Graciela Olivarez: From Mexican American Civil Rights and Antipoverty Activism to the Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future

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Abstract

This report details my research trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center in August 2023. My research agenda was to analyze the work of Graciela Olivarez on the President’s Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. Olivarez became one of the first Latinas to head a federal agency when President Jimmy Carter chose her in 1977 to lead the Community Services Administration (CSA). Olivarez was an active leader in the Mexican American civil rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, before becoming a leader in antipoverty efforts.

John D. Rockefeller, 3rd was the chair and Olivarez the vice-chair of the President’s Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, established in 1970. The Rockefeller Archive Center houses a number of boxes of records related to the formation and actions of that commission. This Commission appointment was a crucial step in Olivarez’s career and was an important factor in her later appointment by President Carter to head the Community Services Administration. I was looking to delve into Olivarez’s role on the Commission, her positions on particular issues – including contraception, abortion, economic issues, environmental impact – the Commission addressed, and others’ perceptions of her role on the Commission. I also was interested to see the ways in which her experience as an antipoverty activist and administrator influenced her perspective on the topic of population growth and the ways in which her experience on the Commission influenced her later work administering the War on Poverty.
My trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in August 2023 was framed by my larger research interests in the life and career of Graciela Olivarez. My current research project builds on my previous scholarship on the War on Poverty and highlights the connections between the Chicano movement, feminism and the War on Poverty through the lens of the life and career of Graciela Olivarez. Olivarez became one of the first Latinas to head a federal agency when President Jimmy Carter chose her in 1977 to head the Community Services Administration (CSA). Olivarez was an active leader in the Mexican American civil rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, before becoming a leader in antipoverty efforts and eventually directing the War on Poverty as head of the CSA from 1977-1980.

I had two primary research goals prior to visiting the RAC. First, I hoped to determine how and why Olivarez was chosen to be one of the members of the Commission and why she was selected to be the vice-chair. Olivarez had plenty of civil rights and antipoverty experience, but she had no expertise or experience on population growth and control. She was not an obvious choice for the Commission. Who had recommended her and why? How had Rockefeller and the Nixon administration been convinced to include her on the Commission and to have her serve as vice-chair? Second, I wanted to review Commission reports, meeting summaries and minutes, correspondence and other materials to learn more about Olivarez’s participation in Commission discussions and debates on the various issues discussed over the life of the Commission. How active of a participant was Olivarez? What were her perspectives on the key issues the Commission debated? How might her positions on some of those issues have informed her later work as running the nation’s War on Poverty as the director of the Community Services Administration? How might her previous civil rights and antipoverty work have shaped the opinions she exhibited on the Commission? I already knew that Olivarez opposed abortion. Indeed, she wrote a dissenting statement in the Commission’s final report, opposing its support of liberalized abortion laws. But how had she expressed that position during Commission meetings? How might her thinking on that issue have informed her antipoverty work or vice versa? What were the perceptions of other commissioners, particularly the chair, John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, about Olivarez? I had previously conducted research in the official records of the President’s Commission on Population Growth and the
American Future at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library. Those records, though, lacked some of the background information on the Commission members and the meeting summaries and minutes that I thought would be very helpful to my study of Olivarez. As a result, the collection of Population Commission records at the Rockefeller Archive Center would be vital to telling the story of Graciela Olivarez’s life and work.

Based on my previous research into Olivarez’s life and career, I suspected that Father Theodore Hesburgh, the president of the University of Notre Dame, likely was one of the people who recommended Olivarez to Rockefeller and/or the Nixon administration. By the time of the creation of the Commission in 1970, Hesburgh and Olivarez had known each other for over a decade. They had initially met when Hesburgh was chair of the US Commission on Civil Rights. Olivarez testified at multiple Commission hearings, at times chastising the Commission for not doing enough to address Mexican American civil rights concerns. Hesburgh was impressed with Olivarez, and they struck up a friendship. Years later, when Olivarez was looking to change jobs, Hesburgh recommended that she become an attorney, even though Olivarez had never completed high school, never mind college. Hesburgh, though, believed Olivarez had the intelligence and determination for law school, so he recommended her to the dean of the Notre Dame Law School. As a result, in 1970, Olivarez became the first woman to graduate from Notre Dame Law School. Indeed, she had not quite finished law school when she was appointed to the Presidential Commission on Population Growth. In addition, John D. Rockefeller, 3rd and Hesburgh knew each other well from their previous service on the President’s Committee on Population Growth during the administration of President Lyndon Johnson. Indeed, Rockefeller often queried Hesburgh about the response of Catholics to population growth issues, like abortion and birth control. Hesburgh had to have been involved in convincing Rockefeller and the Nixon administration to appoint Olivarez, but, until I visited the RAC, I had not found the documentation to support that conclusion. Indeed, my initial research at the RAC showed that Olivarez was not even on the initial lists drawn up by Rockefeller, his staff, or Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the presidential advisor in charge of creating the Commission. Hesburgh’s name was there, though, at least initially.
Graciela Olivarez’s name first appeared on a list of potential Commission members, on April 1, 1970. Rockefeller included extensive handwritten notes next to Olivarez’s name (which was misspelled “Olivares,” something that was not uncommon in the early days of the Commission. In addition, her first name sometimes was misspelled as, “Gracilla.”) Rockefeller’s handwritten notes included the following: “Father Hesburgh – known for 15 years. Headed up poverty program in Arizona. Will grad in June as lawyer. Real leadership qualities. Energetic, bright, very talented, fluent in both languages. Had hard life – husband left her with child. No. 2 on Civil Rights Commission. (Talk to Dean Lawless of Law School – Notre Dame).” Clearly, my suspicions were correct. Rockefeller had consulted his good friend, Father Hesburgh, who had turned down being on the Commission himself and recommended Olivarez, instead.

