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Mexicans in the United States: In Pursuit of Inclusion

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Mexican migrants are the largest foreign-born group in the United States. Although immigration from Mexico has slowed since the 2008 economic crisis and more than 2 million undocumented migrants have been deported to Mexico in that same period, an estimated 12.2 million remained in the United States in 2015, representing 28 percent of the total immigrant population. Including the US-born population of Mexican origin, the Mexican diaspora comprises 36.9 million people, the third largest in the United States after the German and Irish diasporas.

Despite the size of this community and the long history of organizations and networks that have emerged over more than 160 years of migration across the Mexico-US border, established by the treaties of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848) and La Mesilla (1853), Mexicans are one of the most disadvantaged US immigrant groups in terms of socioeconomic mobility and access to citizenship. Compared with other immigrant groups and with the native population, Mexican immigrants have higher levels of poverty, lower educational levels, poorer health outcomes, and lower naturalization rates. These problems result from structural causes in Mexico and the US, including the fact that 5-6 million Mexican immigrants are undocumented. Their struggles generate negative perceptions about Mexicans—and Latinos more generally—and raise concerns about their ability to fully participate as members of American society.

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At the same time, the economic and political power of the Mexican diaspora is seen as a source of great opportunity by governments, businesses, and nonprofit organizations on both sides of the border. Mexican workers and business owners are a vital part of the US economy and a key to the nation's future economic growth. Meanwhile, the remittances they send home (amounting to \$24 billion in 2014, or 2 percent of Mexico's GDP) help millions of families in Mexico meet their basic needs. The strength of Mexican organizations in the United States, particularly hometown associations, has been recognized by the Mexican government since the 1980s as a valuable asset for investments in rural development projects in Mexico via collective remittances, as well as a source of political organization in both countries.

In turn, Mexico has responded to pressure from migrants for reforms to expand their rights as dual citizens and for programs and institutions that cater to their needs in the United States through the extensive Mexican consular infrastructure. As the largest group within the Latino population in the United States (constituting two-thirds of the US population of 55 million Latinos), Mexicans are also recognized as a powerful constituency by US political parties and advocacy groups. But they are still considered a “sleeping giant” whose full political potential has yet to manifest itself.

The disadvantages faced by Mexican migrants, the challenges of their integration into US society, and the question of the rights due to noncitizens are at the core of the immigration debate in the United States. These issues also guide the Mexican government's policy toward Mexican migrants and its work with US institutions at the national, state, and local levels to protect migrants' rights and give them access to information and services

that can improve their well-being. Understanding the characteristics of the Mexican diaspora and the structural causes of the disadvantages some of its members face in their pursuit of rights and socioeconomic mobility in the United States is essential to shaping public perceptions and political responses to the challenges and opportunities that this population represents in both countries.

Conservative pundits such as Mike Gonzalez of the Heritage Foundation argue that Mexicans' "inability to assimilate" is a threat to democracy and accountability. Donald Trump has inflamed these fears to fuel his presidential candidacy. But what is missing from debates about immigration reform and the rights of noncitizens in the United States is an acknowledgment of the responsibility of business as well as government interests on both sides of the border for creating the conditions that drive migration. They also bear responsibility for the disenfranchisement that limits migrants' ability to take full advantage of opportunities for mobility, socioeconomic advancement, and civic participation.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

There is an ongoing debate about whether diaspora is the appropriate term to describe the variety of migration experiences among Mexicans in the United States, their forms of organization, and their identities and activities regarding their country of origin. While diaspora is a term intended to encompass a variety of groups based on assumptions about ethnic identity and their ties with their origin country, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of Mexican immigrants. They vary in their reasons for leaving, their socioeconomic characteristics, and their needs and interests in relation to Mexico and the United States.

Historically, most Mexican migrants have come to the United States in search of better job opportunities, but emigration has a wide variety of causes, including political exile and asylum, family reunification, education, business, and professional advancement. These differences are revealed in Mexican migrants' ways of organizing themselves throughout the United States, where class and region or state of origin still mark divisions within the diaspora.

Mexican émigrés rarely present themselves as a diaspora. That designation is mostly used by

researchers and scholars to refer to the Mexican-origin population as a whole, even though its members have a range of relationships with Mexico and their co-ethnics. Most transnational contact and involvement in issues related to Mexico occurs among first-generation migrants.

