

## Advocacy and Accountability in State–Civil Society Relations

While origin countries and their diasporic bureaucracies have the potential to control and exploit their emigrant populations, they can also serve as an important advocate. Historically, Mexico has a sordid track record of fanning the flames of antiunionism and fueling a race to the bottom in terms of labor export—failing to defend the rights of its workers abroad. Indeed, immigrant expectations for the sending state have been shaped by these histories and past experiences. However, as many localities in the United States have made a hard-right turn toward anti-immigrant policies, the consular network remains one of the few organizations that can meaningfully step in to redress migrant abuses. To be sure, many consuls cited the constraints of diplomatic neutrality when asked about the extent of their advocacy, but many of these diplomats also exercised a great deal of power when possible, remaining within their jurisdictional capacities but at times going straight up to the line of interventionism.

Despite its limitations, therefore, the sending state has the clear *potential* to be an important actor in facilitating immigrants' access to rights and resources at the workplace and beyond. Thus immigrant advocates have called on Mexico to be accountable and to utilize its power and capacity to address these diverse needs. Their pressure has led to key provisions in the binational accords and consular initiatives described in chapter 2. These commitments have been valuable, but true accountability depends on the extent to which the Mexican government successfully fulfills these promises throughout *all* aspects of immigrant life. Indeed, despite specific agreements focusing on labor standards enforcement efforts, immigrant workers themselves do not see their labor concerns as separate from their issues with the other institutions with which they must interact back home and in their new destination.

The domestic Mexican situation in fact shapes migrant expectations abroad. In Mexico, as in many other Latin American countries, a protracted history of colonial rule still restricts equal access to political institutions and basic freedoms. Rural and peri-urban communities are often overlooked, and class overly determines social location in a country famous for having some of the highest levels of income inequality in the region—where 1 percent of the wealthiest individuals have 21 percent of the income (Esquivel Hernandez 2015). These geographic and material disadvantages follow ethnic lines as well, as indigenous poverty rates are four times higher than those of other groups. Each of these structural factors has shaped access to education, jobs, and other basic services such as health care, social welfare supports, and legal protection (Fox 1998).

These factors and life experiences affect the subjective perceptions of Mexican immigrants living in the United States when they encounter consular institutions and attempt to access their rights and benefits (Martínez-Schuldt 2020). For example, as Mexican immigrant workers consider approaching a local consulate for help, they may also consider the Mexican policies that influenced their decision to leave home in the first place, as well as Mexico's uneven track record in supporting them abroad. This complicated and tense relationship between Mexicans living abroad and the institutions that represent them is mediated by diverse civil society organizations. Some of these organizations view Mexico as a trusted partner for immigrant worker rights, others as a government bureaucracy that must be held accountable.

In this chapter, we examine these diverse relationships that emerge beyond the well-defined realms of labor co-enforcement. We do so by focusing on alt-labor groups such as worker centers and the wide array of immigrant rights organizations that seek to expand the scope of sending-state accountability.

#### THE ROCKY EVOLUTION OF MEXICO'S STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

The relationship between consular officials and Mexican immigrants has significantly shifted since the early days of direct consular interference in the unionization efforts of Mexican farmworkers. As historian Gilbert González (1999) documents, Mexican consulates in the 1930s frequently sided with California growers in opposition to the best interests of the Mexican workforce. In fact, consuls consistently steered Mexican workers away from radical leftist unions in favor of a more moderate labor agenda based on the Mexican state model, which aimed to cultivate loyalty and political dependency among migrants. In sum, the consuls promoted a paternalistic policy and supported the formation of Mexican unions instead of encouraging multiethnic organizing.

The Mexican government's paternalistic attitudes toward the diaspora in the 1930s were in line with the labor laws that emerged following the Mexican

Revolution (1910–20). Progressive federal labor laws enacted in Mexico's constitution offered crucial legitimacy for a budding social movement looking to challenge the state's conservative capitalist aspirations (Bensusán and Cook 2003). However, a democratic and independent labor movement never materialized (Bensusán 2000). While organized labor did benefit from tripartite labor conciliation systems and publicly financed social welfare programs under postrevolutionary authoritarianism, few independent unions flourished prior to 1985,<sup>1</sup> a date considered by many scholars to be the beginning of Mexico's long democratic transition.

The Partido Revolucionario Institucional / Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the long-standing authoritarian party that inherited the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, all but abandoned its democratic impulses when it exerted control over Mexican labor unions. Every member of the Confederación de Trabajadores de México / Confederation of Mexican Workers was automatically enrolled in the PRI, and the party and the unions formed a natural alliance throughout the twentieth century (Roberts 2014). Even in the 1930s, Mexican presidential candidates would periodically visit Mexican expatriates in hopes of winning the hearts and minds of their relatives left behind. In subsequent decades, Mexican migrants would organize from California to Kansas City and Chicago to demand absentee voting rights without any success (Santamaría Gómez 2001). It was not until 1989 that migrant political rights took center stage, when Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano of the Frente Democrático Nacional / National Democratic Front made a series of visits to the United States after narrowly losing his first bid for the Mexican presidency. In a speech in Chicago, Cárdenas Solórzano famously called for migrants to be included in the political arena, urging them to mobilize to demand the right to vote absentee (Cárdenas Solórzano 1989).

In the 1990s, many Mexican immigrant organizations demanded the passage of a constitutional amendment that would allow Mexicans abroad to participate in presidential elections. Key proponents included hometown associations and political committees such as the Coalición por los Derechos Políticos de los Mexicanos en el Exterior / Coalition for the Political Rights of Mexicans Abroad. In 1996, Mexico reformed Article 36 of its constitution to eliminate the territorial restriction to vote in an electoral district. Between 1996 and 2005, eighteen electoral reform initiatives were submitted with the support of activists, migrant organizations, political parties, and academics. This advocacy paved the way to amending the federal electoral law—the Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales—in 2005 to grant absentee ballots for Mexicans living abroad. The first Consejo Consultivo del Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior / Advisory Board of the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (CCIME) led the final push to pass this amendment, whose approval spurred multiple migrant-led organizations to lodge new demands, including improving the quality of consular services. The immigrant rights marches of 2006 in cities across the United States in fact coincided with “Get Out the Vote” mobilizations of Mexican expatriates to be included in

Mexico's electoral register. This ultimately contributed to the increase in absentee ballots in Mexico's 2006 presidential election. These organizations also united to leverage collective remittances to aid development in rural communities of origin via the now-defunct *Tres por Uno* (3 x 1) program, a federal matching-funds program aimed at leveraging family remittances to finance infrastructure, scholarships, and productive projects in rural Mexico (Bada 2010, 2011, 2014; Félix 2019; Pintor-Sandoval 2021).

