

Pat Brown and the Emergence of Latinos in California Politics By Kenneth C. Burt



Governor Pat Brown with education advisor Armando Rodriguez. The first Latino school principal in San Diego, Rodriguez successfully promoted bilingual education in the state and nation. Source: Armando Rodriguez

Cinco de Mayo celebrates Mexico's victory over the French in 1862. In California, where this long ago military victory has assumed the status of a major cultural celebration within the Latino community, the day provides an opportune time to examine the historic rise of Latino civic engagement within the larger civil rights agenda that shaped 20th century California. Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown played a very important role in this developing story. He used his good offices to advance civil rights and at the same time was continually pressured to move even more quickly by social activists outside of government.

It is important to place the struggles for social justice in historical context, beginning with

World War II and the all-out effort to defeat Adolf Hitler and Nazism. To ensure the utilization of all Americans in the conflict, President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 issued Executive Order 8802, outlawing "discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin." Mexican Americans, many of whom were the children of immigrants, served in large numbers in the military overseas and on the home front in these newly-integrated defense industries.

California factories produced ships, planes, and uniforms for use in World War II. California farms grew food for the troops and a hungry nation. The expansion of urban jobs and the opening of these positions to Latinos created economic opportunity and led to upward mobility. The economic impact was two-fold: both the new jobs themselves and the filling of these new jobs,



The Democratic Party headquarters in the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles in 1958. Note that the candidates included Pat Brown for governor, Henry Lopez for secretary of state, and Edward Roybal for Los Angeles county supervisor. Source: Kenneth C. Burt

thereby opening up other positions. For example, garment worker Hope Mendoza was among those who found better-paying employment. Lockheed hired her as a “Rosie the Riveter,” making planes in Los Angeles. Another person filled her old spot, as the factory shifted from producing domestic clothes to military uniforms.

Culbert Olson, California’s first Democratic governor in the twentieth century (1939-43), sought to enforce fair employment rules. He was also the first governor to court the Latino vote and to appoint multiple Latinos to state government posts. Olson appointed a Latino to the San Diego municipal court and named several to state boards and commissions.¹

Governor Olson used the 1942 Democratic State Convention to articulate a commitment to racial liberalism, a policy reflected in the party platform.

On the home front we recognize that civil rights must be preserved, and we will fight racial discrimination with all our powers.

By putting into immediate practice one of the tenets of the new democracy we are fighting for, we not only set an example to all other states but actually increase the manpower available for production. All racial groups, especially our Negro population and our citizens of Mexican descent deserve and will receive equal opportunity in education, work, and in every war activity.

We pledge ourselves to provide the machinery for the enforcement, so far as it lies within the state’s power, of the Fair Employment Practices Act. Not only is it essential to provide jobs within war plants, but training centers, schools, and other preparatory facilities must be kept open for all on a basis of complete equality regardless of race, color or creed.²

The 1942 gubernatorial campaign enshrined civil rights into the Democratic agenda even as the party’s candidates suffered widespread defeats. Republican Attorney General Earl Warren defeated Olson, and the Democrats became a minority in both legislative houses despite having a numerical majority among voters. This placed the larger civil rights agenda on hold, despite Warren’s personal support for greater fairness because the Republicans

and conservative Democrats controlled the legislature.

The year after Democrats suffered such painful defeats, Pat Brown won election as San Francisco District Attorney in 1943. He sought to advance his career and to rebuild the Democratic Party. Key contacts within his emerging network included Mexican-born lawyer Philip Newman, an attorney for the Mexican Embassy in Los Angeles. Brown enjoyed Newman’s support when Brown ran unsuccessfully for state attorney general in 1946. That year, Newman served as the vice chair of the California Democratic Party’s Spanish-speaking division. Brown won the office in 1950 with the assistance of a growing group of Mexican American voters in Los Angeles.

Between Brown’s 1946 and 1950 campaigns for attorney general, the number of Mexican Americans registered to vote jumped significantly, as did the community’s self-organization. Tuberculosis educator Edward Roybal and garment union organizer Hope Mendoza were among the young community leaders who founded the Community Service Organization (CSO), which was affiliated with Saul Alinsky in Chicago. CSO registered 15,000 voters prior to the 1948 presidential election. In 1949, the organization—in



Henry Lopez, the Democratic nominee for secretary of state, poses with gubernatorial candidate Pat Brown during the 1958 campaign. Lopez’s nomination and narrow defeat at the polls represented a triumph and a tragedy for the emerging Latino community. Source: Kenneth C. Burt

partnership with the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the garment and steel unions—elected Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council. In 1950, this network supported Pat Brown.³

CSO grew throughout the fifties, registering tens of thousands of new voters in cities up and down the state. While CSO promoted civic engagement, it did not endorse candidates. A number of CSO members and those associated with the growing middle class moved into the Democratic Party and participated in partisan politics through the liberal club movement and its parent body, the California Democratic Council (CDC).

