

# Weighing the Costs and Benefits of Mexican Immigration: The Mexican-American Perspective\*

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*Objective.* Survey research posits that Mexican Americans' perceptions of the costs and benefits of immigration drive their opinions about immigration, but this research does not provide a clear picture of how Mexican Americans calculate these costs and benefits. This article aims to understand the processes that explain how Mexican Americans calculate the costs and benefits of Mexican immigration. *Methods.* The article employs 123 in-depth interviews and observation with later-generation Mexican Americans in Garden City, Kansas, and Santa Maria, California. *Result.* Respondents are ambivalent about how Mexican immigrants affect their lives, and their ambivalence is driven by prevailing ideologies in American society regarding immigration, race, and ethnicity. On the one hand, ardent anti-Mexican nativism leads Mexican Americans to see substantial costs accruing to Mexican immigration. Mexican Americans fear that anti-Mexican nativism leads to status degradation for all people of Mexican descent. On the other hand, an ideology of multiculturalism and its accompanying value of diversity lead Mexican Americans to see substantial benefits accruing to the large Mexican-immigrant population, particularly in politics, the labor market, and popular culture. *Conclusions.* Mexican Americans' perceptions of the costs and benefits of Mexican immigration are based not only on economic considerations, but on social and cultural considerations structured by prevailing and often paradoxical ideologies. Respondents' structural position increases concerns about status degradation resulting from immigration, but also shapes how they are positioned to benefit from the boost in prominence that immigration provides to the entire Mexican-origin population.

The issue of immigration touches the Mexican-origin population more than any other ethnic group in the United States. Mexican immigration has continued virtually uninterrupted for the past 100 years (with the exception of the

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1930s), creating a present-day Mexican-origin population that is a mix of individuals from different generations and who descend from different immigration waves. The issue is also particularly salient for this population because at nearly 30 percent of all immigrants, Mexican immigrants make up the largest share of the foreign-born population (Bean and Stevens, 2003:54). Additionally, the majority of Mexican immigrants enter the United States without authorization, and Mexican immigrants comprise the greatest proportion of all unauthorized immigrants (Passel, 2006). Because of their large numbers and high level of unauthorized status, Mexican immigrants are a lightning rod for policy debates about immigration and recent nativist backlash. Although many Mexican Americans exhibit significant signs of assimilation as measured by education (Alba, 2006; Duncan, Hotz, and Trejo, 2006; Reed et al., 2005; Smith, 2003, 2006), wages (Smith, 2003, 2006), occupational status (Macias, 2006; Ochoa, 2004), and intermarriage (Macias, 2006; Perlmann and Waters, 2004; Rosenfeld, 2002), the continuous and heavy influx of Mexican immigrants and their concentration in low-wage, low-status jobs contributes to their high visibility in the U.S. racial and ethnic landscape.

Noting that Mexican Americans are simultaneously part of the U.S. populace that considers the costs and benefits of immigrants *and* members of an ethnic group that represents nearly a third of today's newcomers, opinion research has paid special attention to the attitudes of Mexican Americans regarding immigration. In examining the factors that explain their opinions, survey research begins from the reasonable premise that perceptions about the effect (in most cases the economic effect) of Latin-American immigration on the lives of survey respondents shape their opinions about immigration. Mexican Americans who perceive the costs of immigration to be higher than the benefits are likely to favor immigration restriction, while those who see the benefits outweighing the costs (or at least see no significant costs even if there are few benefits) are less likely to favor immigration restriction (de la Garza et al., 1991; Hood, Morris, and Shirkey, 1997; Miller, Polinard, and Wrinkle, 1984).

If social scientists understand Mexican Americans' perceptions of the costs and benefits of immigration to drive their opinions about immigration, existing research provides no clear picture of how Mexican Americans calculate these costs and benefits. This article aims to clarify this very issue by employing 123 in-depth interviews and observation with later-generation Mexican Americans in Garden City, Kansas, and Santa Maria, California. Interviews and observation show that Mexican Americans do not believe that Mexican immigrants have a uniformly positive or negative influence. Rather, Mexican-American individuals and the sample as a whole are ambivalent about how Mexican immigrants affect their lives. Their ambivalence is a response to the ways prevailing ideologies in American society regarding immigration, race, and ethnicity guide the larger national reaction to Mexican immigration. On one hand, ardent nativism casts Mexican immigrants as the cause of social and economic ills, leading Mexican Americans to

see substantial costs accruing to immigration from their ethnic homeland. Respondents fear that the nativism Mexican immigrants attract leads to status degradation for all people of Mexican origin. On the other hand, an ideology of multiculturalism and the accompanying value of diversity shape a more welcoming American response to Mexican immigration, imbuing Mexican immigration with benefits in the eyes of Mexican Americans. Respondents note that they benefit from the immigration-driven growth of the Mexican-origin population, which creates a demand for Mexican representation in politics and the workforce. A market-driven multiculturalism creates greater prominence of Mexican-descent individuals in popular culture, and respondents believe that immigration has thus made them part of a culturally ascendant group. This article's interpretive approach illuminates the complexities of Mexican Americans' perceptions of Mexican immigration in ways that survey research hints at, but cannot fully explain.

