrop that I study the Salvadoran community. This project focuses on the most recent years (2007-2008) of Salvadoran activism in the D.C. metro area and I am able to assess how this legacy informs the community activists.

The Seasoned Activists Experience the War and Organize

I found that one of the most telling aspects of the interviewees’ lives is that the war has long-lasting effects and cannot be erased from their memories, experiences, and feelings. Many of the people that I studied were highly affected by the civil war and in their narratives that first-hand experience comes to light:

Personally, I did not live through the repression as much, except for one or two threats. The government persecuted me, but I was not captured. I was never tortured nor did the military shoot my house. I did witness massacres and saw when the military killed people. I still remember those images of dead people in the streets. At that time, I was a teenager but for those of us who came from that period, it marked us significantly (D, male, seasoned activist).

It was a very cruel war because we knew that perhaps we were not going to survive. Honestly, it really felt like that because entire generations were lost. Personally, I do not have any contacts with people so there is an empty void left. I lived through the repression and the assassination of Monseñor Romero but other priests and catechists were also killed. I think these things mark you for life and that is why I always think the past marks your future and you cannot ever leave your past behind (S, female, seasoned activist).

The civil war definitely impacted me. I come from a socially conscious family and many of them were involved in the struggle. As a result of this, my family and I were victims of the war and it is why many of us migrated to the U.S. because we wanted to avoid being kidnapped or killed. I have a lot of relatives and friends that this happened to. Fortunately in my immediate family, no one got hurt in this way (C, female, seasoned activist).
These narratives emulate others that have been quoted in other works (Coutin 2000; Mahler 1995; Menjivar 2000) and show both the atrocity of the war but the endurance to survive it. They are important for my work because they allow me to connect their war-based experiences to their current practices. Without a doubt many of the people that I interviewed were seriously impacted by the war and this left an imprint in their lives that I argue becomes consequential for cementing their political habitus.

Although the civil war was disastrous for Salvadorans and affected their migration stream, it also initiated a way of being that was replete with activism, organizational experience, and critical thought. Several scholars have discussed the role of Salvadorans as political actors within the war and have highlighted the sorts of activism and organizational work they mounted to challenge a repressive state (Wood 2003; Ucles 1996; Brockett 1991 and 2005). Similarly, the actors in this sample discussed their early organizational work in El Salvador, which consisted of ecclesiastical work, participation in student movements, and or joining progressive associations. In fact, in one of the narratives, a participant informs me of his prior activism:

I think the experience started in El Salvador when I was a member of the religious organization and helped out in various activities. The consciousness was already there but obviously I came to the U.S. without any plans. I had to figure out what I would do and when I saw that the media was distorting the truth about the Salvadoran civil war, I reacted. I thought that is was important for someone to clarify the information and not be misled. I slowly became an activist in the U.S. after this experience (S, male, seasoned activist).

These actors developed an understanding of what it meant to be organized and learned to coordinate claims-making efforts involving protests, marches, and boycotts in El

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59 In hearing these stories, I felt a lot of empathy because many respondents told me stories that were so sad and which made me reflect on how difficult and traumatic this experience could have been for many Salvadorans throughout the U.S. and for immigrants from other nations that undergo similar situations.

60 I use the notion of political habitus to reflect on what leads a political actor to act and think as one and to practice his/her politics.
Salvador. Moreover, they developed this under conditions in which it was a crime to be organized and learned to build trust and networks under the radar of the Salvadoran government and the armed forces. In fact, in some of the most repressive times, organizers and activists were routinely killed and/or terrorized. Consequently, these conditions led to a massive wave of political refugees in the 1980s. This has been noted by scholars who find that the underlying reason so many Salvadorans initially left their country was because of their fear of being politically persecuted because of their activist and organizational work (Menjivar 1994; Cordova 1986). As many sought refuge in the metro D.C. area, this prior activism made it feasible for them to become political actors in the receiving state.

Since Salvadorans learned to be activists, organize and mobilize against a repressive and unequal system in El Salvador, these activities had repercussions. Such acts taught them how to use their *cultural repertoires* to engage in the political sphere. In essence, their prior war-based experiences facilitated their capacity to “know-how” to get involved in the metro D.C. area. Following Danese’s (1998) work where the author conceptualizes the know-how as consisting of how migrant’s cultural background helps them navigate the system in the receiving society, I argue that this know-how helped Salvadorans become politicized bodies in the U.S. and converted them into “seasoned activists.” I label these Salvadorans seasoned activists because these are

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61 In the history chapter, I discuss some of the unscrupulous acts of the armed forces and the complicity of the Salvadoran government.
62 Swidler claims that culture provides a repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed (1986:284).
63 I borrow the notion of the “know-how” from Danese who defines it as “the tools that a social group is able to activate in its interactions with the social environment, and is based on those culturally learned ‘recipes’ that allow the members of the group to manage routine problems and daily interaction” (1998:726).
64 The term seasoned activist comes from Menjivar (1994).
people whose consciousness and political work began in El Salvador and continues outside of their homeland. That is, seasoned activists carry that sense of activism and transplant it to the U.S. where they encounter a political system that denied them rights as refugees and instead treated them like undeserving illegal aliens.\textsuperscript{65}

In the early periods of Salvadoran activism in the U.S., Salvadorans simultaneously mobilized for peace in El Salvador and legitimized their stay in the U.S. (Coutin 1998; Garcia 2006). During this early period, many of the activists who fled El Salvador developed what Coutin (2000) calls “transnational solidarity networks.” These networks were created to raise awareness about the abuses that the Salvadoran government was enacting on the population at large and who had no other route than to escape and flee to the U.S. This early activism challenged the U.S. to change its policies towards El Salvador because these policies created more violence and out-migration.

These activists did this political work because they became involved in the Sanctuary movement. Garcia describes the Sanctuary movement in the following quote:

\begin{quote}
[k] by the mid-1980s, thousands of Americans were engaged in one of the most important acts of civil disobedience of the late twentieth century-the Sanctuary movement-a grassroots resistance movement that protested US foreign policy through the harboring and transporting of refugees, in violation of immigration law (2006:98).
\end{quote}

Salvadorans served as the main spokespersons in this movement as they spoke of the atrocities of the war and convinced American activists to get involved in the movement (Coutin 1993). These seasoned activists joined church leaders, progressive whites, and organizations to pressure the U.S. to change its policies towards El Salvador and offered

\textsuperscript{65} Landolt (2000) claims that to grant Salvadorans asylum was therefore to admit that the population displacements were due to political violence and this would have been a direct challenge to the U.S. government since they were helping a government that they claimed to be democratic but on the surface was allowing for human rights abuses to occur and was heavily repressing the political dissenters.
sanctuary to Salvadorans who did not have a place to go. Although these activities continued to be clandestine, seasoned activists did not let their undocumented status impede them from organizing. In doing so, seasoned activists continued to engage in mobilization efforts that could conceivably get them deported back to El Salvador and possibly killed by the Salvadoran government.

Since seasoned activists lived a precarious legal situation, they challenged U.S. policy to define them as legal entrants with refugee rights. Coutin (2000) notes that the struggle for refugee rights had three goals. The first one was to safeguard Salvadorans and prevent their deportation. Secondly, seasoned activists pushed for asylum as an alternative legal pathway because Salvadorans lacked relatives who could legally petition for them to remain in the U.S. Lastly, Coutin remarks that: “claiming refugee status drew attention to human rights abuses by Salvadoran authorities, which in turn legitimized the struggle against the Salvadoran government and problematized U.S. Central American policy” (2000:140).

Transplanting the Organizing Seed: Seasoned Activists Capitalize on the Migrant Experience

The battle for refugee rights taught seasoned activists how to define themselves as permanent settlers and address Salvadoran issues in the U.S. This work continues because at the time of this study, Salvadorans were involved in immigration reform and issues related to migrant’s incorporation. In fact, these seasoned activists participate in immigrant-based organizations and render services to Salvadorans so the community can have a better quality of life. While I explore these organizing practices in the next

66 Many of these activities were infiltrated by FBI agents who saw these activists as guerrillas.
chapter, I want to point out that seasoned activists still carry with them that spirit of activism and solidarity. This allows them to redefine themselves as a group who has that organizing seed in them but want to transplant it in the metro D.C. area to help newcomers.

For many seasoned activists, the first-hand experience with organizing evolves in the D.C. metro area because these participants feel that there are other conditions, albeit differently from El Salvador, that they need to address. The following narratives show this clearly:

The civil war definitely impacted me. In El Salvador, I worked for about twenty years in the whole political process and the revolution. From there, I acquired a lot of consciousness of the reality at hand. When I came here, I was fleeing persecution and the multiple attempts to kill me but also wanted to help out my family. When you migrate here you realize that the reality is different because there are very little job opportunities and I had to work as a day laborer and in the construction industry. You realize that the needs of the community are expansive and that it is important to work alongside the community. It becomes a way to partake in the revolution, but in this case, it takes a different route or form. For instance, in El Salvador, the conditions are political and militaristic, whereas the conditions in the U.S. are related to the migrant’s experience with violence and other things. I do think that here in the states you have the space, not absolutely because it works for the advantage of some and not all, but people can find support (F, male, seasoned activist).

I think part of the work I do here is a reflection of the traumas that we lived through. Even today there are still people migrating to Washington, D.C. and they too are feeling the impact of the civil war in El Salvador. That is why, we do what we can to help out (B, female, seasoned activist).

For one reason or another, the war brought us here. We knew that the people who came after us would need some help or a reference to incorporate better. Those who initially came from El Salvador were good people who migrated because of the war and these people had a social conscious and a desire to be helpful. They focused on projects that would help those who came later and I think that was the beginning of it all (J, male, seasoned activist).

These seasoned activists feel compelled to help because their impetus to continue with their activism is their experience as immigrants. In this way, seasoned activists continue
with a political habitus that is politically active because of their immigrant experience in
the D.C. metro area. As a result, seasoned activists sustain a social consciousness and
feel a moral obligation towards helping their community because they empathize with
immigrant’s incorporation issues. Since they have prior organizational experience, they
feel that they can apply it to their current organizational work and help someone whose
shoes they were in at one point in their lives.

I find that for seasoned activists, the civil war initially informs their political
habitus but their experience as migrants makes their political habitus evolve. The civil
war gave root to the social consciousness, activism, and organizational experience of the
seasoned activists and these participants certainly use their war-based frameworks to
engage in organizational work. However, their experience as migrants causes them to
transplant their organizing seed and build solidarity with the newcomers. Consequently,
ye continue to help the Salvadoran expatriate community. In the following narrative,
this participant shows this clearly:

The great lesson for me was to get to know the Salvadoran community. When I
say this, it means that I got to know my pueblo Salvadoreño through the work that
I did and by living amongst them. I will never forget that I used to work in the
construction industry and this was back breaking work where we had to carry 150
pounds per day. I just could not do it and the supervisor asked if I was a man and
mocked me. That is when I started realizing what it means to be a poor
Salvadoran, with no educational background, who just came from Chirilagua or
Intipuca to New York, and how big this change is. From there, I started building
consciousness about the travails of my people and decided to learn more so I can
help my community out (E, male, seasoned activist).

In short, for seasoned activists, their experience as refugees and as migrants drives their
political habitus. In the end, their political habitus evolves so that it is no longer tied to
their past but inevitably looks towards the future.

Dorrington (1992) and Hamilton and Chinchilla (1999) make similar observations of Salvadoran activists
in Los Angeles.
The 1.5 Seasoned Activists

While many of the seasoned activists are first generation individuals who have built on their war-based frameworks and capitalized on their previous organizing experience, there is a segment of the population that I interviewed who were too young to be involved and/or did not live through the civil war. Yet, despite their generational difference, they share similar motivations (to seasoned activists) to be involved in organizational work. I label these actors 1.5 based on their generational category and seasoned activists because although they were not “seasoned” in El Salvador, they internalize the civil war history and use it as a basis for reclaiming their identity. These 1.5 seasoned activists are unique in that they helped me understand how political habitus is passed down intergenerationally. That is, 1.5 seasoned activists had the activist seed implanted in them by family members and friends. They are likely to build their political habitus around an activist framework that previous generations transmit to them. The following narratives show how this plays out:

I think that anyone who migrated to the U.S. in the 1980s, especially the early 80s, and had family back in El Salvador, the civil war was always in the back of their minds. You would hear it in the radio, you would hear it from people who would call here, and you would start to see the migration of people, like your cousins and everyone else, who would come here. And so you become conscious of it. You always knew about it, you always knew that there was the guerrilla side and then the military side. I think ultimately that is what I would hear growing up and it probably gave me some motivation. I mean it made me mature, it made me think of things differently. It probably, to a certain extent, developed my politics and affected the way I look at issues. I do not think it is necessary to have lived through the war to realize what are the needs of our country and you gain a consciousness that makes you say wait a minute what is going on here (V, female, 1.5 seasoned activist).

It impacted me politically. I am definitely not a communist but I am more left leaning and I would say more socialist than capitalist. All my life, by association of my parents and friends and because I was the oldest, I was always involved in

68 The median age of these participants was six years old at the time of the war.
those activities. And so pretty much it came with everything that I understand about politics (A, male, 1.5 seasoned activist).

But, I mean the effect is there, the family, the influence, my mom was already here, and you know hearing stories. I think this is where it builds up and not just in the Salvadoran civil war and you just learn about it. Maybe you just experience it second nature through other people and so you learn about the evolution of El Salvador and that is ingrained in us. I mean anyone, no matter if you were born here or there. As soon as you start becoming aware a little bit, you are like oh maybe that is why my parents moved here and maybe that is why this is that way, so it is a big deal to me (B, male, 1.5 seasoned activist).

In all of these narratives, the common thread is that for 1.5 seasoned activists, not experiencing the civil war in El Salvador is not a necessary precursor to becoming conscious because their family members and friends pass down the history and critical stance to them. That is, they lack the first-hand experience of the civil war but build their political habitus with an activist and critical “second-nature experience” that gets transmitted to them by their family members and friends. In fact, the main difference between the seasoned activists and the 1.5-seasoned activist is not ideological but rather generational. Both share a similar social and political conscious even though they have different migratory experiences. They also share similar views to assess the community’s problems. I find that even though the 1.5-ers were raised in the U.S., their views are similar to seasoned activists and both practice their politics in the local spaces. As a result, seasoned activists and 1.5-ers are more likely to embark in organizational work that is oriented towards helping immigrants in the local arena.

**The Resources of Seasoned and 1.5 Activists**

Dorrington (1992) argues that within the Salvadoran organizations in Los Angeles, one of the most powerful indigenous resources that exist is what she terms
“collective leadership.” This notion refers to the ability of leaders to work together and volunteer their time, effort, and skills to enact mobilizing efforts. Furthermore, such leadership capabilities are the result of astuteness and prior organizing experience, which help the leaders implement tactics and push for change (Dorrington 1992). Dorrington and others have noticed that the collective leadership amongst Salvadorans is a quality that most consider to be a unique characteristic of the group. In fact, many sustain that this resource has led to the emergence of various organizations throughout the U.S. Interestingly enough, Rodriguez makes similar remarks about Salvadorans in Houston and claims that “[p]rior experience with community work can be an important resource for constructing, or participating in, small organizations that help the migrants’ incorporation into the host society…” (1987:5).

In my work, I found a similar pattern amongst the leadership of the seasoned activists. Seasoned activists are able to capitalize on their indigenous resources, related to shared experiences and the presence of a sizable community, to fight for change. Additionally, the presence of 1.5 seasoned activists amplifies the leadership base and leads to a collective entity that combines war-based frameworks, prior organizing experience, a social/political consciousness, and a critical stance, to embark on progressive work. Although much of the research has suggested that individual level resources leads to political participation, I argue that these activists capitalize on their collective indigenous resources to sustain their organizational work and seek political empowerment.

Summary
I have argued that people who lived through the civil war have an innate ability to develop a political habitus that they carry on when they experience a different challenge as migrants entering a new society. These individuals capitalize on their organizational experience and cultivate an activist sense of being that becomes crucial for their locally oriented organizational work in the D.C. metro area. While I see these individuals as being the most predisposed to continue as activist in any terrain because of their political and social consciousness, it is much more complex in that their political habitus influences the next generation. For instance, the 1.5 seasoned activists relate their activism to what prior generations went through and fought. They have been inspired to act and think critically because of the seasoned activists. In the long run, they share similar views and motivations that enable them to give back to the immigrant community and can capitalize on their indigenous resources to embark on locally based work.

The Emergence of the Charity-Driven Actor

The post-civil war era was significant in the D.C. metro area because it created new forms of organizing and new actors. In the post-civil war era, seasoned activists pay more attention to Salvadoran migrant incorporation issues because of several reasons. Since Salvadorans were beginning to settle permanently in the area, they restructured the organizations from focusing exclusively on refugee rights to fighting and advocating for immigrant rights. These changes coincided with the diversification of the Salvadoran population whose legal and economic status was no longer tenuous but allowed some to find prosperity in the American dream. As these Salvadorans build family ties in the
states, they also acquired legal statuses\textsuperscript{69} that allowed them to travel back to El Salvador during the reconstruction period.\textsuperscript{70} At this juncture, the Salvadoran government no longer viewed the community abroad as an enemy but rather began to recognize its importance within the economy of El Salvador. El Salvador’s recovery from the civil war left it in dire need of economic aid and this situation was aggravated by the natural disasters that occurred. Since El Salvador is left with more to rebuild but little foreign aid to do it with, a new actor emerges that aims to take care of the homeland they left behind. This new actor takes on the role of a philanthropist rather than an activist and becomes instrumental in reconfiguring the organizational work in the metro D.C. area.

In particular, these philanthropists form hometown associations that aim to rebuild the towns in El Salvador using a transnational space. Since they remain connected to El Salvador, they give credence to other studies that characterize Salvadorans as transnational actors (Portes et al. 2001, Itzigsohn 2000, Landolt 2000). In this vein, I look at these philanthropists’ to see if their transnational experience affects their political habitus. Perhaps, their transnationalism allows them to build a political habitus that is different from how seasoned activist’s political habitus evolved.

\textbf{Giving Back: The Philanthropic Volunteers}

Unlike seasoned activists who started doing transnational advocacy work and shifted to locally driven work\textsuperscript{71}, the new actor does transnational work that is driven by philanthropic means. I label this new actor a philanthropic volunteer because they do

\textsuperscript{69} Others were in the process of legalizing their status particularly since IRCA provided a means to obtain permanent legal resident status.

\textsuperscript{70} Popkin (1997) makes this observation in his work on hometown associations in Los Angeles.

\textsuperscript{71} In the next chapter, I explain the organizational work.
charity work on a voluntary basis. The following narrative informs us of the roots of the philanthropic volunteers:

When the natural disasters started, fortunately and unfortunately, it affected the entire region. We started working with the communities during hurricane Mitch and we did it by supporting certain communities and raising funds because people had lost their homes. Then, the earthquakes occurred and so we worked harder. This was a bigger effort because we learned from the experience with hurricane Mitch that we could do more if we collaborated and that way we would be helping out more communities. Yet, people still had their own groups and supported their own community but it made sense that by working together we could get more done and still remain autonomous and independent (F, male, philanthropic volunteer).

The interviewee here remarks that aid-based organizations started in the D.C. metro area because the natural disasters heavily devastated the country. Since they had attained legal status, they were able to visit their country for the first time since they migrated. Their visit to El Salvador allowed them to see the conditions that their towns were left in because of the war and the natural disasters. Upon seeing the needs of their compatriots, they were interested in giving back to El Salvador. In the following narratives, two distinct philanthropic volunteers discuss their reasons for giving back:

We do this because we know that with our entrepreneurial success there has to be some kind of philanthropy. You know that if and when you give back you receive. If I am here it is not because of chance but there has to be a purpose. It makes me satisfied because I do not want to die and not have given something back to my people. I think I keep doing this because I have a conscious to help others even when I have to go begging to businesses for donations (A, female, philanthropic volunteer).

It has to come from the heart and because I lived through poverty, I know that if I can, I help out. Sometimes you realize that when you live here you throw away your money in insignificant things and so why not put that money to use and instead, give it to someone who needs it (R, male, philanthropic volunteer).

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72 Some of the areas that suffered from the civil war were also heavily hit by the natural disasters thereby aggravating the quality of life for the residents.
As these narratives attest, the philanthropic volunteers have secured their lot and can invest time in philanthropic work. They understand their work by constructing charity-based narratives and build a social consciousness that is interested in remitting to El Salvador. These transnational actors use the local spaces in the metro D.C. area to fundraise, design and coordinate development projects and can travel back to El Salvador to oversee the implementation of these hometown projects. Moreover, by being able to travel to El Salvador they develop ties with the local community and government entities and this facilitates the process of giving back.

