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THE MEXICAN IMMIGRATION DEBATE: ASSIMILATION AND PUBLIC POLICY

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This paper navigates through the contentious issues surrounding the contemporary Mexican immigration debate. It argues that an effective and practical immigration policy reform requires an understanding of the empirical reality of Mexican immigration rather than sweeping generalizations that exist in the literature. It focuses on a dual task of presenting a review of U.S. current and past policies on immigration; and an examination of data measuring Mexican assimilation. Findings indicate that previous immigration policies laid the groundwork for the current immigration picture; and that the measures of assimilation clearly indicate that Mexican immigrants are acculturating to the United States. It concludes that the politicization of immigration would make a comprehensive immigration reform difficult to achieve, leading to future increase in Mexican illegal immigration flows.

Introduction

Mexican immigration, both legal and illegal (sometimes called undocumented or unauthorized), is an issue that has become paramount in contemporary U.S. policy discussions. It is a hot-button topic that is fiercely debated in the American Media as well. The controversy surrounding Mexican immigration is rooted in several factors including socio-economic, cultural, historical, demographic, and principles of democracy. On one side of the debate are those that argue that Mexican immigration must be reduced dramatically, if not stopped completely. The proponents of a moratorium on Mexican immigration fear that the massive influx of immigrants from the southern border threatens the ethnic, cultural, and political traditions of the United States by refusing to assimilate. Further, the contention is that Mexican immigrants (especially illegal ones) come with little skills; allegedly take jobs from Americans and strain the welfare, educational, and healthcare systems. Mexican immigrants represented a significant proportion of the foreign-born U.S. population in 2000 (Huntington 2004), and with immigration come high costs. Immigrants use welfare at a higher rate than the native born population. A study conducted in the early 1990s showed 20.7 percent of

immigrant families received cash benefits, Medicaid, vouchers, or housing subsidies, compared to only 14.1 percent of native households and only 10.5 percent of white, non-Hispanic native households (Duignan & Gann 1998). Further, Mexican immigrants hurt the U.S lower class by depressing wages. Several scholars have argued that cheap migrant labor has been a main contributor to growing economic inequality in the United States (Borjas & Freeman 1992 Beck 1996).

Critics maintain that Mexican immigration is responsible for an increasing U.S. population while exacerbating the already deleterious ecological problems. It is argued that continual immigration will exceed the carrying capacity of the United States and will put incredible stress on U.S. wealth, water, energy, timber, and soil resources as well as on housing (Duignan & Gann 1998). Goldberg and Saunders (2001) both assert that illegal immigrants from Mexico damage the environment of the border region by dumping trash, starting wildfires, and trampling species of endangered plants. The smuggling of illegal aliens across the border has been a growing criminal enterprise and political remedies have been implemented in response to the perceived overrepresentation of immigrants within the U.S. criminal justice system (U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform 1994; Scalia 1996). In the forum of public perception there is a direct link between immigration and crime and because of this the immigration crisis must be rectified.

Those on the other side of the debate argue that Mexican immigrants are essential to the U.S. economy by performing work that Americans do not want to do. They assert that in the absence of using cheap, Mexican immigrant labor, Americans could no longer steadily afford the agricultural products we have come to rely on. Research has shown that illegal immigration from Mexico has a minimal impact on wages in U.S. border areas (Hanson, Robertson, & Spilimbergo 2002). In fact, Rojas (1997) argues that legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico constitute a long-term gain for the United States as the most un-skilled and low-wage workers return to Mexico in ten years, leaving only those likely to succeed to remain in the U.S. The hiring of illegal immigrants allows employers to keep up with the demands of a strong U.S. economy. Duignan and Gann (1998) show that "regardless of where they work and what they do, California employers have benefited from immigrants' lower costs and their relatively high productivity and entrepreneurial spirit." Similarly, Elias (1996) argues that both legal and illegal immigrants pay more money in taxes than they consume in educational and social services and are often the victims of slander by politicians looking to gain votes by feeding off of and contributing to antagonism against immigrants. Pro-immigration advocates show that "the weight of the evidence indicates that present levels and patterns of immigration, if maintained in the future and if not

