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Mexican-American Political Participation and California History

By Laura Cazares

In this article, Laura Cazares describes her participation in the local politics of East Salinas during the recent recall election. She draws connections between the current state of Mexican-American political participation in California politics and the historical disenfranchisement that they have suffered since statehood. She also analyzes specific policies that have prevented Mexican-American political involvement and proposes ideas for overcoming them. The political project discussed in this pages stems out of a unique college course designed around the concept of Democratic Participation.

Introduction

Throughout California history, certain themes seem to be replayed over and over again. The theme I have chosen to focus on, for the purpose of this paper, is the on going relationship between race and political participation. This relationship was evident in California even before the signing of the state's first constitution. For the men who assumed the task of deciding who would be allowed to vote in the newly formed state, race was a hot topic of debate. This is made obvious in a chapter from Heizer and Almquist's *Other Californians* called "Constitutional Debate on Race and Rights, 1849." They say clearly that one of two pressing issues of the day centered on "the right of the California Indian to vote (p.95)." It goes on to state:

The delegates...remained firm in their convictions that no persons other than whites should play part in the governing of the state and proceeded to disenfranchise many of those individuals who had originally cast their ballots ...that put these very same delegates in their convention seats (p.96).

The reason I find this important is because systematic voter disenfranchise-

ment in this state had its beginning at this convention, is still deeply rooted, and effects the political participation of Latinos living in California today. This is important for California because, as the demographic landscape changes, if the voting disenfranchisement of large numbers of marginalized communities continues then the racial tension between whites and non-whites will never be put to rest.

The historical question that has shaped my research is: what historical trends can be seen in the political participation of Latinos in California? In California there is a disproportionately low rate of voter turnout among Latinos. Although Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic minority group, their rate of political participation through voting is not rising at the same pace (Citrin & Highton, 2002). For example, the Latino population in California rose from 26.7% of the population in 1990 to 32.4% in 2000 (U.S. Census), and, if the population grows at the same rate, they will make up 38.1% of California's population in 2010. Compare this to the fact that projections of California's electorate show Latinos only making up 16% of the voting population in 2010 and growing only to 19% in 2020 (Citrin & Highton, 2002). In light of California's

recent recall election, I decided to take a closer look at this phenomenon in an attempt to better understand factors contributing to the low rate of Latino voter turnout and to learn about current efforts being made to change this occurrence. In Monterey County, the United Farm Workers (UFW) organized voter outreach efforts focusing on Latinos. Through my research, I learned that mobilization efforts have a direct impact on Latino voter turnout. This was evident in 1994 when Proposition 187 was on the ballot. In an attempt to gain support in opposition of this proposition, Latino activists and their supporters began mobilization efforts in their communities with the outcome being an increase in Latino voting from 41% in 1990 to 50% in 1994 (Citrin & Highton, 2002). The link between the history of low Latino voter turnout and current mobilization efforts was one based upon need. In other words, the history of under representation in the electorate led to the need for the Latino community to carry out mobilization efforts.

I recently engaged in a political project whose goal was to provide support to current efforts being made by supporters of the UFW. I volunteered, going door to door, to encourage Latino voters living in East Salinas (a city in Monterey County with a high Latino population) to vote in California's historic recall election. As a Latino citizen born and raised in California, I had witnessed the passing of state propositions which I deemed racist. With Proposition 54 on the table for the recall election, I knew I could not sit idly by and allow for yet another passing of irresponsible legislation. The disproportionately low rate of voter turnout for people of color in California's electorate has created a need for community action. This is es-

pecially true for the Latino community. What follows is my experience addressing this need through mobilization efforts in East Salinas, and an overview of the literature that supports my claim.

Background Information

Before I can begin to write a paper on my recent experience with political action, I need to define what I mean by politics and political action. As I first began the research on my topic and I considered "politics" I could not help but think of the white, wrinkled men I see on CNN or Crossfire. I thought about laws, bills, and racist California propositions like 209 or 187. I thought about people who stand along the side of the road holding signs depicting pictures of aborted fetuses. Here in the U.S., politics seemed like a series of debates where, on the outside, the issues may look environmental, educational, or military but really it is money. Money shapes the war of words and the incessant double speak that allows unclear, poorly written propositions to end up on the ballot.