Switching focus from the political to the labor arena, we should note that for all the conversations about how US labor and employment laws apply to immigrant workers, scholars often overlook the significance of Mexico's own tradition of relatively progressive *formal* labor regulation. In Mexico (as described in chapter 1), a tripartite system of labor enforcement was established in the 1930s to guarantee the labor protections offered by Article 123 of Mexico's constitution, which formally promised: "All persons have the right to socially useful and dignified work; to that end job creation and social organization for work will be promoted." The regulatory framework relies on labor conciliation and arbitration boards comprising labor, business, and government representatives at the federal, state, and local levels (Middlebrook 1995). This constitutional protection laid the groundwork for the emerging social movement rallying cry proclaiming the "right to stay home" (Bartra 2008) rather than be forced to migrate because of structural economic precarity.

These formal protections, however, are highly politicized. Mexican labor law grants the state unprecedented enforcement powers, with regulators having the ability to resolve both labor-management and intraunion conflicts. The state also keeps a tight grip over wages and strikes through its discretionary authority to interpret constitutional protections for labor rights and its ultimate control of tripartite labor boards and tribunals (Bensusán 2000; Bensusán and Cook 2003). These boards are composed in such a way as to prevent the creation of independent unions (which do not stand a chance at securing representation on them), and strike certification is rare, as represented unions tend to have fierce government loyalties. As a result, union members face an uphill battle to challenge existing practices or certify new union representation (De la Garza Toledo 2021).

Moreover, the low unionization rate of Mexico's labor force is compounded by the scale of its informal sector, which surpasses the size of the formal workforce. Today, Mexico has fifty-three million wage workers, but only about twenty-four million are defined as being in formal employment and by extension covered by one of the government-run social security funds and eligible for federal labor protection. In 2021, there were twenty-nine million informal workers. Furthermore, as in the United States, unionization rates in Mexico have fallen since the 1980s, and only about 4.4 million workers (14.5 percent) were unionized by 2018—with about half of these workers in the private sector (on par with the US workforce) (INEGI 2018, 2020, 2021).<sup>2</sup> The globalization of capital now guarantees a steady

supply of precarious workers to multinational corporations, who decide where and when they should establish operations depending on flexibility, costs, and the labor regulation frameworks in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

The significant size of the informal labor force (along with the woefully insufficient implementation of Mexico's labor reforms) is one of the leading causes of migration to the United States. In Hirschman's (1970) framework, the pattern of leaving low-wage informal employment in search of a higher-paying job in the United States is a classic example of an *exit* made necessary once the people's collective *voice* (e.g., popular protest) no longer has any chance of producing the desired change. Indeed, efforts to democratize labor unions and challenge labor law violations have mostly failed. Meanwhile, access to social security funds and other forms of social protection is severely limited. This is the predeparture context in which Mexican migrants have decided to head north over the last four decades.

#### CONFLICTED CONSULAR RELATIONSHIPS: BALANCING THE GOOD AND THE BAD

Across the board, union membership has fallen in the United States, especially in those industries in which Mexican immigrants are concentrated. While "alt-labor" groups have a limited capacity to bridge this gap, Mexican migrants have become a central target for outreach and have become critical leaders in corners of civil society often overlooked by labor scholars, including immigrant rights grassroots groups and hometown associations. Yet these organizations have also raised concerns of Mexican migrants that go far beyond the core issue of labor standards enforcement. They have urged the Mexican consular network to provide holistic support to migrant workers, especially those who are undocumented. In this regard, while alt-labor groups see the Mexican government—and the consular network as its representative abroad—as a necessary collaborator, they also push for increased accountability.

Worker centers emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to changes in manufacturing processes that increased the precarity of factory workers and drove down wages in service-sector jobs that attracted Latino immigrants. These organizations, many of which were connected to faith-based groups and labor unions, were frequently critical of existing organized labor institutions. Worker centers—many of which catered to immigrant workers—provided an alternative vehicle for collective action in the absence of an existing organizational infrastructure that addressed the needs of these low-wage workers (Gordon 2005; Fine 2006). In parallel fashion, the Mexican consular network was compelled to respond to the rapid growth of Mexican immigrant communities in new destinations. This was in large part a response to the demands of Mexican civil society organizations for better consular services to serve these new communities. For example, following more than a decade of advocate demands, a consulate

office was established in Milwaukee (whose community previously had to travel hours to the nearest office in Chicago).<sup>3</sup> However, rural communities have continued to demand more frequent mobile consulate visits to regions located outside the metropolitan consulates.

The goals of many of these organizations go far beyond passively educating workers about their workplace rights and providing legal support for a select few to bring individual claims against their employers. Apart from basic access to documentation and other transactions that undocumented migrants need to navigate daily life, low-wage worker advocates have called for the Mexican government to offer a wide range of social services, including health services, workforce development, educational opportunities, affordable housing, financial counseling, and of course help navigating labor regulations. As described in chapter 2, Mexico has an obligation to offer basic legal protection to emigrants, but consuls on the ground have also stepped—sometimes reluctantly and in response to advocate demands—into a broader role: catering to a fledgling emigrant constituency (Sherman 1999; Iskander 2010; Délano 2011; Délano Alonso 2018; Félix 2019).

#### *Unique Benefits of Consular Collaboration*

Collaborating with a consulate is a peculiar affair. Part of the reason labor unions and legal aid organizations (like the ones we describe in chapter 3) work so well with the consular network is that they too tend to be hierarchically organized and follow formal rules and protocols; they are thus well set up to help migrants navigate bureaucracies with similar procedures. In turn, consular staff view these types of organizations as their “preferred partners” and refer community members to them. Meanwhile, more informal, movement-oriented advocacy organizations are often left out in the cold.<sup>4</sup>

Few organizational leaders whom we interviewed were exclusively laudatory or critical of the consular network. Rather, they tended to see it as a potentially useful but flawed ally. When it comes to supporting potential claimants, grassroots organizations inhabit a liminal space within the labor rights arena. They accompany workers through often confusing and daunting bureaucracies, but they do not always have the same direct access to US labor standards enforcement agencies staff that consular officials do. Therefore, many worker center leaders see special value in their relationship with local consulate offices, which can help their members secure necessary documents and help advocates gain access to agency personnel who could provide key updates throughout the life of a claim, which can drag on for years.

Community leaders also value consuls’ unique access and connections when community members are detained or face deportation. Indeed, the ever-present shadow of immigration enforcement is a central concern for worker centers. Leaders often described how members came for help with a wide array of challenges and how it was often impossible to differentiate immigration enforcement from

labor rights efforts. As one leader explained, “There’s a false separation in the idea of labor and immigration as two discrete issues. Immigration is certainly about labor, and inherently about labor rights.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the consulate was a useful partner. If a community member could not be located or needed documents quickly after being detained, consular staff could provide critical assistance.

