

BACKGROUND MEMORANDUM

THE POLITICS OF MEXICAN-ORIGIN LEADERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR 2008 & BEYOND

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Woodrow Wilson Center – Mexico Institute
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Executive Summary

This workshop presents the first in-depth, binational study (titled “Focus Mexico/Enfoque México”) of the structure and priorities of Mexican-origin leadership in the United States. The study is unique in its focus on the *dual* strategies and networks characteristic of primarily U.S.-born Mexican American leaders as well as Mexican immigrant community leaders and activists.

Based on over 40 leadership focus groups conducted in six cities, as well as other research and interviews, this study finds that Mexican-origin leaders for generations have acted using a Hispanic or Latino strategy, on one hand, and a Mexican-binational or *migrante* strategy, on the other. The Hispanic/Latino strategy has developed more continuously and resulted in a vast national leadership network that reaches into virtually every sector of American society and government.

The Mexican *migrante* strategy been marked by discontinuity over time, but since the late 1980s it has undergone sustained development. This strategy has resulted in its own network of leaders and organizations, engaged in collective political action, and registered a number of political achievements. With the major exception of the immigrants’ rights marches of 2006, however, the *migrante* network has been more focused on influencing politics and policy in Mexico than in the United States.

On the national level and in key parts of the country (the Southwest, especially) these strategies and networks are notably segregated from each other. In other areas such as Chicago, however, we find significant overlap between them. This study also found a high level of agreement overall between Mexican American and Mexican immigrant leaders on key policy issues, in spite of a number of divergent priorities and the perception of a social gap separating them.

Generational change and the rapid growth of the Mexican-origin population outside of the Southwest raises questions about how the two strategies and networks will interact with each other in the future. This study finds that, contrary to previous historical experience, the binational Mexican *migrante* strategy and network may continue to develop and grow stronger in the medium term. This potential suggests a possible shift toward a more generally integrated

leadership structure that utilizes both strategies of collective socio-political action, especially in new areas of settlement and possibly on a national level as well.

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THE POLITICS OF MEXICAN-ORIGIN LEADERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR 2008 & BEYOND

I. Overview

Of the nearly 30 million people of Mexican origin in the U.S., some 60% are native born and 40% are immigrants. Among the voting age population, however, the immigrants from Mexico constitute a majority, many of whom retain ties with their communities of origin across the border. This raises a series of questions regarding the political values and orientation of the Mexican-origin population, at a time when the major presidential campaigns are openly competing for Hispanic support.

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The Wilson Center presentation will examine several interrelated areas of this ongoing study: (1) the principal collective action strategies employed by Mexican-origin leaders, activists and organizations; (2) the extent to which these strategies have resulted in distinct leadership networks; (3) how these strategies and networks interact nationally and in different parts of the country; (4) convergences and divergences in the political priorities of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants; and (5) implications of our findings for a series of current political questions, including the 2008 presidential contest.

Over a period of five years, our research team has probed the (A) Hispanic/Latino and (B) Mexican *migrante* strategies of collective action in over 40 leadership focus groups in six cities, researched the historical roots of these strategies, ethnographically observed Latino and Mexican immigrant organizations, investigated Mexico’s policies and programs directed toward migrants, and interviewed Mexican American elected officials, their chiefs of staff, heads of national Latino organizations and Mexican government authorities.

In the historical section (II) that follows, we highlight the deep roots of both the Hispanic and *migrante* strategies, and emphasize the long and continuous historical development of the domestically-focused Hispanic/Latino leadership network in the United States. Section III stresses the diverse nature of the communities that the population of Mexican origin has settled in, marked by different proportions of U.S.-born and immigrant residents, and different relations between the two major strategies of collective action mentioned above.

Section IV examines some of our findings regarding the attitudes and priorities of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant leaders. The main general finding is that, in spite of a sense of social gap between them, the preferred policies of immigrant and Mexican American leaders

are strikingly similar. Where differences emerge, these mainly concern how people of Mexican origin in the U.S. should relate politically to Mexico, and on some immigration-related issues. We found, furthermore, a significant degree of resentment expressed by Mexican immigrant leaders toward Mexican American/Latino leaders and organizations.