### **Theoretical Background**

Public opinion research on immigration has been mostly concerned with the factors shaping the desired level of immigration among the U.S. public in general (Citrin et al., 1997; Cornelius, 2002; Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996) and among Latinos in particular (de la Garza et al., 1991, 1992, 1993; Hood, Morris, and Shirkey, 1997; Miller, Polinard, and Wrinkle, 1984). The theoretical rationale behind a focus on Latinos comes from the presumption that they may hold beliefs that differ from members of other ethnic groups because their ethnic roots tie them to the region of the world that sends the largest number of immigrants to the United States. Two hypotheses predominate. The first is the "cultural affinity" hypothesis, which posits that Latinos' cultural similarity and network ties to immigrants give them an affinity for immigrants that produces more accommodating views about immigration in general. The cultural affinity hypothesis finds some support in studies of particular locales, such as southern California (Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993), but plays an insignificant role in Latinos' desired level of immigration among nationally representative samples (Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996).

Few other studies have uncovered support for the cultural affinity hypothesis, finding instead that Latinos' level of structural integration—time spent in the United States, English-speaking ability, and socioeconomic status—is a more powerful determinant of their stance on immigration. This "structural position" hypothesis posits that Latinos who are more structurally integrated into U.S. society are more likely to hold restrictionist views of immigration as compared to those who are less structurally integrated. The structural integration hypothesis proves especially strong when comparing attitudes among Latinos (Binder, Polinard, and Wrinkle, 1997; de la Garza and DeSipio, 1998; de la Garza et al., 1991, 1993; Newton, 2000). This research suggests that across generations Mexican Americans

become less attached to their ethnic identity and their economic interests come to resemble that of other non-immigrant Americans. With their economic interests trumping any sense of ethnic solidarity, integrated Mexican Americans' attitudes become restrictive.

Following this reasoning, survey research taps economic considerations as a central factor shaping how Latinos weigh the costs and benefits of a co-ethnic immigrant population. Latinos who believe that immigrants have a negative impact on their economic situation favor immigration restrictions, while perceptions that immigration yield an economic gain predict the opposite opinion (Binder, Polinard, and Wrinkle, 1997; Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996). If, in fact, Latinos' assessments of these costs and benefits are central to the formation of their opinions on immigration restriction, establishing an understanding of *how* they weigh these costs and benefits, both economic and noneconomic, is crucial to answering larger questions regarding their opinions about immigration. Yet, existing research provides few clues about the processes that explain how Latinos calculate these costs and benefits; how they perceive the effect of their immigrant co-ethnics.

Recent qualitative research suggests that competition for scarce resources does in fact play a role in how native-born Latinos evaluate immigration, but that non-economic considerations are also a factor. Fitzgerald's (2004) ethnographic study of a Southern California labor union shows that native-born Mexican-American and Mexican-immigrant union members struggle for control of economic and political resources within the union. Mexican-American union members feel locked out of jobs and union leadership positions controlled by a Mexican-immigrant hometown network. This sense of exclusion breeds resentment among Mexican-American union members, leading to accusations that Mexican immigrants are less than committed to the union because of their continuing ties to their hometowns, in Mexico.

When Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants are not directly vying for the same resources, cultural considerations may play a more significant role in how they perceive their co-ethnic newcomers. Ochoa's (2000) qualitative study of later-generation Mexican Americans in La Puente, California, shows that Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants negotiate different labor markets, diminishing any sense of economic competition. Instead, Mexican Americans voice discontent about cultural differences between themselves and their immigrant co-ethnics. Mexican Americans point out that immigrants do not assimilate fast enough, and have made Mexican Americans feel culturally inferior by ridiculing them for their subpar Spanish-speaking abilities (also see Menchaca, 1995).

Conflict between native-born members of an ethnic group and their immigrant co-ethnics is hardly new, and historical accounts suggest that Mexican Americans' perceptions of the costs and benefits of Mexican immigration may also be shaped by prevailing ideologies about race and ethnicity. The case of German-American and Eastern-European immigrant

Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is instructive. Widespread anti-Semitic concerns about the putative racial contamination of southern and eastern European Jews were part of a prevailing nativist ideology (Higham, [1955] 1963). Faced with an influx of poor, eastern European Jews and a growing nativist response, established middle-class German-American Jews were concerned that newly-arriving Eastern-European Jews would not only spoil economic gains made by the former, but also lead to status degradation for all American Jews (Sorin, 1992; Szajkowski, 1973).

