

4-1-1984

## Mexican Americans and the Politics of Citizenship: the Case of El Paso, 1936

Mario T. Garcia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Garcia, Mario T.. "Mexican Americans and the Politics of Citizenship: the Case of El Paso, 1936." *New Mexico Historical Review* 59, 2 (1984). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol59/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu), [lsloane@salud.unm.edu](mailto:lsloane@salud.unm.edu), [sarahrk@unm.edu](mailto:sarahrk@unm.edu).

## MEXICAN AMERICANS AND THE POLITICS OF CITIZENSHIP: THE CASE OF EL PASO, 1936

MARIO T. GARCÍA

MEXICAN AMERICANS (those born or naturalized in the United States) commenced in the 1930s to assert themselves politically on a larger scale than ever before. Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals in earlier periods were by no means docile, but they faced different conditions that limited their influence on American politics. During the post-Mexican War years, for example, Mexican Americans (except in northern New Mexico) experienced displacement, isolation, and a lack of socialization concerning their rights as U.S. citizens, which prohibited effective mobilization against the imposition of second-class status.

The significant increase in the Mexican population of the Southwest during the early twentieth century resulting from mass immigration from Mexico did not substantially alter this weak position. Despite their large numbers and dominant roles in the Mexican communities, Mexican immigrants and exiles from the Revolution of 1910 saw themselves as only temporary sojourners awaiting return to *la patria*. Hence, their associations reflected continued interest in Mexican politics and not those of the United States. In addition, immigrants and exiles, retaining their Mexican citizenship, sought reintegration into Mexico and not assimilation into the United States. Their proximity to Mexico, of course, made this decision defensible. Immigrants and exiles, moreover, are more cautious about making political demands because of their vulnerable resident status.<sup>1</sup> These conditions retarding Americanization of Mexican-American politics, however, began to change by the 1930s when a new and expansive generation of U.S.-born Mexican

Americans came of age. These "new" Mexican Americans or members of the "Mexican-American generation" increasingly saw themselves as closer to U.S. conditions, and especially the more middle-class members of this generation sought full integration and achievement of the "American Dream."<sup>2</sup> A case study of Mexican-American leaders in El Paso and their reactions to an incident in 1936 in which officials attempted to reclassify all Mexicans as non-whites reveals the efforts of these Mexican-American leaders to influence local, regional, and national politics.

On 5 October 1936, the city registrar of El Paso, Alex K. Powell, and the city health officer, Dr. T. J. McCamant, announced that El Paso would commence classifying Mexicans as "colored" in birth and death records, although they had previously been recorded as "whites." Powell stated that he was following a recent ruling by the U.S. Bureau of Census calling for such a reclassification of Mexicans. In designating Mexicans as colored, Powell added, El Paso would be following Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. The main issue was high infant mortality rates, for placing Mexicans as colored would reduce El Paso's embarrassingly high death rates of "white" infants. Although Powell did not say so, this decision would also put the City-County Health Unit of El Paso in a more favorable light. After all, some officials for years had argued that Mexicans could not be taught hygiene.<sup>3</sup>

El Paso faced the irony of publicizing itself as a major southwestern health resort while experiencing serious health problems in impoverished Mexican sections of the city. This health problem had arisen at the turn of the century when the city emerged as a border metropolis, largely because of large-scale Mexican immigration. Mexicans composed more than half the city's population, which in 1930 totaled more than 100,000. Mexicans remained poor because employers desired cheap labor and because continued immigration of poor Mexicans provided that labor force. Consequently, health conditions in southside neighborhoods, where most Mexicans lived, left much to be desired. Besides a high infant mortality rate, diseases such as diphtheria, smallpox, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and influenza were not strangers in the barrios. In fact, two separate cities coexisted: Mexican south El Paso and Anglo north El Paso.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the poverty of much of the Mexican community, a significant and politically active leadership existed among the lower middle class, composed of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals. As leaders of community organizations—such as mutual benefit societies—or as lower level appointed or elected city and county officials, these persons functioned as a political pressure group to provide a degree of ethnic self-protection. The move to reclassify Mexicans, however, posed a serious challenge to their leadership.