overridden by other forces, will continue to generate what are, on balance, favorable ratios of benefits to costs for American society" (Bean and Stevens 2003). Mexican immigration enriches the U.S. culturally and simply represents another narrative story in the historical trend of immigration to the United States, a nation founded by immigrants (Martin and Midgley 1999; King 2002). Julian Simon (1989) has professed that Mexican immigrant labor is needed for U.S. economy to function effectively and neither U.S. natural resources nor her environment is at risk from immigration. Pro-immigrant advocates show that the U.S. population has increased in tandem with an increase in U.S. income and despite massive immigration; the environment has improved, not deteriorated (Duignan & Gann, 1998). They also show that the link connecting immigration to higher crime rates is largely a myth and has little, if any, empirical basis (Martinez and Lee 2000, Hagan and Palloni 1999). Immigration, especially Mexican immigration, keeps the population growing and allows for economic development. Though there is cause for concern with massive over population, if allowed to function correctly, the free market will alleviate these concerns. Immigrants tend to have a better work ethic and stronger motivation, thus they are a valued asset to the United States (Simon 1989).

This group of scholars and politicians appears to favor Amnesty measures (similar to the 1986 Immigration Reform) that would allow an estimated 10-12 million immigrants currently in the U.S. to remain in the country either as permanent residents or as temporary workers who will have to go home eventually. With these options, only a minority favors deporting all illegal migrants (Pew Hispanic Center 2006).

Up to this point, we have summarized the sentiments about Mexican Immigration. We realize, however, that the debate is not a win or lose situation; rather, it is a multifaceted issue that should be grounded in systematic analysis and concrete data. To develop a lucid, honest and practical policy requires an understanding of the empirical reality of Mexican immigration. Without a careful synthesis that is based on empirical evidence, scholars and policy makers would be remiss in their assessment, leading to biased judgment and ineffective policy making. Yet, the complexity of immigration saga precludes us from covering all the facets of Mexican immigration debate. As such, the focus in this paper is to present a review of U.S. current and past policies on Mexican immigration; and to examine data/evidence on the extent of Mexican assimilation. Most previous studies seemed to have paid too much attention to the economic ramifications of Mexican immigration but few had looked closely at the data that could explain at how Mexicans are adapting and assimilating. This paper makes a unique contribution to the growing polemics on immigration phenomena by integrating the

historical-policy dimensions with an assessment of Mexican acculturation. In an attempt to navigate through the two objectives, we begin with a reflection on the history and causes of Mexican immigration. Next is a concise analysis of some empirical data of both legal and illegal Mexican immigration because to discuss Mexican immigration without making the distinction between legal and illegal immigration "is to oversimplify substantially the reality of the U.S. immigration picture" (Bean and Stevens 2003). Then we assess empirical data to determine whether or not Mexican immigrants are assimilating to U.S. culture. Later, a review of the contemporary U.S./Mexican immigration policies is presented before finally offering conclusions and insights into the future of Mexican immigration to the United States.

A Brief History of Mexican Immigration to the United States

Almost all of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah were part of Mexico until the Texan War of Independence and the Mexican-American War, in 1835-1836 and 1846-1848 respectively. Upon acquiring these lands, tens of thousands of Mexicans became U.S. citizens, at least technically, though few enjoyed the privileges of citizenship as they were still labeled Mexicanos and treated as outsiders by the American white majority (Hurtado, Rodriguez, Gurin, & Beals 1993). In Mexico however, the economic situation was such that very few emigrated to the U.S., despite its open borders. This was in large part due to the fact that the vast majority of the rural people were not land owners or owned land insufficient to maintain a family (Bean & Stevens 2003). For most, survival depended on the use of all members of the household as labor, thus, immigration to the U.S. was not an option for most rural people in Mexico. This was until the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) when the social instability of the times made rural living even more difficult to sustain. Under these conditions, migration to the U.S. became a more attractive option, especially among male youth.

