
CHAPTER TWO:

“The Emergence of Mexican Americans in California: Historical Perspectives”

In addition to the economic heterogeneity among Mexican Americans mentioned in the previous chapter, the modern Mexican-American community in the state of California is a socially diverse one as well. It is comprised of a newly arrived immigrant population, Mexican Americans whose roots predate U.S. statehood, and Chicanos boasting all the degrees of citizenship in between (Oboler 1).¹ In an effort to understand this social aspect of Chicano diversity as well as to provide historical context for it, this chapter delves into the colonial beginnings of the current Mexican-American community under the Spanish Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Next, U.S. expansionism and discrimination against minorities shapes the early years of Mexican Americans, and then, a thorough treatment of the history of modern Chicano interest groups and community organizations is engaged.

The Spanish Empire in Alta California

Having explored the coast of California and declared the region useful only as a geographical barrier between the rest of the Spanish Empire’s holdings and foreign claimed territory, Spain only exhibited interest in Alta California in the eighteenth century when other nations did the same. Spain’s California holdings were surrounded on all sides by some of the most powerful nations in the world. To the east lurked France, which occupied the vast territory that would later be included in the Louisiana Purchase

¹ “Intragroup racism” fostered within a population characterized by cultural as well as ethnic diversity is a potential downside. Development of this topic is found in Diego Vigil (182-183).

of 1803. To the north, Great Britain manned the founding of Canada, and to the northwest Russia peeked through the Behring Strait at colonization possibilities in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.² The Spanish Empire was rightly on the offensive.

Centuries old attempts by France and England to discover the Strait of Anian, a legendary northwest passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, caused the Spaniards additional anxiety (Sánchez 32). The recent conquest of Canada by England and Russia's successful trading expeditions from Kamtchatka to the Aleutian Islands were considered by Spain to be no light matter (Richman 64-65). Compounded with simultaneous Spanish, English, and Russian interests in Nootka Sound on the West side of Vancouver Island, and international competition for possessions in that area were heating up.³

Moreover, although fellow Bourbons – the French – neighbored Spain's New World holdings, the Louisiana territory only served as a tenuous buffer between New Spain and the soon-to-be-independent United States of America, whose expansionist desires were shamelessly directed westward. A large segment of that territory had already been awarded to Great Britain in the Treaty of Paris, so Spanish fears of English encroachment from the East were not unfounded.

Both postwar treaties and foreign intrigues affected Spanish policy toward its previously unyielding New World possessions.⁴ The Treaty of Paris, the document

² Russian designs on North America were especially worrisome to the Spaniards at that time: "Russia had slowly, but with glacier-like inexorability, been moving eastward toward the [...] the strait dividing Siberia from the present Alaska, and by 1706 had reached Kamtchatka. By 1728 Vitus Behring had drifted through the strait; by 1741 North America had been sighted; by 1745 a descent had been made upon the Aleutian Islands; and by 1760 a Russo-American trade in otter skins had been opened" (Richman 34).

³ Russia had wished to colonize Nootka Sound, England wanted to establish a fur trade with the natives there, and Spain considered it an extension of its Alta California possessions. By 1780, Spanish northward-bound expeditions had ceased (Sánchez 71).

⁴ Another useful description of the international climate in this period can be found in Navarro García (17-31).

finalizing the Seven Years War in Europe (1756-1763), had cost both the French and Spanish Bourbons dearly in “embarrassing concessions” to Great Britain (Sánchez xi). In order to re-immense himself in the international game, King Carlos III relied on a set of decrees later named the “Bourbon Reforms,” which called for, among other things:

[...] the expulsion of the Company of Jesus (the Jesuits) from all the Spanish colonies as well as Spain in the interest of [maintaining] the integrity of the empire; and the reorganization of New World colonies into intendants in order to [...] increase revenues toward the betterment of colonial administration. (Sánchez xi)

The Bourbon Reforms appeared destined for success but were rudely interrupted by the independence movements in New Spain that spread to the rest of Spain’s imperial holdings in the early nineteenth century (Sánchez xi-xii). However, it was the Bourbon Reforms’ mandate to expel the Jesuits from Alta California that opened the door for Spanish movement in that direction (Jackson 73). The military unit that accompanied the Franciscan missionaries taking over the ousted Jesuits’ outposts would explore California’s interior for the first time, facilitating the planning and strategizing of Spain’s colonial designs in the region.

In sum, with global powers closing in on her from all sides, Spain was faced with the ultimatum of more actively employing the region of Alta California via exploration and settlement or losing her North American possessions to those international rivals already jockeying for them. Spain opted for the former, and immediately launched both sea and land expeditions to determine just how valuable was in fact Alta California. The expulsion of the Jesuits simply facilitated Iberian entrée into the region.

In 1761 high-ranking Spanish official José de Gálvez of Malaga was sent by King Carlos III to evaluate and change colonial policies in Mexico. Gálvez had been dispatched as *Visitador General* – a kind of colonial inspector – to calm fears of the Spanish throne regarding relations with the natives and foreign designs on Spanish territory. His goals were to establish stronger government in the regions most heavily plagued by Indian wars and to investigate possibilities for Spanish settlement of Alta California, which had only been considered previously as a buffer zone (Rosenbaum 26).

Gálvez suggested the abandonment of these “buffer zone” politics based on his observations in the territory. He intended to take advantage of the ships of San Blas (a Baja California port) and the silver mines in California and Sonora,⁵ make peace with the natives in Sonora and Nueva Vizcaya, realize successful colonization of the frontier, and oversee the founding of towns and cities in Alta California (Navarro García 209).

