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## Mexican-American Class Structure and Political Participation

### Cover Page Footnote

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# Mexican-American Class Structure and Political Participation

Jorge Chapa

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*This article examines the political attitudes and participation of Mexican-Americans in the context of Milton Gordon's assimilation theory and William Julius Wilson's analyses of bifurcated economic structures resulting in middle-class and lower- or underclass populations. For Gordon, civic assimilation was a step toward complete assimilation. After demonstrating that the Mexican-American population has not achieved parity with the Anglo population even when controlling for generational differences over five decades, the author specifically examines the political attitudes and practices of lower-class (high school dropouts) and middle-class (high school graduates) third-generation Mexican-Americans. The two class groups have similar attitudes about bilingual education and discrimination. The major differences lie in the rates of registration and voting. The similarity in attitudes held by Mexican-Americans is thought to reflect the fact that a large proportion of this population still faces structured disadvantages that are at odds with any notion of assimilation.*

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Despite the fact that much of the Mexican-origin population was born in the United States, almost all policy research and analysis of this group has focused on foreign-born Mexican immigrants, largely ignoring Mexican-Americans born here. This selective focus is generally based on the assumption that social problems among the Mexican-origin population are linked with immigration and, further, that U.S.-born Mexican-Americans are being incorporated or assimilated into American society to the same degree and in the same manner as earlier European immigrants. Indeed, faith in the idea of this inevitable progress has been so strong that past evidence of Mexican-Americans' not having achieved parity has been discounted with the assertion that they will do so in the future.<sup>1</sup>

A recent example of this type of thinking is evident in the work of Linda Chavez, whose *Out of the Barrio* is the most recent statement of the idea that Mexican-Americans and other Latinos are achieving socioeconomic parity. The policy implications of this issue are obvious. If Hispanics are really making steady progress toward full parity with other Americans, then there is no need for federal or state policies or programs to address these needs. Further, conservatives may suggest, as Chavez does, that government programs may actually impede or "derail" this natural progress.<sup>2</sup> If, on the other hand, Hispanics are not catching up with or are falling further behind other

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*“Another way to formulate the essential question behind this research is to ask whether the Chicano experience has more in common with the black experience of racial discrimination or with that of European assimilation. Asking ‘Are Chicanos assimilating?’ is not to prejudge the issue of the applicability of either paradigm. Instead, it is a way to gain perspective on the Chicano experience.”*

*— Jorge Chapa*

Americans, or even forming an underclass, then responsive policies would be much different from those which conservatives prescribe.

In an attempt to lay a factual basis for future policy analysis, I assess the validity of the claim that Chicanos are making progress or "catching up" with the Anglo majority. I do so in a manner consistent with the analytical principles put forward by Chavez. In recognition of the differences between recent immigrants and long-term residents, my statistics focus on those Mexican-Americans or Chicanos who have been in the United States for the longest time, namely, the U.S.-born Mexican-American children of two U.S.-born parents. This group is also known as the third and third-plus generation, since they are three or more generations removed from Mexican residence. The evidence strongly suggests that Chavez's claim that Mexican-origin Hispanics are indeed achieving educational and economic parity with Anglos is incorrect. In addition, I examine the political attitude and practices of middle- and lower-class Mexican-Americans.

American social thought has two paradigms for the process of incorporating new groups into the societal mainstream. The predominant one, the idea of immigrant assimilation, is based on the historical experience of several white European immigrant groups. The other major paradigm is based on the history of black racial subjugation. All would agree that the black experience until the time of large-scale black migration to the North was quite different from the European immigrant experience. Some researchers tended to see this migration as equivalent to that of European immigrants in that blacks subsequently began their assimilation process. Wilson argues that this clearly does not apply to blacks in the lower class. Rather than emulating the Europeans, the Mexican-American pattern of assimilation has been similar to that which William J. Wilson described for blacks: a well-educated middle class largely integrated into all aspects of the society and economy and a relatively uneducated, impoverished, and self-perpetuating lower class.<sup>3</sup>

Another way to formulate the essential question behind this research is to ask whether the Chicano experience has more in common with the black experience of racial discrimination or with that of European assimilation. Asking "Are Chicanos assimilating?" is not to prejudge the issue of the applicability of either paradigm. Instead, it is a way to gain perspective on the Chicano experience.

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### **William Wilson's View of the Black Underclass**

Wilson's basic argument is that class differences among U.S. blacks have grown to the extent that class rather than race is the major determinant of a black person's quality of life and life chances. Wilson further argues that the formation of a black middle class can be traced to the growth of corporations, an increase in government employment of blacks at levels commensurate with their education, government-mandated affirmative action programs, and other antidiscrimination legislation. The black underclass is a consequence of a legacy of racial discrimination and diminishing employment opportunities for relatively undereducated blacks.