Racial identity, of course, has always been a sensitive issue for Mexican Americans. Whether Mexicans are white or of a mixed (mestizo) race remains a personal, existential, and political question. Racial identity, moreover, in the United States where strong racial prejudices exist against people of color constitutes an additional dilemma for Mexican Americans. This ethnocentrism was especially true during the 1930s when increased anti-Mexican sentiment surfaced in a depressed southwestern economy. To avoid the racism that Anglos displayed toward Afro-Americans and toward Mexicans in such places as Texas, many Mexican Americans chose to describe themselves in the more neutral terms of “Latin American” or “Spanish American.” To escape further the stigma of racial inferiority, they also asserted that they were Caucasian. Some Mexican Americans, it should be noted, were descended from exiled conservative elites, who had carried across the border as part of their “cultural baggage” the Porfirian homage to white supremacy. Mexican Americans likewise understood that “nonwhite” could be translated to mean “noncitizen.” Finally, self-portraits of Mexican Americans, unfortunately, did not always coincide with how others saw them.<sup>5</sup>

Interpreting the reclassification effort as still another obstacle to their social integration, Mexican Americans in El Paso quickly launched protests. Local attorney Frank Galván, as president-general of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), declared that his organization, with more than 150 chapters in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, would mount a united effort against reclassification. George Rodríguez, another attorney, stated that a complaint would be made to the State Department in an effort to force the Bureau of the Census to alter its policy.



Cleofas Calleros, from the Cleofas Calleros Collection, Special Collections and Archives Department, University of Texas at El Paso.

He claimed that reclassification would create racial friction in El Paso and the Southwest and harm U.S.–Latin American relations. “The practice is contrary to all facts and classifications of anthropology and ethnology,” Rodríguez added; “Latin Americans belong in the white race.”<sup>6</sup> Cleofas Calleros, head of the immigration office of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in El Paso and one of the city’s foremost Mexican Americans, called for a citywide protest meeting of Mexicans, irrespective of citizenship, to discuss prevention of reclassification. Calleros reminded Mexicans that a year earlier an unsuccessful effort had been made to classify Mexicans as colored in Texas and to disenfranchise them from Democratic primaries. “I will spend my last cent to fight such a proposal,” Calleros emphatically announced; “classifying Spanish-speaking persons as colored is a violation of Texas Law. Mexicans as a race are red if they are Indians and white if they are not Indians.”<sup>7</sup>

Adding to the growing discontent, *El Continental*, El Paso’s most important Spanish-language newspaper, published an editorial on 7 October denouncing classification of Mexicans with “Negroes.” Considering Mexicans as colored, the newspaper believed, was as ridiculous as the Immigration Bureau’s use of the inaccurate term “raza Mexicana.” Mexicans no more belonged to a colored race than to a Mexican one. Only the ignorant confused race with nationality. *El Continental* encouraged all Mexicans in El Paso to resist the reclassification, not because one’s color was that important but because this move constituted an insult. Cultured and refined people did not need a light complexion. Those qualities were internal, not external. Only “barbarians” chose to feel superior to others by making distinctions of race and color.<sup>8</sup>

In letters to the *El Paso Herald-Post*, Mexican Americans further expressed their indignation. Pablo Delgado, an evangelist, pointed out that under this absurd reclassification the children of Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico would now be listed as “Negroes.” He added: “Then Uncle Sam can hang his face in shame before the civilized nations of the world.” Delgado believed all races represented “one blood” made by God, but that Mexicans could not be grouped with Blacks. “The Negroes that are here are the offspring of the Negroes brought for slavery to this country,” he concluded. “They are all branded and now baptized with the names

of 'Jones,' 'Smith,' 'Louises,' 'Washington,' 'Marthas,' 'Toms,' and 'Powells.' *NOT* a single Spanish name." M. A. Gómez, a veteran of World War I and president of the Mexican-American unit of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in El Paso, wrote that he had learned in school that the first white explorers and settlers in Texas had been Spaniards, the ancestors of Mexicans. Blaming racial prejudice against Mexicans on the recent influx of "white trash" into Texas, Gómez sarcastically exhorted Mexican Americans to take direct action against discrimination: "If a goodly number of you 'colored' Spanish-speaking American citizens will get out here every year, get your poll taxes and elect to office the kind of candidate who will hire registrars and others that will not class you as inferior to themselves, we may get some better place in the future."<sup>9</sup>

