



An Ethnic Consensus? Mexican American Political Activism since the Great Depression
Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960 by Mario T. Garcia

Review by: David G. Gutiérrez

Reviews in American History, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jun., 1991), pp. 289-295

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/publishing/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2703086>

Accessed: 04/01/2014 12:45

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Reviews in American History.

<http://www.jstor.org>

AN ETHNIC CONSENSUS? MEXICAN AMERICAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM SINCE THE GREAT DEPRESSION

David G. Gutiérrez

Mario T. García. *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989. xi + 364 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, sources, and index. \$35.00.

One of the most intriguing, and largely overlooked, offshoots of the recent national debate over the “diversification” of American college and university curricula is the intense self-evaluation this controversy has stimulated among scholars of race, ethnicity, and gender. Challenged by the calls in recent years to reform the curricula by expanding the “canon” to include the voices of racial and ethnic minorities and women, and influenced by the same sweeping advances in critical and cultural theory that have so profoundly affected fields such as anthropology, ethnography, and literary theory, ethnic studies scholars have also been compelled to reassess the basic assumptions and methodologies that guide their work.

These general trends in ethnic studies research are strongly evident in recent Mexican American historiography. Like their counterparts in other subfields of American ethnic studies, historians of the Mexican American experience are drawing on theoretical and methodological innovations from fields as diverse as comparative critical ethnography, sociolinguistics, and ethnomusicology to reshape and expand the research agenda in Mexican American history. Not surprisingly, the broadening of the scope of research in Mexican American history has stimulated a concomitant reassessment of the conceptual frameworks within which historians are structuring their work. In the field of political history, this trend was particularly apparent in the 1980s. Departing from a point of view common in the 1960s and 1970s in which interethnic and intercultural conflict between Mexican Americans and “white” or “Anglo” Americans were central themes, a growing number of scholars have shifted to a more internal analysis of the Mexican-descent population of the United States. By focusing their attention on the implications of historical differences in this population in class standing, region of residence, language preferences, citizenship status, and on the political and ide-

Reviews in American History 19 (1991) 289–295 © 1991 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

ological disputes these intraethnic distinctions have stimulated, researchers have gone a long way toward dispelling popular images of Mexican Americans as a largely undifferentiated population of farmworkers and urban laborers. Moreover, as recent interdisciplinary publications in Mexican American history have demonstrated, this shift in focus is adding unprecedented clarity and depth to our knowledge of a wide range of historical issues.¹

In many respects, Mario T. García's new book represents an important example of the fruits of the process of reassessment occurring in Mexican American historiography. Seeking to dispute, as he puts it, previous "impressionistic views of those scholars who . . . have too quickly classified many Mexican American leaders between the 1930s and 1950s as 'accommodationists' . . . and as people who accepted negative views of themselves as pronounced by a hostile Anglo community," García sets out to prove that the group of political and labor activists he calls the "Mexican American Generation" was "much more complex in its makeup and its goals" (p. 17). Indeed, in García's view, this diverse group laid most of the ideological and organizational foundations for the better-known "Chicano" political protests of the 1960s and 1970s.²

Focusing on a broad range of individuals and organizations active in the three decades between the Great Depression and 1960, García's study documents the ideological diversity that characterized Mexican American ethnic politics in that volatile period. In exploring the different political philosophies and strategies, leadership styles, and actions of groups and individuals ranging from the moderate, middle-class oriented League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and liberal former El Paso Texas Mayor Raymond Telles, to militant, left-leaning civil liberties and labor groups such as El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española (the Congress of Spanish-Speaking People) and the Asociación Nacional México Americana (ANMA), García provides new insights into the political debates that often sharply divided Mexican Americans over such important issues as racial discrimination, bilingual education, immigration policy, and the maintenance of Mexican cultural practices in the United States.

García examines these debates in a series of case studies of individuals and organizations he divides into three general groups: "The Middle Class," "Labor and the Left," and "Mexican American Intellectuals." Each of the book's three sections adds to our understanding of the dynamics of Mexican American political organization and action in the Southwest, but García is at his best in his analysis of the thought and work of three of the era's most important intellectuals and social critics: historian Carlos E. Castañeda, folklorist Arthur L. Campa, and education expert George I. Sánchez. Based in the Southwest (Castañeda and Sánchez at the University of Texas, and Campa at

