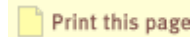


Introduction



Guided Readings: America in Ferment - The Tumultuous 1960s

Viva La Raza!

On election day, 1963, hundreds of Mexican Americans in Crystal City, Texas, the "spinach capital of the world," gathered near a statue of Popeye the Sailor to do something that most had never done before: vote. Although Mexican Americans outnumbered Anglos two to one, Anglos controlled all five seats on the Crystal City council. For three years, organizers struggled to register Mexican American voters. When the election was over, Mexican Americans had won control of the city council. "We have done the impossible," declared Albert Fuentes, who led the voter registration campaign. "If we can do it in Crystal City, we can do it all over Texas. We can awaken the sleeping giant."

During the 1960s, a new Chicano movement suddenly burst onto the national stage. Epic struggles arose across the Southwest to register voters, organize farmworkers, and regain stolen lands. The Mexican American struggle for political and civil rights has received far less attention than the struggles of other minority groups for social justice, but it is in fact only the most recent expression of a long tradition of Mexican American labor and political activism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, between 380,000 and 560,000 U.S. and foreign-born Mexicans lived in the United States. Prior to the Mexican War, many Mexican American farmers lived on land granted by Mexico or Spain. Following the war, these grants had to be legally confirmed. Fraud, protracted litigation, and onerous taxes deprived many Mexican Americans of their land, and by the turn of the century most worked as tenant farmers or as farm laborers on lands owned by Anglos. Mexican Americans faced discrimination, disfranchisement, and even lynchings. Anti-miscegenation laws prohibited intermarriage with Anglos.

Three major surges of immigration, punctuated by two large-scale efforts at deportation, shaped twentieth century Mexican American history. Between 1910 and 1930, nearly 700,000 Mexican immigrants entered the southwestern United States, pushed out of Mexico by revolutionary upheaval and economic instability and pulled into the Southwest's increasing demand for low wage, unskilled physical labor. Mexican immigrants took jobs as migratory laborers or seasonal workers in mines and packinghouses and on commercial farms and ranches. But these jobs generally resulted in lives characterized by geographical isolation and physical mobility with few opportunities for economic advancement. Most immigrants lived segregated communities where Mexican culture and organizations prevailed.

Depression-era unemployment, however, reduced immigration to less than 33,000 during the 1930s. The United States and Mexico sponsored a "repatriation" program that returned half a million people to Mexico, about half of whom were American citizens. Although the program was supposed to be voluntary, many were pressured to leave.

Demand for Mexican American labor resumed during World War II. In 1942, the United States and Mexico instituted the bracero program, which allowed Mexican contract laborers to work in the United States in seasonal agriculture and other sectors of the economy. Following the war, however, a new deportation effort sought to expel resident Mexicans who lacked American citizenship.

During the 1960s, Mexican immigration rose rapidly, propelled by the rapid growth of Mexico's population--which tripled in 50 years; by the higher wages to found in the United States--at least six times higher than those in Mexico; and the unwillingness of the Mexican government to control immigration after the demise of the bracero program in 1964.

Beginning in the early twentieth century, Mexican Americans formed many organizations to address problems of poverty and discrimination. Among the earliest were self-help organizations known as "mutualistas," which provided members with a broad range of benefits and services including credit, insurance, funeral and disability benefits, and often served as the basis for labor unions. During the 1920s, new kinds of organizations appeared, which sought to assimilate Mexican Americans into the mainstream of American society and combat discrimination in education, jobs, wages, and political representation. In 1929, these organizations united to form the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). During the 1940s and 1950s, LULAC organized voter registration drives and filed law suits to end school and job discrimination. World War II marked a major turning point in Mexican American history. More than 300,000 Mexican Americans served in the armed forces, earning more military honors proportionately than any other ethnic group. Veterans formed new activist organizations, like the American G.I. Forum and the Mexican American Political Association, to fight discrimination and end segregation.

As the 1960s began, Mexican Americans shared problems of poverty and discrimination with other minority groups. The median income of a Mexican American family was just 62 percent of the median income of the general population, and over a third of Mexican-American families lived on less than \$3,000 a year. Unemployment was twice the rate among non-Hispanic whites and four-fifths of employed Mexican Americans were concentrated in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, a third in agriculture.

