Abstract:

During the Second World War, the American government created the first federal civil rights agency, the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices (FEPC), to combat discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, or national origin. In existence from 1941 to 1946, the FEPC eventually developed a national network of regional offices that allowed for resources to be targeted towards specific groups, such as America’s second largest minority: people of Mexican origin. In this article, I trace how working with the FEPC shaped the preferred discourse and policy options of Mexican American community leaders. They moved from seeking incorporation on the basis of embracing a technical white racial classification to seeking federal protection on the basis of their national origin. Working with the FEPC provided a positive model of incorporation that shaped the way they talked about themselves and the policy options they preferred to improve conditions for their community.

During the Second World War, the American government created the first federal civil rights agency, the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices (FEPC). President Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 called for “full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders” and the FEPC was created to combat discrimination based on this pluralist mantra. In existence from 1941 to 1946, the FEPC eventually developed a national network of regional offices that allowed for resources to be targeted towards specific groups, such as America’s second largest minority: people of Mexican origin.
Just as wartime facilitated the creation of the FEPC on the national level, leaders in the Southwestern community of Mexican origin were organizing to combat systemic discrimination through strategic Good Neighbor Policy. People of Mexican origin faced an ambiguous place in the United States ethno-racial taxonomy. Often racialized as “Mexicans” regardless of their citizenship status, people of Mexican origin faced discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodation. As the United States sought resources and assistance from Mexico during the Second World War, leaders in the community of Mexican origin sought to utilize their inclusion in the FEPC to achieve greater incorporation in American society.

In this article, I trace the way Mexican American community leaders shifted their preferred discourse and policy options from appeals based on whiteness and assimilation to using the resources of a federal civil rights apparatus to protect them on the basis of their national origin. Particular attention will be devoted to the way a group of leaders shifted their support from the Texas Good Neighbor Commission, a state level agency organized around the precept of Caucasian rights to the FEPC. In profiling this shift, I will show how the institutional organization of the FEPC shaped these changes. The FEPC recognized plural forms of difference in American society and sought to combat discrimination experienced by traditionally marginalized groups with the authority of the federal government. In addition, it provided opportunities for leaders from the community of Mexican origin to in part direct the FEPC’s services to their community and develop approaches that took account of specific concerns such as language issues and reaching out to people mistrustful of the American state. A combination of federal
power and community leadership provided Mexican American community leaders with a framework for incorporation that exhibited results.

Mexican American community leaders have traditionally been characterized as conservatives\textsuperscript{7} who rejected working with African American groups to focus on embracing a white racial classification and assimilation into American society. In this paper, I show a more nuanced picture of these leaders. In supporting the FEPC, they focused on community specific concerns rather than embracing an alliance with African Americans. While supporting the same policies, they created justifications based on their own community. As people of Mexican origin, they sought incorporation as part of the fulfillment of the Good Neighbor Policy. As American citizens, they grounded their appeals in the realization of American democracy.

In addition to the public comments of Mexican American community leaders, some attention is also devoted to their private interactions with FEPC officials. It is clear that Mexican American community leaders directly involved with the FEPC came to see their community as a minority group, one that was in need of federal intervention to have equal opportunities in American society. In both private correspondence and public comments in the post-war era, Mexican American community leaders no longer turned to appeals based on whiteness or assimilation.

Many scholars have portrayed people of Mexican origin and Latinos as a whole as a disorganized community included almost by accident in civil rights policy.\textsuperscript{8} However, in this article I show how some leaders did embrace inclusion in civil rights agencies but by using community specific rationale they hesitated in forming alliances with African Americans. Classified as “whites” by the census but racialized as “Mexicans” in
everyday lives, people of Mexican origin were caught between Black and White and lacked strong community organizations. Thomas Guglielmo put it succinctly when he discussed “Mexicans’ and Mexican-Americans’ long standing connection with whiteness and their equally long standing desire, to distance themselves or at leas their politics from Blackness.” However, in the post-war era Mexican American community leaders who had worked with the FEPC privately equated their communities status with the plight of African Americans and publicly state that people of Mexican origin are somewhere between Black and White.

A small group of Mexican community leaders took leadership positions in FEPC and as a result of experience with positive federal intervention, shifted their preferred discourse and policy options. They were middle class professionals who served as academics and attorneys and provided leadership for community organizations. Academics Carlos Castaneda and George Sanchez and Attorney Alonzo Perales were three leaders from Texas who were involved with the FEPC. In addition, Senator Dennis Chavez, the only member of Congress of Mexican origin also plays an important role. Most prominently, I focus on Carlos Castaneda who served as Special Assistant to the Chairman of the FEPC for Latin American Affairs. Castaneda originally actively supported remedies based on Caucasian rights. However after growing frustrated with the activities of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission he had the opportunity to work for the FEPC where he saw remedies that produce results. In fighting for a permanent FEPC, he crafted a community specific rationale for including people of Mexican origin in civil rights policy.

