

## ***Si se puede!*** **Music, musicians and Latino Vote at the 2008 US Presidential Election**

Jean-Michel Lafleur\* e Marco Martiniello\*\*

**Abstract** This article seeks to examine the relevance of popular culture and music in particular in the context of post-migratory multicultural societies. More precisely, we aim to demonstrate how music and musicians contribute - in specific spatial and temporal settings - to mobilizing migrant origin populations. The article starts with a conceptual discussion on the role of music for ethnic and migrant groups and on the role of music and musicians in electoral campaigns. Subsequently, we review the case of the 2008 US presidential campaign to show the relevance of minority artists' productions and the political use that can be made out of it in competitive electoral contexts such as that of the United States.

**Keywords** Culture, music, artists, political campaign, immigrants, minorities

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## ■ *Si se puede!*

# Music, musicians and Latino Vote at the 2008 US Presidential Election

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Having since long been neglected, issues of participation and political representation of migrants and ethnic minorities of migrant origin have in recent years become the subject of public debate and media coverage.<sup>1</sup> The task of sociologists and political scientists interested in understanding and explaining the mechanisms of political inclusion of immigrants and their descendants is not easy. Indeed, the issue of electoral participation of foreigners and citizens whose ancestors are or were immigrants, for example, does not make itself easily understood because statistics usually available in the area are insufficient and, moreover, the necessary financial resources to carry out large surveys, such as exit polls, are desperately lacking.<sup>2</sup>

However, sociologists and political scientists focusing on the relationship between immigrants and their descendants on the one hand, and formal political institutions, on the other hand, have long neglected other important inputs such as the political significance of the practices and musical productions of migrants and ethnic minorities, or those that are primarily addressed by them. For the majority of traditional political scientists, the boundaries of politics and political institutions coincide perfectly. According to them, there is no need to exercise significant politics outside of elected assemblies, government circles and political parties. To consider the political dimension of music, which is more for immigrants and their descendants, is of little interest and meaning.

In turn, the specialists of Cultural Studies tend to exaggerate the political dimension of art and culture in general. For many of them, nothing can be without political relevance. Therefore, rap, for example, is considered as a practice of resistance or affirmation of identity, whatever may be its content and the approach advocated by the artists.

This article proposes a 'third way' that consists in affirming that it is interesting and important to examine the political relevance of popular arts in general, and music in particular, in the context of multicultural post-migration societies (Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008; Lafleur and Martiniello, 2009). In what way do they allow to a part of a population of immigrant origin to express political views and mobilise themselves politically under certain spatio-temporal conditions?

In the context of electoral participation, we wonder what role music and musicians can play in the political participation of citizens from immigrant or ethnic minorities. Can they be used to build or strengthen electoral support of the candidates? What attitude do candidates adopt with regard to artists during a campaign?

We wish to exemplify this through the US presidential elections of 2008, during which music and musicians were very much present, in particular via clips on the Internet and through concerts, primarily in support of Barack Obama. As will be discussed through various examples, but more particularly regarding the Latino electorate (much of which stems from immigration), musicians have stepped up efforts to mobilise this community.

The article consists of four parts. The first part presents a general discussion on the relationship between music, musicians and politics, with particular emphasis on the United States. The second part proposes a general theoretical framework in order to understand the relevance of musicians and music for the expression and political mobilisation of immigrants and ethnic minorities. This framework then evokes attempts of instrumentalisation of musicians and 'immigrated' musics for electoral purposes. The third part compares this theoretical framework to empirical data collected during the campaign that has led to the election of the first African-American president in the history of the United States. Finally, the conclusion outlines some research perspectives in order to analyze the relationship between popular culture and political mobilisation in the field of Migration and Ethnic Studies.

### **Music and political participation in the United States: some general reflections**

The American elections in the 19th century can be described as moments of socialisation whereby (male) citizens went to the polls with their friends and enjoyed the entertainment offered by the candidates (McGerr, 1986). At that time, there was no question of voting by going to work but to seize the opportunity to meet others, socialise or even discuss business (Altschuler and Blumin, 2000). Although one must bear in mind that the electorate was much smaller than it is today, the rate of electoral participation was also much higher than it would be in the 20th century. This has led some researchers (Addonizio, Green and Glaser, 2007) to assert the hypothesis that to increase voter turnout today, one should not focus solely on the grounds that discourage electoral participation, but instead consider the benefits that voters can have by their presence at the polling station on election day. To prove so, they organised a music festival on election's day in front of polling stations in different US cities. By doing so, they have demonstrated that the festive gatherings did have an impact on voter turnout.

