

Mexican Americans

New guys on the block.

BY JUAN R. RANGEL & PETER SKERRY

We are two Americans with different family histories whose paths converged when we got involved with one of the nation's largest Hispanic charter school operators. At the peak of our efforts a couple of years ago, the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) Charter School Network enrolled more than 7,600 mostly Mexican-origin students in K-12 educational programs across Chicago.

Given our longstanding preoccupation with the challenges facing Mexican Americans, we were dismayed by Donald Trump's provocative campaign rhetoric. But as political realists, we were also sobered by his words, because they highlighted the Mexican-American community's lack of influence and power.

We also recognize the basis of President Trump's popularity. For several years now, millions of Americans have felt financially squeezed and culturally marginalized by business and political elites who have refused to give any credence or legitimacy to popular anxieties aroused by a historic wave of unskilled immigrants. Determined to ignore the inevitable problems

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associated with any such population movement, and often blinded by self-interest, these elites have refused to view this influx as anything other than a blessing to America's culture and a boon to the economy.



Mexican Americans celebrate their swearing-in as U.S. citizens in Phoenix, July 4, 2007.

We are also mindful of the provocative, often insulting, and occasionally threatening rhetoric of Mexican-American leaders seeking to make racialized claims against American society. In effect, these leaders have encouraged Hispanics not just to identify with their brown skin but also to develop *thin* skins. Not surprisingly, these same leaders have seized on Trump's rhetoric as further evidence of Mexican Americans' status as an aggrieved and victimized minority. And so, the struggle continues!

But there is an alternative view. As another immigrant, Mr. Dooley (Finley Peter Dunne's fictional Irish bartender), taught generations of Americans, "Politics ain't beanbag." Or as political scientist James Q. Wilson similarly noted, "Policymaking in the United States is . . . like a barroom brawl." To be sure, immigrants have at times been targeted by xenophobes and nativists. But just as often, they have joined the brawl as active participants in fierce economic and political competition with other immigrants, not to mention former slaves and their descendants. This competition has seldom, if ever, been completely open and fair. But like the descendants of other immigrants, we recognize that the United States has offered greater opportunities to us and our families than were available in the lands of our forebears—whether Mexico or Ireland.

So now with Donald Trump in office, we see an opportunity for Mexican-American and Hispanic leaders generally to respond to his challenge. In the months ahead, we expect these leaders to articulate the anxieties as well as the needs of their people. We similarly anticipate their pointing to the contributions Mexican Americans have made to the nation. Less likely, though much needed, would be these leaders' encouraging their people to acknowledge the sacrifices and contributions of their fellow Americans—many of whom have their own immigrant histories.

Granted, even before Donald Trump appeared on the political stage, the context was not promising. The United States has for some time now been home to an unprecedented 11 million undocumented (or, if you will, illegal) immigrants, more than half of whom are from Mexico. Moreover, many of those arriving in recent decades have not intended to remain. Grandparents and even

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parents continue to dream of one day returning “home.” Yet as indicated by their steadily increasing numbers, many Mexican migrants end up putting down roots here, often for the simple reason that their offspring are Americans—socially and culturally, if not always legally. Nevertheless, proximity to Mexico helps fuel continued indecision, resulting in the transiency and instability characterizing many barrio neighborhoods.

This is one reason why Mexican migrants struggle to learn English. To be sure, their efforts likely reflect less civic duty or pride than personal ambition—or the need to exert parental authority over English-speaking children. Either way, we don’t do much to help them. Meanwhile, programs such as bilingual education and bilingual ballots send quite different signals. Then, too, Mexicans typically want to hold on to some of the culture and language of their homeland. Much of this is familiar from earlier waves of immigrants in our history.

Nevertheless, in a 2013 study for the Manhattan Institute, Duke economist Jacob Vigdor reports that assimilation rates for Mexicans are substantially lower than for other immigrants today.

We are not surprised. Mexican-American leaders have long rejected the goal of assimilation, mistakenly arguing that it requires complete abandonment of their people’s heritage. The truth is, assimilation *does* involve what Norman Podhoretz called “the brutal bargain”: not only the hard work and sacrifice necessary to take advantage of opportunities, but also certain painful if not total adjustments in social and cultural values. For more than a generation, Mexican-American leaders have encouraged their people to avoid this difficult path and instead lay claim to the American dream as an oppressed racial minority whose long-standing grievances entitle them to special privileges and protections.

By contrast, we believe that the path to material success and political

power for Mexican Americans lies in understanding that theirs is only the most recent chapter in a challenging but nonetheless rewarding immigrant assimilation story, and that the best way to claim full ownership as stakeholders in America is not to cast themselves as an oppressed minority but to understand that they are—sometimes literally—the new guys on the block.