A consulate office is also a one-stop shop, offering not just access to documentation but outreach more broadly. We have already examined how labor outreach is necessary for co-enforcement (chapter 3), and the consulate office can attract various community members who might not otherwise approach a grassroots group directly for help. Consular staff routinely partner with experts in occupational health and safety, financial literacy, tax return advice, literacy and education (through the Plazas Comunitarias), and basic preventive health care services (through the Ventanillas de Salud). Many representatives from the CCIME with whom we spoke had an especially long and productive history of working directly with consular staff. These representatives often benefited from the Mexican government’s transversal coordination of migrant affairs, which included funds to send delegations to Mexico to discuss trade and commercial exchange opportunities with government officials from various ministries such as trade, tourism, and agriculture, among others.

Perhaps the benefit of the Mexican consular network to worker centers and other immigrant rights organizations that we found most surprising was the ability, via Labor Rights Week, to reach non-Mexican Latino immigrants. In this regard, several worker centers we spoke with singled out the Mexican consulate for praise in comparison to other Latin American consulates with large immigrant populations in metropolitan areas. For Mexican diplomats, embracing non-Mexican Latino immigrants can be an excellent opportunity to reframe Mexico’s reputation, which has suffered after the well-documented mistreatment Central Americans have endured at the hands of criminals, the Mexican police, and Mexican immigration authorities while they transit through Mexico (O. Martínez 2013).

A common fear among workers in the community is that the Department of Labor (DOL) may report them to Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) if they attempt to access their rights. While organization staff expend considerable energy assuring workers that DOL will not report them, workers are often more comfortable approaching consular representatives than DOL staff. One worker center leader, however, described the consulate office as an option of last resort for precarious workers who lacked the ability to navigate the social service landscape: “If people have to choose between the consulate and an NGO like ours, they come first with us to ask for help. In general, we offer help to people with more education, with an ID or with papers.”<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, given their limited opportunities for seeking help outside of working hours, many co-nationals like the idea of going to a one-stop shop with a low bar to entry like the consulate office rather than appealing to the DOL or worker centers.



Yet we found that despite these benefits, many community organizations struggled to work with consular staff, and their leaders relayed to us a multifaceted set of criticisms from member experiences, which we discuss below.

### *Typical Complaints about Consular Collaboration*

Organizations that focus on educating workers about their workplace rights and/or helping them file claims have found some concrete ways to collaborate with the Mexican government. On the whole, though, we found many community organizations to be highly critical of their broader interactions with consular staff. Leaders we spoke with were frustrated by what they viewed as empty promises of legal protection and the challenges posed by consular bureaucracy, staffing shortages, and lack of communication. Their members often came to them with complaints that consular staff were arrogant, bossy, and ill-tempered and exhibited a lack of compassion for the everyday troubles of low-wage workers. By and large, grassroots immigrant organizations had (perhaps outsized) expectations for the consular bureaucracy, hoping it would be an activist, critically reflexive office instead of merely providing services (Freire 2000). They felt consular bureaucrats should be more present in the community and should publicly advocate for workers, perhaps by visiting New York City construction sites to witness the dangerous conditions under which their co-nationals worked.<sup>7</sup>

One former CCIME member who led a farmworker organization in Orlando spoke favorably of the IME's programming, such as thematic *jornadas* and other cultural celebrations. Nonetheless, they too were frustrated with the perennially neutral stance of consuls, who refused to advocate for policies that would improve farmworker labor protections and who failed to involve farmworkers in their deliberations. Such leaders saw the consular network primarily as a service-oriented institution that maintained the status quo of farmworkers in Florida.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the lack of earmarked consular funds for labor outreach (reflected in staffing shortages for community work) severely limits what a consulate office is actually able to do as a lateral partner. For example, some activists lamented that their local consulate did not even have the resources to provide chairs and tables for a soccer game at a public park.

Funding aside, other civil society actors complained of other shortcomings. For example, one CCIME member who led a group in New York City that had historically organized Mexican workers recounted how community members were frustrated at the rigidity of the process for obtaining a passport or a *matrícula* from the consulate. Members would often travel long distances to Manhattan, only to be turned away because of what they perceived as a trivial and arbitrary reason, such as their documents having "too many wrinkles." For some people, being asked to return with another (unwrinkled) document to prove national identity would be annoying but doable. But for many—such as those who arrived in the United States at an early age and quickly joined the labor force instead of pursuing



a high school diploma—it might be impossible. For instance, a Florida worker center leader complained about the obsolete and inflexible consular bureaucracy not understanding that DACA youth working in the fields did not usually have the two pieces of Mexican-government-issued documentation required to access services, let alone one from the US government.

These daily communication challenges, and a fundamental mismatch between the urgency of community needs and the glacial pace of bureaucratic protocol, were the source of much of the rancor we encountered in Mexican immigrant civil society in the United States. CCIME representatives in New York City tried to address this service gap by inviting consular staff to explain the rationale behind their strict documentation procedures,<sup>9</sup> somewhat easing members' criticisms. This largely fruitful collaboration was followed by several improvements in the digitalization of birth certificates, which ultimately sped up the process. Thus the efforts of transnational grassroots advocates to engage the Mexican consular network through urban democracy could produce successes (Fung 2004). However, these close working relationships were rare and rather fleeting, especially because high turnover at consulate offices made retaining institutional memory challenging. Through persistence and dedication, some remarkable collaborative relationships were formed, but on the whole, new consular staff in particular struggled to easily reallocate resources to crucial emerging priorities, hampering cooperation.

And yet even those critical of the consular network could pinpoint circumstances where a consul was uniquely positioned to help. For example, in one high-profile case, a consul provided a labor leader reliable assistance throughout the effort to prosecute an employer accused of seven instances of modern slavery. During this emergency, sympathetic consular staff immediately helped generate identity documents for the young workers, none of whom had a single piece of documentation.<sup>10</sup> This consul also quickly mobilized local officials in the Mexican state of origin and obtained new birth certificates in order to issue them passports. These documents were critical for enabling the abused workers to stay in the United States and participate in the trial. In turn, the publicity around this case was a boon to the consular Departamento de Protección's reputation and legitimacy.

Consular staff could thus prove extremely useful in navigating government bureaucracies (in the United States or Mexico), but a second order of complaints involved how workers were treated at the consulate. Though consular staff we spoke with often pointed to cultural differences to explain unsatisfactory interactions between bureaucrats and lower-class Mexican workers, civil society leaders acknowledged the challenges workers faced in effectively navigating the consular bureaucracy but also blamed the issue squarely on consular staff's failure to effectively communicate with their co-nationals. The problem was thus twofold, as one Omaha worker center staff member explained: on the one hand, the Mexican bureaucracy was famously inflexible; on the other, many workers admittedly struggled to conform to a rigid time frame and were unable to make the

appropriate preparations (e.g., document gathering) in advance of their visit to the consulate office. He explained,

All organizations have good and bad apples. Bad apples are the ones that treat people like . . . they were their domestic workers, and that creates bad publicity for consulates. However, I also think that even though consulates print flyers or do outreach to disseminate which documents are needed or how many copies they need, people always prepare things last minute. And when we arrive at the consulate, we want a photocopy, but we already know that they don't make photocopies there, so I also think that we need an education process to change that attitude [of the community].<sup>11</sup>

The best working relationships emerged in places where “humble” consular staff were able to build trust with local advocates, such as a day labor center in New York City that began working with the consulate to provide “Know Your Rights” and financial literacy workshops in the community. As one of its leaders noted:

We began to establish a relationship when [the consular official], in his first visit, proposed an opportunity. He asked us to give him a chance to understand us and work together, because he had just arrived from Chicago. He had been working there, and he knew that the relationship between the community and the consulate here was not good, but they wanted to do something different. After this conversation, we decided to give them an opportunity to start offering workshops to our constituents.