The analogy with the 19th century elections obviously has its limits; the most notable being the increasing role played by the television in the US elections after the World War II. But while television certainly has influenced the behaviour of US electoral campaigns, some researchers have however shown the limits of this medium. Baum notes that with the increasing number of channels available to American households, news of political nature, and especially presidential elections, compete with entertainment programs (Baum and Kernell, 1999; Baum, 2005). For Baum, this has tended to encourage politicians to reformat their message to fit an audience accustomed to 'zapping' when bored, but also to expose themselves in television entertainment programs in order to reach less politicised population segments, that are also most likely to easily change their party preference.

In this context where television becomes the main medium used by candidates to reach voters, music will equally play an increasing role. Certainly, this can already be noted during the 1932 presidential, for which Franklin D. Roosevelt chose the song *Happy Days Are Here Again* (a song associated with democratic campaigns up to present) as his campaign anthem.<sup>3</sup> Besides the optimistic tone and content to associate the candidate with a positive image, the political significance of this song, taken from a musical comedy, was however limited. Things were different when Ronald Reagan chose Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* in 1984.<sup>4</sup> While the republican candidate for re-election saw this song as a hymn to the greatness of the country he ruled, he did not think its author would repudiate it, recalling that it was written thinking of the idleness of an America traumatised by the Vietnam War. Many other artists have tried to control the political use of their works, such as Tom Petty who refused the song *I won't back down* to George W. Bush for the 2000 presidential election while he did allow Hillary Clinton to lay claim on it for the Democratic primary of 2008.<sup>5</sup>

By means of these examples one might ask, first, why candidates introduce music and want to associate themselves with musicians during their campaign and secondly, why musicians decide to support a candidate and with what impact.

To understand the interest of candidates to use music and musicians, we can first mention the work of Kenneth Burke (1969) on the theory of identification which, applied to artists during the presidential US election, shows that if a segment of the population, especially youngsters, identify with an artist, this population will then tend to follow the political preferences of the artist.

For Eyerman and Jamison (1998: 163), social movements depend on the formation of a collective identity in which music can play a major role. According to these authors, music helps to create a sense of collective belonging that favors adherence to a cause to the benefit of ritualised and shared memories to which it refers. Lahusen (1996), in turn, insists on the legitimate function of artists. The latter, through the recognition of the legitimacy and validity of their opinions, can serve as a guarantee to a cause and to political action. It appears, therefore, if we adhere to these different works, firstly, that the pressure of the media system, especially television, encourages politicians to simplify their message and spread it through unconventional forums such as entertainment broadcasts, where artists traditionally enjoy a lot of legitimacy. On the other hand, the limited audience of mainstream political actors associated with the emergence of new non-elected actors (companies, international organisations,...) urges politicians to call for artists in order to maintain the interest in political participation and thereby the legitimacy of the democratic system that is in place. If these approaches may help to understand why the candidates show themselves alongside artists in election rallies, they explain to a less satisfactory degree why one candidate can sometimes use only one song without trying to appear alongside of the artist.

It is by means of a more detailed analysis of what music 'does' that one should try to better define its utility for a candidate in the presidential election in particular. First, there is the sound, and rhythm that have to convey a positive impression of the candidate with the image of *Happy Days Are Here Again*, used by Roosevelt. Next, there is

the choice of the musical genre. Although hip-hop may nowadays be singled out for its violent and misogynistic connotations, it remains associated with urban, disadvantaged African-American youth. Using this type of music, or the support of artists that claim to form part of it, in an election campaign is also a way to reach this population segment on the one hand, and to recognise its socio-cultural specificity on the other. Similarly, when John McCain takes a country style song called *Raisin 'McCain* as campaign anthem, he chooses a genre embodying a white, rural and conservative America (although there is also an alternative country that is not conservative).<sup>6</sup>

Even more obvious than genre, sound or rhythm, lyrics can help shape the image of a candidate to express his poetic vision of society or, more directly, his political program. This is the case with *High Hopes* of which Frank Sinatra rewrote the lyrics for the campaign of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1960.<sup>7</sup> But it is also the case of *Yes, we can*, which words are taken from a speech written by Barack Obama, set to music by WILL.I.AM with the contribution of various performers.<sup>8</sup>

One consequently finds what Rolston (2001) calls lyrical drift or diversion of words, which consists in taking the original meaning of a song out of its context to give it another meaning by reinterpreting it in another context. This was attempted by Ronald Reagan with the hit *Born in the USA*, and caused Bruce Springsteen to reiterate the context in which this song was written. Finally, we can also mention that the performance on stage may also be a commitment within an election campaign.

