

U.S.-MEX: IMMIGRATION

Fernández de Castro: Migrant Voices

I was invited by President Calderón to come on his trip to the United States in late February 2008. He went to New York, Chicago, Sacramento and Los Angeles, where he had lengthy meetings with leaders of the Mexican community in the U.S. And of course, in my role as an academic and observer, I was taking notes. So let me share with you some of the concerns expressed by Mexicans in the U.S. during this very harsh period.

First of all, they demanded improvements in consular services. Currently, there are 48 Mexican consulates in the United States, but that is not enough. Demand for Mexican passports is up 200 to 300 percent because of a change in U.S. law that requires a passport to travel to Mexico. At the Mexican Consulate in Raleigh, North Carolina, for example, it now takes 11 months to get an appointment. It is much worse at the U.S. embassy in Mexico. Another stress on consular resources is the surge in Mexican-born parents registering their American-born children as Mexican citizens. The parents, fearing that they will be deported, want to be able to bring their children back with them to Mexico. The increase in the number of birth registrations is just phenomenal, and Mexican consulates are overwhelmed by these new demands.

The second thing I came away with is that people are very angry about what is happening to Mexico's image and to the image of immigrants. They are even creating local anti-defamation leagues, just as the Jews have done in the past, because they believe that Mexico is becoming a scapegoat for all sorts of problems. And they are asking the Mexican federal government to react to this new Mexico-bashing.

Third, they are very worried about increasing deportations. Some of them are not calling 911. Some of them are not going to the hospital. Some are not even sending their kids to school. It is very scary for them. And of course it is very scary for them to drive a car because most have to drive without a license.



Photo by César Octavio López Natarén.

The Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles.

Fourth, they are worried about human rights and labor abuses, especially at the local and state level. This is bad news because that is where the immigration issue is now playing out. The entire U.S. is becoming like California in the early 1990s when Proposition 187 was passed. California once again was predicting the future.

Fifth, and this is very interesting, they are demanding social services in the U.S. from the Mexican government: education, books, libraries, community education centers, health services. At 23 consulates they have what is called the *ventanilla de salud* or health window, where the undocumented can go for information about obtaining health care. The demand for these services is on the rise.

Sixth, they are very concerned about human rights abuses against Central American transmigrants in Mexico. To be honest, I think this caught President Calderón off guard. The first time this point came up was during the president's speech at Harvard University. A Guatemalan student suddenly stood up and demanded help and some important transformations in Mexican immigration policy. According to the National Migration Institute, in 2005 close to half a million Central Americans tried to reach the U.S. through Mexico. However, in Mexico we don't have a horizontal southern border. We have a vertical southern border. Very few Central Americans are stopped at the southern border because we don't have the





Photo from Associated Press.

Mexicans living in California travel to Mexico to vote.

resources to apprehend them there. We continue to stop them in Mexico City, in San Luis Potosí and even in Tijuana, and this allows for human rights abuses to take place all through Mexican territory.

The seventh demand was for absentee voting. They complained that only a small percentage of Mexicans living abroad were able to cast a vote in 2006. They really want to vote. They feel that they are contributing to the Mexican economy, that they are very active in Mexico, and they want to be able to register to vote with the IFE [Federal Electoral Institute] in the U.S. and not have to go to Mexico to register. Obviously it is impossible for 7 million undocumented workers to travel back to Mexico to register to vote.

And finally, they kept asking President Calderón to establish a ministry for immigration issues. To me, it was fascinating to observe all of their demands because they show how intertwined U.S.–Mexico relations really are. Domestic policies in the U.S. — fiscal, health and education policies, which are created for domestic purposes — are affecting Mexicans in the U.S., and therefore they are affecting Mexico. It is fascinating to see those Mexicans, those 12 to 14 million people who were born in Mexico but now live in the U.S., asking the Mexican government for services and protection. It is interesting because it is really changing the role and the conception of Mexican diplomacy in the U.S.

Diplomacy is now about helping Mexicans who live in the U.S., advising them, for example, about how to get an education or health services. It is not about anything else. I believe that President Calderón really understands the new nature of U.S.–Mexico relations, and it is fascinating to see what is happening there, to see all of the new links being forged. We are truly linked to each other as countries. And with 12 to 14 million Mexicans living in the U.S. plus another 18 million U.S. citizens of Mexican origin, there really is a Mexico inside the United States. It is fascinating what could happen with this community if they truly integrate into the U.S. mainstream and become successful.

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