CHAPTER 3

Community Activism and Identity in Houston

Mexican-origin involvement in politics appeared in the early decades of the twentieth century and increased over time.[1] Prior to 1930 it was limited primarily to the social and civic arena, but after 1930 it expanded and became more diverse. The increase in political involvement is indicated by the renewed activity of existing organizations and by the establishment of many new ones.[2] In general, these organizations assisted the population in adapting to American life. Occasionally they protested, challenged, or opposed the continuing social and political deprivation of the Mexican-origin community. Political involvement was not limited to one particular class or gender. Individuals from all social classes and of both genders were involved in this process. The following documents the nature of political involvement by members of the Mexican-origin community in Houston from the early 1900s to around 1960.

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE BARRIOS, 1907–30

Mexican-origin individuals began to get involved in the political affairs of their communities as early as 1907, but this involvement was limited primarily to civic and social affairs. Generally speaking, there was no visible participation by Mexicans in the electoral arena during the early decades of the twentieth century. Although they comprised anywhere from 2 to 5 percent of the total population during this period, they did not run for or

support candidates for political office. Neither were they involved in party politics in the city. This lack of electoral involvement differed significantly from the experiences of Mexicans in other parts of the state.[3] The immigrant status of this population, their small size, and the citizenship and language requirements for voting acted as barriers to electoral participation in Houston.[4]

There also was no visible political participation by Mexicans in the workplace. Mexican-origin individuals comprised a significant proportion of workers in key industries such as the railroads, but they did not participate in any significant unionizing activities.[5] A conservative southern political culture and discrimination from the few unions in existence discouraged labor involvement. Most preferred to adapt to their working conditions or to resist in more casual methods that have not been uncovered by historians.[6]

One area of active political involvement was in the social and civic affairs of the community. Political involvement in this area appeared in the early 1900s and increased appreciably in the 1920s. Its increase was due to many factors, including immigration, urbanization, and the emergence of an immigrant leadership within the community that the historian Mario García refers to as the "Immigrant Generation."[7] This new generation of community leaders was born in Mexico and came to the United States for various reasons. The vast majority of them were, in the words of De León, "poor folk," but there also were small and influential groups of upper-class *ricos* (wealthy individuals), middle-class professionals, and religious exiles.[8]

Mexican immigrants, in general, tended to view themselves as *Mexico de a fuera* (Mexico from the outside) and hoped to return to *la patria* (the motherland) as soon as conditions allowed. Their leaders had a "Mexicanist" identity and shared certain ideas about ethnicity, politics, and society.[9] This identity was complex and comprised of at least four distinct intellectual strands: cultural nationalism, structural accommodationism, social reformism, and conventionality.

The Mexicanist identity, for instance, was nationalistic.[10] It stressed loyalty to Mexico and Mexico's patriarchal and cultural ideals.[11] Those with a Mexicanist identity held ambivalent attitudes toward or had reservations about American cultural forms.[12]

The Mexicanist identity was structurally accommodationist. Mexican immigrants who shared these ideals sought accommodation with, not integration into, the established socioeconomic and political structures

of American society. Although they sought equal access to and equitable treatment by institutions such as public schools, they were not interested in becoming American citizens.[13] Nor were they interested in joining the American mainstream.[14]

Those with a Mexicanist identity likewise were interested in social reform, but only minimally because of their limited stake in American society.[15] The idea of minimal social reform and collective action was based on what the historian Emilio Zamora calls an ethic of mutuality. Those involved in the community, in other words, were motivated by a prevailing sense of altruism, fraternity, and camaraderie. They shared a sentiment that derived from their common identity as Mexicanos, a bond with their community, and the mutual experience they shared as targets of racism and discriminatory treatment in Texas society.[16]

Finally, the Mexicanist identity was highly pragmatic. Those who believed in it used whatever tactics were available to achieve their ends. Activists in the workplace used mostly direct action and confrontation tactics. Those organizing in the community around social and electoral issues turned to the Mexican consulate for assistance or used conventional methods of struggle such as lobbying, petitioning, and litigation.[17]

Mexican-origin leadership in the United States was not solely comprised of immigrants; nor was the Mexicanist identity the only set of ideals in the barrios. Mexican Americans—that is, Mexican-origin individuals born or raised in the United States—were also part of this leadership group. But Mexican Americans and their distinct ideals were few in number and influence during these decades.[18] Immigrants were the dominant social group in the community during the early decades of the twentieth century, and the Mexicanist mentality was the dominant set of ideals.

