Driving Families Forward: The Role of Demographic Changes and Coalition-Building In Winning Driver’s Licenses for Undocumented Immigrants in Massachusetts in 2022

“Thank you, Massachusetts! Thank you for everything! Thank you, thank you! We won the fight!” Joyful shouts, cheers, and chants erupted from the public galleries of the Massachusetts State Senate on Thursday, May 5, 2022 (Chang-Díaz, 2022). Nineteen years after state legislators first green lit such a measure (Gross, 2022a), the State Senate had finally passed the Work and Family Mobility Act in a veto-proof 32-8 vote, allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses. While many factors influencing the success of this legislation have evolved over the years, the people-power built through demographic changes and coalition-building in particular greatly increased the viability of enacting this legislation.

Last Thursday’s passage of the Act was just the most recent episode in a long history of debate around such policies, both in Massachusetts and around the country. Prior to 9/11, many states’ driver’s license applications did not require proof of residency (Kordi, 2020). However, the events of 9/11 caused a series of national security-rationalized regulations. Given that the majority of the 9/11 hijackers had valid American driver’s licenses, Americans feared that, without residence being verified in applications, other people who were national security threats could also obtain driver’s licenses (Schlaflly, 2003).

In the months and years following 9/11, a significant aspect of this debate hinged on that driver’s licenses served dual purposes, permitting driving and being able to be used as federal IDs. However, the debate around driver’s licenses has evolved since then because in 2005, Congress passed the Real ID Act, which issued guidelines around what qualified as a federal ID (Kordi, 2020). Today, in compliance with this Act, Massachusetts has a two-tiered license system, offering standard driver’s licenses and Real IDs (T. Farley-Bouvier, personal communications, 2022). This distinction is important because it evens out the
slippery-slope argument that the issuing of driver’s licenses will necessarily lead to citizenship for all these undocumented immigrants.

Those in favor of granting such driver’s licenses think that undocumented immigrants should have access to driver’s licenses, citing many of both communal and personal reasons. Most communal reasons can be split into economic or public safety. In terms of the economic argument, they allege that, with more people purchasing insurance as a result of gaining driver’s licenses, the number of hit-and-runs is reduced, and insurance costs are lowered for all drivers (Cataudella & Fernández Campbell, 2021). Also, because of less time spent in transit, these driver’s licenses allow undocumented individuals to contribute more to society. Finally, they may increase revenues for the state, as “states may… enjoy a modest revenue increase from growth in sales taxes, licensing fees, and vehicle registration fees as newly licensed drivers purchase, register, and maintain cars” (Williams et al., 2019).

On the public safety side, these driver’s licenses ensure that all drivers have passed a driving test and reduce hit-and-run rates (Cataudella & Fernández Campbell, 2021). Furthermore, these driver’s licenses allow more undocumented immigrants, including Latino ones, to travel by car, making them much less of a target of robbery due to the “walking ATM phenomenon” (Cheong, 2021). These driver’s licenses would also greatly reduce the risk of undocumented immigrants being deported as a result of routine traffic stops (Robert et al., 2021) and overall remove some of the rightful fear that immigrant communities have of police, strengthening the community-police relationships. In addition to these societal benefits, there are also many personal ones.

Driver’s licenses grant undocumented immigrants greater economic freedom on an individual scale, too. First, having a driving card inherently reduces their transportation costs; without a driving card, they are forced to pay in time and money to use public transportation, an Uber-like service, or friends for rides (Cheong, 2021). Having a driver’s license reduces their overall transportation costs. Because having a license opens up a much greater set of job opportunities, it also allows undocumented immigrants the mobility to liberate themselves from abusive employers (Cataudella & Fernández Campbell, 2021).
The Work and Family Mobility Act was first introduced in the Massachusetts legislature in 2005 (Torres, 2020). Since then, 14 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have introduced and enacted similar legislation enabling certain undocumented immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses (Kordi, 2020; Cataudella & Fernández Campbell, 2022) totaling to 18 U.S. jurisdictions with such a policy. The most current version of a bill to extend driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants is H.4470, “An Act relative to work and family mobility.” This year’s bill requires that applicants “provide at least two documents to prove their identity and date of birth” and “clarifies that people who do not have proof of lawful presence will not automatically be registered to vote under a current state law that registers those seeking driver's licenses” (Gross, 2022b) and are still ineligible for a Real ID. Additionally, the bill prohibits the Registry of Motor Vehicles from disclosing applicants’ information except under certain conditions of the Attorney General (The Beacon Hill Times, 2022).