The first large wave of Mexican immigration came between 1900 and 1930 at a time when the demand for cheap agricultural workers coincided with the population growth and increased agricultural production in the American southwest. At that time, U.S. immigration policy was laissez-faire, as the government left the border unpatrolled until 1924 (Alba & Nee 2003). During the Great Depression, Mexican immigrants were seen no longer as cheap labor but as drains on the United States' struggling economy. As such, hundreds of thousands of illegal Mexican immigrants were repatriated back to Mexico. During the Second World War, the need for cheap Mexican labor was apparent and in 1942 the government began the Bracero Program. The program, designed to meet the needs for seasonal agricultural labor, ended in 1964, but it had already laid the

foundation for contemporary Mexican immigration, especially illegal immigration. Despite the 20,000 immigrants per year cap put on Mexico in the 1970s, illegal Mexican immigration continued to grow while during this time the U.S. had adopted a "look other way" policy to deal with unauthorized Mexican immigration.

Drawing on neo-classical economic theory to explain Mexican immigration, the perspective posits that migration stems from macro-level processes of supply and demand between unequal countries. In this case, the U.S. has high demand for low-skilled labor and offers better economic opportunities, whereas Mexico has an abundant supply of low-skilled laborers who cannot find work in Mexico.

Neoclassical economic theory, however, does not offer a comprehensive analysis of Mexican immigration. Any discussion into the causes of Mexican immigration, both legal and illegal, must include network theory of immigration. This is because networks of previous Mexican immigrants, in conjunction with demand for low-skilled labor, have vastly contributed to contemporary Mexican immigration. The foundation for these networks leading to contemporary Mexican immigration was laid with the Bracero Program (mentioned earlier), which ran from 1942 to 1964. The networks of friends, relatives, and labor markets created interpersonal ties between people from both Mexico and the United States which increased the likelihood of further immigration. These networks tend to reduce the risk of immigration by offering newly arrived immigrants social support through work and housing, among other things. The process of cumulative causation continued as Mexico and the United States enhanced their economic ties.

Data Trends on Mexican Legal and Illegal Immigration

The Mexican-origin population has increased both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the U.S. population. As shown in Table 1, persons of Mexican descent accounted for only 0.4 percent of the total U.S. population in 1910 but in 2000, they accounted for 7.5 percent. Only a fraction of this increase is due to a natural increase in previous immigrants over the decades while the majority is accounted for by the dramatic increase in Mexican immigrants during the twentieth century.

Legal Mexican immigrants have steadily increased in their percentage of the total number of immigrants coming to the United States. Table 2 shows that since 1900, there has only been one decade (the 1930s), in which the percentage of Mexicans out of the total number of immigrants did not increase. The reduction was largely due to the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers during the Great Depression. Their numbers rose sharply again however, during the Bracero Program. The most dramatic increase was from the 1970s to the 1980s where

Mexican's comprised 14.2 percent and 22.6 percent of the total immigrant population respectively. However, as section of B of Table 2 illustrates, this was almost entirely due to the legalization provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA 1986). Under the IRCA, unauthorized migrants who had been residing in the U.S. since 1982 or those who had worked in the U.S. agriculture for at least six months were amnestied and given the opportunity to become legal permanent residents. In fact, had it not been for the legalization provision of the IRCA, legal Mexican immigrants would have comprised a lesser percentage in the 1980s and 1990s than they did in the 1970s.

Legal Mexican immigration to the U.S. increased steadily after 1965. During the 1970s about 640,000 Mexicans legally migrated to the United States; about 1,656,000 in the 1980s; and about 2,249,000 in the 1990s. Mexican-born migrants constituted 27.6 percent of the total foreign-born U.S. population in 2000 (Huntington, 2004). The majority of Mexican immigrants reside in the border states of Texas, California, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona.