Regarding the role of musicians, and artists in general, in election campaigns, one should also consider their influence through activities not directly related to their work or performance. In this field, Anglo-Saxon political science has long studied the role of celebrities in political campaigns using the concept of 'celebrity endorsement', coined in commercial sciences that study the persuasive power of 'celebrities' in purchasing decisions. Thus Wood and Herbst (2007) point out that, both in politics and in marketing, 'personalities' are an inspiration, especially for youngsters, and can have an influence. Corner (2000) explains the desire of politicians to associate themselves with persons known to occupy two separate spaces: that of politics where the political identity of a person is forged and where competence is a criterion for success; and that of the public, where awareness and empathy play a far more important role. In the latter case, the depoliticised electorate described by Baum (2005) may be affected with the help of artists.

One element is worth noting with hindsight to the influence of artists such as we have described above. Indeed, one tends to present social groups, especially youngsters, as homogeneous groups that, united by their preference for certain artists, could make similar political choices if these artists encouraged them to do so. This is predicated on the supposed ability of artists to be, as we have seen in the work of Eyerman and Jamison (1998), 'bearers of truth' within social groups. This ability to influence, in turn, would be the result of a process of creating a collective consciousness among different individuals through the ritualised performance of music and the common emotions it provokes. For Lahusen (1996), the values that unite the audience are hence assets that give artists the privilege of being recognised by the public as having legitimate political opinions.

Before addressing the issue of music and immigrant musicians in the electoral campaign of 2008 in the United States, we will present a theoretical framework in order to understand the complex relationships between music, immigrants, ethnic minorities and politics in a post-migratory situation.

### **Music and political action of immigrants and ethnic minorities**

We will first propose a general theoretical framework in order to value the relevance of musicians for the expression and political mobilisation of immigrants and ethnic minorities. We will then evoke the process of instrumentalisation of musicians and 'immigrant music' for electoral purposes in a highly competitive political context like the one of the United States.

Why when they do it, do immigrants and their descendants, as well as ethnic and racial minorities, choose the arts in general, and music in particular, as a form of expression, even as a means of political mobilisation?

Six elements can be put forward to answer this question. First, the political usage of music or other forms of artistic expression by ethnic minorities and immigrants must always be situated in its context and be relativised. One should avoid considering that these groups have traditionally and consistently made use of arts and music in their process of political mobilisation. This would obviously be a mistake. To say that the arts in general and music in particular may have a political relevance and an important function in the mobilisation and political participation of immigrants and ethnic minorities is one thing, but to claim that this is necessarily the case is much more questionable. The question of whether music can be political in itself or only the context in which it is produced renders it political, remains very relevant. In this sense, we recall that when the band *Carte de Séjour* 'remixed' the famous song *Douce France* with Arabic sounds, in the 1980s, voices rose in protest against the re-appropriation of this famous French popular song by a youth segment of immigrant origin.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, one can hypothesise that when the conventional paths of political participation are closed or restricted, the arts and music can become the only means of implicit or explicit political expression. From this point of view, the example of black Americans in the era of segregation is enlightening. Excluded from conventional politics, without political rights, they found ways of expression and political mobilisation in music and literature. Thus, although blues and jazz cannot be regarded as political music, there are many examples to demonstrate how these musical styles allowed to challenge the US apartheid system in force or to resist it. One of the earliest political songs of jazz and blues is no other than the famous *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holiday, a poignant plea tale about lynching, to which blacks in the Deep South often fell victim (Margolick, 2000).<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, even when spaces of conventional political participation are open, arts and music can be of considerable political importance. A lot has been said about the disinterest of young people from every possible origin with regard to politics. Some

even argue that we are facing an ignorant generation with whom social issues do not resonate. However, when looking at rap, for example, it can be noted that some of these young rappers, often coming from immigrant or ethnic minorities, have a lucid and constructed discourse and clear political views. These young people are wary of political institutions that they perceive as distant, and they express their views or challenge the existing system in general, as they also do with the ethnic and racial discrimination of which they consider themselves to be the victims, through music. This then becomes the preferred means adapted to their political demands.

Fourth, the use of music does not necessarily replace the conventional political participation. Thus, while Doc Gyneco put himself at the service of Nicolas Sarkozy's campaign, Joey Starr used his rap to encourage the youth of the suburbs to register to vote and to vote to prevent the election of the former French minister of interior affairs to the presidency of the republic. In the penultimate US presidential elections, we saw Bruce Springsteen unsuccessfully put all his popularity to prevent the re-election of George Bush.