In the academic literature, the use of the term diaspora in reference to Mexican emigration varies. Some authors favor its broader use, given the general identification of Mexican migrants with their homeland and the emotional or social ties that they maintain with it. Others make a point of not using the term broadly because they believe it does not reflect the full variety of emigration experiences, the divisions within Mexican communities abroad, or the fact that not all members maintain the same ties to Mexico.

The Mexican government began to adopt the language of diaspora in the past decade, since it is part of the discourse that guides the migration and development agenda at the international level. Nevertheless, Mexican officials often return to the

language of "Mexican communities abroad," or use the terms interchangeably. This resistance to using the term diaspora could be due to its historical and political associations with the Jewish or Armenian experiences, or

the idea that its usage might imply a more permanent migration, which until the late 1980s was not considered to be characteristic of Mexicans. The preference for the term "Mexican communities abroad" also reflects the hope that it can be more easily understood, as well as create a broader identity for the Mexican migrants that the government seeks to reach through its programs and activities.

PUSH AND PULL

Despite the variety of experiences among Mexican migrants, the idea that they are incapable of assimilating has been a persistent one in the United States. It is based on a range of negative assumptions—for example, that they are unable to accept democratic principles, or unwilling to learn English. A leading proponent of this idea was the late Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, who argued in a 2004 essay, "The Hispanic Challenge," that "unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream US culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic

Outdated immigration policies fail to recognize the historical realities of cross-border mobility and ties.

enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.”

Huntington attributed their supposed inability to assimilate into the American mainstream to the unprecedented scale of Mexican migration; the continuous replenishment of first-generation migrants; the large percentage of undocumented migrants among them; the regional concentration of migrants in certain areas of the United States; their historical connection to parts of US territory that previously belonged to Mexico; and the geographical contiguity with Mexico that allows migrants to maintain constant contact with their origin country. This argument drew numerous responses from scholars who refuted Huntington’s claims and demonstrated that by the second and third generation, Mexican (and Latino) immigrants follow a pattern similar to other groups by increasing their levels of education and English-language proficiency over time. Many studies have also shown that transnational economic and political activities related to Mexico are not only compatible with integration in the United States but actually enhance migrants’ civic participation in American public life (though it remains limited).

Huntington’s and others’ assertions regarding Mexican migrants’ limited socioeconomic mobility and civic participation in the United States disregard the fact that the challenges migrants face are a result of the structural conditions that push them out of Mexico as much as the pull factors that bring them to the United States—not to mention legislation and institutions that determine their migratory status and their access to opportunities for social mobility. For Mexico, emigration has been a safety valve for economic pressures and political dissent that expose the repeated failure of Mexican governments to generate equal opportunities for economic and social development.

Just as the early twentieth-century revolutionary promises of equality, land reform, and liberty went unfulfilled in Mexico, the neoliberal turn of the 1990s and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement displaced millions and deepened existing inequalities by favoring more developed regions in the north over rural areas, particularly in the south of the country. In a country where 46 percent of the population lives under the poverty line while the richest 0.1 percent own 43 percent of the wealth, emigration is often not a choice. Although the process of democratization has advanced significantly since the 1980s, per-

vasive corruption and the weak rule of law have allowed organized crime and violence to spread, prompting many to leave the country (and some to settle permanently in the United States) in fear for their lives.

The United States acquired more than half of Mexico’s territory in the mid-nineteenth century, and has consistently relied on Mexican labor since the early twentieth century. The Mexican population living in those former territories and the networks created through temporary worker programs facilitated a circular flow of people between the two countries until the 1980s. The 1986 passage of the US Immigration Reform and Control Act, which granted permanent-resident status to over two million Mexicans, coupled with the growth of the border-security apparatus, changed the character of Mexico-US migration. The circularity of the flow was replaced by more permanent, unidirectional patterns of migration, while the demand for low-wage labor continued to be met by undocumented migrants, since US employers were unwilling or unable to comply with the restrictions established by temporary visa programs.

STEEP CLIMB

Mexican immigrants—particularly those who are undocumented—often face poor working and living conditions, including abuses by employers. But the pay differential between the two countries (an average of \$58 a day in the United States, compared with \$4.25 a day in Mexico) still makes emigration a worthwhile risk. According to data from the US-based Migration Policy Institute and the Mexican National Population Council (CONAPO), Mexicans’ rate of participation in the US labor force is slightly higher than that of other foreign groups or the native population, but they are concentrated in low-wage jobs in the service industry, construction, transportation, and to a lesser extent, agriculture. Their average annual income of \$37,390 in 2014 was much lower than that of both the foreign-born population as a whole (\$49,487) and the native-born population (\$54,565). Although the poverty rate among people of Mexican origin decreases the longer they live in the United States, in 2012 a CONAPO study found that one in every two Mexican migrants was living in poverty (48 percent), compared with 38 percent of Central American migrants and 24 percent of migrants from other regions.