**Philanthropic Volunteers as the Unintentional Political Actors**

The philanthropic volunteers differ from seasoned activists because the former tends to depoliticize their selves and work. This is due various reasons. Most philanthropic volunteers consider themselves economic migrants who migrated to the U.S. to attain a better future. For them, the civil war had minimal impact in their lives and it was certainly not the impetus for them to leave their country. Once here, these migrants worked hard to achieve economic mobility and when the reconstruction period began in El Salvador, they had already secured their lot and were in the position to give back. For a long time, these philanthropic volunteers avoided organizational work or anything that seemed political because they consider themselves apolitical actors. Yet, when the reconstruction period began, they could travel back to El Salvador and that is when they embarked on charity work. In their mind, helping Salvadorans rebuild their hometowns was not political work but social work. Philanthropic volunteers stepped in to help out El Salvador because at that point, the seasoned activists focused on
Salvadoran immigrant issues in the U.S. Therefore, they took on transnational work and appeared to make it apolitical.

Despite their attempts to depoliticize their work, philanthropic volunteers convey experiences that transform them into politicized bodies. Philanthropic volunteers unintentionally become involved in political affairs through the charity work that they engage in.\(^{73}\) The following narratives attest to this:

When I am invited to certain events and I can make it, then I will go but that is not to say that I have these strong ties with X person. Rather, even as we work with influential people, I personally am not involved with the political angle. However, there are projects that have been done in collaboration with the Salvadoran government but I do not get involved in politics (M, male, philanthropic volunteer).

I use the government officials as a backup to legitimize my work in the eyes of the community and so they can trust my endeavors. But, it is not that I want to have relations with them or so but they have helped us out (H, female, philanthropic volunteer).

Philanthropic volunteers repeated these statements in distinct ways. While they undermine their political views, it is noteworthy that they work with government entities. This can have potential consequences because philanthropic volunteers started out their charity work by presenting an alternative way of being and acting that was not tied to partisan politics. This allowed them to recruit other actors in the area who were also wary of politics. Yet, the giving back process connects them to the Salvadoran government and this has consequences for their political habitus. In other words, downplaying their politics becomes a strategic mechanism that facilitates recruitment, community building, and coalition building with the Salvadoran government.

\(^{73}\) Merton (1936) discusses how unintended consequences often produce actions that were not intentional but become significant for social action.
The Resources of Philanthropic Volunteers

One of the ways in which these actors stand out from seasoned activists is in their ability to obtain collective remittances\textsuperscript{74} to redevelop their communities of origin. These efforts bring together the help of the community who is more than willing to give back and support the work of these philanthropic actors. As such, I argue that one of their important indigenous resources is their ability to generate interest for their projects and utilize the community abroad as their backbone. In this sense, they emulate some of the work that seasoned activists did in the early period of organizing and are able to build solidarity and support for their causes. At the same time, philanthropic volunteers are informed by a remitters’ consciousness\textsuperscript{75} that appears to be apolitical and helps them embark on transnational work. In doing so, the philanthropic volunteer can capitalize on one important resource that the seasoned activist lacks in that the former actor can develop partnerships with the Salvadoran government to gain funds for community projects.

Comparing the Political Habiti of Seasoned Activists and Philanthropic Volunteers

Several characteristics differentiate the philanthropic volunteers from the seasoned activists. Philanthropic volunteers did not feel that the civil war severely affected them and in many cases, they saw themselves as economic and not political migrants. Moreover, philanthropic volunteers did not bring with them that organizational background that the seasoned activists had. Philanthropic volunteers recently became

\textsuperscript{74} Itzigsohn and Villacres (2008) claim that collective remittances are remittances that are collected by migrant organizations to develop and implement local projects in the home town.

\textsuperscript{75} In the sense that remitters are conscious of the need to send money and these individuals have that social consciousness too but practice it on a larger scale and with the intended goal of using the money that they pooled together to impact the infrastructure of the communities they left behind.
immersed in aid-based work because: they have secured their economic and legal position, are able to witness the destruction of local towns first-hand, can tackle work that seasoned activists are not doing, and have the support of the Salvadoran government who eases the process of giving back. Philanthropic volunteers are not interested in being activist but instead want to reconstruct the places they left behind. The philanthropic volunteers share the same selfless desire as seasoned activists do to help but the former actor is more interested in the community in El Salvador. Landolt et al. put it concretely when they argued that: [t]he post-war transnational migrant voice is constituted both out of the ashes of existing organizations and by ordinary Salvadoran immigrants who have never before participated in politics (1999:305).

In comparing the two actors, one can see how they formulate a different political habitus, which is constructed by their different experiences. Philanthropic volunteers are generally people who try to avoid being called activists because the term seems to convey a sense of being too political or too radical. Rather, they personify themselves as philanthropists who embark on transnational work. In contrast, seasoned activists have a very strong political drive and use it to understand their local work. For a seasoned activist, their activist mind-frame is ever present and the only way they can conceivably create change. These diverse views are generated by their different migratory experiences and the extent to which the war influenced their lives. Furthermore, these actors construct a different narrative to understand their involvement with the Salvadoran community. The seasoned activist uses a narrative that is informed by the war and prior organizational experience to embark on local work that helps Salvadoran immigrants in the metro D.C. area. In contrast, philanthropic volunteers use a charity-driven narrative
to help Salvadorans in El Salvador. Consequently, these actors redefine their political habitus in the process of being involved. Seasoned activists’ political habitus evolves when they seek to ameliorate the quality of life of their compatriots such that their local work has a political bent to it. However, philanthropic volunteer’s political habitus was not built from prior experience but was formed unintentionally through their transnational practices, as they are the ones most embedded in a reciprocal relationship with the Salvadoran government.

So far, I have discussed two different actors and how they built their political habitus. I have argued that while one actor is predisposed to act political because of his/her prior experience and early consciousness-raising, the other actor unintentionally becomes a political actor by establishing relations with the Salvadoran government through their charity work. In each case, their inevitable pathway towards becoming a political actor is clearly marked even as the steps they took to it are blurry. These actors, despite their marked differences, have an organizational element that makes them act in local or transnational spaces. But, what happens when someone is not involved in an organization, can they still be politicized or have a political habitus?

**The Non-participant: The Critical Observer**

I have outlined two of the important actors that comprise part of the organizational structure of the area and although these are ideal types, I compare how each actor plays a role in the Salvadoran community. While seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers represent the majority of the participants in this study, there is a third actor who does not engage in organizational work but nevertheless is politically
driven. I label the third actor a critical observer because they purposely stay away from organizations. Rather, they analyze the organizations from afar and can at times be very critical of what they see. This last group is very small compared to the seasoned activists and the philanthropic volunteers because since they are not organizationally affiliated, they did not comprise a big part of the sample. However, I found their narratives important because they serve as a subpopulation that from an outsider perspective provides an understanding of Salvadoran activism. Moreover, they allow me to see how individuals can build a political habitus independently from organizational work.

The critical observer is distinct for several reasons. They feel impacted by the war but not to the extent that they use this experience as a basis to organize or mobilize. Unlike seasoned activists, the critical observer lacks prior organizational experience and is more likely to remain on the fringes of organizational work. Additionally, the critical observer is not going to mobilize for the community’s sake because the critical observer is someone who is not too political or charitable in his or her practices. As a result, they are not going to get involved in organizational work that is local or transnational but prefer to observe this work from afar. In the following narratives, I quote some critical observers to highlight their reasons as to why they remain detached, but at the same time, sympathize with the organizational work that others do:

Because of the [media] work that I do, I cannot be linked to a specific organization but I am always watching what they do and I try to help out by disseminating that to the public. I think people here in the exterior have to organize more though because the issue of remittances is really impacting us and if it were not for remittances, our country would be in a debacle. I think we somehow need to make our power more noteworthy to the government that we as

76 There were ten people who I labeled critical observers compared to thirty who I called seasoned activists and twenty who I called philanthropic volunteers.

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Salvadorans in the exterior count and so they can feel some pressure from us. But, in this moment, I do not think the government pays too much attention to us or to our suggestions. I still see organizations that are constantly working but I am not a part of that (R, male, critical observer).

I am not very well informed because I do not get involved in the internal politics of these organizations and the work I do does not allow me to be involved. What I see from the outside is that these organizations encounter many obstacles. For instance, anti-immigrant groups target pro-immigrant organizations and these people are putting their lives at risk to inform our people. You need this sort of work because we are in an anti-immigrant climate with all these laws against us. I see that the majority of people in Washington are Salvadorans and these laws are affecting us. There is a great fear in our community and even then, I see organizations doing a tremendous job helping our community out and I admire that (D, female, critical observer).

I participate from the outside because I cannot be involved with an organization because of my work. I do support the work of Salvadoran communities and support the leaders. I support whatever cause is fair, whether right-leaning people or leftist spearhead it, but I do so on a personal level. I have a social conscience because I am in the streets everyday and I see the struggles and the injustices that people face (G, male, critical observer).

As these narratives suggest, the critical observer remains distant from organizational work because it helps them maintain an objective stance. Since most critical observers work in media outlets or as business owners, adopting an objective stance allows them to have a public face that will not get tarnished by organizational efforts. Although they see the importance of organizational work, they remain outside of it.

The critical observer builds a political habitus that is detached from political participation, if and when, it entails involvement with an organization. The critical observer may have a social and political conscious but not to the point where they are compelled to act on it. As such, they build their political habitus around the idea of being neutral with their practices. In doing so, these critical observers prefer to remain objective in order to refrain from having to choose between the two options that the organizational structure in the area offers. In essence, while they justify their neutrality
as based on their work, I think their neutrality is more a consequence of how they perceive organizational work.

The critical observer tends to overstate the political side of the organizations. They see leaders affiliated to a specific party or ideology and as one critical observer put it, “I don’t like to be partidista [aligned with a specific party].” This statement shows that they prefer to remain neutral rather than considered a leftist or right-leaning individual. In other words, not joining an organization distances them from partisan politics and the divisions this may cause. One of the narratives further explains this issue:

I think [a hometown organization] is doing a good job and their work is not political but merely charity-based. There are others like [the nonprofits] that are there to help out the immigrant but I think they have a tendency to get a lot of leftist people. My problem with that is that they have a very rigid way of thinking and if you do not agree with them, you probably will become their enemy. This does not allow us to progress because we are still polarized in the same way that we are in our country. We cannot advance because we do not allow for differences and if we did, we would be able to create organizations that would attract the rest of the population and be more democratic. I think they do not want anything to do with me because I think differently (C, male, critical observer).

Another interviewee remarks that:

I think the problem with organizational work here is that there are political ideologies that penetrate them and I did not want to be a part of that. I have my own way of thinking politically but there are a lot of organizations that are there not to help but have political goals (V, male, critical observer).

For the critical observer, the issue at hand is that they perceive organizational work as polarized by political tendencies and this makes the organizational structure less appealing to them. Perhaps, this is the reason why critical observers are careful about exposing their political side and will ascribe to a neutral political ideology since they problematize partisanship. Nevertheless, even as they do not get involved in organizational work, their views show that they think as political actors even though they
do not act it out. Thus, they still develop a political habitus but this ethos is not necessarily going to push them to get involved.

**Critical Observer’s Intellectual Capital as a Resource**

Critical observers differ from the other actors because their political habitus is not sustained by their organizational work. Critical observers do not need an organization to enact their political habitus because they prefer to individualize the process. Critical observer’s political habitus is the most static one because they individualize their political side precisely because they are against politicizing people and organizations. As such, they remain detached and wary of letting one’s politics drive one’s work.

Nevertheless, critical observers show that people can remain on the fringes and still think politically and critically. Since they criticize organizations for having a political nature, critical observers do not let politics taint their lives. They are neither activists nor volunteers but are outsiders who assess organizational work with a critical eye. This allows them to sustain an intellectual and perhaps, an unbiased view of the Salvadoran community at large. As detached observers, they possess an intellectual capital that is outside the realm of the organizational work and it this way serve as watchdogs of the Salvadoran community and its respective organizations.

**Poniendo Un Poquito de Arena (Putting My Little Bit of Grain in the Sand): The Motivating Force Behind these Actors’ Political Habiti**

I have outlined the different actors to suggest that they build their political habiti through different means. The seasoned activist capitalizes on their prior organizational
experience to sustain some of the local work that they do. Their political and social conscious is informed by the civil war and is even passed down to newer generations. In contrast, the philanthropic volunteers define themselves as actors interested in charity-driven work that gives back to El Salvador. As such, they present themselves as apolitical actors in order to work on a transnational level; yet, unintentionally become political players. Finally, critical observers maintain a critical stance even when they remain detached from organizational work. In so doing, they show less of a political inclination compared to the other two actors.

Interestingly enough, these actors share a strong sense of giving back despite their differences. When I asked about their motivations, a recurring theme was to “poner mi poquito de arena (put my little bit of grain in the sand).” This statement describes how these actors see themselves and how they understand the practices that they engage in. In distinct ways, these actors are committed to social change and this statement reflects their underlying motivation to be in an organization or remain a critical observer. Obviously, the task of putting their bit of grain in the sand is easier said than done because, as I suggest in the next chapter, the organizational work is infused with internal and external challenges that come to impact their ability to create change and really “give back.” These actors have to confront the issues embedded in organizational work and this is what I turn to next.
CHAPTER 6: ORGANIZING PRACTICES AND POLITICAL HABITUS

Introduction

The typology of actors that I outlined in the last chapter distinguishes Salvadorans in the metro area because each ideal type exhibits different ways in which they build their political habitus. Regardless of their generational category, seasoned activists form a political habitus with war-based frameworks that are reinvigorated by their migration experience. Philanthropic volunteers construct their political habitus through charity-driven frameworks, while critical observers build a political habitus through critical narratives. As these actors construct their political habitus through different means, they are also simultaneously embedded in an organizational structure that aims to help Salvadorans.

The organizational structure of the area is very important for Salvadorans as it provides a medial-level support system that facilitates their adaptation. Salvadorans have found a strong organizational structure in D.C. There are about 120 community-based organizations with 75 claiming to be Latino non-profits that provide various services (Lee and De Vita 2008; Cantor and De Vita 2008). Although, the Salvadoran community is dispersed throughout the metro area, it is held together by multi-service institutions that are primarily located in D.C. As the population has moved to other areas within Maryland and Virginia, organizations have formed there in order to better the services that they render the population. Moreover, many Salvadorans work for the population they serve, thus enabling the leadership base to be heavily Salvadoran. Along with the non-profit sector, there is a strong organizational structure that is spearheaded by

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77 Price et al. (2005) note that the D.C. community has not witnessed the formation of enclaves or ethnic neighborhoods because historically it has not been an immigrant city.
hometown associations. In fact, Benitez (2005) claims that there are about sixty hometown associations in the D.C. metro area. Because of the presence of distinct organizations led by Salvadorans, this allows me to see how well positioned organizations are to empower the population. In this section, I analyze how this organizational context affects their political habitu. Primarily, this chapter focuses on the work that seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers do because these actors are involved in organizations. However, at the end, I discuss how critical observers assess this organizational work.

The Organizations of Seasoned Activists

The organizational work of seasoned (and 1.5) activists consists of involvement in locally oriented organizations. These “locally-oriented” organizations are more interested in resolving Salvadoran immigrant issues related to health, employment, and political advocacy. I refrain from disclosing the specific names of the organizations to protect the identity of the participants but six organizations were labeled locally driven. Two of the organizations in this study are fundamental to the community because both advocate on behalf of immigrants and render services that involve housing, employment and legal issues. One of these organizations originated from the Sanctuary movement and fought for refugee rights. As such, this organization has gained recognition within the community for its advocacy work. The other organization is known for its support of day laborer centers and is valorized for safeguarding immigrant rights during an anti-immigrant climate. Apart from these organizations, another immigrant-serving

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78 Most of these organizations have 501 (c) (3) status and others are working on getting it.
79 I classify them as local because of the issues that they focus on but they can also be labeled immigrant-serving organizations. I use the terms interchangeably.
institution in this study tackles health care issues and offers a range of medical services to the community at large. The three organizations that I mentioned so far have had long-standing presence in the community since the 1980s. However, organizations that have been founded recently address other immigrant-related issues. For instance, one organization deals with empowering tenants to avoid unjust housing displacements, while the other two are primarily interested in collective mobilization for immigration reform.

The organizational work that seasoned activists do in these spaces allows them to provide a medium from which Salvadoran immigrants can find access to services and address their social/political issues. A case in point is the organization that was founded during the Sanctuary movement. This organization first began fighting for refugee rights and helped Salvadorans apply for asylum. Yet, when the civil war ended, community leaders became cognizant of the fact that Salvadorans were not planning to return to their country even when peace had been restored in El Salvador. As a result, the organization had to restructure itself to address immigrant issues that were geared towards easing Salvadoran’s permanent settlement in the D.C. metro area. Yet, the transition to dealing with immigrant-related needs has incurred some challenges.

In the discussion that follows, I delve into the internal and external issues that create this organizational context. These challenges illuminate the medial-level barriers that encroach on seasoned activists’ political habitus. The themes that will be discussed were laid out by the participants and include internal issues such as ideological cleavages, leadership style, and the lack of grassroots efforts. I focus on these primary issues even though as other studies on organizational work point out, there are a lot more (Chung 2007). Additionally, the external challenges that the participants allude to primarily deal
with the scarcity of funds and the ways in which the different governments affect organizational work.

**The Ideological Cleavages of Seasoned Activists**

As seasoned activists spearhead local organizational work, some of the things they have to confront are the deep cleavages that have existed within the Salvadoran community. These cleavages are rooted in different ideological positions that existed throughout the civil war and persisted when Salvadorans migrated. Menjívar (2000) points out that in the Salvadoran case, the politics back home affects immigrant communities. Therefore, the Salvadoran community abroad is divided by the ideological orientation they hold because of the political party they support in El Salvador. The primary ideological cleavages that exist are between leftist thinking individuals who support the FMLN\(^80\) and right-centered individuals that support Arena\(^81\). Furthermore, because these ideological cleavages are shaped by political partisanship, they also demark migration patterns.

Menjívar (1994) noted that Salvadorans who emigrated in the early 1980s did so because most of them felt politically persecuted. This wave comprised of individuals who had leftist beliefs that went against the norm. In this sample, there were various accounts of individuals who shared stories of political persecution and I highlighted some of these in the previous chapter. These individuals migrated and began to spearhead the organizational work in various communities to fight for peace and refugee rights. These

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\(^{80}\) See history chapter for more information on the FMLN.

\(^{81}\) I want to point out that in El Salvador there are other parties with more moderate leftist or moderate right-centered views but the reason that FMLN and Arena are important is because these two groups have had a long-standing rivalry that began with the civil war.
activities led Itzigsohn and Villacres (2008) to conclude that during the civil war, FMLN sympathizers politically organized the Salvadoran migrant communities while the Salvadoran government did not play a role in the expatriate communities during these early years.

Since these migrants have penetrated the organizational infrastructure of the D.C. metro area, some believe that because the leftist mark is still visible, this creates problems for the organizations. One of the participants remarked that immigrant-serving organizations tend to get a lot of leftist-leaning people and this alienates others who do not share these views. They believe this causes polarization and weakens the potential force of local work because efforts to mobilize the community will inevitably have to confront these pre-existing ideological frictions. Another participant argued that when people see these organizations dominated by one viewpoint, they are resistant to join their efforts when it comes to mobilizing. He specifies this in the following narrative:

I think the events, such as the immigrant protests, are often politicized. I do not agree with displaying a flag of the FMLN because we are the diaspora here and so the ideological tendencies will isolate other people who think differently. I think politicizing things means polarizing them. It is important to take into account that when we do massive things these differences can take away our power and force. In other words, if we take the politics out, we would work better. But, even then, while I do think these divisions take place they are not heavily marked because the final goal to help out is what prevails (D, male, critical observer).

Generally, these remarks were made by people who did not work in these organizations and who critique the left-leaning leaders and not the membership base.

In contrast, those who worked in these immigrant-serving organizations did not feel that their beliefs hindered the work they do. Rather, they saw themselves as progressives who are invested in ameliorating the quality of life of Salvadorans. Moreover, they did not think that their beliefs compromised their ability to provide
services and advocate on Salvadorans’ behalf. In fact, these seasoned activists were more concerned with an anti-immigrant climate than who should run El Salvador. At the time of the study, anti-immigrant issues took precedence in their discussions and so the ideological cleavages were downplayed. Because the anti-immigrant climate was a common threat that was shared by all these organizations, it unified the community and served as an alternative narrative from which to mobilize.

The seasoned activists that are embedded in this work can build a political habitus around mobilizing for an immigrant cause. This has shifted considerably from the war-based frameworks that they used to fight for refugee rights during the early eighties. As the organizational structure has evolved, immigrant rights takes center stage and this makes seasoned activists reconfigure their political habitus to one that captures their new experiences and new challenges. In the battle for immigrant rights, they have learned to identify with the cause because they see themselves as migrants. At the same time, the new challenge that they confront is what to do in an anti-immigrant climate. As such, they remain politically active and vocal because their politicking is geared towards helping their compatriots.