Fifthly, music often plays a role in social and political movements in such a way that it is sometimes difficult to tell if music is a means of political expression or if political mobilisation is a condition of artistic production. For example, the US civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s was both a socio-political movement and an artistic movement in which specific musical forms played a major role (the folk of Pete Seeger or Joan Baez, the soul of Curtis Mayfield and others, the rock music of MC5, etc...).

Finally, the social and economic resources that can be mobilised by minorities also partially explain the type of artistic expression that is most easily used for political purposes. Music can be performed without instruments or with limited and inexpensive equipment, unlike movies for example, which require financial and social resources that are difficultly accessible. Today, the development of the Internet allows virtually anyone to post messages on specialised sites like MySpace or YouTube. In general, certain art forms are more easily within reach of a larger group of people than others. Thus, the undocumented immigrant musician may have its own visibility as an artist on the canvas, regardless of his legal status or financial resources. A good example is provided by the Bolivian musician William Sandoval, 'leader' of some of the undocumented migrants in Belgium, whose musical site allows him to broadcast music and political messages.<sup>11</sup>

In a book entitled *Acting in Concert: Music, Community and Political Action* (1998), political scientist Mark Mattern presents an interesting typology of political action in popular music. First, music can inscribe itself in a political confrontation. It then becomes a form of resistance, opposition and struggle against those that are in power. Classic examples of this type of action are the protest songs of the 1960s and the music of black Americans in their fight against the Jim Crow system, but also the British reggae of the 1980s. The musicians of the Caribbean immigration critiqued the injustices and oppression of which they were victims. They fought for a radical change of power relations in society, against racism and the extreme right and for an

interracial harmony. Music in its conflictual use is considered as an act of militancy where both oppressors and oppressed, both good and evil, are clearly identified as part of a zero-sum game. Such use of music can help to mediatise a cause, and can encourage depoliticised minorities to rejoin the field of political action and therefore sometimes help to influence public politics. In return, the confrontation with music can also strengthen the position of the actors involved, thus strengthening the division between oppressors and oppressed, although this dichotomous model ignores the grey areas and the fluidity between these groups. Secondly, music can have a deliberative function by stimulating reflection on the collective identity of the minority group and the negotiation of this identity with that of other minority groups. Many studies have been conducted on the role of music in the affirmation of identity in immigrant communities and ethnic groups. Viesca (2004), for example, has highlighted the role of Latin-fusion musical productions in the Greater Eastside of Los Angeles. This music (the group Aztlán Underground is a representative) mixes ancient sounds of Mexican *Folklorico* and more contemporary sounds of North American hip-hop to create an own musical style expressing both the roots of the Chicano community and its marginality in the era of globalisation.<sup>12</sup> The debates that have rocked the world of hip-hop show this deliberative function of music. Indeed, there is little uniformity in this movement made of different currents that can be distinguished by their political analysis, their positions on the racial issue, on immigration, sexism, etc. All these debates that help to make sense of collective identity use music as a vector. In the end, music forms part of a pragmatic action when musicians come together to organise a special event in order to achieve a specific result. The best examples of this category are the concerts of *SOS Racisme* in France or the *Live8* concerts driven by Bob Geldof, the *0110 concerts* in Belgium in 2006, *Live Aid*, *Farm Aid*, *Concert for Bangladesh*, the *Belgavox* concert in support of Belgian unity in 2009,<sup>13</sup> etc. To be sure, these three forms of political action through music are not mutually exclusive and they do not particularly relate to minorities of immigrant origin. However, this typology is a good starting point to examine how immigrants and their descendants as well as ethnic minorities can be both political actors and artistic players in order to improve their position in society.

Before focusing on the American electoral campaign of 2008, we would like to consider the instrumentalisation attempts of musicians and immigrant musics purposes. Answering this question requires taking the measure of the challenge posed by the vote of citizens of immigrant and ethnic minorities. In the United States, for example, candidates develop many strategies to attract, or at least not offend, different minorities. In recent years, the Latino electorate has increased significantly in both the Southern States and in other key states for US policy. Being electorally successful on both regional and national levels without the support of Latino voters is difficult not only because of their demographics but also because of the peculiarities of the American electoral system. In European countries, the electoral weight of citizens of immigrant origin may also be significant in some countries, in certain regions and cities. Historically, the promotion of politicians of immigrant origin has often been the first means used by certain parties to try to win the electoral support of citizens of immigrant origin.

