

# **Advancing the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrant Communities**

Rockefeller Brothers Fund  
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## Pivotal Place: New York City’s Democratic Practice Grantmaking

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**ROCKEFELLER BROTHERS FUND**  
**PIVOTAL PLACE: NEW YORK CITY PROGRAM**  
**Program Review of New York City’s Democratic Practice Grantmaking**  
Ben Rodriguez-Cubeñas, Program Director  
November 2009

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

“We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness . . . We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth.” President Obama spoke these words during his inaugural address on January 20, 2009. For many immigration policy supporters that moment marked a shift from the prevailing anti-immigrant rhetoric—which intensified during the so-called “war on terrorism”—to a positive immigrant reform discussion.

Ten months later, the national conversation centers on the government’s response to the economic crisis, climate policy, and health care reform—all politically charged issues. However, this has not deterred immigration policy advocates, including Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s grantees, from working on immigration reform at the state and local levels. In the absence of national immigration reform, cities across the country are creating their own policies and regulations to respond to both legal and undocumented immigration. As the immigration debate is likely to heat up again in 2010, we are already witnessing the beginning of a national campaign to address immigration reform issues. And with one of the most diverse populations in the country, New York City has the potential to be a model for the integration of immigrants into the civic, political, and social life of a city.

This report, “Advancing the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrant Communities,” presents the rationale for the Fund to focus more attention on advancing the civic and political engagement of New York immigrant communities by:

- Strengthening the organizational capacity of a limited number of key community-based and immigrant-led groups to advance citywide social and political inequity issues.
- Supporting collaborations and new networks among immigrants, established community groups, and public institutions to improve local government accountability, access, and services.
- Connecting immigrant groups with citywide, national, and international networks and campaigns for joint action on immigration issues, mutual support, and leadership development.

New York City’s nonprofit organizations are well poised to become leaders in the national debate on immigration. The proposed new guidelines<sup>1</sup> will strengthen the organizational and leadership capacity of these local immigrant groups and build new networks and partnerships that will benefit both immigrants and low-income New Yorkers.

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<sup>1</sup> Guidelines were approved by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s board of trustees in November 2009. The current guidelines are available at [www.rbf.org](http://www.rbf.org).

## INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) created a program architecture, adopted new grantmaking guidelines, and established the Pivotal Place: New York City program. The RBF's pivotal places are regions, nation-states, or subnational locations where the Fund's experience, knowledge, and program interests position it to be particularly effective and where the Fund generally makes a long-term commitment. The Fund's engagement in pivotal places aims to be responsive to local needs and priorities as it pursues its broad thematic areas of interest. They are also places where the Fund's grantmaking can have a significant impact, generate learning, and have ripple effects on a surrounding region, ecosystem, or even the globe.

The Fund has been active in New York City since the RBF's founding there in 1940. The city's extraordinarily diverse population, economic prominence, and cultural vitality combine to make New York City pivotal to the future of the region, the nation, and the world. New York City has the potential to become a model 21st century sustainable urban community that nourishes neighborhoods and civic life, supports individual achievement and artistic expression, generates widely shared prosperity, and preserves and enhances its built and natural environments.

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund has three program themes: democratic practice, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. Two of these program interests—democratic practice and sustainable development—guide the RBF's engagement with New York City as an RBF pivotal place. The Charles E. Culpeper Arts & Culture Grants are a distinctive feature of the Pivotal Place: New York City program. This report presents the rationale for focusing the Fund's grantmaking to strengthen democracy in New York City by enhancing the civic and political engagement of immigrant communities. RBF staff anticipates undertaking a similar review of the sustainable development portion of the program within the next several months.<sup>2</sup>

## BACKGROUND: IMMIGRANT CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT POTENTIAL IN NEW YORK CITY

The guidelines for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Democratic Practice program state that "For democracy to flourish and deliver on its promises—including political participation, human rights, access to justice, a good education, an improved quality of life, a healthy environment, and personal security—its citizens must be engaged, empowered, and assertive. Similarly, institutions of governance must be inclusive, transparent, accountable, and responsive." This frame provides the core ideas that animate the Fund's work to strengthen democracy in New York City. RBF staff believes that engaging New York's diverse, dynamic immigrant population is key to realizing this vision of democracy.