Despite its promising start, this relationship, like so many others in this arena, fell apart when this consular official left: “When [he] left, we lost everything. We don't even know the new staff. We don't know how they work.”<sup>12</sup> In many cases, frequent turnover prevents the establishment of lasting community relationships and limits the potential to provide outreach in communities beyond the consular offices. Most local efforts lack any permanent funding and are often carried out according to the whims and discretion of consular staff, leaving community leaders with few assurances that they will continue when new officials arrive.

This lack of sustained dynamism is most starkly evident in consuls' typical refusal to publicly support campaigns or join protests. One high-profile Miami worker center staff member explained the dilemma as follows: “[The] Mexican government can't engage 100 percent in political affairs in this country. They are here to represent the Mexican government, but they can't participate in a campaign to improve wages. They can't lobby the US government, and this perhaps puts some limits [on] our relationship with them. Our relationship with them is different than the one we have with grassroots [organizations] that are willing to join protests outside a grocery store on our behalf.”<sup>13</sup> This neutral stance, however, is not always maintained in places where organized labor has a long history of consular collaboration. For example, the Chicago consulate regularly attends the public launches of one worker center's campaigns. The leader of this center surmised that consular officials did so in part to signal to Mexican American workers that they had the same rights as native-born workers.<sup>14</sup> However, a different

worker center in Chicago expressed frustration that the centrally controlled consular bureaucracy lacked autonomy to engage locally. Even so, this group also acknowledged that the local consulate's Departamento de Protección did display some flexibility compared to other units that seemed more beholden to Mexico City authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, very few advocates we spoke with viewed their relationship with consular staff as helpful in addressing the root causes of migration or in tackling labor rights violations in Mexico. One major exception was community leaders who could leverage their connections at the CCIME to engage in Mexican policy debates. But on the whole, critical efforts to promote, say, cross-border reforms to address migrant abuse (as we discuss in chapter 5) had not gained traction. In this regard, a staff member from a worker center in Omaha saw an event like Labor Rights Week as a missed opportunity to push for a transnational educational program that would train workers in occupational health and other important issues:

I believe we are good at bringing people [together] and do presentations all week offering trainings along with the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission], OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration], and others; however, [where] is the follow-up we are giving to LRW [Labor Rights Week] or to any other event? It seems that action is dead from the start, and there's no process . . . that will have a bilateral advocacy in the problems that workers have every day. How is it that we can create a link between the LRW [and] the promotion, defense, and protection of labor rights in Mexico to push Mexico to respect their labor laws and promote [the idea] that an occupational health culture begins . . . in Mexico and not only when workers have arrived here?<sup>16</sup>

Not all consuls were as supportive of such transnational solidarity projects. And when they did engage advocates' demands, it was predominantly in response to acute emergencies, such as facilitating the return of migrants who were experiencing health crises, helping locate returned workers to transfer money owed to them by employers, or providing limited assistance to indigent workers left with no choice but to return.<sup>17</sup> However, such support often failed to satisfy. One San Jose advocate noted the irony of the consulate providing more aid to deceased nationals (via corpse repatriation) than to living ones, meager though the former assistance might be (Félix 2011).

#### BEYOND LABOR RIGHTS: DECENTERING IMMIGRANT NEEDS FROM THE WORKPLACE

Beyond just complaints and frustrations around the consular network's role as a solidaristic labor partner and as a resource for struggling (and even deceased) workers, grassroots immigrant rights organizations criticized the sending state for circumscribing the needs and issues of workers to the workplace. For many advocates, the rights of workers spilled into many other arenas of social life and social

provision, far beyond the confines of labor standards enforcement. Immigrant-led organizations often felt that the consulate—as Mexico’s representative in the United States—needed to be held accountable for attending to the full range of diaspora needs. This attention to the broader needs of immigrants is not unique to Mexican immigrant organizations and indeed can be traced back to a host of past immigrant associations.

The arrival of large numbers of new immigrants to the United States in the mid- to late nineteenth century led these newcomers to create nonprofit associations that would provide them with a communal identity and mutual aid. Immigrant nonprofit organizations formed along ethnic and religious lines to offer vital mechanisms for newcomers to integrate into their new society and cope with discriminatory workplace challenges (Bodnar 1985). These organizations were founded in a spirit of self-help, representation, and mutual support and instilled in immigrants a sense of pride and self-respect. Their ideals have shaped the scope of later organizations. For example, the mission statements of many immigrant rights organizations we interviewed incorporate a framework of economic, social, and cultural rights reminiscent of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1976.<sup>18</sup>

Today immigrant rights organizations are key players in an expanding arena of social provision that depends on the third sector, which is largely privately funded and managed (Marwell 2010). The government is no longer the primary provider of state-sponsored social provision services in the United States. Devolution has decreased the total public dollars being spent on social service provision (Conlan 1998), and privatization has increased the amounts channeled through government service contracts to community-based groups, including immigrant service organizations.<sup>19</sup> Given this historical and economic context, the organizations included in our study often took a broad approach to the needs of immigrant workers.

While worker centers often collaborate with consular staff to improve access to documentation, educational workshops, and claims-making support, immigrant rights organizations also address multiple crises beyond labor issues: deportations, naturalization, legal services, domestic violence, lack of health care for the undocumented, and literacy challenges, among other pressing issues. In addition to cultivating good relations with lead consuls and their staff, immigrant rights organizations must cultivate collaborative relationships with an array of government bureaucracies and other nonprofit organizations. For example, in 2003, when the high-security *matrícula consular* document became available, the consulate became a critical resource for undocumented workers who were unable to obtain US identification documents. This new consular ID allowed them to fulfill an array of basic necessary functions, such as opening bank accounts, signing a rental lease, and buying car insurance.

The few dedicated labor hotlines described in chapter 3 have proved to be important community resources for Mexican and non-Mexican nationals alike. Yet paid

consular staff are limited to helping Mexican nationals, which narrows community outreach potential. Further, community advocates have reported that workers whom they refer to these hotlines often complain that they cannot get through the understaffed lines.<sup>20</sup> Beyond referrals for labor issues, educational programming through the Plazas Comunitarias (Délano 2014) and health services through the Ventanillas de Salud (Osorio, Dávila, and Castañeda 2019) are common. These community partnerships have a broad reach across the Latino immigrant population and often advocate on fronts far beyond the stated consular directives.

