

Book Review

California Latino Politics

In 1994 Republican governor Pete Wilson won reelection with nativist appeals to criminalize undocumented immigrants and racist attacks on affirmative action. In 2005 Antonio Vilaraigosa became the first Latino Mayor of Los Angeles since 1872. By 2007, a record twenty-five Latinos held seats in the California State legislature; three of the last four Speakers of the Assembly have been Latino; and seven Latinos are members of the U.S. Congress. Few experts predicted this historic transformation in the state's political landscape.

Historian Kenneth Burt in *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics*, provides a timely analysis of the origins of contemporary Latino political power in the Golden State. Burt, the political director of the California Federation of Teachers, seeks to uncover a 'usable past' to provide lessons for building a new California progressivism informed by 1940s and 1950s Latino civic engagement, labor politics, and coalition-building. He views the election of Edward Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council in 1949, and then his landslide reelection in 1951, as the beginnings of the Latino quest for a voice in California politics.

Burt's fundamental contribution draws upon hundreds of oral interviews and extensive archival research to analyze the reasons for Roybal's election as the first Latino in the twentieth century to serve on the Los Angeles City Council since the 1870s, and to identify the constituencies and interest groups that coalesced to revitalize the Los Angeles liberal left in the late 1940s, and the entire state a decade later.

Burt traces how Latinos emerged as a major political force after the Mexican-American Political Association (MAPA) was started in 1960 and developed the organizational capacity to mobilize Latino voters at the local, state, and federal level.

Pillars of support

His narrative begins when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) emerged after the split with the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor in the 1930s. In Los Angeles, the left-led industrial unions with substantial Latino membership in the garment, electrical, steel, shipping and packing-house industries were the first pillar of support for Roybal.

The second pillar of the L.A. labor-left in the 1940s was the Catholic Church. In the working class and Latino communities of Eastside Los Angeles Fred Ross and Edward Roybal, both trained and inspired by the legendary Chicago community organizer Saul Alinsky, organized the Community Service Organization

(CSO). The CSO won the backing of the CIO and the Catholic Church—particularly Los Angeles Archdiocese Bishop Joseph McGrucken. Labor organizers and parish priests staffed the CSO and the organization evolved from providing services to registering voters. CSO registered 15,000 new predominantly Latino voters by 1949, trained hundreds of Eastside residents to become community activists, and leveraged resources from organized labor and the church to build support for Roybal's campaign.

According to Burt the third pillar of Los Angeles progressivism was coalition politics nurtured in the polyglot Eastside community of Boyle Heights that included Latinos, African-Americans,



Japanese, Yiddish-speaking Jews, Irish, and other white ethnics. Burt shows how Roybal and the CSO knit together an ethnic tapestry with class-based issues such as public housing and rent control, improved public transit, more libraries and better public education, coupled with strong opposition to

employment discrimination and to racist police harassment and attacks on minorities.

Roybal and the CSO won support from the NAACP, Japanese American Citizen League, Jewish Community Relations Council and other ethnic organizations. Prominent Jewish businessmen became major donors and helped to create stable funding for CSO, a Latino organization. Liberal Democrats, the Independent Progressive Party, and the Communist Party all supported Roybal.


Revitalizing from the bottom up

By the late 50s, CSO and the Roybal machine built a social movement and independent power base in East Los Angeles and established an enduring city-wide coalition that could be replicated throughout California. CSO organized twenty major chapters that registered 440,000 new voters by 1960; according to Burt CSO shifted the terrain of local politics to revitalize the Democratic Party from the bottom up.

Pat Brown's gubernatorial victory, with CSO support, over the Republican ultraconservative William Knowland and the defeat of the 1958 anti-union

'right to work' Proposition 18, were a watershed in California politics. Burt traces how Latinos emerged as a major political force after the Mexican-American Political Association (MAPA) was started in 1960 and developed the organizational capacity to mobilize Latino voters at the local, state, and federal level.

In his concluding chapters Burt explores the rebirth of California progressivism. He draws a direct line between the community organizing and coalition building by CSO in the 1940s and the formation of community-labor coalitions in Los Angeles, San Jose, Oakland, and San Diego in the 1990s. These more recent community coalitions have won approval by local government for living wage laws, supported expansion of state provided health care for low income residents, and negotiated 'community benefit agreements' to ensure that public monies provided to private developers create good jobs. The new labor movement is deeply involved in the struggle to defend the rights of undocumented workers and a leading opponent of another bracero or 'guest worker' program.

Kenneth Burt has written an exceptional book: he provides readers with a clear lens to view the past and to understand the rise of Latino California. For more information, go to www.kennethburt.com. 

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