In my paper, I build on the work of previous research around state policies that grant driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants. In her doctoral thesis, Kordi examines the factors that made the campaigns for driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants in Connecticut, Maryland, and Illinois successful. In her work, she identifies four themes, including demographic shifts, and touches on many others that were present in all these movements. Throughout this paper, I will be in conversation with her research.

The outmigration of native-born people, immigration of foreign-born people, and growing undocumented population together increase the political power of immigrants, both undocumented and documented. Kordi’s point that outmigration leaves gaps in economies and communities that immigrants, including undocumented ones, fill, thus solidifying immigrants’ economic, social, and political power helps us see the importance of the demographic shifts in Massachusetts.

Over the past decade, Massachusetts has experienced the outmigration of the native-born population, creating holes in economies and communities. Boston Indicators analysis of Census Bureau data shows that from 2010 to 2018, in net, Massachusetts lost over 125,000 residents to domestic migration (Ciurczak, 2019). These outmigrants are primarily native-born, white, and elderly, and they
cited job opportunities and high housing costs as reasons they left Massachusetts (Rath, 2020). This data
mirrors Kordi’s findings, and in tandem with her evidence that outmigration correlates with state income
loss, shows the importance of these gaps being filled (Kordi, 2020). Yet despite Massachusetts’
population loss in domestic migrations, its more than 3% population growth was the greatest of any
Northeast state (Ciurczak, 2019).

Immigrants to Massachusetts have filled these gaps in economies and communities, thus
increasing their political power. Immigration to Massachusetts has been high in recent years. From 2010
to 2018, the net foreign migration was over 350,000 people (Ciurczak, 2019); in other words,
Massachusetts gained over 350,000 residents from overseas. Further data shows that this growth was at a
faster rate than their native counterparts’: Census Bureau data says that from 2010 to 2020, the
foreign-born population in Massachusetts increased from 14.60% to 16.90% of the total population (ACS
2010; ACS 2020). This is consistent with Kordi’s findings that immigrant populations tend to be a
significant portion of the population of states that have enacted driver’s license legislation. As the
Massachusetts immigrant population has grown, they have naturally filled gaps in economies and
communities, and they have also gained increased political power. The Pew Research Center identified
that, between 2009 and 2019, both the national immigrant population and the national share of immigrants
naturalized increased – specifically, 7.2 million immigrants naturalized (Pew Research Center, 2019a).
While this correlation was not identified at the state level specifically, it is reasonable to assume that this
trend would similarly occur on a smaller scale. Therefore, as the Massachusetts immigrant population has
increased, so has immigrant voting power.

Undocumented immigrants have also filled these gaps in economies and communities, thus
increasing their political power. The undocumented immigrant population in Massachusetts has increased
over the past 15 years. After a high of 220,000 in 2007, from 2011 to 2017, it increased from 180,000 to
275,000 – an increase of more than 50%. This trend is notable because it contrasts with the national trend.
Like the Massachusetts population, the national undocumented immigrant population peaked in 2007 at
12,200,000 people. However, since then, it has consistently declined and was 10,500,000 people, as of
2017 (Pew Research Center, 2019a). Kordi points to the high level of undocumented immigrants nationally to help explain the positioning of driver’s license bills in society. While the level is relatively high, especially compared to pre-2000 levels, the declining population was less convincing. Therefore, the evidence that the Massachusetts undocumented population has increased recently is important. As the number of undocumented immigrants increase, so does their role in Massachusetts communities and economies. Today, they make up 3.80% of the Massachusetts population and 5.10% of the labor force, making Massachusetts a top-10 state in terms of percentage of the labor force that is undocumented (Pew Research Center, 2019b). This increase in population and large role in the labor force has led to increased political power. Massachusetts State Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier, an H.4470 lead cosponsor, identified “a shift… around DACA recipients” over the past decade. In her words, “DACA recipients are ‘coming out,’ so to speak” (T. Farley-Bouvier, personal communications, 2022). While DACA recipients do have legal status in the United States, given the up-and-down nature of the DACA program and its legitimacy, identifying oneself as a DACA recipient can be risky. A trend of more DACA recipients publicly identifying themselves shows that they increasingly feel supported not only personally but also politically, and thus indicates an increase in the political power of undocumented immigrants.

