New and Old Challenges for Mexican Americans

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There is a new cycle of anger rising against Mexican immigration to the United States. But it’s really an old story. The rejection that Chinese, Japanese, Irish, and Italian immigrants experienced is familiar through American history. Mexicans are only the newest group to be welcomed as workers but despised as citizens. Still, it seems remarkable that in 2012 so many politicians have picked a fight with as many as 34 million Mexican-Americans. This is a huge population of potential voters. And Mexican Americans are not alone: Latinos of all types – Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others - add up to total of 54 million Hispanic Americans. This is 17 percent of the population of the United States. The reality of these people raises a question that could well determine the outcome of future presidential contests: how will Latinos in America respond to Mexican bashing?

For Mexican-Americans, an anti-Mexican campaign is nothing new. It fits within repeating cycles of attraction and rejection for Mexican immigrants in this country, and it connects with a long history of challenges that citizens of Mexican descent have faced in finding their place in American society.

Mexicans are unique among the immigrant nationalities in America: they are at once among the oldest and the newest of the country’s foreign-born populations. Many Mexican-Americans can trace their heritage to ancestors who inhabited what is now the US Southwest during the years before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, when Mexico, defeated in war, gave the U.S. lands extending from Texas to California. Since the twentieth century began, this old Mexican-American community has been renewed by waves of immigration. Mexican immigrants have been accepted, sometimes even welcomed, as
laborers. Then, during economic downturns, they have been hated and even expelled when their labor was thought to be unneeded (Corcoran 49).

The border between Mexico and the United States was until quite recently more or less open. Mexicans passed almost freely between Mexico and the United States. The military-style enforcement that exists today was built up in the 1990s. After the most recent immigration surge, which started in the late 1980s, about 11.5 million Mexicans have arrived, and they are by far the largest immigrant group in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, they make up one quarter of all foreign-born people in the United States. Recent economic troubles have made this population a target for those who claim that Mexicans take jobs from Americans (Alvarez 127).

Mexicans have long fought battles to secure their position in America. The essential challenge has been the “immigration cycle.” The immigration cycle began about a century ago. Here’s how it works: in the 1920s, an expanding American economy drew hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrant laborers, including many who crossed the border illegally. This immigration wave provoked a political fight in Texas. John Nance Garner, who represented a congressional district along the border, argued that

“Mexicans have integrated well in southern Texas, and the region’s agriculture depends on them. They will do the necessary farm labor that other people won’t touch.” They are a resource that our agricultural sector can depend on for high quality labor at a low cost to employers and taxpayers (“Fearful Invasion”)."

This was the first stage of the immigration cycle - welcome. Mexicans poured in to do the work that few others would do. But then their labor became unwanted during the Great
Depression – when many whites lost jobs. This led to stage two of the immigration cycle. Stage two was promoted by people like John Box, a congressman who saw that Mexican labor was plentiful in a depressed economy. This gave him the excuse to argue that he wanted the state to be preserved for what he called “real Americans”:

“Texas must remain the home of real Americans - the white race. People like me will not allow Texas to become a dumping ground for the human hordes of poverty-stricken peon Indians of Mexico. They will invade us and make Spanish the ruling language and culture of Texas. We have too many already. We must not let Texas become brown (“Fearful Invasion”).”

This hysteria came from little more than a temporary oversupply of Mexican laborers. Hysteria led to demands for exclusion. The paranoia of Box and other politicians became part of the reaction cycle that led to the passage of major legislation establishing national origin quotas for immigration. These quotas seriously limited the number of Mexicans who could seek citizenship in the United States (“Invasion”).

In the following years, Mexican nationals faced exclusion while Mexican-Americans faced harsh segregation. Throughout the Southwest, “No Mexicans” signs hung on restaurants and stores. At the courthouse in Cochran County, Texas, a sign over the bathroom instructed: “For Whites - Mexicans Keep Out.” Discrimination persisted through the Great Depression and into the war years even though as many as 500,000 Mexican Americans served in World War II. They included up to 14,000 Mexican immigrants who were drafted even they were not American citizens. After the war ended, Mexican veterans who had not been naturalized during their service were required to show that they had
originally entered the United States legally. Despite honorable discharges, thousands who
could not show legal status were deported ("Fearful Invasion").

These veterans included men like Sergeant First Class Ysaias Morales, whose honors
included three presidential citations, who was refused service at restaurants. The wife of
Felix Longoria, a Mexican-American private killed in the Philippines during the war,
received his remains in 1948 and sought to bury them in a town near San Antonio. The
funeral home manager turned her away, saying “Other white people object to the use of the
funeral home by people of Mexican origin (Corcoran 189).” But in a sign of changes soon to
come, Longoria’s case was taken up by the American GI Forum, an organization Mexican-
Americans created after the war to deal with such discrimination. From there, the case
attracted the attention of the junior senator from Texas, Lyndon Johnson. “I deeply regret
to learn that the prejudice of some individuals extends even beyond this life,” Johnson
wrote in a telegram to the Forum. He arranged for Longoria to be buried in Arlington
National Cemetery (235).

After the war, the economy grew and needed ever more workers. The immigration
cycle turned toward welcoming Mexicans for their hard work with low wages. The Bracero
Program, which started in 1942 and continued until 1964, brought in more than 4.5 million
laborers on temporary contracts, mainly to work in American farm fields. Wages were kept
low and abuse of the workers was common, but the workers came ("From Braceros to
Invaders").

The demand for agricultural labor so outstripped the supply of legal braceros after
the war that illegal immigration surged again. Once again, it provoked a reaction.
Influential AM radio broadcasters in Los Angeles demanded the removal of Mexican farm
laborers from California, saying they were afflicted with syphilis and “inherently dishonest.” Such rhetoric set the stage for the wholesale round-ups of Operation Wetback in 1954. In coordinated attacks, the authorities sent troops, state police, and Border Patrol agents through Mexican communities, carting people away in truckloads for deportation (“From Braceros to Invaders”).