**People of Mexican Origin in the Southwest in 1940**
Table 1: People of Mexican Origin as Percentage of State Population 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Arizona</th>
<th>California</th>
<th>Colorado</th>
<th>New Mexico</th>
<th>Texas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2: Mexican Origin Population in the Southwest 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Arizona</th>
<th>California</th>
<th>Colorado</th>
<th>New Mexico</th>
<th>Texas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Americans</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Nationals</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As Table 1 and Table 2 illustrate, people of Mexican origin in the Southwest in 1940 were overwhelmingly American citizens and made up a substantial portion of the population, particularly in New Mexico and Texas. Regardless of their citizenship status, they continued to face problems of discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodation. “Guaranteed American citizenship by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexicans in the Southwest were largely excluded from political rights and consigned to subordinate status in the labor market through patterns of local coercion parallel in many ways to the subordination of African Americans in the post-Civil War South.” Despite the fact that Mexican Americans were American citizens, they were racialized in a way that was discriminatory. Mae Ngai has noted that “Throughout the Southwest, and especially in Texas, all Mexicans suffered from a system of segregation that mimicked the Jim Crow practices of the South. Mexican Americans and immigrants alike lived in segregated colonias, were denied service in restaurants and drug stores that were patronized whites, and were seated in separate sections in movie theaters.” Even in New Mexico, where a large community of Mexican origin has resided since the 16th century, discrimination remained prevalent.
Another layer of complication comes in the area of racial and ethnic classification. While even a small amount of African American ancestry resulted in someone being recorded as Black, the official designations for people of Mexican origin were more ambiguous. To illustrate their particular situation, I draw on changes in census classification in the early 20th century. Classified as white up to 1920, the United States government introduced a Mexican racial classification in 1930. After protest from Mexican American community leaders and Mexican government officials in 1940, racially, people of Mexican origin were again considered white. However, the census devoted specific attention to classifying Spanish-speakers in the Southwest, identifying by language people who classified racially as Mexican in 1930 and those that would later fall into the Hispanic/Latino ethnic option introduced in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and OMB Directive 15.16

Seeking greater opportunities in society, the small Mexican American middle class formed the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in 192917. Formed in the aftermath of mass immigration due to the tumult of the Mexican revolution, LULAC members sought assimilation and acceptance within Southwestern society without challenging capitalism or economic inequality. As Marquez has noted, “collective goals, those which would benefit all Mexican Americas, were limited to creating opportunities available to all American citizens rather than questioning economic and political institutions.”18 LULAC would develop into a community organization with chapters throughout the Southwest, with particular concentrations in New Mexico and Texas. As the oldest and most prominent Mexican American community organization, it represents an excellent place to begin an exploration of the solutions based on culture and
assimilation that were utilized by Mexican American community groups before interacting with the rhetoric and institutional apparatus of the FEPC.

Early statements by LULAC leaders illustrate their attempts to gain incorporation and some of the benefits of citizenship. Longtime LULAC leader M.C. Gonzales writing in 1932 in an editorial entitled “The Aim of LULAC” profiled the goals of Mexican American political leaders:

To assist and encourage about 800,000 people of Mexican descent, now residing in Texas, to assimilate as rapidly as possible, to fuse and transform themselves... We advocate a thorough knowledge of the English language, of American history, traditions, ideals, and institutions only in that way can we hope to benefit ourselves of the best America affords.19

LULAC leaders were attempting to use traditional paths of assimilation to gain the full privileges of American citizenship. Unfortunately the economic hardship of the Great Depression and the deportation and repatriation of one third of the community of Mexican origin left them on the defensive for much of the 1930’s.20 However, by the early 1940’s the wartime needs of the United States in terms of labor and support from the Mexican government21 gave Mexican American community leaders a new opening.

The Good Neighbor Policy created a unique moment for Mexican American community leaders. As Sheridan has noted, they could now use international and transnational pressure to pursue goals with the “expressed purpose…to test the state's new Good Neighbor Policy.” 22 Several venues were made available throughout the state and federal government. However, the opportunities they offered differed vastly in discourse and execution.

The Texas Good Neighbor Commission
In 1943, the Texas Good Neighbor Commission was established with broad support from Mexican American community leaders. Supported by Governor Coke Stevenson, who held traditional Southern views regarding African Americans, the Texas Good Neighbor Commission had the distinction of specifically excluding African Americans. Unlike the FEPC, which was created to combat discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed or national origin, the Texas Good Neighbor Commission was based on the passage of the “Caucasian Race-Equal Privileges Resolution.” Cloaked in the rhetoric of wartime, “this resolution declared “all persons of the Caucasian Race within the jurisdiction of this state are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of public places or amusement.” The resolution was passed in part due to pressure from the Mexican government regarding the implementation of the Bracero agreement, an agreement between the Mexican and the United States government that allowed guest workers from Mexico to come to the United States. Guglielmo notes “prominent Mexican American leaders such as Alonso Perales, George I. Sanchez, M.C. Gonzales and Carlos Castaneda all wrote politicians and government officials in attempts to rally support for the bill, often buttressing their appeals with explicit war related arguments.” Going beyond mere advocacy, in this case major portions of the legislation were authored by longtime M.C. Gonzales. Gonzales was particularly resistant to any impression of being tied in with African Americans and urged other leaders to focus efforts on maintaining a white classification for people of Mexican origin.

