

# Latino Organizations In The United States

Graciela Orozco\*



Laura Cano

The Latino community in the United States has growing political, economic, social and cultural influence in society. This is borne out by the solid organizational infrastructure constructed through an intense process of struggle that began a little over a century and a half ago. Currently, there are around 3,000 Latino organizations of the most diverse type, whose common objective is to contribute to the development and a better quality of life for the Latino population.<sup>1</sup>

In order to expand the relationship between Mexico and that community—which is 58.5 percent Mexicans and Mexican Americans—<sup>2</sup> and bring them closer together, it is very important to

understand Latinos' organizational efforts and the role their organizations play in U.S. society, particularly with regard to issues on the bilateral agenda, given that the potential for these organizations' collaboration in matters of common interest is a resource that we Mexicans must not underestimate.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW

The Latino community's organizational process has been long and difficult. The Mexican population in the U.S. Southwest, mainly in Texas, California and Arizona, made the first organizational efforts after the 1848 war. These were resistance movements that generally operated clandestinely, but which played an important role in the defense of that population, subject to

cruel abuses when the border moved. Later came the mutualist societies that, in addition to promoting cultural belonging and ethnic identity, offered health services, life insurance and loans and fought for the political and labor rights of the Mexican population. These and other forms of association proliferated until the late 1930s. That is when the first formal civil rights organizations appeared, diversifying into industrial workers' and agricultural workers' unions. Later, the years after WWII and the Afro-American civil rights struggle established solid bases for Mexican-American organization that were strengthened by the Chicano Movement. From that time on, the forms and mechanisms of the community's organization have consolidated. From the mid-1980s until today, several umbrella organizations have achieved greater presence with their concerted

\* Founding member and executive director of the Mexican-American Solidarity Foundation.

**TABLE 1**  
**DISTRIBUTION OF ORGANIZATIONS**

STATE	NO. OF ORGANIZATIONS
California	226
Texas	130
Illinois	109
New York	85
Washington, D.C.	79
Florida	46
North Carolina	42
Arizona	33
New Mexico	31
Colorado	25
Michigan, Washington	23
New Jersey	20
Massachusetts, Ohio	16
Indiana, Oregon	13
Nebraska, Pennsylvania,	
Virginia, Wisconsin	12
Louisiana, Missouri	9
Minnesota, Utah	7
Maryland	6
Kansas, Oklahoma	5
Connecticut, Georgia,	
Nevada	4
Arkansas, Hawaii, Iowa,	
South Carolina, Wyoming	3
Tennessee	2
Alabama, Delaware, Idaho,	
Montana, New Hampshire,	
North Dakota, Rhode Island	1

efforts around different specific policies. In addition, a series of low-profile grassroots organizations have the ability to mobilize important groups of the Latino community when their rights are affected.

Despite the 150-year history of the Mexican and Mexican-American community's organizational process, today's formal organizations are of relatively recent creation. Most are less than 40 years old. They were founded between 1964 and 1980, when the number of Mexican and other Latino immigrants was reaching a critical mass, and they

participated in the struggles for civil rights and equal opportunities.

Today, the universe of Latino organizations in the United States is very diverse, including informal groups like clubs of people organized by hometown and sports groups of Mexicans and other Latinos, as well as student organizations and religious associations whose work benefits Latino groups, among others. If a stricter criterion, like being registered by the U.S. Treasury Department's Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as a tax-free organization, is applied, the universe shrinks considerably.

Using different criteria, we can say that the number of Latino organizations in the United States ranges from 3,000 to 5,000. Despite their importance, they are a minuscule part (0.3 percent) of the IRS total of 1.6 million registered tax-exempt organizations.

As with the "third sector" in the rest of the world, Latino organizations are a very unstable universe in which organizations are constantly being formed, some surviving and consolidating and many others disappearing. Until the 1960s, the vast majority of these organizations depended on resources from the community itself, whether through the payment of services rendered or membership dues. In the mid-1960s, Mexican Americans and other Latinos began their struggle to access funding from the government and foundations, which historically had ignored them. Under Lyndon B. Johnson, with the "War on Poverty," government funding became key to financing and creating organizations in the Hispanic community. With time, political priorities changed and these government funds decreased significantly. Many organizations closed their doors and others were forced to seek resources

from foundations, which have been very cautious in supporting Latino organizations.