The major economic changes that have shaped black class structure since World War II are the increased importance of high technology industries and a shift from the production of goods to services. The economic component of these changes includes "uneven economic growth, increasing technology and automation, industry relocation, and labor market segmentation."<sup>4</sup> These changes increase the education requirement for employment and diminish the demand for poorly educated workers with low skill levels.



Correspondingly, this has resulted in increased opportunities for educated blacks and vastly diminished openings for the undereducated lower class. Government-mandated antidiscrimination and affirmative action policies and programs have worked for the benefit of middle-class blacks but have done virtually nothing for the black underclass. Thus, these programs have only widened the gap in the black class structure. For the lower class, employment opportunities have diminished to such a large extent that its members are, to varying degrees, economically superfluous.<sup>5</sup>

There are two major implications of this decline in the significance of race. First, members of other races are now subject to the same economic conditions that created the black underclass. The underclass is not defined in terms of race, as can be seen in the following: "The situation of marginality and redundancy created by the modern industrial society deleteriously affects all the poor, regardless of race. Underclass whites, HispanoAmericans, and native Americans all are victims, to a greater or lesser degree, of class subordination under advanced capitalism."<sup>6</sup>

This observation suggests the basis of my research. The relationship of Wilson's book to my argument is my showing that Chicano class structure can be seen as split into a socially incorporated middle class and a socially segregated lower class. This split class structure is due to the same factors that Wilson uses to explain the change in the black class structure. A major difference between Chicano and black class structure is that the black lower class can be further divided into the working poor and the persistently poor underclass. The Chicano lower class, in contrast, consists almost entirely of working poor. There is not much evidence to indicate the existence of a Chicano underclass.

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### **Milton Gordon's Model of Assimilation**

To better understand the Chicano experience, a synthesis of various theorists of cultural and economic change must take place. Although the traditional model of assimilation as exemplified by Gordon's work is limited, it does provide a useful means of conceptualizing various aspects of assimilation. For Gordon, the assimilation process consisted of a sequence of stages that would lead to the next successive stage and eventually result in complete assimilation. The first stage, "structural assimilation," is the large-scale entrance of immigrants into cliques, clubs, and other social institutions of the host (American) society. This integration of social interactions leads to the second stage, "marital assimilation." The children of intermarriage tend to form an identity based mainly on the host society. For Gordon, this is "identificational assimilation," the third stage in the process. Since the former immigrants have integrated, intermarried, and identified with Americans, it is difficult for others to maintain prejudiced attitudes or discriminatory practices. The next steps are the disappearance of prejudice and discrimination — "attitude receptional" and "behavioral receptional" assimilation in Gordon's terms. These set the stage for "civic assimilation," namely, the absence of value and power conflict. The process ends in complete assimilation, the descendants of the immigrants having been absorbed and accepted into American society.<sup>7</sup>

Gordon's framework allows him and those who use it to speak about assimilation in specific and differentiated terms. For example, rather than saying Jews were or were not assimilated, Gordon could say that they were substantially acculturated, mostly assimilated civically, but still not assimilated in structural or identificational terms. These different components of assimilation could be evaluated for different groups and provide a

basis for analytic comparisons. This is a major and useful contribution.<sup>8</sup>

According to Gordon, the United States of twenty five years ago could best characterized as a society of structural pluralism rather than cultural pluralism. These plural structures are, in Gordon's terms, subsocieties. Ethnic groups live within a separate subsociety, interacting primarily with other group members. Structural pluralism, by maintaining distinct groups, makes prejudice and discrimination possible.

The maintenance of separate subsocieties is the structural basis for the maintenance of separate and different subcultures. True and total assimilation, as defined by the achievement of all seven types or stages of assimilation, occurs only after primary group structural assimilation. For Gordon, it is structural assimilation, not acculturation, that leads to complete assimilation in the sequence of stages. Structural assimilation *inevitably* leads to marital assimilation. A consequence of this amalgamation is the loss of a distinct ethnic identity, thus resulting in identificational assimilation. *Eventually*, prejudice and discrimination disappear, because members of the formerly distinct ethnic group can no longer be identified. All the previous steps or stages in the immigration process minimize value conflicts, and civic assimilation finishes the process.