Along with this intolerance, we can also trace the efforts of Mexicans to resist discrimination and advance in American society. The tenacious struggle of Cesar Chavez to organize farmworkers in California was such an episode. This Chavez, the founder of the United Farm Workers, was a Mexican-American from Arizona who had spent part of his childhood on the California migrant trail harvesting crops. He launched his campaign to unionize grape pickers in the town of Delano in 1965. Chavez’s campaigns were about more than fair wages for farm labor. He also worked to raise the conditions of his people. In 1968, he undertook a fast protesting injustice against Mexican Americans. It lasted twenty-five days and raised him to national attention. On the day when Chavez broke his fast, it was Robert Kennedy, then a Democratic presidential candidate, who handed him morsels of bread. “The world must know, from this time forward, that the migrant farm worker, the Mexican-American, is coming into his own rights,” Kennedy said. The farmworkers were winning “a special kind of citizenship.... You are winning it for yourselves—and therefore no one can ever take it away (Gonzales and Anze).”

Caesar Chavez became Mexican-Americans’ most recognized figure, and his inspirational leadership empowered Mexican Americans. But more than any personal activism, a piece of legislation passed by Congress in 1965 had a lasting impact on empowering Mexican-Americans. The Immigration and Nationality Act transformed the
immigration system and, over the next fifty years, gave Mexican-Americans an advantage: strength in numbers. The law eliminated the national origin quotas, opening immigration to newcomers from around the world, and it put a priority on bringing family members of American citizens and legal residents who were already in the United States. This was especially favorable to Mexicans, with so many of their families settled here. Over the next five decades about 16 million Mexicans came - about 28 percent of all new immigrants. This inflow was by far the most from any nation, according to the Pew Research Center. As it turned out, half of all newcomers in the next five decades were from Latin America (Gonzales and Anza).

When we look at the Mexican immigrant experience, we can see the high personal costs they pay to join American society. For instance, a Latina from Nuevo Laredo, Marta Quintanilla Calle, left two small sons behind and on her way to an illegal border crossing. She suffered a series of sexual assaults by smugglers. She labored as a motel housekeeper and a cashier, always scrimping and fending off predatory local street gangs. “It doesn’t offer easy money to live here,” she said of the United States after two decades in the country. “You have to work hard to make it here.” But Quintanilla Calle did make it in America. She worked hard, made a stable marriage to an American citizen, and brought her sons legally to the United States. “If you want to see the fruit, first you have to sow the seed,” she would say. As soon as she could pass the naturalization test, she became a citizen herself, determined to vote. Now she has a stake in the tone and substance of the immigration debate – like so many of her fellow Latinos (“The Latino Generation”).

Calle is not the only one. Over the last decade, Latinos have begun to unite in an emerging national identity that is binding them together as a national political force. The
young people are growing up American – speaking English as a first language and going to college in significant numbers. These young Mexican-Americans are in fact working to become very much a part of this country - a country that still does not embrace them as full Americans (“The Latino Generation”).

At the same time, they are coming to identifying themselves as Latinos in the public sphere. Coming of age just as they become the largest minority, they realize the enormity of their numbers. And most of these young Mexican Americans have experience with political hostility, having grown up amid angry disputes like the failed Proposition 187 in the 1990s in California, an effort to restrict public benefits for undocumented immigrants. Even those born in the United States have had to define themselves in part in reaction to hatred from many people (“The Latino Advantage”).

The fact is that recent surveys provide convincing evidence that this Latino generation is ready to become a decisive force in American politics. There is a mountain of evidence to show that common views and experiences among different Latino groups — Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, even Cuban-Americans — are creating a common identity and an “increasingly unified and empowered population.” The fact is that 93 percent of Latinos who are under eighteen today are American citizens. By their count, every month more than 73,000 Latinos become old enough to vote. The demography is relentless (“The Latino Advantage”).

This research shows the risks for politicians who speak against Latinos. The immigration debate is becoming a critical force motivating their votes. Attacks on the community have the effect of unifying all Latino groups. For politicians to fend off the
electoral consequences of demographic change, the political parties must persuade Latino voters that the age of hostility is over (Valasquez).

Nevertheless, many politicians continue to characterize of Mexican immigrants as criminals, drug dealers, and sex offenders. It is insulting but also inaccurate, going against a consensus of academic research showing that Mexicans have lower incarceration rates than Americans. But more alarming to many Latinos are threats to deport millions of Mexican immigrants and require them to take their American-born children with them. Although a mass purge may sound outlandish, for Latino immigrants the possibility is not remote. While the pace of deportations has slowed in recent months, they continue to be a fact of life in Latino communities. During the last five years, the U.S. has deported almost a million immigrants (“The Fearful Invasion”).

Probably most offensive tactics so far is the call to repeal “birthright citizenship.” Immigrants know the term “anchor baby” is a misnomer, since US-born children cannot help their parents immigrate until the children turn twenty-one years old. It seems unlikely that any politician could mobilize the huge national push it would take to amend the Constitution, but the effect of his proposal is to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the citizenship of many Latino children (“The Fearful Invasion”).

In recent years, Latin-American political organizations have grown and connected as never before. This year, many of those groups have turned their energies to voter registration. Tens of thousands of legal immigrants have been naturalized in recent months. When these people start voting in large numbers, anti-Mexican bigots will begin to lose their positions as congressional representatives, senators, and judges. Electoral power will make Mexican-Americans in particular and Latinos in general a force to contend with.
Works Cited


