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California Latino Politics: The Fight for Inclusion—Then and Now

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In *The Search for a Civic Voice*, Kenneth C. Burt presents his readers with a detailed accounting of Latino involvement in electoral politics. Burt addresses three key issues: what are the origins of modern Latino politics, what lessons can be drawn from these early pioneers, and what

is the state of Latino politics today? Burt contends that the origins of Latino political involvement date back much earlier than academics and activists generally acknowledge. He dates its origins from the evening of April 28, 1939, the first meeting of El Congreso or the First National Congress of Mexican and Spanish American People's of the United States.

Burt's historical analysis traces the birth of the Latino movement to the early efforts of prominent individuals such as Eduardo Quevedo, Luisa Moreno, Saul Alinsky, Fred Ross, and Edward R. Roybal. The groundswell of political activism coincides with the emergence of a broad coalition of diverse ethnic groups such as Jewish, Japanese, and Mexican Americans and key actors such as labor

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unions and the Catholic Church, who banded together to accomplish common goals.

The most telling things about these early political activists are the lessons extracted from their failures as well as their successes. These activists faced a daunting political climate that included police discrimination as illustrated through cases such as the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon trial, the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots, and the 1951 Bloody Christmas Beating. Edward R. Roybal, who lost the Los Angeles Council race in 1947, formed the Community Service Organization (CSO) with the aid of community organizers Fred Ross and Saul Alinsky. The CSO aided in voter registration drives that contributed to Roybal's electoral victory in 1949 and his subsequent re-election, serving on the Los Angeles City Council until 1962. The grassroots organizations extended beyond elections as both César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, who previously trained under Fred Ross and helped with voter registration drives, eventually left CSO to form the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in 1962 to organize on behalf of California farm workers.

Burt argues that voter drives were crucial to the success of Latino political organization by the early community activists. The major role played by Latino voters in the 2008 presidential election is a tribute to their pioneering efforts and signaled a seismic shift in California politics. On July 10, 2008, several civic organizations formed a

nationwide alliance to launch voter registration drives called the We Are America Alliance (WAAA). The WAAA registered some 468,541 new voters. According to WAAA's voter registration goals,¹ registration totals by state include 87,554 new voters in California, 84,345 in Florida, 34,490 in Pennsylvania, 25,173 in Texas, 27,026 in Illinois, 18,166 in Arizona, 16,640 in New York, 33,573 in Colorado, 51,782 in Nevada, 80,477 in New Mexico, 8,000 in Maine, 680 in New Hampshire, and 635 in Virginia.

The political significance of the increase in the number of Latinos registered to vote was evident in battleground states, such as Florida, Colorado, and Virginia. According to a press release from the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC):

Latino voters provided the margin of victory for Obama in key battleground states. In Florida where Obama won by just 198,303, Latinos cast 14% of the ballots and supported Obama (57%) over McCain (42%). In Colorado where Obama won by 138,521 votes, Latinos cast 17% of the ballots and supported Obama (73%) over McCain (27%). In Virginia where Obama won by 155,862 votes, Latinos cast 5% of the ballots and supported Obama (65%) over McCain (34%).²

Another key to Latino political gains has been the organization of an expanding web of political alliances. Alliances were a critical component to the early political activists, who focused their efforts on creating broad-based social, political, and economic ties. Roybal's 1951 electoral victory in Boyle Heights was a product of years of work by activists to weld coalitions of diverse community groups into an electoral majority by stressing issues that cut across ethnic and racial divisions (p. 114).

In 2004, George Sánchez wrote about the multiracial efforts by Jewish communities that were part of the broad-based alliances cited by Burt. Sánchez, relying on minutes of board meetings of the Soto-Michigan Jewish Community Center, wrote:

The Soto-Michigan Jewish Community Center began to distinguish itself through innovative programming aimed at addressing the changing nature of the Boyle Heights community and the need for increased intercultural work in the neighborhood. Led by Mel Janapol, board member in charge of "intercultural activities," this effort began by inviting non-Jewish youth from outside the community to a model seder at the Jewish Center. At the same time, youth director Mark Keats organized the first Friendship Festival in spring 1949 at the Fresno Playground, to "bring

together Mexican, Japanese, Negro, and Jewish youth in a cooperative venture." By the following year, the "Festival of Friendship" had grown to include a three-hour formal arts program, a parade, food sales, and an art exhibit. More than 12,000 people attended, with 1,500 participating in the parade alone. Later that year, a late autumn intercultural week included a Jewish-American cultural night next to evenings dedicated to the cultural contributions of Japanese Americans, Negro Americans, and Mexican Americans.³

The final key to the initial success and the ongoing impact of Latino political organizations has been their emphasis on maintaining and updating the links that bind the alliances. Given the variable nature of alliances, activists had to remain diligent. Burt suggests that if Latinos are to sustain a prominent role in politics, alliances must not only be preserved, they must be broadened to include labor unions, veterans organization, and business associations.