The history of relations between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants further highlights the role that prevailing ideologies about race and ethnicity play in shaping Mexican-American perceptions of Mexican immigration. Gutiérrez (1995) shows that Mexican-American civic and political organizations continually weighed the political costs and benefits of including Mexican immigrants in their efforts. The tactics they ultimately chose varied over time, and the prevailing social and political mores of particular historical periods determined these strategies. For example, during the 1930s, 1940s, and part of the 1950s the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a prominent Mexican-American civic organization, feared poor Mexican immigrants would sour U.S. attitudes toward people of Mexican descent. LULAC excluded Mexican immigrants from their ranks, adopting a stance that was in lock-step with the dominant ideology of Americanization. However, mass deportations of Mexican immigrants and the nascent civil rights and Chicano movements led LULAC to soften its stance regarding Mexican immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s.

Given prevailing ideologies, we might expect Mexican Americans to see both costs and benefits to Mexican immigration. Nativism directed at Mexican immigrants runs high, particularly because of the high level of unauthorized Mexican immigration (Espenshade and Belanger, 1997; Hood, Morris, and Shirkey, 1997; Ngai, 2004). Mexican Americans may see serious costs accruing to the large co-ethnic immigrant population as a result. Yet, Americans' attitudes about race and ethnicity have become more accommodating during the last 30 years (Schuman et al., 1997). Multiculturalism and the various policies it guides have taken hold throughout the United States (Alba and Nee, 2003; Suárez-Orozco, 2000), providing a context in which Mexican Americans may see significant benefits to Mexican immigration. In view of the present-day demographic and ideological context, how do Mexican Americans calculate the costs and benefits of Mexican immigration?

### **Methods, Research Setting, and Respondents**

I draw on 123<sup>1</sup> in-depth interviews with later-generation Mexican Americans in order to explore this question. I conducted interviews in Garden

<sup>1</sup>A list of respondents and their key demographic characteristics is available on request from the author.

City, Kansas, and Santa Maria, California, with respondents whose ancestors have been in the United States since 1940 or earlier, who are of Mexican descent on both their mother's and father's side of the family, and who have lived in their respective city for most of their lives. According to survey research, later-generation Mexican Americans are most likely to be structurally integrated, and therefore are predicted to perceive higher costs associated with immigration (de la Garza et al., 1991, 1993; Newton, 2000).

Garden City is a small beef-packing town located in the southwestern corner of Kansas. The 2000 U.S. Census reports that of the town's 28,451 residents, 9,865, or 34.7 percent, are of Mexican origin. Roughly half the Mexican-origin population is foreign born. The history of Mexican immigration to Garden City is best described as interrupted. Between roughly 1900 and 1930, Mexican immigrants came to the area to build the railroads and work the sugar beet fields (Avila, 1997). But Mexican-immigrant settlement shifted away from Kansas to other states in the middle of the 20th century, and there was a nearly 40-year hiatus of Mexican immigration to the state (Durand, Massey, and Charvet, 2000). In 1980, beef-packing plants opened in Garden City, and in combination with changes in federal immigration laws in 1986 that spurred a Mexican-immigrant diaspora (Durand, Massey, and Charvet, 2000), Garden City saw a resurgence of Mexican immigration (Stull, 1990).

Santa Maria is an agricultural city located on the central coast of California. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 40,719, or 52.3 percent, of Santa Maria's 77,423 inhabitants are of Mexican origin. Like Garden City, roughly half the Mexican-origin population is foreign born. Unlike Garden City, however, Mexican immigration to Santa Maria was constant throughout the 20th century. Although there was a hiatus of immigration in Kansas, California became an increasingly popular destination for Mexican immigrants in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (Durand, Massey, and Charvet, 2000). Agricultural work has always attracted Mexican immigrants to Santa Maria, but advances in agriculture technology in recent decades have created a year-round demand for the inexpensive labor that Mexican immigrants provide (Palerm, 1994, 1997). Mexican immigrants are practically the only source of agricultural labor in the fields around the city.

The interviews from Garden City and Santa Maria are part of a larger study examining the effects of Mexican-immigrant replenishment on Mexican-American ethnic identity. I chose these two cities for theoretical reasons. I began from the premise that the differences in historical patterns of immigrant replenishment might yield differences in ethnic identity formation, which includes Mexican Americans' perceptions about the costs and benefits of Mexican immigration. Although not as pronounced as I expected, this variation does yield some differences in the identity formation, as well as in variation how Mexican Americans perceive these costs and benefits.

I also chose Garden City and Santa Maria because both cities are geographically and demographically small in size, thus maximizing interactions

between Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans in Garden City and Santa Maria are not statistically representative of Mexican Americans nationwide. Both these communities are semi-rural, and Mexican Americans are predominantly an urban and suburban population. Nevertheless, the overall experiences of Mexican Americans in Garden City and Santa Maria are consonant with research conducted on later-generation Mexican Americans in more urban and suburban settings (Macias, 2003, 2004, 2006; Ochoa, 2000, 2004). Furthermore, the experiences of Mexican Americans in this study with regard to intergenerational advancement in education, income, and intermarriage reflect national trends (Alba, 2006; Alba et al., forthcoming; Duncan, Hotz, and Trejo, 2006; Macias, 2006; Perlmann and Waters, 2004; Reed et al., 2005; Smith, 2003, 2006).