When I considered politics, I considered one or a series of political acts. I saw a political act as a conscious act by a person or a group in public or private. I feel it was a political act when author Frank Bardacke insisted on the use of a long handled hoe, which he wrote about in his book *Good Liberals and Great Blue Herons*. It was a political act when the workers he describes organized for the frozen foods strike. In addition, it was a political act when Richard Shaw chose to pass out literature for his *Thanks* campaign. It was a political act when school administrators chose to squander millions of dollars that would have otherwise gone into the

classrooms. And lastly, it was a political act when LULAC changed its support of rent control in Watsonville. I do not think my idea of politics differs much from that of Frank Bardacke. What I have learned is that when one plans a political action it is attached to a specific goal. This was an important idea for me as I began my own political act.

I was born into a political family. We are Chicanos. Chicanos are basically politically active Mexican-Americans. My first public political act was in the mid-90's when Prop. 187 passed here in California. I walked with a group of other students from the city building in Santa Cruz to Highway 1. There on Highway 1 we stopped traffic, held hands and sang songs. I knew that there was a chance that we may be arrested, but the police, although heavy in presence, were not heavy in hand. They allowed us a specific amount of time to express our concerns and feelings. After the allotted time we returned to the city building, clearing the highway in time for 5:00 PM traffic. Another time I acted politically I marched with the UFW in Watsonville. My cousin, a friend, and I drove down from S.F. on April 13, 1997 and took part in a huge march and rally. It was powerful and moving for me to make a personal and public showing of my support, political and otherwise. There are other small acts that I live out on a daily basis: I drive an economical car, I'm an out queer person in my large Mexican family, and I work with communities to strengthen our ties and battle destructive forces such as disease, poverty, or racism.

Now that I have read a lot and met some of the political activists in my community, I must say that my idea of "politics" has changed. While I do agree

that a lot of the power still lies in the hands of a few wealthy white men, I have begun to see that people can have a say in what is happening on the local level and on the national level, as was the case in Robert Gottlieb's essay, "Grassroots Environmentalism." However, my idea of a political act remains the same, a conscious act by an individual with a specific outcome in mind. I include in this a conscious choice not to act. I will use for an example a chapter from bell hook's book, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. She writes the chapter as she sits (in first class) on a plane next to a white man who kept quiet when a boarding pass mix-up led to her black companion being forced to move to coach, while he was mistakenly bumped up to first class. Although hooks and her companion paid for the first class seating, her companion was brought up to the front of the plane and accused of trying to occupy a seat in first class. When she tried to explain the mix-up the stewardess ignored her and informed her in a loud voice "as though she is a child, as though she is a foreigner who does not speak airline English, that she must take another seat (p.8)." As for the white man who benefited from the mistake, hooks points out "that he had an opportunity to not be complicit with the racism and sexism that is so all-pervasive in this society," but instead all he did was offer a weak apology and remained seated next to her for the duration of the flight (p.9). Even choices not to do something, like not speaking up, can be a political act, if it is for a specific outcome.

Project Action

For my project I chose to get involved in the state recall election. My goal was to

contribute to efforts being made to encourage individuals living in East Salinas, who are eligible to vote, to do so. The main strategy was precinct walking, including door-to-door outreach. These activities supported my efforts by putting me in the middle of the community and keeping my efforts on a realistic grass-roots level. I worked with the United Farm Worker's Union (UFW). I chose them because they have a history of organizing within the community I am interested in working with. In addition, they had already begun in their efforts to get people to vote. The reason this issue is so important to me is because I have witnessed elections in the past, when the outcome, as I stated before, has been the passing of a racist or unjust proposition. Just recently, I was watching Public T.V. and there was a program about Mexican-Americans. A celebrity was sharing an interaction they had with their father, a naturalized citizen of almost 35 years who had made the choice never to vote in one election. When the son asked why he chose not to vote, the father replied, 'the gringos have been doing a good job so far, why would they want me to mess it up.' I had to chuckle, because it is so true of older family members of mine. We are a proud, but humble culture. But election time is not a time to be humble, we need to realize the power of our combined voices and direct this power in a way that might increase the quality of life for our current and future loved ones.

