

AAUW FORUM

Mexican Immigration to the U.S.: A Bilateral Perspective, 1965 to the present

(Special reference to California and the Napa/Sonoma region)

January 14-February 18, 2021

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This course will take a bilateral perspective, taking into account conditions in Mexico that induce migration to the U.S. as well as the situation in this country that prompts Mexican immigration—or not—both documented and undocumented. The Mexican immigrant flow has not been evenly uniform in its points of destination nor in its settlement patterns. While the course will discuss the growing presence of Mexican immigrants in the upper Midwest and the Southeast, particular attention will be given to California.

Furthermore, where most appropriate, I will discuss certain topics as they relate to the Napa/Sonoma region. In such a brief set of lectures, I cannot duplicate the 15-week course that I have taught for many years at UC Berkeley. However, if you have a particular topic that you wish for me to address, please feel free to send me an email (as noted above); I will do my best to incorporate it into the lectures and/or the Q&A sessions. If you enroll before the first session, you will receive a “handout” via email as an attachment that will provide some basic information on immigration to the U.S., Mexican immigration, and related statistics and definitions of terms to be utilized in the lectures/slides.

Format of the course: the lectures with power point slides will be divided into two parts; the first segment will be about 45 minutes in length; then after a very short break of 5 minutes or so, the lecture will resume until about 11:30, at which time I will invite you to participate in a Q&A session of approximately 15 minutes or so. Occasionally, technical resources permitting, I will show some very short film clips. The syllabus below is subject to change, given current events.

Session #1

January 14: “What happened to the Mexicans?”: The decline of Mexican immigration to the U.S. since 2007

The answer to this question must be understood in light of the historical factors on both sides of the border that impinge upon the flow of migration from Mexico to the U.S. The lecture will emphasize the significance of the U.S. immigration Act of 1965, but historical background will be presented so as to understand the significance of that legislation and its implications. Moreover, the lecture will discuss conceptual issues important to the content of the course. The session will conclude with a trans-border overview of turning points in the migration of Mexicans to the U.S. to be addressed by the course.

Session #2

January 21: A Crucial Transition: 1965-1986

This lecture will examine the unintended consequences of the 1965 Immigration Act in the midst of the growing instability in the political economy of Mexico, which culminates in a deep crisis in the early 1980s. The crisis will lead to a surge of labor migration to the U.S., much of it undocumented. This surge will coincide with a burst of economic growth in the U.S., most dramatically in California. Meanwhile, the drug trade between Mexico and the U.S. takes a decisive turn with important implications for Mexican immigration. The wave of immigrants will provoke the Reagan administration to approve the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA)—a turning point in the history of Mexican immigration to the U.S. This period will also mark Mexico’s first steps toward what becomes the NAFTA agreement of 1994, but this era also marks the acceleration of an impending crisis in Central America that will eventually implicate Mexico.

Session #3

January 28: The Politics of Immigration, Part 1: from Clinton to George W. Bush

This session will deal with conditions in Mexico in light of the implementation of NAFTA, the “peso crisis” of 1994, and the declining economic situation in the Mexican countryside. The lecture will also examine the consequences of proposition 187 and the response of the Clinton administration as partisan differences intensify. The session will conclude with an analysis of the failed attempt by President GW Bush to pass immigration reform legislation despite bipartisan support, but not enough to move the bill beyond the Senate.

Session #4

February 4: Fallout: the Failure of Immigration Reform

This session will discuss the ripple effects following the failed immigration reform efforts during the GW Bush presidency in light of the intensifying, bitter polarization between the two major parties. This session will also explore the importance of remittances to Mexico, demographic trends, the implications of increased border enforcement, and the role of the Mexican drug trade in undocumented migration. The session will also take into account the causes of the diversification of the settlement patterns of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. in light of structural changes in the U.S. economy. In addition, the lecture will address the meanings of “citizenship” for U.S.-born children of Mexican immigrant parents, documented and undocumented.