A major hurdle on the path to upward mobility is educational attainment. Only 6 percent of Mex-

ican immigrants (ages 25 and over) had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2014, compared with 29 percent of other immigrants and 30 percent of the US-born population. Although education trends improve for the second and third generations of Latinos, the socioeconomic situation of the first generation of migrants has an impact on the health and education outcomes of their children.

Undocumented status is also a barrier, not just for first-generation immigrants who cannot access funds for college, but also for their US-born children who often lack the support systems necessary to perform well in school. High-school dropout rates for Latinos have decreased sharply in the past decade (from 32 percent in 2000 to 14 percent in 2013), but according to a study by the Pew Research Center, they still have the highest dropout rate among all major racial and ethnic groups. This has been attributed to their need to work at a young age to support their families, limited parental support, and lack of English proficiency. Although the proficiency rate has improved significantly over the last two decades, a 2015 Migration Policy Institute report estimated that 63 percent of Latinos speak English less than very well. In comparison, only 21 percent of Asian immigrants were considered to have limited English proficiency.

Health outcomes among immigrant populations are another indicator of how rapidly or fully integration occurs across generations. In the case of Mexican and other immigrants from Latin America in general there is a process of negative integration, in the sense that their health declines considerably upon arrival in the United States as a result of changes in diet, low income, limited access to services, and mental health issues often linked to the rigors of immigration and adaptation. According to the 2013 Binational Report on Mexican Migrants in the United States and Mexico, Mexicans have lower mortality rates than non-Hispanic whites when they arrive in the United States. But they have a higher risk of HIV infection, diabetes, and work-related injuries due to poor labor conditions. Those who remain for longer periods have poorer health outcomes, including higher mortality rates.

Due to their precarious migratory status, a majority of Mexican migrants do not have benefits such as health insurance, and they are ineligible for most public-assistance programs. According to a study by researchers at CONAPO and the University of California, Berkeley, in 2012 “approximately

53 percent of Mexican-born immigrants living in the US lacked any type of health coverage,” which is much higher than the rates of uncovered white non-Latinos (11 percent), African-Americans (18 percent), and immigrants from all other countries, and slightly above the rate for Hondurans and Salvadorans (50 percent). The researchers attribute this to “the existence of a pattern of inequality in access to health services in the United States that corresponds to ethnic and racial origin and place of origin, in which immigrants from certain Latin American countries are the most vulnerable population groups.”

Finally, full access to membership in society and its benefits is limited by the fact that only 28 percent of Mexican immigrants are US citizens. Mexicans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans have the lowest naturalization rates among immigrant groups (a range of 36 percent to 38 percent, compared with 61 percent for other immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 70 percent for Asian migrants). Of the 5 million Mexicans who have the status of US permanent residents, an estimated 2.7 million were eligible for naturalization in 2013 but had not applied for it due to lack of information, limited English proficiency, or prohibitive costs.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Throughout his campaign for the US presidency, Trump has repeatedly declared that he will force Mexico to pay for the construction of a wall on the border. Trump talks about the wall as though layers of steel and barbed wire had not been proliferating along the border since 1993. He also fails to mention that the cost of this infrastructure is also measured in the lives of hundreds of people who die each year attempting to cross the border. Similarly, Trump's call for the deportation of all undocumented immigrants ignores the costs incurred by millions of mixed-status families (including US citizens) that have already been separated as a result of the deportation policies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

The suggestion that migrants' countries of origin should assume a portion of the costs that their residence imposes on another country is not far-fetched in itself, but it is necessary to take the discussion beyond the logic of migration controls. The real question concerns the distribution of migration's costs and benefits between countries of origin and destination. Is it the responsibility of the country of origin to absorb a por-

tion of the destination country's costs (stemming from migrants' use of public services such as education and health care, for example)? Or should the country of origin impose a tax on emigrants' incomes to recoup its investments in the education and health of citizens who now contribute to the economic development of another country, as Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati has suggested?