Utilizing already established bases in what is now Northwestern Mexico to launch land explorations of the unknown region, Spanish realized Alta California’s worth as a source of natural resources and promising ports and resolved to quickly settle the territory. Baja California missions served both as an expeditionary base and as a source of supplies, and it was there that *Visitador General* Gálvez – along with a newly formed Catalan military company – realized Spanish ambitions in Alta California (Jackson 73).

The California expedition of the Catalanian Volunteers lasted from 1769 to 1774 and represented the first land-based exploration of Alta California’s coast and interior (Sánchez xv). During their stay in New Spain’s northwestern territory, the Volunteers

⁵ As noted on page 34 of this work, the discovery of mineral wealth is a classic impetus for settlement or expansion, as was the case in California in the mid-nineteenth century. Dick’s Chapter VII cleverly named “The Diggings” (85-101) provides a breakdown of the wide spectrum of political and social effects occasioned by the individual appropriation of public lands in the aftermath of mineral discoveries during that period.

participated in the exploration and settlement of the region from San Diego to San Francisco, as well as the discoveries of San Francisco Bay and the great Central Valley.

The Catalanian Volunteers' lieutenant, Pedro Fages, kept a detailed journal of the company's travels in which he described all phenomena they encountered, including the state of the region's natural resources and the Alta California natives. The confirmation of California's diverse natural resources gave Fages' expedition much reason to celebrate. Due to the region's water supply, fishing, fertility of soil, and "abundance of everything necessary, all this region [...] greatly exceeds the favorable idea we formed of it when we were merely passing through it" (Fages 45). And because the Spanish company experienced little threat from the area's native inhabitants, Fages was able to repudiate popular belief regarding initial conflict between explorers and Native Americans. Fages noted that "it was never necessary for us to use our weapons for any purpose save to obtain some game" (8). At night, however, Alta California's native population did not hesitate to "discharge arrows at the horses, killing some of our animals, perhaps rather for the sake of satisfying their hunger than by way of insult or of taking revenge" (Fages 9). All evidence pointed to a cautious curiosity among the natives and the explorers, but no incipient violence.⁶

Therefore, the Catalanian Volunteers were able to "militarily [reinforce] Spain's claim to the northwestern portion of her American empire, [assist] in the imposition of Spanish sovereignty over native groups, and [defend] Spain's right to exploit natural resources and cheap native labor in North America" (Sánchez xiii).

⁶ Fages went on to describe the region's native population as suffering from moral depravity and as boasting impressive physical strength, both traits that qualified them for reform through Catholic missions. In order to accomplish this, however, Fages knew that the trust of the natives would have to be earned. This posed a dilemma, since the natives suspected the Spaniards of coming to Alta California to steal their women, as they had brought none of their own along with them (43-44).

Shortly thereafter, Alta California witnessed the employment of the Mission “as an instrument of state in and after 1769” (Richman 41). Although the missionaries themselves adhered to dogmatic rhetoric – “The principal riches that exist there [...] are the *innumerable souls* redeemed by the most precious blood of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ [...]” (Kino 457) – their undeniable function was to secure the Spanish Empire’s faltering grip on the region, a role familiar to The Church.

As far back as Columbus’ initial explorations of North America, the Catholic faith was staking its claim on the souls of the New World. Pope Alexander VI issued a bull on May 3, 1493, awarding Spain the New World on the condition “that there be sent thither worthy, God-fearing, learned, skilled and experienced men, in order to instruct the inhabitants of the Catholic faith” (Richman 34). Queen Isabella had so felt the responsibility of the papal injunction that in her will penned in 1504, she left to Ferdinand instructions concerning the treatment of natives in the New World. According to Isabella’s will, Ferdinand was to follow to the letter what had been commanded by the Pope with respect to the natives, that they “be not infringed in any aspect (*que no se exceda cosa alguna*)” (Richman 34). Unlike the propensity of the British Empire – and later of the United States – to aim for native subjugation and even extinction, the Spanish Empire had relatively peaceful goals with respect to the North American natives.⁷

The Spanish Empire, having taken as its own more land than it could people or cultivate in North America, was in need of The Church to serve in this capacity. “Missions solved these problems by turning the Indians into civilized beings [Catholic

⁷ Thornton’s article on the causes and rates of Native American population decline confirms my assertion that North American natives were wiped out by much more violent forces than the natives of South and Meso-America. Under the U.S. government, Native Americans were subject to – in addition to disease and oppression – forced migration, genocide, and extinction of animals that served as cultural and economic cornerstones (e.g., buffalo) (Thornton 311).

converts and sedentary farmers] and settling them to cultivate the land” (Hutchinson 174). In this respect the Spanish throne was clearly more concerned with the political than the religious occupation of missions in Alta California.

Within a decade of the establishment of the first mission in the northern territory, missionary communities comprised of religious men and native converts outnumbered any other type of settlement (Rosenbaum 29). By 1800, the Franciscans alleged to have 20,000 Mission Indians under their care, while the rest of the imperial population constituted approximately 1,200 individuals dispersed along 500 miles of California’s coastline.⁸ Spanish missionaries were able to achieve this rapid colonization by restructuring the musculature of their native wards; they were not only converted into Catholics but also into an effective labor force. “Under the tutelage of the friars, [converted natives] learned the tasks of farming and ranching and the skills of carpentry and weaving” (Rosenbaum 29).⁹ Essentially, it can be said that Spanish command and Native American sweat laid the foundations of colonial Alta California.

