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Mexican Lobbying in the U.S. A New Generation Understanding the System

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Larry Downing/Reuters

In this article, I will itemize some of the Mexican Diaspora's lobbying efforts in the United States to explain how its new generations, more highly qualified than their predecessors, are getting involved to defend the interests of their fellow citizens. Lobbying is a cultural practice of the U.S. political and business classes and civil society. Rooted in the

first amendment right of petition,¹ it is an effective tool for bringing pressure by domestic or foreign interest groups to influence government decisions by hiring professional firms or through grassroots mobilization.² It is only logical that Mexican-origin organizations have had to learn to do it over the years.

My definition of Mexican Diaspora in the United States is the group of people made up of Mexican immigrants and their descendants born there, known as Mexican-Americans.

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The latter, together with a segment of immigrants, children, or young people who have become naturalized U.S. citizens, consider themselves Latinos or Hispanics, and play that role to achieve greater acceptance in political life.³ The organizations that consider themselves representatives of the interests of the U.S. Latino population, like the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (Maldef), the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), or the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), are part of this group. I also identify as part of the Diaspora the coalition of networks of Mexican migrants and the councils, federations, and clubs of Mexican-born U.S. residents.

Three main critiques have been made of this definition: first, that the Diaspora is not well organized, though it is segmented; secondly, that it does not have a permanent structure for coordination; and third, that most of its members are not politicized. To respond to these points and argue that they do not necessarily affect the concept itself, I would underline three characteristics pointed out by Yossi Shain:

1. Diasporas' cores are made up of well-organized elites of the group who mobilize the community. According to this logic, only the minority is permanently active and is not always visible.
2. The majority are passive members who second the core group in mobilizations. Although not permanently organized, they are receptive to the coordination by Diaspora elites.
3. Most people in a Diaspora are silent members of the group.⁴ Ordinary people are not up to date on political, social, or cultural issues, but their number and weight in the economy make them the target of the Diaspora elites. The Mexican case has these characteristics.

The approval of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, the most important legislation on the issue of the twentieth century, was an initial factor in organizing the Mexican Diaspora community since it legalized the status of more than 2.5 million Mexican-origin immigrants who had been living there clandestinely.⁵ In the words of Jorge Durand, with this law, Mexican migration stopped being circular and clandestine, and migrants became involved in the U.S. system and assumed their new status.⁶

Another factor was Proposition 187, a racially tinged bill promoted by the then-governor of California, Republican Pete Wilson, and approved by the state legislature in November

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1994, which prohibited undocumented immigrants from accessing non-urgent social and health care services funded by public monies.⁷ This prompted both first-generation migrants and U.S. citizens of Mexican origin to organize to defeat it and mobilize the grass roots in the biggest effort up to that point in history.⁸

The experience of political cooperation between Mexicans and Mexican-Americans would be repeated again during the huge marches of May 2006, when more than five million people came out to demand a comprehensive immigration reform. The country had never seen demonstrations that large,⁹ which showed that the level of political awareness in the Diaspora had increased over the previous two decades. Carlos Salinas de Gortari understood this in 1990, when he was president of Mexico, since he recognized the importance of Mexican-Americans and their knowledge and understanding of the U.S. political system. And he knew that it was strategically important to approach them so they could help foster the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or at least not oppose it.¹⁰

Since NAFTA was initially rejected by Democratic circles and Republican congresspersons from conservative, anti-immigrant regions, Salinas went to Maldef, LULAC, and La Raza, among others, to repair Mexico's negative image and to get them to become a domestic political bloc that could help lobby Congress. To legitimize his alliance with the Diaspora, he created the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, which began the process of bringing institutions together, and which Alexandra Délano defined as going "from 'non-intervention' to the institutionalization of relations."¹¹ This is where the idea for the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME) was born, though it materialized in 2003 with Vicente Fox; from there the Institute's Consultative Council emerged to create synergies of collaboration between the Mexican government and the Diaspora.

Narrowing the institutional gap between the Mexican government and the Diaspora resulted in the historic case of their joint lobbying in the United States to stop the HR10 bill in the House of Representatives. Historically, Mexico has pro-

vided migrants with a consular identification card without anyone objecting. However, in 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, the House approved HR10 bill 282 votes to 134.¹² The bill's central idea was that U.S. authorities would invalidate the consular identification card for security reasons and refuse to receive it as identification because it was not designed with security measures and was easily forgeable.

In response, the Mexican network of consulates, the IME, and different Mexican-origin Latino leaders, like Raúl Yzaguirre, the director of the La Raza's National Council, and Maldef Director Thomas Sáenz, carried out public activities to defend the card so the federal, state, county, and city governments would accept it.¹³ The Mexican government coordinated with the Diaspora to bring pressure to bear on a local level and in Washington, not only on the federal government, but also on financial institutions, counties, cities, police departments, and schools. When HR10 was scuttled, it showed that Mexico and the Diaspora had considerable lobbying muscle seldom seen before.¹⁴

When the government turns to the Diaspora to pressure congresspersons and officials on a grassroots level, possibilities for impacting a decision broaden because the number of people involved grows and the effort is joined by new generations, better prepared educationally, who understand the steps to follow and the political rhythms of the U.S. system. Of the 33.6 million people of Mexican origin in the U.S., 21.9 million were born there and 11.7 million in Mexico. Their average age is about 25, two years younger than other Hispanics, and 12 years younger than the U.S. national average, which is 37.¹⁵ Of those 33.6 million, 24.7 million are U.S. citizens, 22.4 million are bilingual, 7.5 million speak English every day, 12.1 million speak it very well, and 10.3 million at least understand it.¹⁶ Contrary to what Huntington argues in *Who Are We?*, the Mexican Diaspora has adapted to that culture even better than other ethnic or national groups.¹⁷ If we take into account the fact that the Diaspora is growing due to the entry of people with higher and higher educational levels, the community's perception of itself is gradually changing and growing in self-confidence.