We learned this lesson working with the charter schools network. As UNO renovated or built facilities for 16 schools, we sometimes encountered opposition and hostility, especially in neighborhoods where Mexican immigrants had been displacing aging white-ethnic homeowners. But instead of accusing such neighbors of racism, denouncing them to the media, or threatening them with litigation, we opted to listen to their concerns. We looked past their sometimes annoying or even offensive complaints and acknowledged that our students and their families were newcomers. And we sought opportunities

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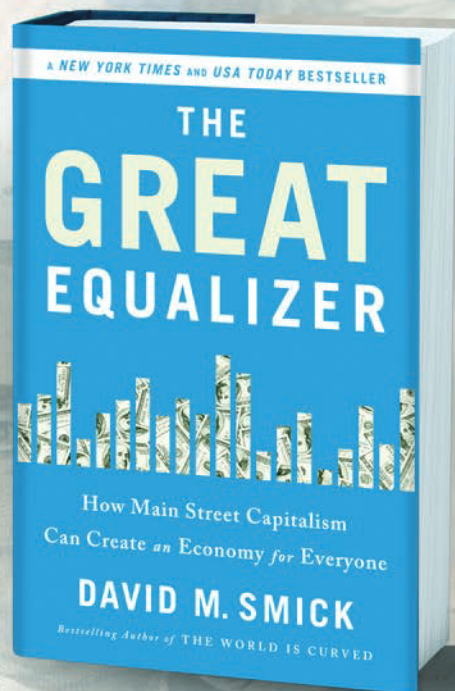
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to make the longer-term residents feel part of what we were trying to do. We expressed our shared concerns about youth gangs and sought input about what to do about them. We invited long-established neighborhood associations to hold their meetings in our buildings—and in some cases, to help us name our new schools.

Some years ago the African-American political scientist Charles Hamilton had a critical insight. In the wake of 1960s protest politics, he noted the tendency of minority leaders increasingly to seek out plaintiffs for litigation within the sedate confines of the judicial system, as opposed to developing precinct captains in the rough-and-tumble of electoral politics.

Decades later, Hamilton has proved to be prescient, if not precise. For we're all plaintiffs now. But we're posturing in the court of public opinion, where we've grown accustomed to asserting "rights" and non-negotiable demands. Playing in this highly professionalized arena requires large sums of money and well-paid staff. Efforts to regulate the process—whether formally through campaign finance reform, or informally by means of political correctness—have not been helpful. Indeed, they have contributed to the rise of Trumpism. But whereas in the past, bluster, posturing, and confrontation often led to concrete political gains, today they just lead to . . . more bluster, posturing, and confrontation.

Unfortunately, Mexican-American leaders have assimilated to this system and come to rely too much on plaintiffs and not enough on precinct captains. Mexican Americans have been encouraged to develop a brittle pride that often hinders their ability to see the other guy's perspective and work toward an agreement. Mexican Americans are hardly the only ones to be seduced into this kind of identity politics. But as the largest group of new guys on the American block, it has left them in a particularly vulnerable position. By calling attention to this, Donald Trump may have inadvertently done them—and the rest of us—a favor. ♦

Entitled to Spend

Will Congress restrain a profligate president?

BY JAY COST



As a candidate for president, Donald Trump did not offer much in the way of specific policies. Still, based on the handful of details he did present, it is pretty clear he wants to spend money, *a lot of money*.

For starters, he wants to cut taxes—"big league." The Tax Foundation estimates that the Trump plan would reduce federal revenues by \$4.4 to \$5.9 trillion over the course of a decade. Under dynamic scoring, whereby the growth of the economy is factored into the analysis, that number drops to somewhere between \$2.6 and \$3.9 trillion.

Trump also wants to spend more on infrastructure. Last week, McClatchy published a list of about 50 projects that the Trump administration envisions as public-private partnerships. The total price tag is estimated at \$137.5 billion—a lot of dough for Uncle Sam, even if the private sector picks up some of the tab. Trump

also promised to increase funding for the Veterans Administration and suggested that veterans should be treated by any doctor that accepts Medicare—an idea that sounds great, but would be expensive. Trump intends to end the military sequester, which has a 10-year price tag of about \$1 trillion. In a September speech, he promised to "ask Congress to fully offset the costs of increased military spending."

But where will such savings be found? The good news is that Trump has nominated Mick Mulvaney, a South Carolina congressman and noted budget hawk, as director of the Office of Management and Budget. Perhaps he will be a rigorous steward of the public finances. The bad news is that the administration already seems to have taken entitlement reform off the table. A few days before the inauguration, White House chief of staff Reince Priebus told ABC News, "There are no plans in President-elect Trump's policies moving forward to touch Medicare and Social Security." This is despite the fact that

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