Section V discusses a number of political implications and possible future directions for the strategies, networks and communities examined and considered by the study.

II. Historical Evolution: Two Strategies & Two Networks

A. Becoming Latino

The Mexican-origin population was originally incorporated into the United States in 1848 as a territorial minority that had a weak association with Mexico. Ties with Mexico were tenuous because the territories of New Mexico, Texas, California and Arizona had experienced Mexican rule for only one generation before U.S. annexation and Mexico was not a consolidated nation before 1848. The territorial minority in the U.S. Southwest was largely insulated from the events of the nineteenth century that helped consolidate Mexico's nationhood and was connected to Mexico mainly through language, music and other forms of culture, but not closely connected to its political institutions or national narrative.

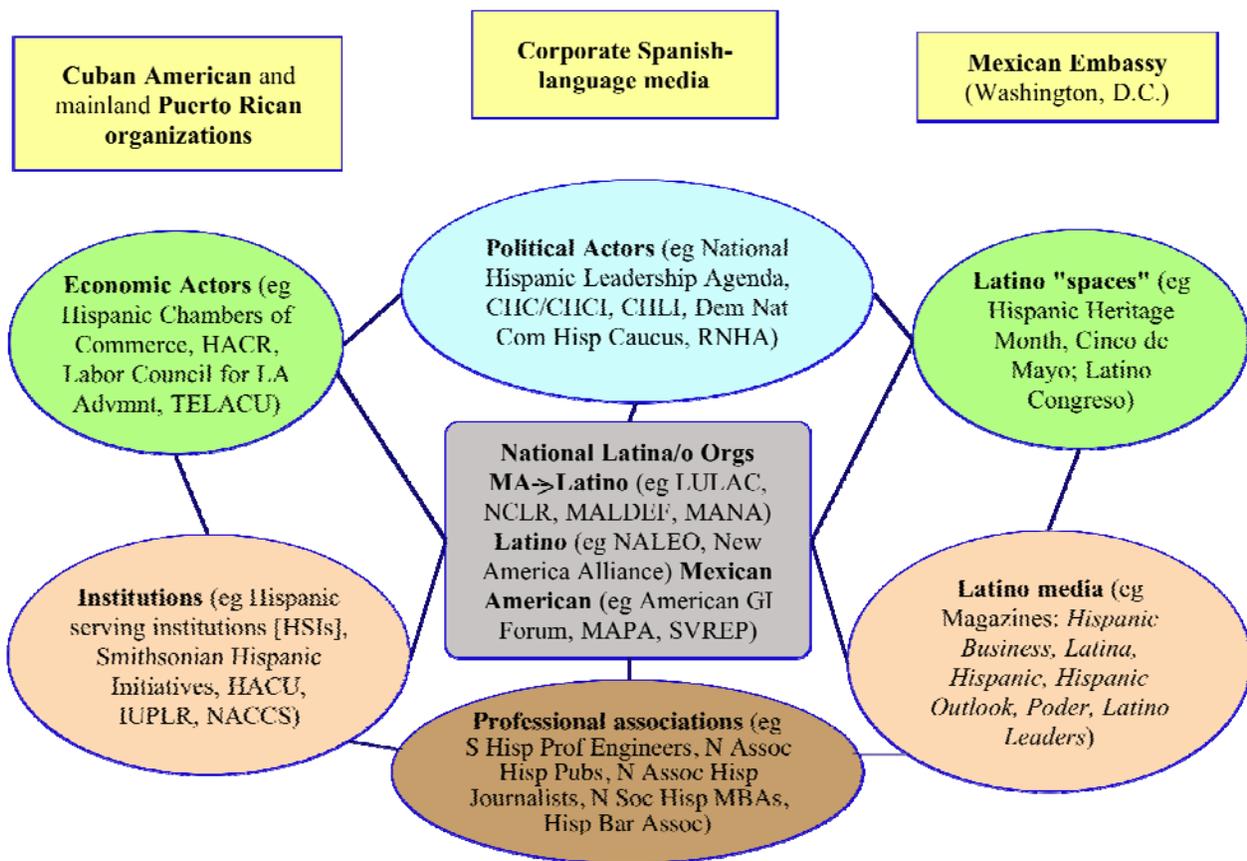
Geography, immigration of South Americans during the Gold Rush, and the class divisions within this population enhanced this distance from Mexico. Gold rush *sonorenses*, Chileans, and Peruvians quickly became *hispanos* (or *españoles*, in the Spanish-language press) in California—the earliest instance of a Latino pan-ethnic grouping. The largest immigration from Mexico before 1910 was into South Texas, and in part because “Mexican” had become stigmatized, second generation leaders among that population quickly adopted the euphemism “Latin American.” New Mexicans, the largest concentration of this territorial minority in 1848, refused to be lumped together with the landless *peones* arriving as unskilled laborers from Mexico and even more broadly adopted “hispano” or “Spanish” to refer to themselves.