However, the ideological cleavages that exist within the community show the conflicting nature within which seasoned activists have to navigate. Critics of this organizational work note that organizations are riddled with lefties who divide the community and polarize the events. These criticisms create an image of the local organizational work as one that is divided by homeland politics. Yet, seasoned activists downplay their ideological cleavages because they strategically employ an alternative narrative that unifies them. This narrative depicts Salvadorans as unified under an
immigrant banner where political leniencies do not play a role. As such, seasoned activists can downplay their cleavages when there is a bigger threat to face. Because they were confronting a climate of terrorism that was constructed by anti-immigrant laws, seasoned activists had to react. These issues helped locally based organizations appear as the “guardians” of immigrants and their presence received more support from the community. Even still, some question whether the ultimate goal of these participants is to help the community or boost their image through their organizational work.

Cada uno jala para su lado (Each Pulls to their Side): Leadership and Seasoned Activists

The image of the organization is important because it creates conditions that can be detrimental to its progress. First, the notion of the organization as being leftist still holds in the eyes of the onlookers even when leaders downplay their political views. Secondly, the leadership base is still largely concentrated in the hands of the pioneers (per se) and this is viewed negatively. These leaders are criticized because they are seen as exerting total control over the organization. Some of the critics mentioned feeling that an organization was someone’s personal project. One of the participants utilized the Salvadoran saying: “uno jala por su lado y otro por el otro” (one person pulls to their side and the other one to theirs) to express their concern of how people look out for their own interests when they lead organizational work. The following narrative addresses this concern:

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82 For instance, the House of Representative passed the Sensenbrenner Bill and this bill included various anti-immigrant provisions, such as, imposing criminal penalties to anyone who assisted undocumented immigrants with social services. Furthermore, 287(g) was adopted by some states to allow them to police immigrants.

83 This roughly translates to each person pulling to their side
The problem is that they all want to take the credit for things. I think if the organizations want to tackle this immigration issue they have to be united but the problem is that they say they did this and the other one says they did that and that is what creates these divisions. In the end, we do not agree on things because each person wants to take the trophy (D, female, community observer).

This participant expresses her dissatisfaction with personalities that capitalize on activist agendas. Others remarked that individuals take leading roles because they want to be seen as the protagonist’s of the efforts. For instance, these participants remark that:

Unfortunately, I think, we do not coordinate things well so different efforts get replicated. There is a lot of protagonismo (i.e. leading roles), egos, the it is all about me, the individualism. This protagonismo of people makes it so that they leave behind the needs of the people (R, male, seasoned activist).

I also learned that it is important and primordial to work in unison and build coalitions. Even though it does get a bit complicated because as a Salvadoran community, we often compete with one another. When you initially come here you think that people will work together but it does not happen like that because people put themselves first and last. This becomes something to fight against because this prevents us from building a sense of community and build solidarity (F, male, seasoned activist).

These participants note that within the locally driven work there are internal dynamics that generate less collaboration because people’s interests conflict with their intended organizational goals. These narratives point to the fact that because elites have centralized their role and taken over community efforts, it is harder for organizations to build solidarity and engage in effective collective action. Throughout the interviews, some noted that the first immigrant march (which occurred in 2006) was seen as a success because it reflected the collaboration of the organizations and the entire community. However, attempts to continue the massive efforts have been undermined because some want to claim ownership of the immigration reform issue.

When the organizational work is seen as territorial, the organization cannot evolve because it is viewed as directed by the elites and thereby, closed off to new leaders and
alternative ideas. When leadership becomes centralized it not only challenges the building of solidarity, but also potential members feel left out of the organizational structure. Fresh new leaders often feel that the doors of the organizations are closed off to them. In the following narrative, a participant makes note of how a protagonist attitude undermines the ability of new leadership to emerge:

There has not been a way to cultivate more members because I think the leadership has been very limited, dogmatic, and has not been open. I have seen people with capacities to lead and they get put aside because the other leaders say we know how to best do things and so people get tired of that attitude. That is, the member’s opinion, strategies, and ideas are not taken into account and you get tired of that because there is no space to empower or to teach the tools to lead (E, female, seasoned activist).

By being centralized, the organizational structure is not training new leaders to take leading roles. In the decades that follow, this will put a damper on future community building efforts that seek to empower Salvadorans.

These character flaws and ways of enacting them within the organizational spaces work against seasoned activists’ political habitus. These individuals engage in efforts that are clouded by their interests and the community perceives this. Consequently, seasoned activists’ efforts are going to be less effective in doing community building work. They will have a harder time sustaining the ‘collective leadership’ that has long characterized them and which thus far has been a valuable resource for them. As this leadership gets centralized, this resource will be lost, making it harder for seasoned activists to engage in political action. As a result, the ability for seasoned activists to build a political habitus conflicts with both their self-interests and the role they enact within the organization. Moreover, centralizing the organization can lead to less grassroots efforts that put the community in the backburner.
Not grassroots enough: Seasoned Activists Transition to Service Work

One of the aspects that make these immigrant-serving organizations unique within the local spaces is their political potential. These organizations are at the forefront of fighting for immigrant rights and do this in several ways. They advocate and lobby for the Salvadoran community. Some of the battles they have fought relate to: extending TPS, obtaining driver licenses for undocumented immigrants, opposing raids and the separation of families, and lobbying for immigration reform. They also provide services like legal representation, tenant advocacy, and conduct health fairs. Along with helping immigrants with housing, employment, and legal issues, they have workshops that teach immigrants different things like: how to protect themselves from a raid and how to protect themselves from an employer. Yet, some see these organizations transitioning from community entities to bureaucratic ones.

Some of these organizations grew out of the Sanctuary movement and many considered them grassroots organizations built around solidarity networks. The seasoned activists who were part of these organizations were influenced by the idea that educating “the masses” was a way to fight for a cause.\textsuperscript{84} These organizations relied on protests, rallies, vigils, and other mobilization tactics that were done in the streets and not inside the organization. Now, organizations are seen as lacking that mobilizing force because they do not have a Salvadoran base that can rally alongside them.

Their role has evolved into agencies that mainly provide services but do not empower people. Part of the reason for this is that by providing services, they lack the time, manpower, and funds to do grassroots work. Moreover, because the population at

\textsuperscript{84} This idea was based on Freire’s (2000) work about educating the masses by using popular education.
large sees the organizations as serving them, there is really no structure or space for the community to be involved and to develop projects or initiatives that can serve as collaborative efforts between the organizations and the community. The following narrative addresses the decline of grassroots work within nonprofits:

In my opinion, I see those organizations, like in the 1980s, they served their purpose. I think at that time they were more of like a real nonprofit. I am not going to disrespect them but a lot of things have changed and maybe it changes because once the war is over then you know the dynamics of everything changed but I don’t feel they are as grassroots as they were before and that’s probably why I like (the cultural organization) more because we are a little bit more grassroots (A, male, 1.5 seasoned activist).

This participant highlights how locally based organizations have become less interested in claims making and more invested in providing services. Thus, the political spirit that once characterized them withers, the mass base disappears, and they become interested in other endeavors. As the organizations transition to entities that can safeguard immigrant rights, they focus on the service component and lose sight of the empowering dimension as suggested by the following narrative:

There are other organizations and these are assistance-based but I think what is missing is that they have become simply aid-based organizations. In turn, you have lost the empowering component, the capacitacion (the training), and the ability to show people they can transform our environment. But, for me, the role they play now is very different from the one they played in the past. I think empowering the community so they can assume leadership roles, reach a higher educational level, and so forth is not prioritized because the community is seen as the clientele, those poor people who need the aid. I am not happy with this situation (E, female, seasoned activist).

The ability for organizations to raise consciousness is not the priority and very seldom do they use alternative means to educate and build awareness. That is, while these organizations still educate the population about their rights, they put less effort into using different means from which to do this work. For instance, many of the participants
claimed that in the past, various means were used to empower the community such as plays, workshops, artwork, music, and going door to door. Now, these strategies are seldom employed even though they can help generate more community support.

Although seasoned activists have a political habitus, they are not building it amongst the community members because they have transitioned from being grassroots organizers to becoming service providers. The grassroots work that once characterized them and pushed them to engage in mobilization efforts is not visibly marked within the organizations. They do less protest work, door-to-door efforts, and/or outreach through alternative means. Instead, the community becomes the clientele, which they serve, and not one that they empower. This affects their ability to transfer their political habitus into something more concrete and which could reverberate within the community. Part of the issue, though, is that their ability to embark on transformative changes alongside the community is hindered by external forces which as one participant noted, puts them “entre la espada y la pared” (between a rock and a hard place).

**Seasoned Activists and Las Migajas (The Scraps)**

These immigrant-serving institutions tend to be affected by scarce funding. A lot of the participants voiced their concern with how scarce funds restrict their work. These narratives highlight the ways in which scarce funds come to typify the scraps they receive from the government\(^8^5\):

I think the funds separate people because they are scarce while there are multiple projects and so that becomes a source of tension. These governments do not give out much so its just migajas (scraps) that we are getting (R, male, seasoned activist).

\(^8^5\) Other funds come from philanthropists or foundations but because these are less reliable, most mentioned the one source that is somewhat reliable and that is why the discussion focuses on government monies.
A big obstacle is obtaining the resources because there are never enough funds for our type of work. Although we want to create a whole organizational process we end up being a service-oriented organization. We need more staff and personnel to divide the work because you often end up taking multiple roles (F, male, seasoned activist).

The other problem is that the majority of people involved are doing service related work and they are salaried, and so being salaried cripples you because you dedicate your efforts in doing research, becoming a think-tank, and they get involved in looking for funds so the goal of empowering the community gets lost. I think it is hard for organizations because the funding you rely on co-opts and also people sometimes want to live off of that funding and so the organization serves but does not organize. I think it all gets lost in bureaucracy and the system does it that way (M, male, seasoned activist).

Even as there is a lot to be done, very little funding is given to these initiatives. Moreover, funds are used to sustain the organization’s personnel and projects so that there is little left over to give back to the community.

The problems with relying on the “migajas” are twofold. On one hand, organizations continually spend their time and energy looking for funds. On the other hand, when funds are allocated, organizational work can be co-opted by the funding agent and this cripples organizations from empowering the community. In order for organizations to both service and empower the community they have to garner funds from multiple sources so that the funds will be more plentiful. Once organizations rely on government monies, they hardly invest their time in fundraising efforts that can bring in the community. For example, even though they host galas, these are often too costly for the community to attend. As a result, most of their fundraising efforts entail grant writing but this leaves out the community because they do not play a role in the process.

The role that funding plays within these organizations highlights one of the structural barriers that seasoned activists have to mediate. As these organizations
transition into service providers, they have to find ways to generate funds for their projects. Yet, these funds are scarce and cannot amass everyone and everything. When these organizations find money for their projects, they run the risk of being co-opted by the funding agent. Consequently, these issues challenge the political habitus of seasoned activists because they have to invest their time and energy to be service providers and not activists. Moreover, their ability to engage the community in political action is restricted because the organizations no longer create a space for the community to learn to become political actors and participate in its own quest for change. This is problematized when seasoned activists have to navigate through the government loops.

**How Government Matters: Seasoned Activists Assess the U.S. Government**

Bloemraad (2005) notes that the U.S. government tends to have a laissez-faire approach with how it incorporates its immigrants. Yet, the participants in this study questioned to what extent the government was laissez-faire about their organizational work. On one level, they feel their hands are tied when it comes to the restrictions placed on nonprofits and their political activities. On the other hand, they feel that the government does not step in to defend the rights of immigrants. This narrative reflects one of the participant’s feelings toward the federal government:

I think the Salvadoran organizations began with the goal to raise consciousness amongst people and to get a base and members. At the same time, if you are nonprofit you cannot do politics so that means the law holds you back, but there could be things that one can do (A, female, seasoned activist).

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86 Chung (2005) notes that having a nonprofit status does not necessarily detract from the organization’s political work. I think if Salvadoran organizations wanted to indirectly inform and educate the community to be political, they could do it.
As mentioned, the restrictions that the federal government places on nonprofits prevent them from empowering the population. This is in great contrast to the past when organizations were highly politicized because they were not dependant on government monies but fundraised amongst themselves. Now, the participants feel that by appeasing to the federal government, their politics revolves around advocacy and lobbying work rather than grassroots work such as consciousness rising. Chung (2007) notes that an alternative route that some organizations take to empower the population is to not seek mainstream funds but develop their own indigenous resources to do politics. But, Salvadoran immigrant-serving organizations lack the indigenous resources. Therefore, their reliance on government monies diminishes their activist stance.

Another issue that is problematic for the seasoned activists is the lack of federal authority over state laws. The following participant remarks:

Their politics of leaving it up to the states and localities to generate their own politics has greatly affected Salvadorans. We are susceptible to being deported, discriminated, experience reduced social services and human services, because the local governments are anti-immigrant and have xenophobic attitudes (R, male, seasoned activist).

The issue for locally driven organizations is that while they serve as protectors of the community (especially during an anti-immigrant climate), these organizations expect the federal government to offer them support. In reality, however, organizations do not receive the backing of the federal government to defend themselves against anti-immigrant laws because the federal authority has left it up to the states to deal with immigration. In doing so, certain counties in the metro D.C. area designated anti-

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87 Additionally, in this period the federal government was extremely hostile to Salvadorans so there were no openings available to them. They had to build these openings through their own accord.
immigrant laws. These laws pressured organizations throughout the D.C. metro area to service the population that was escaping these anti-immigrant zones.

The experiences that seasoned activists articulate, as they negotiate their place to the U.S. government, shows the ebbs and flows that locally-based organizational work undergoes. In some ways they feel some support, particularly when it comes to funding. Even as scarce as it is, there is still an entity from which organizations can secure their livelihood. Yet, this puts them in a vulnerable position and it is accentuated when there is an anti-immigrant climate for two reasons. On one hand, the demands for services increases when the community is being attacked but the funds do not necessarily address the increasing needs; meanwhile the organizations are not permitted to engage in politics to empower the community. On the other hand, because the federal government allows local laws to be enacted that impinge on the civil rights of individuals, organizations are the only ones left for the community to rely on because the federal government does not extend that support.

Despite the fact that immigrant-serving organizations will continue to have a tenuous relationship with the federal government, there is also space for deliberation as narrated by the following quote:

I feel we have a good relationship with the federal government. I do think they can be more effective though. There have been key moments, like after the earthquakes, where we have petitioned things like TPS and the community participated and made their wishes heard to the federal government representatives (S, male, seasoned activist).

One of the strengths of the community is that it has experience dealing with legal issues stemming from their rights to asylum to the current situation regarding immigrant rights. Continuously fighting for legal rights has opened a space in which they can find some

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89 One example was the 287(g) proposition in Virginia.
room to deliberate and make claims to the government. This benefits seasoned activists’ political habitus because they are able to negotiate laws, practice their lobbying skills, and engage in advocacy work. Yet, their ability to inject their political habitus in conscious-building efforts that can include the community is limited by government pressures. Therefore, their ability to create transformative changes because they have a strong disposition to be politically active is restricted by government demands. The interesting aspect is that seasoned activists do not have to battle it out with just one government; rather, they must also confront the Salvadoran government.

**Seasoned Activists Assess the Salvadoran government**

The tensions that seasoned activists have with the way the U.S. government approaches their locally based work pale compared to the animosity that seasoned activists feel towards the Salvadoran government. The locally based organizations purposively distance themselves from the Salvadoran government and although this is historically rooted, it has consequences even today. As I mentioned before, many of the organizations founded by left-leaning individuals opposed the Salvadoran government because they blamed the regime for generating both the civil war and the massive flow of immigrants. As a result of their sympathy towards the FMLN party, they have a lot of friction with the Salvadoran government and its representatives in the U.S. (i.e. the consulate and embassy) as this participant remarks:

I think one thing that happens here is that people who belong to or have an affinity for the FMLN lead the nonprofits and so this makes them unacceptable to the Salvadoran government (E, male, seasoned activist).
Because many of these individuals continue to spearhead the organizational work and the regime continues to be right wing\textsuperscript{90}, they distrust and distance themselves from the Salvadoran government. In the following narrative, this participant expresses why he distrusts the government:

I think leftist groups have a much more extensive and wider base abroad than the right-wing faction. In recent years, the right wing has mobilized because the dominant party, ARENA, has come to recognize the valor and the importance of working with Salvadoran communities in the U.S. They started putting more attention and resources into these communities to the point where, I think, they feel they have control or dominion over the community. They probably feel they are the ones who handle the immigration issues in part because they have an intimate relationship with the Republican Party. We have seen that there has been this closeness between the Republican Party and ex-presidents like Francisco Flores, who feel they have been the spokespersons for the community. The Salvadoran government is motivated to get close to its emigrant community because it wants to be accepted and grow along with it so it can continue expanding and perpetuate itself. Another reason is that they became aware of the fact that they had alienated themselves from the community and had not acculturated the right-wing groups as much as the leftist-groups had done. Leftist-groups did a much better job at reaching out to the community. The government is trying to win over the hearts of the diaspora community because they want their vote so they can continue being the power holder so what they do is court them (P, male, seasoned activist).

Many of the participants distrust the motives and actions of the Salvadoran government and are wary of the government taking advantage of the community abroad. In essence, they would not like to see the community abroad being used and manipulated so the right-wing government could remain in power. One of the most recent examples of how this distrust continued was that in the previous election of 2005, the Salvadoran government claimed that if the leftist government won, the remittances to El Salvador would terminate. Some participants called this Arena’s “campaign of terror” and associated it with the way the party has continuously terrorized the population at large to impose its willpower.

\textsuperscript{90} I conducted my field work before the FMLN won the 2009 presidential election.
As the relationship between the Salvadoran government and the immigrant-serving organizations remains challenging, the Salvadoran government restructured their consulate offices in the U.S. to emulate some of the work that nonprofits already do with regards to immigration. The consulate office tackles short-term issues like getting a work permit but do not deal with other issues that most undocumented face.\textsuperscript{91} For instance, even when consular offices assist with TPS permits, they cannot address issues related to the immigrant experience but refuse to give the nonprofits some form of credibility for stepping in. One of the participants expressed this:

\begin{quote}
We worked with TPS before the government of El Salvador got into it. We fought a lot for it when Salvadorans needed something to make them legal since the natural disasters occurred. We also worked recently with the immigration reform issue and became part of the coalition that formed. We organized marches, lobbied, and did other things to push for immigration reform while the government did nothing (Z, male, seasoned activist).
\end{quote}

This creates tensions with seasoned activists and causes them to distance themselves and not collaborate with the government representatives. At the same time, the Salvadoran government favors other organizations in the area. Seasoned activists feel that the Salvadoran government is more interested in getting money for development projects in El Salvador than advocating for immigrants in the U.S. The Salvadoran government is criticized because its outreach efforts are infused with self-interest and only encompass one segment of the population abroad. Therefore, most seasoned activists, find it hard to build an alliance with the Salvadoran government.

Another way in which seasoned activist express their tension with the Salvadoran government is in their narratives about TPS\textsuperscript{92}. Seasoned activists claim that the

\textsuperscript{91} Such as not getting paid for their work, housing displacements, getting inadequate care, etc.
\textsuperscript{92} For more information about TPS see the Appendix I section.
Salvadoran government uses TPS as a publicity stunt. For instance, several narratives reflect this:

A good example would be TPS, which they feel has been extended because of their relationship with the US government and so the embassy and the consulate have embarked on these massive campaigns to reach out to the community. At the same time, the community has pressured them to be more responsive because the community has been disgusted with their inefficiency in processing passports, the long waits, their treatment of people. So I think due to the pressure from the community and leftist oriented groups, the Salvadoran government has learned to understand that they should have ties to the Salvadoran community and now the government gives us a lot of weight (P, male, seasoned activist).

Do you think it benefits the Salvadoran government to legalize all these people, of course not, because they will forget about El Salvador? They know they need us to sustain the economy so it is not convenient for them to see that people become legal. This is a hypocritical situation because they say the advocate on people’s behalf and come here to do it but they forget that TPS is not a permanent pathway to legalization (S, female, seasoned activist).

These seasoned activists criticize the extent to which TPS is not a long-term benefit for Salvadorans but keeps them in a “legal limbo” and is not the solution for undocumented migrants. Furthermore, they question how well the Salvadoran government negotiates this policy because while it is true that some see TPS a step up from being undocumented, they feel that the price El Salvador pays for TPS is in its unconditional support of U.S. interests.