In sum, community partnerships with consular programs play an important role in meeting the variety of needs of immigrant communities. However, challenges remain, such as reconciling clashing leadership and decision-making styles, expanding outreach targets (e.g., indigenous organizations and other non-Mexican Latinos), and more meaningfully addressing concerns in communities of origin. We discuss each of these dynamics below.

### *Uneven Encounters: Demanding Greater Equality and More Respect*

Beyond labor regulation, the consular network engages in a variety of collaborations with community nonprofits for cultural, educational, health-related, and financial literacy programs, as well as for transnational community development in rural Mexico (Goldring 2002; Byrnes 2003; Boruchoff 2019). However, despite the various benefits of consular collaboration described in chapter 3—specifically for groups focused on workplace co-enforcement—these are often hierarchical relationships, with the consular network determining the agenda. Many immigrant rights organizations we analyzed sought greater equality and respect in their collaborations with consular officials (Fennema 2004).

Apart from issues of respect, there were practical concerns. Advocates bemoaned the glacial pace of the consular bureaucracy. Foreign nationals found such delays even more irksome, given that they saw themselves as having to endure consular mistreatment, classism, and racism as well. The solution for some migrants was to hire brokers who could more effectively navigate the myriad rights bureaucracies—including the consulate itself. Migrants who did not have the option to forgo a day of work to wait many hours on the phone to get a service appointment at a consulate could hire a service (a practice sometimes called *coyotaje*) to do this for them instead—a worthwhile investment. The use of these *aviadores* or *gestores* (as they are also sometimes called) is a familiar strategy in Mexico—across sectors and class strata—for dealing with a slow and complicated public bureaucracy (Spener 2011).

At the organizational level groups we interviewed often complained that consular officials played favorites. For example, organizations disputed who was allowed to provide notary services, who was given preferential legal referrals, and who received other consular stamps of approval.<sup>21</sup> The consular program's trusted referral lists were a critical resource for inquiring co-nationals, so organizations sought to expand the range of referral options offered to community members.

These referrals were not always for pro bono services, often including private attorneys as well.

Many groups reported a litany of complaints from their members, who contested the notion that the consulate was a viable community resource. For example, one Los Angeles leader explained, “Our members don’t rely on the consulate. They rather rely on grassroots organizing to help them with their paperwork because they don’t trust the consulate and feel like they are not going to help them.”<sup>22</sup> Others, calling out the classism embedded in consular institutions and Mexico at large, lamented that any effective consular interaction required intervention from more savvy community advocates. One New York City leader explained that her organization was a necessary broker for many members attempting to navigate the consular bureaucracy: “When a member without any documentation calls the consulate, the answer is like, ‘Mmm, there’s little we can do.’ They don’t get as many options unless I call them.”<sup>23</sup> This leader—an educated, middle-class woman from an established worker center—had a better chance of getting a prompt, effective response than an uneducated, undocumented worker.

Organization staff too voiced frustrations. One leader charged that the consulate lacked a sufficient media strategy to promote the hotline they helped staff in the community.<sup>24</sup> Others complained about patchy access to the consulate’s community events, and many demanded less neutrality and more aggressive advocacy on the part of consular staff.

Yet these complaints also implicitly recognized the important role of the consular network and the potential benefits of consular collaboration. And while institutional gripes abounded, advocates would also laud the personal commitment of many of their consular colleagues. For example, the nonprofit that ran the New York City consulate’s hotline had its central funding abruptly cut in 2012 following Mexico’s presidential election (after which personnel assignments changed). In response, the consul in charge commissioned a report detailing how many callers from both the United States *and* Mexico the hotline was serving, along with client success stories. With these data in hand, dedicated consular officials presented the report to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores / Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mexico City, and according to the staff we interviewed, “They harassed the people in charge until we got the funding back.” This did not go unnoticed by the consulate’s partner organization: “So that was really impressive, and it shows us that they appreciated the services that we were providing, and that was great.”<sup>25</sup> This advocacy cemented the organization’s trust in the consulate.

On a broader scale, the varying local conditions for immigrant rights advocacy across the country go along with a variety of consular relationships. While metropolitan organizations tend to operate in a richer civil society system, immigrant rights organizations serving rural and suburban communities face additional challenges such as lack of access to public transportation and few alternative sources of support. These conditions elevate expectations for consular services, which can

lead to frequent disappointments. For example, a Mexican hometown association from Zacatecas in the Los Angeles metropolitan area complained that consular invitations to participate in Labor Rights Week were not disseminated to other hometown associations further from the urban core of Los Angeles, blaming the local consulate's lack of media reach for publicizing these events.<sup>26</sup> A service-oriented organization in Los Angeles similarly voiced concern that the lack of coordination and information dissemination was failing to keep their clientele abreast of consular events.<sup>27</sup>

Community leaders also complained about the consulate's contradictory qualities: they always seemed to lack capacity, yet they made constant requests for collaboration. One Quaker-led immigrant organization in Miami complained that the local consulate never returned their phone calls, yet the consulate expected solidarity and mobilization during Labor Rights Week. Moreover, the representative we spoke to charged that the consulate neither disseminated its program information nor engaged with local worker-led nonprofits as Labor Rights Week partners. From this organization's perspective, the consulate was useful only in dire emergencies, such as with workers who had lost everything and whose only solution was to accept a voluntary repatriation paid for by the consulate.<sup>28</sup> Critics argue that this last-ditch consular "support mechanism" is in fact emblematic of a long history of viewing undocumented migrant workers as ultimately disposable (González 1999; Goodman 2020).

As we have repeatedly discussed, community frustration often emanated from a misunderstanding about the limits and possibilities of consular intervention. Organizations frequently questioned the consular network's central purpose. A grassroots immigrant organization in New York, for instance, became frustrated that instead of getting involved in social justice campaigns to improve labor rights, the local consulate focused on offering passport services and engaged only superficially with the labor and human rights of Mexican workers.<sup>29</sup> Another Mexican immigrant working for a suburban grassroots immigrant rights organization in Chicago described his frustration with this consulate in blunt terms:

There are many bad habits, many abusers with bad habits there in the consulate. You have to clean and bring [in] new people. I am angry, enraged, and feel impotent. I feel angry when I see that citizens don't have what they deserve, no attention, no justice, nothing. The consulate can't help them with anything at all because they can't do anything. I have never heard a single person say: "The Labor Rights Week was very good." They don't even know that this thing exists. Every time I need them to support difficult cases that involve dead people or difficult legal cases, they never take such cases.<sup>30</sup>