By the WWI era, Mexican American leaders responded to the U.S. Americanization movement by promoting the use of English, sometimes expressing an exaggerated support of patriotic symbols, and avoiding issues that would connect them politically with Mexico. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), established in 1929 in Texas, was perhaps the most prominent example of this approach.

In turn, WWII spawned the birth of the modern Civil Rights movement, in the case of Mexican Americans most notably with the foundation of the veterans' group known as GI Forum. Major Mexican American organizations that were active in the 1950s and 1960s established national offices by the 1970s and redefined their missions and diversified their boards and staff to include other Latinos, even if their leadership remained predominantly Mexican American. Other organizations, such as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), as well as many professional and business associations, were founded from the start on a pan-ethnic basis, albeit with Mexican Americans often playing a leading role.

The drive to become national organizations with a voice in Washington provided incentives for Mexican American leaders to broaden their coalition, seek other Hispanic allies, and emulate the organizational behavior and the civil rights movement of American ethnic groups such as European immigrants and of American blacks, respectively. This has given a largely domestic focus to the Latino political agenda and a heightened sense of the importance of domestic empowerment and acceptance. Not surprisingly, then, the Latino leadership strategy has often been indifferent to Mexico, its politics, and to international issues. The formal embrace by Mexican American leaders of a Hispanic/Latino strategy, rooted in a long history of their relative distancing from Mexico, has resulted in an institutionalized pan-Latino or Hispanic leadership network and political identity.

Fig. 1: **The Hispanic/Latino Network**



The vast modern Latino network of leaders, activists and organizations is primarily based in the Mexican American, Puerto Rican and Cuban American populations, but it has come to significantly encompass the more recently established communities of Central American, Dominican, and other origins.

Here we focus on the Mexican-origin component of those network hubs and various interrelated categories. This network includes national Latino organizations and associations, perhaps

hundreds of professionally staffed community organizations, thousands of elected officials, scores of thousands of organized professionals, and as many or more organized business owners and executives engaged in collective action as Latinos. We identify some of the more well-known organizations in the figure above and note that the distinctions between political NGOs, civil rights organizations, and the like are somewhat arbitrary. We also note that these organizations maintain important connections to Cuban American and mainland Puerto Rican organizations, relatively weak connections to the Mexican Embassy in Washington, and connections with Mexican consulates that are so weak in relative terms to not merit representation here.