Resentful, Mexican-American community leaders mobilized to prohibit reclassification in El Paso. One day after the intended move was announced, Gómez stated that the Veterans of Foreign Wars had hired an attorney to seek an injunction in behalf of twenty-five Mexican Americans and that would name Powell and McCamant as defendants. Gómez and his colleagues stressed in their petition that all of the plaintiffs "are of the Spanish, Spanish-American, or Mexican race, and no one of said plaintiffs is a negro or a descendant of the negro race." If the reclassification went into effect, they warned, Mexican children might be prohibited from attending public schools as whites. Reclassification would also expose Mexicans to numerous other forms of *de jure* racial discrimination. Moreover, the Mexican Americans noted, reclassification was illegal since it violated a Texas law of 1925 stipulating that the term "colored" included only persons of "mixed blood descended from negro ancestry."<sup>10</sup>

Despite the protests, Powell and McCamant defended their decision and invited anyone who had complaints to discuss the matter. They insisted, however, that the reclassification of Mexicans as colored had not originated with them, but with Washington. "They'll have to appeal to the Bureau of Census or the Department of Commerce if they want the ruling changed," Dr. McCamant said of his critics. "We've been instructed by the government to make the classification—so there's nothing we can do about it." This decision would allow El Paso to compare its infant mortality rate with that of the other Texas cities that counted Mexicans as colored.

"The segregation would give El Paso a lower infant mortality rate," McCamant admitted.<sup>11</sup>

On 7 October the Sixty-Fifth District Court heard the Mexican American request for an injunction. Urging a large turnout for the hearing, Mexican-American leaders leafleted the barrios. "Ladies and Gentlemen," they appealed to residents, "come and defend our Sacred rights." To ensure a good audience, leaders provided free transportation to the courthouse from the south side.<sup>12</sup> At the hearing, attended by many Mexicans, Dr. McCamant, through his lawyer, again upheld the reclassification. However, this time, no doubt because of mounting reaction, McCamant announced that the reclassification would not go into effect. According to McCamant, neither he nor Powell had ever registered any Mexicans as colored and had no intention of doing so. Racial classification of births and deaths, he told the court, depended on the attending physician or midwife and not on the City-County Health Unit. McCamant further explained that the whole incident had been a "misunderstanding." He defensively concluded that from the standpoint of public health the segregated classification would be useful, but reiterated that it would not be employed in El Paso. With McCamant's retreat, the court dismissed the case, seeing no need for an injunction.<sup>13</sup> A relieved *Herald-Post* applauded the reversal and correctly noted that high infant mortality rate in El Paso could be decreased only by alleviating impoverished conditions and not by playing with statistics.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, Mexican Americans were offended by being considered colored not only because this view posed an infringement on their civil rights, but also because, unfortunately, some held racist views toward Afro-Americans. Living in a Texas that segregated Blacks in more obvious ways than Mexicans, and in an era still riddled with overt discrimination toward Blacks, including lynchings, Mexicans probably could not be isolated from the intimidation of such practices. Hoping to avoid similar racial discrimination, many Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals argued they were white so as to distinguish themselves from Afro-Americans.<sup>15</sup>

Successful in their opposition to reclassification, Mexican American leaders of El Paso encouraged more effective political organization among their people. Mexicans in El Paso had always organized politically and socially, but, as some now pointed out,



the attempt to reclassify Mexicans as colored indicated a need for a stronger political network to discourage discrimination. Calleros, writing in *El Continental*, told Mexicans to become more politically aggressive to thwart any infringement of their rights. He rejected the notion that ethnic defense was "undignified" or that it served only to make Anglos angry. "What we have to understand," Calleros lectured his readers, "is that we are just as much Americans as they are, and we are more American since we can trace our presence on this continent for many years or generations before the descendants of Plymouth Rock." If recent events had insulted Mexicans, Calleros believed they had only themselves to blame. He was amazed that in El Paso with 60,000 persons of Mexican descent—at least 15,000 of whom were eligible to vote—that only 2,500 to 3,000 bothered to pay their poll taxes. "Hopefully, we can get ten thousand to pay their poll tax," Calleros concluded, "and in the next election vote out our enemies."<sup>16</sup> Sharing Calleros's concern, one Mexican American, J. G. Escajeda, supported the call for better political organization among Mexican Americans. "Fellow Latins," he exhorted,

arouse ourselves to the fact that the only way to counteract un-American tendencies, do away with race prejudice, and get the rightful recognition for our people, is by placing men in office who do not look down on people of Latin race. Let us everyone pay our poll tax—as this is our only arms for defense—and in the coming City election let us elect into our public offices men who exalt above everything else the sovereignty of thoughtfulness, sympathy, and vision as against grosser impulses of mankind.<sup>17</sup>