Once established, the activities of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission were limited to passing vague resolutions and collecting public accommodation complaints and
the agency lacked enforcement authority. A six member board was appointed by Texas Governor Stevenson that included two people of Mexican origin. Among the early resolutions was one that authorized the Texas Good Neighbor Commission to “request the appropriate authorities of the State of Texas to appoint a committee of educators and scholars to recommend reforms and elimination of objectionable aspects in the text books.”

In describing the soliciting of complaints on the grounds of public accommodation, Executive Director Pauline Kibbe stated that:

A practice that seemed to do little more than chart discrimination did not provide the strong enforcement authority that Mexican American community leaders felt necessary to combat discrimination. Guglielmo noted the sense of frustration by quoting a letter from Alonzo Perales to Carlos Castaneda in which he stated that, “All the [Texas Legislature]…did was to pass a resolution stating that they disapproved of racial discrimination in Texas…This means we did not get the law we wanted and which our nation needs.”

Efforts to pass permanent anti-discrimination legislation in Texas quickly succumbed to racial tension. The existence of the FEPC provided a new option for Mexican American community leaders anxious for remedies that could improve the opportunities of their community.

**Action and Words: The FEPC and People of Mexican Origin**
The FEPC gathered complaints and conducted investigations and hearings in a process that served as the precursor to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in terms of mission and practice. The agency began by conducting national hearings and eventually was expanded in 1943 to include twelve regional offices. Those localized decentralized offices allowed for region-specific approaches backed by the power of the federal government. The FEPC was a federal agency that focused primarily on employment discrimination complaints. The FEPC solicited complaints just as the Texas Good Neighbor Commission. However several factors differentiated the agency: federal leadership, more tangible results and leadership of Mexican American community leaders at the local level. Working with the agency would shift the preferred policy options and rhetoric of Mexican American community leaders from appeals based on education, assimilation and whiteness to a focus on efforts to make the wartime FEPC permanent.

Two people shaped the leadership of the FEPC in terms of people of Mexican origin: Malcolm Ross as Chairman of the FEPC and Carlos Castaneda as Special Assistant to the Chairman for Latin American Affairs. Ross’s service as Chair of the FEPC from 1943 to 1946 provided the agency with stability and a leader who understood the situation of people of Mexican origin in the Southwest. Ross served as an Arizona miner in the early 1920’s and recounting his experience, he noted that:

American, Welsh, Cornish or what not, we underground miners were a clan all our own. We were Anglos in so far as the Mexican miners were concerned. They were not allowed to work underground…My daily rate as a novice mucker topped that of skilled Mexican miners who hard worked in the dangerous trade for years…It was not easy to know whether a man was a Mexican national or an American citizens of Mexican origin. Both were there, but we Anglos never mixed with either.31
Ross took this experience and contextualized to the existing conditions in the Southwest, reflecting “that there are a couple of million Americans of Mexican origin living among us as second class citizens never occurred to me until many years late.”

Ross’s speeches implicitly included combating discrimination against people of Mexican origin in the FEPC’s mission. In one speech he situated people of Mexican origin as a minority group entitled to incorporation using their wartime participation as a way to highlight their unjust discrimination:

Who are the minority American groups? There are three million Spanish Americans in our Southwest. Their ancestors also died within the Alamo, side by side with their Anglo-American brothers and rode spur to spur with the Texans at San Jacinto where the Alamo was avenged. Today, there are Spanish American prisoners waiting behind Japanese barricades for Bataan to be avenged. But in their home state, there remains industrial discrimination against their brothers.

As a result, Ross clearly recognized the multiple forms of discrimination in American society, showing that even as this early date civil rights policy was being formulated in a way that descended beyond the Black-White dichotomy. However, Ross classified people of Mexican origin as non-white, creating the potential for conflict with Mexican American community leaders who wanted to embrace a Caucasian racial classification. For example, in congressional testimony during hearings to create a permanent FEPC, Ross stated that “the Negro and the Latin American are as susceptible to discrimination today as when they landed at Jamestown or pioneered the Sierra Nevadas. I am convinced that no White American can…possibly understand.” While Ross’s comments situated the place of people of Mexican origin in a way that exemplified the discrimination occurring in the Southwest they also portrayed the Latin American as non-white. A letter from Jonathan Daniels, President Roosevelt’s administrative assistant to Dr. Will Alexander of the War Manpower Commission indicates how delicate the matter
of white classification could be. In discussing figures obtained by Ross regarding minority employment Daniels noted that “Mike was able to secure figures only on “non-whites” which includes Mexicans. I know that you agree that the inclusion of Mexicans under the heading non-white will irritate the Spanish-American group. I wonder if it would not be possible to eliminate this non-white classification and have figures kept on a more specific racial and minority basis. Mexican American community leaders were not read to abandon whiteness but Ross’s rhetoric and helped them to construct a rationale for their incorporation into emerging civil rights policy. Turning to idea of national origin discrimination provided a way to talk about discrimination and inclusion without being encumbered by debates of white racial classifications.