B. Remaining Mexican

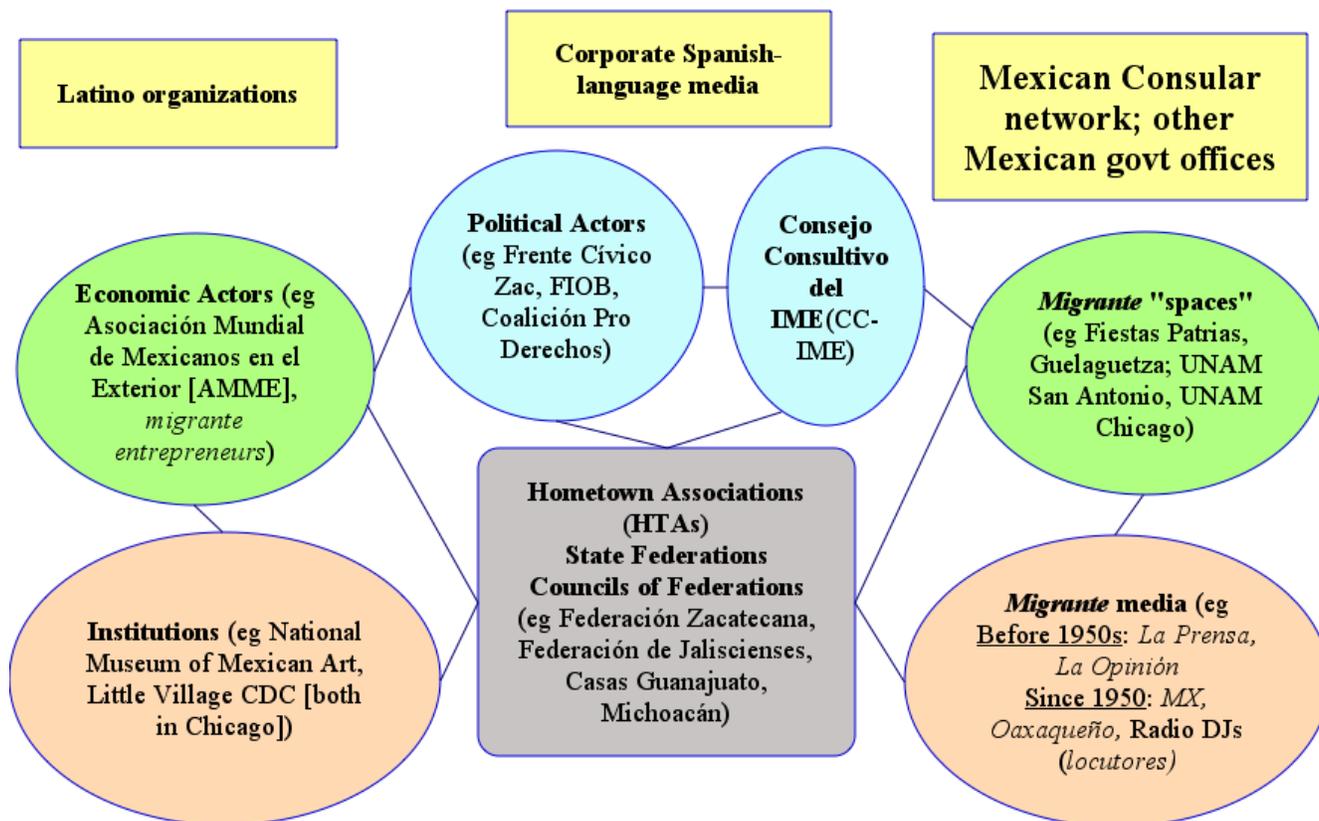
What we refer to here as the alternative Mexican-binational or *migrante* strategy was employed recurrently by Mexican immigrant leaders between the 1860s and the 1920s, and again since the late 1980s. The French intervention in Mexico in the 1860s sparked the formation of over 100 organizations in California in support of the beleaguered Mexican republic, and some of these even sought the right to vote from abroad in the restored republic after the French withdrew. Such *Juntas Patrióticas* were established also to celebrate Mexican independence in U.S. communities, and mutual aid societies were established using Mexican cultural symbols and often seeking the support of the local Mexican consulate.

A similar pattern of events can be found shortly before and during the Mexican Revolution. Many government critics found exile in San Antonio, El Paso and Los Angeles, where they engaged in journalism and pamphleteering against successive Mexican regimes. During the 1920s and 1930s they successfully petitioned the Mexican government for consular support; for repatriation (in 1921 and again in 1929-1932), or for assistance during labor disputes or unemployment and massive layoffs by U.S. employers.

The co-existence of the domestically-focused Hispanic/Latino strategy on one hand, and the *migrante* or Mexican-binational strategy, on the other, since the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, is in part the result of successive waves of Mexican immigration. Not surprisingly, immigrants often maintain an identity with and a relatively close connection to their country of origin. But the willingness of Mexican political actors, especially the Mexican government through its consulates, to engage that community has been a necessary condition for the existence of a sustained *migrante* strategy.