The tensions that seasoned activists have with the Salvadoran government are complex. First, the distrust is historically rooted, and impacts their present views. In general, these seasoned activists built their political habitus in opposition to this regime and resent the fact that Arena still holds political power in El Salvador. Secondly, the seasoned activists abhor the ways in which the government plays favoritism and reaches out to the community to fulfill their own self-interests. They see these schemes as

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93 For a discussion on the impact of TPS on people’s lives see Menjivar (2006) and Abrego (2008).
94 El Salvador was one of the only Latin American countries to send troops to Iraq.
manipulative and courting those who will not defy and question Arena’s hegemonic power. Finally, seasoned activists critique the ways in which the Salvadoran government capitalizes on TPS and use it as a tool to win over supporters. Due to these reasons, seasoned activists reconstruct their political habitus so it is replenished with stark criticism and consciousness. At the same time that seasoned activists’ political habitus is informed by their opposition to the Salvadoran government, it is also hindered. In contrast to the past, the Salvadoran government can now win over expatriates and this creates new challenges that seasoned activists must confront.

**Seasoned Activists and “Somos Bien Chispa” (We are Quick)**

In summary, I discussed some of the issues that seasoned activists feel challenged by because these experiences speak to their ability/inability to build their political habitus. As the organizational structure evolves and new actors emerge, the seasoned activists will need to redefine their politics, mission, and their commitments. The seasoned activists in this sample claim that they are more than willing to face whatever obstacles come their way because they have the “chispa”\(^95\) to do it. There is tremendous resilience amongst the people who do the locally oriented work. Some of their narratives convey the fact that they want to make a difference and that their motives are not to gain material rewards, but come from the heart. When I asked these participants what motivates them to do this work, they answered:

> What I have liked the most is getting to know my community and finding ways to grow and keep on going and it has helped me develop too. I have always had aspirations to be better at organizing, helping out, and want to learn how to advance my community's interests and advance politically. I think that is

\(^{95}\) There is no direct translation to this because it is part of the Salvadoran lexicon but it generally means the ability to be quick in doing things.
important for me and along the way I have learned to navigate the political system of this country. I see so many needs and problems that need to be addressed and so I see the need to advance politically and that gives me hope to keep going and keep fighting (E, male, seasoned activist).

Here I am trying to uplift my community, support them, and walk with them through the years and with all the difficulties we encounter (S, female, seasoned activist).

As these narratives show, people are committed to the local work because they are motivated by solidarity and a prospect for change. Their ability to tackle the challenging aspects of organizational work speaks to the ways in which their political habitus evolves. That is, they have to maneuver the challenging aspects of organizational work and still maintain a political habitus that is firmly rooted in a spirit of solidarity and prospects for a better world.

Their local organizational work is highly regarded and praised by the community. Within the Salvadoran community, no other entity could do the work seasoned activists do when it comes to fighting for immigrant rights. These locally driven organizations are especially important because they can effectively advocate for immigrants during an anti-immigrant climate. The services rendered by these locally oriented organizations facilitate the incorporation process of Salvadorans because they provide access to multiple services in Spanish. These forms of assistance-ship help safeguard the immigrant population from unfriendly government practices and policies that close the doors to them. In the following narrative, a seasoned activist remarks on the importance of these organizations:

There are a wide variety of organizations and I think what unites us is that Salvadoran identity and so we care about it and want to maintain it. We want to be informed of what goes on in El Salvador but what also unites us is that we want to fulfill the immediate needs of the community when it comes to immigration, housing, and health. Those three areas are crucial but maybe the
immigration issue is the most important one that we try to address. I think the immigration issue is the glue that has made us all work together to address it (R, male, seasoned activist).

Many participants expressed how much a common threat can help organizations realize that because there is camaraderie and shared experiences, the only way to “fight back” is to unify under the same banner. One participant quoted another leader’s words and said that “there is only one party here and that is the Salvadoran one” and I found this quote very much captured the general sentiment of the area. In the following narrative, one of the participants claims that:

The organizations do collaborate with one another when there is a common threat like the raids or the anti-immigrant laws and so this common threat makes them put their differences aside to unite and mobilize and do things like march, rally, etc (C, female, seasoned activist).

While I do not want to overstate the unity that exists within the organizational structure of the area, it is important to note that in this sort of work, there are times of contention and cooperation. As long as there are structural challenges that impact all Salvadorans, there will be activism. In the best scenario, this activism will come from all the organizations and it will depend on the ingeniousness of the leaders and members of the community to be “chispa” (quick) when it comes to getting things done so that the benefits can extend to Salvadorans in the area. If and when they do this, the political habitus of these actors can empower the community to take action and defend their rights.

**Philanthropic Volunteers Construct New Forms of Organizing**

In the post-civil war era, philanthropic volunteers restructured the organizational work in the metro D.C. area because they formed hometown associations that give back to El Salvador. In doing so, they filled a void that seasoned activists left when they
transitioned to local work. Consequently, philanthropic volunteers embark on transnational work that has implications for the philanthropic volunteers’ organizing practices and redefines their political habitus.

In this section, I outline some of the challenges that hometown associations are forced to confront and critically assess the apolitical stances that hometowns are characterized by. The political habitus of actors can lead to social action that has intended and unintended consequences. These actors, whether consciously or unconsciously, become political actors in the process of doing community work. The experience of philanthropic volunteers in hometown associations highlights how this happens.

**Philanthropic Volunteers Partake in Broad Based Participation**

One of the things that characterize philanthropic volunteers from seasoned activists is that the former is involved in organizational work that is transnational. The transnational oriented organizations have an agenda that is rooted in getting involved in Salvadoran affairs from outside of El Salvador. In this study, I interviewed members from four distinct organizations. One of these organizations serves as the umbrella organization of the hometown associations in the area and it seeks to work on development projects in El Salvador but is not exclusive to a certain locality or community. This organization will generally oversee the planning and implementation of large-scale projects and help the other hometowns garner funds for their projects. The other three hometown associations work in distinct communities that are located in the Eastern parts of El Salvador. One of these communities has traditionally been known for being the pioneer in sending immigrants to the D.C. metro area. The other two are recent
endeavors that have come out of the emerging community’s interest in helping their local towns. In all these cases, the hometown associations have worked on ameliorating the infrastructure of El Salvador and improving the quality of life of its residents.\textsuperscript{96}

Hometown associations are characterized by their broad-based participation. In the D.C. metro area, there were several ways this work was enacted. This sort of work requires volunteers and while there are boards of directors that are assigned, these members are not being paid for any of this work. Rather, as many of the participants explained, they have to take on multiple roles and are simultaneously a leader, a project manager, the event planner, the one who cooks and sells the food, etc. Moreover, these individuals do not have an actual building where they could hold meetings, plan and conduct events but have to rely on multiple sites to do this work.\textsuperscript{97} Yet, these hometown associations are successful at dramatically altering the communities they left behind and can get people to attend their events. They can amass support to send money, manpower, and resources, to the communities in El Salvador. For instance, in the following narrative, one of the philanthropic volunteer explains the multiple ways of fundraising:

We do multiple things and create different activities like organize fieldtrips to the casinos and have done boat parties. These events have brought together the entrepreneurs of the area and we also celebrated an entrepreneurial gala where the majority of the business people were from [a state in El Salvador]. For this event, the mayor of Washington D.C. attended and so did the ambassador in the area. We also chose someone from here to represent us in the beauty pageant over there. This is a way of fundraising because the one who sells the most tickets get elected to run for queen in the pageant. We do other things like raffle airline tickets and these are the things we do to fundraise (H, male, philanthropic volunteer).

\textsuperscript{96} For instance, some have added computers to classrooms, opened cultural centers, donated school supplies and so forth.

\textsuperscript{97} Such as restaurants, parks, people’s homes, and they rented meeting halls.
This narrative highlights the creative ways in which HTAs fundraise. Moreover, they depict how HTA work is done from the ground up. Landolt (1997:20) calls this work “grassroots transnational aid” and finds that communities that receive social remittances from HTAs are better developed (with paved roads and electricity) than those who do not have a sponsoring HTA abroad. Yet, although she considers them grassroots, their work is purely charity-based and misses the grassroots angle that seeks to lobby, advocate, and mobilize. Moreover, it does not serve as an avenue by which the community in El Salvador and/or the community in the metro area can empower itself and become politically active.

HTAs depoliticize their work to attract members. Since partisan politics is divisive within the community, they steer away from enacting a political voice. They know that bringing the politics inside the organization will keep others out and they need the community base to sustain their projects. Thus, the image they portray is one that does charity work for the greater good of Salvadoran society. Therefore, HTAs public image is one that is not interested in doing political work. That is why, at first glance, philanthropic volunteers involved in these activities do not appear to display a political habitus. These participants argue that they have better things to do with their time than get involved in the political discussions of El Salvador.

Philanthropic Volunteers Negotiate Time Constraints

98 I call it social remittances because it is a collective entity that is sending money back home as opposed to individual remittances.
A major obstacle that resurfaces in this work is the lack of time. Since it is voluntary, people have to devote a certain amount of their free time to do this unpaid work. Thus, while this work entails a strong commitment on behalf of the participants, they often feel as though they are sacrificing their free time and their other commitments (i.e. familial, work-related, etc) to do this work. Apart from this, some reflect on how much more time they invest in relation to other members and this becomes frustrating for the most committed members. The following narrative reflects on how time comes to impact this type of work:

Time is not on our side. Sometimes you have meetings and you just got out of work and have to go to them to work on a project. Sometimes it is hard to get everyone to collaborate on the activities. However, I do not think these are huge obstacles but rather they are small ones that are overcome (R, male, philanthropic volunteer).

As this participant states, finding the time to devote to volunteer work after working several hours in a paid position can be challenging. The issue of time means that for these volunteers, there is no particular time to meet and/or how long the meeting will take. Instead, everything is done in a more dynamic and unstructured manner but while time is more fluid, it is also limited. Thus, this transnational work is challenged by time constraints that hinder the efforts of HTA members.

**Philanthropic Volunteers as Social Remitters**

Philanthropic volunteers act as social remitters because they collectively raise money to develop the communities in El Salvador. Their fundraising efforts attract a mass base because the community is more than willing to donate money, attend their

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Itzigsohn and Villacres (2008) call these collective remittances and explain that these are remittances that are collected by migrant organizations to develop and implement local projects in the home town.

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fundraising events, etc. Particularly, when the natural disasters took place, the community deemed this sort of work as a good cause.\textsuperscript{101} Philanthropic volunteer conceive of their work as grassroots as explained in the following narrative:

[Our organization] is grassroots because we work with the community. Obviously, we do not do lobbying nor do we have the budgets they [nonprofits] have or the employees or the installations to do organizing work. But, the advantage that we have is the community network and the fact that people know our work and support us and maybe if we were salaried, we would be obliged to do more for the community but we do get enough support from the community (L, male, philanthropic volunteer).

Compared to immigrant-serving organizations, the fundraising efforts of HTAs can be both a blessing and a curse. While they rely on the community to gain funds for their development projects, these projects require more money than the actual hometowns can raise. As such, the hometowns have expanded their fundraising efforts to include institutional support and this is where the Salvadoran government has stepped in.

The government caters to hometown work because it recognizes the importance of it for the development of the country (Gammage 2006) and has allowed the private sector to cooperate with the HTAs. They have implemented lax policies so that this collaboration can take place.\textsuperscript{102} This has occurred in several ways. The central government in El Salvador created a program in 2003 called “Unidos por la Solidaridad” (United for Solidarity). This program is executed by the Fondo de Inversion Social para

\textsuperscript{101} I think it is interesting that the hometowns tackle a lot of small projects that over time have significant effects and sometimes these projects are criticized by others who see them too locally centered or regional. But, perhaps this work shows that immigrants can transform locales using transnational resources. In this case, they align with an organization in the hometown, which oversees these projects.

\textsuperscript{102} Although Mahler (2000) claims that the local government in El Salvador sees HTA’s differently because to them, HTA’s are threats to their power. She says: “Local leaders become jealous of migrants’ power as exercised through the associations and the remittances generated, at least in part because it makes the leaders seem incapable of addressing their own communities’ problems. In some cases migrants have run for and been elected to office as local mayors, underscoring the vulnerability of local leaders” (39).
el Desarrollo Local de El Salvador (FISDL)\textsuperscript{103} in order to “…coordinate the efforts and funds of HTAs, the community, municipal government and national authorities on economic and social development projects…” (Itzigsohn and Villacres 2008:681). One participant explained it in the following manner:

When the FISDL was formed they had to, whether they liked it or not, pay attention to our community of [an Eastern town]. We became the model to build on and so a tripartite government comprised of the central government, the local government, and the municipality and we, the Salvadorans in the exterior, started a project to put electricity in the town and this expanded to the national level. We became known for the community abroad with the most projects in El Salvador. The FISDL is an institution that manages the funds that come from the community abroad and go into El Salvador [so] they helped us build a soccer stadium, a cultural center, and pave the roads (H, male, philanthropic volunteer).

Other programs have helped hometowns do similar work. A program called Manos Unidas unifies the bank of El Salvador, a foundation\textsuperscript{104}, and the communities abroad so that together, they can improve the educational and developmental component of towns in El Salvador. The following narrative attests to how this is done:

Instead of helping someone each time, we felt it was best to do something that would benefit more people and so we started the work on our own but then linked with [the umbrella organization]. When we linked with [the umbrella organization] there were more doors that opened for us in terms of raising funds. There were more people who got involved and were not from [our town] but wanted to help and of course we also helped them out and supported them. Through [the umbrella organization] we were able to get the Banco Agricola to collaborate with us. Through FUPAD [Pan-American Development Foundation] there is a program called Manos Unidas para El Salvador [Unified Hands for El Salvador]. The bank gives a certain amount of money for a project and they work with the communities 2 to 1 so if I have a project of 24 million they say okay you put 8 million and we put 16 million. Of course, when we saw that opportunity we said okay let’s do it (R, male, philanthropic volunteer).

\textsuperscript{103} This means the Funds of Social Investment for the Local Development of El Salvador

\textsuperscript{104} The Pan-American Development Foundation is a nonprofit entity located in DC and it seeks to create sustainable living communities throughout Latin America. For more information about the Manos Unidas program see http://www.padf.org/DOCUMENTS/PressReleases/08/080618MANOSUNIDASGRANTS%20_finalEnglish.pdf.
For this participant, the banking system has allowed hometown associations to enact development projects in El Salvador and he sees it as a win-win. In order to qualify for this funding, the hometown association submits a proposal of its intended goals, a selection committee approves the project, and it is funded. Yet, these narratives also highlight a troubling component of HTA work because what started as a community building effort has transitioned into a complex affair. These narratives suggest that the process of giving back becomes institutionalized when the government steps in to facilitate the remittance process. While this funding is certainly helpful, HTAs are no longer community-based entities that work independently because they actually solicit government monies. In doing this ‘cooperative’ work, the indigenous ways in which HTAs obtained their resources has been replaced by government aid.

There is no doubt that Salvadorans are remitters and in doing so, help support the Salvadoran economy. Yet, the policy in El Salvador has been to ensure remittances as a safety net. Mahler notes that: “The activist government policy is more likely the consequence of a need to preserve remittance flows that were and continue to be major factors in the country’s economic health and hence its political stability” (2000:219). Moreover, she criticizes this dependency because it has ramifications on Salvadorans. She claims that individual remittances create transnational obligations whereby:

Immigrants bear the burden of supporting family in El Salvador and also financing new homes or repairs to their old homes there. In order to save money for these investments from their paltry salaries and informal economic activities,

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105 As of late, remittances account for 17% of El Salvador’s GDP (CISPES report).
106 During the passage of IRCA, Duarte made an appeal to Washington so that it would halt the massive deportations of Salvadorans and initiated the lobbying process on behalf of emigrants by arguing that repatriating Salvadorans during the conflict would devastate the country’s economy (Mahler 2000). Cristiani interjected for TPS holders so that it was not terminated and they would not be deported during the reconstruction period in which remittances had become more important than U.S. aid in the previous years (Mahler 2000).

Similarly, the social remittances that philanthropic volunteers send to El Salvador create transnational obligations that incur sacrifices on their behalf. Since they build ties with the government, this furthers their sense of commitment to El Salvador. Yet, the aid they give El Salvador is more than what they receive from the Salvadoran state. That is, it is unclear if philanthropic volunteers obtain any power by being social remitters. What is clear is that the philanthropic volunteers are the most highly sought actor within the expatriate community. Therefore, the help that the Salvadoran government offers HTAs is not coincidental.

The Salvadoran Government Reaches Out to Philanthropic Volunteers

In the post-civil war era, the Salvadoran government has employed ways to reconnect with the expatriate community. Scholars claim that the government is motivated to reach out to Salvadorans abroad because the economy is dependant on individual and social remittances. The Salvadoran government employs narratives and practices that affect philanthropic volunteers in unique ways. Baker-Cristales (2005) notes that the Salvadoran who is abroad is the “far-away brother” who is always present in the eyes of the Salvadoran government. Yet, the notion of the far-away brother

107 Mahler (2000) claims that in 1999 the Salvadoran government established the Dirección General de Atención a la Comunidad en el Exterior (DGACE) and the goal of the organization was to make links with the Salvadoran community abroad. This was a way for the Salvadoran government to make emigrants responsible for the national development of the country.

108 Another important actor is the Salvadoran business person but their work does not generate the social investment that HTA work does.

109 See Baker-Cristales (2005); Benitez (2005); Rodriguez (2005); Itzigsohn (2000)

110 Rodriguez (2005) discusses some of the symbols that are attached to the far away brother such as a national monument that is located on the highway that runs from the airport to San Salvador to honor the immigrant brother.
is not the community abroad, instead the far-away brother is a very particular actor. In this case, philanthropic volunteers are the far-away brothers because their social and economic aid benefits El Salvador. The Salvadoran representatives in the D.C. metro area recognize this and continuously reach out to hometowns. In fact, when I asked the following participant to tell me about the organizational work in the area, the response was:

What I have seen is that all the Salvadoran organizations are united, work hard, and are emprendedores (entrepreneurially savvy). They show a very strong tie to El Salvador and so they do activities that sometimes are dependent on where they came from. Nevertheless, they do activities that benefit the communities they left behind in El Salvador or they do stuff to benefit their community here in the metro area (M, female, government official).

For this government official, the hometowns’ work is automatically recognizable and this is not surprising. Philanthropic volunteers are not involved in organizational work that opposes the government in El Salvador. This means that for the government, these actors are safe, rational and can be counted on to build coalitions with.

The Salvadoran state devised other creative ways to lure emigrants back to El Salvador. It created the Department 15, which as Rodriguez\textsuperscript{111} puts it:

\begin{quote}
[\textit{it is}] a virtual community of sorts, conceptualized by transnational communication networks, Departamento 15 is recognized today as the 15\textsuperscript{th} province of El Salvador after the 14 political divisions within the country’s geographic territory (2005:20).
\end{quote}

The Departamento 15 is a mythical image of the community abroad and is used in the everyday parlance of the government entities. Moreover, media outlets cover news stories from the Salvadoran diaspora in a section called Departamento 15. These stories convey the struggles and successes that the expatriate community encounters. This section provides access to expatriates so they can reconnect with long lost friends and

\textsuperscript{111} For an elaborate discussion of Departamento 15 and what it represents culturally see Rodriguez (2005).
family members and it is used as a space from which to advertise to Salvadorans abroad. At the same time, they cover instances when the consulates in the diaspora help the community with legal, social, and economic issues. With the Departamento 15, the Salvadoran government creates cultural narratives that allow the “far-away brother” to feel connected to the homeland. Rodriguez points out that “[t]he immigrant narratives of Departamento 15, however ambivalent, are used to justify migration patterns, to suggest migration as a viable economic valve, and to release the state from systematically addressing the economic needs of a great majority of Salvadoran nationals, many of who are forced into migration” (2005:25). Thus, these immigrant narratives allow the Salvadoran government to expel potential migrants, who, in turn, become new sources of capital for El Salvador and recruit old migrants, who in turn, can invest in El Salvador with their remittances. With these cultural narratives, the Salvadoran government capitalizes on the pockets of philanthropic volunteers and creates an obligation to the homeland that weighs heavily on their shoulders.112

Along with these cultural narratives that try to reach out to the community abroad, the government has expanded its consular services in the diaspora. In the metro D.C area, for instance, they deal with passports and/or visa applications but also tackle temporary protected status and other legal paperwork.113 When I asked how the government impacts the organizations in the area, the respondent claimed that:

We impact organizations in a very important way because, for the first time, the president Saca created a Vice-Minister of Exterior Relations. In creating this, he

112 The “hermano lejano” also serves as a gendered construction of nationalism because in highlighting the men’s role in the immigration story it downplays women’s efforts (see Baker-Cristales 2004, Rodriguez 2005).
113 Smith (2006) notes that the consulate of Mexico is a tool of the home country government to control or oversee the activities of HTAs while Itsigsohn and Villacres (2008) make a similar observation for Salvadorans.
strengthened everything that involved the diplomatic and consular relations and so we work every day with the problems that Salvadorans abroad go through (M, female, government official).