In 1958, Mexican Americans, CSO, CDC, and organized labor joined together in supporting gubernatorial candidate Pat Brown. Latino workers also rallied to defend the right of workers to engage in collective bargaining, which was facing an attack from U.S. Senator and Republican gubernatorial candidate William F. Knowland, the sponsor of a right-to-work voter initiative.



Los Angeles United Auto Workers' leader Henry Lacayo, Governor Pat Brown, and UAW President Walter Reuther at a banquet honoring California Latino labor leaders in Los Angeles. The dinner was part of a larger effort to stimulate support for Brown in his 1966 campaign against actor Ronald Reagan. Source: Henry Lacayo

In the campaign, Brown stressed the state's growing diversity, recognizing the presence of "more than a million persons of Mexican descent in the state." He pledged to support a fair employment law, as is "now in effect in fourteen states." Moreover, he pledged to initiate "within thirty days of becoming governor" a meeting of "leaders in business, in labor, in government and in all aspects of our lives" to find solutions to challenges in the "field of human relations."⁴

Latino supporters operating under the auspices of the multicultural Community Groups for Pat Brown opened a Democratic Party headquarters at Fourth and Soto Streets in Boyle Heights, the heart of Latino Los Angeles. Labor leader and former CSO president J.J. Rodriguez served as cochair. Attorney Philip Newman, theater owner Frank Fouce, and engineer Alexander Zambrano represented the business and professional sectors.⁵

Latino leaders enthusiastically campaigned for Brown despite some private frustration with the standard bearer. The grievances revolved around the desire to elect one of their own to statewide office. Behind the scenes, Brown prevented Roybal from becoming the candidate for lieutenant governor. "Attorney General Brown felt that it would be detrimental to the Democratic Party to have two candidates who are Catholic running on the same ticket," said Roybal, who decided to run for another office. Then, after CDC helped ensure the nomination of CSO and CDC activist Henry Lopez for secretary of state, Brown failed to campaign for Lopez, a World War II veteran and Harvard-educated attorney.⁶

From Brown's vantage point, he was seeking to maintain a largely nonpartisan image even as he ran as a Democrat, given the minority status of the Democrats in statewide politics. In the election he received the backing of moderate Republicans who were angry that their party was lurching to the right and attacking organized labor. Statewide Democrats were largely responsible for raising their own funds and running their own campaigns.

Mexican Americans viewed this political approach with alarm; some attributed racial motives to its design and implementation. Attorney Herman Sillas believed that Brown's decision not to campaign with Lopez reflected an "anti-Mexican bias" among the general public and a political calculation relative to the limited number of Latino votes "as a percentage of the total."⁷ The hurt feeling lasted because Lopez was the only statewide Democratic candidate to lose in 1958. Lopez's narrow defeat represented a missed opportunity for Mexican Americans, with lasting consequences.⁸

Latino anger at the defeat of Lopez served as the impetus for the formation of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). MAPA served a vehicle for middle class activists. Its leaders included Edward Roybal, the first CSO

president, who was elected to Congress in 1962; and labor leader-turned-businessman Bert Corona.

And yet Brown's gubernatorial victory, joined to a major set of Democratic victories up and down the ballot, created the potential for major steps toward equality. Mexican Americans remained loyal to Brown throughout his administration, but pushed him continually to do more for a growing community. In 1959, he signed the Fair Employment Practices Act. Two years later, he signed the CSO's top legislative priority: noncitizen old-age pensions for working-class immigrants, with the state and federal government splitting the costs.⁹ In celebrating Brown's signing of the bill, CSO emphasized the 400,000 people it registered to vote between 1948 and 1960.¹⁰ The ability to fund elderly immigrants lacking citizenship—in 1961!—stands as a remarkable feat in light of today's contentious debate over immigration.

Brown also appointed CSO leader Dolores Huerta to the Industrial Welfare Commission's Agricultural Wage Board. The IWC raised wages of women and minors in agriculture in 1961, but the governor was slow to embrace the Huerta- and Cesar Chavez-led United Farm Workers (UFW). The unionization of farm workers pitted Mexican Americans against two other traditional Democratic allies, the Teamsters Union and farmers, whose rural legislators Brown needed to enact his larger liberal agenda. Within a year of the start of the 1965 grape strike, Brown did embrace *la causa* and the UFW endorsed the governor's unsuccessful reelection campaign against actor Ronald Reagan in 1966.¹¹

Brown made history by appointing more Latinos to positions in state government than all his predecessors combined. He named a number of Mexican Americans to judicial posts, including his old friend, Newman, and to other positions in the government. He tapped future state Supreme Court justice Cruz Reynoso, an early CSO leader, as a personal assistant, and Armando Rodriguez, another early CSO leader, to develop an educational strategy for Latinos; this led to the adoption of bilingual education. Brown likewise spent more time with the Latino community than any previous chief executive: he addressed MAPA, LULAC, and the GI Forum, and the 1962-established Spanish-Speaking Committee to reelect Governor Brown.¹²

Latinos likewise benefited from a major housing bill pushed by the black- and labor-led civil

rights coalition, of which CSO was a part. Brown signed the Rumford Fair Housing Act in 1963. This landmark bill benefited Latinos as had Roosevelt's executive order in 1941 and Brown's fair housing legislation in 1959.

