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Southwestern Strategy: Mexican Americans and Republican Politics in the Arizona Borderlands

The rising fortunes of Southwestern conservatives like Barry Goldwater overlapped with the ongoing struggle of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to fully participate in American society. While historians of modern conservatism detail the “Southern Strategy,” intellectual and populist movements, and anti-labor campaigns, they tend to avoid the backbone of the Southwestern economy: the Mexican worker. Surprisingly, Mexican workers remain concealed from the historical narrative and relegated to the shadows despite the growth of the conservative strongholds of Arizona, Texas, and California in conjunction with expanding populations of Mexican descent.

This paper will consider the question of where does the Mexican American population fit into the Goldwater era and the ways in which the presence of a large Mexican American population and Mexico's proximity shaped the politics of Barry Goldwater's generation and the Republican Party in Arizona. It will outline the limits of seeing Southwest conservatism as wholly colorblind, highlight how life in the borderlands formed the entrepreneurial ideology of Goldwater's generation, and analyze how the Mexican-American population shaped the rhetoric and strategies of the Republican Party in Arizona.