Gradually realizing what was needed, Mexican-American community leaders astutely used the reclassification crisis to pursue greater political organization. Cleofas Calleros, as president of the *Sociedades Latino-Americanas*, criticized members of his organization, consisting of representatives from thirty-five Mexican societies, for being inactive even though the association had existed for two years. Calleros blamed this inactivity on the apathy of members, to division between Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, and to members overlooking the importance of civic involvement. The last few days, Calleros emphasized, revealed the

urgency of political unity, and he called on his colleagues to join new citywide organizational efforts.<sup>18</sup>

Building on these early efforts, Mexican American leaders within two weeks following the reclassification announcement organized *La Federación de Sociedades Latino-Americanas*, linking seven major Mexican associations composed of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals. These groups included the Veterans of Foreign Wars, *Sociedades Latino-Americanas*, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the United Citizens' Civic League, the Citizens' Democratic Civic Association, the Latin-American Townsend Club, and the *Comité Cívico Mexicano*. Officers were M. A. Gómez as president and Cleofas Calleros as vice-president. In a circular letter to members and potential members, the new federación stressed that its charter organizations had joined forces because of the attempt to reclassify Mexicans as colored and the dangerous but unsuccessful effort the previous year to exclude Mexicans from voting in Democratic primaries. These were but two recent cases of discrimination; there had been many others. To combat prejudice, the leaders of the federación announced that it would register Mexican-American voters to form a strong bloc in local politics. The group noted that some 60,000 Spanish-speaking persons resided in El Paso County, 85 percent being U.S. citizens "who can and should freely exercise their rights." Voting was the most important right. Federación leaders believed they could register at least 15,000 Mexican-American voters. Hence they concentrated on getting Mexican Americans to pay their poll taxes. If successful, the federación had no doubt that Anglo politicians would "sing another tune" when dealing with Mexicans.<sup>19</sup>

The federación also pledged to seek better job opportunities for young Mexicans who were being denied equal employment opportunities. It insisted that more Mexican Americans needed to be hired in public jobs. "Haven't you noticed," the federación pointed out, "that in not a single streetcar are there Mexican drivers? Neither will you find a telephone operator. This is because these jobs are reserved for 'whites,' and not for 'prietos' [dark-skinned]." Discrimination could be eradicated if Mexicans shed their apathy and united with the federación in a civic effort to change conditions in

El Paso. The federación added that in this movement no Mexican would be excluded regardless of citizenship.<sup>20</sup>

Hoping to obtain decisive political influence in local politics, the federación spent much of its energy on the poll tax campaign. It distributed information on who was eligible to vote and on how and where to pay poll taxes. Members of the federación personally contacted eligible voters who had not yet registered.<sup>21</sup> To motivate these potential voters, the federación appealed to their American patriotism and to their ethnic loyalty. The federación argued that one paid his poll tax because it was his civic duty. Voting guaranteed citizens their legal rights, including electing officials and having a voice in the education of their children. Registering also displayed one's pride in one's raza.<sup>22</sup> Complementing their voter registration drive, the federación also sponsored community meetings during the fall of 1936 to provide information on pertinent issues and to help organize voters for the city election the following year. At one assembly held on Thanksgiving Day in Liberty Hall, the foremost concert hall in El Paso, 2,500 persons attended.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the federación published a newspaper, *Actualidad*, to establish an information network. According to Calleros, who served as editor, *Actualidad* would aid in establishing organization and unity among Mexicans in El Paso and would help teach Mexicans how to be good citizens and residents of the city. Calleros told readers, especially those born and educated in the United States, that the newspaper would be in Spanish, in order to reach the widest possible audience, but that a simple grammar would be used so that all could understand. Appearing first on 18 November 1936, *Actualidad* alerted readers to the federación's existence and to its program of five main objectives. The federación sought to improve the social, cultural, and economic conditions of Mexicans in El Paso; and it would work to unify Mexicans as a way of achieving social progress. The federación would also do "cultural work" to educate the community since only through education could people learn to exercise their rights. Economically, the federación would seek to improve wages and working conditions. "Economic independence," *Actualidad* correctly observed, "is the foundation of all other forms of independence." Moreover, the federación looked

toward the eventual organization of a national association of Mexicans in the United States to labor for the betterment *de nuestra raza*. To fail to organize now, *Actualidad* warned, might result in the Mexican community's eventually losing its right to vote and the right to associate with "free people." Hence no Mexican should question whether now was the appropriate time to organize. To hesitate might be disastrous, and to allow "future generations [to] condemn our lack of civic duty."<sup>24</sup>