My relationship to the community I worked with was a country of origin relationship. While I may have been born in the U.S., I have aunts and uncles born in Mexico. My grandfather came to the U.S. by way of Texas and the Rio Grande. What I feel I brought to the community was education and perspec-

tive, in addition to faith and compassion. What I needed to be conscious of was my own privilege and my weak Spanish skills. However, there were cultural ties that remained throughout years of assimilation. Importance of family, knowledge of cultural traditions and proper ways to address community members of certain ages are values that served me well as I began my outreach efforts.

As I approached my topic I considered the type of information I needed to know related to the history of voter turnout for minorities in California. Information topics included, but were not limited to, the history of voting rights in California, and policies and restrictions for who can currently vote in California. As I was reading the U.S. Constitution, the first item I came across that applied to my project was found in Article 1, Section 8. This section states that Congress has the power "to establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization". I understood this to be a citizenship issue. What I hear is that Congress has the power to create the rules of who can or cannot become a citizen. If someone is not a citizen, then they cannot register to vote. This is very important to my research, because many of the individuals living in the area where I did my volunteer hours are not eligible for naturalization, which keeps them from being able to vote.

Next, I decided to look at California's Voting Laws. The first selection I made was from Code 2027 and states; "Residence in a trailer or vehicle or at any public camp or camping ground may constitute a domicile for voting purposes if the registrant complies with the other requirements of this article." I selected this code because I thought it was important that even

someone who is living in his or her car could register to vote and take part in an election. The reason I see this as important is because housing in this County is so expensive and so many people are considered homeless. Also, when I was going door to door for my project I could see that some homes had more than one family living in them. As people opened the front door it was easy to see mattresses lined up on living room floors creating sleeping quarters for a significant number of people. It was obvious how difficult it can be for people to maintain housing, so it seems significant that even a homeless person can have a say in an election.

The second, and final, statewide election code that I considered relevant to my project was California Code 2035. This code has to do with the establishment of precincts and states:

Whenever any jurisdiction is divided into election precincts or whenever the boundaries of established precincts are changed or new precincts created, the precinct boundaries shall be fixed in a manner so that the number of voters in each precinct does not exceed 1,000 in counties with a population of less than 1,000,000, and does not exceed 1,250 in all other counties, on the 88th day prior to the day of election, unless otherwise provided by law.

Basically, this outlines how many precincts a county will have and helps to establish the number of polling locations. This is very important because the distance a person has to travel to vote may affect the likelihood of that individual actually making it to the polls. This may have a direct effect on the rate of voter turnout. This issue has been recently addressed here in Monterey

County when the county elections office switched to all mail-in ballot elections.

Today, people of color are kept away from the polls by, first, denying them the right to vote through the passing of legislation such as the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and, secondly, by making sure they cannot understand the often-confusing ballot text. Take, for example, the following text from Proposition 209:

The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.

This sounds like it is trying to do away with discrimination in the state. In reality, what it did away with was the means to ensuring that places like universities and government offices mirrored the ethnic diversity of surrounding communities. The proposition that sounded like it was good for people of color really was not. This is confusing for a native English speaker, consider the dilemma a non-English as a first language person is faced with.

The problems that we see today in the disproportionate voting patterns of Latinos in California have their roots buried deep within the transcripts of California's first constitutional debate and can be tied to the history of voting disenfranchisement in California. The spirited arguments that took place during the convention centered around just who should be allowed into the state and who should be allowed to vote. This led to confusion about just who would be classified as "white" and who was consid-

ered “Mexican” under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Many of the men that attended the convention, who made historical decisions that would shape the state forever, were new to California themselves.

