



Democracy & Society

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Affirmative Action in White and Black

BY IRA KATZNELSON

Hurricane Katrina's violent winds and waters tore away the shrouds that ordinarily mask the country's racial pattern of poverty and neglect. Understandably, most commentators focused on the woeful federal response. Others, taking a longer view, yearned for a burst of activism patterned on the New Deal. But that nostalgia requires a heavy dose of historical amnesia. It also misses the chance to come to terms with how the federal government in the 1930s and 1940s contributed to the persistence of two Americas.

In June 1965, President Lyndon Johnson asked in a sweeping and assertive address why the black population of the United States had fallen even further behind the country's white majority during the two decades since the end of the Second World War, despite the era's sustained national prosperity. Conceding that 'we are not completely sure why this is', he stressed the need to adopt bold new policies of affirmative action to remedy the disabilities following from two centuries of oppression.

Johnson missed the chance to say how the major policies of the New Deal and Fair Deal of the 1930s and 1940s, inflected by the preferences of the southern wing of the Democratic Party, had massively advantaged American whites while often excluding African-Americans, especially the majority who still lived [Continued, Page 6]

Mapping Mexican Migrant Civil Society

BY JONATHAN FOX

This essay draws from an extensive background paper prepared for: "Mexican Migrant Civic and Political Participation," November 4-5, 2005, Co-sponsored by the Latin American and Latino Studies Department, University of California, Santa Cruz and the Mexico Institute and Division of United States Studies of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. For the full version, with references and footnotes, as well as thematic background papers see: www.wilsoncenter.org/migrantparticipation

Recognizing migrant civil society

The more than 10 million Mexicans who live and work in the US represent approximately one in eight adults who were born in Mexico. They also represent 3.6% of the US population. While the growing numbers of Mexicans in the US are widely recognized, the presence of Mexican society in the US has not been widely acknowledged. Though organized migrants are now more visible than, say, a decade ago, the full breadth and depth of migrant collective action is still not well understood.

Many tens of thousands of Mexican migrants work together with their *paisanos* to promote "phi- [Continued, Page 10]

Do organized Mexican migrants represent the US branch of Mexican society, or the Mexican branch of US society?

Having reviewed these four different arenas of migrant civil society, how might we think about their relationships with US civil society? Is migrant civil society the *US branch of Mexico's civil society*? Or is it the *Mexican branch of US civil society*? The concept of migrant civil society proposed here would include both, because it is defined by the migrants themselves rather than the national arena within which they are active. The hometown associations would be the clearest example of a branch of Mexican civil society that is *in*, but not necessarily *of* the US. They have created a public sphere that is clearly Mexican, not only because of its participants' national origin, but also because of its culture, organizational style, symbolic references and principal counterparts. In contrast, for examples of Mexican branches of US civil society, we could look at the trade union locals that have become majority-migrant and migrant-led, as in the case of several major agro-industrial, service and construction unions in California, or the probably hundreds of religious congregations that have become Mexican spaces within US churches.

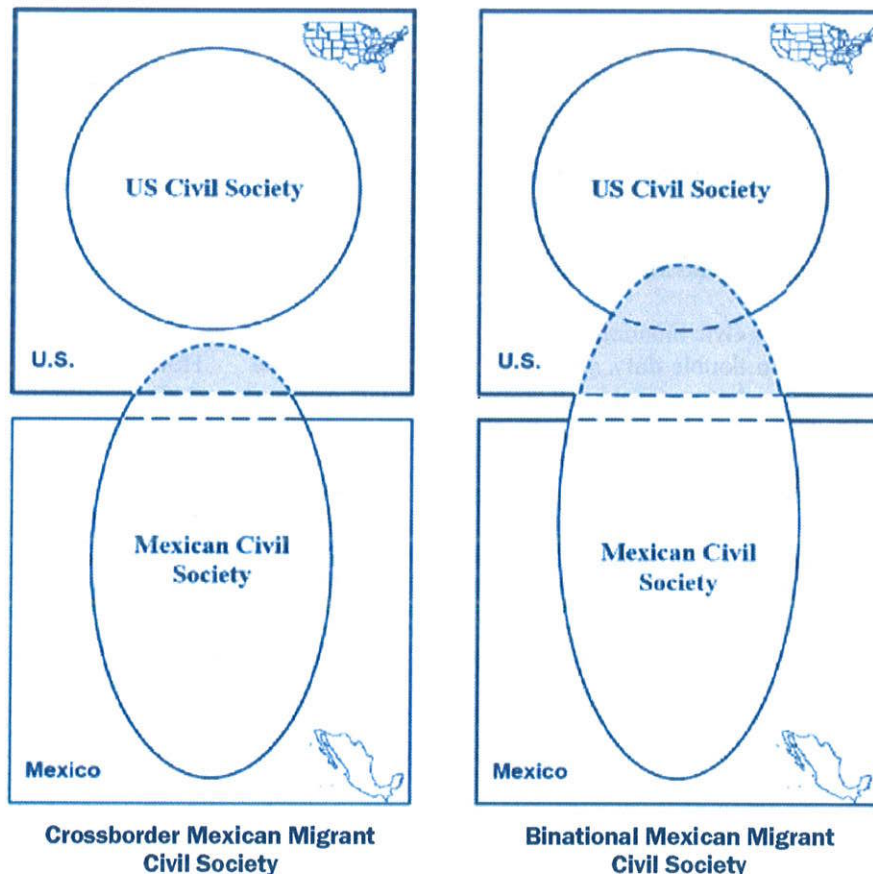
To pursue this conceptual question, one way to think about this distinction between migrant civil society *in* the US versus *of* the US, is to think about two words that are usually treated as synonyms: *cross-border* and *binational*. Here “cross-border” refers to Mexican society broadly defined, located both inside and outside the physical borders of the homeland. “Binational,” in contrast, would refer to being *of* both nations, an overlapping sphere or space of convergence, in which civil society actors are simultaneously part of both Mexican and US civil societies.