In this context, it is conceivable that some forms of popular musics and the ability of expression of musicians from immigrant and ethnic minorities may help to mobilise voters. These artists and their cultural productions can be part of a strategy of political manipulation to direct the vote of citizens of immigrant and ethnic minorities to certain parties or particular candidates. These manipulative attempts may find their origin in the proper initiatives of artists that are integrated in the electoral strategy of a candidate. The instrumentalisation may also be orchestrated by officials of the electoral campaign of certain candidates.

### **The case of the 2008 US Presidential Elections**

Although artists have historically been involved in US electoral campaigns, it is the election of 2008 that seems to have given a new dimension to the presence of artists: be it record financial contributions made by the artists themselves, songs composed in honor of the candidates, or evidence of explicit support in the press or cultural events. We will focus here on the role artists have played in the campaign of Barack Obama and we will particularly focus on Latino artists.

According to the press, no less than thousand songs, known or unknown, have been written in support of Barack Obama and it would take about 50 hours to listen to them all on the site [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (Les Inrockuptibles, 2008). If the involvement of artists in the American electoral campaigns thus seems to have taken on new proportions with the advent of candidate Obama, the phenomenon is still part of a certain tradition of political activism of American protest singers, of which the period of the Vietnam War up till now seemed like the golden age.

But before considering the mobilisation of artists in favor of Barack Obama, it is a good idea to first stress the importance of two terms of President Bush in the awakening of the political consciousness of many artists. In fact, whether they belonged to musical styles known for their rebellious nature, such as independent rock, or to country music, in the collective imagination associated with conservative America, many artists have openly positioned themselves against the foreign policy of President Bush. These position-takings entailed sharp criticism for certain groups, such as the female country music group Dixie Chicks, even among its traditional audience.

During the 2004 presidential campaign, two artists that would later engage in the Obama campaign, Sheryl Crow and Bruce Springsteen, had already supported the Democratic candidate John Kerry in a collective of artists grouped under the acronym 'Vote for Change'. This campaign, that saw a number of concerts in states crucial to the presidential election, however ended in disappointment. For artists like John Fogerty (frontman of Creedence Clearwater Revival), *"extremely disappointed to see that most people have forgotten what happened in Vietnam"*, the quagmire in Iraq had to lead the American electorate to punish George W. Bush in 2004 (Le Soir, 2008: 35). This was not the case, but this episode proved, as pointed out by Dave Matthews, that for the artists supporting Kerry in 2004, 'the motivation was getting rid of Bush,

of being against everything he stood for' rather than really support the political candidate Kerry (Rolling Stone, 2008).

Along with the quagmire in Iraq, another dramatic event helped in bringing artists together against George W. Bush: Hurricane Katrina, breaking in upon New Orleans, revealed the failures of the government in place and resulted in a surge of solidarity led by artists like Bruce Springsteen, who held a solidarity concert for the hurricane victims, or Brad Pitt, who was involved in rebuilding neighbourhoods. By the end of the second term of George W. Bush, this last one was successful in the mobilisation of many artists against him. It is in part on this dissatisfaction that the success of Barack Obama would gradually be built.

Very different from the campaign around candidate Kerry, the artists supporting Obama will retake his message of change. It is no longer about opposing the republican opponent and what he represents, but rather about adhering to the values of the democratic candidate that is promoting a new vision for the United States. Sheryl Crow does not say anything else when she tells the Swiss newspaper *Le Matin* that *'Obama's victory is a must, only he can offer my country the change it needs'* (our emphasis, *Le Matin*, 2008). Barack Obama himself explains why so many artists have adhered to his political message: *"The musicians and, more generally, creative people may be more prone to ideas of change, or at least more receptive - to not be satisfied with what exists, but to take it forward"* (Rolling Stone, 2008).

Among the initiatives taken by artists, the most significant one has been to publicly display their support for candidate Obama in songs, during a concert, in newspapers or on the web. Dave Matthews, for example, sent an e-mail on October 4, 2008, the day before 'Super Tuesday', to no less than one million email addresses of fans gathered over the years (Rolling Stone, 2008). Bruce Springsteen, in turn, published a letter on his website in April 2008, in which he declared his support for Obama because *"[h]e speaks to the America I've envisioned in my music for the past 35 years, a generous nation with a citizenry willing to tackle nuanced and complex problems, a country that's interested in its collective destiny and in the potential of its gathered spirit. A place where '...nobody crowds you, and nobody goes it alone"* (USA Today, 2008).