Mexico's responses to Trump have focused on condemning the racist and discriminatory nature of his rhetoric and rejecting his assertion that it will pay for the wall. The timidity of these responses, and especially President Enrique Peña Nieto's invitation to Trump for an official visit to Mexico City in August, have been amply criticized by the Mexican public on both sides of the border. Yet, at the same time, the Mexican government continues to develop a discreet, "below the radar" strategy (as former ambassador to the United States Arturo Sarukhan describes it) that seeks to counteract the long tradition of anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Mexican discourse north of the border. Since 2001, after the failure of a proposed US-Mexico bilateral migration agreement, Mexico turned its attention to collaborations with different actors at the local, state, and federal levels. This effort has two main goals: promoting laws and policies that uphold the human rights of immigrants, and assisting their progress toward full integration in the United States.

Mexico has invested a great deal of resources in developing programs to support the health, education, financial literacy, and civic participation of the Mexican and broader Latino population in the United States. The Foreign Ministry and the Institute of Mexicans Abroad have established adult-education programs including literacy training, preparation for high-school equivalency tests, and English classes. These programs operate in over 300 public schools, community centers, and jails around the United States. Mexico also provides scholarships to help undocumented youth complete their US university studies.

The *Ventanillas de Salud* (Health Windows) are booths inside Mexican consular offices that offer tests for diseases like diabetes and HIV, as well as medical referrals. The Mexican Ministry of Health (in collaboration with clinics, hospitals, and other Latin American consulates) sponsors

health-information fairs in churches, community organizations, schools, and public parks.

Mexican consulates have formed alliances with banks, universities, nonprofit organizations, and US federal, state, and local government agencies to offer financial advice on savings, mortgages, and tax payments. They also organize seminars and workshops focused on developing relationships among community groups, promoting labor rights, and encouraging eligible immigrants to apply for naturalization.

All these programs receive support from US-based nonprofit organizations, businesses, and government institutions, including the Labor Department and Citizenship and Immigration Services. The programs help millions of Mexicans (and other Spanish-speaking migrants who are also welcomed at Mexican consular offices) who would otherwise have difficulty obtaining this assistance, due to cultural or language barriers, or fear that their migration status would put them at risk.

Beyond providing direct support for immigrant communities, the Mexican government is also attempting through these programs to change the stereotypical image of Mexico and Mexicans in the eyes of the American public. It aims

to show that Trump and his ilk are wrong when they claim that Mexico sends only undesirable migrants across the border.

PERSISTENT BIASES

Trump's statements characterizing Mexican immigrants as dangerous and violent are not so different, tone aside, from the arguments of more mainstream Republicans who for decades have depicted immigrants as "illegals." Such rhetoric led to a growing enforcement apparatus that since the 1990s has included stricter immigration laws, border fences, and increased funding for an enlarged Border Patrol, raids, and deportations. These policies have continued regardless of which party holds the presidency. However, many Republicans now recognize that anti-immigrant rhetoric is increasingly costly to their party's standing with Latino voters. Mitt Romney, the party's 2012 presidential nominee, called for the "self-deportation" of "illegal" immigrants. He ended up with just 27 percent of the Latino vote, compared with 31 percent for John McCain in 2008 and 44 percent for

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George W. Bush in 2004. This trend of declining support resulted largely from the party's unwillingness to act on immigration reform, beyond its focus on border security and deportation.

Some of the primary US news outlets, also concerned about alienating a growing Latino population, have adjusted the language they use to describe immigration. Notably, there has been a movement away from the phrase "illegal immigrant" or the noun "illegal/s" to refer to people born outside the United States who reside in the country without authorization, responding to pressure from organizations such as Define American and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. In 2009, CNN canceled Lou Dobbs' talk show—known for its defamatory reports about immigrants—partly in response to criticism from the Latino community, which the network had been trying to connect with through its special series "Latino in America."

Nonetheless, anti-immigrant discourse and laws continue to be popular in many places across the United States, as is clear from Trump's rise. This is especially so in midwestern and southeastern states where the immigrant population has grown significantly in recent years, raising concerns about the economic costs the newcomers may impose on the local economy, or the social and cultural changes they bring to their communities. Twenty-six states sued in federal court to block implementation of a 2014 executive action by Obama to expand access to his administration's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which has allowed more than 728,000 youths (77 percent of them from Mexico) who arrived in the United States before the age of 16 to obtain a temporary permit to reside and work in the country.

