In 1942 US officials approached their Mexican counterparts with a novel proposal: they suggested that the two governments cooperate on a program that would allow Mexican men to work in the United States as seasonal contract farmworkers, or braceros. These braceros would replace the young Americans mobilizing to fight in World War II, as well as satisfy the demands of farm owners in states like California and Texas who wanted access to a labor force that could be used to undercut farmworkers’ unions. Despite a history of publicly discouraging migration to the United States and concerns that migratory departures would harm domestic agricultural production, Mexican authorities accepted the proposal after concluding that a guest worker program would help them place some limits on departures and that braceros’ earnings and acquired knowledge could advance development in rural Mexico. The Bracero Program, the unofficial name given to the bilateral initiative, was and remains unprecedented, the only instance when the Mexican and US governments formally reached an accord that aimed to manage the Mexico-US migratory flow. And while the program was initially conceived as a wartime measure, it would continue through the end of 1964. All told, a total of 4.6 million bracero contracts were granted to Mexican workers during the program’s duration. Mexican federal officials earmarked a disproportionate share of these contracts, at least 44 percent, for distribution in Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas, five states in the center-west and center-north that were home to one-fifth of Mexico’s total population. Contract allocations for these states are given in table 1.

The Bracero Program’s impact on Mexico-US migration patterns, the lives of braceros and their families, Mexico-US diplomatic relations, and US politics, society, and economics has been well documented in historical and
social scientific studies. In the United States, the bilateral initiative prompted the development of punitive immigration and border policing policies that targeted undocumented Mexican immigrants, spurred a reshaping of Mexican American and Chicana/o ethnic and political identities, motivated farm labor activists and organizers, and helped advance the interests of commercial-scale farm owners who rely on underpaid Mexican immigrant labor. And it was the US government that generally held the stronger hand and extracted favorable concessions during the periodic bilateral negotiations.
that renewed the terms of the agreement that authorized the Bracero Program. As for the braceros themselves, they engaged in transnational labor activism, refashioned their own ethnic and sexual identities, confronted anti-Mexican discrimination, and earned moneys that they invested in their home communities, all while their families adapted to their seasonal absences. And significantly, the braceros established a web of transnational social and financial networks that their younger relatives and acquaintances used to facilitate their migratory journeys to the United States during the final decades of the twentieth century, which helps explain why a similarly disproportionate share of post-Bracero Program Mexican immigrants—between 39 and 51 percent—were from Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas. My own parents, who are both natives of Changuitiro, a rural community in northern Michoacán, are among those who used these transnational networks: my father, who began migrating seasonally to the United States during the mid-1960s, is the younger brother of a bracero; he married my mother, the daughter of a bracero, in the late 1960s, and they decided to settle permanently in California's Central Valley, where numerous Changuitiro braceros had worked, during the late 1970s.

Abandoning Their Beloved Land examines bracero migration from the states of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas. It shifts away from the focus of previous studies to explore how the Bracero Program functioned within Mexico before braceros reached the United States, and it pays special attention to the political factors that undergirded both the administration of the bracero selection process and individual decisions to migrate. It thus addresses underexplored questions about the bilateral...
introduction whose answers cast light on the full array of factors that shaped Mexico-US migration patterns during the pivotal years of the Bracero Program, as well as the internal mechanics of the postrevolutionary (1940–76) Mexican state and the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolutionary Party). What were the politics of the program’s administration at the federal, state, and municipal levels? Why did federal authorities allocate a disproportionate share of contracts to the center-northern and center-western states? How did state governments distribute contracts within their jurisdictions? What role did local-level authorities play? How did officials select individual braceros, and why? What were the politics of bracero decision making? What political factors motivated *campesinos* (rural workers) from Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas to seek out and accept bracero contracts? How did aspiring braceros engage with the officials who determined who would have the opportunity to migrate?