In Houston, as in other parts of the country, Mexican immigrants provided most of the leadership in the community. These leaders founded their own organizations to promote their particular interests or concerns. Many of these groups were multipurpose in general, whereas others were devoted primarily to meeting the cultural, recreational, or civil rights of the Mexican-origin community. Some of the most important organizations founded or expanded during this period included masonic or fraternal lodges, *sociedades patrioticas* (also known as *juntas patrioticas*), *mutualista* societies, and social clubs.[19] Masonic or fraternal lodges provided insurance and other social needs. Sociedades patrioticas, or juntas patrioticas, sponsored festivities for Mexican Independence Day, Cinco de Mayo parades, beauty contests, speeches, and debates about general social and

political issues. Mutualista societies generally provided funeral and illness benefits, collective support, group defense, cultural recreational services, and sometimes employment referrals. Social clubs were more general in nature and included those aimed at promoting recreation, leisure, and entertainment activities.[20]

Immigrants began to organize around their particular social concerns as early as 1907.[21] Within a twenty-five-year period they established a variety of organizations and provided for the health, recreational, and social services of other immigrants residing in Houston. These organizations in general made life more tolerable for Mexican immigrants who had decided to make Houston their home.[22]

Although it was rare, some members of the community engaged in struggles against discrimination and injustice. Some of these struggles were initiated by existing or new organizations or by prominent individuals, usually those with access to the print media.[23] This is the case, for instance, with the Agrupación Protectora Mexicana, an association dedicated to the defense of Mexicans in Texas. Its members displayed an awareness of discrimination and commitment to struggle on behalf of civil and human rights. The commitment of these members was shown in 1911 when a delegation from Houston attended the Primer Congreso Mexicanista, a meeting being hosted in Laredo. This statewide conference was organized in order to inform the Mexican-origin community about the problems confronting it. More specifically, the conference encouraged discussion of the lack of legal justice, social and educational discrimination, labor exploitation, cultural retention, and the need for unity.[24] The Houston delegation to this conference played a key role in speaking out against all forms of discrimination and for cultural maintenance. J. J. Mercado, especially, took a leading role in the deliberations by denouncing judicial injustice against Mexicans in Texas and expressing his concern over the linguistic deterioration occurring within the Mexican community in Texas.[25] Other members of the organization protested the problem of exclusion and discrimination in the public schools, the loss of the Spanish language and Mexican culture through the assimilationist public school, and the inferior quality of education for Mexican-origin children. As a way of resolving these issues, the Houston delegates proposed sending a letter of protest against segregation to the state superintendent of public instruction. They also supported the establishment of *escuelitas,* or community-controlled schools that would teach the Spanish language and preserve the

Mexican culture, and promoted the hiring of Spanish-language teachers from Mexico for instruction in the public schools.[26]

Members of the activist community in Houston also supported other civil rights causes. For instance, they supported Gregorio Cortez's efforts to get paroled from Texas prisons after his encounter with the law. They also supported Aniceto Pizana and Luis de la Rosa's popular uprising in the Lower Rio Grande and Venustiano Carranza's efforts in northern Mexico to oust the tyrant Victoriano Huerta, who in 1913 had usurped the presidency from Francisco I. Madero.[27]

Most organizations and individuals during the early decades of the twentieth century did not engage in civil rights activities because of their immigrant status, limited resources, and lack of political power. Some, however, supported cultural maintenance efforts in the schools or sought to keep themselves informed of important issues such as educational discrimination. For example, in keeping with the critique of assimilation and "de-Mexicanization," Mexican-origin clubs presented plays and other forms of cultural activities at Rusk Elementary. This was a means for ensuring that "lo mexicano" was preserved in the schools as Mexican children learned "lo americano."[28] Because of the immigrant status of the population, the Mexican consul also was invited to address the community on issues pertinent to them, including those pertaining to inequality in education. In this way the Mexican consul played an important role in the education of the population attending the segregated Mexican schools.[29]

As indicated above, then, most immigrants were interested in surviving, not challenging, the new environment. Adaptation to new conditions thus became the dominant means of political activity in the colonias during the early decades of the twentieth century.