The existence of and work by an issue-specific coalition has empowered the campaign to continue gaining momentum. As a research reference point, Kordi does not name coalition-building as a factor present in all of the states that she studied. She does mention that all of her interviewees “highlighted how advocating for immigration policies outside immigrant communities was pivotal to gaining support.”

The issue-specific coalition is new. Since the beginning of Massachusetts advocacy around driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants in 2003, its supporters have been an “unusual alliance of supporters that includes police chiefs and immigrant groups” (Greenberger, 2003). However, prior to 2019, while the Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA) spearheaded the advocacy efforts, there was no issue-specific coalition through which all the many supporters’ efforts were coordinated (T. Farley-Bouvier, personal communications, 2022). But since 2019, the Driving
Families Forward coalition, co-chaired by the SEIU 32BJ and Brazilian Workers Center, has brought together over 320 organizations, including the Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition, the Massachusetts Major City Chiefs of Police Association (Massachusetts Immigrant & Refugee Advocacy Coalition, 2021), and Planned Parenthood (Planned Parenthood Advocacy Fund of Massachusetts, Inc., 2021).

Issue-specific coalitions are important because they increase capacity. State Representative Farley-Bouvier noted that having an issue-specific coalition brings in more funding from across different sectors – in this case, from labor, businesses, and foundations. Additionally, she highlighted that it allows for the hiring of people who work on a single issue full-time (T. Farley-Bouvier, personal communications, 2022). Although she did not specifically name this, this increased funding and human resources give the movement greater capacity.

The Coalition has improved the viability of the driver’s license legislation in practice, too. One way to notice this is through state legislators’ sentiments. When asked about what factors influencing driver’s license legislation had changed over the past decade and thus made the legislation more viable, H.4470 lead cosponsor State Representative Christine Barber identified the Driving Families Forward Coalition and how its “really broadened [its] support-base.” Furthermore, she noted that:

“This broadened support, from a variety of sectors and key stakeholders, helps to effectively communicate how the bill is essential to public safety & transit safety, economic development, public health, equity, and personal wellbeing & mobility in the Commonwealth. Through the work of the Coalition, knowledge on what the bill does & its importance has been able to reach residents & political figures statewide, and members of the state legislature.” (C. Barber, personal communications, May 3, 2022)

These comments show how the Coalition and the support it has built has improved the viability of the legislation. Notably, every Senator who spoke in support of the Act in the opening statements of the Senate Hearing specifically mentioned the Driving Families Forward Coalition and their role in advocacy
efforts (State Senate, 2022). But this support has been particularly important because it has also impacted the legislation itself.

Having a diverse issue-specific coalition improves the legislation, too. In my interview about factors influencing driver’s license legislation that had made the legislation more viable, State Representative Farley-Bouvier identified working with law enforcement. She noted how that collaboration has influenced the specific language around the protection of driver’s data and what documents are required to prove identity. In particular, she highlighted how language about the required documents had evolved from last year’s legislative session to this year’s and even within this year’s session (T. Farley-Bouvier, personal communications, 2022). Overall, the building of an issue-specific coalition has deeply improved the viability of driver’s license legislation.

Despite the people-power that’s been achieved through these demographic shifts and coalition-building, the bill faced legislative opposition right up until its passing. In last week’s Senate vote, the Work and Family Mobility Act was opposed by all three Republicans and five Democrats. Most importantly, Republican Governor Charlie Baker continues to oppose this bill, hence why earning a veto-proof majority of the votes in both the House and Senate was so critical. Speaking on “Boston Public Radio” in March, Governor Baker cited concerns about potential voter fraud, mentioning Massachusetts’ automatic voter registration (Sokolow, 2022). At Thursday’s Senate hearing, the bill’s lead cosponsors in the Senate, State Senators Cright and Gomez, preemptively retorted this idea by citing that there are already safeguards designed to ensure that driver’s license holders who are non-citizens are not registered to vote, mentoring green card holders, DACA recipients, and those on student and work visas as examples of people who may have driver’s licenses but cannot vote (Senate Session, 2022).