Respondents range in age from 15 to 98. I interviewed people from a wide array of occupational and educational backgrounds to access a broad cross-section of Mexican Americans in each city. I obtained respondents using the snowball sampling technique. I minimized sample-selection bias by utilizing several different networks of individuals. I analyzed interviews using ATLASTi,<sup>2</sup> a software package that allows users to attach coding categories to relevant parts of transcripts in order to compare similarly coded portions of text across interviews. Data collection and analysis were simultaneous processes in this project. I began analyzing my interviews during data collection in order to explore in future interviews theoretical insights and nuances I identified in earlier interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Weiss, 1995).

### **“Giving Us All a Bad Name”**

Similar to research on later-generation Mexican Americans in other settings (Ochoa, 2000, 2004), Mexican Americans in Garden City and Santa Maria do not mention direct economic competition as a cost of Mexican immigration. Respondents in Garden City and Santa Maria rarely compete for jobs or other economic resources. Mexican Americans are by and large firmly planted in the middle class,<sup>3</sup> while the bulk of Mexican immigrants concentrate in low-wage jobs in beef-packing plants (in Garden City) and agriculture (in Santa Maria) that have been tagged as “Mexican-immigrant” work. The native-born population, including Mexican Americans, shuns these jobs.

Instead, the costs that Mexican Americans perceive arise from the belief that what happens among their immigrant co-ethnics reflects poorly on all people of Mexican descent. Many said that Mexican immigrants have a largely negative influence on the overall image of Mexican-origin individ-

<sup>2</sup>See ([www.atlasti.de](http://www.atlasti.de)) for more information.

<sup>3</sup>Many of the Mexican Americans I interviewed gained middle-class status through blue-collar jobs, while others occupy professional occupations.

uals, and pointed to the national and local media as a root cause. Garden City's local television station and newspaper frequently display the names and photos of the most wanted criminals in the county. Among the most wanted are many Latinos, whom Garden City residents presume to be Mexican immigrants because the names and faces are unfamiliar to long-time residents. Garden City respondents believe that these reports cast the entire Mexican-origin population in a negative light. Reflecting this belief were the words of Ellen Iturbe, a 44-year-old secretary in Garden City.

You started reading things in the paper and it would upset me because I'm thinking it makes us look bad, and we're the locals, from here. And yeah, I would get mad at things that you read in the paper because we're not all like that. I mean you know . . . I felt sometimes I would think that, then everybody thinks that we're all like that. And we're not.

Local residents' pervasive anti-Mexican-immigrant ire also acts on respondents' belief that Mexican immigrants negatively affect their image. Local residents often loudly voice complaints about what they perceive to be unsavory lifestyle characteristics displayed by foreign-born Mexicans. Among these lifestyle characteristics are housing strategies (multiple people in a single dwelling), overall cleanliness, and poor etiquette in public spaces. Keenly aware of these complaints from local residents, some Mexican Americans fear that these lifestyle characteristics contribute to negative stereotypes that local residents apply to Mexican Americans. In the process of voicing their concerns, some respondents echo the ire of non-Mexicans. The comments of Johnny Rincón, a 63-year-old liquor store owner in Santa Maria, illustrate.

[Other people] probably say, "Look at those guys. They're all the same." Because the way these guys are living it kind of hurts us in some ways . . . The housing, how they live, leaving their cars, what they're driving, the way they dress, their overall rudeness too. A lot of people complain they're real rude people, the ones that come from over there. You know something happens I say, "Excuse me" or something like that. A lot of times these people don't say "excuse me." We get a lot of that, especially in stores. They let their little kids run in the aisles, eating all the food and opening packages. And *todos mocosos* (with mucus on their nose), with the diapers. They should keep those kids a little cleaner.

Most Mexican Americans who voiced concerns about status degradation, however, expressed a degree of ambivalence. The majority are sympathetic toward the plight of immigrants, even if they express disappointment about the ways they believe this plight reflects on Mexican Americans. Lupe Bustamante, a 58-year-old office manager in Santa Maria, is among the most sympathetic respondents to Mexican immigrants. Yet, she expressed frustration about how the housing strategies immigrants employ may dampen others' views of Mexican Americans.



Well, I think one of the ways [Mexican immigration influences Mexican Americans] is I hear more negative things about Mexicans now. I mean you hear more negative things because of that. . . . [It] makes me angry, that's about it. And sometimes they make me angry because I think a lot of them, if they tried, they could do a little better. But I think mostly it just makes me angry. I wish that it wasn't that so many of them had to live together like that because if you live two to three families in a house or in one place, it's bound to get run down. So it's just an impact on the city so therefore people will start saying things. And you hear it and it does make you mad, or it does me anyway.

