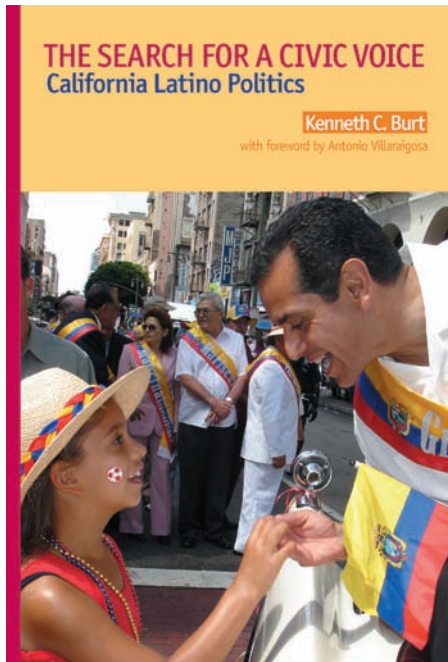


## An Overdue Examination of Latino Politics in California:

### A Review of *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics*

by *Kenneth C. Burt*  
(Regina Books, 2007)

Reviewed by *Henry A.J. Ramos*



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It is ironic, given California's historic significance in American politics and the size of its Latino population, that so relatively few books have meaningfully examined the evolution of Latino politics in the state and the impacts of growing Latino involvement in California political life on national political leadership and policy. Kenneth C. Burt's *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics* helps substantially to fill this void.

Indeed, Burt's comprehensive book (more than 350 pages in length) establishes itself as a seminal contribution to the literature. It does so for the breadth of its coverage, the unique insights it provides drawing often on little known, but fascinating, facts, and the author's remarkable capacity to synthesize the various epochs of Latino politics into a coherent narrative that helps the reader piece together otherwise seemingly disconnected developments in the trajectory of Latino public life.

The book covers leadership and developments from the late 1930s through the present, with a particular focus on the critically important fifty-year history dating from 1938, with the rise of the First National Congress of Mexican and Spanish Speaking Peoples of the United States (El Congreso) in Los Angeles, to 1978 and the gubernatorial administration of former California Governor Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown Jr., which led to the landmark California Agricultural Labor Relations Act and the rise of the conservative Reagan revolution

that still informs much of the nation's political culture.

One of Burt's central theses, which he firmly establishes in his book, is that "modern" California Latino politics actually began not with the renowned and popularly invoked farm labor movement led by César Chávez but rather with the civic- and labor-oriented efforts of Latino leaders of the 1930s, often working in tandem with Jewish, African American, and progressive Anglo leaders. These efforts in turn were advanced in later years by groundbreaking civic and political leaders. These included Edward Roybal, former Los Angeles city council member and California congressman; Henry López, the Harvard-educated 1958 California statewide political candidate; James Carlos McCormick, Kennedy campaign and presidential aide who led the hugely effective *Vive Kennedy!* effort that helped to elevate Latino political visibility onto the national stage; and Herman Gallegos, the San Francisco Bay Area-based founding president of the National Council of La Raza.

As suggested earlier, a key by-product of formative Latino community political strategy based on highly limited political representation was the necessity of creative coalition building with other key elements of the body politic seeking needed reforms to address their shared interests. Burt chronicles resulting Latino partnerships with not only other racial and ethnic groups to achieve common aims in California, but also collaborations with leading labor and religious leaders, as well as more enlightened mainstream politicians to gain power and influence change.

A culminating and instructive victory resulting from such strategic coalition building, not widely recalled today, was

the 1961 passage of a Non-Citizens Old Age Pension measure that then Community Service Organization (CSO) leader Dolores Huerta helped to shepherd through the state legislature. Through successful organizing involving support from labor, religious, and progressive leaders across the state, Latino leaders like Huerta were able to persuade both the California assembly and senate—neither of which at the time had a single Latino sitting member—to approve the extension of retirement benefits to qualifying rural and urban noncitizens. Former California Governor Pat Brown signed the bill into law. By any measure, such a victory was epic; and it is difficult even today to fully comprehend the incredible odds Huerta and her colleagues faced in achieving such a victory.

On this note, another of Burt's important organizing insights in his book is his acknowledgement that women played a much more significant leadership role in key chapters of Latino political life than most observers have recognized. Leaders like Luisa Moreno, founder of *El Congreso*, Maria Duran and Hope Mendoza of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, and Huerta, the early CSO and United Farm Workers organizer, all contributed singularly to the advancement of Latino political empowerment in California.

More generally, Burt's analysis shows how early formative efforts by California Latino and Latina leaders to gain influence and status in the state and national Democratic Party, along with substantial demographic growth in the Latino population of California and other key states, ultimately pressed Republican leaders to also incorporate Latino concerns, beginning with former President Richard Nixon and extending to former President Ronald Reagan. Through this process of

Latino integration into the major political parties, Latino leaders were able to, in turn, garner important policy and representational concessions from both parties leading to the present day's political landscape in which Latino leadership in California is much more aligned with the Latino community's robust share of the state's population. Indeed, four of the last six speakers of the California Assembly have been Latinos, and presently more than forty California cities and municipalities are governed by Latino mayors, including Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who is also a former assembly speaker.

*The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics* is a comprehensively researched and well-written recount of essential and often new information about the Latino political journey and contribution to public life in California and the nation. It is worthy and indeed essential reading for all students of Latino political life, as well as more general readers who wish to inform themselves of the origins of contemporary Latino political advancement.