The FEPC’s Southwestern regional offices included Mexican American community leaders as staff, with the leadership of Carlos Castaneda shaping a community specific response to people of Mexican origin. In his service as Special Assistant to the Chairman for Latin American Affairs. In that capacity, he coordinated efforts toward people of Mexican origin in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Through working with the FEPC, Castaneda could point to accomplishments that resulted in tangible gains for people of Mexican origin. In an article for a Committee of 100 newsletter Castaneda stated that the FEPC’s regional Dallas office “handled 600 complaints since it opened in Dallas in 1943, and has settled 60 per cent of them satisfactorily.” Castaneda pointed to direct positive results, noting that 60% of complaints settled resulted in workers obtain promotions, pay increases and other positive remedies. The FEPC provided quantifiable improvements in the working conditions and
opportunities for people of Mexican origin while also educating employers regarding the need to comply with anti-discrimination policies.

Castaneda noted the urgency of continuing the work of the FEPC by pointing to the labor-market conditions he noticed. As the war ended and temporary wartime agencies such as the FEPC faced closure, Castaneda noted that “the closing of this office leaves minority groups without protection at the time they need it most…Skilled Latin-Americans are being offered common-labor jobs, and they must take them or have none. Often they do the skilled work, but at common-labor rates of pay.”

Without the federal authority of the FEPC, historical patterns of discrimination would continue. After seeing the promise of the FEPC, Castaneda and other Mexican American community leaders would look to the promise of a permanent federal civil rights agency.

**The Fight for a Permanent FEPC**

In 1944 and 1945, efforts were made to pass federal legislation that would turn the FEPC from a temporary wartime agency into a permanent federal civil rights apparatus. The national campaign for a permanent FEPC was led by African American labor leader A. Phillip Randolph and included groups such as the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League. National councils for a permanent FEPC were organized throughout the country, sending telegrams to public officials and writing letters to newspapers in support of the legislation. People of Mexican origin were also included in these efforts, albeit in a rather limited fashion. Randolph and others in the campaign for a permanent FEPC dig give attention to people of Mexican origin and Spanish-speakers in general seeking to “mobilize them behind the drive for permanent FEPC legislation.”

Accounts of the campaign have not that “in 1944, at the suggestion of Senator Chavez of New
Mexico, the National Council approaches Ernest Maes, Director of Inter-American Cooperation in the Department of Interior to explore the possibilities of a field by him to awaken Spanish-American interest in the legislation.”39 In addition, “to supplement this initial venture, the National Council prepared a few items of literature in Spanish and sought to reach the Spanish-Americans through its field representatives and other media.”40 However, efforts to integrate people of Mexican origin and other Latinos into the existing campaign were not terribly successful. The same Mexican American community leaders who supported the Caucasian rights of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission before turning to the FEPC now designed community specific rationale to support a permanent FEPC.

Mexican American community leaders specifically tailored appeals for a permanent FEPC based on their positive involvement with the agency. Carlos Castaneda’s editorial in the Committee of 100 newsletter provides a concise summary of the mobilizing techniques the FEPC instilled in Mexican American civic leaders. The Committee of 100 was another Mexican American community group, with a make-up of middle class membership in many ways similar to LULAC and was led by Alonso Perales. The discourse and practices of the FEPC were synthesized with justification based on the Good Neighbor Policy and wartime service. Not only was helping people of Mexican origin good policy in terms of promoting positive inter-American relations, but it provided brave people of Mexican origin who served the United States during World War II with access to improved employment prospects when they returned home. Castaneda’s editorial began by noting that the FEPC gave “an opportunity to secure jobs to thousands of Latin American previously denied employment, regardless of their
qualifications, except as common laborers, janitors and gardeners because they were “Mexicans.” Castaneda noted the way people of Mexican origin were racialized and then looked to federal intervention as a proven remedy. Complaints filed with the FEPC objected to discrimination on the basis of national origin rather than embracing whiteness. Castaneda showed that filing complaints with the federal government on the basis of national origin had the potential to produce positive results.