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### Assimilation and Economic Mobility

How is assimilation related to class or economic status? This is the glaring gap in Gordon's theory, but it is rather simple to add an economic dimension to a social world composed of separate subsocieties. In addition to dividing the social whole on the basis of race or ethnicity, subsocieties cleave groups on the basis of class.<sup>9</sup> Much of what is commonly understood as assimilation is inextricably linked with middle-class status. Historically, most Mexican-Americans have been economically disadvantaged. Thus, those who are in the middle-class probably achieved that status as the result of recent economic mobility. I present evidence in this section to support my contention that middle-class Mexican-Americans are assimilating in most of the stages that comprise Gordon's model. I also supply data that support the contention that Mexican-Americans of lower-class status are not following this process. Instead, they show clear indications of reproducing a separate subsociety based on class and ethnicity. Furthermore, this is true even for Mexican-Americans who have been in the United States for many generations.

Separate subsocieties typically have separate subcultures. Simply maintaining an identity as a member of a separate group could be considered a defining aspect of a subculture. The history, affect, and emotions associated with membership in this group are certainly sufficient to define a subculture. This is particularly true for people who feel that they have suffered unjustly from disadvantage or discrimination. Alejandro Portes has argued that Chicanos will create and maintain a distinct and disaffected culture as long as they are not fully integrated into the economy. This is a situation of "ethnic-resilience" rather than assimilation.<sup>10</sup> The culture that arises in this situation is one that has a diffident stance toward mainstream middle-class society.

Rather than following the different steps leading toward complete assimilation, Chicanos, as a group, have not achieved educational or economic parity with Anglos. This situation has created and maintained a separate culture and subsociety. Furthermore, even the relatively small proportion of middle-class Chicanos who have



achieved socioeconomic parity and are following some of the steps toward assimilation continue to exhibit a set of political attitudes that reflect value and power conflicts with the American mainstream. Chicanos of different class groups generally have similar political attitudes. Although middle-class Chicanos usually show greater degrees of structural, marital, attitudinal, and behavioral receptional assimilation than lower-class Chicanos, both groups have similar political attitudes, which indicates that neither group is undergoing civic assimilation.

In fact, the established low rate of Chicano economic mobility and the possibility that this economic inequity may block or inhibit civic assimilation gives my research relevancy beyond theoretical concerns. The possibility that this situation may result in a large politically alienated or disaffected group is of concern to everyone. The heated public debate on laws and policies toward contemporary Mexican immigration reflects this perception in part. However, by focusing on Mexican immigrants rather than on the economic and political assimilation of U.S.-born Chicano descendants of these and previous Mexican immigrants, this debate has missed a very important part of the issue: Will the limited economic achievement of many Chicanos also limit their stake in the system?

Gordon defined civic assimilation as the absence of value and power conflicts, that is, situations in which immigrants do not raise political issues that are opposed by the members of the host society. Political alienation and disaffection can thus be defined as the opposite of civic assimilation and identified by the presence of conflicts over values and power. Gordon recognized that it is possible for groups to attain some aspects of assimilation without going through the whole sequence. For example, he believed that blacks were civically assimilated without being assimilated in other respects.<sup>11</sup> The history of black politics and protest in the past twenty-five years would make the claim that blacks have no value or power conflicts with the American mainstream laughable, but the grave and extreme degree of the conflicts make laughter impossible. We can expect that the different classes of blacks would also define different subsocieties and subcultures. In fact, Wilson's more recent work has developed the notion that a major factor in creation of the black underclass is its social isolation from middle-class blacks and mainstream, middle-class norms and values.<sup>12</sup>

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### **Concepts, Data, and Definitions**

The analysis in this section examines the similarities and differences in the political perceptions, attitudes, and actions of Chicanos of different classes and educational levels at one point in time, 1979. No one class schema can be expected to provide a completely accurate view of Chicano life chances. I have found that there are important differences in the life chances of adult Chicano high school dropouts compared with adult Chicano high school graduates.

I use these educationally based categories to define two Chicano class groups: adults who have finished high school and adult high school dropouts. Class distinctions grounded on traditional occupation-based categories are valid and apply to the same analysis.<sup>13</sup> The distinction between high school dropouts and high school graduates goes beyond earnings and reflects marked differences in life chances. It may more accurately reflect the distinction William Wilson tried to make between a middle class and the lower class and underclass than does the simple occupational classifications he used.<sup>14</sup> However, my purpose is to establish a preliminary perspective on what is relatively uncharted territory.



I simply use the distinction between high school dropouts and high school graduates as a preliminary means of quantifying different aspects of Milton Gordon's assimilation schema for Chicanos in relation to their economic and educational status. Therefore, I employ this rudimentary but conceptually valid class schema. It is justified on the grounds that the earnings and the life chances of Chicano dropouts are distinctly different from and worse than those of Chicanos who have a high school education or more.