If one considers the hundreds of artists, known or less-known, that have sent similar messages to their fans, it appears that millions of potential voters have been directly or indirectly reached by an encouragement to vote for Obama. Surveys conducted by private companies and research conducted by scholars differ on the ability of celebrities to influence the vote of voters (Wood and Herbst, 2007:147). For example, a survey on the influence of the support of the most famous American television host Oprah Winfrey for Barack Obama says that 60% of respondents felt that this support was useful for Barack Obama, while 69% said that their own vote would not be influenced by this support (Pew Research Center, 2007).

In addition to public appeals to vote for candidate Obama, many artists have expressed themselves in music. This is the case of Sheryl Crow that changed her *Are you strong enough to be my man?* to *Are you strong enough to be my president?* But there

can also be completely new songs composed during the electoral campaign. This applies to the pop song entitled *I Got a Crush ... On Obama*, performed by Amber Lee Ettinger, better known as the "Obama Girl" that was viewed by over two million Internet users in less than three weeks on the site [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (USA Today, 2007).<sup>14</sup>

The musical production that would be mediated most belongs to a genre that mixes political speech and musical accompaniment. The mix of *Yes We Can*, produced by African-American musician WILL.I.AM from a speech that Barack Obama delivered on January 8, 2008 in New Hampshire, after his defeat in that state, with accompaniment of guitar, a song covered by a series of show business personalities like Scarlett Johanson and Herbie Hancock.<sup>15</sup> This song, originally released in video format, was viewed 16 million times between February and July 2008 on the site [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (Rolling Stone, 2008). Although here again it would be impossible to measure the impact of this video on voter choice, this campaign event, echoed by the media, teaches us at least two things. On the one hand, the Internet plays an important role, since 24% of Americans over the age of 18 regularly monitored the election campaign online (Le Soir, 2008). For Barack Obama and many artists such as WILL.I.AM, the web has proved a more direct, faster and often less costly means than television to speak to American citizens. But especially, as the artist states, the web makes it possible to turn the individual into an active citizen within the campaign since with this video, "*You have a choice whether or not you wanna forward it to your friend, or whether or not you even wanna watch it. The rules changed because of the Internet*" (Rolling Stone, 2008). On the other hand, this episode tells us that artistic initiatives that are independent of the Barack Obama campaign can afterwards find themselves at the heart of the official propaganda of the candidate, since the latter showed the video on his campaign website.

In addition to public statements and artistic productions trying to appear in favour of Barack Obama, many artists have also displayed their support during their performance. Examples include the encouragements to vote for Obama and the projection of his image on big screen by hip-hop artist Jay-Z during his tour, or Michael Stipe of REM wearing a t-shirt bearing the image of the democratic candidate during his concerts. One also recalls that Madonna showed her inclination for the democratic cause by attacking candidate McCain, whom she compared to Adolf Hitler during one of her shows. Some other artists like the Foo Fighters and Jackson Browne explicitly asked John McCain to stop using their songs without permission as part of his campaign. Such public disclaimers appear as much public support to Barack Obama.

The musical tours that have been specially arranged for the elections have been numerous. They often had the promotion of youth participation in the elections as a formal message. The tour *Get Out and Vote 08*, for example, was organised by a collective of artists in partnership with the association Rock the Vote, which for nearly 20 years encourages young people to participate in elections through artists. We note that many artists participating in this tour had previously expressed their support for candidate Barack Obama. The same was true for the Hip-hop Summit Action Network association, which organised free concerts for those willing to register as voters. Its leader, Russell Simmons, is a star in the world of hip-hop and he equally supported

Obama. These events are worth noting when one knows that among the 18-29 year olds, 2 million more voters than in 2004 were registered, thus reaching a participation rate of 51%, a level not been reached since 1972 (Rockthevote, 2009).

Regarding Latinos, of whom the electoral mobilisation is low historically speaking, with the notable exception of Cuban-Americans (Lafleur, 2005), various initiatives were taken by members of the community to get people to register as voters. One of the campaign's most famous video clips in Spanish, entitled *Podemos con Obama* (see below), sums up the issue pretty well in its introduction: during the 2004 presidential, President Bush won by 3.5 million votes of difference, but 8 million Latinos eligible to vote did not show up. This population can thus make a difference if it mobilises itself.