the University of New Mexico, and later, at the University of Denver), each of these scholars spent long careers in research and publication focused on the region's ethnic Mexican population. In a fascinating discussion of these scholars' analyses of the roots and implications of Mexican Americans' subordinate status in American society, García develops a convincing case that Castañeda, Campa, Sánchez, and other Mexican American advocates of the 1930s and 1940s largely anticipated many of the critiques and proposals for reform most often associated with Chicano militants of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, García notes that Sánchez's early work in I.Q. testing and bilingualism among Mexican American children in New Mexico broke ground for later research that discredited pervasive ethnocentric assumptions that Mexican American "educational underachievement" stemmed either from heredity or from deficiencies inherent in Mexican culture. Similarly, in his careful work on the evolution of Spanish/Mexican culture in the Southwest, Campa sought to challenge negative stereotypes about Mexican Americans by simultaneously rejecting racist notions about the inherent primacy of white, Anglo-Saxon American culture while illuminating the complexity and historical utility of Mexican Americans' syncretic culture. In the end, García argues, these intellectuals—and the other leaders of this era—laid the foundations for the modern Mexican American civil rights movement by collectively developing a sophisticated "world view of a culturally pluralistic society" in which they hoped to forge "an eventual synthesis and coexistence between the culture of their [Mexican immigrant] parents and their desire to be fully accepted as U.S. citizens" (p. 21).

Although *Mexican Americans* clearly reflects much of the recent innovative thinking on Mexican American political activity in a particularly volatile period of American history, García's use of a "generational approach to Chicano history" as his interpretive framework raises some provocative questions. The most important of these involve the issue of what García calls the "political spirit" or "Zeitgeist" of the era (p. 6). On the most fundamental level, García's thesis is based on his observation that, after 1930, a majority of the Mexican American population had been born in the United States, and thus were American citizens. Using this fact as his point of departure, García then follows a line of argument similar in some respects to that advanced by John Blum, Richard Polenberg, and Philip Gleason in their general discussions of American ethnic politics during World War II. In García's view, Mexican Americans' nativity in the United States and subsequent experience of racism and discrimination on the one hand, and their faith in the inclusionary rhetoric of the New Deal, the Atlantic Charter, and the "Four Freedoms" on the other, helped to forge a new "political generation" of leaders committed to achieving "civil rights, . . . first-class citizenship, . . . and a secure identity

for Americans of Mexican descent" (p. 2). García argues that this political generation was clearly different from what he describes as the Mexican "Immigrant Era" of the first third of this century. Departing from their parents' romantic and nostalgic psychological attachment to Mexico, this "Mexican American Generation" considered themselves "Americans" rather than "Mexicans," and therefore expected full rights as American citizens. As García puts it, the Mexican American Generation "identified with the World War II slogan: 'Americans All' " (p. 2). "Growing up in this country, Mexican Americans were increasingly more acculturated, bilingual, and, as a result, more politically functional. Formally educated to a greater extent than ever before, they became better socialized to their rights as U.S. citizens. . . . For Mexican Americans, there was no going back to Mexico. The United States was their home" (p. 15).

Although García is certainly correct that the liberal, "Americanist" ideological orientation he attributes to the "Mexican American Generation" reflected the beliefs of a large (and growing) number of Mexican Americans in the years between 1930 and 1960, his assertion that this perspective defined the dominant "spirit" of a "generation" is problematic in at least two important respects. First, this reasoning tends to oversimplify, and thus to obscure, the actual generational and demographic composition of the ethnic Mexican population between 1930 and 1960. Consequently, the political generation model helps to conceal many of the political and social implications of that complex demographic structure. For example, although García is correct in noting that a majority of the total Mexican-descent population in this period were U.S.-born American citizens, it is important to note that a large number of this group were the first-generation children of Mexican immigrants. Indeed, throughout the period in question immigrants and first-generation Mexican Americans represented a very large percentage of the nation's total "Mexican-stock" population, ranging from at least two-thirds of the total in 1930 to more than 45 percent in 1960.

When the composition of the total Mexican-stock population is viewed in this light, one must at least raise the question of the extent to which the large numbers of first-generation Mexican Americans and resident Mexican immigrants in the United States considered themselves "Americans All." Although García addresses this issue, in part, by noting that his central concern is with the Mexican American political "elite," and not with the "masses" (p. 6), his references to demographic changes and increasing participation in electoral politics seem to imply that the changes influencing political activists were also "trickling down" to other Mexican Americans. García may well be correct in asserting that the views of the political leaders of the Mexican Amer-

ican Generation defined the “Zeitgeist” of the era, but to imply that increasing rates of nativity on U.S. soil necessarily reflected the ethnic Mexican population’s political socialization or an increasing commitment to liberal democratic principles probably overstates the case. Until we better understand the relationship between leadership and the large and rapidly-growing Mexican American/Mexican immigrant population, and the political implications of potentially important variables such as rates of Mexican immigration and naturalization, patterns of language usage and retention, and the variations in ethnic consciousness these variables help create—points that García only touches upon—the issue of a Mexican American Zeitgeist must at least remain open to question.