One factor that confounds any attempt to determine the status or characteristics of the U.S. Mexican-origin population is the issue of immigrant status. Any credible analysis of Chicano economic mobility must at least distinguish between U.S.-born *Chicanos* and foreign-born *Mexicanos*. This follows from the fact that the concept of assimilation implies an intergenerational process. Any assessment of social or economic status that addresses the issue of assimilation and does not make this distinction is missing the point. It is preferable to further distinguish U.S.-born Chicanos by the number of generations they have resided in this country. In an attempt to avoid such confusion, the data I present on political attitudes pertain only to the third and third-plus generation. The reason for focusing on these is that most assimilation theorists expect the third generation to be largely or totally assimilated.<sup>15</sup> The nativity of an individual's parents was the basis for identifying different generations. I define the third generation as consisting of the U.S.-born children of U.S.-born parents. This category includes all those who have been in this country for more than three generations as well.

The analyses were drawn from three sources: Census Public Use Microdata files for 1940–1970, the November 1979 and November 1989 Current Population Surveys (CPS), and the 1979 National Chicano Survey. I use the census and CPS data to show the attainments of Chicanos in comparison with other racial/ethnic groups. Chicanos are U.S.-born people of Mexican descent. Anglos are defined as white non-Hispanics. Blacks and Asians are also non-Hispanics of those two racial groups.<sup>16</sup> The data from the 1979 National Chicano Survey are used to compare and contrast the political attitudes, practices, and beliefs of various Chicano class groups.

### ***Generational Differences: The United States in 1989***

Table 1 presents the average number of years of school completed. The figures for the Mexican-origin population show a large difference between first-generation immigrants and second- or third-generation Chicanos. The average educational level of third-generation Chicanos is 11.1 years — substantially lower than the 12.7 years for third-generation Anglos. It is also lower than the level attained by third-generation blacks.

Another important education indicator is the proportion of the work-age population who have less than a high school education. While I have followed the common convention of calling them high school dropouts, this label may be misleading because many individuals in this category have less than an eighth-grade education and did not even start high school. The third panel in Table 2 lists the percentage or proportion of these people in each generational group. The dropout pattern for Chicanos is similar to that shown in the years of school completed — substantially higher educational levels for third-generation Chicanos compared with the first-generation immigrants and substantially lower levels for third-generation Chicanos compared with third-generation Anglos. The dropout level for third-generation Chicanos is slightly higher than that for third-generation blacks. For both groups, the dropout proportions are much higher than they are for Anglos.

Before discussing the significance of these figures, one must address the following

Table 1a

	First Generation	Second Generation	Third Generation
Chicano	8.0	10.5	11.1
Anglo	12.4	11.8	12.7
Black	12.4	12.1	11.5

Table 1b

	First Generation	Second Generation	Third Generation
Chicano	73%	49%	40%
Anglo	24%	24%	21%
Black	23%	34%	37%

Source: November 1989 Current Population Survey.

question: Why use comparisons relative to Anglo achievement? There are two reasons for using Anglos as the standard of comparison: first, in the United States, socioeconomic parity with Anglos is the principal way to gauge social equity, and second, Anglos are the majority population and typically have the highest levels of educational and economic attainment. Almost all concerns about parity, equality, and assimilation are defined in comparison with Anglos.

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 strongly suggest that Chicanos have not achieved parity with Anglos in terms of such commonly used measures of well-being as educational attainment. Even third-generation Chicanos as a whole have low rates of educational attainment and high rates of dropping out. However, some Chicanos are achieving higher educational levels. My other research has shown that these middle-class Chicanos, roughly equivalent to the adult Chicanos who at least have finished high school, are also achieving economic parity with Anglos and are showing many aspects of assimilation in Gordon's schema. In contrast, the lower-class Chicanos are maintaining a socially separate subsociety. Furthermore, the differences between Chicanos and Anglos have persisted over time. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that the gap between the educational attainment of third-generation Mexican-Americans and third-generation Anglos has widened since 1960 and remained about the same since then. Chicanos with low levels of education represent a large and persistent feature of the Chicano class distribution. The balance of this section compares and contrasts the dimension of civic assimilation for these two Chicano class groups.

Table 2

**Measures of Structural and Marital Assimilation for High School Dropouts and High School Graduates, United States, 1979**

	High School Dropouts	High School Graduates+
All or most friends are of Mexican descent.	80%	60%
All or most of your children's friends were of Mexican descent.	70%	43%
All or most of your neighbors are of Mexican descent.	59%	38%
Have few or no contacts with Anglos.	34%	11%
Spouse is not of Mexican descent.	14%	34%
Would prefer that child marry someone of Mexican descent.	60%	41%
Children's spouses not of Mexican descent.	19%	50%

Source: 1979 National Chicano Survey.