I argue that bracero migration was a deeply politicized process shaped by a complex web of national, regional, and local factors. Put another way, bracero migration cannot be fully explained as a strictly socioeconomic phenomenon wherein Mexican officials dispassionately identified impoverished campesinos who stood to benefit materially from migrating. I do not discount socioeconomic factors such as landlessness, unemployment, and low wage levels as the proximate cause that prompted individual decisions to migrate as braceros, nor do I dismiss the federal government’s belief that braceros’ earnings would boost development levels in rural Mexico. But as this book shows, the individual political allegiances of aspiring braceros—for example, whether they supported official initiatives such as land redistribution or opposed such measures because of their religious beliefs—contributed directly to the socioeconomic marginalization that fueled the elevated popular demand for bracero contracts in the center-north and center-west. Simultaneously, powerful political factors—such as official concerns that unregulated migration would lead to agricultural production declines, the implementation of competing rural development initiatives, the working relationship between federal and state administrations, the lobbying efforts of rural labor unions, and the personal alliances and rivalries of municipal authorities— influenced the decisions of the federal and state officials who crafted bracero eligibility guidelines and allocated contracts, as well as the actions of the municipal authorities who selected individual braceros.

This book’s argument is based on unexplored and underexplored document collections stored in the federal archives of Mexico City; the state
archives of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacán; and the municipal archives of local jurisdictions like Zacatecas City; as well as a small number of interviews. The Mexican government’s active intervention in the migratory process during the years of the Bracero Program produced a wealth of documents. A significant portion of the available documents were drafted by the officials administering the program: memoranda that detailed bracero eligibility guidelines and selection instructions; correspondence between federal, state, and municipal administrations in which officials relayed instructions and expressed their concerns about how the program was unfolding; domestic intelligence reports compiled by agents of the federal Departamento de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DIPS; Political and Social Investigations Department) who were dispatched to monitor contract distribution sites; and officially compiled lists of aspiring and selected braceros. Alongside these officially produced documents is a treasure trove of written contract requests, nearly three thousand, in which aspiring braceros, or relatives and allies who were writing on their behalf, explained to government officials why they were interested in migrating to the United States. And there are numerous letters in which aspiring braceros and others denounced officials whose corruption and inefficiency were affecting the program’s administration.

A close reading of the written contract requests and other documents that detail on-the-ground conditions in bracero-sending communities—such as federal decrees that sanctioned the redistribution of privately owned lands and security reports compiled by community leaders, labor union officials, and military officers—reveals the close links between individual political allegiances and the socioeconomic marginalization that aspiring braceros cited as the primary reason they wanted to migrate. These documents show that the socioeconomic standing of numerous prospective braceros had been adversely affected by local-level political conflicts. Some of these conflicts involved progressive and conservative factions that were struggling for control of rural labor union locals in the sugar-producing zones of central and southern Jalisco, which led to workers who had been dismissed or blacklisted seeking out bracero contracts. Others pitted community-level factions of conservative Catholic partisans who opposed official anticlericalism, land redistribution, and secular public education against their neighbors who supported these government initiatives. The roots of these religious-political conflicts date to the 1920s, when tens of thousands of conservative Catholic partisans took up arms against the federal government during the Cristero War (1926–29).10 Jean Meyer has
calculated that nearly two-thirds of the Cristeros were from Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas. And many former Cristeros then joined Catholic opposition organizations and political parties like the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS; National Synarchist Union) and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN; National Action Party) during the late 1930s and early 1940s; the UNS had slightly more than 300,000 members by the time the Bracero Program began, and nearly two-thirds of them were from the center-north and center-west. Other recent studies of post-Cristero War Catholic activism have shown that violent community-level clashes between conservative Catholic partisans and their pro-government rivals persisted into the years of the Bracero Program. What this book establishes is that in many cases these endemic conflicts led directly to the landlessness, unemployment, and low wage levels that aspiring center-western and center-northern braceros mentioned in their contract requests.