One in 10 immigrants to the United States resides in New York City and immigrants comprise 22 percent of the state's population.<sup>3</sup> A report released by the Center for Immigrant Studies shows that foreign born immigrants living in New York are socioeconomically closer to the city's average citizens than elsewhere in the country. The study reports that New York immigrants are more likely to be in the country legally, have health insurance, and tend to be better educated. States with the widest income gaps between immigrants and citizens are California, Texas, Arizona, and Colorado. The report concluded that the narrower socioeconomic differences make it easier for immigrants in New York to become part of civic and political life of the city.

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<sup>2</sup> The program review paper about Pivotal Place: New York City's sustainable development grantmaking has been completed since this report and is available at [www.rbf.org](http://www.rbf.org).

<sup>3</sup> Sam Roberts, Immigrants in New York Better Off Study Finds, The New York Times, December 2, 2007, from Center for Immigrant Studies Report, Steven Camarota, p. 21.

Nevertheless, immigrants—both documented and undocumented—and many low-income neighbors, face myriad interrelated barriers to economic security and upward mobility, including underfunded, low-performing public schools; a lack of living wage jobs; a shrinking stock of affordable housing; and inadequate health care. Recent immigrants face increased profiling, police harassment in their workplaces and communities, and erosion of fundamental protections afforded by the United States Constitution as a result of the policies and biases post September 11, and the federal government's failure to achieve immigration reform. How the city addresses social inequalities and integrates immigrants into civic life is of utmost importance to its future.

New York could serve as an example to other cities around the country as government officials, community practitioners, and others seek innovative ways to integrate immigrants into their communities and engage them as partners in addressing societal problems.

## **CONTEXT: NATIONAL AND LOCAL IMMIGRATION TRENDS**

Immigration is one of the United States' most distinguishing characteristics, helping drive economic growth and defining national identity since the country's founding. Immigrants across the generations have made the United States the land of opportunity: the nation that values self-reliance, freedom, and democracy and welcomes those willing to work hard for a better future.<sup>4</sup> The record-breaking growth and diversity of the immigrant population in recent decades have created a demographic imperative for the integration of newcomers into American society. A Pew Research Center report projects that the United States will become increasingly immigrant-based and Hispanics will approach 30 percent of the population by 2050. "If current trends continue, the population of the United States will rise to 438 million in 2050, from 296 million in 2005, and 82 percent of the increase will be due to immigrants arriving between 2005 and 2050 and their U.S.-born descendants. Of the 117 million people added to the population during this period due to immigration, 67 million will be the immigrants themselves and 50 million will be their U.S.-born children or grandchildren."<sup>5</sup> The foreign-born population increased by almost 1.6 million, approximately 5 percent, in 2001 alone, surpassing the record-breaking volumes of the 1990s, when over 13 million immigrants entered the country.<sup>6</sup>

Immigrants are also invigorating the political landscape. Between 1996 and 2000 the number of foreign-born voters increased by 20 percent. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigrant Services, in 2008 more than one million immigrants became new citizens. They are establishing themselves as important swing voters, representing great diversity of political outlooks across class, generation, and ethnic categories. The democratic experience of participating with others to solve community problems strengthens immigrants, the communities in which they live, and democracy itself.<sup>7</sup> But our newest citizens face many barriers to full participation in voting and broader civic engagement activities, including a lack of understanding of the U.S. political process, language barriers, discrimination, workplace exploitation, and poverty.

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<sup>4</sup> Grantmakers Concerned with Immigration and Refugees and Funders Committee on Civic Participation, *Investing in Our Communities: Strategies for Immigrant Integration*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *U.S. Population Projections: 2005 – 2050*, Pew Research Center, February 11, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Capp, Randolph, Michael E. Fix, and Jeffrey S. Passel, *The Dispersal of Immigrants in the 1990s*, The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. November 26, 2002, Brief #2, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Craig McGarvey, Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees in collaboration with Funders Committee on Civic Participation, *Pursuing Democracy's Promise: Newcomer Participation in America*, 2004, p. 13.

## Status of National Immigration Reform

In 2007, the question of what to do about the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants currently living and working in the United States emerged again at the forefront of the American political debate. A Comprehensive Immigration Reform Bill—which called for a guest worker program, a point system to determine naturalization eligibility, and an increase in border security—was introduced with bipartisan support in the House before dying in the Senate. This experience exposed not only the depth of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, but also the lack of political will to address this contentious issue. The recent tripling of fees for naturalization applications and other immigration petitions, the backlog of applications, heightened enforcement of federal immigration policies, and an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment in the media have put new pressures on New York City’s immigrant residents.