The success of the Spanish missions may be measured in terms of the “thrust of Spanish frontier policy,” which “was to incorporate Indians into colonial society, albeit in a subservient position” (Jackson 87). Spanish holy men had few intentions of converting the Native Americans into social or spiritual equals. Rather, natives were to integrate into Spanish colonial society as second-class members to serve solely as numerical additions to the headcount of Alta California’s settlements. Missions were established by the

⁸ Other authors have disputed this number. According to Jackson, “in 1790 7,711 converts lived in eleven missions, 13,628 in eighteen missions in 1800, and 21,063 in twenty missions in 1820” (77). These numbers seem paltry when compared to the overall native population in the region, which is also fodder for controversy: “Scholars have debated the size of the pre-Hispanic Indian population, and generally estimate the population of all the land that makes up the modern state of California. The figure most commonly cited is Cook’s estimate of some 300,000 for the entire state.” Reference made in Jackson (76) to Cook (42-43).

⁹ Missions also tended to assert authority over the natives’ personal and trade practices as well: “In most cases both social and economic affairs were under the controlling hand of the missionary priest” (Zavala 189).

Spanish Empire to expand its interests and strengthen the integrity of its claims in Alta California, not to actually ensure the spiritual health of the region's native population.¹⁰ In this respect, Spain's colonization efforts in Alta California enjoyed a significant measure of achievement.

Alta California remained what Robert H. Jackson calls a "frontier community" well into the nineteenth century (Rosenbaum 26). Alta California was a frontier "both in the New World sense of outposts of European 'civilization' in the 'wilderness' and in the Old World sense of the boundary between one national power and another" (Rosenbaum 26). Settlement of these lands was indeed critical to the maintenance of Spanish importance in the international theater, and the various settlement patterns that emerged in Alta California are discussed next.

Once the Spanish Empire decided that Alta California needed to be settled by more than just missionaries, the first obstacle to overcome was finding people to settle the territory. The Spanish government, however, found it difficult to enlist settlers for Alta California due to the great distance from the population centers of central Mexico as well as due to the perceived lack of mineral deposits in the area, which is a classic impetus to colonization (Navarro García 203). To solve this problem and recruit colonists to brave the wilds of Alta California, the Mexican government offered "free passage to California, together with promises of free land, free farm animals, and free farming tools" (Hutchinson 173). Nevertheless, "only a trickle came forward" and "both governments

¹⁰ Political functions of the Catholic Church continue to play a major role in the formulation of minority social and political organization. See footnote 71 for more on the matter.

then took to sending what Adam Smith picturesquely calls ‘felons and strumpets’ to California, with equally poor results” (Hutchinson 173).¹¹

In addition to the government-sponsored incentives offered to populate Alta California, there existed alternative motivation behind the modest exodus to the region: unlike Baja California, the northern region boasted of a large availability of arable land and water supply, as well as an abundant food supply thanks to the flourishing mission economy (Jackson 85). In the end, relatively docile natives, large amounts of respectably yielding farmland, free supplies, animals, and land provided by the government, and the opportunity for an economic renaissance provided sufficient pull to a notable number of settlers to Alta California.¹²

Once secular communities began to establish themselves, the realization was made that missions controlled most of the arable land and available labor force. Therefore, distribution of the goods that had been promised to the families and social convicts settling in Alta California was carried out through the issuing of a large number of land grants by the missionary administrations.

Mission land grants gave landless settlers the opportunity to participate in the colonial economy and led to the formation of agricultural communities; among the first of these were San José (1777), Los Angeles (1781), and the Villa de Branciforte (1797) (Jackson 85). The production surpluses created by this fruitful economic partnership went to the sustenance of the military – or presidio – communities, which had been quickly

¹¹ This contributed to the infamous historical construct of the “Wild West” – as perpetuated in Horan and Sann – which is rejected by Harris (284-286) as he puts forth the concept of “culture as pure idea”; any historical account of local culture holds no water under this precept, as it is purported to be nothing but a collective imagining.

¹² Felipe de Neve, Governor of Baja California, convinced 11 Mexican families to move north and start the Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles del Río de Porciúncula in September 1781, in an effort to please the Spanish monarchy. Today the pueblo is known simply as Los Angeles (Bauer 45; Fox 68).

constructed upon arrival in Alta California to secure Spanish control of the area. The first four presidios were located at San Diego (1769), Monterey (1770), San Francisco (1776), and Santa Barbara (1782) (Jackson 85).

The military garrisons and agricultural communities, although crucial to the development of colonial California, represented only a small portion of the region's settlers.¹³ Until the secularization of the missions and the lands falling under their control in the 1820s, Catholic missionaries and mission-dwelling natives comprised the largest and most influential segment of the colonizing population in Alta California. Agricultural and military social and economic patterns of societal development, as well as a large Mexican presence, had been firmly grounded in the future of California.

