



LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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MEXICAN AMERICANS AND ETHNIC AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES

by
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A report drawn from *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race* (2008), an update of the classic *The Mexican American People* (1970), a longitudinal and intergenerational study on the extent of assimilation among Mexican Americans over four generations.

Over the past forty years, Mexican Americans have retained a strong national origin and ethnic identity.

They continue to prefer Democratic candidates, and they favor the continued arrival of Mexican immigrants. Consequently, our study finds evidence of strong ethnic identification and relatively little political assimilation.¹

ETHNIC IDENTITY

When asked to name their ethnic identity, most respondents replied that they were Mexican or Mexican American. Smaller percentages identified as Chicano, Latino, or Hispanic. About 10 percent did not mention an ethnic group, preferring a term such as “American.”

We then asked respondents how strongly they identified with the ethnic group they had named. About three-quarters of first-generation original respondents said that their ethnicity was important or very important to them, as Figure 1 shows. Nearly the same proportion of their second-generation children felt as strongly about their ethnicity. Although a majority of all respondents said that they had a strong ethnic identity, that

sentiment was weaker in the third and, especially, the fourth generations of children.²

RACIAL IDENTITY

Although race is not a biologically valid concept, sociologists use it because individuals not only identify themselves and others on the basis of race but also tend to organize and behave politically along racial lines. Mexican Americans, like Latinos generally, typically identify as racially “other” because they do not think that they fit into the typical American racial categories of white versus black (Rodriguez 2000).

In the 2000 survey, we asked respondents how they identify when presented with a census-like question about their race. Figure 2 reveals that 38 percent of the first generation identified as white. White identity was markedly weaker among the children of original respondents, and it declined with each successive generation. This is especially significant given that about 10 percent of second-generation children had one non-Hispanic white parent. This generational change suggests that Mexican Americans are moving not into the mainstream, but away from it.

VOTING REPUBLICAN

Mexican Americans have often been portrayed as overwhelmingly Democratic. Figure 3 shows that a substantial majority of respondents did report voting for the Democratic

candidate in 1964 and 1996, although voting Republican had increased. Only 4 percent of first-generation and 11 percent of third-generation original respondents voted for the Republican candidate in 1964. By the 1996 election, more original respondents—6 percent of the first generation and 17 percent of the third generation—voted for the Republican.

More children voted Republican than their parents did, but there were no significant generational differences among them.

ATTITUDES ABOUT IMMIGRATION
 Mexican Americans appear to be moving away from their traditional support for the Democratic Party, yet respondents agreed with Democratic positions on

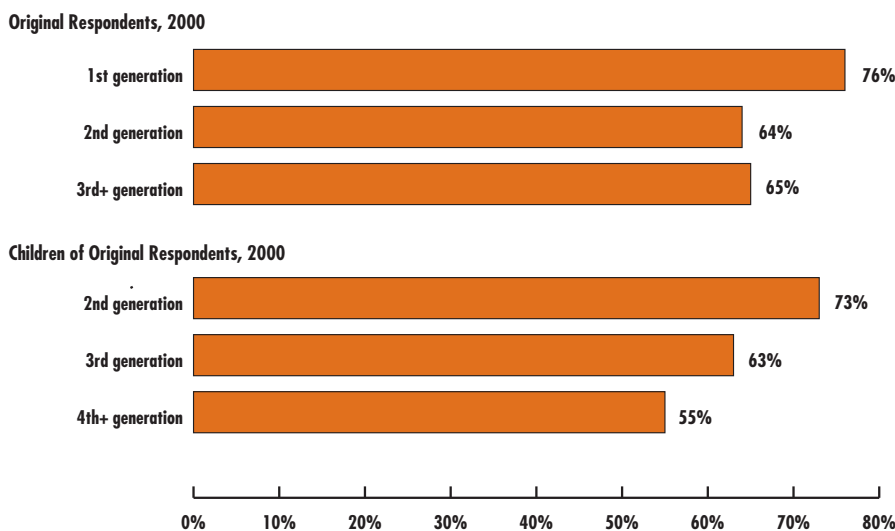
several controversial issues. One issue was immigration. When asked in 2000 whether they agreed with the statement “Mexicans should be able to immigrate to the United States if they want to,” a majority said yes. This consensus is inconsistent with assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003) because it is contrary to the majority position among voters, as indicated by the passage of California Proposition 187 (the denial of public services to illegal immigrants) in 1994.