Such frustrations seemed to undercut the consulate's purported mission to be a resource for (often precarious) emigrants. In this vein, another leader of an immigrant organization in San Diego lambasted consular efforts to protect vulnerable migrants in this border city: "We perfectly know everything that the consulate



does not do and everything that they should do and don't do. And something that I can indeed tell you, with full knowledge of the facts, is that the consulate in San Diego is a white elephant, and I hope that Mexicans abroad unite to shape different ways of working in these institutions, because these are funded with taxpayers' pesos. And they are here like lazy people, without doing anything."<sup>31</sup>

Even when consular aid was offered in certain cases (such as arranging for documentation or securing legal counsel), some organizers saw this help as a waste of resources in the absence of a simultaneous political commitment to remedying deep inequities. Even organizations that exclusively focused on defending DACA recipients—arguably the most sympathetic immigrant group in the country at present—lamented the local consulate's lack of proactive engagement. For example, one group of mothers (of DACA-mented children) in San Diego expected bolder action from consular staff:

It is not like consulates are very much siding with Mexicans abroad. I see actually the opposite. I don't see that they are sufficiently involved. I think that they are afraid of losing their diplomatic visas, losing their diplomatic immunity. I don't really know. But even if this is the case, I only know that they don't participate a lot in direct actions with the community. They don't go out there and try to find out who are the community leaders. I don't see a total support. I think that should be their job as representatives of this community.<sup>32</sup>

By and large, immigrant rights organizations conceded that basic consular assistance was helpful while pursuing strong labor cases, and sometimes even in extreme circumstances such as corpse repatriation (Félix 2011) and deportation defense (a service that officials proudly espoused during the Trump administration). For example, a janitorial watchdog group in Los Angeles serving immigrant workers praised the consulate there for helping it to identify members of a class action lawsuit who had already returned to Mexico.<sup>33</sup> Several organizations also noted the consulate's helpfulness in assisting with funeral expenses.<sup>34</sup>

However, not all organizations were as appreciative. One Dallas day labor center leader expressed a particularly cynical view of consular documentation fees: "The consulate doesn't offer them [its members] much assistance, because . . . they see [them as] . . . customers they can get money from."<sup>35</sup> While such perspectives could be seen as singular and misplaced, they do reflect the understandable ire of migrants who have fled poverty in Mexico, face workplace abuse in the United States, and then feel betrayed—or fleeced—by their government. For these migrants, the unavoidable consular bureaucracy can become a source of intense frustration, a frustration compounded by deep-seated race and class hierarchies.

### *Legacies with Indigenous Organizations*

In Mexico, access to political institutions, services, and other basic freedoms varies depending on geographic location (urban vs. rural), social class (middle class vs. working poor), and ethnic group (indigenous vs. mestizo). Histories of class elitism

and racism (which affect both indigenous people and Afro-Mexicans, among others) fuel skepticism toward government officials. The consular network's attempts to improve community relations often generate a "rational wariness" on the part of immigrant organizations, who are often reluctant to participate (Fox 2007).

Most poignantly, Mexican indigenous communities in the United States continue to experience high levels of marginalization and abandonment by the Mexican government. As migration origins have shifted south—away from traditional sending regions and toward communities in Oaxaca and Chiapas—organizations representing these migrants have demanded improved access to health services and linguistic support for monolingual speakers of indigenous languages (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Leco Tomás 2009). On the whole, the consular network's track record has been dismal on this front.

In Los Angeles, for example, Maya organizations we spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with the consular network's supposed advocacy role. Many attributed the root of consular disengagement to clear class differences: "[The consulate], they claim that they can't participate in political things because all our platforms and demands are political and they don't have time. They don't have the mechanism, and definitely they only side with the winners. They simply side with those who feel they are bourgeois, [well-funded organizations] that are pretending to help . . . but the working people, the honest people, they [the consulate] don't care about them."<sup>36</sup> An indigenous organization leader in Fresno further explained that distrust impeded deeper collaboration with the consular office, which, they pointed out, was run largely by mestizo bureaucrats. Even though both sides were trying to bridge the gap, they remained frustrated: "Supposedly, the consulate has a mission to protect Mexican citizens, but few Mexicans want to go there because the consulate doesn't treat them well. They are arrogant."<sup>37</sup>

This long-standing distrust is transnational. An indigenous Oaxaqueño organization spokesperson based in San Diego explained that they had been in constant conflict with local consular officials for two decades and had been unsuccessful in forging a healthy, fruitful relationship with them: "Sometimes they send me emails, but [then] sometimes one or two years go by and I don't hear anything from them. So it's difficult for us to know what are they really doing."<sup>38</sup> Part of the challenge was that this organization had adopted a holistic approach to labor advocacy that went far beyond the statutory protections embedded in the formal memoranda of understanding. More than simply processing bureaucratic claims, they had established autonomous spaces for their members, used radio programming for education and dissemination, and maintained relations with a variety of advocacy networks including unions and worker centers. Within this framework, consular engagement was less straightforward, and the ideal partnership would require far more than neutral engagement in processing claims.

These same communities were also skeptical that the Mexican government would significantly support immigration reform in the United States—a key topic

of immigration advocacy over the last three decades. This went beyond complaints about consular neutrality; rather, many Maya hometown association leaders viewed Mexico's own domestic immigration policies as suspect. Indeed, they argued that the Mexican government had no legitimacy to negotiate an immigration reform for Mexicans in the United States given that Mexico "does the same thing to indigenous communities and immigrants from Central America."<sup>39</sup> The solidarity between Mexican and Central American populations and the ongoing crisis at Mexico's southern border fuel this critique. In this context, one San Diego–based organization has made the protection of Central American migrants in transit an important issue on its agenda.<sup>40</sup> And one Houston-based worker center organizes migrants from across Mexico and Central America, often attempting to collaborate with consular officials from governments across the region. As one leader put it: "Mexicans aren't blind to what's going on in their own country, [and they know] how Mexico has responded to [largely indigenous] Central American immigrants coming through Mexico."<sup>41</sup> These sentiments confirm that state-society relations in destination contexts cannot be understood in a domestic vacuum and require a cross-border lens.

### *Transnational Immigrant Advocacy*

As for immigrant rights groups led by immigrants themselves, these are often compelled to adopt a transnational advocacy approach, which can include funding transnational programs serving immigrant families left behind in Mexico. In Salt Lake City, one organization used their consular relationship to focus exclusively on managing *Tres por Uno* projects. The group rationalized this approach as a way to "stop the labor exodus from Mexico while supporting productive investment of migrant workers in the US."<sup>42</sup> While such relatively newer immigrant organizations share the rosy view that increased development can stop the labor exodus from Mexico, there is little evidence of any causal relationship between *Tres por Uno* projects and low migration intensity indexes (Duquette-Rury 2019; Bada and Fox 2021).