### New York City’s Immigrant Communities

According to a 2005 report from the Department of City Planning and the Mayor’s Office on Immigrant Affairs, New York City had 2.9 million foreign-born residents out of a total population of approximately 8.3 million in 2000. This is the largest number in the city’s history. These immigrants have come from a multitude of nations that is unmatched by any other American city.

43 percent of the city’s 3 million foreign-born residents arrived in the United States in the last 10 years; 46 percent of the city’s immigrant population speaks a language other than English at home.

- *The Newest New Yorkers 2000* Briefing Booklet, New York City Department of Planning Population Division

New York City’s demography is not static, but shaped by a dynamic flow of people. As some people leave the city for other points in the Northeast and beyond, a continuous flow of new immigrants replenishes the city’s population. In just 30 years, what was primarily a European population has now become a place with no dominant race/ethnic or nationality group. Indeed, New York epitomizes the world city.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Newest New Yorkers: Immigrant New York in the New Millennium*, New York City Department of City Planning Population Division, p. 8.

**Foreign-born Population by Country of Birth  
New York City, 1990 and 2000**

	2000		1990		Growth, 1990-2000	
	Rank	Number	Rank	Number	Number	Percent
<b>TOTAL, Foreign-born</b>	-	2,871,032	-	2,082,931	788,101	37.8
Dominican Republic	1	369,186	1	225,017	144,169	64.1
China	2	261,551	2	160,399	101,152	63.1
Jamaica	3	178,922	3	116,128	62,794	54.1
Guyana	4	130,647	6	76,150	54,497	71.6
Mexico	5	122,550	17	32,689	89,861	274.9
Ecuador	6	114,944	10	60,451	54,493	90.1
Haiti	7	95,580	7	71,892	23,688	32.9
Trinidad & Tobago	8	88,794	12	56,478	32,316	57.2
Colombia	9	84,404	8	65,731	18,673	28.4
Russia	10	81,408	*	*	*	*
Italy	11	72,481	4	98,868	(26,387)	-26.7
Korea	12	70,990	11	56,949	14,041	24.7
Ukraine	13	69,727	*	*	*	*
India	14	68,263	14	40,419	27,844	68.9
Poland	15	65,999	9	61,265	4,734	7.7
Philippines	16	49,644	16	36,463	13,181	36.1
Bangladesh	17	42,865	42	8,695	34,170	393.0
Pakistan	18	39,165	29	14,911	24,254	162.7
Honduras	19	32,358	27	17,890	14,468	80.9
Greece	20	29,805	18	31,894	(2,089)	-6.5

\*The USSR was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in 1990 with 80,815 residents. If it were a single entity in 2000, it would have ranked 4<sup>th</sup> with approximately 164,000 persons.

Source: The Newest New Yorkers 2000, Briefing Booklet, New York City Department of City Planning Population Division.

## Immigrants: A Catalyst for Economic Growth for New York

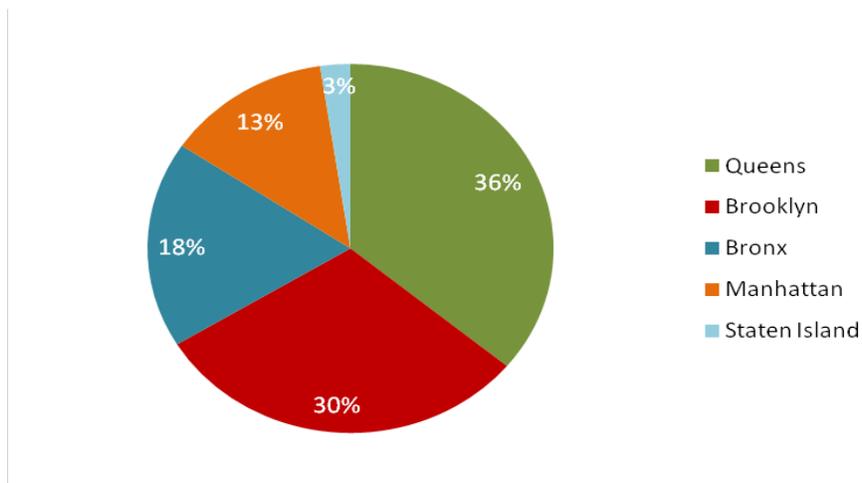
In the political frenzy around immigration policy and reform, it is all too easy to lose perspective on the economic role that immigrants play in New York State. Immigrants make up 21 percent of the state population, and contribute to New York’s economy in a wide variety of ways.