The second, related problem inherent in the political generation approach is that the conceptualization tends to flatten and diminish the significance of the various political disputes that clearly *did* divide Mexican American civil rights and labor activists in the three decades between 1930 and 1960. Indeed, although García notes that members of the Mexican American Generation often “differ[ed] politically and ideologically” (pp. 5–6), in the end, *Mexican Americans* offers a remarkably consensus interpretation of a particularly contentious era. According to García, Mexican American and Mexican immigrant activists may have disagreed over the most appropriate short-term political tactics and long-term reform strategies, but they generally agreed with the California activist Ignacio López’s assessment of the fundamental issue facing Mexican Americans: “They could either accept their second-class status, as many had for almost 100 years and through at least five generations, or they could struggle for equality” (p. 100). Facing this choice, and “sharing common experiences, . . . hopes, and disillusionments” (p. 19), García concludes, “the Mexican American Generation sought broad consensus” (p. 21) in its efforts to achieve equal rights and integration into the political mainstream.

The basic problem with this logic is that Mexican American organizations and individuals that deeply disagreed with one another are treated as deriving from the same New Deal liberal reformist tradition. For example, groups such as LULAC (an organization that encouraged Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants to pursue a civil rights strategy of “assimilation” into the American political and cultural mainstream) were often diametrically opposed to Mexican American activists like Communist labor leader Emma Tenayuca, or organizations such as the Congress of Spanish-Speaking People (a coalition group that advocated, among other things, bilingual education, the preservation of Mexican culture, and equal rights for even unnaturalized resident aliens in the United States), but García generally dismisses such differences as insignificant. Thus, in assessing the Congress, he writes:

El Congreso's more militant brand of politics did not translate into a revolutionary political position aimed at successfully challenging the dominant reformist tendency in Mexican American political circles and voiced by groups such as LULAC. Mexican American Left leaders, such as those in El Congreso, although perceived at times as undesirable competitors by their middle-class counterparts, supplemented rather than superseded the reform movements of the period. . . . A Mexican American Left emerged out of the 1930s, but it was one centered on reform not revolution. [p. 174]

García's point about the influence of the reform perspective is well taken, but to dismiss as inconsequential the political perspectives of those Mexican American and immigrant activists who dissented—and to ignore their views as to *why* they dissented (especially during traumatic episodes such as the Depression, "Operation Wetback," and the McCarthy antilabor and antiimmigrant witchhunts of the 1950s)—is to minimize an important facet of Mexican American political history. García is correct in asserting that few activists of this era went so far as to advocate violence or revolution as means to achieve their goals, but one need only note the often fierce debates that occurred then (and continued to occur) among Mexican Americans (and Mexican immigrants) over U.S. immigration and foreign policy, bilingual education and other language issues, and the question of "assimilation" versus "cultural maintenance" (to name but a few of the most divisive issues), to recognize that Mexican American political history since 1930 has been characterized not by consensus, but by protracted and often bitter internal conflict.

These criticisms are not meant to detract from the importance of García's study. Indeed, one measure of the book's contribution to Mexican American historiography is that it raises numerous interpretive questions that undoubtedly will help shape future research in this crucial period. Moreover, by exploring the range and development of political thought in this period of unprecedented Mexican American political organization and activism, García has added greatly to our understanding of the persistence of issues that continue to face Mexican Americans and other ethnic minorities in contemporary American society.

David G. Gutiérrez, Department of History, University of California, San Diego, is the author of "Sin Fronteras?": Chicanos, Mexican Americans, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Mexican Immigration Debate," Journal of American Ethnic History (forthcoming), and is currently completing a monograph titled Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity, 1910–1986.

1. For recent examples of scholarship that explore the implications of the complex structure and variegated political responses of the United States' Mexican American and Mexican immigrant population, see the articles on Mexican American women in Ellen Carol Dubois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (1990); Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, The Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (1991); David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (1987); Genaro M. Padilla, "The Recovery of Chicano Nineteenth-Century Autobiography," *American Quarterly* 40 (1988): 286–306; Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: A History of a Working Class Music* (1987); Alejandro Portes and Robert L. Bach, *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (1985); and Rosaura Sánchez, *Chicano Discourse: Sociohistorical Perspectives* (1983).

2. In *Mexican Americans*, García uses the terms "Mexican American," "Chicano," and in some cases, "Mexican immigrant" interchangeably to designate individuals of Mexican descent who reside in the United States. Although I find this usage somewhat problematic, I have attempted in this essay to utilize these terms in the same manner García uses them.