Both in the case of the Latino electorate and with youngsters, one notes that the presidential election of 2008 has brought profound changes. In fact, a poll by the Pew Hispanic Center (2008a) indicates that the involvement of Latinos increased in 12 of the 15 states where it was possible to compare the participation in the democratic primary elections of 2004 and 2008. Similarly, in the State of California Latino voters represented 30% of participants in the democratic primary in 2008 as opposed to only 16% in 2004. However, the same poll indicates that more Latinos supported the candidate Clinton than Barack Obama. During the presidential election, however, 67% of the Latinos supported the democratic candidate against 31% for John McCain (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008b). These results are even more surprising considering that Barack Obama in the eyes of the Latino community apparently had different disabilities in relation to WASP candidates. First, candidate Clinton could count on the positive balance left by her husband during his two presidential terms from the Latin community. Second, commentators emphasised the difficulty of some Latino voters to vote for an African-American candidate. In addition, in 2004, President Bush had succeeded to take over a substantial portion of the Latino vote in favour of the Republican Party (above 40%). Finally, candidate McCain had written a reform project for migration policy in Parliament with John Kerry, which had made a good impression on the community.

Although the issue of migration policy reform has certainly contributed to politicise a traditionally less active Latin population, many initiatives from the community itself also helped to drive up the turnout. A Latin member of the governing bodies of the Democratic Party (Democratic National Committee) and Hillary Clinton supporter put up a project called *Casablanca* (White House) which aim was to bring together 8.000 volunteers to encourage Latinos to register as voters (El Mundo, 2007).

Beside this type of militant initiative, artists from the community at stake, following the example of WASP artists or the African-American minority, stepped up efforts to encourage Latinos to vote (endorsement, support concert, musical productions, ... ). The Puerto Rican singer Ricky Martin, for example, said in a press statements issued by the team of candidate Clinton that she "*has always been consistent in her commitment with the needs of the Latino community*" (Latina Lista, 2008). Whether they be rock artists like Juanes or stars of norteña music such as Los Tigres del Norte, many

artists have urged their fans to register as voters at concerts. Similarly, the star of the Dominican merengue Juan Luis Guerra and Mexican rockers Mana have attended the support concert held in Miami in March 2008, entitled *Ya es Hora* (it is time), and intended to convince Latinos to go and vote. The stars of Latin-fusion of the Spam All-stars also held a support concert for Obama in Florida, bringing together 16,000 people. One therefore finds that Latino artists of different national origins and belonging to different musical styles have helped to mobilise Latino voters that are equally extremely diverse. Whether from the Mexican community, traditionally democratic but close to Clinton, or from the traditionally republican Cuban community, artists from every community and every musical style have wanted to lend their support to Obama.

The parallels between the strategies adopted by Latino artists and those of artists from other groups or communities even went much further with the production of a video bringing together 24 Latino personalities in a clip posted on YouTube entitled *Podemos con Obama* (We can with Obama).<sup>16</sup> The utterances of the director of this clip, Andres Levin, member of the Cuban funk band Yerba Buena, confirm that 'seeing the power and effect of [the WILL.I.AM] video had, I thought this is something I can do' (Miami Herald, 2008). This music video, much like that of Colombian filmmaker Andres Useche, entitled *Si se puede cambiar* (Yes we can change),<sup>17</sup> the clip *Viva Obama* in mariachi style<sup>18</sup> and the clip in reggaeton style *Como se llama* (What is his name),<sup>19</sup> was viewed hundreds of thousands of times within some weeks.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that these last two pieces are the work of a single producer, Miguel Orozco, who in 2007 adhered to candidate Obama's message and created the website Amigos de Obama<sup>20</sup> of which the goal is "(...) use new media to effectively introduce Senator Obama to Latinos and communicate his inspiring story" (WebWire, 2008). By diversifying the musical styles and using the linguistic code of 'spanglish', Orozco managed to send out a unifying message around candidate Obama for a Latino community characterised by its diverse national origins, its migration routes, and its cultural affinities. Contrary to the campaign song in Spanish of candidate Clinton (entitled Hillary, Hillary Clinton) that she commissioned to the artist Johnny Canales,<sup>21</sup> the hits produced by Orozco were officially used by Obama only after his campaign team had requested it (Wall Street Journal, 2007).