In fact, government representatives use media outlets to reach out to the Salvadoran community in the metro area. They use Spanish-speaking newspapers to announce that the consular offices will assist immigrants with their paper work so they can get the “permiso” (permit). Yet, this service is less rooted in helping Salvadorans navigate the system in the states and more interested in helping Salvadorans get the permit so that they can be employed and send remittances to El Salvador. Scholars question if this legal help is done to avoid deportations and guarantee a steady flow of remittances (Itzigsohn 2000; Landolt et al. 1999; Baker-Cristales 2005; Gammage 2006). As a result, the Salvadoran government’s outreach efforts end up being service related but fail to address larger issues like dual-citizenship and electoral participation. This issue makes Salvadorans look like they are important as long as they remit but in no way speak to their potential power as political agents. This diminishes the participatory power that the community abroad can have. When I was doing the study, although local organizations were tackling immigration reform, the Salvadoran government remained silent about the issue. Therefore, the actions of the Salvadoran state show that that government builds cultural constructions of what it means to be Salvadoran to lure the emigrant population. However, the Salvadoran government simultaneously negates the structural constraints that the community abroad endures.

114 See [http://www.eltiempolatino.com/edic_Ant./09/ene/2/imprimalo/B_etl.pdf](http://www.eltiempolatino.com/edic_Ant./09/ene/2/imprimalo/B_etl.pdf);
115 Gammage (2006) makes a similar critique
Les Gusta Saludar con el Sombrero Ajeno (They Like to Salute with Someone Else’s Hat): The Complicated Relationship Between Philanthropic Volunteers’ Work and the Salvadoran Government

There are philanthropic volunteers who are weary of what working with the Salvadoran government can mean. In the following narratives, members of hometowns remark on what the consequences are:

Les gusta saludar con el sombrero ajeno (they like to salute with someone else’s hat). I think it is ridiculous that you are sacrificing yourself here to help out over there. The government wants your help but with certain conditions and that makes no sense. I think the government does not have anything to do with us because we are doing these things without asking them and of course they take the credit. They do publicity stunts that thanks to them and their visits, they help sustain external relations with the expatriate community (R, male, philanthropic volunteer).

Look, speaking about the [Salvadoran] government, they take every opportunity they get and say they spend a lot of their energy in Washington and in the U.S. because they claim that 25% of the population lives here. But, in reality I do not see that level of support extend to the community. Even though they claim they have an office that deals with the far away brothers, I still do not see how that reflects back to our community. They travel a lot to establish these treaties between Washington and El Salvador so that these can create work in El Salvador and I think that is great, but that benefits Salvadorans over there. While I am grateful this happens, I still do not see them supporting us in the way they paint it. I just don’t (F, male, philanthropic volunteer).

As these narratives suggest, although hometowns do much of the work, the government can use these projects to enhance its image in El Salvador and abroad. The Salvadoran government enacts a presidential forum that takes place every year and in this event, they credit the work of philanthropic volunteers. According to some of the participants who have attended the presidential forum, the Salvadoran government bombards the participants with examples of the types of activities that they have done in conjunction with the far away brothers in the hometown associations. Through these events, the
Salvadoran government can continue outreaching to the community abroad and win supporters (Guarnizo 1998). However, the relationship the Salvadoran government sustains with HTAs is an unequal one because philanthropic volunteers are putting most of the effort, time, and commitment to do this work. Yet, the Salvadoran government takes credit for the HTA work in a similar way as it does with its consulate services.

The Political Tie between Philanthropic Volunteers and the Salvadoran Government: Friends or Allies?

Another challenge that Salvadorans undergo is the fact that even as they act as transnational actors, they do so within the confines of nationalistic frameworks. In many ways, this is reflective of the juxtaposition between an economic market that is global and a political system that is nationalistic. In the case of philanthropic volunteers, this is certainly applicable because although Salvadorans are remitters, they cannot exercise their vote outside of El Salvador. In essence, they are disenfranchised here and in El Salvador and are consequently, invisible in the political systems in which their economic aid is of utmost importance. Occasionally, the Salvadoran state reaches out to the community abroad and makes it seem that expatriates are legitimate political players. For instance, during electoral periods, the candidates campaign in the metro D.C. area and philanthropic volunteers attend these events. However, they are not incorporated into the political process because they lack the right to vote from abroad. In this way, philanthropic volunteers are the “absent but ever present” brother whose economic power masks their lack of political power (Baker-Cristales 2005:142).
Yet, other scholars claim that despite these challenges, Salvadorans bypass these barriers by exerting their agency. Since hometown associations are the most sought after organization that the Salvadoran government courts, they can serve as indirect political entities. HTA’s develop ties with the Salvadoran government and are seen as representatives of the Salvadoran community that lives abroad (Baker-Cristales 2005). Consequently, members of HTA’s have an opportunity to become transnational political actors and are able to redefine the meaning of citizen as it pertains to only one nation-state.

The work that philanthropic volunteers do in HTA’s show us that aligning with organizations can increase the political clout of Salvadorans. There are indications that philanthropic volunteers can indirectly influence the Salvadoran government and become unintended political players. In the following narratives, these participants admit to the work they have done in conjunction with the Salvadoran government:

We did feel a lot of support, for instance when Calderon Sol was the president, he helped us build a stadium and supported our efforts and [the hometown association] is actually a nonprofit in El Salvador and it is registered as such (B, female, philanthropic volunteer).

The Salvadoran government has collaborated with the hometowns because I went to an event where [a hometown association] built 30 or so houses and they were helped with the logistics of it but that is all. I see that many of the people that do this will like to take on a political office over there and the government does not let that happen so they become a bit resentful. I do not like politics so I do not bother with that and I tell them what is the point of you doing that if you are connected to the government you are already taking on a political role. I do think some of the leaders of these organizations do want to take a political role and it could be that since they were always taken for granted now it is their time to be taken into account and that is where I see the clashes (H, female, philanthropic volunteer).

Philanthropic volunteers sustain relationships with government entities and attend campaign talks to support potential candidates from El Salvador. This is an important
component of their work because if the ‘right’ candidate is elected, HTA work can be easier to fulfill and fund in the local towns.\textsuperscript{116} Similarly, philanthropic volunteers utilize their experience in fundraising to procure money for candidates who run for office in El Salvador. Generally, philanthropic volunteers maintain the most active ties with the government representatives in the D.C. metro area and invite these representatives to their fundraising activities. Philanthropic volunteers also honor these representatives in their galas. While on the outside, these coalitions may appear to not be politically motivated, these hometowns are definitely politicized bodies that interact and work with government structures. In fact, Landolt et al. suggest that:

\begin{quote}
\textquote{The home town associations reject the idea that they are political actors…In spite of their self-professed neutrality and their emphasis on the humanitarian nature of their agenda, the home town association is a political actor…Associations also become politicized since their presence in El Salvador and in Salvadoran settlements abroad incites local and transnational political responses from both municipal authorities and the national government of El Salvador (1999:308).}
\end{quote}

Even as they resist to be politically linked, one of the participants actually ran for office in the hometown that he was trying to rebuild. This leads us to question if the HTAs are vehicles from which the members can unintentionally become political actors.

While most Salvadorans admire the efforts of hometown associations and many recognize that these organizations do good deeds, their work is also criticized by others (particularly by the seasoned activists) because of the political ties that are sustained with the Salvadoran establishment. Many critics repudiate the work of hometown associations because in their mind, hometowns are doing the work that the government should be doing in the first place. Moreover, these critics see the hometowns as vehicles of support for the powers that be rather than vehicles of change and progress. Those outside of this

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{116} Ostergaard (2001) differentiates between homeland politics and immigrant politics and I believe HTAs do the former while immigrant-serving organizations do the latter.}
organizational work claim that the apolitical stance of philanthropic volunteers is suspicious. In the following narrative, this participant is weary of philanthropic volunteers allying with the Salvadoran government:

I do not really know too much about [the hometown association] and what I have not liked is that the leadership in [the hometown] is too closely allied to Arena and to the current government. The problem I have with that is, it does not necessarily stem from the fact that I support a different government, but its more because if you know about Arena it was founded by D’Aubission and he was the one who created the death squads and played an important role in the assassination of Monseñor Romero. So for me, if you are collaborating with people like that or at least sit in the same table with them, that to me is unacceptable. I like seeing that there are these associations because that is a way to help each other out and unify and that unity brings force. But, I have a problem with the fact that they do not limit whom they ally with and I have seen them fairly closely linked to the government (E, female, seasoned activist).

**Philanthropic Volunteers and Political Habitus: A Reexamination**

Assessing the political nature of HTA work is complex because on one hand, their organizing and fundraising points to a grassroots component. But, on the other hand, their work requires institutional support, which can lead them to be co-opted by government interests. As social remitters, they are certainly fundamental to the development of El Salvador and perhaps the most prized far-away actor. Their HTA work opens up the opportunity for them to elevate their status and be deemed important by the Salvadoran government. However, their attempts to build political leverage conflict with government interests and HTAs are limited in their scope because they profess neutrality from which the state benefits. That is, the Salvadoran government knows that they do not have a political actor who is going to demand changes or try to change the regime. Even as HTAs are in the position to demand legitimacy and transparency from the government, they are far from doing it because their work does not
create transformative political outcomes. For one, philanthropic volunteers do not have
the right to vote from abroad and will not mobilize around this issue because they deem it
too political. Moreover, because their work is socially based and requires government
support, this makes them revert to their apolitical stance. Perhaps, hometown associations
overemphasize their altruism to deemphasize their political ties. Consequently, they may
profess an apolitical stance because it is a strategic way to collaborate with the
Salvadoran government.

I argue that there are several reasons to not consider philanthropic volunteers
apolitical actors. On the one hand, they belong in one of the few organizations in the area
that is courted by the government. On the other hand, because they collaborate in
projects with the Salvadoran government, HTAs rely on government support for funding
the development projects. In doing so, a relationship is created and maintained that has
unintended consequences for the political habitus that these actors formulate. They have
the potential to build political clout because they contribute to the economic well being of
El Salvador. Even though philanthropic volunteers started out with an apolitical stance,
their experiences change and they do become political actors vis-à-vis their ties to the
Salvadoran government. Yet, these experiences also make them profess a neutral stance
from which they can maintain a cooperative relationship with the government.

Summary: Working for the Transnational and not the Local

The transnational work that HTAs do is based on recreating the places that they
left behind. In this vein, hometown work differs from local work because it does not

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117 Additionally, the Salvadoran chamber of commerce, professional, and business associations are also sought after.
entail working with immigrants, collaborating with local governments, and/or providing services. This transnational work is voluntary and builds coalitions with the Salvadoran government. As a result, HTA’s do not get involved in local issues related to immigration reform and TPS. In fact, one of the narratives claimed that:

We have not mobilized however that does not mean we ignore the needs of people. We do not get too involved in the anti-immigrant marches because in general those of us from [Eastern city] are anti-political and many are not interested in politics and since many are residents or citizens they are okay so they do not really care too much about that (H, male, philanthropic volunteer).

For the community in the D.C. metro area, HTAs would not be relied upon when it comes to defending immigrant rights. HTA’s have stronger links to the Salvadoran government and weak links to the U.S. government. As post-war volunteers they lack those initial ties that seasoned activists have with U.S. establishments. At the same time, HTA’s idea of who needs help is different from what immigrant-serving organizations think. The latter feels that helping Salvadorans abroad can alleviate their ills, while the former thinks that improving El Salvador will help Salvadorans not migrate.

The Critical Observer Takes a Stand

In the previous chapter, I suggested that critical observers remain outsiders looking in because they dislike the political bents of organizations. Yet, the critical observer presents an interesting dynamic because on the one hand, they dislike the political nature of organizations when these can potentially create frictions within the community. On the other hand, they would like to see organizations practice their politics towards empowering the community in the metro D.C. area. In the following
narrative, this participant expresses his discontent with what organizations are doing wrong:

I think in numbers we are a lot, but we lack the political representation and here if you lack that, you are nobody. We do not do anything about it but we can start somewhere. I know people who are illiterate and I think we can start teaching them Spanish and then English and I think this can benefit the population. We do not need a lot of money to do that and so I think rather than giving people the fish you should show them how to fish and that way they will know how to survive on their own. All it takes is willpower and when people see action and results they support you (E, male, critical observer).

This participant resembles other critical observers who espouse strong critiques about the organizational work and question how transformative it is for the community. In another instance, this participant sums up his discontent with the following quote:

In the meantime, they do not work on the pertinent issues like the massive deportations and so I remain neutral and observe from the background and make my own assessments about who has a better vision and sense of implementing things. I would love for these organizations to work for the community and help out the ordinary Salvadoran and people who need the help. But, they need to form a united front and support people who look for their help so they can improve our community but this does not happen (E, male, critical observer).

For this critical observer, organizations lack political representation and clout to truly fight for Salvadoran immigrant rights in the area. As such, the critical observer is disenchanted with organizations because these are not helping the community incorporate into the mainstream. Most of the critical observers think that organizations are doing a poor job in terms of building solidarity in the community and more importantly, are not legitimizing their role with the government powers. In the following narrative, another critical observer discusses the lack of organizational power in the metro area:

As far as Salvadoran organizations are concerned, I mean there aren’t too many there are a few. I mean there’s a chamber of commerce here [and] there’s a business caucus that was just formed but other than that there really aren’t any major Salvadoran run ones. From what I’ve seen anyway, there are small ones but nothing like [a nonprofit] that is a huge organization and it has a good budget
and it is very well organized, very active, very influential. Salvadorans do not run it necessarily but they do help a lot of Salvadorans and they seem to be pretty good at everything as far as outreach is concerned and media contacts. I think the DC metro region is small but, at the same time, because we have Virginia and Maryland and different jurisdictions and these cross borders it makes it more difficult. There are organizations in Virginia that I have never heard about and they are working with the Latino community (W, male, critical observer).

The critical observer is more likely to point fingers on what is not working because they have the advantage of being on the outside. Yet, as an outsider looking in, the critical observer goes back and forth in terms of whom to blame for the powerlessness of the Salvadoran community. On one hand, they blame organizations for lacking political clout and on the other hand, they blame community members for not partaking in their own empowerment. In the following narrative, this participant notes that organizations are trying to build solidarity but the community is reluctant to participate in this endeavor:

The Salvadoran community that lives in the area, I think it is hereditary, but they seem to not want to participate in the things that affect them. Even though, I see the organizations, for instance, trying to reach out when it comes to getting people to tackle the immigration issues we are facing and which have gotten worse in the past couple of years. But, the community does not participate and I think its because there needs to be consciousness-raising and they need to learn that their participation is vital to create change. But, I do see the organizations doing a lot of work and they work constantly but they do not get the response from the community that they would want to get (R, male, critical observer).

Even though critical observers have mixed views about the organizational work and the community, this does not weaken their support of Salvadorans. For critical observers, organizations, for good or bad, are the only vehicles that could tackle the structural issues that Salvadorans confront and can help ameliorate the situation of Salvadorans in the metro area. As such, critical observers recognize the importance of
organizational work for the community but are also cautious of overemphasizing their strengths without pointing out their weaknesses.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the different organizing experiences redefine the actors’ political habitus. Seasoned Activists have a strong political tendency, which they enact in their local work. However, they have to confront internal issues and this makes them less effective in generating political power for the community. But, the hardest parts to tackle are the external forces they navigate. On the one hand, their political drive is challenged by their inability to generate enough funding so they can be efficacious in community politics. On the other hand, the relations they have with the government powers are contentious and this limits their ability to make demands. In contrast, the philanthropic volunteers build a political habitus that appears to be politically neutral. They embark on grassroots work that encompasses a strong participation from the community but in no way generates political activism. They take on transnational projects that allow them to create bridges with the Salvadoran government and these bridges create a pathway for philanthropic volunteers to become political actors. They can build leverage through the social remittances that they contribute to the Salvadoran economy but resist to do it in order to maintain a cordial relationship with the Salvadoran government. Finally, critical observers assess this work and would rather see the politicization of these organizations as less rooted in Salvadoran politics and more entrenched in building political clout for Salvadorans in the U.S.
CHAPTER 7: THE STRUCTURAL FORCES THAT IMPACT POLITICAL HABITU

Introduction

Thus far, I have shown that within the Salvadoran community in the metro area, there are different political actors who develop a political habitus that is either based on a) their experience with the war (b) their charity-based work or (c) their observations. Despite their differences, however, they share a similar view by which to assess the sorts of struggles that Salvadorans undergo. This view is what I call the transnational consciousness. The transnational consciousness is a way of looking at the world that encompasses different spaces, borders, and transcends the nation-state. It builds on the idea of double-consciousness that Dubois (1903) outlined, but in this case it means that individuals formulate a way of thinking and being that is connected to the worlds that they identify with. These participants are attached to their homeland in El Salvador but their lives are rooted in the U.S. so they develop a consciousness that encompasses the two worlds that they belong in. The transnational consciousness is an ideological tool that they use to engage in political, social, and/or critical work. With the transnational consciousness, participants analyze the issues that impact Salvadorans as being interconnected both to what goes on in El Salvador and to what happens in the U.S. Because the transnational consciousness becomes part of their worldview, it guides their political habitus and the participants develop a stronger commitment to their work. This transnational consciousness engenders a political habitus that is reflexive and analyzes social problems from various angles that are by and large, interconnected by a global society. In the process, a feedback loop occurs when people’s political actions are guided
by their transnational consciousness and this worldview interacts with their political habitus so they can continue with their involvement.

Although the transnational consciousness is part of each actor’s worldview and informs his or her political habitus, each person articulates it in a different way. Similar to how these participants get involved in different organizational work, they also enact very distinct forms of this transnational consciousness. In the following discussion, I address how transnational consciousness is employed by each type of actor and how, in turn, it redefines their political habitus. Then, I shift the discussion to how the transnational consciousness shapes their views of the federal and Salvadoran governments. I aim to show that the participants enact a transnational consciousness that allows them to understand the issues that Salvadorans face as being the result of international practices that both governments create and from which these governments reap the most benefits.

**The Transnational Consciousness of the Local Actor**

Seasoned activists have been keen on maintaining a transnational consciousness but for most, it is hard to act transnationally because the local work takes up the bulk of their time. Their transition to local work is due to various reasons. First, seasoned activists no longer embark on transnational work because they are disillusioned with the fact that the right-wing Arena regime continues to dominate the political world in El Salvador. Moreover, they are largely ignored by the Salvadoran government and find it hard to make demands to their homeland government. Secondly, they have learned over time how to navigate the local nonprofit world in the D.C. metro area and can deal with
local issues that help Salvadorans incorporate better. These leaders learned to navigate the mainstream and consequently developed ties with the local and state level governments in the U.S. Consequently, over time they have learned to lobby, advocate, and get funding for their work in immigrants rights. For these seasoned activists, the U.S. government has become more accessible; while, the Salvadoran government never reached out or would compromise with the seasoned activists. As a result, these leftist oriented leaders have gradually downplayed their transnational political work to prioritize issues related to immigrant rights. In doing so, they are more likely to fight anti-immigrant propositions, confront the minutemen, and lobby on behalf of immigration reform rather than deal with changing the right-wing ARENA regime in El Salvador. As a result, these activists have chosen to apply their transnational consciousness to local work and this reflects their high level of frustration with the Salvadoran power structures. At the same time, because they embark on immigrant rights work, they are simultaneously constructing their permanency in the U.S. and tackle issues that can help other Salvadorans settle too.

Seasoned activists display their transnational consciousness through their critiques of how transnational processes hurt the community and create unequal relations between El Salvador and the U.S. In the following narrative, one local actor displays this transnational consciousness:

I think the governments have had a liaison and there has been a very close relationship between the republican presidency and our right wing ARENA party in El Salvador. This has been there since the peace accords and it has been helpful to Salvadorans. After hurricane Mitch, the temporary protected status was renewed and as you know every 12 to 18 months, it has to be renewed again. At any one point, it could have been stopped and yet it was not so I think there is a

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118 Osteergaard (2001) distinguishes between homeland politics, which deals with the politics of the homeland and immigrant politics, which focuses on the politics of the receiving state.
political price that we are paying for TPS. Maybe TPS is the payment for our support of the United States war in Iraq (N, female, 1.5 seasoned activist).