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE BARRIOS, 1930–60

During the years from 1930 to 1960 political activity within the Mexican-origin community increased and expanded to the electoral arena. Several significant factors contributed to this activism, including fluctuating economic conditions, public education, the impact of American consumer culture, a more differentiated class structure within the Mexican community, increased institutional mistreatment, and the emergence of a new generation of community leaders.[30] The latter were members of the Mexican American Generation. These activists were born or raised in the

United States and became involved in civil rights, labor organizing, and electoral activities during the years from the late 1920s to the early 1960s.

This new American-born generation of Mexican-origin leaders held distinct and, in contrast to the Immigrant Generation before them, different ideas about ethnicity, politics, and society. Theirs was a Mexican Americanist rather than a Mexicanist identity.[31] The Mexican Americanist identity, while ideologically complex and highly evolutionary, was, like the Mexicanist one, comprised of at least four unique but dissimilar intellectual strands: cultural pluralism, structural integration, reformism or moderate reforms of the existing social order, and accommodationism or the use of conventional means to realize social reform.[32]

The members of the Mexican American Generation, for instance, were not assimilationists or *vendidos* (sellouts), as many scholars argue.[33] They believed in cultural pluralism, a complex set of ideals that embodied distinct notions of culture, race, class, and gender. Culturally speaking, these individuals urged acculturation, or the adoption of selective aspects of the dominant culture into the existing Mexican culture.[34] They sought what the historian Richard García calls a synthesis of lo americano and lo mexicano. The former, however, became dominant over time as a result of living in the United States.[35] It is interesting, and probably in keeping with their desire to assimilate, that most members of the Mexican American Generation also viewed themselves as members of the Caucasian or white race, although they were primarily a racially mixed or mestizo group.[36] They aspired to middle-class status, looked to middle-class role models, and promoted the establishment of male-only organizations.[37]

Members of the Mexican American Generation additionally believed in structural integration or in gaining access to mainstream institutions. For this reason they were extremely loyal to the existing social order and to the ideological rationalizations for maintaining these structures.[38] In most cases they believed in integrating on their own terms, but because of their lack of significant political and economic clout this was usually done on Anglo terms.[39]

Despite support for the social order, members of the Mexican American Generation were aware of continuing inequities such as racial discrimination, unequal treatment, poverty, and institutional insensitivity. These indicated that the society was imperfect and in need of moderate change. The goal of members of the Mexican American Generation thus was to support moderate social change that would improve, not replace, the existing social order.[40]

Their appreciation of American institutions, ideas, and behaviors likewise encouraged them to utilize mostly conventional strategies and tactics such as education, litigation, and lobbying to realize their social change goals.[41] In general, Mexican American activists vehemently rejected violence and direct action as legitimate forms of struggle. The LULAC constitution for the state office was adamant on this issue: "We shall oppose any radical and violent demonstrations which may tend to create conflicts and disturb the peace and tranquillity of our country."[42] Occasionally Mexican American organizations used direct action, but the vast majority of these social activists emphasized conventional means, especially litigation.[43] Litigation strategy during these years generally sought treatment of Mexican Americans as part of the Caucasian or white race in order to achieve social equality. This not only was the most effective means for challenging discrimination against Mexican Americans but it also complemented the white ethnic identity of the activists in the community.[44]

Members of the Mexican American Generation were in the forefront of efforts to better life for the Mexican community during the years from 1930 to 1960, and they were responsible for the increase in electoral and community involvement. They, in essence, initiated and led the campaign for Mexican American civil rights in the United States.

The new generation of middle-class Mexican American leaders was also active in Houston. These leaders established new types of organizations and expanded activism to include social protest and electoral activities. They established two basic types of organizations: those aimed at meeting the needs of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans; and those aimed at meeting the needs of Mexican Americans only.[45] The former was what Arnoldo De Leon called "transitional" in nature. They lasted for only a few years and appealed, for a short period of time, to Mexican nationals and the more Americanized members of the Mexican-origin community. They represented a historical link between earlier types of Mexican-origin organizations and the emerging Mexican American ones. They also helped bridge the transition from the Mexicanist to the Mexican Americanist identity.[46]

Three important "transitional" organizations were founded in Houston during the Depression: El Club Femenino Chapultepec,[47] the Federación de Sociedades Mexicanas y Latino Americanas (FSMLA),[48] and La Unión Fraternal.[49] Although they had different objectives, they became involved in meeting the needs of the Mexican and Mexican American population and in protesting various forms of institutional discrimination, including

school segregation. However, because of their short duration, they only had a limited impact on barrio life and institutional discrimination.