Burt offers a frank assessment of the grim realities that remain before California Latinos can convert their demographic numbers into serious political power. Burt raises a number of critical issues yet to be explored, particularly the alarmingly low rates of registration and turnout among Latinos voters and the plethora of social and economic issues they face.

Why don't Latinos vote, and to what extent do California Latino politics reflect that of Latinos elsewhere in the United States? While Latinos are the largest minority group in California, they are themselves a diverse group rather a unified voting bloc. The experiences of a Cuban immigrant may be in stark contrast with those of an immigrant from El Salvador. While the two may share a common language and a broader affiliation to Latin America, that may be all that they share. Scholars frequently use the term "Latino" to speak about this large ethnic minority, but little comparative analysis has been done to draw out the distinctions between these minorities and how their experiences shape their understanding or involvement in American politics.

What accounts for the fluctuations in Latino political engagement? Do Latinos turn out when a particular issue is of salience or is there a broader connection between the Latino community and Latino politicians to maintain a steady level of engagement on a broad range of issues relevant to Latino communities? Burt says Latinos supported Ronald Reagan over incumbent Governor Pat Brown in 1966 because Latino leaders were unable to deliver the Latino vote for Brown, and Republicans appealed to dissatisfaction among older, more traditional Mexican Americans who were dissatisfied with the direction of the country during the Vietnam War.

The issue of "targeted mobilization," used by both Democratic and Republican parties, speaks to a larger problem with low voter turnout among Latinos. Latino votes are often sought during tight races and as a result, political parties and organizations use "targeted mobilization" to reach out to Latino voters with broader themes, such as family values, which resonate in the Latino community.

Latino electoral politics is not a top down affair but a bottom up process that relies on and requires an emphasis on community level politics. Latino candidates need to return to the community and engage citizens at the local level, not simply appearing in the run-up to an election but seeing that they maintain a presence and that their voice is in off election years.

In July 1999, the *Los Angeles Times* printed an interview with Roybal after the electoral victories of Alex Padilla and Nick Pacheco. Roybal acknowledged that Latinos have made great strides: "There were 30 times as many Latino lawmakers in California as when he first took office 50 years ago. Yet, despite these gains, numerous problems remain."⁴ The problems persist, according to Roybal, because politicians lack a community spirit.

Burt's findings hold significance for political activists and Latino candidates who seek to raise the level of Latino involvement in politics. The Latino population has become the largest ethnic minority group in California (34 percent) based on the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau. Demographers

predict that by 2025, Latinos will be the largest population in the state.

Yet, Latino voter turnout does not reflect the power of their numbers. In California, Latinos represent 14 percent of voters and 63 percent of nonvoters.⁵ Whether Latino political activists come from college clubs, organizations such as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHS), or Latino politicians like Councilman José Huizar, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, or United States Department of Labor Secretary, and former member of Congress, Hilda Solis, the message remains the same. Much like the difficulties former Councilman Roybal alluded to, politicians and community-based organizations have to connect with people in the community and get them involved in the political debates.

If Latino candidates want to seize on these newly registered Latinos beyond the 2008 presidential election, it is critical to ensure that the concerns of these voters are heard during nonelection cycles, in forums that address social, political, and economic concerns critical to their communities.

Notes

¹ For more information, visit the WAAA website “WAAA Nears Voter Registration Goals” at <<http://www.weareamericaalliance.org/go/news/waaa-nears-voter-registration-goals/>>.

² Press release: “Historic Latino Voter Turnout Helps Elect Barack Obama,” dated November 5, 2008. Accessed November 21, 2008 <<http://www.lulac.org/advocacy/press/2008/obamaelected.html>>.

³ G. Sánchez, “What’s Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s,” *American Quarterly* 56:3 (2004): 633–61.

⁴ A. Olivo, “Grandfather of Latino Politics Faults New Leaders,” *Los Angeles Times*, (July 27, 1999), B1.

⁵ Mark Baldassare, “California’s Exclusive Electorate,” *Public Policy Institute*, September 2006, p. 6.