Starting in 1989, the Mexican government undertook to reform and expand its policies toward its trans-border migrants and their communities of origin and settlement. Although working principally through its network of over 40 consulates (soon to be 50) in the United States and the new Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, the new policies came to involve several departments other than the foreign ministry, as well as state and local governments. These policies encouraged the organization of hometown associations (HTAs) by Mexican immigrants, and supported their involvement in the economic development of their communities of origin. The most prominent of these came to be known as the *Tres-por-uno* (officially, “Programa 3 x 1 para Migrantes”), a matching-funds program by which remittances by Mexican immigrants dedicated to community development projects were matched by financial contributions from the federal, state, and later municipal governments.

Fig. 2: The *Migrante* Network



There are now over 1,000 HTAs registered with Mexican consulates in the United States, and several dozen federations of HTAs and councils of federations. The Communities Abroad Program has been succeeded by the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME), which in 2003 established an advisory council known as its *Consejo Consultivo* (or CC-IME). This representative body of some 150 persons of Mexican origin in the U.S. and Canada meets in Mexico and the United States to promote activities and policies designed to advance the status of the binational migrante community. Thus *migrante* leaders and activists, supported by Mexican policy and pursuing a binational or diasporic strategy, have developed what we may refer to as a migrante leadership network separate and distinct from the Latino network mentioned earlier.