The Fiscal Policy Institute report, *Working for a Better Life*, documents how immigrants in New York State—both legal and undocumented—have become a central component in the state’s economic growth. Immigrants added \$229 billion to the state’s economy in 2006. This represents an astounding 22.4 percent of New York State’s total gross domestic product.<sup>9</sup> The study also found that city neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants have seen rapid growth in new business startups. Immigrants are generally credited with bringing new life and vitality to disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout the city. Recognizing and embracing the demographic trends that have helped shape New York City over the last decades could help create the renewed energy and focus needed to address the city’s current and future social, economic, and political challenges and opportunities.

## Immigrant Impact on New York City School System

Education systems have always been a key entry point for immigrant integration. And, perhaps no other public institution has witnessed the profound changes caused by immigration as have public schools. According to the New York City Department of Education, 6.2 percent of the overall student population is considered “new immigrants,” (meaning they have been in the United States three years or less); 43.7 percent of English Language Learners (ELL) are foreign-born, and 41.8 percent of all students are from immigrant families that speak a language other than English at home.<sup>10</sup> Across New York’s five boroughs, schools will continue to be a vital public institution supporting and celebrating the contributions of the city’s diverse student body and their families.

**Diversity in New York City Public Schools by Borough**



Source: The Newest New Yorkers 2000, Briefing Booklet, New York City Department of City Planning Population Division

<sup>9</sup> Fiscal Policy Institute, *Working for a Better Life*, November 2007.

<sup>10</sup> New York City Department of Education.

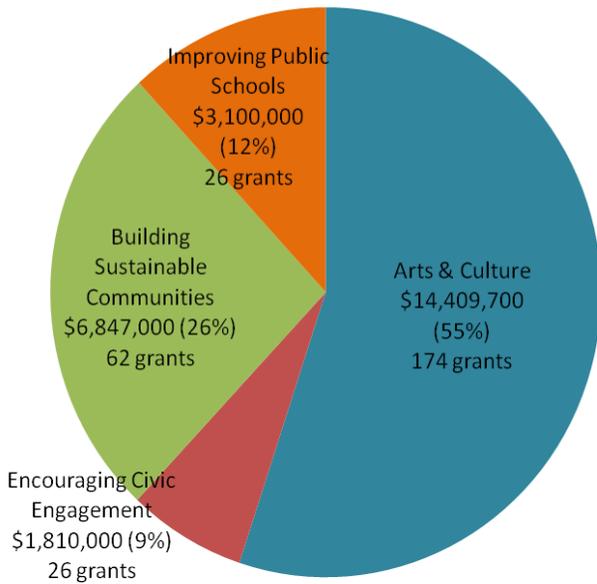
## OVERVIEW OF RBF'S NEW YORK CITY GRANTMAKING

Since 2003, the RBF's New York City grantmaking has pursued four goals:

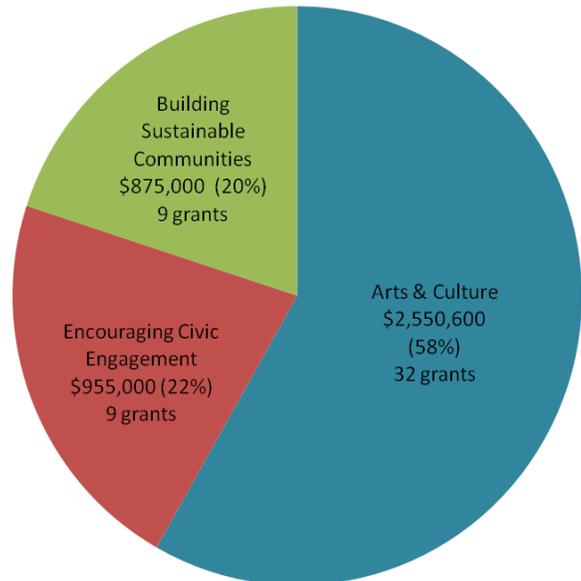
- **Democratic Practice:** Encouraging civic engagement
- **Human Advancement:** Encouraging civic participation in public education<sup>11</sup>
- **Sustainable Development:** Building sustainable communities
- **Charles E. Culpeper Arts & Culture Grants:** Supporting the creative process and building capacity in cultural organizations