Despite the early history of voting rights for Latinos in California, the community continues to maintain strong ties as Bardacke shows in a chapter entitled “Earthquake Politics: From Mexico City to Watson.” He discusses the impact of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake on his community in Watsonville. He describes the community’s interaction after the quake and the support systems that went into place without the use of agency help. A neighborly camaraderie swept through the streets and transcended the many languages spoken by the residents of Watsonville. Although Frank points out that the solidarity only lasted a few days in his community, what is important is that, even if only for a brief moment, it existed. Recently, California has been rocked politically by racist propositions such as 187 and 209. Hopefully, the time is near when Latinos and other marginalized citizens will come together and make their unity felt at the polls.

Perhaps by bringing these histories to light, Latinos might see they have a long standing role in the community of California, leading them to make a conscious decision to have a say in tomorrow’s history by voting in every (historical) election. However, leading a discussion, which includes painful histories, is a difficult thing to do. In the Introduction to her *Something in the Soil*, Patricia Nelson Limerick addresses the difficulty of discussing topics that people do not want to consider. In her case, the topic was new western history. According to Limerick, of the conflicts and dilemmas

stirred up in the 19th century, many remain to haunt Westerners in the 20th century. I believe this is true, especially the strained relations between Mexican Americans and Anglos. When I consider the history of my problem, I cannot help but wonder if Latinos consider politics in California a white man’s issue, and thus steer clear from it. Also, I am familiar with the difficulty of bringing up an issue some people would rather not discuss, in this case politics. What Limerick’s introduction provides is a background for considering differing views of history in the West.

To anyone driving down Blanco Road, between Marina and Salinas, it is obvious that people of color drive the agricultural labor force. Upon closer inspection, observers may learn that many of the laborers have Mexican ethnic origins. This is not a chance occurrence. The systematic use of Mexican labor for agriculture has its history in California Law. In the Historical Summary prepared by John C. Williamson, entitled “The Bracero Program and its Aftermath,” he notes that through a program arranged by the American and Mexican governments Mexican men were brought to California to work in the fields. This program was Public Law 78 enacted in July 1951. The purpose of this law was to “supply Mexican agricultural workers in order to alleviate shortages in the domestic farm work force” while “protecting the domestic farm work force from adverse effects of the importation of Mexican agricultural workers (p.1).” Braceros, or “strong-armed ones,” were issued “green cards” allowing them to live anywhere in California for the purpose of working for up to three years, with the possibility of citizenship at the end of the allotted time. This meant that while the workers

were contributing to the economic success of the state they had no rights, such as voting. The Bracero Program and the INS policies that went along with it grossly favored the best interest of the grower (Calavita, 1992). The outcome of this was the marginalization of the Mexican community, which unfortunately remains true today. Public Law 78 expired on December 31, 1964 and although the report gives statistics on the agricultural success of the program, it does not mention the naturalization of any of the Mexican workers.

Political Action Summary

The political action I undertook centered on California's most recent statewide election. The volunteer work that I completed consisted of street-level outreach. I went door to door in East Salinas encouraging people to vote in the recall election. My work took place over three days leading up to Election Day. On my first day, a Thursday afternoon, I met the people I would be working with in the parking lot of the Cesar Chavez library. After a brief discussion on what we were to say to people and how to understand the map of addresses we would be approaching, I was paired up with another volunteer to begin covering our assigned streets. On this day, I worked with a 17-year-old female who was doing volunteer work as part of her high school graduation requirement. We were both nervous in the beginning, me because of my questionable Spanish skills and she because some of her classmates lived in the area. All in all my first day went pretty smoothly. People were apprehensive as they initially opened their doors, but once we told them our names they took the time to hear what we had to say.