The written contract requests also demonstrate that there was another group of prospective braceros whose socioeconomic fortunes had been negatively affected by political considerations: ejidatarios (beneficiaries of the agrarian reform) and those whose desire to become ejidatarios had been frustrated by a conservative shift in federal agrarian policy. Officials redistributed 5.5 million hectares of land among 399,829 Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas ejidatarios between 1915, when the first law that sanctioned the redistribution of privately owned lands went into effect, and 1940. But the guidelines that structured the establishment and governance of ejidos (agrarian reform communities) routinely saddled ejidatarios with poor-quality or insufficient lands, restricted their access to credit sources, and prohibited the subdivision, sale, or leasing of their holdings. And because the conservative federal administrations of the postrevolutionary period did not prioritize land redistribution like their counterparts from previous decades had, the agrarian reform process slowed considerably during the years of the Bracero Program.

Only 3.5 million hectares were redistributed among 61,625 center-northern and center-western ejidatarios between 1940 and 1964, which meant that a rapidly growing population—the combined population of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas increased from 4.4 million in 1940 to 7.1 million in 1960—had decreased access to land. Thus, like their counterparts whose fortunes had been affected by local political conflicts, campesinos who were frustrated with the agrarian reform’s flawed implementation turned to the Bracero Program for relief.

6 • INTRODUCTION
The influence that local religious-political conflicts and the agrarian reform’s shortcomings had on bracero migration was most evident in the Greater Bajío, the name I use to refer to the contiguous lands of southern Guanajuato, northern Michoacán, northeastern Jalisco, southwestern Aguascalientes, and southern Zacatecas. This was because the Greater Bajío was one of the principal bastions of conservative Catholic opposition to government policies, the amount of land redistributed in the region prior to the Bracero Program, and the dramatic slowing of the agrarian reform there after 1940, which coincided with a significant demographic expansion rate. Greater Bajío jurisdictions like Pénjamo (Guanajuato), Tepatitlán (Jalisco), and Zamora (Michoacán) were among the earliest and most enduring sites of Cristero, Sinarquista, and PAN activity. And while 1.9 million hectares were redistributed among 191,357 Greater Bajío ejidatarios before 1940, only 397,596 hectares were redistributed among 18,962 ejidatarios in the region during the years of the Bracero Program. At the same time that the land redistribution