Mexicano Marginalization: A California Custom

The war for Mexico's independence from Spain – although successful on Mexico's behalf – left the fledgling nation bankrupt and almost devoid of military personnel, especially in the North, when it ended in 1821. As a result, when the United States sought to wrestle away Mexico's uppermost half less than three decades later in the Mexican American War, Mexico was all but helpless to defend itself from northern aggression. Furthermore, residents of Alta California were almost relieved to witness the transfer of their nationality from Mexican to American. Due to the region's great distance from the governing centers of Mexico, residents of California had been "generally ignored" by the Mexican government since independence from Spanish rule, causing

¹³ In 1790, the population of the presidios and pueblos totaled a mere 906 individuals (Jackson 88).

many of them to be pleased regarding the shift in authority (Moore 17).¹⁴ California became part of U.S. territory under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the document that ended the Mexican-American War but precipitated more than a century of cultural and racial struggle for *mexicanos*. According to the treaty,

Mexicans living in the new United States territory were to be extended the same legal privileges as White citizens. California legislators, however, interpreted the ‘spirit’ of the treaty to mean that only ‘White Mexican males’ were to receive full citizenship rights. State legislators argued that Mexicans of Indian descent should be given the legal rights of American Indians and only White Mexicans should be considered United States citizens. (Menchaca 19)

Upon acquiring “U.S. citizenship,” most Mexicans were immediately converted into an inferior class, subject to exploitation by the government as well as by the private citizenry. Mexican residents of the new U.S. territory had expected respect before the law but rather found themselves suddenly citizens of a country that only appreciated their property value and despised their culture. With the signing of a single document, Mexican Americans “*became* a minority not by immigrating or being brought to [the United States] as a subordinate people, but by being conquered” (Moore 11). This unsavory development paralleled the “absorption” of indigenous people in Alta California by the Spanish Empire less than two centuries earlier.

¹⁴ Evidence for this can be found in Hero (34) as well as in Madrid: “Some of our ancestors participated actively in efforts to have their region become part of the United States. They joined the new society, made theirs the values of the conquering nation, took on its manners and modes, learned its language, adopted its institutions, joined its churches, and, through marriage, sought to incorporate themselves into the new community” (105).

Mexican landowners soon found their economic and related social status virtually destroyed by their incorporation into the American Union. The California State government soon became intolerant of its *mexicano* residents: “taxes were imposed upon land; laws were no longer published in Spanish; [and] in 1855 a law was passed forbidding school instruction in Spanish” (Moore 19).¹⁵ A devastating flood in 1862 followed by two years of drought, along with “mortgages, legal fees, taxes, and low cattle prices” (Moore 19), hammered the final nails into the coffin of Mexican economic and social comfort in California. “Politically the erosion was reflected by the gradual disappearance of *californios* from public life: by the early 1880s there were no longer any Spanish names in the public offices of Southern California” (Moore 19).

Mexicans had become effectively locked out of California’s political realm, a phenomenon resonating in their simultaneous social segregation. Once the largest landowning class in the region, *mexicanos* were fully relegated to the status of an inferior citizenry by the year 1870; the Treaty of Hidalgo had turned white Americans into “the new property owners and transformed the Mexican population into a landless and economically dependent laboring class” (Menchaca 9). Moreover, in developing urban centers statewide, “Anglo American settlers restructured the old pueblos by constructing new subdivisions in the towns and prohibiting Mexicans from moving into White neighborhoods” (Menchaca 25).¹⁶

Despite Mexicans’ difficult economic and social circumstances brought about by the U.S. usurpation of the Alta California territory (among many others), many Mexican

¹⁵ The bi-lingual education debate in California continues to this day. Consult with the [English Learners](#) website of the California Department of Education for an update.

¹⁶ Residue of this culture-based city planning strategy can still be seen in San Francisco, San José, Santa Bárbara, Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Cruz, and Monterey. Return to Chapter One for details.

citizens immigrated to the region in hopes of locating relief from the strains of war. During the period 1910-1924, the United States – and particularly California – experienced a huge influx of immigrants from what remained of sovereign Mexico due to the turbulent atmosphere caused by the Mexican Revolution (Menchaca 29).

Shortly thereafter, the Great Depression struck the United States with a powerful and lasting blow, and *mexicanos*, who by this time constituted a poor laboring class in California, were among those struck hardest of all. Midwestern whites financially shattered by the famous dust bowl of the mid-1930s migrated west to locate agricultural labor jobs which had been occupied primarily by Mexicans. California fruit growers preferred to assist white, down-on-their-luck brethren, and this frequently left *mexicanos* out of the job. Additionally, unemployed urban workers moved in large numbers to the country – often in response to pressure by urban relief agencies – and thus provided even more competition for unskilled agricultural work (Menchaca 26).

World War II furnished the impetus for the transformation of Mexicans living in the United States into a more politically organized entity. Fundamentally excluded from public life by white-sponsored segregationist tactics, WWII gave *mexicanos* the opportunity to experience life outside the agricultural sector working in industrial jobs. The establishment of the *bracero* program was also significant, as it essentially froze the advancement of Mexican-American farm-worker unionization for several decades. More about this period is offered in a discussion of the abundant social and political impulses to Mexican-American political organization. Before moving ahead, however, the concentrated nature of the effects of these events on Mexicans living in Southern California in general and in Los Angeles in particular should be addressed.

The Founding of “Little Mexico”

The colony of Los Angeles – established in 1781 and ruled by the Spanish Empire – began as a village of Native American and Mexican inhabitants. The arrival of white U.S. citizens in the years prior to California statehood ushered in the beginning of the end of social, economic, and political power for *mexicanos* living in the soon-to-be U.S. territory. And 1849, the year of California’s official incorporation into the American Union, signaled the definitive end, at least until present times.¹⁷

Once white settlers took up residence in Los Angeles, Mexican immigrants to the region as well as *mexicanos* born in the region were limited to living in the one small area that comprised the original village.¹⁸ This was achieved by real estate covenants and other land sales practices that prohibited them from moving elsewhere. The white newcomers also sought “to restrict Mexican voting rights and to prohibit cultural practices native to the Mexican community” by clustering together both geographically and politically (Romo 4-5).