Through *Actualidad* the federación implored Mexican Americans to pay their poll taxes. It noted that city elections would be in February of 1937 and that Mexican Americans had several issues to settle. These issues included the way the incumbent administration had handled the reclassification issue, inferior schools in the barrios, unsatisfactory parks in South and East El Paso where the majority of Mexicans lived, and the deplorable streets in Mexican neighborhoods. *Actualidad* proposed that the polling booth be the logical place to commence these much-needed reforms.<sup>25</sup>

Besides a poll tax campaign and publishing *Actualidad*, the federación provided information about political candidates to Mexican-American voters. Prior to the February city elections it requested each of the three candidates for mayor to answer a questionnaire on their views about the Mexican community. "You may rest assured," the federación told the candidates, "that this is not a political trick or that any other than a civic interest is behind this desire for information." Eight questions were asked, including the following:

In referring to English-speaking persons or other persons of the Anglo-Saxon race, as differing from the Spanish-speaking persons, do you make the distinction, WHITE and MEXICAN?

Are you personally acquainted with the conditions now existing in the part of El Paso occupied by the people of the Spanish-speaking race?

Do you believe that the people in this section of the city are entitled to equal considerations as that of the balance of the city?

Do you know that certain public schools in the city have considerably more facilities than others?<sup>26</sup>

Wishing to acquire Mexican-American political support and aware

that good economics fostered amiable race relations, each of the mayoral candidates answered the questionnaire in favor of Mexican-American interests. Each indicated that he made no distinctions between the terms "White" and "Mexican." "I do not," affirmed A. B. Poe, one of the candidates; "I have always referred to them [Mexicans] as American citizens." He added: "I do not believe there is any businessman who has taken a greater interest in your people than I have." As evidence, Poe listed the number of Spanish-surnamed employees in his auto dealership, including skilled mechanics and salesmen.<sup>27</sup> The candidates likewise sought Mexican-American votes by placing political advertisements in *Actualidad*. In these, the candidates revealed their sensitivity to the reclassification issue and to the political response of Mexican Americans to the issue by condemning the attempt to classify Mexicans as colored. "We will do everything we can to prevent a repetition of this injustice," Dan Thompson and his aldermanic slate promised.<sup>28</sup> "I was the first public official to denounce the reclassification," the notice of A. B. Poe read.<sup>29</sup> And Marvin Harlan stated: "During the World War no one thought of classifying Latin Americans as people of color. Why now?"<sup>30</sup> While neither the federación nor *Actualidad* endorsed any candidate, and it is not certain that they succeeded in enrolling larger numbers of voters, still Mexican-American organizational efforts reminded the Anglo politicians of the political presence of Mexicans and perhaps more importantly of their potential influence on El Paso politics.

Encouraged by their successful local organization, Mexican-American leaders in El Paso boldly expanded their political network in an effort to affect public policy regionally and nationally. First of all, they initiated efforts in Washington, D.C., and in other parts of Texas to prevent reclassification of Mexicans. Calleros, as director of the El Paso Immigration Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, informed his national office in Washington about the reclassification, and his communication led to a protest to the Census Bureau.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, Calleros and other federación leaders, after raising funds in El Paso for a statewide campaign against reclassification, contacted other Mexican Americans in Texas and inquired about conditions in their cities.<sup>32</sup> From San Antonio, Alonso S. Perales, attorney and key political figure, responded that

their officials used three classifications: white, Mexican, and colored. "We have never registered our formal protest," explained Perales, "because we, persons of Mexican descent, regardless of citizenship, are very proud of our racial extraction and do not wish to convey the impression that we are ashamed to be called Mexicans."<sup>33</sup>

