

CALIFORNIANA

Vol. 17 No. 2 | Fall 2007

Book Review



The Search For A Civic Voice: California Latino Politics

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The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics

Kenneth Burt's *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics* is a compelling historical walkthrough of the political empowerment strategies used by Latinos in the 1940's through the 1990s and the present. Starting in Boyle Heights with the 1949 election of Ed Roybal, the first Mexican American to be elected to the Los Angeles City Council, and ending with the 2005 election of Antonio Villaraigosa, the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles in more than 100 years, *Civic Voice* is a story of Latino firsts—the first judges, city council members, mayors and state legislators.

Using more than 200 oral histories, archival research and academic literature from a number of fields, the narrative of *Civic Voice* reflects the author's own career in politics as a participant-observer. In the tradition of Ernesto Galarza and Carey McWilliams, *Civic Voice* is the story of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

The author reveals that Latino electoral success occurred much earlier than is commonly understood. In 1947, Ed Roybal, a World War II veteran, first ran for L.A. city council and was defeated. The following year he founded and became the first president of the Community Service Organization (CSO), which registered 15,000 Mexican American voters during the election of 1948, and recruited 1,000 members in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles. The CSO was affiliated

with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a multiethnic working class community organization started by the legendary Saul Alinsky. CSO's chief organizer was Fred Ross, who some years later was to train as his protégé a young organizer named Cesar Chavez.

Stressing the civil rights of Latinos and working closely with the Jewish community of Boyle Heights, Roybal and Ross put together a multiethnic political organization that elevated Roybal one year later to the city council. Roybal served on the city council until 1962, when he was elected to Congress and served for the next 30 years.

Fast forward through the next 300 pages of *Civic Voice* and you will see four generations of Latino movement and political leaders; Chavez, then Alatorre and Torres, then Molina and Villaraigosa, then Nuñez and Padilla—all using Roybal's model of civic participation—extending voting rights by eliminating discriminatory practices and engaging in outreach to turn out the vote.

An example of the "new style" of campaigning reminiscent of Roybal's initial win in 1949, was a labor-immigrant coalition electing a former labor official, Gill Cedillo, for an Assembly seat in a 1997 special election. Cedillo, a progressive coalition builder, had ties to the old Latino and Jewish groups central to Boyle Heights in the 1940s. The Latino Caucus chaired by Senator

Richard Polanco prodded business interests to pay for flyers in the final days of the election. The author attributes Cedillo's resounding election win to a rebirthing of a Latino-labor alliance in concert with other ethnic and minority communities.

The author draws parallels between the civil rights responses to two historical events that galvanized the electorate to put Latinos into office: the Zoot Suit Riots of the 1940s (when police and military authorities did little to control mobs of off-duty soldiers and sailors from indiscriminate attacks on Latino youths) and the passage of Proposition 187 in 1994 (and the race-baiting associated with it). One constant during that time was the Community Service Organization. CSO registered 440,000 voters between 1947 and 1960, all the while organizing groups over civil rights and Latino empowerment. A 1960 CSO sponsored bill AB 5 (Burton) the "Non-Citizen Old Age Pension" bill made non-citizens in the state eligible for old-age pensions. A Stockton school teacher and CSO leader, Delores Huerta, was chief lobbyist for the bill signed by Governor Brown in 1961 and it remained law for 25 years. Huerta would later go on to become vice-president of the United Farm Workers and an icon of Latina empowerment for half a century.

Again, *Civic Voice* is a story of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. ■