Many transnationally focused immigrant rights groups have also worked to champion justice for guest workers. Several well-funded organizations led by US-based lawyers, for example, have hired full-time organizers to establish monitoring programs in Mexico (as we describe further in chapter 5).<sup>43</sup> Groups such as these have leveraged their robust networks of lawyers—often in conjunction with the Mexican Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social / Ministry of Labor—to provide information and training sessions on the rights of H-2 guest workers. Key issues include combating visa fraud and recruitment abuses and training workers about their rights in their seasonal jobs. These highly professionalized organizations are media savvy and understand the pressure points that trigger the Mexican government's attention. As we discuss in the next chapter, they invoke not only domestic law but also bilateral accords such as the North American Free

Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to raise awareness around migrant workers' precarity—especially those temporary workers living in rural and suburban areas whom traditional Labor Rights Week programming can sometimes miss.<sup>44</sup> Relying on their capacity in both the United States and Mexico, these transnational organizations advocate a global justice framework that brings attention to the portability of rights for all workers, regardless of legal status, nationality, or consular jurisdiction. As one leader put it, “I think there’s been a really good effort by the Mexican consulate to help with labor rights issues for their citizens in the United States. I think it’s a good honest effort. I wish it applied equally to protecting migrant workers in Mexico.”<sup>45</sup>

However, only a select group of organizations have the resources for this “grassstops” form of advocacy. Grassstops groups have a national profile (Betancur and Garcia 2011) and often are run by professional elites focused on policy advocacy (Ashar and Lai 2019). In contrast, hometown associations and other indigenous organizations in San Francisco and Fresno, for example, operate with mostly volunteer staff and largely focus their efforts on the needs of Mexican workers in their local communities. For example, hometown associations routinely mobilize their *paisanos* to respond when someone is jailed (triggering the possibility of consular advocacy) or needs help obtaining an emergency passport or a *matrícula* from the local consulate. Yet it can be challenging to obtain direct support from a consular official, especially in a large metropolitan area like Los Angeles, where consular staff do not have the capacity to make frequent visits to detained people. In some cases, the consular staff may call on a hometown association volunteer to help broker an intervention to stall deportation proceedings.<sup>46</sup> Official delegations from state governments in Mexico can also prove helpful following a migrant death or other emergency situations. For example, in San Francisco, Maya hometown associations have a close connection with the state government of Yucatán.<sup>47</sup>

All of these state-society relations are politically fraught. Although consular diplomats insist that they are nonpartisan and do not work for a political party, organizations understand that new elections bring certain political parties into power and new agendas to the consular network. For example, one Omaha group remembered that when the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional / National Action Party), whose candidate was Vicente Fox, won the presidency in 2000 after the seven-decade reign of the PRI, much of the long-standing consular programming was suspended.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, as migrant demography shifts, inevitable changes in consular jurisdictions can significantly interrupt trust-building efforts, especially affecting those small and informal groups that lack an office, are less established, and are less likely to be on a consul’s radar. These common (and often well-founded, based on the experiences of our respondents) perceptions that the consulate is a highly partisan operation where only sympathizers of the incumbent party can have their voices heard prevents grassroots organizations with different or nonpartisan political agendas from pursuing transnational advocacy projects.

## HOW PLACE MATTERS FOR SHAPING CONSULAR RELATIONSHIPS

Beyond uncovering these universal challenges to achieving broad-based consular collaboration, our interviews with immigrant labor advocates throughout the country reveal how the wide variety of local contexts can dramatically shape the collaborative landscape. This holds true even for federated organizations with a broad national presence across the United States and for consular programs that have been rolled out nationwide. Local demographic and political dynamics are certainly crucial, but we also found that the organizational infrastructure of each consular jurisdiction determined how state-society relationships evolved, as many other authors have confirmed in their analyses of domestic government coalitions (Bloemraad 2006a, 2006b; de Graauw 2016; Gleeson and Bada 2019). While a formal typology is beyond the scope of this analysis, we offer some important dynamics that emerged in more and less established destinations.

### *More Established Destinations*

In large established metropolitan areas with a long history of immigration from Mexico, organizations that provide specialized services and focus on case management are far more common. In these places, organizational density also tends to be much higher, rendering the local consulate an insignificant actor. For example, the leader of a well-established worker center in San Jose, California, noted the limited value of the consulate there: “The consulate is a place where people go to find some information, but I need to say—without sounding pretentious—that our center offers lots of information. We have multiple workshops where our members can learn about labor rights, and we likely offer more workshops than the consulate because we focus a lot in education.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, a staff member of a garment worker center in Los Angeles offered the frank reflection that their organizers had not been in communication with the consulate for more than three years—with no adverse effect on their operations.<sup>50</sup> In San Francisco, arguably the city with one of the densest immigrant civil society landscapes (de Graauw 2016), the consular relationship was similarly nonexistent. One worker center leader claimed that the consulate did not really help them, even when one of their members died.<sup>51</sup>

The consulate is also seen as a relatively minor or ineffective player in major emerging destinations (Singer 2015) where organizations have made significant headway on the immigrant worker advocacy front and tend to lead far ahead of the consulate. For example, a worker center leader in Phoenix expressed frustration over the consulate’s lack of involvement, saying that its members had therefore come to not count on consular aid: “It is very rare that they mention the consulate, and when they do, they sincerely say that the consulate couldn’t help them or did not solve their problem. Other than that, the members do not mention the consulate.”<sup>52</sup> Staff from an Alinsky-inspired organization in Phoenix expressed similar reservations about consular help: “They are usually not good. Long lines,

long waits. For the most part, if our members enter the consulate, it's to get an ID. But actual services, we haven't had many of our members speak about that."<sup>53</sup> For some, the overwhelmed and understaffed consulate appointment system shaped their poor impression of the consulate, which was commonly associated with long lines and interminable waits. In sum, for those groups that had long-established trust and access to migrant communities, the consulate was not so much an active partner as yet another bureaucracy with which to contend.

Part of the challenge in establishing fruitful consular collaborations is the mismatch in organizational cultures between consulates and civil society organizations, as described by Gleeson (2012). In large metropolitan areas, consulates typically engage in co-enforcement efforts with ubiquitous US (and state and local) labor standard enforcement agencies. Like consulates, these agencies are highly formalized, with a clear leadership command and a narrow set of expectations for consular involvement. In contrast, worker centers and other immigrant rights organizations often have less formal communication styles, hampering the development of their relationships with local consulates. One Chicago worker center leader did not undervalue the benefits of consular-government agency cooperation, pointing to the importance of formal agreements ensuring that a consulate receive regular visits from the DOL and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The leader's worker center, however, did not have the capacity to staff repeated, all-day visits to the consulate office because of lack of funding; able to arrange only four consular visits a year, the organization felt left behind. This leader hoped to see consular attention more evenly split between government agencies and community organizations, each of which served a fundamentally different function. The *modus operandi* of government agencies, this same Chicago leader remarked sarcastically, was: "Bring me your claim, wait a year, and I will give you back \$50." By contrast, his organization had a broader set of concerns, which could lead to contrasting expectations for partnerships: "For us, we care about organizing. Government agencies only care about offering a service."<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, many worker center leaders wanted consular staff to espouse the value of worker mobilization, rather than merely pursuing individual claims that did little to address the root causes of labor abuses. In contrast, consular staff saw themselves primarily as street bureaucrats charged with offering individual services to the Mexican diaspora. Consular staff were thus compelled to preserve their neutrality and were often judicious in supporting organizing campaigns. As a result, consular support was largely limited to referring workers to US labor agencies and community groups that could help them navigate those bureaucracies, rather than championing a specific group's cause.