Perales and the LULAC council of San Antonio, however, issued a resolution on 14 October protesting "against the insult cast upon our race by the Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce." LULAC also sent a copy of the protest to Rep. Maury Maverick, San Antonio's delegate to Congress, and requested that he immediately investigate the matter with the Commerce Department "with a view of having persons of Mexican or Spanish extraction definitely and permanently classified as whites and not as a color."<sup>34</sup> One day later Maverick wrote to the director of the Bureau of the Census inquiring whether Mexicans had been reclassified as colored. If true, Maverick noted that Mexicans in Texas considered this action a "deadly insult." Such a classification, moreover, was inaccurate since Mexicans did not descend from Africans. "In the state of Texas the Mexican people have been citizens for 100 years"; the liberal Texas Democrat stressed, "they have gone to our Texas schools; they speak the English language like anyone else and are no different than, for instance, an Italian, a Roumanian, or a Hollander who settles in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, or in New York City." Maverick demanded a new classification and suggested that perhaps Mexicans could be listed as "other White—Mexican," if a special category were needed. But by no means should they be considered colored. "To classify these people here as 'colored,'" Maverick reiterated, "is to jumble them in as *Negroes*, which they are not and which naturally causes the most violent feelings."<sup>35</sup>

Pressured by Congressman Maverick as well as by Senator Denis Chavez of New Mexico, Rep. R. E. Thomason of El Paso, and Mexico's ambassador to the United States, the director of the Census Bureau and the secretary of commerce rescinded the reclassification of Mexicans. They blamed the controversy on an "error" the Division of Vital Statistics made in not following the established classification of the Bureau of Census that Mexicans were whites. In the future, both groups promised, Mexicans would be registered

in all categories as whites.<sup>36</sup> Informing Calleros of the good news, the director of the Bureau of Immigration of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in Washington congratulated Mexican-American leaders in El Paso for their prompt and effective protest. "It was a most important matter both to N.C.W.C and to the U.S. Government officials," he noted; "in fact, the State Department was up in arms when informed of this procedure by the various Vital Statistics offices in Texas. If permitted to go on, the action would practically have destroyed the President's 'good neighbor' program."<sup>37</sup>

Successful in helping to prevent the Census Bureau from re-classifying Mexicans, Mexican-American leaders in El Paso, in conjunction with their political allies in other locations, protested similar efforts by other public bodies. In November 1936, for example, the federación learned that the new Social Security forms included a statement reading: "If you are either white or Negro, place a check mark in the proper place. For other than white or Negro, write out color or race to which you belong in the space provided. Typical examples of other color classifications are: Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Filipino, etc."<sup>38</sup> The federación at once called on the Internal Revenue Service and the Treasury Department to stop this discriminatory classification. The federación reminded these Washington bureaucracies of the recent clarification on the correct listing of Mexicans. Moreover, in a letter to fellow Texan Vice-President John Nance Garner, leaders of the federación underlined the contradiction of the United States' pursuing a Good Neighbor Policy with Latin America and at the same time discriminating against Mexican Americans.<sup>39</sup> "Kindly immediately have forms stopped," Calleros wired Representative Thomason, "or have treasury department instruct every postmaster to delete the word Mexican."<sup>40</sup> Perales in San Antonio, having been informed of the Social Security forms by Calleros, notified Representative Maverick, who quickly protested.<sup>41</sup>

Rapid and effective protest by Mexican Americans and their supporters again led to officials expressing regret about the controversy and promising to classify Mexicans as whites in the future. Social Security officers explained that they had maintained Mexicans in the colored category because when their forms had been printed,

they had not been notified of the clarification of the Census Bureau. Yet with more than forty million forms already printed, the Social Security office insisted that they could not recall them. Still, they pledged that the error would not be repeated, and the commissioner of Internal Revenue suggested that Mexicans filling out the forms register as whites.<sup>42</sup> Federación leaders conducted additional satisfactory inquiries with the War Department, the federal old age pension system, and the Immigration and Naturalization Bureau. In each of these cases federal officials agreed to classify Mexicans as whites.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, however, Mexican-American response to the reclassification incidents of 1936 did not eradicate other institutionalized forms of discrimination, especially economic underdevelopment. Reform politics could only do so much. Still, the reclassification issue led to what appears to be a greater degree of protection for Mexican Americans in El Paso and elsewhere in Texas. Moreover, the development of a reform consciousness and the assertion of civil rights for Mexican Americans in the United States also represented an important forward step. Mexican Americans, primarily through their leadership, used the controversy to show Anglo leaders that Mexicans would not accept second-class citizenship. They gained this position not only through effective local organization, which succeeded in rescinding the reclassification of Mexicans as colored, but also by displaying an astute political awareness of pressure group politics and the importance of a regional and even national support system. Mexican Americans by the 1930s, while still closely tied to their Mexican cultural roots, desired political and economic integration in the United States and would not tolerate denial of full citizenship rights. Subordinate status was unacceptable to most Mexican Americans because, on the one hand, they had been raised in a Mexican cultural environment where respect for oneself and one's family was stressed, including standing up for one's rights, and, on the other, because they had become sufficiently assimilated through American schools to believe in an "American Dream" and in everyone's opportunity to obtain that goal if one worked hard. In short, Mexican and American traditions encouraged Mexican Americans to secure their civil rights. This possibility was especially noticeable for middle-class Mexican