Castaneda focused his efforts on two communities: the community of Mexican origin and congressional leaders discussing the passage of a bill for a permanent FEPC. To both communities he grounded his approach in practicality. Rather than calls to embrace a whiteness that may never materialize he followed Ross in his use of wartime rhetoric as a justification. Just as Ross had included people of Mexican origin amongst the various groups experiencing discriminating and entitled from assistance to the American state, Castaneda used similar rhetoric to support the continuation of the FEPC. At this point, I quote from Castaneda at length to illustrate his argument:

FEPC was not a noble experiment. It is not a new fangled idea, a special privilege or a war concession. It was the late but frank recognition of an injustice that needed to be righted for the successful prosecution of the war. Now that victory over Nazism, Fascism, and Shintoism has been obtained, and the rights and dignity of the common man reasserted, FEPC is as essential to the preservation of the peace as it was to the prosecution of the war. To deprive a man of the right to employment without restriction because of race, creed, color, or national origin, to hamper his right to promotion for the same reason, or to limit his earning capacity and subject him to inferior wages because of his racial extraction or religion affiliation is un-American, undemocratic and unpatriotic. It is a negation of the very basis on which democracy stands.

The above passage by Castaneda shows he uses the unity of wartime and promise of American democracy to provide an appeal for the government to combat discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, or national origin. In addition, he had a tangible policy
goal in the creation of a permanent FEPC. Rather than embracing a narrow promise of whiteness, people of Mexican origin were portrayed as Americans entitled to protection against discrimination in the name of American democracy.

Leader Alonzo Perales moved beyond the arguments for inclusion to note the specific rationale for a permanent FEPC stating that “A federal law is necessary in order to put an end to this painful situation immediately. The education program is useful, but it is very slow, and we have no time to lose.”

Not only was the inclusive nature of the FEPC seen as the preferred remedy, but federal legislation with genuine enforcement authority. As a result rather than seeking Caucasian rights and rejecting alliances with African American groups, Mexican American community leaders embraced the FEPC and incorporation into an emerging federal civil rights agency. Castaneda and Perales would then take their case to Washington, to testify in hearings for a permanent FEPC.

**Advocating for a Permanent FEPC: Mexican American Community Leaders Take Their Case to Congress**

In 1944, the United States Senate held hearings for a permanent FEPC. Facilitated by New Mexico Senator Dennis Chavez, the hearings provided an opportunity for various groups to plead their case. African American, labor, Jewish and women’s groups were among those that supported a permanent FEPC while there was opposition from business groups and various citizens. As the lead Senate sponsor of FEPC legislation, Senator Chavez brought an understanding of the issues facing people of Mexican origin. In testimony between Senator Chavez and Carlos Castaneda, each aspect of the rationale for incorporating people of Mexican origin into federal civil rights legislation was articulated. After working with the FEPC, Castaneda no longer turned to arguments based on promoting assimilation or Caucasian rights. Indeed, his testimony
before Congress gives no reference to whiteness, rather he outlined conditions faced by people of Mexican origin, the strategic interest of promoting inter-American relations and cloaked his arguments in support for American democracy. Castaneda specifically sought protection from discrimination on the basis of national origin. Castaneda characterized people of Mexican origin as a group identifiable by the category of national origin thereby sidestepping debates over racial classification.

The closing paragraph of Castaneda’s opening statement to the congressional hearings for a permanent FEPC exhibit the community specific rationale for incorporating people of Mexican origin. He ended his remarks by noting that:

> Bill S. 2047, being considered by your Committee to prohibit discrimination in Employment based on race, creed, color, national origin or ancestry will enable Mexican-American citizens throughout this country…to secure economic opportunities in employment in the post-war era…During its short period of operation it has done much to integrate Mexican Americans in war and essential industries and in government employ…Equal employment opportunities, the right to work and earn a decent living on par with all other persons of race, creed, color national origin or ancestry is a basic principle of American democracy.  

Combating discrimination against people of Mexican origin is portrayed as necessary for the realization of American democracy. Rather than embracing or discussing a particular racial classification, Castaneda focused on how incorporating people of Mexican origin was part of providing equal opportunities. While he used the emerging language of civil rights rhetoric, he did not specifically align people of Mexican origin with the interests of African Americans.

Following Castaneda’s statement, Dennis Chavez guided him through a question and answer period that exhibited the community specific rationale for incorporating people of Mexican origin into this early attempt to pass civil rights legislation:
Senator Chavez—Within the state of Texas there are Many Mexicans?
Dr. Castaneda—Yes, that is correct Senator.
Senator Chavez—Many of these so-called Mexicans are native-born citizens of the State of Texas, and of the United States. Is that correct?
Dr. Castaneda—That is correct.55

Chavez immediately provided an opening for Castaneda to emphasize that many people of Mexican origin were American citizens. People of Mexican origin were portrayed as part of American society, rather than a cheap source of labor. Chavez’s questioning went on to give Castaneda opportunities to provide the community specific circumstances of discrimination and reasons for inclusion of people of Mexican origin in anti-discrimination policy:

Senator Chavez—And a portion of them are immigrant Mexican nationals?
Dr. Castaneda—Yes, Senator.
Senator Chavez—Have you been able to observe yourself the economic treatment of both classes of those people, both, the so-called Mexican-Texan, and the Mexican national?
Dr. Castaneda—Yes, Senator. In connection with the work of the committee, and also in the years previous to the establishment of the committee, I have been interested in the condition of the Mexican-American or the Latin Americans in the State of Texas. There are in Texas approximately 1,000,000 persons of Mexican extraction, of which more than 60 percent are American citizens. In employment practices there is no difference made whatsoever between a Mexican national and an American citizen. If a worker’s name is a Spanish one, he is considered as Mexican and treated as such.