On my second day, I met a large group of volunteers at the United Farm

Workers' (UFW) Salinas office. It was early Saturday morning and the building was already full when I walked in. Coffee and *pan dulce* (sweet bread) were provided for the volunteers. After a series of short speeches, one by Simon Salinas and one by Art Hernandez, we were split up into groups and given maps of the area we would be covering. On this day, I was a little concerned because I would be walking my streets alone. As a trained outreach worker since 1998, I was always sure to never do outreach alone. Although this went against my better judgment, I remained quiet and proceeded along my route. After a while, I became less nervous; this was due to the fact that the streets were crawling with volunteers who had just been at the UFW building with me. The fear that I had felt shifted to pride as I saw people of all ages walking along the streets of East Salinas early on a Saturday in an effort to get out the vote.

My third and final day of volunteer work took place the Monday evening prior to the election. On this day, I worked with a young man and an older gentleman. We split up on each side of the street and distributed flyers to those on our list, making sure they knew where their polling place was. As with the days before, this effort went by smoothly and before I knew it the time had come to return to the UFW building. On the drive back from East Salinas, I was given an opportunity to talk to the other older volunteer. I asked him where he was from and how he ended up in Monterey County. He shared with me that in Mexico some of the people describe this county as the richest county in the world. With all the agriculture fields and year round crops the work was always available. I found this to be very interesting and was glad to have had the

opportunity meet him. My last day wrapped up back at the UFW building as I sat and organized lists of who still needed to be contacted for the next set of volunteers. As I drove home that day, I felt good that I had taken part in the effort. I was glad that I was active in the election, and no matter the outcome I felt successful in my efforts.

All of my work took place through collaboration with the United Farm Workers (UFW). What I learned about this group is that even when people have come together for the purpose of work a spirit of joy and sharing remains. I would definitely work with the UFW again. They seemed to foster a friendly environment and yet kept volunteers motivated by highlighting the importance of the work and validating everyone's efforts. I was glad to learn that a group of Latinos were so involved in political participation and that such mobilization efforts were taking place locally.

My idea of politics has stayed the same throughout this effort and as a result of this experience I will be more likely to participate politically in my community. The reason why is because I now believe this type of effort can make a difference. When I first began this project, I expected to encounter a lot of apathy. As a result of my experience, my view has changed. What I have learned is that the community that shows a low voter turnout in many past elections does indeed care about their own political participation. Latinos in East Salinas do care about politics and elections; this was visible in the number of volunteers involved in the beginning of the efforts and in those who joined the efforts after we had gone to their door. Women with babies who could not go far agreed to go door to door in their

apartment complexes. Others babysat so that their friends could volunteer. In a community known for gang violence, I witnessed a gathering of teens who were involved in the process of promoting political engagement. I went into this project with a slightly broken spirit and emerged enlightened and invigorated.

The last thing I will consider in this essay is the way my understanding of California history has helped me to make sense of my political participation. I have learned one of the themes in the history of voter disenfranchisement in California is the marginalization of certain groups. In being pushed aside, certain groups go underrepresented in the primary decision making process in this state's elections. This, in combination with programs, such as the Bracero Program, has created a situation where Latinos remain underrepresented in the state electorate. This provided a foundation on which I could decide where my efforts were needed. Based upon California history, my decision to work with mobilization efforts in East Salinas was valid and worthwhile.

Policy & Recommendation

During the course of my project I have encountered a few policies in place having to do with voting and elections. Some of the policies have to do with who can vote; some focus on when the last day someone can register to vote and still take place in upcoming elections; and some have to do with locations where people live counting as a valid residence in order to register within a county. The policy that I chose to focus on for this paper is a statewide election code, California code 2035, which established precincts and polling locations. This policy is enforced by our local elections department, the agency responsible

for all of our voting, polling, or ballot issues.

What this policy states is that in a county like Monterey, where the population exceeds 1,000,000 people, each precinct is not to go beyond 1,250 voters. This is important because polling locations are set up according to the number of precincts, and studies have shown that distance to polling locations has a direct impact on the rate of voter turnout. This is especially true for areas such as East Salinas due to the fact “distance imposes its heaviest burden on turnout in suburban precincts in the middle ranges of distance (2–5 miles)” (p. 471 Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2003). This is because, for the less accessible locations, some potential voters will conclude that the cost of getting to the polls outweighs the benefits of personal satisfaction stemming from political participation (Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2003). In an effort to address low voter turnout and the cost of each polling location, Monterey County has become a test county for all mail-in ballot elections.