More than being upset at the immigrants themselves, Lupe and others express a general disappointment about the existence of a situation in which high housing prices and unscrupulous landlords force immigrants to crowd into small dwellings. This situation, however, is ultimately a cost in the eyes of Mexican-American respondents.

Mexican Americans' perceptions shape how they negotiate daily life in Garden City and Santa Maria. Respondents reported that they have to make up for the perceived cost of being Mexican American by fending off negative stereotypes that they believe the immigrants perpetuate. They noted that they sometimes have to prove to non-Mexicans that they are indeed *U.S.*-born Mexicans who have integrated into American society. A particularly common stereotype pertains to language. The large Mexican-immigrant population creates a widespread belief that all people of Mexican descent are foreign, and therefore speak limited English. Donald Mercado, a 47-year-old nonprofit manager, said that when he leaves Garden City (where he is familiar to most residents) he often makes a point to greet individuals in social situations before they greet him in order to avoid potential stereotyping. Donald's dark skin may lead some to believe he is an immigrant, and his readiness to speak first in interactions with non-Mexicans is a defense mechanism against such a perception.

[I]f I go in, let's say some other outside communities, I think sometimes people will look at me and kind of be ready to say something to me because they are fearful that I'm going to say something in Spanish to them. That would catch them off guard. But what I do when I go to, let's say out of town or [an] out of town area, I usually will speak first and I'll always ask, "How are you doing? How are you doing? What's going on today?"

Bob Fernandez, a 52-year-old graphic designer in Santa Maria, invoked similar strategies in interactions with his neighbors in order to prove that he does not conform to stereotypes commonly applied to Mexican immigrants.

I think when I see the stuff in the newspaper, whether it's Hispanics or Mexicans or whoever that's doing it, it just brings a stigma onto all of us. Because I think there's a lot of the public out there that on first view, their initial thought is, "Oh here's another Mexican." . . . You always wonder moving [into a new neighborhood], "Are the neighbors across the street

saying 'Oh here comes another Mexican family'”? And I guess I'm the type of person that never lets people's attitude affect me. Like the neighbors across the street were rather cool for a long time, and it could possibly have been because they didn't like Mexicans. I really don't know . . . But I'm the type that if I see them out there, I'm gonna' holler across the street, "Hello! How are you?" Just force them to say hello, force them to be nice.

These concerns may not be just a function of perception, but of reality. Many respondents noted that they do in fact face discrimination because of stereotypes about Mexican nativity and legal status.

The youngest respondents also perceive costs of status degradation associated with a large Mexican-immigrant population. However, they worry much less about being mistaken for immigrants than they do about being tagged as gang members or "gangsters." The likelihood that the youngest respondents are confused for immigrants is less than for older respondents because younger Mexican Americans display styles of dress, ways of speaking, and tastes that reflect a strong familiarity with U.S. popular culture, signaling their native-born status. Yet, these young Mexican-American men and women believe that they fight stereotypes that the children of immigrants—the second generation—perpetuate (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Vigil, 1988). Faith Obregón, a high-achieving, 16-year-old high school student in Garden City, expressed concerns about being mistaken for a gang-member:

Well, like the stereotype for a Mexican is like this gangster who shoots and he's not into school. I don't know. That just makes me feel like I have to prove to people that it's not like that. Because there are kids like that in my classes and in school that I know. And it just makes me feel like I have to work really hard just to straighten that out, [to show] that I'm not a gangster and I'm not in gang.

The presence of a large Mexican-immigrant population means there is also a large second generation. Although there is a substantial number of second-generation Mexican Americans who are exceptional students,<sup>4</sup> those who are not faring well often stand out. The struggles that define second-generation Mexican Americans' adaptation are similar to those that defined the second generation from earlier immigrant groups (Child, 1943; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997). Yet, the continual replenishment of Mexican immigration means that there is perpetually a Mexican-American second generation that deals with these struggles. Adolescent Mexican Americans thus contend with stereotypes based on the experiences of the second generation, yielding perceived costs related to the presence of large Mexican-immigrant and second-generation populations.

<sup>4</sup>During my time in Santa Maria, for example, a number of second-generation Mexican Americans were accepted to Ivy League and elite West Coast colleges, and were among the star athletes and campus leaders.