Figure 1

**Educational Attainment, Third-Generation Mexican-Americans and Anglos, Ages 25-64, United States, 1940-1989**

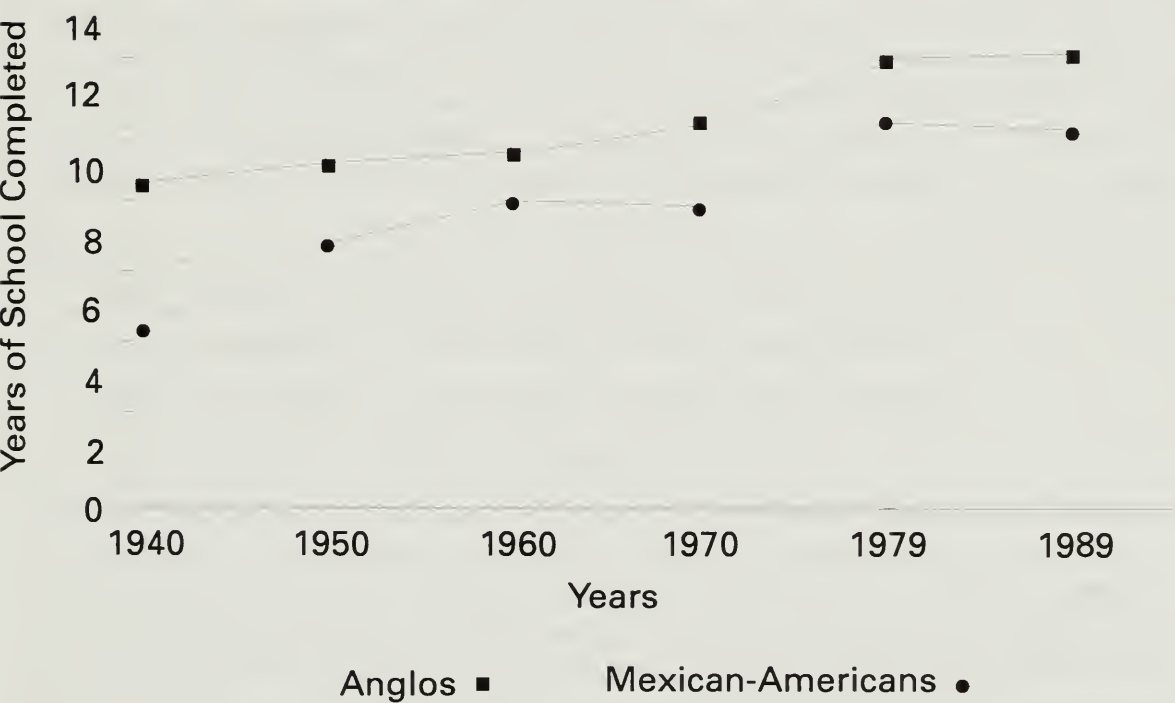




Figure 2

**Relative Educational Attainment, Third-Generation Mexican-Americans and Anglos, Ages 25–64, United States, 1940–1989**



***Chicano Political Attitudes, Beliefs, and Civic Assimilation***

Civic assimilation as outlined by Gordon can cover an extremely wide range of topics. He defines civic assimilation as the absence of value and power conflicts in which the immigrant group raises political issues that are opposed by members of the host society. Gordon's discussion of this aspect of assimilation is brief. He does not present examples that serve as a guide to his intended meaning of civic assimilation. Some Chicanos have recently supported a wide range of unpopular issues. Political separatism, that is, the creation of a separate nation-state or country for Chicanos, along with the advocacy of socialism, communism, or political violence must lie on one extreme of this range. These values would surely be opposed by almost all members of the host society and, undoubtedly, most Chicanos as well.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Chicanos who espouse these beliefs are not civically assimilated.

Many issues and actions on the political agenda of some Chicanos are more difficult to categorize on the basis of Gordon's definition. For example, supporters of a protest demonstration or a product boycott are in conflict with some members of the majority, host population, but some or many may see these actions as legitimate aspects of participatory democracy. The same is true of efforts to support affirmative action or bilingual education. Chicano support of bilingual education has been interpreted in several ways. Some Anglos and Chicanos see it as forming the linguistic basis of a separate nation. However, most supporters see it, at least in part, as a means of providing better education for their children. Some Chicano support for bilingual education is also motivated by the desire to legitimate and preserve Chicano culture.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it is impossible to interpret unambiguously support for bilingual education as either civic assimilation or its opposite. The same is true of a number of similar issues.