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One concrete example is the number of Mexicans with doctoral degrees, which came to 20 000 in 2009 according to BBVA Bancomer figures.¹⁸ As Miryam Hazan says, this makes the Mexican Diaspora one of the most highly qualified, trailing only China and India.¹⁹ In this context, it is important to mention two aspects that Arturo Sarukhán has reflected upon: that the Mexican Diaspora in the United States has constantly been fed by migratory flows from Mexico and that it co-exists with the phenomenon of migration as a whole, which is fed by migrants with higher educational levels.²⁰ That is why it is worth repeating that the new generations of that Diaspora have learned from the U.S. political culture and increasingly resort efficiently to lobbying to push for their interests. Two other examples are experiences involving the California and Illinois state governments.

In 2005, the California legislature approved SB670, the Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program, thanks to mobilizations and demands by the Diaspora, led by Maldef, emphasizing the unconstitutionality of the deportations of U.S. citizens and legal residents of Mexican origin to Mexico between 1929 and 1944, in the framework of the Mexican Repatriation Program. With this act, California offers a public apology to those individuals illegally deported and forced to emigrate to Mexico and requests that the Department of Parks and Recreation place a commemorative plaque in a public place in Los Angeles.²¹

The bill was introduced into the California legislature by Senator Joseph Dunn on February 22, 2005. After being approved by both houses in September, it was signed into law by Governor Schwarzenegger on October 5, 2005. The legislators who sponsored this bill in California's Congress were U.S. politicians of Mexican origin whose electoral campaigns were supported by Mexican-American organizations.²²

During the discussions about the bill, Maldef presented speeches and reparations petitions of surviving deportees before different legislative committees in 2003 with the support of Cruz Reynoso, a civil rights attorney and former official of the California Supreme Court; Dolores Huerta, an icon of unionism together with César Chávez and civil rights defender; and Esteban Torres, president of the Junta de LA Plaza and former federal congressman for District 38. When the issue was reported in the press and pressure on California's Congress stepped up, the legislature gave in.²³

A similar case took place in Illinois: SB1557 was signed into law by Governor Pat Quinn on August 25, 2009, condemning and declaring unconstitutional the deportation of be-

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tween 1.5 and 2 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in 1933. This state law mandates all state-funded educational institutions, from primary schools to high schools, to include a specific module in their history study plans to deal with the issue with that focus.²⁴

Journalist Vicente Serrano led the Diaspora lobbying effort to get this bill passed; he later made the documentary *Injusticia olvidada* to tell the story. The senator for Illinois District 2, William Delgado, took up the fight in the state legislature.²⁵ Both in California and in Illinois, mobilizing the Diaspora was essential for success. In Illinois, Mexican immigrants took the lead, and in California, Mexican-Americans. In both cases, both groups supported each other's efforts. What happened in California in 2005 was key for inspiring what was done in Chicago in 2009.

These two cases of successful Diaspora lobbying on the issue of deportations united the community given the per-

ception of a collective threat: they recover the historic memory in the same way that the Jews and Armenians have done by remembering their traumatic events (the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide). This shows that new generations of the Diaspora better understand the U.S. system and its lobbying mechanisms for pushing forward their historic demands.

It is no coincidence that President Barack Obama, with 2016 in mind, has resorted to executive action to alleviate the situation of 5 million immigrants, mostly of Mexican origin, using his constitutional right to make decisions when Congress has blocked his bills. As columnist León Krauze points out, the power of the Mexican-origin community is increasing because its members are more and more organized to demand their rights, even in the electoral sphere.²⁶

To conclude, I would like to cite the idea of academic Carlos Heredia, who suggested the Mexican government pay attention to the movements in the Diaspora: "Since the issues that most interest us Mexicans are matter of U.S. domestic policy, our best strategy is to strengthen the organizing capability of our migrants and foster the U.S. agenda of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. . . . Supporting them is the best way of helping ourselves."²⁷ 

NOTES

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Highly Skilled Mexican Women Migrants To the United States

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Tobias Schwarz/Reuters

International migration is undergoing profound transformations; understanding them requires a thorough review of the conceptual and methodological frameworks used for analysis and the design of public immigration policies. Recent UN information confirms that 232 million peo-

ple, or 3.2 percent of the world's population, live somewhere other than their usual country of residence. Of that total number of migrants, 136 million are located in industrialized countries and the other 96 million in developing nations.

It should be noted that in recent years, growth in international migration has slowed significantly due to the recessive effects of the global crisis that broke out between 2007 and 2008. However, different information sources, among

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