Although Los Angeles was located thousands of miles from the eastern urban centers known for their radical industrial transformations near the end of the nineteenth century, it was certainly not left out. The arrival of the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads and the ensuing competition for passengers arriving in and departing from Los Angeles after the 1880s heavily fueled commercial development in Southern California

¹⁷ There have been a few notable exceptions to this in the U.S. Southwest over the years, including political activists Luisa Moreno (Larralde and Griswold del Castillo) and Bert Corona (BCLI), and journalist Ruben Salazar (Ruben Salazar).

¹⁸ The original village still stands today and not only represents a cultural and historical landmark in Los Angeles, but also a learning opportunity for non-Chicanos (Olvera Street; El Pueblo de los Angeles Historical Monument).

(Romo 5). Railroad depots built near the Mexican part of town, by this time called “Little Mexico,” attracted new industries and warehouses to downtown Los Angeles. This, combined with an abundant supply of natural oil deposits in Southern California and the first-class San Pedro harbor, helped crystallize Los Angeles’ status as an industrialized center of capital and growth in the early twentieth century. With improved industry and communication networks, Los Angeles emerged as an exporter of manufactured goods, processor of agricultural products, importer of machinery and technology, supplier of labor, and distributor of financial capital (Romo 6).

Following this urban transformation, L.A.’s rapidly developing industrial sector was in need of skilled and unskilled workers to sustain the high levels of growth, and Mexicans satisfied the demand.¹⁹ Los Angeles became the labor distribution center for Mexican unskilled workers for the entire western half of the United States, and then some. “In Los Angeles, labor agents arranged for Mexican workers to board ships headed for Alaska, railroads bound for the Midwest, and trucks destined for the rich agricultural fields of the San Joaquín Valley” (Romo 13).

Over the years the Mexican-American population in Los Angeles evolved from a small, Spanish-speaking *pueblito* organized around a central plaza to a large, Spanish-speaking barrio centered around a thriving cultural and nationalistic public life. The Mexican-American community in Los Angeles continued to attract Mexican immigrants since the barrio provided “a sense of identity with the homeland and a transition in American society” (Romo 10). Maintenance of the Spanish language, the establishment of Mexican businesses like restaurants and grocery stores, the proliferation of Spanish-

¹⁹ “Reliable and cheap, Mexican labor became the basis for industrial development” (Romo 6).

language newspapers and radio stations, and a dependence on Catholic unity helped Mexicans adjust to life in the United States. In these ways, Mexicans were able to “live a little of the old culture in Los Angeles” (Romo 12). Modern preservation of these cultural traditions serves as a continual magnet to Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles, as mentioned previously in Chapter One. The constant influx of new immigrants coupled with the established Mexican-American community in Southern California converted the scenic location into a potential hotbed of Mexican-American political activity.

“Ya no aguantamos”: *Roots of Political Mobilization*

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the dire shortage of young men in America’s labor force during World War II provoked farming associations to vigorously lobby for and achieve the passage of Agricultural Labor Law No. 45 on August 4, 1942 (Menchaca 90). The law established a temporary workers’ program to ensure that growers would not experience labor shortages; unfortunately, the *bracero* program had the adverse effect of stripping Mexican-American workers of any bargaining tools in the struggle for fair working conditions. Workers complaining of low wages, poor living conditions in company housing, long workdays, etc., could simply be replaced with one of the thousands of eager temporary workers imported to California from Mexico. Consequently, unionization and any other possible organization efforts of Mexican Americans in the agricultural sector (which constituted a majority in California) were snuffed out by the importation of Mexican nationals through the *bracero* program.

The Second World War and the *bracero* program, however, did cultivate some positive changes in California's Mexican-American community. By the summer of 1942, many Mexican-American homes in East Los Angeles displayed American flags, "a symbol that a member of the family was in uniform" (Romo 167). These uniformed Mexican Americans were exposed to non-agricultural, technical jobs and offered opportunities under the G.I. Bill as they had never before received. Under the Bill, Chicano veterans were eligible for loans to start businesses, attend college or trade school, or buy homes (Menchaca 98). Moreover, Mexican Americans in the service were not treated as such; rather, they were simply one more among the ranks of soldiers of white, black, and various other ethnicities fighting for the liberty of all U.S. citizens.²⁰ Returning to the oppression of the United States was a huge disappointment after experiencing the cultural independence Mexican Americans had experienced abroad.

The *bracero* program had created a large community of Mexican laborers in California that worked five days a week but lacked social activities to occupy their evenings and weekends. As a result, a small entrepreneurial class of Mexican Americans took advantage of the economic deficiency in their communities and opened up a variety of small businesses. Bars, social clubs, restaurants, grocery stores, and even stores selling luxury items such as bicycles and televisions opened in significant numbers all over California and in high concentrations in Southern California.

²⁰ "Mexican Americans accounted for one-fifth of the total casualties from Los Angeles in World War II, although they comprised only one-tenth of the city's population [...] Nationwide, Mexican Americans returned as the most decorated ethnic group in the armed services, winning seventeen Medals of Honor" (Romo 167). Chicanos continued to enlist en masse in the U.S. military up until and throughout the era of the Vietnam War, and they died in greater numbers than any other ethnic/cultural group because they opted for posts in the divisions of highest risk (Fox 123).