Table 3

**Percentage of Third- and Third-Plus-Generation Chicanos  
Agreeing with Questions Regarding  
Political Attitudes, High School Dropouts and High School Graduates  
United States, 1979**

	High School Dropouts	High School Graduates+
Demonstrate or protest against an unfair policy.	69%	70%
Boycott goods.	43%	53%
Support bilingual education.	94%	88%
Pressure employers to hire more Chicanos.	80%	66% <sup>a</sup>

Source: 1979 National Chicano Survey.

<sup>a</sup>Class differences significant at the 95% confidence level.

The figures in Table 3 represent efforts to determine attitudes on issues that have recently been or still are important elements of Chicano politics. They reflect the responses to various questions in the National Chicano Survey regarding attitudes regarding protests or demonstrations, consumer boycotts, bilingual education, and pressuring employers. The responses of Chicanos of both groups were statistically indistinguishable for three out of four of these. Only on the item regarding the desirability of pressuring employers to hire more Chicanos do we see any statistically significant difference. Among the dropouts, 80 percent agreed with this statement compared with 66 percent of the graduates. This difference is significant at the 99 percent confidence level. Still, while this difference is large and significant, the two groups are not diametric opposites. The question also presents an ambiguity between the end, hiring more Chicanos, and the means, pressuring employers. While we do not have the data to distinguish between these alternative interpretations, it is possible that the two groups may be in virtual agreement on the goal of such action, as they are on the other items, but disagree on the means.

The conclusions which can be drawn from this discussion are that, generally, a high proportion of Chicanos of both class groups support the issues that have been central to the Chicano political agenda. This high level of support is far more important than the usually small variation between classes. Large, marked differences between classes and educational groups in structural, marital, and identificational assimilation are not associated with similar class differences in political attitudes or civic assimilation. These findings are different from those expected from Gordon's framework and are consistent with the modified version of Portes and Bach's theory of resilient ethnicity.

***Perceptions of Prejudice and Discrimination***

Unlike the other types or aspects of assimilation in Gordon's model, those dealing with prejudice and discrimination are properties of the host society rather than the assimilating immigrant group. This is reflected in Gordon's rather awkward labels for these concepts. In his terminology, attitude receptional assimilation means the absence of prejudice, and behavioral receptional assimilation means the absence of discriminatory behavior of the hosts toward the migrant groups. A moment's reflection suggests that

Table 4

**Percentage of Third- and Third-Plus-Generation Chicanos  
Agreeing with Questions Regarding  
Perceptions of Prejudice and Discrimination, High School Dropouts  
and High School Graduates, United States, 1979**

	High School Dropouts	High School Graduates+
Police respect Chicanos less than Anglos.	66%	55%
Some companies will not hire Chicanos.	52%	55%
Chicanos have to work harder to get ahead.	84%	75%
Chicanos face a lot of discrimination in the United States.	33%	33%

Source: 1979 National Chicano Survey.

prejudice and discrimination can be fully understood only by examining the attitudes and behaviors of members of the host society toward the migrant group. After going through cultural, structural, marital, and identificational assimilation, it is difficult for former immigrants to sustain prejudice and discrimination because they cannot be distinguished from the host. To complete the logic of the argument, Gordon believes that prejudice is the natural, inevitable human reaction to a group that remains distinct and unassimilated.<sup>19</sup>

Given these considerations, the complete study of attitudinal and behavioral receptional assimilation of U.S. Chicanos would have to include all Americans. This is beyond my capabilities and the scope of most research on this topic. I have to follow the precedent found in the research literature and limit my study to Chicanos' perceptions of prejudice and discrimination rather than the prejudicial sentiments and discriminatory actions toward Chicanos that may or may not exist in the general population. It is important to point out that while Gordon emphasizes the attitudes and actions of the hosts as key characteristics of these types of assimilation, in his framework the perceptions of prejudice and discrimination should parallel their actual occurrence.

Portes and Bach deal with perceptions of prejudice and discrimination directly, examining two opposing perspectives. In their formulation, Gordon's assimilationist perspective implies that higher degrees of assimilation imply more knowledge of American society, more favorable attitudes toward it, and fewer perceptions of prejudice and discrimination. Their alternative, the conflict or ethnic-resilience perspective, posits that higher degrees of assimilation and more knowledge of American society make Mexican migrants aware of "their real social position and [that they] are exposed to prejudice and discrimination."<sup>20</sup> These formulations guide my own analysis.

Table 4 lists the responses of the third- and third-plus-generation National Chicano Survey respondents to questions intended to determine their perceptions of prejudice and discrimination. Note that these do not ask whether an individual thinks he or she has experienced prejudice or discrimination. Instead, they ask if an individual Chicano feels that people of Mexican descent as a group have been the victims of prejudice or discrimination.