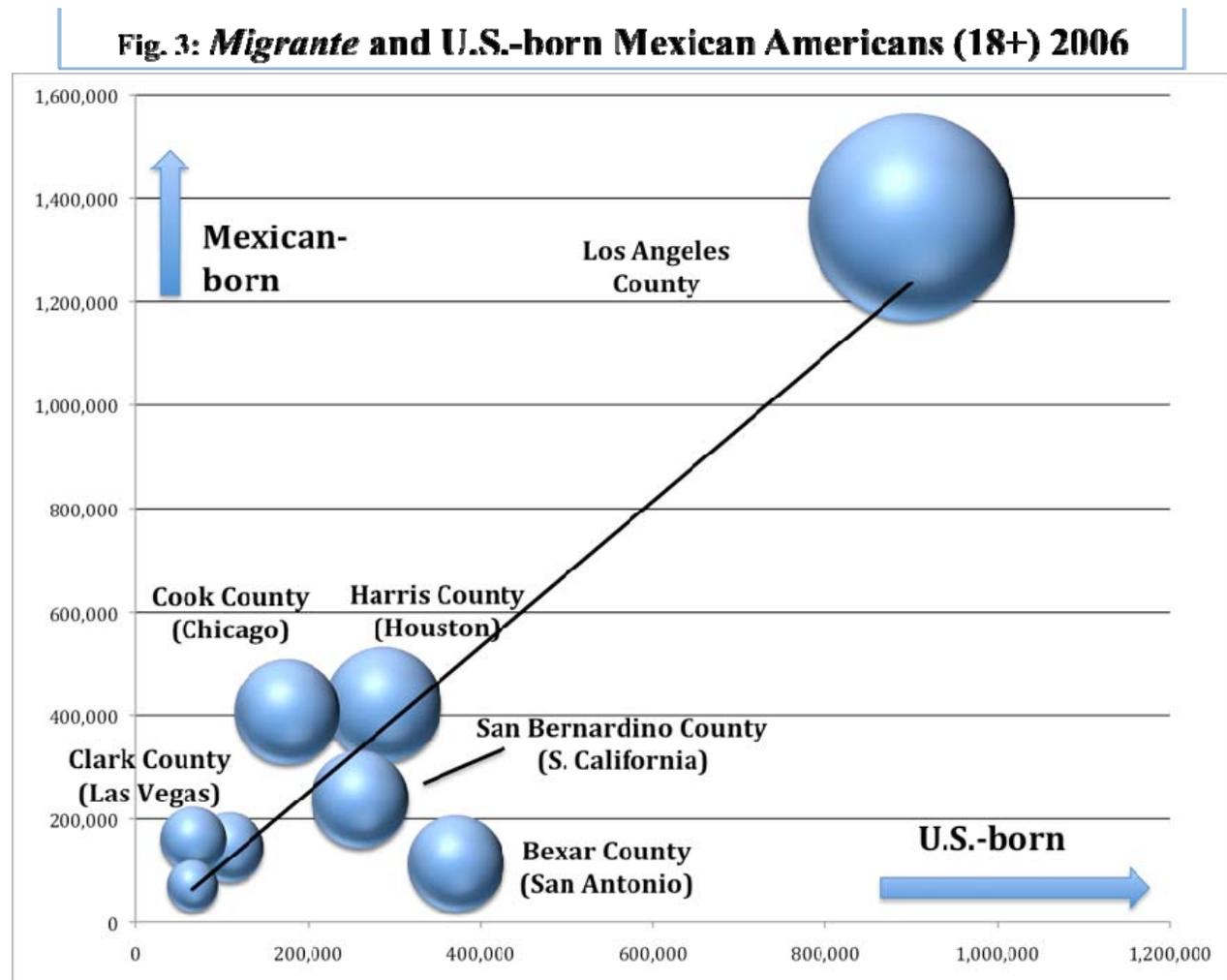
III. Models of Interaction

In communities across the country, the Mexican origin population is to be found not only at different numerical levels, but also differing significantly in composition and historical development. Several major Southwestern cities, from San Antonio to Los Angeles, have had substantial Mexican American (or “Hispano,” as in Albuquerque) populations for several generations. Even after decades of renewed mass migration from Mexico, in San Antonio, Albuquerque and Tucson, in particular, the U.S.-born component substantially outnumbers the Mexican immigrant population.

In these communities, Mexican Americans have achieved a significant degree of political representation at the local, state and federal levels. All sixteen Mexican American members of Congress, for example, are U.S.-born and represent traditionally Mexican American districts from South Texas to Southern California.

In communities elsewhere, however, the Mexican immigrant population constitutes a majority, especially among the adult Mexican-origin population. This is particularly so in cities such as Chicago, Houston, Dallas and Las Vegas. The Mexican-binational strategy and leadership network logically tend to be more highly developed in communities with large concentrations of immigrants. (In these communities we are also more likely to find Mexican immigrant politicians elected to significant local offices.)

The chart in this section illustrates some of the counties with the largest Mexican-origin populations. The size of the spheres corresponds to the relative size of the adult population of Mexican origin. The placement of the spheres on the chart corresponds to the balance between Mexican immigrants on one hand, and U.S.-born Mexican Americans, on the other.



These demographic differences provide some clues concerning how the two strategies and the two leadership networks examined here relate to each other. In Los Angeles, for example, we find that the two networks have relatively little overlap between each other, in spite of — or

perhaps because of — the presence in large numbers of both Mexican Americans and immigrants in the population. In LA, migrante leaders tend not to “cross over” and act as *Latino* leaders, run for major elected offices, or be represented in gatherings of Latino leaders. And by the same token, Latino leaders who are U.S.-born Mexican Americans in Los Angeles are generally not accepted as leaders of the *Mexican* (immigrant) community – at least not by the migrante leadership network.

Early in our study, influenced by our fieldwork in Los Angeles and Dallas, we came to hypothesize that these two leadership networks are not only distinct, but are to some degree socio-political rivals — although the rivalry was notably one-way. We found repeated examples of migrante community leaders who were critical and even resentful of Mexican American leaders who define themselves and their organizations as Latino and who specialize in the Hispanic/Latino strategy.

Further fieldwork established, however, that segregation into distinct and rival leadership networks is not universally the case. We find that there is significant variation between communities in how the Hispanic/Latino and the Mexican-binational strategies interact. Since we found in Chicago the most important alternative dynamic to the bifurcation we found in Los Angeles, we have come to call this variation as the difference between an “LA model” and a “Chicago model.”