Table 1
Total Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1910 to 2000

Year	*Total Mexican-Origin Population (In Thousands)*	*Percentage of Total U. S. Population*
2000	21,207	7.5
1990	13,393	5.4
1980	8,740	3.9
1970	4,532	2.2
1960	1,736	1.0
1950	1,346	0.9
1940	1,077	0.8
1930	1,423	1.2
1920	740	0.7
1910	385	0.4

Sources: Table recreated from "America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity" using the following data: U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (1975); U.S. Bureau of the Census (1980, 1990); Current Population Survey (2002).
*Mexican-origin population calculated as a sum of the Mexican-born population and natives of Mexican percentage.

The end of the Bracero Program in 1964 brought about a substantial increase in illegal Mexican immigration that has yet to wane. Furthermore, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the national-origin quotas imposed by the Immigration Act of 1924,was heralded as a civil rights victory by allowing people with outstanding accomplishments and skills to come to the United States. Thus, the new policy favored new immigrants mostly from Asia and Africa but brought about a large

increase in illegal Mexican immigration. If border apprehensions are any indicator of increased illegal border crossing, the numbers are alarming. Apprehensions across the border increased from 1.6 million in the 1960s to 8.3 million in the 1970s, 11.9 million in the 1980s, and 14.7 million in the 1990s (Huntington 2004). This increase has seen an equally remarkable increase in the amount of money the United States spends to curb illegal immigration. In 1994 alone the Border Patrol appropriation rose to almost half a billion dollars and the INS now spends over $300 million per year to fight document fraud (Ashabranner, 1996).

Table 2
Legal Immigration from Mexico to the United States, 1900 to 2000

Years	*Number Arriving from Mexico in the Decade in the Decade*	*Percentage of All Immigrants Arriving*
A. Published totals		
1991 to 2000	2,249,421	24.7
1981 to 1990	1,655,843	22.6
1970 to 1980	640,294	14.2
1961 to 1970	453,937	13.7
1951 to 1960	299,811	11.9
1941 to 1950	60,589	5.9
1931 to 1940	22,319	4.2
1921 to 1930	459,287	11.2
1911 to 1920	219,004	3.8
1901 to 1910	49,642	0.6
B. Numbers of Mexican arrivals, excluding IRCA legalizations*		
1991 to 2000	1,194,259	13.1
1981 to 1990	693,213	11.6

Sources: Table recreated from "America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity" using the following data: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (2002a and various years). Numbers other than those legalizing their immigration status.

Unauthorized or illegal immigration has been the major cause of the political and policy controversy surrounding Mexican immigration. As a result, contemporary immigration reform is often synonymous with illegal Mexican immigration reform. In general, there are two types of unauthorized Mexican immigrants, sojourners and settlers. Sojourners comprise the outflow of Mexicans from the U.S. This outflow is an important aspect of the Mexican immigration picture as it is often over looked. Most assume that the majority of unauthorized Mexican migrants are settlers, coming to remain in the United States when in fact, the opposite is true. The neglect of observing this outflow has led to sensationalist accounts of illegal Mexican aliens overrunning the U.S. The

dramatic increase in the amount of border apprehensions led some to believe that illegal Mexican immigration was increasing significantly. By neglecting the outflow of these same migrants, the observers seem to have exaggerated the rate of growth of illegal Mexican immigration and contributed to border paranoia. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that there are approximately 11.5 to 12 million illegal Mexican immigrants residing in the United States as of March 2006. Unauthorized Mexican immigrants comprise more than half of all unauthorized immigrants in the United States (Bean & Stevens 2003). And "while unauthorized migration from Mexico continues, legal immigrants constitute the largest component of the Mexican-born population in the United States despite all the publicity given to unauthorized migrants" (Bean & Stevens 2003).

Are Mexican's Assimilating?