Figure 4 indicates a trend away from assimilation among original respondents between 1965 and 2000, as the percentage of those agreeing that Mexicans should be able to immigrate increased within each generation. Children of original respondents were less supportive than their parents, however, with just over half responding affirmatively. These numbers are, nonetheless, significantly higher than those reported by non-Hispanic whites and blacks (Telles and Ortiz 2008). Responses to questions about the immigration of other racial/ethnic groups also showed relatively favorable attitudes across all generations, which might indicate ethnic solidarity or a sympathetic view of the plight of immigrants.

CONCLUSION

Mexican Americans continue to identify with their ethnic culture, and ethnic identification remains strong across generations, indicating that ethnic assimilation is slow. In addition, we found relatively little political assimilation. These findings support the view that Mexican Americans are part of an ethnic political community with a distinct ethnic and political sensibility.

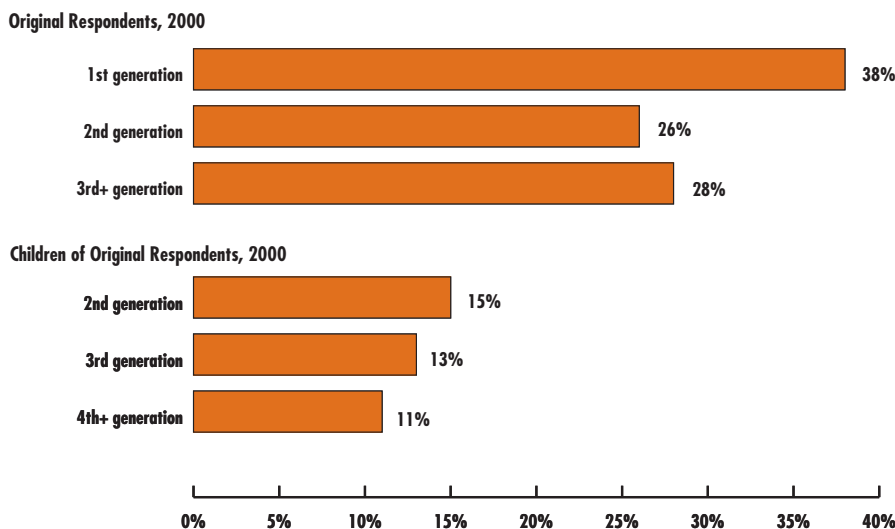
Figure 1. Percentage Reporting a Strong Ethnic Identity



Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

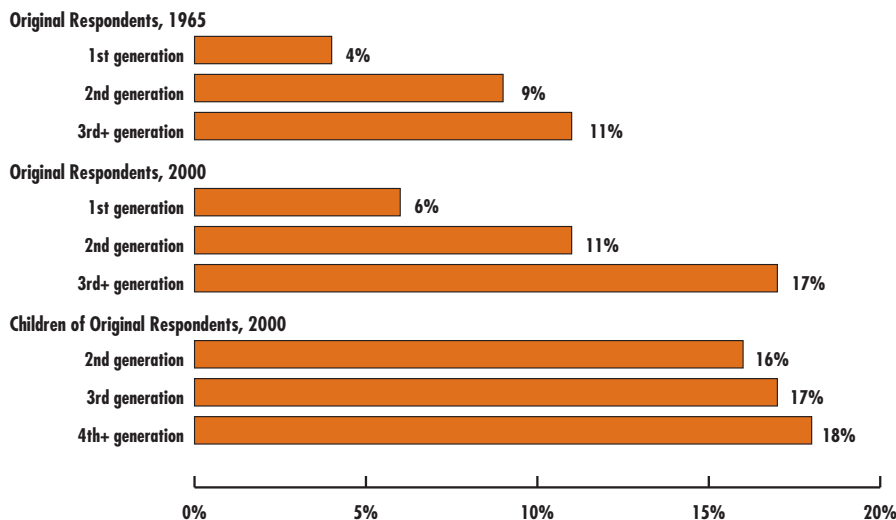
Note: Third- and fourth-generation respondents include subsequent generations.