During the period 2003-2008, the majority of the New York City resources, nearly \$14.4 million, were allocated to the Charles E. Culpeper Arts & Culture Grants. Sustainable Development work received just over \$6.8 million, while Democratic Practice and Human Advancement/Education received \$1.8 and \$3.1 million respectively. In 2009, New York City's Human Advancement/Education grantmaking was incorporated into the "encouraging civic engagement" goal—a natural reframing given that work's strong orientation toward community organizing and civic participation as strategies to improve schools.

Pivotal Place: New York City  
Total Grantmaking Dollars by Program Goal  
2003-2008



Pivotal Place: New York City  
2009 Grantmaking Dollars by Program Goal



<sup>11</sup> The Human Advancement Program was eliminated in 2008; education is now coded under Democratic Practice.

When the RBF began its education grantmaking in New York City almost 13 years ago, there was no organized citywide parent and community coalition. The Campaign for Fiscal Equity's (CFE) lawsuit to secure equitable funding for public schools was just getting off the ground. The system was opaque and unaccountable; and mechanisms for collective decision making were very limited. While there is still a long way to go before public schools meet all parents' and students' expectations, much has changed since the mid-1990s. Today, there exists a strong citywide civic infrastructure of parents and community groups with strong advocacy skills; and the legislature upheld CFE's lawsuit resulting in significant new revenues for New York City public schools prior to the economic downturn.

From the outset, immigrant communities have been engaged in a range of RBF-supported work in New York. Immigrant parents and students have played a central role in the constituency-building strategy to improve public education. The Fund has supported groups that engage young and newly arrived immigrants and children of immigrants in advocacy and organizing efforts around the rights of English Language Learners and their parents. Immigrant groups also have received a series of organizational capacity-building grants. Given the progress made and the pressing issues of concern to both the immigrant community and the Fund, RBF staff believes the time is right to incorporate our education grantmaking into a larger New York City democratic practice goal of increasing immigrant civic and political participation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE GRANTMAKING IN NEW YORK CITY**

The proposed shift to a sharper focus on civic and political participation of immigrant communities will position the New York City program to respond in a more robust manner to key civic issues in New York City.

The RBF would consider multiyear grants, strategic planning assistance, professional development grants, support for coalition building, public policy development, public forums on relevant immigration civic engagement issues, and advocacy. Going forward, the Fund would no longer have a goal explicitly focused on improving the New York City's public education system.

That said, the city's education system would be one of the public institutions the RBF would seek to impact by:

- Working with several citywide education coalitions to be more deliberate in advancing meaningful engagement of immigrant parents and students.
- Supporting coalition building among education advocacy groups with immigrant-led, multi-issue groups to strengthen these associations in order to grow and broaden impact.

The RBF also would consider opportunities to support issue-specific campaigns that emerge from coalitions that address key civic issues of concern to immigrant populations and have the potential for significant impact locally and nationally. Both new and established community-based organizations and the neighborhoods and public institutions that they are trying to improve, will benefit from the coming together of these different constituencies and stronger organizations. Ensuring that the barriers to greater civic participation are removed will go a long way to making New York City a model for immigrant and new citizen integration. RBF staff also aims to bring the New York experience and innovations to national debates on immigration reform likely to take place in the coming years.

## CONCLUSION

By focusing on the civic and political engagement of immigrant communities, the Fund aims to contribute to a more equitable New York. RBF staff envisions strengthening broad-based citywide coalitions of immigrant groups working with other organizations to impact schools, housing, jobs, civil liberties, and public discourse. The RBF's support for immigrant community organizations and leaders will enhance the ability of many marginalized groups to join with diverse constituents in advocacy campaigns that seek to improve government agency responsiveness, transparency, and accountability at the local, state, and federal levels. Through speaker forums, policy research, and other forms of dissemination, the Fund can galvanize groups to develop joint actions and help support advances in other RBF program areas. Finally, the Fund's grantmaking<sup>12</sup> will help build a record of success locally that can contribute to national immigration reform and community development policy.

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<sup>12</sup> The revised Pivotal Place: New York City guidelines are available at [www.rbf.org](http://www.rbf.org).