This is an important step in addressing the issue of low voter turnout. Studies have shown that with the (competent) use of mail-in ballots, the result will be an increase in voter turnout in local elections that rivals high rates seen in presidential elections (Southwell & Burchett, 2000). The reason I make sure to use the term “competent” was made obvious in one of the most recent local elections in Monterey County. On November 11, 2003, the Monterey Herald reported that an undisclosed number of registered voters in Castroville were left out of the election due to the fact that they did not receive their ballots until the day after the election. What was so important about that particular election was that the ballot included individuals run-

ning for the water board. As we all know, water is a big issue in California and who determines its use in our communities can have a serious impact on allocation. The outcome of this election “oversight” has yet to be played out; however, according to the newspaper; the Registrar of Voters Tony Anchundo will ask the Monterey County district attorney and the U.S. attorney general to investigate.

One change I would like to see in California’s voting policy is the expansion of languages the ballot is written in. I make this recommendation based upon my own experience during my work on this project and also due to the recent historical recall election. I witnessed individuals not understanding clearly the differences between voting “Yes” or “No” on the recall. They needed an explanation, in the language they were comfortable with, as to why and how they could vote “No” and still vote for Cruz Bustamante, one of the candidates for Governor. In addition, on the day of the election, the news reported troubles taking place at the East Salinas polling location. The problem was that there was only one Spanish-speaking poll worker and a line of individuals who needed translation of the ballot in order to cast their vote. Although some of the individuals came with bilingual family members, the voting privacy issue prohibited them from helping one another. This resulted in an even longer voting process, which can impact a person’s decision to vote. My recommendation would be to place enough bilingual polling volunteers to assist in communities that need them.

I am aware that I am biased in wanting to see a change in the languages ballots are printed in. I am a Mexican-American and my grandfather is a natu-

ralized citizen who speaks Spanish as a first language. I also have assumptions about the world that lead me to think that by being more inclusive of different languages there is more of a chance of equality in the voting process. Voting laws and policies are very powerful documents, and either an individual must learn to work within them or they must strive for a position in the community that would allow them the opportunity to amend them.

Conclusion

Part of being historically informed is learning about the painful ethnohistories of the people who came before us. Sometimes, in researching the past, emotions make their way to the surface. For me, it happened while watching D. Anaya's documentary on *Los Californios* in one of my college classes. At first, I was overwhelmed by the intense feelings of anger and sadness evoked by the images and stories of the people who share the same ethnic background as I do. I expressed my emotions in class. Later, I was horrified at my open display of emotion and knew that this was just the sort of thing that kept people from listening to my point of view. Luckily, I came across an article by Michael Harkin, entitled "Feeling and Thinking in Memory and Forgetting: Toward an Ethnohistory of the Emotions." In this article, Harkin looks at the role of emotions in historical consciousness and ethnohistorical practice. He writes, "we cannot hope to present rich accounts of events unless we take note of the emotional valence of those events (p.262)." Harkin's article validates my response to Anaya's film by stating that emotions are "in part a reaction to, in part a commentary on the social actions of others

(p.265)." I realize that it is my own internalized racism that makes me feel embarrassed by my emotional display when I read that "what ever groups in American society have been the object of nativistic and racist attention of the moment...have been said to be too emotional (pp.265-266)." But, just when I thought I should give up hope, Harkins shares that, "the strength of the ethnohistorical method, involving face to face interactions with consultants as well as archival research, is precisely that it does allow for such empathy, which enriches our understanding of the past (p.268)."

For me, this project has done just that, enriched my understanding of the past. By exploring the history behind voter turnout rates today, I have unlearned the one-sided stories from the past and broadened my scope to include many perspectives in California's history. I have a better understanding of reasons people of color might not vote. It is through this understanding that a plan for change can be made.

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