For this participant, the amicable relations that the two governments sustain create mixed blessings for Salvadorans in the U.S. While they entail some form of legal relief, TPS is only temporary and requires a level of support for U.S. foreign policy. Another participant expresses a similar critique in the following narrative:

What happens is that TPS is convenient and that is why the [Salvadoran] government does not have a more aggressive agenda with the Bush administration in pressuring the federal government to convert TPS into something else. The Salvadoran government is not doing that work and yet they claim that thanks to them and their lobbying power, the U.S. government renews TPS. That is not true because the organizations have done the brunt of the work. I also critique how El Salvador has troops in Iraq without any additional benefit going to Salvadorans in the exterior (L, female, seasoned activist)

As these narratives show, these actors employ a transnational consciousness that allows them to comment on the two “systems.” Seasoned activists critique the social, economic, and political conditions that U.S. and Salvadoran governments create because they are consequential for migrants. They believe that policies like TPS only limit immigrants’ progress; that they marginalize and disenfranchise them in the nations (i.e., U.S. and El Salvador) that immigrants help sustain the most. As such, seasoned activists are wary of policies that only offer temporary relief because they see them as band-aid solutions for transnational processes. In the end, they feel that U.S.-El Salvador relations come at a costly price for the community. Consequently, seasoned activists embark on local projects to alleviate those costs. For instance, one of the organizations helps workers defend their rights and teaches them about the laws that protect them if they are mistreated, underpaid, or not paid at all. This is especially helpful for TPS-holders who are vulnerable because their temporary status expires or often do not make enough money.
to cover the renewal fees. Thus, the organization steps in because it knows that Salvadorans are only temporary legal workers who can easily be taken advantage of because of their marginal status. Similarly, another organization offers health care services at affordable costs because they are mindful that TPS-holders do not earn living wages. In general, many of these local organizations use their lobbying power to effectively push for TPS to become a permanent status or a pathway to residency. In their mind, TPS-holders could fully enjoy the benefits of citizenship if the U.S. government reformed it rather than renewed it.

Seasoned activists react to transnational processes by becoming the service provider to a group that they see as the victim of both nations. In their mind, the Salvadoran government fails to create adequate policies that can retain the population and benefits more by pushing Salvadorans out of their homeland. Similarly, Salvadorans encounter a context of reception in the U.S. that pulls them with the prospect of getting a job but does little in providing them with material and legal aid from which to incorporate into U.S. society. As seasoned activists help the expatriate community, they reflect on how different local level concerns would be if push factors within El Salvador changed and if the receiving state was more receptive. As far as seasoned activists are concerned, it becomes their job to step in because the U.S. and El Salvador have essentially failed these individuals. As a result, seasoned activists understand that what they do is necessary, essential, and one-way of helping out the community. In this way, their local action is a pragmatic solution to transnational processes.

The political habitus of these actors is rearticulated with a transnational consciousness that generates local action to improve transnational impact. They conceive
of their work as helping a spectrum of Salvadoran society because they have learned to navigate the local political arena. They can make demands to the local government to continue their work as service providers. At the same time, they are able to lobby and advocate on behalf of immigrants to the U.S. government. Yet, even as they have the capacity to deal with mainstream issues, they are not able to build transnational linkages to create overarching changes and alleviate larger-scale problems. This is because they do not maintain ties with organizations in El Salvador and have little contact with organizations that try to tackle transnational issues. They no longer embark on transnational work that deals with homeland politics because they are disenchanted with Salvadoran politics. They sense that the transnational work that Salvadorans do now becomes a way to feed into the system and do the work of the government. They critique efforts to improve communities in El Salvador because these take away attention from the housing and social issues that Salvadorans in the U.S. face. In large part, they have shifted their actions to deal with immigrant politics because this reflects their own transformation as activists and permanent settlers who no longer foresee a return to their homeland. By remaining locally rooted they attempt to improve their life in the U.S. and ease some of the problems that Salvadorans encounter, while simultaneously using a transnational lens to be mindful that the local troubles of immigrants are attached to international processes.

119 The organizations that are located in MD and VA can also make demands to their state government.
120 This may change because seasoned activists may be reinvigorated to do transnational work because of the victory of the FMLN. I saw signs when locally based seasoned activists organized to help victims of Hurricane Ida. There is now an umbrella organization that is comprised of different local organizations that are committed to relief efforts in El Salvador.
121 Portes (2001) creates a useful way of thinking about international versus transnational processes and suggests that international pertains to the activities of nation-states whereas transnational refers to activities performed by non-institutional actors.
The Transnational Seasoned Activist

The majority in the sample are seasoned activists who are locally rooted because of two main reasons. On the one hand, they know how to do the local work and feel that this can minimize the transnational repercussions that Salvadorans face. On the other hand, they are critical of who really benefits from immigrants’ transnational practices. Yet, there were a few seasoned activists who still maintain transnational linkages because they have a very strong political allegiance to El Salvador. These participants are involved in transnational politics because they aim to challenge the dominant government establishment in El Salvador. While it is a small segment of the seasoned activists sample, these individuals are significant because they serve as the U.S.-based oppositional force to the Salvadoran government. They are very vocal about their political leanings and their political work and are the ones who still remain in the trenches (so to speak) of Salvadoran politics. The following narrative attests to the transnational seasoned activist:

We do not have a specific place where we are concentrated in. I think we are a virtual country outside of El Salvador and as such we have rights and freedoms to choose our own politicians and choose the appropriate party that can sustain our economy in El Salvador. No one can deny the fact that what El Salvador exports is cheap labor and what it gets in return are the remittances. As a virtual El Salvador, we can change that. I think we are at a crucial political moment and we should listen and figure out what the best choice is for our country and who we think can do that job. I think we should be aware that we can make significant changes from here (L, male, seasoned activist).

As this participant shows, transnational seasoned activists continue to embark on political work because they feel they can create significant changes in the politics of El Salvador from anywhere they live. They follow Salvadoran politics very closely and some travel back and forth during electoral periods.

122 Abrego (2008) has done work on how families are separated because of these transnational processes.
Transnational seasoned activists do political work from the U.S. and are affiliated with the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) subcommittees in the D.C. metro area. These participants hold instrumental positions within their organization and act as coordinators, officers, and representatives of the sub-committees in the area. At the time of the study, some of these individuals were participating in the Salvadoran elections and organized meetings to engage in political dialogue. Additionally, they strategized and fundraised to help the FMLN candidates who were running for mayors. Because they want to have an FMLN victory in El Salvador, they dedicated a lot of their time to campaigning for the presidential candidate. On occasions, they were able to bring the presidential candidate to the D.C. metro area and this was an important step because it allowed the candidate to connect to the community abroad. During the Salvadoran presidential election, some of them voted and served as international observers and oversaw potential electoral fraud. However, with the elections or not, these individuals make demands from afar so that the Salvadoran government knows that the community abroad is not passive. They are the ones who will protest in front of the embassy against policies they deem detrimental to El Salvador. They remain attuned to what the Salvadoran party in power is doing and will publish articles in the Latino newspapers of the area where they demand legitimacy and transparency from the government. These seasoned activists have continued the long-standing involvement of doing progressive work with a transnational bent.

\[123\] The FMLN was the guerilla faction during the civil war and with the 1992 peace accords; they gave up their arms to become a political party. There are several sub-committees in the diaspora that do political work for the FMLN political party in El Salvador.

\[124\] During my time in the field, Mauricio Funes was running for president as the FMLN candidate.
As a result of their ongoing commitment to social and political justice, these individuals juggle local and transnational work. For them, the local work is what pays them and the transnational work feeds their need for political activism in their homeland. Since they have been embedded in this work for years, they have experienced important changes. One of these changes has been the legitimacy of the FMLN as an official party in El Salvador. These participants certainly capitalize on this advantage to win more supporters in the metro area because part of their organizational work also entails raising consciousness amongst the immigrant population. As one participant puts it, “the people are in the mountains and we have to ally behind them and that is why we focus on the community that is here [in D.C.] and try to win over their hearts and minds so there can be change in El Salvador.” They hope that from abroad, they can convert or influence others who can help pave the way for the FMLN to become the dominant presidential power.\textsuperscript{125} As intermediary agents, they become an extension of the civil society in El Salvador and by living abroad, can embark on transnational politics that can be consequential for Salvadoran society.

Without a doubt, there are obstacles that these actors confront. The Salvadoran community in the metro area is undergoing demographic changes and has become more diversified in its politics. A lot of Arena supporters have emerged and some of my informants noted that this is particularly evident among more prosperous Salvadorans. This is compounded by the fact that the Republican and Arena parties critique leftist-oriented individuals for being communists, radicals, and instigators. The transnational

\textsuperscript{125} The Salvadoran presidential elections took place in March 2009 and the candidate running for the FMLN party, Mauricio Funes, was elected as El Salvador’s next president; thereby, ending the seventeen year rule of the incumbent party, ARENA.
seasoned activists are particularly bothered by what they view as manipulative schemes that are used to maintain power. In the following narrative, one such actor expresses this:

Another big impact that the [U.S.] federal government has is that it gets involved in the internal politics of El Salvador. What you find is that representatives of the federal government here go to El Salvador and take the side of the dominant party. They buy into and perpetuate ideas such that if the left wins in El Salvador, all the Salvadorans in the states will get deported and the remittances would end. Ultimately people believe in that and a lot of people do not vote in the Salvadoran elections and this just makes the situation worse and does not contribute to bringing about the ever-needed change that our country demands (F, male, seasoned activist).

Transnational seasoned activists work to counter the political propaganda that right-wing governments use to appease the community abroad. In this case, this participant points out that two very important themes, remittances and deportation threats, are used as political tools to scare the community abroad from voting for the left. For instance, some of the interviewees mentioned receiving recorded phone calls from the Salvadoran government that mentioned how remittances would end if the FMLN won. The logic that the Salvadoran government used was that an FMLN victory would turn El Salvador into another Cuba. As such, the U.S. would embargo El Salvador and eliminate TPS so that anyone who was not a permanent residence or citizen would be susceptible to deportation. The massive deportations of Salvadorans would significantly reduce the remittances sent to El Salvador. In essence, the Salvadoran government claimed that El Salvador would turn into a communist country and completely lose the support of the U.S. and this would be detrimental to all Salvadorans.

For these particular actors, their transnational consciousness serves as their critical guidebook and in so doing, informs their political habitus. Although they have always had a strong political ethos, at any point in time, they could have easily given up
and resigned themselves to a right-wing ARENA hegemony. However, they continue serving as an oppositional force for varying reasons. Whereas in the past they challenged the Salvadoran state to end the civil war, nowadays they protest against the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), neo-liberal policies related to privatization of industries, and for a change in Salvadoran government. They have expanded their political fight to address concerns that are transnational in nature. For example, they view CAFTA as a policy that will benefit the U.S. without improving the labor market in El Salvador. Furthermore, they criticize the alliance between the U.S. and Salvadoran governments because they see them as capitalistic enterprises that are more interested in reaping the benefits of a neo-liberal economy than creating social reform. As a result of these issues, they have formed a transnational consciousness, which pushes them to engage in transnational politics to work for change. In doing so, these transnational seasoned activists display a political habitus that is transnational in its thoughts and practices and is nourished by a consciousness that spans borders. Without the transnational seasoned activist, the oppositional force from abroad would be nonexistent in the post-civil war era.

**The Transnational Consciousness of Philanthropic Volunteers**

The transnational consciousness of philanthropic volunteers is the result of their practices. As they attempt to improve their communities, they engender new opportunities from which Salvadorans can be enticed to stay in their country. For instance, some members mentioned how they fix schools, send computers, or hand out school supplies so children can learn. By doing this, they hope to set a precedent and
contribute to alleviating the illiteracy problem in El Salvador. Another participant mentioned that his organization had developed a pilot program to show women in rural areas how to sew. This was a way to enhance women’s skills so they can start up their own business and subsist out of their skills. In doing this work, the participant mentioned that the local economy could improve if people were given the tools to be self-starters. The activities of HTA’s show that the ultimate goal of these organizations is to eventually make their hometowns self-sufficient so they do not have to rely on social remittances. Interestingly enough, another participant remarked that by fixing their hometowns, they aim to make these places retirement-friendly:

We come here and are getting old and maybe we want to retire in [an Eastern town]. By making our communities better, we can bring in some of the comforts that we are already used to here to retire over there (H, male, philanthropic volunteer).

Therefore, by embarking on this transnational work, philanthropic volunteers develop a transnational consciousness that focuses on improving the hometowns so they can offer a better quality of life to their residents there and those that are abroad. Yet, this type of work is conscientious but it is less critical and politically minded.

Their transnational consciousness is less critical about government structures but employed in a more strategic way. Since their work here helps build up the infrastructure of the Salvadoran state, they align with government entities for support. The following narratives address this clearly:

We have to constantly be in good relations with whomever, not just the government or the administration in power, but also get along with the other political parties who are allied or in opposition of the current administration. That is what [the hometown association] does and so you can say it is a bit of lobbying and getting along with them, saluting them, visiting them, hugging them, taking a picture with them. We do this because we know the necessity of our country is
huge and so we have to act in accordance to that need and execute projects that better our country (L, male, philanthropic volunteer).

I definitely think we have a relationship with them [i.e Salvadoran government] and that is super important. In my case, I maintain close links with the ambassador and I think he reaches out to the community. We have worked hand in hand on several projects together and so I would say the community is 80% united with the government even as we may have differences (C, male, philanthropic volunteer).

Philanthropic volunteers can overstate their role in HTA’s within El Salvador so that the government continues to appeal to them and credits them for this work. Philanthropic volunteers do not critique the government but rather show their importance to gain some benefits from this partnership. In this way, they are apt at maneuvering their way into being the esteemed far-away brother. One of the participants mentioned that the resources of the expatriate community are their economic power and HTA’s certainly capitalize on their social remittances. In this way, they sort of turn the cards around, and in the game of who benefits from remittances, they are not necessarily on the losing team.

In other words, they use their economic power to gain some credibility from the Salvadoran authorities. In the following narrative, a participant expresses this clearly:

Salvadorans in the exterior are in style. I have noticed that four or five years ago no one paid attention to us. Now, you see government entities establishing relations with the expatriates and forming a vice-minister for relations with Salvadorans in the exterior. I think they have finally opened up their eyes and realized that we contribute to the economy, we generate tourism and we generate money for TACA airlines (H, male, philanthropic volunteer).

As a strategy, the philanthropic volunteers downplay their critiques in order to benefit from the help that the Salvadoran government offers them. In fact, scholars have noted that because of their collaboration with the government, HTA’s can be considered the new elites. On the one hand, HTA’s do all of the decision-making and there is no deliberation between them and the communities in El Salvador. Paul and Gammage
(2004) note that HTA’s tend to create and maintain hierarchical relations because HTA’s identify the projects, plan them, fund them and implement them; while the home community focuses on the logistics and oversight of the projects. On the other hand, they have more political leverage because of the social remittances they send the local towns. Itzigsohn and Villacres note that “[t]hrough HTAs, immigrants have the power to influence home-town politics by determining local development agendas and budgetary allocations” (2008:680). As a result, philanthropic volunteers strategically elaborate projects that give back and from which they can obtain a status marker.

The transnational consciousness of philanthropic volunteers has consequences for the political habitus they build. Their charity work makes them the most significant unintentional political actor in El Salvador. At the same time, the HTA serves as a stepping-stone so individuals can exert non-electoral political actions in the U.S. The differences in their political activities in the U.S. versus El Salvador are due to several things. HTAs publicize themselves as apolitical in order to recruit more members and to avoid being stigmatized as right-wing Arena supporters. They know that Salvadoran party politics is divisive amongst the community abroad and for this reason, they avoid being linked to a political ideology but rather play a neutral card. Yet, they do this for the sake of the HTA because it makes their charity work more effective and less tied to political interests. But, as individuals, they actually learn to engage in the political world and do so on a local level in the metro D.C. area. They campaign for Salvadorans running for office, participate in pro-immigrant events, and reach out to other organizations that advocate on behalf of immigrants. This is what Jones-Correa calls a politics of in-between in which immigrants “simultaneously maintain distance and ties to
both polities through the manipulation of immigrants multiple identities, drawing on continuities from their countries of origin, but tailoring action to their situation as immigrants in this country” (1998:147). Therefore, philanthropic volunteers begin their political work in El Salvador through indirect channels, build on these ties to sustain their organizational work, and finally, learn to use what they have learned to do non-electoral work in the D.C. metro area. At the same time, they still maintain a level of distance from mainstream politics and are not completely engaged in comparison to seasoned activists. They will not lobby, protest, or do any type of direct action work because this is too radical for them. Moreover, they lack a greater knowledge of mainstream politics and cannot tap into their organization to mobilize the community.

Comparing Transnationalism among Seasoned Activists and Philanthropic Volunteers

Seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers practice transnational politics in varying ways. For the most part, philanthropic volunteers unintentionally get involved in the political activities of the Salvadoran state whereas seasoned activists are transnational precisely because their intentions are to be politically engaged in opposition to the state. This has direct consequences for the political habitus that each actor formulates. The transnational seasoned activist relies on an ongoing critical stance of government entities and on a willingness to create change in multiple spaces. They have the political drive to continue with their involvement and will keep serving as the oppositional force. Their political habitus is critical, oriented towards activism, and sustained by a consciousness that transcends borders. On the other hand, the philanthropic volunteers did not intend to
become political actors but in the process of doing community work, they become a constituency that the Salvadoran government courts, works with, and uses. As these actors engage in transnational work, they build a consciousness to cement it. The philanthropic volunteer develops a political habitus that appears politically neutral in its stance but is consequential in its actions. This actor invokes a very tactful way of doing politics for the sake of improving the communities left behind. They build a political habitus that is pragmatic rather than critical and act transnationally to impact local towns in El Salvador.

**The Transnational Consciousness of the Critical Observer**

The critical observer utilizes their transnational consciousness to understand the root of the problems that Salvadorans emigrants undergo but will not act to address these issues. One of the ways in which this transnational consciousness resurges is from this narrative:

> I think the same divisions that exist in El Salvador exist here. If our country wants to get ahead, we cannot see the political banner but rather work in unison and our problem is that we are tied to one side. Salvadorans here can influence El Salvador and we are a modular community and the political parties care about what we think. But, this will end in twenty years because when you come here and adapt you will not send money anymore. As Salvadorans integrate, they will stop sending remittances (V, male, critical observer).

This participant exhibits a transnational consciousness that is analytical about Salvadoran society. Yet, for the critical observer, thinking transnationally is about as far as they go. Only in rare occasions, will they help out the community. As a result, although they have a critical stance and assess problems with a transnational consciousness, their actions have minimal impact because they remain outside of the organizational structures.
Critical observers share some similarities and differences with locally based seasoned activists when it comes to their transnational consciousness. Critical observers make important critiques about the transnational processes that affect Salvadorans. For example, the following narratives display critiques that these actors have towards U.S. and Salvadoran policies:

The government in our country does not advocate on our behalf to the US government for TPS. I think that the US government is the one that ultimately decides what benefits they get out of it. The U.S. government needs the cheap labor and therefore they decide to extend TPS or not (F, male, critical observer).

I think the government of the United States is partly responsible for the massive flow of Salvadoran migrants that come here. When people talk about this anti-immigrant sentiment and the laws that go along with that, what is not discussed are the reasons for why people migrate and why people are so desperate that the conditions in their country are not improving. The fact that the Salvadoran government continues to be corrupt is partly a result of the support that the U.S. government gives El Salvador. Another thing that astonishes me is that even though we have Salvadoran troops in Iraq, the deportation of Salvadorans has not declined. So you tell me who is helping who (M, male, seasoned activist).

In this regard, critical observers emulate locally based seasoned activists in their critiques of how foreign policy negatively impacts Salvadoran migrants. They have common assessments about the ways in which policies that appear to be favorable to Salvadoran have long-term consequences that are harmful to the group. Yet, their main difference is that while seasoned activists are willing to tackle transnational issues with the local work they do, the critical observer simply watches, critiques and refrains from organizational work. The critical observer distrusts organizations and generally sees them as entities filled with internal frictions. The critical observer also critiques how ineffective organizations are in building a voice in the U.S. and in El Salvador. As a result, critical observers do not feel that they can gain empowerment through an organization and would rather remain detached. In this way, they internalize their political habitus and do not
display it in their actions. As such, the critical observer reacts to transnational processes but does not act to remedy them.

**La Tierra Te Jala (Your Land Pulls You Back)**

Without a doubt, the participants in this study all share a very strong bond to their homeland. In fact, one of the interviewees suggested that the reason they remain attached to El Salvador is because “la tierra te jala” or the fact that “your land pulls you back.” Due to this sense of belonging, these participants start developing a transnational consciousness. This transnational consciousness shapes their political habitus to the extent that it impacts them to be political actors even though their politics gets played out differently. In all the cases, the political habitus of the participants is constantly nourished by a transnational consciousness but the outcomes are different. Some act transnationally, while others prefer to act locally, and others hardly act at all. The transnational consciousness of the locally bound seasoned activist allows them to critique social issues with a global lens and feel that the best they can do is to address the local concerns that Salvadoran migrants have. As such, their political habitus or ethos is nourished by a transnational consciousness and a willingness to address transnational issues with local action. Because this actor is the most rooted in the U.S., he/she focuses on navigating mainstream issues and is the least transnational in his/her practices. The transnational consciousness of transnational seasoned activists sustains their critical stance and politics so that they are simultaneously invested in local arenas to help out their compatriots and are involved in homeland politics to change the macro-conditions that hurt those they help. Thus, their political habitus revolves around thinking and
acting transnationally. Philanthropic volunteers develop a transnational consciousness that is driven by charity rather than a critical or political mind frame and they work transnationally to reconstruct the communities in El Salvador. They unintentionally become political actors through their ties with the Salvadoran government and this ends up having repercussions in the U.S. Finally, critical observers have a transnational consciousness that they exert to critique and sustain their political views. But, although they have a political habitus that is critically driven they are not active, locally or transnationally, and will not tackle a cause.