Moreover, this last element allows us to underline that, although we might have so far presented the artists as autonomous actors, the music and artists have also been used by the candidate Obama's in his election strategy. We have already mentioned the presence of artists at Obama's side during his campaign meetings or the organization of concerts for the democratic candidate. If the recuperation of WILL.I.AM's song on the campaign website is a clear example of strategic music use, it is the convention in Denver where Barack Obama would be officially nominated as candidate for the democratic party where the use of music has been most spectacular. The musical performances mobilised the 75.000 spectators present. With a budget of several million dollars, the event also wanted to convince a large part of the US population. According to observers, it were indeed the contributions of artists such as Melissa Etheridge, who resumed hits of Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen, rather than political

rhetoric that attracted the viewers' attention (Forbes.com, 2008).<sup>22</sup> These concerts obviously contributed to a raised public tension until Barack Obama's discourse.

One can also note that during this event, as in many efforts of candidate Obama, his entrance on stage was accompanied by a song by Irish band U2, *City of Blinding Lights*. Besides the artistic value of this piece, one might wonder why Obama is using an Irish band to open his meetings when a number of American artists offer him his support. Some observers point to the reputation of these pieces but also the vagueness of their words that can be adapted to all causes (Globe and Mail, 2008). However, we must also put this into the politicians' strategy of simplifying their message and to associate themselves with artists to incite citizen's interest in politics. The choice of a group like U2, known for its struggle for the reduction of the third world debt, hence seems particularly appropriate because of the little controversial character of its political commitments for the general public.

Before concluding, we also note that the success of candidate Obama among American artists also has to do with his qualities as an orator. As noted by Bada (2008), one finds the musicality of the sermons of African-American religious leaders in the speeches of Barack Obama. This quality, in addition to the strategic use of music and artists, has undoubtedly contributed to the attraction of the crowds like few politicians have managed to do before.

## Conclusions

After this analysis of the role of artists in the 2008 US electoral campaign, it seems important to note two limitations in the use of artists and music in such campaigns. We note, first, that it is difficult to precisely measure the impact of a song or an artist's presence alongside a candidate on the electoral results. We have shown earlier that certain categories of voters, such as youth or Latinos, have been particularly encouraged to vote in the last presidential elections. However, even if the results indicate a historic mobilisation of the electorate, it is not possible to determine the importance and role of music and artists. In turn, the resurgence of the political mobilisation of artists and the attention that they have gotten from the candidates confirm our initial idea that further study of the phenomenon is desirable. Second, our analysis of the US campaign of 2008 demonstrates the importance that the Internet has gained in communication with the public, both with regard to candidates and artists. In fact, many of the cultural productions that we have presented, have through the web, been viewed by several million people, out of the candidates' control. This element introduces a fundamental difference in comparison with traditional campaigns, in which candidates decided on their appearances with artists and on the choice of music in their electoral campaign.

The question of the relations between immigrants, their descendants, ethnic minorities and politics has become a research topic as important as others. Numerous studies have been conducted on various aspects of their mobilisation, their participation and their political representation. However, many questions remain to be explored. In

considering the relevance of music and musicians in the political life of immigrants and ethnic minorities, we have tried to show that there is an interest in going beyond traditional approaches to political participation of immigrants and to take the relationship between minority cultural productions and political expression seriously.

Our work does not lead us to any generalisation, but does allow us to make a plea for a new agenda of research on the relationship between culture and politics in post-migration and multicultural societies, and to thus reconnect in innovative ways with one of the oldest questions that has crossed the history of social, political and anthropological thought.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article, written in French by the authors, was translated into English by Bart Vanspawen.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to make a connection to the literature on post-democracy, as is done by Hague, Street and Savigny (2008). According to Crouch (2004), despite the existence of democratic institutions, post-democracy is characterized by political management by elites without taking citizens into account. In such a system, the support of artists in the political sphere aims at maintaining the illusion of political participation (which effectiveness is hence substantially reduced) by seeking to stimulate public interest.

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqsT4xnKZPg>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>4</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z11e4W8mF60>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>5</sup> Available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P93cl\\_u1mng](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P93cl_u1mng), accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>6</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmKglTJefjg>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>7</sup> Available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezp\\_8XCDYvM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezp_8XCDYvM), accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>8</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>9</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNLoxJPZqzM>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>10</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.williamsandoval.com>

<sup>12</sup> Available at <http://www.myspace.com/aztlanunderground>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>13</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgFclij92Cg>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>14</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>15</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>16</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuXqy40F4Co>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>17</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ky8Hvq-FOU>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>18</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fd-MVU4vtU>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>19</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgBbmBLGiQE>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>20</sup> [www.amigosdeobama.com](http://www.amigosdeobama.com)

<sup>21</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wNvvuG309s>, accessed on 09.09.2009

<sup>22</sup> Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNgxdQkDcu8>, accessed on 09.09.2009

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