But Hesburgh’s recommendation of Olivarez was not the only one Rockefeller received. Earlier, in March 1970, George Harrar, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, sent Rockefeller a list of potential candidates for the Commission with his thoughts about them. Harrar wrote this: “On the Mexican American side, Graciela Gil Olivares [sp] is outstanding, knowledgeable, experienced, tough-minded and intelligent. She would be an admirable representative to have on your committee. She is presently at Notre Dame Law School.” Exactly how Harrar knew Olivarez or who he talked to about her is unknown, but his recommendation in support of her could not have been stronger. So, between Harrar and Hesburgh, Rockefeller had robust recommendations for Olivarez from the head of the Rockefeller Foundation and the former chair of the Civil Rights Commission who was also a friend and close confidant. In addition to those recommendations, Olivarez filled Rockefeller’s desire to have Mexican American and Catholic representation on the Commission.

These two recommendations, though, did not guarantee Olivarez’s inclusion on the Commission. Any proposed members had to be approved by the Nixon White House, and by Presidential Counsellor Daniel Patrick Moynihan and his staff, in particular. Indeed, a list Moynihan created on April 20, 1970 – about which he commented, “here is a good, solid list for the Population Commission. Do you think we can wrap it up this week?” – did not include Olivarez. Apparently, though, Rockefeller was not happy with that exclusion. Two days later, Rockefeller’s assistant, David Lelewer, wrote Rockefeller
that he had met with Moynihan and that “Mr. Moynihan will resubmit the names of Olivarez and [Christian] Ramsey.” For whatever reason, the Nixon White House had initially rejected Olivarez. After Lelewer’s conversation with Moynihan and the resubmission of her name, though, Olivarez stayed on every future list of Commission members.⁵

So, while it is clear that Graciela Olivarez was selected to be on the Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future due to a combination of enthusiastic recommendations from Father Hesburgh and George Harrar, and the decision-making of John D. Rockefeller, 3rd to make sure to include a Mexican American and Catholic representative on the Commission, what is not clear is why Olivarez was chosen to be the vice-chair of the Commission. Moynihan sent a memo to Rockefeller in July, but that letter was a mere formality. Indeed, Graciela already had signed the document appointing her as first vice-chair of the Commission (Christian Ramsey a fourth-year medical student served as second vice-chair) in June at the Commission’s first meeting, which came several days after the official White House announcement of the Commission membership. Most likely it was the same combination of reasons that had gotten Olivarez on the Commission that led to her appointment as first vice-chair, but the documentation for that is not complete.⁶

From my review of the transcripts and summaries of Commission meetings, I was able to get a much better sense of Graciela Olivarez’s role on the Commission, how she contributed to discussions of issues in meetings, and her perspective on those issues. In terms of her role on the Commission, Olivarez, as first vice-chair, ran a few of the meetings in Rockefeller’s absence. From all reports, she excelled in this capacity and received the respect of her fellow commissioners. For example, her fellow commissioner, Marilyn “Missy” Chandler, wife of Los Angeles Times publisher Otis Chandler, wrote Rockefeller after a meeting he had missed that “Mrs. Olivares [sp.] ran a good meeting and was an excellent choice for vice chairman....” Following the release of the Commission’s final report and a subsequent meeting with President Richard Nixon at the White House -- a meeting which included Rockefeller, Olivarez, and Ramsey -- Rockefeller wrote a thank-you letter to Olivarez. In it, he told Olivarez, “I do want to send you this further word of special appreciation for your service as Vice-chairman. You really helped me tremendously by sharing the presiding during the last
months when the load became heavier; and, you did it so well, if I may say so.” He also told Olivarez that her “forthright comments were always helpful and appreciated.” Indeed, Rockefeller thought so highly of Olivarez’s work on the Commission, he enthusiastically recommended her for director of the Community Services Administration to the Carter administration years later.7