During the days of relief, the various agents who distributed relief, allowed much less to Mexican families on relief than to Anglo-American families, anybody with a Spanish name, be he an American citizen or not, and they did it on the assumption that a Mexican does not eat so much, that he is not used to eating butter and bacon and other rich foods, and that if they gave it to them it might make them sick.

Senator Chavez—Well we have heard that similar argument was used by some of the State governments in the South. So it is not particularly new. But the reason for my question is because we have heard so much about this good-will business, about how much the people of the United States and the United States government, love the people south of the border.46
This particular exchange is revealing for several reasons. In a short passage, Castaneda and Chavez managed to convey the racialized discrimination experienced by people of Mexican origin, past negative experiences with the American government and a rationale for inclusion in anti-discrimination policy. Not only were the many people of Mexican origin who were American citizens entitled to assistance as part of American society but it was also part of the United States need to cultivate friendships with Mexico and other nations south of the border. When Chavez mentions that governments in the South had some of the same discriminatory policies towards relief as those experienced by people of Mexican origin in the Southwest, he seemed to be linking people of Mexican origin and African Americans. However in immediately turning to a description of the Good Neighbor Policy, he still grounds the call to combat discrimination against people of Mexican origin in community-specific rhetoric. The exchange continues with a further description of both the need for the Good Neighbor Policy and the perception that the FEPC was helping to improve conditions:

Senator Chavez-But from your experience as a member of the F.E.P.C. agency, you know that those conditions that you have described exist not only in Texas but throughout the entire Southwest, wherever Americans of Mexican or Spanish extraction live?
Dr. Castaneda-In speeches before Clubs interested in Pan-Americanism, this question has been asked, “Do the people south of the Rio Grande feel kindly toward this country?” And I have had to say that there are many people South of the Rio Grande who seriously doubt the protestations of friendship made, when the ways in which the Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals are treated in the Southwest are reported in Mexican newspapers.
Senator Chavez-In order to be fair, wouldn’t you say, though, that as far as the government is concerned, including the great State of Texas, they are trying to remedy the situation?
Dr. Castaneda-Yes, I think there is a sincere effort being made. We have been trying that for many years and at present there are even greater efforts being made through persuasion, but the roots of prejudice are so deep-seated in the Southwest that it is going to take something more than persuasion to bring about a change of condition.47
In the above passage, Castaneda notes the importance or promoting goodwill South of the border and the need for strong federal remedies to combat discrimination. He also indirectly criticizes approaches based on persuasion, implicitly rejecting remedies based on embracing assimilation, whiteness, or an education approach. Instead, Castaneda feels that something more is required, an agency with actual enforcement authority:

Senator Chavez-Well, suppose we were to abolish that agency, and its personnel, would you still be for a Fair Employment Practices Committee?
Dr. Castaneda-Yes. I would say that we in Texas-and I am speaking now not as an employee of the F.E.P.C. but as one of those who has worked for many years in trying to eradicate discrimination against Mexican Americans-I would say that we in Texas are convinced that the solution to the problem is legislation, legislation that can be effectively enforced so as to restrain that small minority, but very aggressive minority, that because of ignorance, perhaps practice discrimination that brings shame upon our American democracy.48

Castaneda continued to focus on the idea of a permanent federal agency with enforcement authority. The fight for a permanent FEPC allowed Mexican American community leaders to ground their appeals for incorporation in a tangible policy goal. While it was the same tangible policy goal pursued by leaders such as A. Phillip Randolph and his National Councils for a permanent FEPC, Mexican American community leaders worked independently, through organizations such as LULAC and the Committee of 100 and by designing community specific calls for incorporation. Focusing on the FEPC’s mission of combating discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, or national origin, leaders such as Castaneda grounded appeals for incorporation in terms of the realization of American democracy and the necessity of promoting the Good Neighbor Policy. As a result, if permanent FEPC legislation were passed the United States would be helping good citizens (the majority of people of Mexican origin who
were American citizens) by being a good neighbor. Rather than seeking incorporation on
the basis of vague appeals to whiteness, assimilation or promoted cultural understanding
only a permanent national civil rights agency could result in serious progress in
combating discrimination against people of Mexican origin.