One of the controversial aspects of the Mexican immigration phenomenon, although less substantiated, among scholars as well as the American media is the perception that Mexican immigrants are not assimilating to U.S. culture. Many believe they are instead attempting to create Mexican communities within the United States that speak only Spanish and desire to remain culturally distinct from Americans, thus rejecting U.S. culture. For instance, Samuel Huntington, chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area studies, argues vehemently that unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, and instead have formed their own ethnic enclaves that if left unchecked, threatens to split the United States into two cultures using two different languages. Although he recognizes that many past immigrant groups have formed similar ethnic enclaves, (i.e. Italians, Irish, Polish, etc.) he asserts that Mexican immigrants differ from these other immigrant groups in their contiguity, scale, illegality, regional concentration, persistence and historical presence (Huntington 2004). He believes that the popular discourses on multiculturalism and diversity, among academics and the unknowing public are leading the United States down a path where the nation will be forced to be a bilingual society and in that transformation would be a loss of important aspects of what it means to be American, especially in the U.S. southwest and Border States. Huntington argues that the regional concentration of Mexicans in these areas is unprecedented and that if Mexican immigration is not curtailed drastically, especially unauthorized immigration, the U.S. southwest soon will be majority Hispanic and thus, un-American. How empirically valid are these assertions?

Table 3 shows that the percentage of Mexicans living in these areas today is actually less than it was 30 years ago. In 1970, 86.9 percent of Mexicans lived in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, or Texas.

Table 3
Percentage of Mexican-Origin Population in the Five Southwestern States, 1950 to 2000

	1950		*1960*		*1970*	
State	*Number (In Thousands)*	*Percentage of All Mexican Origin*	*Number (In Thousands)*	*Percentage of All Mexican Origin*	*Number (In Thousands)*	*Percentage of All Mexican Origin*
Arizona	126	5.5	207	5.9	240	5.3
California	758	33.2	1,456	41.4	1,857	41.0
Colorado	119	5.2	152	4.3	104	2.3
New Mexico	249	10.9	276	7.9	119	2.6
Texas	1,027	45.0	1,423	40.5	1,619	35.7
Other States		-		-	593	13.1
Total	2,282	100.0	3,514	100.0	4,532	100.0
Percentage of Mexican-origin population in the five southwestern states						86.9

	1980		*1990*		*2000*	
State	*Number (In Thousands)*	*Percentage of All Mexican Origin*	*Number (In Thousands)*	*Percentage of All Mexican Origin*	*Number (In Thousands)*	*Percentage of All Mexican Origin*
Arizona	396	4.5	619	4.6	1,296	6.3
California	3,637	41.6	6,071	45.3	8,456	41.0
Colorado	207	2.4	279	2.1	451	2.2
New Mexico	234	2.7	329	2.5	330	1.6
Texas	2,752	31.5	3,900	29.1	5,072	24.6
Other States	1,514	17.3	2,195	16.4	5,036	24.4
Total	8,740	100.0	13,393	100.0	20,641	100.0
Percentage of Mexican-origin population in the five southwestern states		82.7		83.6		75.7

Sources: Table recreated from "America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity" using the following data: U.S. Bureau of the Census; (1970, "Persons of Spanish Origin," *Subject Reports* PC(2)-1-C; 1980, "Persons of Spanish Origin by State: 1980," *Supplementary Report* PC80-S1-7; "General Social and Economic Characteristics," *United States Summary* PC80-1-C1; 1990, "General Social and Economic Characteristics," United States Summary; 2000, "Demographic Profiles: 100-percent and Sample Data," available online at *www.census.gov*.

This number dropped to 75.7 percent in 2000. This is in large part due to the economic shift away from agriculture that has drawn Mexican migrants elsewhere to find work. States such as Illinois, Michigan and Washington now have large Mexican immigrant populations. This decrease in regional concentration is likely to continue for many decades (Bean & Stevens 2003).

Despite the grim future of the U.S. culture split prophesized by Huntington, the available evidence suggests that Mexican immigrants are assimilating to U.S. culture, much in the way other immigrant groups have before them. Research shows that a clear majority of Hispanics believe that immigrants, in order to be part of American society, have to be able to speak English and an even larger majority believes that English should be taught to immigrant children in schools. These numbers are reflected in the fact that by the third generation, 94 percent of Hispanic immigrants speak English very well, despite that only 23 percent of the first generation can do so (Pew Hispanic Center 2003).