Figure 2. Percentage Identifying as White in Response to a Census-like Question



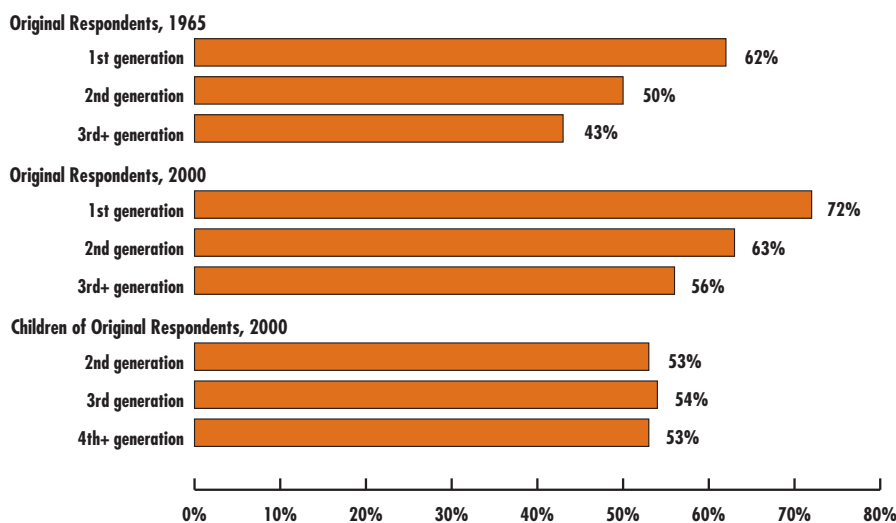
Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

Note: Third- and fourth-generation respondents include subsequent generations.

Figure 3. Percentage Voting for the Republican Presidential Candidate

Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

Note: Third- and fourth-generation respondents include subsequent generations.

Figure 4. Percentage Agreeing That Mexicans Should Be Able to Immigrate

Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

Note: Third- and fourth-generation respondents include subsequent generations.

NOTES

1. The immigration of Mexicans to the United States is the largest and longest migration from a single country in our nation's history. Scholars disagree considerably on how extensively Mexican Americans are assimilating into U.S. society. Results reported in *Generations of Exclusion* reveal that Mexican Americans are not assimilating as consistently or as rapidly as predicted.

These results are drawn from a longitudinal and intergenerational research study based at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. In 1965–66, Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles and San Antonio were interviewed (referred to as the 1965 survey). Of these original respondents, 684 were re-interviewed in 1998–2002 (referred to as the 2000 survey), plus 758 of their adult children (up to two per family). The two surveys provide data for a systematic analysis of assimilation over four generations. Key measures of assimilation—including education, socioeconomic status, language, religion, family values, intermarriage, residential segregation, ethnic identity, and political preference—are explored in CSRC Policy and Issues Briefs Nos. 17–21.

2. *Mexican American Culture and Language*, CSRC Latino Policy and Issues Brief no. 21, explores additional measures of ethnic identity.

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SOURCE Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz, *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

FUNDING National Institute of Child and Human Development, Ford Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, Russell Sage Foundation, The John Randolph Haynes Foundation, various UC and UCLA sources, including the CSRC Latino Research Program, which receives support from the University of California Committee on Latino Research.

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A longitudinal and intergenerational study on Mexican American assimilation finds evidence that Mexican Americans retain their ethnic identification across generations and that they are part of a community with a distinct political sensibility.

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ISSN: 1543-2238.

Editor: Chon A. Noriega

Senior Editor: Rebecca Frazier

Series Funding: This series is a project of the CSRC Latino Research Program, which receives funding from the University of California Committee on Latino Research, and the CSRC California Program on Opportunity and Equity, which receives funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.



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