The most significant organizations were those founded by Mexican Americans for Mexican Americans. In Houston the leading organization founded by this new generation of leaders was the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), including Council 60, the Latin American Club (LAC), and Council 22.[50] LULAC and its different councils best represented the Mexican Americanist identity in Houston because it articulated the new ideas about being Mexican in the United States and sought to integrate the population into this country's mainstream institutions.[51] One of the central reasons for the establishment of LULAC, for example, was "to study the laws of local government, and to induce the Latin people of Houston to understand the government, to partake of voting privileges, and thus to become better citizens." [52] Emilio R. Lozano, president general of LULAC, reiterated this purpose when he urged the membership in a May, 1935, meeting in Houston to "exercise our American citizenship properly" in order to receive better treatment at the hand of Anglos. He also urged all "American citizens of Latin extraction" to pay their poll tax, be independent financially, and be "good, true, and loyal American citizens." [53]

The Latin American Club (LAC) had similar integrationist goals. According to its constitution, the organization's basic purposes were to protect "Latin American Citizens" of this country, to teach them the importance of United States citizenship, and to study the laws of local, state, and national government. Most important, LAC encouraged the "Latin American" people to understand the government and to partake in voting and all other privileges extended to them by the United States.[54] LULAC, LAC, and other similar organizations became highly active in promoting active citizenship among their members. The ultimate result was an appreciable increase in electoral and civic activism.[55]

Different types of electoral activities were promoted during the 1930s. LAC, for instance, initiated a series of campaigns for payment of the poll tax and hosted demonstrations of new voting machines.[56] In 1935 LAC endorsed a bond election that would be used to improve recreational facilities in several of the barrios in the city.[57] Three years later the Texas American Citizens of Magnolia Park, a group similar to LAC, hosted a meeting of Anglo politicians running for office. In November, 1940, another organization, the Latin Sons of Texas, endorsed a slate of candidates for political office in Houston.[58] In this same year two additional organi-

zations in the Magnolia Park area, the Pan American Political Council and the Cooperative Club of Latin American Citizens, held rallies for Anglo candidates.[59]

In one instance LAC and Council 60 threatened to withdraw their political support for an Anglo city councilperson by the name of S. A. Starkey unless the derogatory remarks he had made about Mexicans were withdrawn.[60] The president of LAC, John Duhig, chided Starkey and threatened to vote against him in the next election unless he showed "the Latin American citizen, who has done his duty in placing him in office" some respect. LAC claimed to have over fifteen hundred poll taxes to battle the commissioner and even proposed putting up a candidate of its own against him. Although Starkey offered no apology and merely stated that he had been misquoted on the issue, this incident served to inform the dominant society that Mexican Americans were emerging as a political force to be reckoned with.[61]

Most of these electoral efforts focused on promoting active citizenship and encouraging support for Anglo candidates. In one particular case in 1947, however, John J. Herrera, a prominent member of LULAC Council 60, ran for a special senatorial race in Harris County. Although he lost, running seventh among forty-two candidates, it was the first time that any Mexican American had run for political office in the county.[62]

Despite the increase in electoral activity, no Mexican Americans were elected to office from 1930 to 1960. The lack of Mexican Americans in elective office indicated that the pattern of political powerlessness established in the early decades of the twentieth century remained intact during the years from 1930 to 1960. The Mexican-origin population, in other words, remained without any significant political power and influence.

Civic involvement in the Mexican-origin community also increased in the 1930s and became more assertive and diverse during the next two decades. During the Depression organizations such as LULAC, LAC, and Club Chapultepec promoted a variety of activities, including the payment of poll taxes, naturalization, and an end to discrimination in hiring, social services, and the treatment of Mexican-origin workers.[63] None of these activities, however, focused on eliminating discrimination in the schools. This did not mean that these organizations and individuals belonging to them were not interested in education; rather they were. But because of the effects of the Depression, activists focused on supporting the schools or on providing services to students and parents.

Although minimal then, there was some involvement in the schools.