Mexican Americans in both Garden City and Santa Maria expressed similar sentiments, but opinions about immigrants' negative influence are more pronounced in Garden City. Mexican Americans in Garden City have developed a narrative distinct from that of their immigrant co-ethnics. Because there was a break in immigration to Garden City, Mexican Americans tend to compare their image in the community prior to the resurgence of Mexican immigration to this image after the surge in Mexican immigration. The comparison leads many to believe that Mexican immigrants have cast a bad light on the positive image that later-generation Mexican Americans have worked so hard to cultivate. This belief is especially prevalent among respondents from the middle and oldest cohorts who have lived through both the Mexican-immigration recession and resurgence. They recall a time when Mexican Americans fought to become accepted as part of the mainstream in Garden City, and they express pride in having gained acceptance as full-fledged members of the community. Some in Garden City believe that the increased presence of Mexican immigrants threatens to return Mexican Americans to their prior status as second-class citizens. As Timothy Saenz, a 39-year-old theater director explained:

My parents, my grandparents worked hard so that I could be where I am today. And I feel like the Mexicans coming in from Mexico are going to . . . if they don't Americanize themselves, if they don't learn to be an American, then they're going to bring those of us that our grandparents and parents worked so hard to get us to this point, they're going to bring it down again.

Although respondents in both cities believe their image is vulnerable, the comparison between the time when there were no Mexican immigrants coming to Garden City and today exacerbates Garden City respondents' fears about the fragility of their image.

### **“Without Them, We Wouldn't Be Where We Are”**

Mexican Americans also perceive significant benefits owing to the substantial Mexican-immigrant population. Just as a prevailing nativist ideology structures the U.S. response to Mexican immigration, an ideology of multiculturalism and the accompanying value of diversity create a more welcoming context of reception for Mexican immigrants. As Alba and Nee (2003) point out, federal legislation passed in the 1960s imposing stiff penalties for racial and ethnic discrimination has forced many firms and organizations to adopt strategies to demonstrate compliance. The responses to these legal changes have created “an institutionalized consensus on the value of diversity” (2003:57) that pervades, however superficially, in contemporary U.S. society. Because of the value of diversity and the ideology of multiculturalism from which it springs, U.S. institutions are in some ways more welcoming of Mexican immigrants. Although racial and ethnic

differences produce unequal outcomes generally, respondents believe that their ethnic identity yields some advantages in an era of multiculturalism. The youngest respondents are especially apt to see the world through the multicultural lens because the ideology has prevailed throughout their lives.

### ***Immigrant-Driven Growth and the Demand for Racial and Ethnic Representation***

Despite fears about Mexican immigrants creating a poor image of Mexican Americans, respondents believe that immigrants have a positive influence on their social position. They opine that the ascendancy of Mexican Americans into the core institutions in Garden City and Santa Maria would not be possible if not for the presence of a large Mexican-immigrant population.

The demand for Mexican-origin representation is especially prevalent in local politics. In an era when racial and ethnic representation is a valued component of democratic principles, it is often to Mexican Americans that voters and public officials turn for “Mexican” representation. Well aware of this fact, many Mexican Americans see immigration as a benefit to their political clout. Both Garden City and Santa Maria have a substantial number of Mexican-origin elected public officials. During my fieldwork, three of the five members of the city commission (in Garden City) and three of the five city council members, including the mayor (in Santa Maria), were of Mexican descent.<sup>5</sup> Respondents fully recognize the institutionalized demand for such representation, and cite the role of Mexican immigrants in creating this demand. As Hank Pacheco, a 27-year-old law-enforcement officer in Santa Maria, told me:

Actually now we're starting to take a lot larger role. Like you know, our former [Mexican-American] mayor now is in the state legislature . . . But like our city council has a lot more Hispanics or Mexicans now . . . I think part of it is the increase in Mexican population. That's definitely one of them. . . . And actually knowing what [Mexican-American politicians are] talking about and getting enough people to listen and then by doing that, it makes other groups of people in the area kind of open their eyes and take notice a little bit. I think it's been a really positive thing.

<sup>5</sup>Some respondents and key informants in Santa Maria believe that the Anglo political elite helped to elect these council members and the former mayor in order pacify the complaints of those who believe that the city government has excluded minorities from leadership positions. They also assert that these Mexican-American elected officials do not support an agenda that is favorable to people of Mexican descent. These complaints took the form of a pending lawsuit filed by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund arguing that the at-large election of council members yielded inadequate representation for people of Mexican origin.

Mexican Americans also believe that the large presence of Mexican immigrants benefits their employment opportunities, especially for those who are bilingual. The looming financial penalties stemming from anti-discrimination laws motivate many businesses to hire a diverse workforce in order to promote the principles of multiculturalism and to demonstrate legal compliance. However, the cost of discriminating against Mexican immigrants in Garden City and Santa Maria comes from the potential loss of revenue as much as it does from legal sanction. Since Mexican immigrants make up such a large proportion of the population in each city, businesses that discriminate or exclude them will lose out on a substantial source of potential revenue. As a result, businesses have worked to accommodate and attract immigrant clientele, most notably through the presence of bilingual employees found in banks, grocery stores, restaurants, gas stations, and retail stores.

Mexican Americans, especially those who speak Spanish, are among the primary beneficiaries of the strategy that firms utilize to attract and accommodate immigrant customers. Mexican Americans are often seen as highly valuable employees because they have a keen familiarity with U.S. institutions and culture *and* they possess the ability to communicate effectively with Spanish-speaking clientele. Consider the case of Aaron Briseño, a 17-year-old high school student whose grandfather taught him to speak Spanish. Aaron believes his ability to communicate with Spanish-speaking customers made him desirable as an employee at a local grocery store.