Also, more and more Mexican immigrants are becoming naturalized citizens. Table 4 shows the amount of Mexican's choosing to become naturalized U.S. citizens since 1960. From 1990 to 1995 the number of Mexicans choosing naturalization increased by nearly 50,000 people. Although Mexicans have a slower naturalization rate compared to other immigrant groups, the number and percentage of naturalized Mexicans has been and continues to increase. From 1995-2005, the number of naturalized citizens from Mexico rose by 144 percent, which was more than any other major immigrant group (Pew Hispanic Center 2007b). And their slow naturalization rate is not a reflection of their unwillingness to accept U.S. culture but can be linked to other factors such as their lack of English speaking capabilities which has been shown to be the largest obstacle for Mexican immigrants to obtain citizenship (Pew Hispanic

Table 4
Number of Naturalizations among Mexican-Born Persons in the United States, 1950 to 1996

Year	*Number of Naturalizations Among Mexicans*	*Number per Ten Thousand Mexican-Born Persons in the United States*
1995	67,238	110.9
1990	17,564	40.9
1980	9,341	4.2
1970	6,195	0.8
1960	5,913	1.0

Source: Table recreated from "America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity" using the following data: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (2002a and earlier years).

Center 2007b). It is also one of the main reasons Mexicans struggle in school and can at least partially explain why Mexican immigrants, more than any other group, have the highest high school drop out rate. Tellingly, Mexicans do not even maintain the most active ties to their home country among Latinos in the United States, as they trail behind both Columbians and Dominicans (Pew Hispanic Center 2007a).

Rates of intermarriage, arguably the best indicator of an ethnic group's assimilation, undeniably show that Hispanics are not forming Hispanic-only communities. In 1990, one in eight first generation Hispanics had a non-Hispanic spouse. By the second generation this number drops to 1 in 3 and by the third generation 54 percent had a non-Hispanic spouse (Thernstrom 2004). Some who argue against Mexican immigration claim that earlier European immigrants were able to assimilate because they were seen as "white," and the racial distinctiveness of Mexicans makes them unlikely to be accepted in mainstream culture as Europeans were. However, such a view neglects the historical reality and the context of past immigration flows in that many of those who are considered white today, were not when they first immigrated. Jews, Italians and Irish for examples, all were considered racially distinct groups, separate from native born Americans. They eventually came to be considered white. As Alba and Nee (2003) write, "perhaps the most important conclusion to take from the social assimilation of European and Asians descended from the nineteenth and early twentieth century immigration is that racial/ethnic boundaries can blur, stretch, and move, as the current emphasis on the social construction of race implies."

Contemporary Mexican Immigration Policies

Until the 1960s, Mexican migrants were mostly temporary seasonal workers, many of whom returned to Mexico in between working seasons. It was not until the 1970s when there was a large influx of Mexican immigration, especially illegal, that contained many permanent migrants. This increase was in large part due to the end of the Bracero program which brought about a substantial increase in illegal immigration as many workers who had previously worked, or who knew people who previously worked in the U.S., continued to come. This immigration was exacerbated by the economic stagnation in Mexico of the 1980s and the shift in the U.S. economy which became more service-based. Though there was still demand for Mexican migrant labor in agriculture, the agricultural labor market could not create enough jobs in order to absorb the amount of the Mexican immigrants that were flowing into the U.S. As such, the new service based economy created new need for cheap, low-skilled labor in construction, service and retail jobs. Many of these jobs brought Mexican

immigrants into U.S. cities and encouraged permanent residents as these jobs were, for the most part, not seasonal. It was around this time that Mexican immigration became a pressing public and political issue.

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was signed into law in an attempt to curb undocumented immigration through two major provisions: (1) placing sanctions on employers of illegal immigrants, and (2) offering an amnesty program and eventual citizenship to undocumented immigrants already residing in the United States (Hayes, 2001). Massey *et al.* (2002) argue the IRCA was both a highly restrictive program and an expansive one, as it led to a drastic increase in border enforcement and the legalization of around 2.3 million formerly illegal Mexicans. The IRCA has been a highly contentious issue in the immigration debate as some have argued that it was passed in response to perceived "alien invasion" hysteria that was sweeping the nation due to politicians essentially manufacturing a border crisis.[1] The IRCA may also have been counter productive as it potentially sent the message to many Mexicans considering immigrating to the United States that eventually they would be legalized, though it was meant to discourage further unauthorized Mexican immigration.