Today, only 1.5 percent of the U.S.\$29 billion dispensed yearly by foundations goes to causes linked to the Hispanic community. In addition, only seven foundations participate wholeheartedly with funds, 50 percent of which come from a single donor, the Ford Foundation.

Among the reasons for this low participation of mainstream philanthropic organizations in Latino issues are ignorance about the community, despite its being the country's largest minority; latent racism; and the still scant —although constantly increasing— presence of Hispanics in these institutions' boards, where they represent only 0.5 percent of members. This is why in the last decade, Latinos, continuing their historical tendency to build their own institutions to achieve greater control over their lives, have begun to create their first community funds.

Another alternative source of funding for Latino organizations has been large corporations, which have increasingly responded mainly because of the growing importance of the Hispanic community in the U.S. economy and their interest in penetrating this dynamic ethnic market. It should be mentioned that 56.6 percent of the revenues of the 25 largest Latino organizations in the U.S. —altogether more than U.S.\$260 million in 2000— was contributed by corporations.

Nevertheless, it should be supposed that it is the largest organizations that concentrate most of the resources given by corporations for projects in the Latino community. The small organizations fight a constant, difficult battle to continue operating.

## GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Overall, we can say that the distribution of Latino organizations corresponds to the distribution of Latinos in general. States that have the largest number of Latinos also have the majority of community organizations. Washington, D.C. is an exception, since, although its Latino population is not very large, a sizeable number of organizations, several of them national, have their headquarters there.

Table 1, based on a sample of 1,062 Latino organizations distributed in 44 U.S. states shows the distribution of Latino organizations in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> As the table shows, five of the states with the largest Latino population (California, Texas, Illinois, Florida and New York), together with Washington, D.C., totaled 63.5 percent of the sample, although Latino organizations exist in almost the entire country.

The great majority of the Latino organizations are Mexican-American, whether because it is the origin of their founders, because they mainly deal with people of Mexican origin, or because they are led by Mexican Americans. This is a logical result of their larger comparative weight vis-à-vis the other Latinos. Nevertheless, since the mid-1970s, the community has tended to define itself and its organizations using the term "Hispanic" or "Latino," in an attempt to include all the other communities of Latin American and Caribbean origin.

In contrast with this trend, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, mainly, do include their origin in the names of their organizations, which has led some of the important groups of Mexicans and Mexican Americans to propose once again mentioning their

origin in their organizations' names to show their majority presence and the leadership they have always had in the Latino community. In fact, some organizations never relinquished their Mexican-American identity in their name. This is the case, just as an example, of the Mexican American Legal and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF).

## DISTRIBUTION BY KIND OF ACTIVITY

Latino organizations are as diverse as the community itself, whose causes include a broad gamut of aims and issues. Although with different action

strategies and even ideological differences, the common denominator in these organizations' struggles continues to be the quest for economic, political and social demands aimed at creating equal opportunities in U.S. society.

These groups' efforts are directed not only at U.S. Latino-origin citizens, but also at recent immigrants, both documented and undocumented. They are frequently multi-issue and multi-area oriented. On occasion, their activities focus on a particular group: young people, senior citizens, the differently abled or marginalized people.

Education is the field with the largest number of organizations. This is because it is precisely one of the sharpest problems of the Latino community and, therefore, a common banner.

Business promotion, mainly through Hispanic chambers of commerce, is also a very frequent aim, linked to the visibility that Latino consumers have acquired over recent decades—with around U.S.\$500 billion a year in buying power—and the dynamic growth of the Hispanic business community.

Labor training, health care, advocacy, community development, culture and housing are also the issues that hundreds of groups organize around.

Although important advocacy groups work on matters that affect the community as a whole, like defending its labor and civil rights, it is very common that several associations join forces around these issues, regardless of their main objectives. Thus, they gain strength

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to defend a cause in the courts or vis-à-vis the government, to change a public policy or a law that harms or discriminates against Hispanics.