If somebody asks me, “Do you know Spanish?” And I’ll tell them if I can speak it. Yeah, I do. That’s one of the reasons I got a job at [the grocery store]. A lot of Hispanic people live on that side of town and they tend to shop at that store. And I put on my application that I was a good translator and sometimes people back in pharmacy or grocery department need me to translate for them and I do that.

Similarly, several respondents noted that their employer provides additional pay to workers who speak Spanish, a reward for bilingualism that only exists because of the large Mexican-immigrant population. Mexican Americans are not the only potential beneficiaries of “bilingual pay,” since one need not be of Mexican (or Latino) origin to speak Spanish. Yet, for those Mexican Americans who grew up speaking Spanish, it is seen as a part of their ethnic roots that carries a reward in the labor market. These rewards are especially clear for respondents already in or likely to enter professional occupations. Young college graduates or college-bound respondents readily recognize that the immigrant-driven growth of the Mexican-origin population yields benefits in an era of multiculturalism, which has become a taken-for-granted part of today’s ideological landscape. As Rolando Fernandez, a 21-year-old college student remarked:

I see [Mexican immigration] as much bigger plus than any minus, especially in California. Like I said, not to be exploitative, but I’m going to definitely

at some point use my name and use my background to advance myself. Not just . . . obviously for partially selfish goals, but at the same time because I feel that the higher status I can reach, like I was saying earlier, I can bring somebody along with me.

Professional Mexican Americans' class position allows them to more easily fend off the perceived negative effects that respondents point out as being a cost of immigration, and their professional status enables them to benefit from the need for racial and ethnic representation in professional occupations. Some respondents, like Rolando, have altruistic motives to use their occupational and class statuses to "give back" to the Mexican-immigrant community. However, they also recognize their ethnic background to be an increasingly valued individual asset. The lumping together of Mexican-American and foreign-born Mexicans that sometimes leads to discrimination against Mexican Americans may also contain an element of opportunity. A pervasive multicultural ideology means that Mexican Americans are the most likely to "get the call" when firms and institutions want "Mexican" representation. To be sure, employers prefer Mexican immigrants over Mexican Americans at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003), but the fact that Mexican Americans come from the same ethnic category, while enjoying the practical benefits of English proficiency, U.S. citizenship, and familiarity with U.S. society, make them better positioned to reap the advantages of multiculturalism.

### *The Mexican Critical Mass and Mexican-American Popular Culture*

The benefit that Mexican Americans perceive also springs from the ascendancy of the Mexican-origin population in U.S. popular culture. One aspect of this perception lies in the belief that Mexican immigration has created a critical mass that increasingly defines popular culture in Garden City, Santa Maria, and nationwide. Many of the youngest respondents point out that the growing Mexican population has created a majority Mexican-origin youth population of which they are a part by virtue of their ethnic origin. Their familiarity with popular culture makes the youngest respondents especially likely to cite the positive effects of Mexican immigration on the cultural status of Mexican Americans. The comments of Melissa Santiago, a 16-year-old high school student in Santa Maria, illustrate:

[J]ust the fact that there are people living in Santa Maria that are like me and that are Mexican on both sides. And they're just like me. . . . [Without the immigrants it would] be kind of weird because . . . only a certain amount of people would be the only Mexicans here, to where if there was a lot of white people, you'd feel out of place maybe.

Mexican Americans find comfort in their "in-group" status because it means that they are part of a group that is defining the demographic and

cultural futures of these cities. As one high-school-aged Santa Maria respondent put it: “The white kids gotta’ blend in with the Mexicans.”

The growth of the Mexican-immigrant population (and Latino population, for that matter) has also facilitated the entrance of Mexican popular culture into mainstream popular culture, further eliciting positive feelings among respondents about the effects of Mexican immigration. As corporate America recognizes the immense profit to be made by catering to Latino immigrants, it has launched targeted marketing campaigns aimed at attracting this population’s spending (Dávila, 2001). This “market-driven multiculturalism” (Zolberg and Long, 1999:26) gives the Mexican-origin population growing prominence in popular culture as television, film, print media, and music increasingly reflect and celebrate people of Mexican origin. Respondents thus believe that the influx of Mexican immigrants and the resulting increase in the Mexican-origin population carries a social benefit. As Mark Santos, a 29-year-old social worker in Garden City, commented:

I see a lot of positives. Our culture has a lot of great things to offer. Of course our music is now mainstream, it’s big time. Our festivities are growing in every city. Everyone is picking it up and doing those things and celebrating what we celebrate and what we stand for. I think it’s great.