If the police do not respect Chicanos as much as Anglos, then this may be a matter of



either prejudice or discrimination, or both. The responses to a question regarding this statement show that 66 percent of Chicano dropouts, compared with 55 percent of the graduates, agree with it. While notable, the difference between the two groups is not significant.

Other items reported in Table 4 refer to perceived employment discrimination. A little more than half of each group agree with the statement that some companies do not hire people just because they are of Mexican descent. The proportions are similar in each group. A much higher proportion of each group agree, however, that people of Mexican descent do have to work harder to get ahead. Again, the differences between the two groups are not significant. The type of employment discrimination perceived by Chicanos is not an overt bar to employment but a more subtle hindrance to advancement.

Another question elicits the perception of discrimination in general. A third of each group believes that people of Mexican descent face a lot of discrimination in the United States. The proportions of those who think that such people face some discrimination, versus little or none, vary enough to make the overall distribution between the two groups distinct and significantly different. It is surprising that the proportion of dropouts who believe that Chicanos experience little or no discrimination is much greater than the proportion among high school graduates.

Insofar as these questions reflect perceptions of prejudice and discrimination, the expectations of assimilation paradigm are not supported. Middle-class Chicanos who have gone through the prior stages of assimilation are maintaining a stance that is arguably contrary to civic assimilation. The evidence here does not directly support the acceptance of Portes and Bach's formulation either, but it does support a reasonable modification of it. Portes and Bach's work focuses on first-generation Mexican immigrants. In their model, the factor that increases the sensitivity of the upwardly mobile migrants to prejudice and discrimination is their increased knowledge of and familiarity with the workings of American society. It is quite plausible to suppose that all third-generation Chicanos have a high degree of such knowledge and familiarity and should have roughly similar high perceptions of prejudice and discrimination. This is precisely the general result of the data presented thus far.

These results are far from conclusive, but they are consistent with and supportive of the modification of the ethnic-resilience framework necessary to account for the differences between Mexican immigrants and third-generation Chicanos. I acknowledge the fact that responses to survey questions about perceptions of prejudice and discrimination are more equivocal than responses to questions about age, sex, and education. Any analysis of these questions is subject to the same caveats and qualifications as any other surveys, and arguably, any other interpretations of verbal communications.

### ***Differences in Political Practices***

The main area in which we can expect to find differences between these different class groupings of Chicanos is that of political practices. The literature on registration and voting is replete with instances showing that class and educational differences are reflected in differences in rates of political participation.

The data in Table 5 confirm the overall findings so far that the Chicanos of these two groups have similar political beliefs and the expectation that they have different rates of participation. Virtually identical and very high proportions of both groups agree that supporting a candidate and expressing individual opinions by voting are good things

Table 5

**Percentage of Third- and Third-Plus-Generation Chicanos Agreeing with Questions Regarding Political Practices  
High School Dropouts and High School Graduates, United States, 1979**

	High School Dropouts	High School Graduates+
Get Chicanos to vote for a good candidate.	89%	88%
Express opinion by voting	97%	96%
Voted in last presidential election.	45%	59% <sup>a</sup>
Registered to vote.	51%	63% <sup>a</sup>

Source: 1979 National Chicano Survey.

<sup>a</sup>Class differences significant at the 95% confidence level.

to do, as indicated by the responses to the first two listed in Table 5. The fact that socioeconomic differences are associated with different rates of participation is well known.<sup>21</sup> The data presented here are consistent with the universal finding that better-educated Americans have higher registration and participation rates than those with lower levels. A higher proportion of Chicano high school graduates are registered to vote and have voted than high school dropouts.

It seems that the only clear distinction between lower- and middle-class Chicanos is in the different rates of electoral participation. The political attitudes and beliefs of both class groups show similarly high levels of support for Chicano issues and similar perceptions of prejudice and discrimination.

**Discussion**

The foregoing research points to the following elaborations of the two theoretical paradigms that have guided this work. The first is that of Gordon's framework, the fact that middle-class Chicanos are structurally, maritally, and identificationally assimilated yet still perceive levels of prejudice and discrimination. That they avow support of Chicano political issues and actions which are similar to the less assimilated lower-class and blue-collar Chicanos suggests that a literal interpretation of his theory is wrong. Insofar as my analysis of prejudice, discrimination, and civic assimilation shows that in these respects middle-class Chicanos have not assimilated, it does not appear to be the case that complete assimilation necessarily follows structural assimilation. The comparison of political attitudes and perceptions of discrimination between high school graduates and high school dropouts showed a surprising overall correspondence between these two groups.