In summary, the education afforded to Mexican-American veterans by the G.I. Bill combined with the financial success of intuitive Chicano businessmen led to the establishment of a Mexican-American middle class as well as a Mexican-American upper class (Romo 167). These more educated and successful ranks would later assert themselves politically to advance the goals of their community.

In Southern California, the awakening of Mexican-American political consciousness can also be attributed to other, more specific incidents. When the brutalized body of young José Diaz was found at a popular East Los Angeles swimming hole in August 1942, the smell of a ripe legal battle permeated the air. Members of the 38th Street gang had been reported in the vicinity around the time of the body's discovery, and 22 of the gang's members were arrested and charged with murder. An unprecedented mass trial followed, which "gained national attention and provoked new anti-Mexican sentiment in the Los Angeles community."²¹ After 15 of the 22 defendants were convicted of murder, assaults, and several lesser offenses, the East L.A. community organized the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, named for the swimming hole where Diaz' body was found. The convictions were appealed, and "the District Court of Appeals found the trial judge biased against the defendants and overturned the convictions" (Romo 166). The organization of the Mexican-American community on behalf of the young gang members, combined with the frustrations of a new Mexican-American middle and upper class, whetted Southern California's appetite for *mexicano* political mobilization.

²¹ The legal injustices committed during that trial are detailed in Rodríguez (69).

According to the author Avila, another cultural event that touched the lives of Southern California inhabitants was the construction of the vast and intimidating freeway circuits. The government primarily purchased land to build the new, modern freeways in areas where property values were lowest, and this was the case almost exclusively in minority communities. Residents of neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights – which was traversed by five different freeways during the 1950s – became outraged by the unchecked butchering of their communities and responded by forming organizations to protest further freeway construction in their backyards. Avila summarizes their efforts:

[Chicanos] packed public hearings with the California Division of Highways to voice their opposition; they met in neighbors' homes to organize community opposition; and they formed several community groups to fight the onslaught of the freeway, such as the Eastside Citizens' Committee against the Freeway, and the Freeway Fighters. They also wrote to local papers, which routinely published the letters of an angry community. (574)²²

This was only one of many motivations to political organization of Mexican Americans during the second half of the twentieth century. Chapter Three picks up from here and takes us to the contemporary epoch.

²² Avila also engages an interesting discussion of alternative methods by which Chicanos have protested social and/or political injustices: through the production of culture. According to Avila, traditional political channels – such as those proposed in this project – and popular culture are “strategies designed to preserve neighborhoods or the memory of them when gone” (581). The use of art as a channel for cultural and political empowerment is also treated in Rodríguez (79-80) and Diego Vigil (203-204).

Grass-Roots Strategies of the Chicano Community

Before continuing with the political development of the Mexican-American community, an informative tangent should be engaged and this portion of my narrative should be placed within the larger context of the modern U.S. political system.

The basic perennial tenets of the American government continue to stand: separate institutions and shared power; checks and balances; executive, legislative, and judicial branches; the “sovereignty of the people” (Tocqueville 57)²³; constitutional and federal supremacy; “polyarchical” competition and conflict in the legislative process (Dahl 137), etc. However, some ideas have been re-analyzed, bringing forth new standards of governmental description. For example, Hamiltonian precepts of the tyranny of the majority have been repudiated by arguments that a majority no longer exists in the United States; the modern argument is that the electorate is instead a composite of minority interests coalescing into a majority only on election day (Dahl 128).

The acknowledgment of a minority-based electorate is important to the modern cause of pluralism, as it supports another basic tenet of the American political system: grass-roots politics. Participation of small yet intensely determined groups functioning at the citizenry level is – and always has been – key to the political creed of U.S. society. The individualism that is essential to this creed fuels the development of pluralism by expediting the need to associate in order to attain political empowerment (Tocqueville 114-118).²⁴ Moreover, the American political creed also instills in its public a sense of

²³ “The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them” (Tocqueville 60).

²⁴ “Associations ought, in democratic nations, to stand in lieu of those powerful private individuals whom the equality of conditions has swept away” (Tocqueville 117).

responsibility to defend their individual rights. Locke insists that “they who by any injustice offended will seldom fail where they are able by force to make good their injustice” (6). That is, Americans will not tolerate injustices inflicted upon them; they would sooner organize themselves to fight the injustice. These virtues upon which U.S. society was founded continue to manifest themselves currently in the realization of political pluralism and widespread activism.

Following this line of thought, political participation often begins with the organization of a group of concerned individuals. It grows to include more people and the ability to raise money for their cause becomes more sophisticated. The movement superlatively reaches the level of representation within the halls of Congress in the form of a lobbyist paid to influence legislators in their policy-making decisions. Ideally, the lobby representing the grass-roots movement achieves the ability to be “heard ‘effectively,’” meaning “that one or more officials are not only ready to listen to the noise, but expect to suffer in some significant way if they do not placate the group, its leaders, or its most vociferous leaders” (Dahl 145). At this echelon, the interest group (which is what the grass-roots movement has essentially become) has achieved impressive access to the time and prestige of MCs and the influence over policy decisions that accompanies them.

Although these groups represent relatively small numbers of concerned individuals, their sway can be quite powerful in Washington. Congressional recognition of these groups as forceful agents of political change and as potent voices of organized segments of the voting population is proof that the transition of grass-roots movements to interest groups acting in the political sphere is a sound and well-planned one. In the next

section, the transition of Mexican Americans from a loosely organized, oppressed minority to a cultural group sought after by presidential candidates (see Footnote 3) is the focus.