Special mention should be made of Latino organizations that deal with migration, an issue of interest to the Hispanic community, and of bilateral interest. In this field, they have historically played a very active role, and, although their influence has not been sufficient to have an impact on federal decision making, on a local and state level they have been more successful.

For these groups, the priority is both documented and undocumented immigrants who are already in the United States. This makes them a key factor for greater effectiveness in protecting our compatriots who continue to emi-

grate despite reinforced surveillance of our northern border and the terrible murders by immigrant-hunting neo-Nazi groups. Latino organizations daily defend the causes and the rights of people of Mexican origin and other Latinos, offering information and legal services.

As is to be expected in a highly decentralized country like the United States, the vast majority of the organizations operate on a local level. Nevertheless, there are also state, regional and national groups, although none of them really have a presence in the entire country, but rather in those states with a high concentration of Latino population.

#### MEXICAN ORGANIZATIONS

People of Mexican birth now living in the United States now come to 8.7 million, that is 42.5 percent of the entire population of Mexican origin. Their organizations are almost invisible for the rest of U.S. society, and they even have little contact with Mexican-American and other-origin Latino groups. The vast majority are not formally constituted under U.S. law, making it impossible for them to request funds from foundations, corporations or the government. Their fund-raising is mainly done through events they organize and support given them by compatriots who have managed to set up prosperous businesses, although in recent years, they also have begun to approach local companies and even large corporations.

Many of these groups are organized by state of origin and began to proliferate in the 1980s given the interest of the governors from states that had high emigration rates and receive a

large part of remittances sent back to Mexico. Today, almost all the state governments have recognized the need to approach the people from their states in the U.S., both to channel resources for local economic development and to win votes. Twenty-five states have set up offices in Mexico to attend to migrants with different levels of resources and activities, showing the growing importance that emigrants and their clubs have for their native states. This is also having a positive effect in encouraging the creation of new clubs, and, although there is no systematic effort that can tell us the number of these organizations, estimates put them at about 1,000, distributed in at least 20 states of the United States.

Another form of traditional associations among Mexican immigrants have been sports leagues and groups: estimates put the number at about 20,000 in the entire U.S.

For immigrants, sports is the cheapest form of entertainment; it also has the advantage of bringing the entire family together. Thus, every Sunday, sports matches are common in local parks anywhere there are enough Mexicans to form at least two teams to play against each other. The most popular sports are, of course, soccer, baseball, basketball and *charrería*, or rodeos, among others, and leagues organize regular competitions. The best established leagues raise funds with local businesses to rent parks and pay referees. Today, their tournaments are also sponsored by different companies, even Mexican ones.

Recently, political organizations of Mexican immigrants have emerged in the United States, like the Coalition for Political Rights of Mexicans Abroad and the International Coalition of Mex-

icans Abroad (CIME), whose central aim is to lobby for legislation that would allow immigrants to participate in the Mexican political system. Several of these groups have partisan agendas and demand the right to vote for Mexicans abroad, and not only in presidential elections. Some ask for the creation of a sixth proportional representation district that would allow them to vote for and be elected as deputies and senators. Also, recently, the Council of Presidents of Federations of Mexican Community Clubs was formed in Los Angeles, a mechanism to influence the bilateral agenda on migration issues as well as domestic U.S. affairs linked to improvements in health and educational services and giving driver's licenses to undocumented migrants. With regard to Mexico, this council seeks to promote Mexicans' voting rights abroad and to spread the "3 for 1" program.<sup>4</sup> This is a demonstration of greater activism on the part of some organization leaders who today seek to have a political impact not only in Mexico but also in the United States. ■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this article, we will only take into consideration not-for-profit Latino organizations.

<sup>2</sup> This percentage is based on the 20.6 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans registered in the 2000 U.S. census, a very conservative figure if we consider that at least half of the six million Latinos who did not specify country of origin could be Mexican or of Mexican descent.

<sup>3</sup> G. Orozco, E. González and R. Díaz de Cosío, *Las organizaciones mexicano-americanas, hispanas y mexicanas en Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de México, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> The "3 for 1" program fosters fund raising in the U.S. for social and infrastructure projects in migrant sending communities in Mexico, whereby every dollar raised would be matched by both Mexico's federal and state governments. [Editor's Note.]