Session #5

February 11: The Great Recession, Obama, and Mexican Immigration

This session will focus on the failure of immigration reform legislation in 2013 in spite of the evident decline in undocumented Mexican immigration to the U.S. Toward that end, the lecture will spotlight certain aspects of the proposed legislation compared to the earlier reform efforts during the Bush era. Particular attention will be given to legislative efforts at the state level that summoned judicial review and adjudication, and the ramifications of those court decisions. This session will also consider the impact of border and interior enforcement on the one hand and on the other President Obama’s effort to protect those who were brought to the U.S. as young children by their undocumented parents (DACA) and subsequently his failed effort to also extend protection to DACA parents (DAPA) (though in some cases one of the parents was in the U.S. legally).

Session #6

February 18: The Politics of Immigration, Part 2: The Trump Administration

This session will examine the roots and consequences of President Trump’s controversial stance on immigration policies in light of a highly partisan political context. Particular attention will be paid to the origins of the so-called “caravans” from Central America and the role of Mexico in the “crisis at the border” that inflamed the debate over the border wall, detentions, separated children, asylum petition processing, and the role of Mexico in dealing with these issues.

This session will conclude with a discussion of the outcomes of the 2020 elections and the possibility of changes in immigration policies of the Trump era by the Biden administration, such as a partial merit-based admission policy, newcomer programs, and dealing with the immigration court backlog, among other issues.

Resources

The literature on Mexican immigration is enormous as well as numerous documentaries and more than a dozen feature films. The suggested readings and the films below are intended to shed light on the complexities of Mexican immigration to the U.S.

1. *The Beast/La Bestia* (2010 documentary): this documentary provides a picture of the means by which many immigrants (from Mexico and Central America) get to the border via railway; it is a hard look at that process.
2. *American Dirt*, Jeanine Cummins (2020), this book is the story of a mother and her son as they navigate their way to the border after the murder of the father of the family. Despite its melodramatic, controversial elements, much of the story possesses a strong sense of the harrowing journeys that confront immigrant women and children in particular who must cross the border undocumented.
3. *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*, San Quinones (2016, Bloomsbury Press), this book gives a very good picture of the drug trade networks in the U.S. by Mexican crime organizations and their operations. Must reading for anyone who is interested in how the opioid crisis morphed into a way for the drug cartels to find new customers.
4. *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration*, Julie Hirschfeld and Michael D. Shear (Simon and Schuster, 2019), this book provides a blow-y-blow analysis of the thinking of the Trump administration toward border enforcement, and including the president's emphasis on the building of the border wall.
5. *Two Nations Indivisible: Mexico, the United States, and the Road Ahead*, Shannon O'Neil (Oxford University Press, 2013), this book discusses the interdependent relationship between Mexico and the U.S. built on trade and common interests in the success of the NAFTA agreement in its original version and with the revisions made during the Trump administration. The book focuses on the importance of the accord for both countries.

6. *9500 Liberty* (2009 documentary), deals with an incident which points to the reaction of that community to the rapid increase in immigrants from Latin America, mainly of Mexican origin, into their community. Available online.
7. *Zero tolerance*, Frontline, PBS (2019) is a hard-hitting documentary on the so-called “crisis of the border” of 2019. Available online.
8. *Under the Same Moon* (2007), feature film, tells the story of a single, undocumented mother working in the U.S. to support her child in Mexico, cared for by the grandmother; but when the child’s grandmother suddenly dies, he must find a way to get to his mother in the U.S. Available online.
9. *A Better Life* (2011), feature film, is the story of a single father working in the U.S. undocumented who struggles to understand his son’s troubled sense of identity and the lure of the youth gang life. Available online.

If you would like other sources on a particular topic, please let me know.

As all of you know, the question of immigration has been a very controversial issue at times in American history, such as the influx of Irish immigrants in the mid-19th century that touched off a virulent anti-Catholic movement in certain parts of the country. And more recently the “border wall” and the Trump administration’s policies on immigration have led to heated, partisan debate. For those wishing differing perspectives on immigration, I suggest two distinct sources: one that is generally moderate on the question of immigration and another that is more conservative in its views: the Migration Policy Institute and the Center for Immigration Studies; both have websites with information that may be useful for those who are interested in a particular topic related to immigration in general, and that relating specifically to migration from Mexico. There are many other sources that I could list, but these two “think tanks” are good starting points for considering different viewpoints on issues that have been very contentious in recent years. I have my own views, of course, on the issues involved that are not necessarily consistent with the websites noted above.