Educational attainment lagged behind other groups (Mexican Americans averaged less than nine years of schooling as recently as 1970), and Mexican American pupils were concentrated in predominantly Mexican-American schools, less well staffed and supplied than non-Mexican American schools, with few Hispanic or Spanish-speaking teachers. Gerrymandered election districts and restrictive voting legislation resulted in the political underrepresentation of Mexican-Americans. In addition, they were underrepresented or excluded from juries by requirements that jurors be able to speak and understand English.

During the 1960s, a new surge of Mexican American militancy arose. In 1962 Cesar Chavez began to organize California farm workers, and three years later, in Delano, California, he led his first strike. At the same time that Chavez led the struggle for higher wages, enforcement of state labor laws, and recognition of the farm worker union, Reies Lopez Tijerina fought to win compensation for the descendants of families whose lands had been seized illegally. In 1963 Tijerina founded the Alianza Federal de Mercedes (the Federal Alliance of Land Grants) in New Mexico to restore the legal rights of heirs to Spanish and Mexican land grants that had been guaranteed under the treaty ending the Mexican War.

In Denver, Rodolfo ("Corky") Gonzales formed the Crusade for Justice in 1965 to protest school discrimination; provide legal, medical, and financial services and jobs for Chicanos; and foster the Mexican-American cultural heritage. La Raza Unida political parties arose in a number of small towns with large Mexican American populations. On college campuses across the Southwest, Mexican Americans formed political organizations.

In 1968 Congress responded to the demand among Mexican Americans for equal educational opportunity by enacting legislation encouraging school districts to adopt bilingual education programs to instruct non-English speakers in both English and their native language. In a more recent action, Congress moved in 1986 to legalize the status of many immigrants, including many Mexicans, who entered the United States illegally. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 provided permanent legal residency to undocumented workers who had lived in the United States since before 1982 and prohibits employment of illegal aliens.

Since 1960 Mexican Americans have made impressive political gains. During the 1960s four Mexican Americans--Senator Joseph Montoya of New Mexico and representatives Eligio de la Garza and Henry B. Gonzales of Texas and Edward R. Roybal of California--were elected to Congress. In 1974 two Chicanos were elected governors--Jerry Apodaca in New Mexico and Raul Castro in Arizona--becoming the first Mexican American governors since early in this century. In 1981 Henry Cisneros of San Antonio became the first

Mexican American mayor of a large city.

Today, 14 million Mexican Americans live in the United States. This is a sixty percent increase over the number in 1980 and a four-fold increase over 1960, making Mexican Americans the country's youngest and fastest growing minority group.

Because of Mexico's proximity, a continuous influx of new arrivals, and concentration in predominantly Mexican barrios and colonies, Mexican Americans are able to maintain ties with their ancestral culture to a degree not possible for other ethnic group. An estimated 40 percent of all Hispanics (of which Mexican Americans make up almost two-thirds) are immigrants and another 30 percent are the children of immigrants. As a result, Mexican Americans, more than any other immigrant group, have evolved a bilingual, bicultural identity that combines Mexican and American elements. Today, half of all Mexican Americans speak Spanish at home.

While high birthrates and immigration have contributed to increasing political power, Mexican Americans continue to lag behind other groups in political representation due to lower voting rates and the fact that many are not yet naturalized citizens. Mexican Americans are also less well off than other Americans in income, education, and home ownership rates. They are twice as likely to be poor as non-Hispanics and three times less likely to have completed college. Third generation Mexican Americans average just 11 years of schooling, 2 years less than non-Hispanics. More than other groups, Mexican American workers are concentrated in low paying jobs in factories, warehouses, construction, and the service sector. Mexican American teenagers are more likely to drop out of high school, often to help their families during periods of economic distress. Mexican Americans are less likely to have health insurance than any other ethnic group.

Today, many Americans worry about whether Mexican immigrants will assimilate into the mainstream of American life. Many fear that prospects for upward mobility--so vital for the assimilation of earlier immigrant groups--are eroding, and that the consequences are apparent in an increase in teenage pregnancy and single parent households. Others express anger about illegal immigration--an issue that has increasingly inflamed American politics. In 1994 California voters adopted Proposition 187, denying public services to illegal aliens.

As the United States approaches the twenty-first century, many important political and socio-economic issues face the country's largest immigrant group. For most European ethnic groups, ethnic background ceased to be an important factor in social or economic standing by the third generation. Will the same be true of Mexican Americans? Will Mexican Americans advance socially, economically, and politically like earlier European immigrants or will racism and discrimination consign many to an economic underclass? Will Mexican Americans follow the European immigrant path of movement out of distinct urban enclaves and intermarriage, or will they successfully maintain a distinct identity and cultural heritage? EE

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