Americans whose material conditions and wants complemented their personal and political idealism. Beginning in the the 1930s, leaders of an arising Mexican American middle-class forged the first significant Mexican civil rights movement in the United States—a history yet to be fully appreciated.

#### NOTES

I wish to thank the Center for Chicano Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for a faculty development grant in 1981 that facilitated research on this project. I am also indebted to Professors Carl Harris and Joel Williamson for their encouragement and helpful suggestions. Particular acknowledgment goes to Cesar Caballero and his staff at Special Collections, University of Texas, at El Paso Library.

1. For the post-Mexican War period and early Mexican immigration to the U.S., see, for example, Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in A Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Robert J. Rosenbaum, *Mexicano Resistance in the Southwest: "The Sacred Right of Self-Preservation"* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Arnoldo De León, *The Tejano Community, 1836-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Lawrence A. Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration to the United States 1897-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980); and Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976).

2. For further information on the "Mexican-American Generation," see Mario T. García, "Americans All: The Mexican-American Generation and the Politics of Wartime Los Angeles, 1941-1946" (unpublished paper); Carl Allsup, *The American G. I Forum: Origins and Evolutions* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, 1982); Edward Garza, "L. U. L. A. C." (M. A. thesis, Southwest Texas State Teachers College, 1951); Frances Jerome Woods, *Mexican Ethnic Leadership in San Antonio, Texas* (Washington, D.C. Catholic University Press, 1949); Alsonso S. Perales, *Are We Good Neighbors* (1948; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1974); and Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 299-349.

3. See clippings from *El Paso Herald-Post*, 5 October 1936; Holbert L. Dunn, M. D., chief statistician for Vital Statistics, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census to Arthur G. Wale, statistician, Houston Health Department, Washington, D.C., 21 August 1936; *El Paso Times*, 6 October 1936; and *Herald-Post*,

7 October 1936. All sources are located in the Cleofas Calleros Collection (CCC), MSS 933, box 28, folder 1, Special Collections, University of Texas at El Paso. All further references to Calleros Collection are to be found in MSS 933, box 28, folder 1.

4. García, *Desert Immigrants*.

5. For the Mexican identity problem, see, for example, Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove Press, 1961); Samuel Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962); and Henry C. Schmidt, *The Roots of Lo Mexicano: Self and Society in Mexican Thought, 1900–1934* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1978).

6. *Herald-Post*, 6 October 1936, CCC.

7. *El Continental* (El Paso), 6 October 1936, CCC. As early as 1930 efforts were made to exclude Mexican Americans from voting in Democratic Party primaries in Texas. In July 1930, the Travis County primary election committee adopted a resolution barring Mexican Americans from voting in Democratic Party primaries unless they could prove they were of “pure Castillian descent” and not of Indian descent. See *San Antonio Evening Express*, 25 July 1930, in Eleuterio Escobar Collection, Miscellaneous Folder-Newspaper, Rare Book Collection, Benson Latin American Library, University of Texas, Austin.

8. *El Continental*, 6 October 1936, CCC.

9. *Herald-Post*, 8 October 1936, CCC.

10. *Herald-Post*, 6 October 1936; M. A. Gómez to registrar, Houston Office of Vital Statistics, El Paso, 7 October 1936; M. A. Gómez to Jimmie Tafoya, El Paso, 7 October 1936; Tafoya to Gómez, San Antonio, 7 October 1936; Marguerite Cummins to Gómez, Fort Worth, 8 October 1936; and petition of M. A. Gómez, et al., to the District Court of El Paso, Sixty-Fifth Judicial District, all in CCC. In addition to Mexican Americans, Mexican nationals became distressed over the reclassification issue. For views from Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, see *Herald-Post*, 7–8 October 1936; *El Continental*, 11 October 1936, CCC. Recognizing that the incident might cause irreparable damage to Anglo-Mexican relations in a city dependent on Mexican labor and commerce with Mexico, some Anglo leaders also demurred; see *Herald-Post*, 7 October 1936; *El Continental*, 8 October 1936, CCC.