Meanwhile, civil society groups faced myriad logistical challenges accessing and navigating the consulate office in these big cities. For example, visiting the local consulate can be tricky for groups located farther from consular offices, given transportation challenges, bureaucratic delays, and long wait times. As a result,

one worker center in the Tristate area almost never referred out-of-state clients to the New York City consulate.<sup>55</sup> Groups serving non-Mexican Latinos—in New York City or Chicago for instance—were also limited in their ability to access the Mexican consulate on behalf of their members who were not Mexican nationals. In large global cities like Houston, Mexico was able to convene the entire Latin American consular corps. However, Mexico's consular network was by far the best resourced, as one Washington, DC, community leader acknowledged. Compared to the Salvadoran consular staff, they explained, Mexican officials “just have a lot more resources that they put on the ground here.”<sup>56</sup> This imbalance affected the relationships that groups chose to pursue. In Miami, one worker center staffer explained how the center often opted to work with the Mexican consulate since it was better organized and resourced than the Guatemalan consulate.<sup>57</sup> The Mexican consulate there threw more support behind community events and select individual cases, another Miami organizer explained.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, even in these well-established immigrant destinations, non-Mexican Latinos likely struggled harder to reap the benefit of consular collaborations.

### *Newer and Outlying Destinations*

While more established places are home to more varied civil society interests and a diverse Latino immigrant population, newer destinations tend to lack established groups and have a thinner history of consular collaboration. This was the case with one worker center in Salt Lake City (a minor emerging destination [Singer 2015]) that offered basic services such as English classes. As a city known for its refugee resettlement infrastructure, Salt Lake City has far fewer organizations focused on economic migrants. Though certainly aware of the local consulate, one worker center we talked to had yet to strike up a working relationship with it.<sup>59</sup>

In newer destinations like this, there are fewer groups with the capacity to specifically serve Mexican immigrants, so the Mexican-oriented groups that do exist must largely shoulder the burden themselves. Often, given the sparse consular presence for other Latin American countries, they end up serving these similarly situated migrants. In places like Atlanta, the Central American consulates have very limited resources, so the Mexican consulate operates as an important clearinghouse for many other Latino populations in the absence of other legal aid, social services, and general community support.<sup>60</sup>

Albeit stretched thin, consular involvement in these regions is still crucial. Community leaders we spoke with in these settings did not have the luxury of expending energy on well-founded consular criticisms. Rather, they were more likely to report appreciating consular help when it arrived. For example, a staff member from a worker center serving meatpacking workers in Omaha, Nebraska, praised the leadership role assumed by the Mexican government in offering a broad menu of services throughout the state. The consulates of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, meanwhile, also relied on the Mexican consulate for resources



and the space to conduct outreach, which was limited to a few events throughout the year.<sup>61</sup>

The Mexican consulates' health services through the *Ventanilla de Salud* and *Seguro Popular* (a public health insurance program offering minimal coverage to migrants' families in Mexico) were especially popular in communities such as Raleigh and Salt Lake City, which lacked abundant alternatives for immigrant health care access. These consular outreach initiatives provided thousands of community members with information about low-cost health services in their region (R. Smith, Waisanen, and Barbosa 2019).<sup>62</sup> In other newer destinations like Atlanta, there were fewer organizations focused on immigrant workers relative to other metropolitan areas in our study. Instead, consulates often turned to employers' associations as outreach partners. These business associations tended to be especially active at safety fairs catering to workers and their family members, which also happened to be convenient recruiting opportunities. However, they focused much less on worker organizing and voice, placing more emphasis on industry leadership and skills training.

The consular network played an especially important role in the suburbs, where transportation woes combined with a paucity of services, language access, and cultural competence to erect formidable barriers for immigrants. For example, the leader of an organization serving low-wage immigrant workers in suburban Illinois saw consular collaboration as mutually beneficial:

For us, the most important [thing] is that the consulate offers resources that we don't have and we offer them resources that they don't have, like having the possibility to do outreach to workers that live in the suburbs and to farmworkers who may believe in the benefits of organizing. The consulate can help us when someone is in jail or was caught driving without a license and will be deported. While we arrange for a last payroll payment, the consulate has diplomatic privileges and can visit the worker in jail and get a signature. If the consulate calls the EEOC to follow up on one of our cases, the agency picks up the phone faster. They also help us to mediate conflicts between worker centers and unions as a neutral party.<sup>63</sup>

Generally, the absence of other community resources and the more hostile local political environment tended to bring the benefits of the consulate into sharp relief for immigrant suburbanites and the organizations that served them.

#### AMPLIFYING IMMIGRANT VOICES: SEARCHING FOR BROADER ACCOUNTABILITY

By and large, immigrant advocates have managed to find a way into previously impenetrable diplomatic bureaucracies and are voicing their concerns more loudly than in the past. While we have presented many instances of frustration and criticism, we have also highlighted examples of varied community partnerships that leverage consular resources for community outreach. Yet these successes represent

only a particular kind of community outreach dependent on centralized consular priorities and resources. Challenges still abound, especially in newer destinations and those farther from urban cores. It is therefore doubtful that even successful models can necessarily be scaled up universally. Limitations to consular outreach persist, and burned-out advocates are often wary of relying on shifting, unevenly applied government policies.

Budgetary constraints further limit the consular network's ability to fulfill its obligations under the Vienna Convention to fully represent the eleven million Mexican nationals living in the United States (half of whom are undocumented) (Israel and Batalova 2020). Consulates therefore rely on local organizations to expand their reach and more effectively liaise with US government bureaucracies. These efforts are no doubt hampered by class and racial biases among diplomatic bureaucrats and advocates that may not be easily addressed. However, it is clear that empowered and engaged immigration and labor activists are willing to make claims visible and attempt to shatter the social structures behind such divisions. Meanwhile, the services offered by consulate offices—however imperfect—play a critical role, especially in places with few other options.

In sum, immigrant advocates must navigate US and Mexican bureaucracies while also attempting to amplify migrant worker voices democratically. Both countries of origin and countries of reception typically follow a Westphalian framework that can leave little room for bottom-up, cross-border accountability politics. While many grassroots migrant worker advocates are actively holding consulates to account and collaborating to further migrant justice across an array of arenas in the United States, grassroots organizations are attempting to address these issues transnationally. Chapter 5 reviews several key stories of transnational labor advocacy that has been successful precisely because of the elite expertise and resources that advocates are able to deploy.