These participants invoke a transnational consciousness to either react or act to transnational impact, all the while as they seek to better the lives of their compatriots and their country. Yet, they must confront the agents who they deem responsible for the issues that Salvadorans face. In this next section, I discuss some of the ways in which they invoke a transnational consciousness through their critiques of the federal and Salvadoran government. A discussion of how they assess the governments not only shows the areas in which they tend to agree but also where they differ in their views. Moreover, this discussion highlights the structural constraints that the participants perceive and which can limit their ability to make overarching changes.

Assessing the Federal government: An Area of Convergence

A male seasoned activist noted that “social justice issues are universal and it doesn't matter if it is a developed or developing country, there are battles to be fought.” Yet, for many who want to fight, the challenges they face are structurally placed. One of the agents who they deem responsible for Salvadorans’ troubles is the federal
The participants share similar views about the federal government and in general, see it as ineffective in dealing with immigrants. They do not see Salvadorans reaping the advantages of the U.S.’s immigration policy. In the following narratives, these participants articulate it clearly:

I think it is an interesting dynamic because Bush gets along with the Salvadoran government. I see that the Salvadoran president supports the president here and gives him credibility for TPS. But, the climate is so anti-immigrant that the federal government is not doing much for Latinos. I think depending on where you are you have different views about how effective the federal government is and for Salvadorans in El Salvador they are effective because of TPS but here it is a different story (W, male, critical observer).

TPS helps a lot of people. We are a big population with estimates of around 200 million Salvadorans and a lot rely on TPS. That is why, I think, it should become a permanent residency because the people who have had TPS for six years or so cannot be considered temporary migrants anymore. But, this depends on Congress and they have shown that they do not care about our well-being even after all the mobilization efforts we undertook. They show that they do not care about us because they have not offered us a legal pathway so we can incorporate in this country (V, male, seasoned activist).

I mean the federal government has helped our community in the sense of letting us stay here with the permit. But, I think we are taken for granted for the work we put in here. We do not have the same liberties that we do in our country. For instance, if I do not have papers then I cannot drive a car. If I do not speak English, I get stared down at an American restaurant so little things like that. We are treated with disgust and have very limited opportunities to take advantage of (R, male, philanthropic volunteer).

Their critical stance is based on the fact that the U.S. does not offer immigrants a legal pathway. Instead, the federal government offers a temporary opportunity to remain legal and this just aggravates the problems of Salvadorans because they cannot incorporate in the system and simply remain on the margins of U.S. policy. As such, these participants consider legalization a crucial issue and insist that immigration reform is needed. Yet, they lose hope in the federal government particularly since they perceive the climate to be
anti-immigrant. In fact, most contend that the federal government closes off the political opportunity structure to them.

These participants are especially concerned for those who experience liminal legality (Menjivar 2006). Liminal legality is a state of limbo that Salvadorans with TPS must face and it forces them to work hard, send remittances, and stay away from politics. This limbo puts Salvadorans in a state of fear from deportation, marginalizes them in low paying work, and gives them less access to a better quality of life (Menjivar 2006; Coutin 2000). In fact, Bailey et al. (2002) find that Salvadorans with TPS suffer similar hardships as those who are undocumented but that one key difference is that TPS-holders are visible to the law. This visibility forces them to guard themselves and accept their lot without demanding anything in return from the government.\footnote{It should be noted that TPS-holders have restricted access to social programs.} For people who engage in local work, they respond to this legal crisis by reacting to the immediate needs of the population. Some organizations offer job training programs, medical care, legal representation, and housing services. In a different manner, HTA’s do social activities like dances, galas, fieldtrips, etc so that these events provide an avenue from which to alleviate the social ills of the population at large. In fact, because all the respondents are concerned with the liminal lives of Salvadorans, they empathized with their compatriots. In general, they felt that the distinction between them and those with legal limbo becomes socially meaningless when the anti-immigrant threat takes over. One of the participants summed it up by saying, “to them we are all undeserving immigrants.”

Another issue for the participants is that they lack the political clout to influence U.S. governmental powers and have a hard time accessing the political opportunity structure. Many repeatedly addressed how they feel detached and have very little
influence when it comes to the decisions that the federal government makes. In particular, these participants feel powerless because they cannot alter immigration laws. These actors feel challenged by their invisibility and lack of representation within U.S. political structures. They lack a charismatic leader that can voice their concerns and represent them at the federal level. In fact, the slogan of the D.C. metro area regarding ‘taxation with no representation’ can be similarly applied to these participants because they lack the necessary clout to influence the federal government. This is especially troubling since they assess the federal government as incapable and unwilling to find a legal path for their compatriots. Some of the narratives address this:

It is sad that there were not enough votes to approve the immigration reform. It is preferable that we have documented people who are registered because the success of immigrants becomes a win-win for the US. I have noticed that once you become a resident your money stays here and those 12 million people can fund the retirement of the baby boomers. If we want to grow and stay competitive, we need to open our doors to these immigrants (F, male, philanthropic volunteer).

This anti-immigrant climate that is taking place in the whole country really makes it difficult for the community to cope and it is forcing them to live on the edge of things. These are people that do not have hope that a law will come and at least grant them the right to work permanently. I find this problematic because it affects their job prospects and the education of their children (E, female, seasoned activist).

These narratives suggest that overall their views of the federal government are unfavorable. They feel detached from the political opportunity structures because of the legal barriers that their compatriots encounter and their inability to engage in contentious politics. Yet, even though these participants share similar views of the federal government, their assessments of the Salvadoran government vary.

Assessing the Salvadoran government: An Area of Divergence
Critical observers resemble seasoned activists in their critique of the Salvadoran government and, unlike philanthropic volunteers, are willing to espouse their views. For instance, in the following quote, a critical observer notes that the Salvadoran government has vested interests in the community abroad because essentially that is where their gold mine is:

I think the government of Arena is very aware of the importance of the Salvadoran diaspora and the power it has and you can see this through the Vice Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is a presidential forum so all Salvadorans can get together in El Salvador or here or in other places to meet and discuss future projects that we can collaborate on. They also talk about the sorts of economic and political impact we can have. I think they are aware of the power of our remittances because El Salvador would drown without that money y no puedes descuidar a la gallinita de los huevos de oro [you cannot ignore the rooster with the golden eggs]. I do see that the consular offices are very aware of the community here and TPS is definitely an issue they tackle. I think they know that Salvadorans cannot return because it would be difficult to sustain them over there and the resources they send back would not be possible. The government works hard so we can stay here and still give back so there is much interest on their part towards the community abroad, and this is different from say ten or so years ago, and I think this will keep growing (D, male, critical observer).

This critical observer is weary of the Salvadoran government’s efforts to intervene in the affairs of the community abroad and feels that the government is merely filled with self-interest. Similarly, seasoned activists espouse a shared skepticism:

The Salvadoran government is highly influenced by the U.S. government and uses its military force to support the U.S. in Iraq. They feel compromised with the U.S. government to do as it says. TPS is not entirely beneficial for Salvadorans because people still get exploited and it does not offer them a permanent right to work or even the prospect of becoming a citizen. Besides, not all emigrants can get the TPS and the Salvadoran government does not advocate for its emigrants to have more rights or say anything during this anti-immigrant climate. They can be more proactive in guaranteeing people some permanent status but they are not (D, female, seasoned activist).

In this critique, the seasoned activist questions the Salvadoran government because it is the weaker power and does not do enough of what it promises its emigrants. In contrast,
philanthropic volunteers see the government invested in the affairs of the expatriate community and are fond of these efforts. They will be the first to admire how much the Salvadoran government has improved because it reaches out to the community.

Remittances are another topic that is contested by the participants. In these narratives, these participants offer other stark critiques about the Salvadoran government’s dependency on individual and social remittances:

I think the use and need for remittances is a huge problem because the government depends on us to work and send them money so they can have a stable economy. They do not produce or export anything but rather exploit and underpay the workers. In El Salvador you earn colones 127 to spend dollars and so there are no avenues from which people can make a living. Since the majority receives remittances nothing gets produced but what will happen to El Salvador if the economy in this country collapses (E, male, critical observer).

This critical observer feels that it is troubling to maintain a country with remittances because as soon as these stop being sent, the country could collapse. In the following narrative, a seasoned activist critiques the fact that remittances do not translate into political power for Salvadorans abroad:

The remittances are sent and that is all that happens. People who send remittances are not conscious enough to think of the remittances as an instrument from which they can influence the political process in El Salvador. The great critique is that the Salvadoran government sees Salvadorans abroad as remitters and that’s all. I think there would be pressure put on the government if the organizations said okay we are halting the remittances we send to El Salvador. I think this would paralyze the government into action but that pressure does not exist because the consciousness has not been built (P, male, seasoned activist).

Another observer makes a similar statement and addresses the juxtaposition that is caused when Salvadoran remitters are highly valued for the economic well-being of the country but are devalued as political agents:

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127 The former currency of El Salvador was called colones and this was switched in the 90s to the dollar as part of the neo-liberal policies that the state took to boost its economy.
Salvadorans are important in the labor sense or to send remittances but not as political actors…we don’t have anyone to ask to and people ask the ambassador to delegate for them but what can he do when he is powerless (M, male, critical observer).

Interestingly enough, philanthropic volunteers do not relay any problems with remitting and see it as beneficial for the country rather than as an evil. They shy away from critiquing the government and certainly did not espouse negative remarks as those conveyed by the other actors. In fact, they argued that without their economic aid, El Salvador would be in a worse shape.

Finally, the question of who benefits from the government-community relationship is one that critical observers and seasoned activists are ready to answer. In the following narrative, a seasoned activist offers a world-systems critique of how the Salvadorans government takes advantage of the far-away brother:

What happens is that structurally you create a country where expulsing people out of it becomes the best solution and becomes part of the structure and the machine and at the individual level people won’t see this and they leave their country, go through marginalized conditions here, send money over there just so it can be used for consumption purposes and all this creates a vicious cycle and how can this change well with the elections and with a government that creates a different political and economic model and who is capable of bettering the quality of life of all Salvadorans and not just the powerful segment (P, male, seasoned activist).

This narrative goes to show that for the critically minded, the question of what it means to be a far-away brother is important to tackle. One of the participants summarizes how he sees the community and government’s relationships unfolding:

I think there is an easy way to sum up the role of both governments in the Salvadoran community. The Salvadoran government gives us no support apart from coming here and manipulating people to send remittances. The federal government is utterly disinterested in us and if it could, it would eliminate all of us who are migrants (D, male, seasoned activist).

Conclusion
This chapter addressed how the participants develop a transnational consciousness that shapes their political habitus and guides their political actions. There is a feedback loop that is developed when the actors utilize their transnational consciousness to inform their political choices and in the process refine their political habitus. I discussed how this occurs for the actors and suggest that while seasoned activists are the most predisposed to be politically active, within this group there are those who live active transnational lives. The transnational seasoned activist demands transparency from the Salvadoran government and has been engaged in this battle during and after the civil war. They fight against policies that are designed by nation-states and which they see as ultimately paralyzing the Salvadoran laborer. In the course of making political demands, they use a transnational consciousness to formulate their critiques and this worldview revitalizes their political habitus so that they become the most politically engaged transnational actors. In contrast, the locally rooted seasoned actors share the same worldview and use similar critiques but would rather focus on improving the situation of Salvadorans in the U.S. In this way, they enact a political habitus that is centered on doing immigrant politics instead of homeland politics. Although the critical observer is likely to share a similar transnational orientation, they are very individualistic in their politics and do not get involved in organizations. In this way, even though a transnational consciousness informs their critiques, their inactions suggest that not everyone who has a transnational consciousness will be motivated to act and make demands. Thus, critical observers articulate a political habitus that makes them politically aware but this shows up in their thoughts and not in their actions. Finally, the transnational consciousness of the philanthropic volunteers motivates them to do social
work that at first glance does not appear to make them politically active. Yet, as they gain certain experiences and build ties with the Salvadoran government, the philanthropic volunteers develop a political habitus that has ramifications in El Salvador and in the U.S. They learn that their work is valuable to the Salvadoran state and maneuver their way to build partnerships with the government. In doing so, they create a sense of worth that the Salvadoran government recognizes and which philanthropic volunteers see as a solution to the immigration problem. As they navigate through the Salvadoran territory, they realize that while they cannot be overt political actors in their country, they certainly can use their skills to participate in the local politics of the D.C. metro area. As individuals, they become interested in political change and participate in efforts that lead them to the pathway of becoming politically active actors.

In this section, I also focused on what their views of the Salvadoran and U.S. government are to highlight the obstacles that the participants share. These obstacles are structurally placed and show the limits that impinge on their political habitus. While it is true that they develop a transnational consciousness, they cannot act and/or react outside of the confines of the nation-states. Therefore, as their worldview interacts with their political habitus and generates critical thinking or transnational/local work, these participants are confined by things such as: legal barriers, lack of access to government structures, and a self-interested and remittance-dependant government. These examples give credence to what Landolt et al. claim:

…the transnational social field, which first emerges as an indeterministic social space, quickly becomes a contested terrain of action in which the displaced search for survival and demand social recognition and the powerful scramble to control the transnational flow of resources and reimpose their dominion (1999:313).
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past (Marx, 1978:595).

Introduction

The aim of this project was to assess what forces shape the political experiences of Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area. Using the notion of \textit{political habitus} that I defined as the disposition, thoughts, and actions that inhabit peoples’ worldview, and in turn, influences the political choices they make, I set out to study Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area with a qualitative approach. I conducted interviews with sixty individuals to learn about their migration story, organizational life, and overall views of the Salvadoran and U.S. governments. I learned that Salvadorans have varying experiences that define and redefine their political habitus. Moreover, these experiences, as Marx notes above, are tied to their past. Nevertheless, they remake their present and in turn, rebuild their political habitus. In the following discussion, I summarize the main findings and conclude with some implications and directions for future work.

Reintroducing the Actors

I argued that Salvadorans’ political habitus is influenced by different life experiences, which in turn, affect their political actions. I created a typology of the different political actors in the area and categorized them as seasoned activists, philanthropic volunteers, and critical observers. Seasoned activists were the most predisposed to act in overtly political ways because they had different elements that
influenced them. Namely, seasoned activists were greatly affected by the war to the extent that it not only led to their migration to the U.S. but it also influenced their activism. For the most part, seasoned activists developed prior organizational experience in El Salvador and built on this experience in the U.S. They used war-based frameworks to build a political and social consciousness centered on helping Salvadorans confront their travails. During the civil war, seasoned activists embarked on projects that sought to build solidarity, end the war, and demand legitimacy from the Salvadoran government. Moreover, they fought legal battles to gain immigrant rights and openly critiqued the complicity of the U.S. government in the civil war. Yet, for seasoned activists, this was the beginning of a long journey of political action. Their commitment to social justice was reinforced by their migration experience. As seasoned activists underwent and understood the challenges that migrants endure, they became involved in the U.S. and participated in local organizational efforts to improve the situation of the Salvadoran community.

The seasoned activist is a complex political actor. They transplant their organizing seed not only to their current work but also to newer generations. Seasoned activists have been able to influence the 1.5-generation that was raised in the U.S. and who did not experience the first-hand accounts that the older activists narrated about the civil war. Seasoned activists have been instrumental actors in passing down the history and politics of El Salvador to the 1.5-ers. In fact, because of the intergenerational transmission of activism that has occurred, 1.5 seasoned activists share similar ideological and left-leaning views to seasoned activists. Consequently, 1.5-ers join organizational efforts that seek to improve the quality of life of Salvadorans in the metro
D.C. area. Another reason why seasoned activists are multifaceted is that their organizational work can entail both local and transnational work. While most of the participants work in the local arenas where they generally spearhead non-profit work, some seasoned activists have not lost ties to their homeland. This creates a situation in which seasoned activists can engage in immigrant politics and/or homeland politics. The work on immigrant politics is geared towards helping the community but becomes riddled with internal issues within the organization and external challenges outside of the organization’s capacity. These seasoned activists have to learn to maneuver through the hoops of scarce funding and internal cleavages to make their organizations more effective. At the same time, they have to grapple with the conflict of being service providers but not compromising their grassroots element. However, a segment of the seasoned activists believe that the political situation of El Salvador is just as important to tackle. They feel that Salvadorans’ situation will only improve if the hegemonic control of the right-wing Arena government ends. As a result, they get involved in the FMLN sub-committees that are in the U.S. in order to fight for change in Salvadoran politics. These individuals will campaign, oversee elections, vote, and build consciousness amongst the community without being confined to borders.

Despite their differences in generation and organizational work, seasoned activists are tied together by a similar worldview that I call the transnational consciousness. The transnational consciousness is an ideological tool the participants use to engage in political, social, and/or critical work and which they use to analyze the issues that impact Salvadorans as being interconnected both to what goes on in El Salvador and to what happens in the U.S. The actors employ this worldview to understand the problems that
Salvadorans face and it guides their political actions, which in turn reinforces their political habitus. The seasoned actors redefine the problems that Salvadorans face and link them back to transnational processes that are created by the U.S. and Salvadoran governments. They are adamant about policies that further marginalize the Salvadoran population. Although their responses differ in terms of how they try to redress the effects of transnationalism on Salvadorans, their activist political habitus is strengthened. Thus, they reinvigorate their political habitus because of the worldview that they sustain and the political actions that they take on.

One of the conclusions that I reached in this work is that Salvadoran political actors in the metro D.C. vary in their dispositions, their political activities, and their resources. In contrast to seasoned activists, there is a second group of participants, the philanthropic volunteers, who at first glance appear disinterested in politics. Nevertheless, they engage in social activities that are geared toward helping their compatriots in El Salvador. These individuals become active as they get together to collectively garner funds and send them to El Salvador. Their fundraising activities require the participation of the community and these efforts fund development projects in El Salvador that rebuild communities, which were damaged by the civil war and the natural disasters. Philanthropic volunteers are tied to a framework of giving back to the communities that they left behind and fill a void because none of the seasoned activists are interested in doing this type of work. Moreover, they are privileged by the institutional support they receive from the Salvadoran government for their charity-driven work. The Salvadoran government coordinates, funds, and helps the philanthropic volunteer implement the designated project, which can range from giving out school
supplies to building a stadium. In the process, the philanthropic volunteers learn to capitalize on the bridges that they create with the Salvadoran government.

The philanthropic volunteer becomes a symbol who is exalted by the Salvadoran government and consequently develops a political habitus. The Salvadoran government uses the rhetoric of the far-away brother to connect with the community that is abroad. This esteemed far-away brother is not just the individual who has a longing for their country, but is the person who remits to El Salvador. The philanthropic volunteer is praised and courted by the Salvadoran government and is invited to events and asked to participate in development initiatives like the Manos Unidas program. These bridges create an opportunity for the philanthropic volunteer to be a political actor and this happens in different ways. First, the Salvadoran representatives in the metro D.C. area recognize the efforts of hometown associations and build camaraderie with the philanthropic volunteers. Secondly, the philanthropic volunteers work closely with the government and thereby develop a perspective on the government’s actions. Thirdly, the philanthropic volunteers act as allies and the Salvadoran government capitalizes on this relationship to ensure some level of support from the population that lives abroad. Lastly, philanthropic volunteers are closely aligned with the government and are critiqued for it. For instance, seasoned activists and critical observers critique philanthropic volunteers for taking on the responsibility of rebuilding El Salvador and thereby making the government’s job easier. Therefore, even as philanthropic volunteers do not exhibit political partisanship and portray a neutral political stance, their actions create the unintended consequence of turning them into political actors. They learn to be pragmatic and not critical in order to give back.
While philanthropic volunteers are not vocal about their political tendencies, they certainly learn to do politics. Their political habitus is manifested in their political practices in the U.S. Although they get involved in non-electoral activities, these actions are directly related to what they have learned through their charity work. For example, because they build relationships with the Salvadoran government, they learn to engage in politics and will support a candidate in the metro D.C. area. Moreover, they develop a worldview that helps them define the role they play as one that helps alleviate some of the problems engendered by transnational processes.

In contrast to seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers, the critical observers refrain from getting involved in organizational work. These actors are unique because while they display a critical framework, they do not act upon it. They distance themselves from organizational work because of several reasons. Many critical observers work in places (such as media outlets) where they have to maintain an objective stance so as not to compromise their public image. More importantly, they oppose the political partisanship that exists within the organizations. For critical observers, the organizational structure is riddled with leftist or right wing leaning individuals who control the organization and do not make room for alternative viewpoints. The critical observers claim that organizations become people’s personal projects and that this has negative consequences for building momentum within the Salvadoran community. They are especially bothered by how little clout the Salvadoran organizations have within mainstream U.S.-based politics. At the same time, critical observers recognize that
organizational work is important for the Salvadoran community and could serve as a means to empower them.