Some of the major differences can be summarized as follows:

“LA Model”

- Bifurcated leadership networks
- Low leadership crossover
- Few migrante politicians – Latinos rule (in major offices)
- Few migrante-led institutions

“Chicago Model”

- Less bifurcation, more crossover
- Notable migrante elected officials
- Major migrante-led institutions
- Alternative strategies & higher ‘Mexicanness’

Briefly put, in Chicago Mexican immigrant leaders appear more able to alternate between a Mexican-binational strategy and a Hispanic/Latino strategy, while in Los Angeles, Mexican-origin leaders tend more to specialize in one strategy or the other. In Chicago, it is also proportionately more common to find Mexican immigrants elected to the City Council and the state legislature than is the case in the Los Angeles area.

Overall, leaders in Chicago appear more likely to consider themselves all “Mexican” in a sense that includes both Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, while in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the Southwest Mexican American leaders are more likely to distinguish between themselves and Mexican immigrants as a group. (We will offer some preliminary explanations for these differences between Los Angeles and Chicago – and the larger regions that they represent – in our presentation at the Wilson Center.)

IV. Attitudes and Priorities

Our study's in-depth discussions with nearly 400 Mexican American and Mexican immigrant leaders have provided us with a bounty of information that we are continuing to analyze. This study furthermore focuses on probing underlying values and belief structures rather than the sorts of opinions and perceptions of the most immediate nature that is favored in most surveys of Latino political opinion. Nonetheless, some basic patterns have emerged in our analysis so far — and even some insights into how a few selected attitudes and priorities of this leadership appear to be evolving over time.

A. Divergences

- Many migrante leaders feel that Mexican American/Latino leaders and their organizations neglect immigrant priorities and issues related to Mexico, and that while Latino organizations benefit from claiming to represent and serve the immigrant population, they fail to deliver needed services to immigrants. Furthermore, many migrante leaders feel unwelcome in Latino organizations and their gatherings.
- Many Mexican American/Latino leaders agree that in particular Mexico and Mexico-related issues (not including immigration) receive little attention, but they feel that this is appropriate given the declared missions of Latino organizations and the responsibilities of Latino elected officials.
- Although there is a high level of agreement across the board on the importance of immigration-related issues, these often are not as high a priority for Mexican American leaders as they are for migrante leaders. It is not uncommon to find Mexican American leaders who do not offer immigration as one of their principal priorities.
- General agreement on the importance of immigration as an issue may mask different understandings of its meaning. There are strong indications that many Mexican American/Latino leaders see immigration-related issues as important to community empowerment in U.S. politics. Many migrante leaders, however, seem to have a less political view of the importance of immigration policy reform.
- Many migrante leaders seem unfamiliar with and have trouble understanding the advocacy role of prominent Latino organizations, and expect more of them in terms of direct services on a local level.
- Mexican migrante leaders are much more supportive than most Mexican Americans of (1) the idea of creating a national organization separate from other (non-Mexican origin) Latinos, (2) the desirability of achieving an “open border” between Mexico and the U.S., and (3) the desirability of direct involvement by migrantes in Mexican politics.

B. Convergences

In spite of all of the above (and more not reported here), we actually found a high level of agreement between Mexican American and migrante leaders on principal priorities — sometimes in surprising ways:

- Both types of leaders regard the immigration issue to be of relatively high importance – even if they may understand its importance in different ways.
- Education is a more strongly shared policy priority between Mexican American and migrante leaders than is immigration. Here too, however, an even higher level of agreement may contain something of a different understanding, but in an unexpected way. Only migrante leaders offered the view that both governments on both sides of the border should address the educational needs of Mexican migrantes *binationally*.
- Immigration reform in the U.S. that would only benefit Mexicans — as in a bilateral deal between the two governments — would not be acceptable. A clear majority of all focus group participants stood for immigration reform that would legalize the undocumented without discriminating among them by national origin.
- In spite of their differences on the desirability of having leaders focus more on Mexico, we found views among both Mexican Americans and migrantes that serve as obstacles to doing so. First, the idea of U.S. foreign aid for Mexico is so unfamiliar that the question does not produce useful or codifiable discussion. Second, in nearly every focus group official corruption in Mexico is offered as an obstacle to supporting community development projects there.

Finally, we found widespread agreement on two points regarding “Mexico’s attitudes toward people of Mexican-origin in the U.S.” First, both Mexican American and migrante leaders have experienced discriminatory treatment and deprecating attitudes on the part of Mexican society. There is considerable agreement, however, that Mexican attitudes toward migrantes and Mexican Americans have improved in recent years, in particular on the part of the Mexican government since the election of Vicente Fox in 2000.