11. *Herald-Post*, 6 October 1936, CCC; see report by Cleofas Calleros to Bruce Mohler, National Catholic Welfare Conference, El Paso, 9 October 1936, CCC.

12. See copy of leaflet in CCC.

13. See copy of defense statement by McCamant and Powell in CCC; also *Herald-Post*, 8 October 1936 and *El Continental*, 7 October 1936, CCC.

14. *Herald-Post*, 8 October 1936, CCC.

15. *El Continental*, 20 October 1936, CC.

16. *El Continental*, 8–9 October 1936, CCC.

17. *Herald-Post*, 13 October 1936 and *El Continental*, 18 October 1936, CCC.

18. Calleros to Sociedades Latino-Americanas, El Paso, 10 October 1936, CCC.

19. Modesto Gómez, Cleofas Calleros, et al., to Residentes Latino-Americanos del Condado de El Paso, Texas, El Paso, 15 October 1936, CCC.
20. Gómez and Calleros to Residentes, 10 October 1936, CCC.
21. Gómez and Calleros to Estimable Votante, El Paso, 26 October 1936, CCC.
22. See federación document in CCC.
23. See the advertisement for "Conferencia En La Escuela Zavala," 17 December 1936 and Calleros to El Paso Merchants, El Paso, 3 December 1936, CCC.
24. *Actualidad*, 18 November 1936, CCC.
25. *Actualidad*, 18 November 1936; and 27 November, 11 December 1936, CCC.
26. Calleros to A. B. Poe, El Paso, 9 February 1937; Calleros to Marvin Harlan, El Paso, 9 February 1937; and Calleros to Dan Thompson, 9 February 1937, CCC.
27. See A. B. Poe's answers to questionnaire, and Poe to Calleros, El Paso, 12 February 1937, CCC.
28. *Actualidad*, 18 November 1936, CCC.
29. *Actualidad*, 26 November 1936, CCC.
30. *Actualidad*, 11 December 1936, CCC.
31. See telegram from Bruce M. Mohler to Calleros, Washington, D.C., 14 October 1936, CCC.
32. Gómez and Calleros to Residentes, El Paso, 8 October 1936, CCC.
33. Alonso S. Perales to Calleros, San Antonio, 10 October 1936, CCC.
34. See LULAC resolution of 14 October 1936, CCC.
35. Maury Maverick to Hon. Wm. L. Austin, San Antonio, 15 October 1936, CCC.
36. *Times*, 21 October 1936; telegram from Calleros to Thomason, El Paso, no date; *Noticiero Semanal* (Mexico City), 13 November 1936; telegram from Wm. L. Austin to Maury Maverick, Washington, D.C., 15 October 1936; telegrams from Mohler to Calleros, Washington, D.C., 16 October, 17 October 1936; and Austin to Joe T. Presswood, Washington, D.C., 20 October 1936, all in CCC.
37. Mohler to Calleros, Washington, D.C., 17 October 1936, CCC.
38. L. A. Velarde to Modesto A. Gómez, El Paso, November 1936, CCC.
39. See telegram from Calleros to Hon. R. E. Thomason, El Paso, 22 November 1936; Modesto A. Gómez, Servando I. Esquivel, and Cleofas Calleros to Hon. John Nance Garner, El Paso, 22 November 1936, CCC.
40. Telegram from Calleros to Thomason, El Paso, 22 November 1936, CCC.
41. Telegram from Calleros to Perales, El Paso, 22 November 1936, CCC.
42. See telegram from Kate George to Calleros, Washington, D.C., 25 November 1936; telegram from Social Security Board to Calleros, Washington, D.C., 27 November 1936; R. F. Evans, special supervisor, Social Security Board to Hon. R. E. Thomason, Washington, D.C., 2 December 1936, CCC.
43. Calleros to Mohler, El Paso, 1 December 1936; Mohler to Calleros, Washington, D.C., 15 February 1937; Calleros to Mohler, El Paso, 5 August 1937; and Mohler to Calleros, Washington, D.C., 7 August 1937, CCC.