Governor Baker also expressed concerns over the lack of distinction between driver’s licenses, based on drivers’ citizenship statuses and how some other states do note this difference (Sokolow, 2022). However, when Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr mentioned this in Thursday’s debate, Senator Crighton, a lead cosponsor of the bill, was quick to respond. He pointed out that since the implementation of the Real ID Act, Virginia is the only commonwealth or state to make a distinction and mentioned that
by making a distinction, they would discourage much of the safety regardless of and destigmatizing of immigration status that this bill was designed to make progress on (Senate Session, 2022).

Lastly, Democratic Senator Gobi shared that her hesitancy towards this legislation stemmed from that “[her] police chiefs and members of law [enforcement’s]... voices [had] not been heard.” While it is hard to measure exactly whose voice “has been heard,” cosponsor of the bill, State Senator Chang-Díaz, did remark in her opening statement that a majority of Massachusetts sheriffs and District Attorneys supported the bill before its passage was a “foregone conclusion” (Senate Session, 2022). All this legislative opposition highlights that the bill’s path to passage was not an easy one and that, especially given that the bill will be vetoed, debate around driver’s license legislation will likely continue for the foreseeable future. But the opposition the bill faced was not just legislative.

This bill also faces public scrutiny. In a poll by Suffolk University and the Boston Globe that was published last week, a narrow plurality of respondents expressed opposition to legislation that allows undocumented immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses. While some respondents’ opinions seemed to change after being informed of the specifics of the bill, this poll can be used as evidence that some people’s voices are not being heard (Gross & Stout, 2022).

The Work and Family Mobility Act stirred up anti-immigrant sentiment, too. Speaking as a woman of color and the daughter of an immigrant, State Senator Chang-Díaz revealed some of the personal opposition that she had received in response to her support of the bill on social media, stating that “the debate around this bill in particular has stirred up a rise in hateful sentiment toward immigrants.” One message she received read, “You and your type are running this once-great Commonwealth. I hope you get run over by a drunk illegal and see how you feel.” Her testimony and example of xenophobia shows that advocating for immigrants, undocumented and documented alike, does come with pushback. However, State Senator Chang-Díaz framed the vote on the driver’s license bill as “an opportunity to reject that narrative” (State Senate, 2022), referring to the narrative that immigrants are hurting Massachusetts, so in that way, the State Senate overcame the hate.
My research regarding the importance of demographic shifts and coalition-building to the success of the Work and Family Mobility Act can be applied to improve similar ongoing and future organizing efforts and research on such organizing. In terms of organizing, the findings about the impacts of demographic shifts – the outmigration of native-born populations and increasing immigrant and undocumented immigrant populations – can corroborate much of Kordi’s findings and be used to identify states that are fertile for successful driver’s license campaigns. Building on Kordi’s previous research, the findings on the importance of coalition-building and a diverse, “unusual” coalition in effectively communicating about and honing the language of the legislation can similarly be used by organizers to prioritize this strategy to similar efforts. Further research could also examine the role of coalition-building specifically in other organizing for driver’s license legislation.

Policies like the Family and Work Mobility Act can have great impacts on people. The organizing to enact this legislation has evolved greatly over the past two decades, and there are particular factors that can be pointed to as having made significant impacts on the passage of the bill. Everyday people and their communities can impact policy, whether through gaining political power or building an issue-specific cross-sectional coalition. And there was never a better display of this than the shouts and cheers following the passage of the Work and Family Mobility Act in the State Senate.
Barber, C. (2022, May 3). Personal communications.


Chang-Díaz, S. [@SenChangDiaz]. (2022, May 5). For anyone who might need some political joy this week, here are the #DrivingMAForward advocates at the passage of the bill in the Senate just now [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/SenChangDiaz/status/1522336873112293379?s=20&t=cSw24FEGdKhVLPyb2ssmlw


References