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process slowed to a crawl in the Greater Bajío, the region’s population grew from 2.2 million in 1940 to 3.5 million in 1960. The combined impact of these pressures—campesinos who had lost their lands or their jobs because of ongoing religious-political conflicts, ejidatarios hampered by the agrarian reform’s administration, and a growing population of disenchanted would-be ejidatarios with dim prospects for acquiring redistributed lands—was reflected in the written contract requests sent from Greater Bajío communities, which accounted for 64 percent of those I examined during my research.
Where written contract requests shed light on the political factors that motivated campesinos’ decisions to migrate as braceros, official documents reveal the myriad political considerations that shaped the contract distribution and bracero selection processes. The authorities who crafted eligibility guidelines, allocated contracts, and selected individual braceros based their decisions on a political calculus that accounted for the concerns of officials who worried about bracero migration harming domestic agricultural production, the lobbying efforts of rural labor unions, the need to respond to natural disasters like the Paricutín Volcano eruption in central Michoacán, the status of other development initiatives, and regional and local alliances and rivalries, as well as gauges of popular demand for contracts. This calculus also reflected the relative autonomy that state and municipal governments enjoyed during bracero selection periods. The official documents that detail the Bracero Program’s administration show that Mexican federal authorities, like their counterparts in the United States, played a less prominent role in that process as the program progressed into the 1950s and 1960s. But whereas in the United States this retreat from administrative duties involved an increased deferment to the interests of farm owners who employed braceros (as well as agricultural guest workers from Caribbean islands like Jamaica) and reduced oversight of bracero work and housing sites, in Mexico it was marked by the deliberate delegation of bracero selection responsibilities to state governments following a failed attempt to centralize that process in Mexico City. Once the federal government divorced itself from direct participation in the bracero selection process, it focused its administrative efforts on dividing contract allocations among the states. For their part, the governments of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas had broad latitude to distribute contract allotments as they saw fit within their jurisdictions and to craft eligibility requirements that coexisted alongside but did not supersede federal ones. State authorities generally earmarked the majority or plurality of their contract allotments for distribution in Greater Bajío municipalities, but they occasionally carved out special contract allocations for aspiring braceros who had been affected by organized labor conflicts or natural disasters. However, cautious state officials did not want to overextend their governments, even in those instances when they set aside contracts for specific groups of campesinos. As a result, they decentralized the bracero selection process even further by delegating the authority to choose individual migrant workers to municipal governments and exercising minimal oversight of their local counterparts.
The decentralization of the bracero selection process and the absence of any significant oversight made municipal officials the Bracero Program’s ultimate power brokers within Mexico. Municipal authorities essentially had free reign to choose braceros however they pleased, and they routinely ignored federal- and state-level eligibility guidelines and their constituents’ genuine needs so that they could enrich themselves and meet their own political ends. In addition to selling contracts, municipal officials used the bracero selection process to solidify their local political standing by favoring their allies who were interested in migrating, freezing their rivals out of the program, and temporarily removing campesinos who were deemed threats during critical electoral cycles. In several instances, the aspiring braceros who were targeted by local authorities were the conservative Catholic and pro-government partisans who were involved in the religious-political conflicts that were destabilizing center-western and center-northern communities; which specific faction was graced with bracero contracts often depended on the political inclinations of individual municipal officials. What this shows is that, counter to Harry Cross and James Sandos’s assertion in their 1981 study that federal officials used the Bracero Program to remove members of organizations like the UNS, it was municipal authorities who used bracero migration as a safety valve to ease the political pressures that resulted from the conservative Catholic opposition’s outsized presence in the center-north and center-west.22

This book’s finding that municipal governments wielded such power in the bracero selection process broadens our understanding of both the Bracero Program’s administration and the Mexican state’s internal mechanics during the mid-twentieth century, specifically, the decades after 1940, the year that Manuel Ávila Camacho’s conservative presidential administration succeeded Lázaro Cárdenas’s progressive one. The traditional idea of the PRI as a “leviathan” that successfully centralized political power at the federal level, reduced regional and local officials to dutiful vassals who enacted directives issued in Mexico City, and used violence to stifle resistance and impose its will after 1940 has been gradually undermined by several waves of historiography in recent decades.23 These revisionist studies have provided a more nuanced interpretation that recognizes the PRI’s monopolization of national-level political offices and its regular use of repressive violence—violence that assumed a distinctly harder edge during Adolfo López Mateos’s presidency (1958–64) and that was increasingly directed at both rural and urban leftists during the presidencies of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–70) and Luis
Echeverría (1970–76)—but also effectively highlights how “messiness, ambiguity, contradiction, and diversity” were hallmarks of Mexican state building during the mid-twentieth century, as well as how “considerable cultural, local, and ethnic autonomies” and “salient popular bargaining and veto power” softened the ruling party’s governing style and prompted strategic concessions to regional and local actors, particularly during the 1940s and 1950s.24 The Bracero Program did not generate the kind of radical political activism that became the target of state-sanctioned repression campaigns during the bilateral initiative’s later years. But this study of its administration casts light on how haphazard the policy-making process could be during the middle decades of the twentieth century, and it also reveals a significant instance of high-level officials conceding tangible power to local-level authorities. This concession is all the more striking because it was largely a response to the federal government’s failure to tightly control the bracero selection process and the state governments’ fear that they would overextend their administrative capacities, not popular protests or pressure from municipal officials who wanted to play a greater role in the Bracero Program’s administration.