Mexican-American Appropriation of Traditional Activist Tools

As referenced before, Mexican-American businessmen experienced promising amounts of success following the importation of Mexican laborers during and after World War II. In the same period, Mexican-American veterans returned from war to educate themselves or open businesses with G.I. loans. Also, specific cases of judicial injustice and communal concerns in Los Angeles served as impulses for Mexican Americans to the calling of political organization. These individuals – ambitious, educated, and determined to achieve justice – converted themselves into the first wave of Mexican-American political activists in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Riding the current of the contemporary civil rights movement, Mexican Americans utilized various models of political activism to promote the aspirations of their community.

Beginning in the 1940s, “Mexican Americans [had begun] to ‘play the game’ according to Anglo political rules. The new idea of progress became associated with exercising the franchise and attempting to gain both elective and appointive office” (Moore 138). Working within the established white-American power configuration, the early Mexican-American empowerment groups wished to show whites that their groups were “different from other, ‘trouble-making’ [groups of] Mexicans” (Moore 142).²⁵

²⁵ “Working within the system” is a time-honored and trusted political strategy among the Mexican-American population (Fox 144).

Exemplified by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC),²⁶ these early groups practiced what can be called a “politics of adaptation” (Moore 138). They wished to gain political power, not usurp it from whites; they did not view politics in America as a zero-sum affair but rather believed that there was plenty of power to go around. The main goal of groups of this disposition was to “train” their members for “citizenship” (Moore 142); that is, early Mexican-American political activism was geared toward motivating Mexican Americans to participate in the current political system, not toward changing that system. LULAC, for example, stated as its chief concern the development “within the members of our race the best, purest and most perfect type of a true and loyal citizen of the United States of America” (Moore 143).²⁷ In concert with the liberalization of the political atmosphere in the late 1960s and 1970s, the League later constituted a strong ally to “the barrio residents of Los Angeles and surrounding communities [...] in challenging the segregation of children in the public schools” (Romo 168).

Groups like LULAC often aimed to achieve their goals by motivating Mexican Americans to vote and elect Chicanos to public office. Gaining offices at the local, state, and federal levels would give Mexican-American leaders the opportunity to realize policy changes from within the governing political structure. A negative aspect of this method of change was that by the time the Mexican American reached public office, he had adapted so thoroughly to working with white colleagues that the possibility of his losing touch with the Mexican-American community from which he came was very real. Adaptation-oriented activist groups were frequently criticized by other members of the Mexican-

²⁶ Additional discussion of LULAC and its role in the mid-century political recognition of Latinos can be found in Hero (35).

²⁷ I agree with Moore’s assertion that “it is hard now to imagine the normal Mexican mixture of Spanish and Indian as constituting a distinct ‘race,’ but Anglo Americans of the Southwest defined it as such” (1). Original members of LULAC also defined themselves as such, revealing their eagerness to please Anglo political power-brokers.

American community for denying Mexican culture and the Spanish language in an overzealous effort to be accepted by the dominant white-American political culture; this led to the conception of alternative routes to political empowerment.

Dissatisfaction with the results of working within the Anglo system led to the “radicalization of Mexican American political activity” in the 1960s as illustrated vividly by the Chicano movement (Romo 168).²⁸ Chicanos insisted that the political system itself was the problem and therefore went beyond questioning and challenging the “assumptions of other generations of Mexican-American political leaders” to doubting and then attempting to reformulate “some of the most basic assumptions of American politics” (Romo 168). Chicanos sought to validate Mexican-American culture and the Spanish language in the American public arena. They worked to achieve more extreme goals than acceptance in the white political theater by utilizing aggressive protest tactics to publicize their *causa*. Promotion of Chicano community values, such as economic independence and cultural stimulation through the arts, represented a large part of their political platform.²⁹ Heavily rooted in America’s university system, the Chicano movement also pushed for the establishment of cultural studies programs in four-year institutions across the nation (Romo 170).³⁰ Unlike those who practiced the politics of adaptation, the Chicano movement rooted in Southern California worked outside of the traditional legislative process to effect social and political change within the contemporary Mexican-American community.

²⁸ An alternative view: Diego Vigil attributes the mobilization of the Chicano movement to three key events of the 1960s: achievements of the black civil rights movement, President Johnson’s War on Poverty, and the Vietnam War (187).

²⁹ See footnote 61 for readings on the subject.

³⁰ In this domain, the Chicano movement enjoyed a substantial degree of success; as of 1995, there were approximately 132 Latino and/or Chicano Studies programs in the United States ([Chicano Studies Centers](#)).

The author Limón himself lived through several manifestations of Chicano activism in the early 1960s. As a university student in Texas, Limón became involved in a support group for one of the earliest Mexican-American political movements, that of “farm laborers in California, south Texas, and everywhere else that Mexican-American agricultural workers were to be found” (82-83). For this movement, the early 1960s was a “period of intense labor unionization” (82) and a time during which pressing issues for Mexican-American communities were being formulated into a coherent political discourse. The cause of Chicano farmworkers in essence became “a cultural catalyst for Mexican-American students, providing us with a central symbol in which to ground our political and cultural sentiments and our new education” (82-83). Limón continues:

As the least acculturated and most economically exploited members of the Mexican-American society, the farmworkers were an ideal resolving symbol [...] It may well be said that the Mexican-American student movement started [...] as a series of farmworkers support committees on campuses in the Southwest and across the country. (82-83)

These student organizations eventually achieved a more refined form and became a key vehicle for Chicano political mobilization. In Texas, the Mexican-American Youth Organization (MAYO) was the Chicano student organization par excellence; everywhere else, *el Movimiento Estudiantil de Chicanos en Aztlán* (MEChA) enlisted Mexican-American students to act on a variety of community-related issues.