If “cross-border” refers to “a people divided by a border,” as New York's Tepeyac Association put it, then “binational” refers to engaging *with both societies at the same time*. In this sense, a migrant civil society that is engaged across borders may or may not be engaged binationally.

When organized migrants go public—as immigrants, as workers and as Mexicans

A key part of forging civil society involves migrants “coming out” as public, collective actors, representing themselves rather than relying on advocates. For example, migrant organizations were officially represented on the 2003 cross-country Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride. This initiative was led in part by the broadest multi-racial set of US civil

Mexican Civil Society in the U.S.: Crossborder and Binational



society organizations—the trade union movement. This convergence was made possible, in turn, by the growing voice and clout of Latino leaders within the US labor movement—most notably in California. In several areas of recent Mexican settlement in the US, such as Nashville, the Freedom Ride permitted migrant organizations to become public actors for the first time.

In contrast to what could be called the Freedom Ride's “integration strategy,” Mexican migrant-led organizations also construct and deploy their *own* collective identities as their primary basis for claiming a space in the public sphere. For example, not long after the Freedom Ride, the *Asociación Tepeyac*—a New York-based, Mexican faith-based mem-

were accepted. Yet these numbers are less surprising when one takes the daunting procedural and political obstacles into account.

Mexico's electoral authorities have been very cautious about any measures that might raise questions about the security of a national voting process that only recently has won the trust of the electorate. Mexico's congress also built measures into the law that were designed to limit the possibility of external intervention in an extraterritorial voting process. As a result, only those migrants who already held a Mexican voter registration card could use the new vote-by-mail system, which also required the sending of copies of the card by registered mail. Political obstacles included a ban on Mexican political party or campaign activity abroad. This experiment in migrant voting poses a paradox, as suggested by a recent *Los Angeles Times* editorial (Sept. 21, 2005). Recalling dissident José Vasconcelos' 1928 presidential campaign in the US, the editors noted that before Mexican migrants had the right to vote, they could do politics freely in the US. Now that they have the vote, they are prohibited from doing politics.

What is clear is that given the constraints on Mexican political party activities in the US, migrants will have to depend almost exclusively on US Spanish language media to be informed participants in the process, underscoring the critical role these outlets perform.

4. HOW CAN DISENFRANCHISED MIGRANTS GAIN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION?

The issue of how migrants can gain political representation poses a puzzle. If they lack voting rights in their host country, then host country politicians have little electoral incentive to make the political investment necessary to enfranchise them. If they also lack voting rights in their country of origin, then their home country politicians will lack political incentives to enfranchise them. This presents a 'chicken and egg' problem—migrants need to gain electoral clout for politicians to pay attention, yet they need politicians to pay attention to get electoral clout.

In Mexico, the recent approval of the absentee ballot represents a first step towards overcoming this problem, though the structure of the voting process is likely to encourage low turnout. In the US, the unrepresented population is huge and growing. In California, for example, 20% of the adult population lacks the right to vote. The discursive frame of "non-citizen enfranchisement" challenges the systemic political exclusion of immigrants, but also blurs the distinction between undocumented immigrants and permanent

residents. The reasons for their exclusion are different, as are their possible pathways to inclusion.

5. WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO US CITIZENSHIP FOR MEXICAN PERMANENT RESIDENTS?

In any discussion of immigrant integration, Mexicans stand out in part because of what conservative nationalists perceive as their insularity. They point to lower rates of naturalization, English language acquisition and social mobility compared to other national origin groups, as well as persistent pride in their language and ethnicity. These critics see the large concentrations of Spanish-speaking immigrants in major cities as an inherent hindrance to the kind of assimilation that they associate with integration into US society. Yet new forms of integration may be evolving. It is possible that these communities offer a critical mass within which new forms of civic, social and political engagement can emerge, public spheres in which Mexicans can both continue to be Mexicans and join US society at the same time.

Naturalization is a classic indicator of engagement with US society, in the social science sense that the successful acquisition of citizenship is also correlated with other indicators of integration. Mexican migrants have long naturalized at lower rates than other national origin groups, and naturalization rates among eligible legal permanent residents vary significantly across national origin groups. According to a key study by the Urban Institute, the percentage of Asians who had adopted US citizenship in 1995 was 56%. Among non-Mexican Latin Americans the rate was 40%. Among Mexican legal residents, only 19% had taken out citizenship in 1995. By 2001, all these rates went up—to 67% among Asians, to 58% among non-Mexican Latin Americans, with the rate among Mexicans almost doubling to 34%. This data suggest two distinct trends—first, the persistent *lag* among Mexicans compared to immigrants of other nationalities, and second, the sharp *rise* in their naturalization rates within a remarkably short period of time. These trends appear to be contradictory. What factors can explain both continuity and change?

One could interpret the combination of continuity and change in naturalization rates in terms of two simultaneous trends. On the one hand, in a context in which the dominant political cultures in both countries continue to require people to choose—either you are Mexican or you are American, but you can't be both—many Mexicans in the US want to live and work here while continuing to identify as Mexican. The persistent power of the political culture of nationalism *on both sides* could partly account for the persistent lag in naturalization rates. On the other hand, in

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