LAC, for instance, participated in health education drives in the community and in the schools during the 1930s. Because of the large number of Mexican workers contracting contagious diseases such as tuberculosis, LAC in May, 1938, helped to sponsor "Latin American Health Week." Health education activities, comprised of lectures and free moving pictures on tuberculosis and other phases of health conditions, were held in several Mexican schools during an entire week in early May.[64] During the mid-1930s LULAC also sponsored activities aimed at keeping youth in school and out of trouble. It formed a Boy Scout troop for Mexican Americans, supported the passage of recreation bonds to improve recreational facilities in several barrios, and organized the Club Recreativo Tenochtitlán.[65] This club worked on projects to get the city's parks and recreation department to improve school playgrounds.[66] In 1940 FSMLA promoted health education by sponsoring a variety of exhibitions informing members of the community on ways to avoid or control such diseases as syphilis, cancer, and tuberculosis.[67]

The campaign for barrio betterment and especially for civil rights increased appreciably during World War II. The federal government's involvement in promoting understanding between the United States and Latin America during an international conflict provided a stimulus for increased civic involvement. This climate emerged as part of the Good Neighbor Policy aimed at promoting better relations between Mexicans and Anglos in the Southwest during the war years in the early 1940s. The Mexican-origin population in Houston as well as in other parts of the state and country took advantage of this favorable political circumstance to attack discrimination in all its institutional forms. The emphasis of this effort was on informing the Anglo community about the detrimental effects of discrimination and segregation and on encouraging their elimination.[68] Of particular importance was the role that La Union Fraternal and FSMLA played in this civil rights campaign. In the early 1940s, for instance, both were involved in protesting school segregation in Houston and in the surrounding communities.[69]

In the mid-1940s LULAC Council 60 joined them.[70] In 1944, for example, it formed the Anti-Segregated Mexican School Committee to combat discrimination and segregation.[71] Between 1945 and 1947 Council 60 also worked with local officials in Pearland to eliminate school segregation. Pearland was a small community located about eighteen miles southwest of Houston. In early 1945 a complaint of discrimination from Pearland

came to John Herrera, district governor of LULAC. According to this complaint, Spanish-speaking students were forced to attend a dilapidated one-room, one-teacher Mexican school while Anglos had a modern school plan. This Mexican school had fifty-one students in grades one through five and was two miles from the Anglo school on the edge of the city limits. In the fall of 1945 Manuela González attempted to enroll her daughter in the San Jacinto Elementary School, the school for Anglo students. She immediately received opposition from parents, teachers, and school administrators. She then called John Herrera for assistance. LULAC appealed to the board and complained that school officials "had no right to separate these children two miles away from the other children and put them all in one room with only one teacher for five grades and to share a playground fenced with barbed wire." This appeal, however, apparently had no effect on the local school board.[72]

LULAC, with the entire support of the Mexican-origin community, then boycotted the schools. For eight months the community protested. During the 1946–47 school year local officials, at the insistence of the state superintendent of public education, L. A. Woods, integrated the schools and moved the Mexican school to the central campus.[73]

In addition to participating in the struggle against educational segregation, Mexican American groups also promoted stay-in-school activities. In the mid-1940s the Good Citizens League, an organization containing prominent leaders of the Mexican-origin community, supported a campaign to keep youth in schools and to teach them useful trades and how to become "better citizens." The ultimate purpose of these efforts was to reduce the amount of juvenile delinquency in the barrios.[74] FSMLA likewise promoted sports activities as means of reducing delinquency and increasing school attendance.[75]

After the war Mexican American participation in civic issues in general and in civil rights activities in particular heightened. Transitional organizations such as La Union Fraternal, FSMLA, and Club Chapultepec either became defunct or disbanded. Mexican American groups such as LULAC, however, became more widespread. In fact, LULAC became the leading organization engaged in civil rights. It was assisted tremendously by the emergence of the Ladies LULAC Council.

During the 1950s a newly reorganized and reanimated Ladies LULAC Council 22 engaged in many social activities aimed at improving conditions in the community and in the schools.[76] In the mid-1950s, for in-

stance, it established a variety of programs benefiting children in the community. Two important programs affecting schoolchildren were the Milk Fund and the Eye Glass Fund. As part of the former program Council 22 purchased milk tickets for needy children whose parents were victims of tuberculosis. The Eye Glass Fund was developed to provide glasses for underprivileged schoolchildren.[77] Additionally, this council supported the establishment of an English-language-based nursery school for Spanish-speaking children, provided libraries at Lubbock and Dow Elementary, and helped with a Latin American exchange-student program. Janie Tijerina, wife of longtime Council 60 member Félix Tijerina, was one of the most active members of the Ladies Council.[78]