The facts suggest that the continued existence of a large group of disadvantaged Chicanos perpetuates perceptions of prejudice and discrimination and engenders the support of pro-Chicano issues among the middle-class Chicanos who are otherwise integrated into the social and economic mainstream. These findings, consistent with Portes and Bach's resilient-ethnicity arguments, are expanded to apply directly to the third-generation Chicanos examined here. My findings suggest that these successful Chicanos will have their sentiments shaped by the large number of less successful Chicanos



who fit explicitly into the assumptions of this paradigm regarding the lower socioeconomic status of Chicanos.

The larger context in which these findings should be read is that a large part of the Chicano population is not achieving parity with Anglos. By this I mean that a substantial portion of third-generation Chicanos have educational levels that have shown no indication of converging with Anglo levels, and their earnings and occupational status have decreased in comparison with Anglos. It also means that a large group of economically disadvantaged Chicanos is maintaining a separate social structure. What is the connection between low educational attainment, economic disadvantage, and the maintenance of a nonassimilative culture and social structure? Low educational attainment has gone hand in hand with low occupational status. Chicanos with less than a high school education get lower-level jobs and lower wages. Chicanos with lower-class and blue-collar jobs have children who get less education and are much more likely to live in a structurally segregated society with a subculture that is different from Anglo culture.<sup>22</sup> We have every reason to expect this to be reflected in the political attitudes and beliefs of the Chicanos who experience these conditions. The surprising result of the research presented here is that the middle-class Chicanos who have achieved parity with Anglos have political attitudes and beliefs similar to the lower-class Chicanos who have not.

These tentative findings have several implications for Chicano politics. First, there are issues that appeal to Chicanos across class lines. There are high degrees of support for bilingual education and participation in protests and demonstrations. Second, there is a sentiment shared across class lines that Chicanos are subject to disadvantages and discrimination on the job, by police, and in other spheres of their lives. These attitudes could be the basis of a political campaign targeted at Chicanos. The common support for Chicano issues and common attitudes about the relatively disadvantaged status of Chicanos are indications that attitudinal receptional, behavioral receptional, and civic assimilation have not yet occurred in either class group. Finally, any electoral campaign striving to get out the Chicano vote will be more successful among middle-class rather than lower-class Chicanos. 🐼

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## Notes

1. See Leo Grebler, J. Moore, and R. Guzman, *The Mexican-American People* (New York: Free Press, 1970).
2. Linda Chavez, *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
3. William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also Jorge Chapa, "The Increasing Significance of Class: Class, Culture, and Mexican-American Assimilation," Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1988, and "The Question of Mexican-American Assimilation," Austin, *Public Affairs Comment*, Spring 1989.
4. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*, 153–154.
5. Ibid., 89–109.



6. Ibid., 154.
7. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 68–72 and passim.
8. There is a major omission in this conceptual framework; it does not include a notion of economic assimilation or economic mobility. The term “structural assimilation” has often been used by others to mean economic mobility, but it is clear that for Gordon it has a social rather than an economic meaning.
9. This idea is implicit in Gordon’s notion of an “ethclass,” but he mentions this term and does not fully incorporate it into his thinking. Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers* (New York: Free Press, 1962), explicitly develops a link between economic mobility and social-structural assimilation.
10. This line of argument is evident in a number of works by Alejandro Portes and various co-authors. A fully developed theoretical and empirical development of this model can be found in Portes and Robert Bach, *Latin Journey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
11. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, 81–82.
12. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.
13. Ibid.
14. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*, ix–xi, 156–161.
15. See David Feathermen and Robert Hauser, *Opportunity and Change* (New York: Free Press, 1978), and Lisa Neidert and Reynolds Farley, “Assimilation in the United States,” *American Sociological Review* 50, no. 6 (December 1985).
16. Carlos H. Arce, *Mexican Origin People in the United States: Codebook for the 1979 Mexican-American Survey* (Ann Arbor: Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1980[?]).
17. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 212–217, and Martin Sanchez-Jankowski, *City Bound* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 77–122 and passim.
18. Rodolfo de la Garza, “As American as Tamale Pie,” in *Mexican-Americans in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Walker Connor (Washington: Urban Institute Press, 1986). For a slightly different interpretation, see Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., “Let All of Them Take Heed”: *Mexican-Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910–1981* (Austin: University of Texas, Center for Mexican-American Studies, 1987).
19. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, 233–239.
20. Portes and Bach, *Latin Journey*, 282–288.
21. See, for example, Ray Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
22. Chapa, “The Increasing Significance of Class.”