STRUCTURE

This book’s narrative begins with a top-down perspective that examines federal and state policies and eligibility guidelines, the failed attempt to centralize the bracero selection process in Mexico City during the Bracero Program’s earliest years, and the decision to delegate bracero selection responsibilities to local authorities. It then shifts to a local lens that explores the political factors that fueled popular demand for bracero contracts and the way in which municipal officials used the bracero selection process to advance their own distinct agendas. Chapters 3 and 4 focus specifically on the Greater Bajío; chapters 1, 2, and 5 examine the entirety of the center-north and center-west. Each chapter covers the Bracero Program’s entire duration.

Chapter 1 examines the federal administration of the Bracero Program. Believing that tight control and close oversight of the bracero selection process would minimize domestic agricultural production declines and undocumented migration, federal officials initially required all aspiring braceros to travel to Mexico City and implemented a host of restrictions. But multiple setbacks hampered this attempt at centralization, and federal authorities
gradually reduced their oversight responsibilities and delegated the task of choosing individual braceros to state governments. Chapter 2 focuses on the state governments of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas. Unlike their federal counterparts, center-northern and center-western state officials never seriously considered centralizing the bracero selection process in their jurisdictions and quickly decentralized that process even further. However, state authorities did draft eligibility parameters that granted preference to aspiring braceros who had been affected by natural disasters or whose employment had been disrupted by organized labor conflicts.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the factors that generated demand for bracero contracts in the Greater Bajío. Chapter 3 focuses on how endemic intracommunity conflicts between conservative Catholic opposition factions and pro-government ones influenced individual decisions to seek out bracero contracts. These ongoing clashes contributed directly to landlessness, unemployment, and low wage levels, which in turn generated demand for bracero contracts. Chapter 4 examines ejidatarios and aspiring ejidatarios who wanted to migrate as braceros. Although they had nominally benefited from the agrarian reform, ejidatarios found that the policies that structured the land redistribution process, particularly those that detailed which lands could be redistributed and what ejidatarios could do with their holdings, ultimately constricted their socioeconomic opportunities. At the same time, a growing population of young men found their access to lands blocked by conservative federal administrations that slowed the pace of land redistribution during the years of the Bracero Program. Both frustrated ejidatarios and would-be ejidatarios turned to the Bracero Program for relief.

Chapter 5 returns to an administrative focus, albeit a local one. Municipal officials wasted little time turning control of the bracero selection process to their political and financial advantage. They extorted bribes in exchange for contracts, granted contracts to their local allies, or deprived their rivals of the opportunity to migrate as braceros. In numerous instances, these allies and rivals were embroiled in the intracommunity conflicts that are the focus of chapter 3. Above all, municipal officials prioritized using the Bracero Program to meet their own ends, and they zealously guarded their power whenever there was popular pushback from constituents who were unhappy with how the bracero selection process was being corrupted.

Together, these chapters tell a new and richly detailed story of Mexican migration to the United States during the years of the Bracero Program, one
that has been obscured by contemporary discourses that tend to portray past and present Mexican immigrants as primarily socioeconomic actors—that is, as impoverished individuals who come to the United States in search of higher wages and either fulfill a vital role in the US economy or “take” jobs from American workers—and distill the politics of the Mexico-US migratory process to the rhetoric and policy positions of high-level officials.  

Abandoning Their Beloved Land shows us that bracero migration was more than a socioeconomic phenomenon. It reveals that the Bracero Program was shaped by the political calculations of the officials who administered it and the campesinos who decided to migrate; that in addition to being transnational actors, Mexican officials and aspiring braceros from Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas made decisions in deeply interconnected national, regional, and local political contexts; and that the center-west’s and center-north’s migratory tradition is inextricably linked to both the revolutionary agrarian reform’s flaws and the region’s status as the epicenter of conservative Catholic opposition to government initiatives during the revolutionary and postrevolutionary periods.