LULAC Council 60 accelerated its involvement in the post–World War II era. In the late 1940s and early 1950s it supported a campaign to reduce the dropout rate and to end juvenile delinquency in the community through three types of activities: increased parental involvement in the schools, the development of sports teams, and the establishment of a Boys' Club.[79] In the early and mid-1950s Council 60 supported the development of job training for dropouts, the establishment of a library in Anson Jones Elementary, and increased school attendance.[80] To promote the latter, Council 60 printed and distributed "Back to School" pamphlets in Houston's barrios and made announcements on KLVL radio, the only Spanish-language media in the city. It then held rallies in late August or early September to encourage increased enrollment in the schools.[81]

Toward the end of the decade LULAC took steps to establish one of its most well known projects, a preschool for non-English-speaking children. The inspiration for this special educational program came from several sources. First, Council 60 learned of the success of Council 22's support of a language-based preschool program in the early 1950s. Second, two LULAC members were informed about a successful program in Freeport, a small community located in the Houston area. In 1955 Oscar Laurel and Howard Ruhlman of Council 60 were invited by the Brazosport Chamber of Commerce to attend a fund-raising fiesta for La Escuelita, a preschool program established by the Freeport Chamber of Commerce to teach English to Spanish-speaking children. These individuals were impressed with its success and encouraged LULAC to sponsor similar efforts.[82] Third, Alfred Hernández got the idea of developing a preschool program for Spanish-speaking children in the mid-1950s after speaking to a psychologist from the University of Houston concerning the cultural biases in the

aptitude tests given to incoming soldiers. As part of the solution to these low test scores, they discussed developing an intensive language program for quickly learning English. Hernández worked with this idea and began to consider how it might be applied to children so that they could learn a second language through a small, basic vocabulary.[83]

The idea of a preschool program for Spanish-speaking children, however, did not become a LULAC project until Félix Tijerina embraced the idea. Tijerina was the president of LULAC from 1956 to 1960. In 1957 he became convinced of the importance of this type of program after talking to Isabel Verver, a teenage girl who had taught at a preschool in Ganado and in Edna, Texas, based on the principal of teaching English to Spanish-speaking children using a basic vocabulary.[84] These experiences eventually led Tijerina to develop an experimental preschool program that eventually came to be known as the Little School of the 400.[85] The name came from the list of four hundred basic English words that formed the core of the curriculum. The Little School of the 400 became one of LULAC's most important projects in the latter part of the 1950s and the early 1960s.[86] These activities indicate that Mexican American involvement in civic matters increased appreciably during the years from 1930 to 1960 and that women also played a key role in this process.

The actions by the local LULACs to improve the schooling of Mexican children differed from the approach taken by the state office. At the state level LULAC focused primarily on eliminating school segregation through litigation. It initiated this effort in 1930 with the filing of an antisegregation lawsuit against local officials in Del Rio, Texas. Although LULAC lost the case, the courts ruled that segregating Mexican children on the basis of race was unconstitutional.[87] From 1948 to 1957 LULAC filed discrimination charges against many local school districts throughout the state. John J. Herrera, one of Council 60's most prominent members, played a key role in initiating the rash of antidiscrimination activity in Texas during the post–World War II period. In 1948 he participated as a lawyer in a lawsuit against the local school officials from Bastrop, a small rural community in central Texas.[88] In *Delgado v Bastrop Independent School District* the parents of school-age Mexican-origin children alleged that school officials in four communities in central Texas were segregating their children contrary to the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. District Court agreed with the plaintiffs and ruled that placing students of Mexican ancestry in different buildings was arbitrary, discriminatory, and illegal. Judge Ben H. Rice also

permanently restrained and enjoined the local school board and the local superintendent from segregating these students in separate schools or classes.[89]

The *Delgado* decision was an extremely important case for several reasons. First, it helped to clarify several of the constitutional issues not answered by prior rulings.[90] Second, it determined how far school authorities could go in grouping Mexican-origin children in separate classes within the same school.[91] Third, it clarified the responsibility of state school officials with respect to the establishment and maintenance of segregation.[92] Finally, and most important, it provided a psychological boost to the fledgling Mexican American civil rights movement in education and led to the development of a systematic campaign to eliminate school segregation in the entire state.[93] Herrera's role in this lawsuit was of extreme importance and helped to lay the foundation for the growth of the post–World War II Mexican American civil rights movement.