Recognizing that illegal Mexican immigration was established and sustained through the networks of previous immigrants, the U.S. sought to break up these networks in a mutually beneficial way for Mexico and the United States. The U.S. Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development concluded in 1990 that the remedy for unauthorized migration from Mexico was expanded trade between the Mexico and the United States (Martin and Midgley 1999). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), passed on January 1, 1994, was meant to reduce the trade barriers between Mexico, the United States, and Canada in an effort to stimulate economic growth for all three countries. In regards to NAFTA, former Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari said "more jobs will mean higher wages in Mexico, and this in turn will mean fewer migrants to the U.S. and Canada. "We want to export goods, not people" (Martin and Midgley 1999). However, some have argued that NAFTA has sent contradictory messages. Through the agreement, the United States sought to integrate most markets in North America except for the labor market. Thus, the U.S. policy toward Mexico appears somewhat paradoxical; as it simultaneously promotes integration while insisting to remain separate (Massey *et al.* 2002).

In 1996 Congress passed immigration legislation and welfare reform policies in part to curb welfare use among non citizen immigrants in an effort to deter further illegal immigration. And today, Mexican immigration remains at the forefront of American politics and should

prove to play a key role in the 2008 presidential election. Interestingly, Americans generally have more confidence in Democrats than Republicans on immigration issues and a majority of Americans disapprove of President Bush's immigration policies (Pew Hispanic Center 2006). Recent legislation put forth by President Bush in 2007 offered "amnesty" provisions to unauthorized Mexican immigrants residing in the U.S., one of the core reasons it was rejected by the public and by both the Republicans and the Democrats in Congress.

Conclusions

The history of U.S. immigration policies towards Mexico allowed for millions of Mexicans to enter the United States to temporarily work. The Bracero Program laid the groundwork for U.S. contemporary immigration picture as it established the networks of Mexican immigrants that encourages further immigration and allows it to thrive today. The contemporary policies have been ineffective at curbing unauthorized Mexican immigration, perhaps for this reason. We realize that it is not so simple to come to the conclusion that Mexican immigration is either good or bad for the United States. The immigration debate is too nuanced to perform such a simple calculation. It is clear that immigration comes with both costs and benefits. We further believe that the "immigration crisis" that is sweeping the nation is largely inflated by politicians attempting to garner votes by "regaining control of the border."

By and large, Mexican immigrants are acculturating to the United States and the threat of a culturally divided United States is unsupported by the available empirical data. In light of the available data, it is safe to affirm that much of the recent immigration concerns are similar to nativist arguments against previous waves of immigrants to the U.S. Today, Mexicans are less regionally concentrated in the southwest, not more. By the third generation the overwhelming majority of Mexican-origin people can speak English very well. More Mexican-born immigrants are choosing naturalization. Intermarriage rates debunk the idea that Hispanics marry only Hispanics. In short, the forces of assimilation are as strong as they have been for other immigrant groups and the dynamics of the "melting pot" analogy still remain relevant (Alba & Nee 2003).

Into the near future, the public will most likely retain a certain degree of ambivalence towards Mexican immigration while politicians will exacerbate and contribute to "immigration paranoia." The politicization of Mexican immigration would continue to be a stumbling block to a comprehensive immigration policy reform because vested partisan interests are unlikely to agree to provisions that would hurt their constituencies. At the same time, we want to recognize that where majority of Americans rest on this issue has potentially dramatic

consequences on the future of Mexican immigration. We will conclude by saying that the enormous cost of fortifying the 2000 mile fence, the impracticality of deporting all illegal aliens currently in the United States, and the demand for illegal immigrants by U.S. agricultural owners and construction companies–all point to a direction of future increase in Mexican immigration.

Note

1. See Massey, Durand, & Malone, Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration

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