



Migration, Assimilation and Diaspora: Positive Sum Solutions are Possible

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The US and Mexico are slowly returning to negotiate new agreements on central issues in this most crucial bi-partisan relationship, after that momentum was lost due to the 9-11 tragedy. The Bush and Fox administrations deserve credit for having negotiated fundamental changes in our two countries relations -- for example, trading increased cooperation from Mexico in controlling the border for increased numbers of visas and economic development cooperation. In the current debate surrounding these renewed negotiations, the issue of the relationship of Mexico with Mexicans in the United States has emerged, specifically over voting rights and dual nationality. Some in the US worry that Mexico's continued links with immigrants and their children in the US will disrupt the assimilation process in the US and threaten US interests, while some in Mexico fear that Mexican migrants in the US will have influence in Mexico but not have to live with the consequences of their use of it. Both views are wrong, and could lead to unwise policies that will inhibit the ability of the US and Mexico to negotiate their bilateral relationship and processes of globalization to their mutual benefit.

Concretely, the debate involves a 1998 law that made it possible for Mexicans to retain Mexican "nationality" after acquiring US citizenship, and a 1996 change in the Mexican constitution that gives Mexicans the (as yet unimplemented) right to vote in its presidential elections from abroad. Dual nationality (which does not include the right to vote in Mexico) was intended to encourage Mexican immigrants to become US citizens, among other reasons so that they could fight anti-immigrant legislation like Proposition 187 in California. The right to vote in Presidential elections from abroad is still unimplemented both because the PRI fears that migrants will vote against it, and because some fear negative reactions in the US. The first measure is part of a large policy of *acercamiento* or "closer relations" with the Mexican diaspora in the US, while the second was part of the process of democratization in Mexico.

The fear that this relationship threatens assimilation in the US or Mexican sovereignty is misplaced. First, Mexico seeks not to expand, but to acknowledge belatedly how migration has changed it. One in three Mexicans will visit the US in their lifetime. In migrant sending regions, everyone has a relative *en el norte*, and almost every peso spent can be traced to one of the 8 billion dollars remitted from the US to Mexico each year, making migrants second only to oil for Mexico's economy. Many, including President Fox, argue that such strong involvement means migrants

deserve a chance to have a voice in the communities they help sustain. To deny them the chance to exercise their constitutional right to vote for president in Mexico is to keep several million people in political limbo, with no vote anywhere. Mexico wants to see migrants become US citizens who are also members of the Mexican diaspora. In the Dominican case, such diasporic membership (via dual citizenship) has facilitated assimilation, including greater political involvement in New York. In its fullest potential, the Mexican case will yield a diasporic relationship significantly less intense than that between American Jews and Israel, but more intense than what exists now, but completely consistent with assimilation.

Second, continued links with Mexico should help Mexican Americans what sociologist Alejandro Portes calls “segmented assimilation”, in which ethnic retention helps the children of immigrants succeed in the US. The danger of “straight line” assimilation that strips ethnic identity away directly is that it can lead into an oppositional subculture, which contributes to poor school and work outcomes. Stated differently, the real danger to assimilation is not links with Mexico, but bad Americanization in the US. The US should focus more energy on developing an immigrant policy – in addition to its immigration policy – to help foster positive assimilation, and work with the Mexico where possible to help us achieve it.

The relationship Mexico is developing with Mexicans in the US is not incommensurate with full assimilation here. Research shows that most Mexican Americans will be monolingual English speakers by the third generation, and will have views on issues affecting Mexico that differ significantly with Mexican government positions. Diasporic Mexican identity will be decidedly secondary to the primary political identity as American citizens. If properly nurtured, such a diasporic identity could facilitate assimilation in the US, and be another important dimension of the emerging partnership between the US and Mexico that the Bush and Fox administrations have worked so hard to develop.

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