After *Delgado,* the LULAC state office encouraged and worked for the passage and implementation of antisegregation school policy at the state level. It pressured the state board of education and the commissioner of education to issue policy statements in opposition to segregated schools for Mexican-origin children.[94] In some cases LULAC filed administrative complaints against local districts that refused to eliminate segregation.[95]

By the mid-1950s, however, LULAC resorted again to litigation because of the ineffectiveness of administrative remedies and the continued failure of local districts to eliminate segregation. As part of the litigation campaign at the state level, civil rights activists within LULAC developed a legal strategy that sought to have the Mexican-origin population declared part of the Caucasian or white race.[96] This legal strategy was in keeping with the jurisprudence of the time. For instance, most federal and state documents before 1954 mandated or sanctioned the separation of blacks and whites, but they did not stipulate that members of the same race could or should be segregated. Mexican-origin civil rights lawyers thus sought acceptance of their own group as Caucasian or white in order to prove that in the absence of a statute allowing segregation of Mexicans, any attempt by local school officials to separate them would be a violation of law.[97] Although the courts made inconsistent rulings on the racial status of Mexican Americans, the trend in federal decisions between 1930 and 1960 was to classify them as a distinct class of whites for constitutional purposes.[98]

This legal strategy was largely in response to the rise of anti-Mexican

sentiment in the state and the efforts by the dominant society to disfranchise Mexican Americans or to target them for discrimination based on a change in racial classification from white to nonwhite. As early as 1896 members of the dominant society began to challenge the white racial status of the Mexican American population in order to disfranchise them politically.[99] That these discriminatory efforts continued into the twentieth century is illustrated by a 1936 incident in which a federal agency changed the racial status of Mexican Americans. That year the newly established Social Security Board called upon Mexicans in the United States applying for social security to designate themselves as a race other than "white." Some of the designations from which they could choose were Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Filipino. Mexican Americans from LAC and from Council 60 as well as other LULAC councils in the rest of the state responded vociferously to this policy change. Fearful of increased racial discrimination and insulted by being labeled as nonwhite by federal officials, they initiated an aggressive letter-writing campaign to their representatives in congress and to federal officials protesting this action and demanding its rescission. Representative of the sentiments of most Mexican American leaders in Houston was the letter sent by one of LULAC's members to Joe H. Eagle, Houston's congressman from the Eighth District. After complaining about this change in policy he stated: "We are NOT a 'yellow' race, and we protest being classified as such, and ask that the classification be corrected to eliminate such classification for the Latin American Race."[100] Others wrote similar letters to government officials and reminded them that Mexicans were white since they were descendants of the Spaniards.[101] This political pressure eventually led to the rescinding of the designation.[102]

The white status of these individuals was a departure from the identity of those who belonged to the Immigrant Generation. Most of the leaders during the early decades of the twentieth century, especially those in the 1920s, viewed themselves as descendants of indigenous people and tended to promote "native" values, *mestizaje* (mixed blood ties), and various forms of an emerging cultural nationalism.[103] Their veneration of the Indian Virgen de Guadalupe and of Benito Juarez, Mexico's first Indian president, reflected this belief in what José Vasconcelos, the most prominent Mexican intellectual of the 1920s, called "indologia" or "la raza cosmica."[104] Members of the Mexican American Generation rejected this identity and acquired a new one based on *la raza blanca* (the white race).

This racial status was quickly incorporated into the emerging ethnic identity of the Mexican American Generation and became the guiding post for civil rights activity for the next three decades.

CONCLUSION

During 1930 to 1960, then, there were significant political developments in the Mexican-origin community. First, there was a trend toward increased political participation in the electoral and civic arenas. Second, there was a shift in the ethnic identity of the community's leadership from a Mexicanist to a Mexican Americanist one and from an indigenous to a white racial status. This racial classification served as an important means for challenging institutional discrimination and anti-Mexican sentiments in the years from 1930 to 1960. However, the designation came to haunt the community in the late 1960s as local officials used the white label to desegregate the schools. In response to this new form of discrimination, members of the Mexican-origin community abandoned its white identity and acquired a new one based on minority group status in the United States. They became brown, not white, as noted one of the slogans used during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The following chapters explore the forces and events that led to this shift in the community's identity from white to brown and to their increased mobilization over the issue of school segregation during the height of the Chicano movement years.

PART II

Rumblings and Early School Activism, 1968–70