The Migration Policy Institute has reported significant economic benefits for the United States as a result of that program. It was expected that those benefits would be even greater with the proposed expansion of the program to include parents of US citizens who are undocumented and eliminate the age limit that restricts the existing program to those under 30 years old. However, these extensions were effectively blocked by a June 2016 split decision by Supreme Court. That left in place a lower court ruling against the expansion, though the original DACA program remains in effect.

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Numerous other studies confirm the contributions that immigrants have made to the economy by paying taxes, participating in the consumer economy, offering specialized labor, investing, and creating businesses. The data also prove that the link between crime and immigration is actually the opposite of what some Republicans argue: in fact, more immigration correlates with less crime. According to an Immigration Policy Center report, the growth of the undocumented immigrant population between 1990 and 2013 coincided with a 48-percent decline in violent crime. The majority of immigrants deported in recent years were not charged with serious crimes but for immigration-related offenses such as unauthorized entry or re-entry, or for minor offenses like drug possession and traffic violations.

Biases against "illegal" immigrants should be recognized as part of the wider context of racial discrimination and the mass incarceration of people of color in the United States through policies that help generate a cycle of marginalization, criminalization, and violence. A study led by the sociologist Rubén Rumbaut of the University of California, Irvine, found that incarceration rates are higher among second-generation US-born children of immigrants with low levels of education than for those who were born outside the country.

TRANSNATIONAL TIES

The opposition to Trump among media outlets, business owners, artists, and other prominent public figures from the Latino community and its allies shows that Latinos can exercise the political clout that has long been anticipated as a result of their growing demographic importance. The new activism traces its roots to Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers' movement of the 1960s, which continues to resonate strongly among Mexican and Latino organizations and most recently with Dreamer activists (a movement that has called on Congress and the Obama administration to grant access to higher education and a path to citizenship to undocumented immigrant youth who were raised in the United States). The ability of Mexican and Latino immigrants to come together in response to anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation was previously seen in protests against laws in California (Proposition 187, a ballot measure approved in 1994) and

Arizona (SB 1070, enacted in 2010) that sought to reduce noncitizens' access to public services and criminalized individuals who provided support to undocumented immigrants. The 2006 demonstrations against a similarly harsh measure known as the Sensenbrenner Bill, which was passed by the US House but rejected by the Senate, were another display of effective mobilization.

Although political organization and access to elected positions at the local and state levels have consistently improved, national coalitions among Mexican immigrant organizations (and Latinos more broadly) are still fragile. Voting rates remain low compared with other minorities. These factors make it difficult to sustain efforts to respond to hostile political rhetoric and policies and to promote an alternative agenda.

At the root of Trump's arguments, and those of many others who made similar claims in the past, are ignorance and the fear that immigrants do not want to or will not be able to fully embrace and participate in US society—that they represent the worst of their cultures, pose a security threat, cannot speak English, and do not share democratic values. Those who argue that the ties of the Mexican diaspora (including US-born citizens) to Mexico are “a real danger” to “democracy and local accountability” or that the Mexican government is “striving to ensure that Mexican-Americans do not assimilate culturally and patriotically,” as Gonzalez, the Heritage Foundation analyst, recently suggested in a *National Affairs* article, ignore the fact that transnational engagement through hometown associations and other cross-border activities has strengthened migrants' and their descendants' abilities to participate in US civic and political life. The democratic values

and forms of organization they have learned in the US have also influenced their political participation back in Mexico.

Putting aside the underlying political and economic interests that the Mexican government has in developing ties with its citizens in the United States, its outreach efforts through its consulates, including assistance with access to education, health, and naturalization, are a direct response to the fact that these opportunities remain out of reach for many regardless of their migration status. The disadvantages that millions of Mexican migrants face are partly the result of limited funding for integration programs in the United States. They are also caused by outdated immigration policies that fail to recognize the historical realities of cross-border mobility and ties. The discourse of bilateral collaboration mostly focuses on securing the border rather than the well-being of Mexicans and their communities in both countries. This structural context hinders the participation of Mexican migrants and their offspring as members of American society and reinforces misinformed perceptions about the costs or threats associated with their presence.

The experience of Mexican migrants in the United States is unique in many ways given the shared history, the dynamics implied by a 2,000-mile border, the size of the diaspora, and the economic, social, cultural, and political ties between the two societies. Viewed from a binational perspective, the Mexican diaspora and the politics and policies that have shaped it illuminate the challenges and opportunities that diasporas represent for both origin and destination countries—and the ways in which governmental and societal responses on one side of the border affect the other side. ■