Older respondents in Garden City also recognize how demographic and ideological shifts have converged to change the mix of costs and benefits that accrue to Mexican immigration. These older respondents note the difference in “being Mexican” in Garden City today as compared to the time prior to the resurgence of immigration. The differences are apparent not only in the visibility of Mexican ethnicity in mainstream culture, but also in the esteem they attach to being a person of Mexican descent. Joe Gil, Jr., a 56-year-old retired retail sales manager in Garden City, reflected on how the resurgence of Mexican immigration combined with the efforts of local businesses to cater to Mexican immigrants has created a sense of ethnic pride:

The first half of my life it was rough. I didn’t feel too good about [being Mexican American]. But as things began to improve, as the population of the city changed the mix and we got more Hispanic people in town, the language began to change; yeah I felt a lot better about it. You bet I do now. You bet! . . . Not until the influx of the beef plants and then people started coming in—then things began to change. Then they were catering to them, you bet. Power of the buck makes a big difference.

The effort to profit from the growing number of Mexican immigrants has, in the eyes of Mexican Americans, given some power to the Mexican-origin population to define popular culture, and indeed the U.S. mainstream.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Social science research shows that Latinos' perceptions of the costs and benefits of immigration shape their opinions about immigration. Yet, this research does not suggest how native-born Latinos calculate these costs and benefits. By drawing on in-depth interviews and observations, this article suggests that Mexican Americans express a large degree of ambivalence about the costs and benefits of immigration from their ethnic homeland. Their ambivalence reflects and is influenced by a larger ambivalent context that greets Mexican immigrants (Cornelius, 2002). On one hand, anti-Mexican-immigrant nativism makes U.S. society an unwelcoming place for Mexican immigrants. Americans socially shun Mexican immigrants because of their unauthorized status and belief that they contribute to economic and cultural degradation. As a result, Mexican Americans opine that their immigrant co-ethnics threaten the status of all people of Mexican descent. This perception shapes how some Mexican Americans negotiate their daily life. Fearful that non-Mexicans will apply negative stereotypes about Mexican immigrants or second-generation "gangsters," respondents say that they have to fend off these stereotypes. On the other hand, an ideology of multiculturalism and an accompanying value of diversity create a more welcoming space for Mexican ethnicity. This more welcoming environment includes a value on racial and ethnic representation in politics and industry, as well as culturally sensitive corporate marketing aimed at the "Hispanic market." Mexican Americans thus believe that the immigrant-driven growth of the Mexican-origin population benefits them because they are most likely to "get the call" when there is a need for racial and ethnic representation. A market-driven multiculturalism combined with the growth in the Mexican-origin population has made this population ascendant in U.S. popular culture. Mexican Americans, particularly those who are younger, note a social benefit coming from Mexican immigration precisely because it has given the entire Mexican-origin population greater cultural prominence.

As with previous research (Binder, Polinard, and Wrinkle, 1997; de la Garza and DeSipio, 1998; de la Garza et al., 1991, 1993; Newton, 2000), this article shows that structural position matters in how Mexican Americans calculate the costs and benefits of Mexican immigration. However, the article also shows their structural integration to be a source of ambivalence. The large degree to which they have integrated into U.S. society precipitates a fear that the influx of a large, poor, and mostly unauthorized co-ethnic immigrant population will threaten their own status as integrated Americans. Yet, the extent of their structural integration also puts them in a position to realize the benefits of membership in a massive U.S. ethnic group in an era of multiculturalism. It is precisely because of their elevated levels of educational attainment and occupational status that the most upwardly mobile believe they benefit from policies and programs that positively recognize racial and ethnic origin.



Changing sentiment in U.S. society, either positive or negative, is likely to alter how Mexican Americans see the costs and benefits of immigration from their ethnic homeland. I conducted the interviews for this article during a period when Mexican immigration was largely peripheral to national policy debates. However, in 2006, Mexican immigration became a central focus of policymakers and pundits as the U.S. Congress considered major immigration reform legislation. At no point in the last decade has the ambivalent balance that characterizes the U.S. response to Mexican immigration tilted more negatively. When this largely negative response becomes as vocal as it did in 2006, Mexican Americans' fears about the harmful effects of Mexican immigration on the image of Mexican Americans likely deepen, and may overshadow the benefits they recognize. Mexican Americans still likely weigh these fears against the potentially positive impacts of immigration they see emanating from market forces and popular culture that tend to work independently of policy decisions.

Future research that employs native-born Latinos' perception of costs and benefits of Latino immigration as an independent variable explaining attitudes about immigration would do well to consider the multifaceted ways in which Mexican Americans view immigration. This research suggests that ideological and demographic shifts create a complex mix of costs and benefits in the eyes of native-born Latinos. Survey instruments should include multiple aspects of the costs and benefits that respondents weigh and not just those related to economic considerations. As this research and others have shown (Ochoa, 2000), Mexican Americans' perceptions of the costs and benefits of Mexican immigration are based largely on social and cultural considerations structured by prevailing and often paradoxical ideologies.

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