And Rockefeller was right. Olivarez was not afraid to express her opinions clearly and directly. She was not the most talkative member of the committee, but she made her position clear on the issues that mattered most to her. It is clear from the transcripts and summaries of Commission meetings that Olivarez saw herself as representing three constituencies: Catholics, Mexican Americans, and westerners. As a devout Catholic, Olivarez was opposed to liberalized abortion laws, and she made her position known during any discussions of the issue. For instance, at the April 13, 1971 meeting Olivarez argued that abortion put the onus for contraception on women and allowed men to be irresponsible sexual partners. Indeed, at a previous meeting, Olivarez noted that “she would refuse to endorse an abortion recommendation that did not include a provision for vasectomies,” arguing that the Commission could not “continually talk about the woman’s role in pregnancy and birth, but must also recognize that of the man.”8

The second group of issues of concern to Olivarez were those that impacted Mexican Americans. Olivarez consistently commented that problems affecting Mexican Americans and other racially oppressed groups were not getting enough attention from the Commission. Indeed, she clearly at times saw the Commission’s focus as mostly about concerns that impacted whites. One of those issues that she saw as significant to Mexican Americans was immigration. In several meetings, Olivarez raised the argument that undocumented immigrants were depressing wages in the Southwest and were a key reason for the economic challenges and poverty that faced some Mexican Americans there.9

She saw those issues as closely related to what she saw as the Commission’s general ignorance of issues in the American West. On more than one occasion, Olivarez noted that Commission statements about national population growth ignored the realities in the American West. At a Commission meeting in February 1972, members of the Commission discussed the creation of a television program about the Commission and
the establishment of a Citizens Committee to continue some of the work of the Commission. Olivarez objected, saying, “The Committee is going to be made up of New Yorkers. Who can afford to be flying in every week?”

Her meeting comments about representation, immigration, and abortion, though, ultimately really were about poverty, which was her central concern. One topic that consumed the Commission’s time was population stabilization and distribution. In a discussion about population stabilization, Olivarez contended that “arguing that stabilization is needed to free resources to alleviate social ills is a ‘cop out’ because those resources are available now, and there is no guarantee they will be put to socially worthwhile uses any more than they are now.” And, in a discussion about the possibilities of a redistribution of the population, Olivarez argued that such a policy would be very expensive and put an undue burden on the poor, who could not afford it.

Much of the documentation and results of my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center still need further analysis, particularly in comparison to materials on Olivarez from other archival collections and repositories. I have not done that yet, but hope to do so in the near future. What is clear from the materials at the RAC, though, is that John D. Rockefeller, 3rd and the Nixon administration chose Olivarez to be on the President’s Commission on Population Growth and the American Future in part due to her previous antipoverty work, her relationship with Father Theodore Hesburgh, and her work in Mexican American civil rights. In addition, transcripts and summaries of Commission meetings demonstrate a confident and forthright Olivarez, well-respected by Rockefeller and other Commission members, who was particularly engaged with two or three primary issues related to population growth – abortion, immigration, and poverty – and especially interested in how those issues impacted Mexican Americans. Her positions on some of these issues and her work on the Commission clearly led to her appointment several years later to the position of director of the Community Services Administration and her continued work on issues related to poverty and civil rights.
See, for example, John D. Rockefeller, 3rd to Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, March 1, 1972 and Hesburgh to Rockefeller, March 6, 1972, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Associates Papers, David K. Lelewer, Series 4 – Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, Box 1, Folder “Commission on Population Growth and the American Future – Opposition.” All citations are from records in the Rockefeller Archive Center.


Christian Ramsey was a fourth-year medical student who became the second vice-chair for the Commission. Daniel Patrick Moynihan to Harry Flemming, April 20, 1970; and, David Lelewer to John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, April 22, 1970, John D. Rockefeller Associates Papers, David K. Lelewer Papers, Box 1, Folder – CPGAF General Correspondence.


Quote is from Summary of Meeting of the President’s Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, December 21-22, 1970, John D. Rockefeller Associates, David K. Lelewer Papers, Box 1, Folder CPGAF Meetings. See also, Summary of Commission Meeting, April 13, 1971, Lelewer Files, Box 1, Folder CPGAF Meetings.

See, for example, Olivarez’s comments represented in Summary of Commission Meeting for March 16-17, 1971 and August 15-16, 1971, David K. Lelewer Papers, Box 1, Folder -- CPGAF Meetings.

Quote is from Transcript of February 4, 1972 Commission Meeting, Lelewer Files, Box 1, Folder – CPGAF Meetings. See also, Summary of Commission Meetings for July 13-14, 1971 and August 15-16, 1971, Lelewer Papers, Box 1, Folder – CPGAF Meetings.

See Summaries of Meetings for July 13-14, 1971 and November 29-December 1, 1971, Lelewer P, Bapersox 1, Folder CPGAF Meetings.