During preparations for a final report from the FEPC in 1946, Carlos Castaneda
was again consulted by FEPC officials. In requesting assistance, Malcolm Ross asked
Castaneda to “please keep in mind not only the discrimination practiced against Mexican-
Americans, but also the better relationships have arisen out of their

In lamenting the end of the FEPC, Castaneda expressed privately the idea that
without federal intervention there would be a return to pre-existing discrimination. He
noted that:

There is more need than ever for, FEPC in Texas. Industrialists and Unions alike
have reverted to the good old days of the prewar era and combined to put the
Negro and the Mexican back in his place as common laborer, fit only for servile
Manual labor, dirty and undesirable jobs and the lowest paying work. The Ante
Bellum Status Quo has been restored generally.49

This letter shows that behind the scenes, Castaneda continued to believe that without a
permanent FEPC, the traditional discrimination experienced by people of Mexican origin
would continue. What is particularly striking is that in this environment Castaneda
includes people of Mexican origin along with African Americans. While avoiding
debates over whiteness in public, in private Castaneda was willing to include people of
Castaneda also indicated a continuing interest in serving in a way that noted his
commitment to large-scale support for minority groups, he stated that:

Should permanent legislation be enacted on FEPC, I am deeply interest in it and
would like to return. I still feel that I owe it to my people and other minority
groups to help obtain for them a fair economic deal.50
Legislation for a permanent FEPC ultimately failed, with a combination of Western Republicans and Southern Democrats successfully filibustering the legislation. Not until 1964 would a permanent federal civil rights agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, be created. However, the fight for a permanent FEPC provided a framework for people of Mexican origin to seek to combat discrimination.

As with so much of American policy, when federal law was stifled, the battle turned to the states. In 1945, New York passed the Ives-Quinn law and became the first state to pass its own fair employment legislation. In the Southwest, New Mexico passed fair employment legislation in 1948. In the state with the nation’s largest concentration people of Mexican origin, “Spanish-speaking miners joined by the NAACP and other civil rights organizations aggressively pushed the New Mexico legislature to pass a state FEPC bill. In the aftermath of the FEPC, leaders were turning to fair employment on the state level and working with other civil rights organizations to ensure its passage.

In the aftermath of the FEPC, the agency’s inclusion of people of Mexican origin gave Mexican American community leaders some room to explore their ambiguous place in the United States ethno-racial taxonomy. Writing in 1947, Castaneda noted that “the Mexican, constituting the second largest minority in this region, while not officially classified as “colored”, has generally come to be designated as “non-white.” Discuss the component parts of our population, or of any meeting, or audience and you find yourself facing three classes in the mind of the average citizen: White, Colored, and Mexican, or White, Colored, and non-White. Thus the Mexican may not be considered “Colored” but
he is certainly not “White” either, in the opinion of the man on the street.” Castaneda no longer focused on claiming a whiteness that Anglos were reluctant to recognize, rather he situated people of Mexican origin and other Latin Americans in such a way that presupposes the creation of the Latino ethnic classification.

Conclusion

The FEPC incorporated people of Mexican origin into the United States Government’s first civil rights agency encouraging Mexican American civic leaders to shift their preferred discourse and policy options. Caught between Black and White, leaders who had previously sought incorporation on the basis of promoting assimilation or embracing whiteness embraced the promise of a federal civil rights agency that would combat discrimination on the basis of nation origin. Working with the FEPC they saw how a federal agency with real enforcement authority could achieve practical results. As a result, they supported legislation for a permanent FEPC. Arguing that by including people of Mexican origin in the agency, the United States government would both promote inter-American relations and help citizens of Mexican origin experience the promise of American democracy, Mexican American civic leaders now had a tangible argument to fight for incorporation.

Another feature of the FEPC was that it included people of Mexican origin in leadership positions. The Texas Good Neighbor Commission was led by a board appointed by a committed segregationist and when complaints were received placed them on a map rather than conducted investigations. The staff was led by a white woman and promoted an approach based on a slow process of educating society rather than an agency with genuine enforcement authority. In contrast, the FEPC was led by a Chairman,
Malcolm Ross, who was knowledgeable of the conditions faced by people of Mexican origin and included them in the agency’s mission. On the local level, Carlos Castaneda conducted investigations regarding people of Mexican origin with the full weight of the federal government behind him. Community specific rationales and leadership informed the FEPC’s efforts towards people of Mexican origin rather than having a toothless agency devoid of involvement or influence by non-whites.

In addition to providing Mexican American civic leaders with a preferred policy option, working with the FEPC also helped them to have a vocabulary to talk about specific remedies to the discrimination faced by their community. For African Americans, calls for civil rights leaders such as A. Phillip Randolph and the NAACP were augmented by studies such as the landmark one by Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal. Particularly since initiatives such as the Texas Good Neighbor Commission situated people of Mexican origin as Caucasians, merely joining an emerging African American call or civil rights was not an option. People of Mexican origin fused elements of the Good Neighbor Policy, the contributions of wartime and the promise of genuine enforcement authority to create a community specific call for incorporation. With the passage of state level fair employment legislation in New Mexico in 1948, the policy and discursive options fashioned through working with FEPC manifested itself in continued efforts.