C. Movement (since 2000)

Our fieldwork since 2003, combined with a preceding pilot study in 2000, have allowed us to detect signs of change in some of the attitudes expressed by both Mexican American and migrante community leaders. One of these is that migrante leaders appear to be significantly becoming more comfortable with referring to themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

Among Mexican American leaders, we noted an increasing openness to two very different kinds of issues, (1) the idea of a pro-Mexico lobby, and (2) a guest worker program, especially as part of a larger package of immigration reforms. On the first point, we might add that our fieldwork in Washington, DC suggested that the human resources for the purpose of an ethnically based foreign policy lobby in relation to Mexico appear to be readily available. However, it must be noted that there appears to be no demand on the part of the Mexican American electorate for pro-Mexico advocacy.

A final point on the question of the desirability of forming a national organization by and for people of Mexican origin, apart from other Latinos. This was noted as a point of divergence between Mexican American and migrante leaders. However, we also noted a somewhat paradoxical willingness of Mexican Americans to participate in and support such an

organization, if it were already in existence. We will suggest a possible explanation for this paradox in our Wilson Center presentation.

V. Future Directions

Currently, the Mexican American/Hispanic/Latino leadership and the migrante/Mexican-binational leadership constitute two mature and complete networks that often exist in parallel with little contact between them, especially in the Southwest. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that these two networks do not act in complete isolation. The migrante leadership network is being consolidated like never before, and is showing signs of influencing Latino leaders and organizations. At the same time, Latino organizations are having some effects on migrante organizations. What does the future hold?

This is not the first time that there has been a large and sustained migration from Mexico that has generated a migrante leadership network (and its associated binational strategy); it has been a recurring phenomenon for over a century. Historically the tendency has been for the migrante organizations to disappear altogether — or at least become significantly transformed — as the succeeding generations become more incorporated into U.S. society. While there is no reason to doubt that ultimately this might be the fate of this epoch's networks and organizations, several factors suggest that it is not likely to be displaced by the Latino network in the medium term, and that in fact we may be seeing a confluence of forces that will reinforce what we have termed the Chicago Model.

There exist several factors with the potential to change the traditional patterns, principal among which are geographic, demographic, and political issues:

Geographic Factors:

- Although not the first time they have settled outside of the Southwest, in the past two decades the Mexican immigrant communities have spread out in territory and numbers never seen before.
- Many of these new settlements are in areas previously dominated by older communities of different countries of origin, e.g. Puerto Ricans in Chicago and New York, Dominicans in New York and Boston, Cubans in Florida, etc.

Demographic Factors:

- In the meantime, the overarching demographic phenomenon, not only for the Mexican-origin community but for all Latino groups, is the overwhelming number of the Mexican immigrant second-generation cohort, which is poised to become the majority group of all Latinos in the United States. In addition, many in this second generation are coming of age in areas far from the traditional Mexican American/Latino powerbase.

Political Factors:

- Mirroring the unprecedented sustainability in both size and duration of recent Mexican immigration, the success they have achieved in both modifying Mexican policy (*3X1*, *Voto remoto*), and receiving sustained support from the Mexican government (PCME, CCIME), has meant that the binational strategy of the migrante network continues to be seen as a viable alternative to the Hispanic/Latino strategy of Mexican Americans.

- At the same time, the growing presence of a new ethnic group in a number of battleground states (again, mostly outside the Southwest) that has yet to be definitively captured by Democrats or Republicans means that both parties are paying unprecedented attention to both new citizens and the U.S.-born second generation. Although the Republicans have suffered setbacks in this regard due to the Party base's stand on immigration, they are not giving up on their efforts to capture this valuable group.

Thus, what we expect is that the modality seen in the Chicago Model (less bifurcation, more crossover, with the use of both binational and Latino strategies) will become more the norm in the medium term, as a preponderant second generation leadership takes over networks and organizations begun by their parents, and Mexican-origin communities become consolidated in areas far outside the Southwestern United States.