The “most pressing social issue” for the Mexican-American community at that time – as well as in the present – was education, or lack thereof (Limón 83). Thus it is logical that Mexican-American political activism was born in institutions of higher

learning, not in fields where agricultural laborers were being exploited. As Limón stated, the societal environment in which Chicanos found themselves in the 1960s was “a world of politically produced social deprivation, of racial stigma, of disempowerment most visibly evident in farmworker society but by no means confined to it” (88).

More observations may be made about the organizations themselves in their nascent epoch. As many of the participants represented the first generation of Mexican-American university students in their families, they often were the products of traditional Mexican values transmitted to them by their parents and extended families. These traditional Mexican values included the transfer of the patriarchal (read: sexist) treatment of women participants as well as the regarding of the Catholic Church as a community center/launching ground for neighborhood activities.

Under the auspices of the first student organization of which Limón became a member, he points out that female members belonged to a subordinate subgroup.³¹ The main function of this subgroup was to serve as the traditional Mexican female figures and cater to the male members – the true political activists and leaders – of the group. The author records his impressions of this phenomenon at his first meeting attended: “I started going around the room meeting *men* students, encountering women only when I made my way to be served at a food and drink table, food and drink they had prepared” (82).

The author also relates the anecdote of how his Catholic parish members organized a church bazaar in order to raise money for his university textbooks, as he was among the first youths to attend an institution of higher education from that

³¹ The subordinate status of women in patriarchal Chicano households in particular and in U.S. society in general is developed in Vélez-Ibáñez’s chapter on “Living in *Confianza* and Patriarchy: The Cultural Systems of U.S. Mexican Households” (137-181), is mentioned briefly in Fox (83), and is a principal theme in the work of Pardo.

neighborhood. This practice of looking to the Catholic Church for financial and/or moral support in non-religious, society affairs can also be located in the Mexican context, since the Church serves this very same purpose below the border as well. A relationship of “quid pro quo” between Catholic institutions and congregations is arguably commonplace in Mexico as well as in the United States, and it sets the stage for community support of individual endeavors, be they educational, political, etc.³²

In Los Angeles in the late 1960s and 70s, non-traditional political activism was becoming the norm, and it was not unusual to witness protest movements among high school students, Chicano, black, and white anti-Vietnam War demonstrators, and picketing of area supermarkets by members of the United Farmworkers Union. “Between 1967 and 1972, rallies featuring César Chávez, land grant leader Reies López Tijerina, and Black Power activists became common in the [East Los Angeles] community.” The palpable ambience of political activity in California had generated the Chicano movement already mentioned. The movement “attempted, with considerable success, to instill ethnic pride, call attention to inequities in the judicial system, and give rise to a new political consciousness” (Romo 170).

Los Angeles Mexican Americans were no longer accepting post-Hidalgo references to Chicano political and social inferiority and finally possessed the ideological and practical tools to work toward achieving constitutionally mandated equality in the

³² Although the Catholic Church is not the focus of this project, the role of Catholicism in the development of identity construction and political values in minority communities in the United States is an interesting topic for another project. The author Madrid leads the way: “Religion has been a powerful force in creating community, and in combination with language, culture, and territory, has historically been the basis of city-states, or empires, and subsequently of nations” (103). And Diego Vigil contributes: “The Catholic Church has attempted to organize families into large neighborhood groups, such as Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in San Antonio, The Organization of the Northwest (TON) in Chicago, and the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) in Los Angeles” (211). Also see Rodríguez (150-151).



Following my own lead from Footnote 71 on the previous page, I turn to the cartooning stylistics of Lalo Alcaraz in this entry entitled “Juan Diego” in order to give the powerful influence of the Catholic Church over the socialization, politicization, and racialization of Chicanos a humorous spin.

United States. For the first time in almost a century, Mexican Americans in California were aggressively exercising their rights as U.S. citizens and demanding redress for past societal wrongs.

Returning to José Diaz and the Sleepy Lagoon case, one can see here the seeds of a similar political growth in the Mexican-American community. Organizing a successful defense of the “youths involved in the Sleepy Lagoon case had unleashed a new political awareness among [East Los Angeles] residents” (Romo 168). This new appreciation

manifested itself in the organization of 30 East L.A. residents into the Community Service Organization (CSO) (Romo 168). The CSO eventually succeeded in mobilizing large segments of the Mexican-American community into activities directed against “restricted housing, police brutality, segregated schools, inequitable justice, and discriminatory employment” (Moore 146). Unlike LULAC, the CSO represented the Mexican-American middle and lower classes and even made advocacy efforts on behalf of newly arrived immigrants. In addition, the CSO sought to “cope with concrete and immediate social, economic, and political problems,” instead of promoting issues related to ethnic and cultural validation (Moore 146).

Following the turbulent Chicano activism of the 1960s and 70s, Mexican American experienced a political “cooling-off” period in the 1980s. It was a dramatic shift from “outlaw to routine politics, from attempts to storm the citadel of power to networking in its outer corridors” (Fox 143). The basic models of Chicano activism, however, had been established and continue in existence today, and they continue to constitute all the ideological points on a broad spectrum in Chicano political activity. In Chapter Three, several groups of Mexican-American activists currently operating in Los Angeles County are profiled and placed in the context of Chicano constituent desires in modern Congressional districts.