The neglected history of people of Mexican origin and the FEPC provides an early example of the way they were incorporated from the beginning in federal civil rights policy. In part it contradicts accounts such as that of Craig Kaplowitz’s work on people of Mexican origin and civil rights policy in the 1960’s that “the Mexican
American groups most involved in national policy throughout the 1960’s refused to be treated as a racial minority.”55 While I agree with Kaplowitz’s further assertion that “LULAC leaders rejected both a race-minority self-identity and the militantism of the Chicanos, instead committing themselves to American political and economic systems while emphasizing the responsibilities as well as the rights of American citizens,”56 I disagree with the narrow framework he outlines. Rather than being stifled by rigid dichotomies between being treated as a racial minority or not, I have shown the way that Mexican American community leaders fashioned a discourse that situated national origin discrimination as something the American government should work to combat. Using the promise of democracy, the needs of the Good Neighbor Policy and the promise of federal intervention, they came up with language and policy that fit their ambiguous status between Black and White.

As a result, people of Mexican origin fashioned their own incorporation into civil rights policy during its nascent beginnings during the Second World War. Skeptical about working with African Americans, they turned to strategic use of the Good Neighbor Policy, recognition of their status as American citizens and an agency that had the potential to produce results to shape community specific rationales for incorporation. While not explicitly rejecting earlier appeals to whiteness and assimilation, pragmatic Mexican American community leaders embraced the potential promise of federal intervention in a way that helped contribute to their inclusion in American civil rights policy.

2 For accounts of the FEPC see Ruchames, Louis. Race, Jobs and Politics. (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1971); Daniel, Cletus Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness: The FEPC in the

For the purposes of this paper, people of Mexican origin are defined as anyone born in Mexico or descended from Mexicans regardless of citizenship status. Mexican Americans are defined as people Mexican origin born in the United States or those who became naturalized citizens while Mexicans are immigrants in the United States either legally or illegally.

For the purposes of this paper the Southwest is defined as Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas.

The Good Neighbor Policy originated from Franklin Roosevelt’s 1933 inaugural address in which he stated “In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the Good Neighbor.” The policy shaped the Roosevelt Administration’s response to relations with Mexico and Latin America. For illustrations of the relationship between civil rights for people of Mexican origin and the Good Neighbor Policy see Sheridan, Clare. “Another White Race: Mexican Americans and the Paradox of Power.” Law and History Review. 21 (Spring 2003): 109-144 and Rivas-Rodriquez, Maggie, ed. Mexican Americans & World War II. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

I refer to them as Mexican American Community leaders because they were exclusively educated Mexican Americans who were professionals and held prominent positions in the community.


For an example of this approach see Skrentny, John. The Minority Rights Revolution. (New York: Belknap Press, 2002).


For further biographical information regarding Castaneda see Almazaz, Felix D. Knight Without Armor: Carlos Castaneda 1896-1958. (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1999).


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For an excellent account of the situation in New Mexico see Sanchez, George. A Forgotten People. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1941).

For a fuller discussion of these specific census classifications, see Hattam, Victoria. In the Shadow of Race: Jews, Latinos and Immigrants in the United States. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).


Sheridan, Pg. 113.

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Guglielmo, Pg. 1212


Guglielmo, Pg. 1223


Ross, Pg. 3

Address of Malcolm Ross to the Chicago Civil Liberties Committee. Official Files of Malcolm Ross, Chairman of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices. Box 67. Record Group 228. (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC).

Statement of Malcolm Ross, September 8, 1944. Official Files of Malcolm Ross, Chairman of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices. Box 67. Record Group 228 (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC).


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Kesselman, Pg. 110.

Castaneda, Carlos. *Committee of 100.* Fall 1945. Official Files of Malcolm Ross, Chairman of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices. Box 67. Record Group 228. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC.

Castaneda, 1945

Perales, Alonzo. 1945. *Committee of 100.* Fall 1945. Official Files of Malcolm Ross, Chairman of the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices. Box 69. Record Group 228. (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC).

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Perales, Pg. 98

Perales, Pg. 73

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Perales, Pg. 73

Letter from Carlos Castaneda to Clarence M. Mitchell. March 15, 1946. Box 17, Folder 2. Papers of Carlos E. Castaneda (Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas)

Letter from Carlos Castaneda to Clarence M. Mitchell. March 15, 1946. Box 17, Folder 2. Papers of Carlos E. Castaneda (Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas)


53 Perales, Pg. 19


55 Kaplowitz, Craig. *LULAC, Mexican Americans and National Policy*. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2005). Pg. 3

56 Kaplowitz, Pg. 6