Critical observers use critical frameworks as part of their political habitus. They adopt a transnational consciousness to analyze the problems that Salvadorans undergo and which they see are created by the U.S. and Salvadoran governments. They build their political assessments with the transnational consciousness that they employ and develop their political habitus to be an informed critic. Yet, they do not participate in collective work or take action to help solve the problems that the Salvadoran community faces.

**Dealing with the Two Governments**

These actors live in worlds that ideologically and/or actively cross borders. Their worldviews suggest that they define themselves as part Salvadoran and part American. As much as they long for their homeland, they also attempt to adapt to their host society and, in so doing, become perceptive actors. They develop a transnational consciousness that serves as their ideological compass and helps them understand their actions.

These actors interact with social structures that are difficult to navigate. In their assessments of the Salvadoran and U.S. government, they share some of the ways in which the social structure inhibits their political practices. The Salvadoran state, for instance, created conditions that pushed many of these actors out of their country. This is clearly articulated in the accounts of seasoned activists who narrate their civil war experiences. Yet, for many of these actors, the Salvadoran government continues to complicate the lives of Salvadorans. The critical observers note that the Salvadoran
government essentially treats philanthropic volunteers as their gold mine but does not
grant them political privileges that can empower them. In essence, critical observers and
seasoned activists sense that the Salvadoran government demands more from the
expatriates than what they give back to the emigrants. These participants view this
relationship as an unequal one and find it problematic that even though emigrants are
treated as economic providers, they have no political weight in their homeland. Yet,
philanthropic volunteers approach the situation in a different manner because even as
they are aware that the relationship between the government and the expatriates is an
unequal one, they do not let that hold them back. They try to build leverage by actively
working alongside the government and show the government entities how important they
are to the economic well being of El Salvador. The philanthropic volunteers create viable
relations with the Salvadoran government and can get funding, publicity, and recognition
for their projects. As a result, they temper their political views even if they feel that the
government uses them.

These actors diverge in their assessments of the Salvadoran government but
converge in their views of the U.S. government. Their views of the U.S. government say
a lot about where they see themselves and which battles they have to fight. They find
very little institutional support when it comes to funding and fighting for immigrant
rights. For all the actors, an anti-immigrant climate is detrimental to people who are not
offered a pathway to legalization. Particularly, they reflect on the difficulties that being
on a liminal legality entails for the Salvadoran community and how this status leaves
them vulnerable to the will of the U.S. Moreover, they claim that the U.S. looks at TPS
policy as if it were a favor for Salvadorans. They argue that the policy is renewed
because the Salvadoran government cooperates with U.S.’s foreign policy through such actions as sending troops to Iraq. These actors feel powerless because even as some advocate for TPS to become a permanent legal status, they do not have enough political clout or leaders that can push for the community’s voice to be heard. The most they can do is advocate for services that can alleviate the marginalization that the community faces. In this way, the experience of seasoned activists has been a vital resource to withstand the structural constraints that Salvadorans endure.

**The Political Habitus, the Actors, and the Social Structure**

I set out to understand the political habitus of Salvadorans and to discover those factors that shape its development. In the end, I found that Salvadoran immigrants develop a political habitus that is the result of experiences that span borders and that are shaped by specific social and structural contexts. As such, political habitus is altered by Salvadorans’ agency and the structural constraints they encounter. In this way, each actor makes sense of their circumstances and chooses what actions they will take. Some prefer to remain critical and not act at all while others will navigate local and transnational spaces to act on their vision of what best serves the Salvadoran community. Yet, immigrant activists have to maneuver through a social structure that poses many challenges. They face structural constraints that are engendered by living in the U.S., but thinking in transnational terms and being, in a sense, marginal to both U.S. and Salvadoran societies. Their political actions are also constrained by the organizations in which they work and through which they pursue their political goals. Finally, as Salvadorans becomes politically engaged, their actions and experiences—and how they
interpret them—become part of a feedback loop that reshapes their political habitus. Thus, I find that political habitus are *dynamic*: they evolve as actors create and are created by new social and political circumstances. Consequently, I conclude that there are various ways to be political and these are conditioned by subjective beliefs, as well as, accumulated experiences that are structured by institutional forces.

**Implications of Work**

This dissertation tried to address some of the steps that Salvadorans take to become political actors. I borrowed the notion of habitus from Bourdieu’s (1977) work and applied it to the political world to make sense of how actors come to conceive of their political drive. I contend that political habitus captures how experiences shape political behavior and can redefine the constructs that actors’ build around what is political. The notion of political habitus contributes to the literature on Latino politics because it suggests that the particularities of groups are important to consider when studying their political participation. I used the notion of political habitus to suggest that Salvadorans frame their political choices and actions around issues that go beyond voting. This conceptual tool is a way to articulate how Salvadorans create and recreate their political experiences and adds a dimension that is not studied in this work.

In highlighting the case of Salvadorans, I contribute to the emerging scholarship on immigrant politics. In light of how immigrants are participating in unions, immigration marches, and engaging in transnational practices, it is even more pertinent to study how they construct their political lives. In this work, I highlighted how immigrant politics evolves such that experiences interact with new forms of organizing and I address
the divergent paths that Salvadorans take when they engage in politics. By doing so, I highlight the complex ways that immigrant politics takes place. This work has implications for discussions on how domestic and homeland politics play dual roles in structuring the political experiences of immigrants. Since it looks at how ethnic actors and their practices are multi-dimensional, it also challenges notions of ethnic political solidarity to suggest that it is constantly negotiated within the Salvadoran community and between these political actors. In doing so, this work also contributes to social movement scholarship that has left out the experience of immigrants in the U.S., and in particular, that of Salvadorans.

This work highlights the role that organizations play in mediating between the community and the political institutions. I addressed how organizations balance the survival of their entity with the survival of the community. I discussed the internal dynamics that cause friction, as well as, the external forces that challenge organization’s potential to build a united front. This has implications for work on immigrant organizations because it suggests that even as they serve as intermediary agents that aim to empower the population, they have to overcome several barriers to effectively create change.

The discussion of immigrant politics points to the processes of incorporation through political means. With the introduction of alternative perspectives, assimilation is no longer the only viable route to incorporate in the mainstream. The transnational literature argues that immigrants can do politics in the homeland and in the receiving state. I have found that government-migrant relations, policies, and different immigrant outlooks/practices complicate this process. Although the work on Salvadorans suggested
that Salvadorans are transnational actors, I maintain that Salvadorans are transnational actors in different ways and show the complexities of this process rather than assume there is a linear path that people take when they cross borders. I build on the transnational literature because I address how the process affects agency, consciousness, and practices. In particular, I build on the notion of transnational consciousness to explain how Salvadorans make sense of their practices and are conscientious about the government’s role within this international space.

However, my work argues that for Salvadorans, assimilation continues to be a route that is pursued but it is hard to get to. Namely, the state is an important actor because it maintains an institutional environment in which the civil rights of minorities are safeguarded (Alba and Nee 2003). In this work, I highlight how policy structures immigrant’s political views and creates a closed opportunity structure even for those who have the capacity to challenge it. This work contributes to the understanding of immigrant incorporation because it explores the political projects these actors take on, their reactions to the political projects of the state, and the ways in which they maneuver the two. Salvadorans’ views of TPS and the constraints this policy incurs points to a new policy direction. Rather than TPS being an alternative and temporary path to legality, it can possibly become a permanent form of legalization. This legalization would address the legal limbo that Salvadorans face and create better opportunities for the community and the organizations. Moreover, having a legal population would enhance Salvadoran’s political power and transform their organizational efforts. However, this would incur changes in the federal government’s approach towards immigration policy. That is,
rather than leaving it up to the states to deal with immigration, they could have a more hands-on approach and create immigration reform.

**Reflections on Dissertation Project**

In this project, I created ideal types to problematize group similarities and argue that differences emerge within Salvadorans in the metro D.C. area. By using the notion of political habitus, I tried to assess how identities matter. I argued that identities are constructed by experiences so that being Salvadoran means different things for people. This gets complicated when ethnic identity mixes with political practices and results in different political habitus. Yet, these identities can be further deconstructed by looking at other ways that Salvadorans are set apart. Mainly, generational differences, gender dynamics, and class privileges are some of the identity markers that come to structure who and what is Salvadoran. These are aspects of the Salvadoran experience that I hope to capture in future work because in this study, I mainly focused on the historical narratives and organizing practices that set Salvadorans apart. In doing so, the sample was limited in its scope because I was not able to address how these identities play out within and between the three actors.

**Directions for Future Research**

Although this project analyzed the political habitus of Salvadorans in the metro D.C. area, it has opened up research possibilities for future work. It can certainly be beneficial to learn about the political habitus of the everyday Salvadoran laborer—a group that was missing from my sample. Because everyone has a political habitus even if
they do not get involved, a future research project would look at who are the individuals that do not join organizations and how do they build a political habitus that is more personalized. This research would complement this work since it could capture those who are invisible to the organizational realm. Since I argue that immigrant politics is pertinent to study, understanding why people do not act adds to this type of work.

This work would benefit from a gendered-analysis because this could push the notion of political habitus so that in fact, one can analyze if gendered lenses shape political habitus. That is, do men and women build a political habitus that is shaped by different experiences and articulated in their practices? Do women experience local or transnational work with obstacles that men do not encounter? Finally, a gendered analysis could discover how structural issues reinforce gender differences and in turn, how policy plays a role. With these questions, one can conceive of a research agenda that would include women’s voices and unpack the gender dynamics within the Salvadoran community in the metro D.C. area to better study the gendered-constructions that influence political habitus.

Third, we can expand this analysis to study Salvadorans in other areas and compare Salvadorans to other groups. There are Salvadoran communities in Los Angeles, Houston, and Long Island, and these sites can be informative in generating insights on how Salvadoran political action is shaped by place-specific characteristics. Moreover, a comparison of these sites can also compare the experiences that they share and articulate some of the differences. For instance, are Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area able to build a political habitus in similar or different ways from Salvadorans in Los Angeles? This comparative work will strengthen the conceptual tool of political habitus
and allow us to see the processes more clearly. Additionally, Salvadoreans’ political habitus can be compared to other groups. For instance, if Salvadoreans use war-based frameworks to construct their political ethos, do other groups who experienced civil wars do the same? In this regard, Salvadoreans could be compared to other groups who have been impacted by refugee policy, such as Vietnamese and Haitians, and one can compare the distinctions and similarities of each case.

Finally, since I have argued that political habitus is a dynamic concept, it would be useful to see how the actors studied here will change over time. For instance, Salvadorean politics is no longer dominated by the right-wing regime because Mauricio Funes won the presidency, which led to an FMLN victory. How do changes in Salvadorean politics affect the political habitus of these individuals? Will seasoned activists reinvigorate their commitment to El Salvador while philanthropic volunteers learn to work with the FMLN government? Moreover, will the passage of time affect transnational involvement so that it will persist over decades or diffuse as all actors start prioritizing their political incorporation in the states? Lastly, what effects will U.S. immigration policy have on the actors and their transnational/local involvement? An extended case study would allow us to see how political habitus evolves and address some of these questions.
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APPENDIX I

There are a number of court cases, in which the judicial struggles of Salvadorans came to light during the early years of the war. In *Noe Castillo Nunez, et al., v. Hal Boldin, et al.*, Salvadorans filed a class action suit in 1981 on behalf of Salvadorans and Guatemalans detained in Texas and the outcome prohibited the INS to deny detainees their rights. In *Orantes-Hernandez, et al., v. Smith, et al.*, Salvadorans in California challenged the adjudication process and won a permanent injunction. The *Orantes-Hernandez et al., v. Richard Thornburgh* ordered the INS to inform all Salvadoran detainees of their rights to apply for political asylum and contact a lawyer. Finally, in *El Rescate Legal Services, Inc., et al., v. Executive Office for Immigration Review, et al.*, the plaintiffs charged that due process was being violated because the defendants did not have interpreters and in 1989 the court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. In *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*, the government agreed to reopen the asylum claims that had been denied to Salvadorans and Guatemalans and allowed for special procedures for asylum petitions. The problem was that asylum cases did not get a decision until a decade and a half later and since the wars had ended, the government claimed that there was no longer a need for asylum (Rodriguez 2007). Rodriguez notes that “[g]iven the large-scale denial of asylum petitions, undocumented Central Americans sought to acquire legal status at every opportunity, such as through IRCA” (2007:91). However, as we can see from the varying laws that I discuss below, Salvadorans have gone through a roller coaster when it comes to their legal situation.

The passage of the 1980 Refugee Act was meant to grant fair asylum procedures to individuals who were being persecuted but the majority of Salvadorans did not qualify
for protection because they were classified as economic migrants by the United States. At the same time, Nicaraguans were granted asylum because they were fleeing a communist regime, the denial rate of Salvadorans was 97.4% (Mahler 1995). Nevertheless, Mahler (1995) argues that Salvadorans were far from being economic migrants because their main reason for leaving their homeland was not poverty but fear for their lives. In fact, in 1982, the Reagan administration paved the way for more violence as it supplied the Armed Forces with funding that they in turn used to go after guerilla groups and sympathizers and conducted death-squad operations and massacred entire villages (Menjivar 1993). This violent repression made Salvadorans escape to the U.S. but many entered illegally and were denied asylum claims. Because of this, organizations had to compile evidence of human rights abuses that were perpetuated by the Salvadoran government. The Moakley-DeConcini Bill was proposed and it would have allowed temporary stay for Salvadorans and a safe haven, but Congress never passed it (Landolt 2000:92).

It was in the later years of the 1980s that Salvadorans were finally granted an opportunity through several acts that emerged in that period. One of these was the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which granted legal status to persons who had entered the U.S. territory prior to, and resided continuously since, January 1, 1982. Through this act, many undocumented Salvadorans who had migrated before 1982 could now regularize their status and sponsor other relatives. As a result, 60% of Salvadorans

128 This is typical of US policy towards refugees because when the US opposes a regime, it helps out the emigrants that want to flee that regime and we have plenty of examples of Cubans, Vietnamese and others who received such assistance. However, because they were ‘friendly’ with the Salvadoran establishment, they did not see the need to help out Salvadoran emigrants who were simply economic migrants as far as the US policy was concerned. Even though, the US knew and had proof that Salvadorans were being politically persecuted.
were able to qualify (Garcia 2006: 91) under IRCA. Yet, a high percentage of Salvadorans migrated after the cut off date and could not qualify. Rodriguez claims that “[t]he inability of many Central Americans to qualify for amnesty because of the 1982 cut-off date created a major disadvantage in Central American immigrant communities around the country. This disadvantage was lifted only partially in the 1990s through the enactment of temporary relief measures such as the Temporary Protective Status and the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act” (2007:87). For the undocumented, a better pathway to legality was to seek employment authorization, even though this was temporary and did not convert into a permanent legal status.

The Immigration Act of 1990 established Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for individuals who had been physically present in the U.S. before 1990 and this created an opportunity for Salvadorans to remain the states. Because many Salvadorans had arrived before that time, they could qualify for TPS and over 200,000 Salvadorans were able to register for work permits (Garcia 2006). In fact, the battle for TPS made Salvadorans the first nationality group to be granted a work permit and as a result, other groups who have recently migrated, have been able to capitalize on this provision. TPS allowed Salvadorans to obtain employment for at least eighteen months or more (if renewed by the U.S. Attorney General). Mahler (2000) claims that this legislation documents the undocumented because it provides a social security number and driver’s license to Salvadorans. When TPS expired, Salvadorans became eligible for deferred enforced departure (DED), which delayed their deportation for one year. Since many had become dependent on the status, their way of avoiding deportation was to file asylum claims but
their rate of denial was higher than for other groups so a lawsuit against the Department of the State became necessary.

In January 1991, the American Baptist Church (ABC) filed a lawsuit against the State Department because it consistently denied Salvadoran’s asylum claims. When the ABC lawsuit was settled and won, Salvadorans who had entered before September 19, 1990 (Garcia 2006) obtained new hearings but this path to legalization was still fairly restrictive. For instance, those who qualified to gain asylum had to prove continuous residency and could not leave the country even for family emergencies or anything of that matter (Bailey et al. 2002). Moreover, they had to have an intact record that demonstrated their good citizenship. In a recent study on the impact of ABC on Salvadorans, Wright et al. (2000) find that having an ABC status is just one step away from being undocumented and in certain cases can be more costly in terms of the application and legal fees that it incurs. They argue that with ABC status, Salvadorans remain in a limbo that is often aggravated by INS\textsuperscript{129} mistakes or lengthy waits to renew the permit that guarantees their employment and in essence, their survival in the states.

As the war halted its course, the work permits given through TPS/DED were terminated because it was argued that Salvadorans no longer needed protection. However, after a few natural disasters that occurred in 2001, TPS was extended until September 2007. By and large, because many Salvadorans utilize TPS to get a work authorization and to prevent deportation, TPS has been pivotal in the lives of many Salvadorans as an alternative to an undocumented status. It has also become a piece of legislation that is negotiated by the two governments and in fact the latest president of El

\textsuperscript{129} INS stands for Immigration and Naturalization Service and it was originally responsible for filing the work permits but this has been replaced by the Department of Homeland Security who now handles the applications.
Salvador claimed to make multiple visits to Washington, D.C. in order to lobby for extending TPS (Valiente 2006). Yet, this legislation has also made them vulnerable to policy decisions that take place in Washington and with the growing anti-immigrant sentiments that are recently occurring; those with this “legal limbo.”

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 has become the latest and greatest immigration laws to affect Salvadorans. According to critics of the law, it is one of the toughest restrictions on immigrants because it punishes those who overstay their visas to three to ten years of exclusion from the country making it more feasible for them to seek illegal paths for re-entry or to remain under the radar as undocumented persons. Moreover, this law makes the situation of permanent residents tenuous because they are liable to deportation if they commit any felony and this makes Salvadoran vulnerable even after they have some legality. Moreover, Mahler (2001) claims that the law eliminated political asylum policies, forced undocumented migrants to return to their homeland to regularize their status, and implemented more strict standards to gain permanent residency through “cancellation of removal” (i.e. the chance to file papers without being deported). Mountz et al. (2002) note that canceling a removal order meant justifying it under the bases of the applicant enduring extreme hardship if returned to their country of origin and that this tended to favor those who had families in the states.

With the passage of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) in 1997, some Salvadorans are somewhat protected from IIRIRA. NACARA gave Salvadorans who were previously registered by TPS or ABC programs an opportunity to become permanent residents and lowered the standards for

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“cancellation of removal.” The applicants had to demonstrate that they had lived in the U.S. for seven years, had good moral character, proof of income tax returns, and would suffer hardships if deported (Menjivar 2000). One of the most difficulties however is that extreme hardship was difficult for Salvadorans to prove after the war had ceased. Moreover, they first have to appear before a judge to request a cancellation of removal that would halt their deportation and, if that is granted to them, they can be on their way to apply for a permanent residency (Menjivar 2000). But, new emigrants cannot take advantage of the NACARA and are susceptible to deportation once their TPS expires. Some scholars claim that in the long term, TPS disadvantages Salvadorans because they experience a “truncated transnationalism” (Miyares et al. 2003) whereby they cannot visit their homeland even while they maintain ties to it nor can they bring their family members over to the states. Their only choice is to comply with the conditions of the program and inform the federal government of their whereabouts and wait with hope for a permanent residency status to come out of some new immigration reform.

Mountz et al. (2002) claim that these temporary programs have served to prolong rather than relieve the experiences of displacements for Salvadorans and rendered the population to be under the watchful eye of the federal government. If it were not for the ABC lawsuit, Salvadorans would have not been able to make claims for asylum. Yet, because of discriminatory proceedings against the population, these ABC claims hardly altered the lives of the many Salvadorans who needed the status. What this means is that few Salvadorans have found a path to legalization through the so-called refugee laws. Rather, the TPS/DED policies have been the only recourse from which Salvadorans can find a viable opportunity to remain in the states, if only temporarily. Even still, the post-
civil war wave continues to “buy time”\textsuperscript{131} by appealing to asylee status and from which they can obtain a work permit. As Mountz et al. (2002) note that Salvadorans are really left with three alternatives—they can apply for political asylum under ABC, suspend their deportation under NACARA, or forgo legality and remain undocumented.

# APPENDIX II
## OVERALL DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Both</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median Age</strong></td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separated or Divorced</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>B.A. or more</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Median Length of Residency in U.S.</strong></td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupations</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Employed</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Income</strong></td>
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<td>Income Range</td>
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<td>Cell 2</td>
<td>Cell 3</td>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,001-$15,000</td>
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