Passage of these bills for noncitizen old age pensions, fair employment, and fair housing are significant given the existing political and structural barriers to reform. California was then largely an Anglo state, with a relatively small number of minority voters; the 120-member state legislature included only two blacks and no Latinos during the period 1959 to 1961 and just two Latinos, Philip Soto and John Moreno, from 1963 to 1965; and rural conservatives held disproportionate power because the state senate was then apportioned by county and not by population, with Los Angeles having only a single senator.

These obstacles made the passage of the three civil rights measures a bigger achievement than is largely recognized. Advances in civil rights were possible because of the combination of the liberalism and political skills of Brown and other civil rights advocates in Sacramento, the large Democratic victories in 1958, and the determined grassroots organizing by the liberal-labor-minority coalition across the state.

The struggle to achieve economic and social justice for Latinos, which took a step forward in the early 1940s, and continued to advance in subsequent decades, has continued to evolve because of the ever-increasing size of the Latino community. Governor Pat Brown played a formidable role in this development at a pivotal moment in the state's history.

As we look back today from an era in which Latinos are the principal minority group in California politics, with significant success not only in mobilizing their vote, but also in electing public officials, and actually providing the foundation for Democratic dominance in a state long led by Republicans, the significance of Governor Brown's strong if at times contentious relationship with an emerging and dynamic Latino community seems more important than ever. The ties between Pat Brown and the Latino community, even if at times frayed, were crucial to the expansion of California politics and government to encompass the needs of a diverse and dynamic state.

Kenneth C. Burt is the author of *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics* (2007), which he completed as the Carey McWilliams Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley. He is political director of the California Federation of Teachers and a board member of the Pat Brown Institute and *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy*. For more information or to reach him, go to www.KennethBurt.com.

¹ Kenneth C. Burt, *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 2007), 29-52.

² “Democratic Platform Keys Election to Victory Issues: Gov. Olson’s Address Lashes Appeasers,” *Labor Herald*, Sept. 25, 1942, 1.

³ Kenneth C. Burt, “The Power of a Mobilized Citizenry and Coalition Politics: The 1949 Election of Edward R. Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council,” *Southern California Quarterly*, vol. 85, vol. 4 (Winter 2003).

⁴ Brown, Statement on Civil Rights, 1958, Box 56, Folder “Minority Group Data,” Edmund G. “Pat” Brown Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵ Letter, Edward Rodriguez, Community Groups for Pat Brown, to “Hello,” Sept 3, 1958, Box 3, Folder “Governor Brown,” Edward Roybal Papers, Special Collections, UCLA.

⁶ Author’s interview with Edward Roybal, Los Angeles, Nov. 2, 1981, and Pasadena, March 10, 1995; Author’s interview with Henry Lopez, 1981, Los Angeles; Kenneth Burt, *The History of MAPA and Chicano Politics* (Sacramento: MAPA, 1982).

⁷ Author’s interview with Herman Sillas, Los Angeles, Aug. 22, 2003.

⁸ The Mexican American community would have to wait forty years before voters selected Cruz Bustamante as the statewide elected official in 1998.

⁹ For the perspective of Brown, his staff, and key legislators on the noncitizen old-age pension bill, see Governor’s files, Assembly Bill 5, Chapter 1970, California State Archives. For more on the coalition lobbying on behalf of the bill, as well as the fair employment and fair housing measures, see the Max Mont Papers, Special Collections, California State University, Northridge.

¹⁰ “Que Dia Tan Marvillos!,” UFW—Office of the President, Box 26, Folder 26-9, Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

¹¹ Huerta represented potatoes on the wage board; a second CSO member, Hector Abeytia, from Fresno, represented cotton. IWC Minutes, 1959-1961, with attached documents. According to the IWC’s “History of the California Wage Board for Agriculture,” “In November 1956, Attorney General Edmund G. Brown (now Governor of California,) ruled that the Industrial Welfare Commission had authority to promulgate order covering women and minors engaged as agricultural workers” but the IWC tabled discussion.

¹² Box 78, Misc. Folders, Pat Brown Papers, UC Berkeley.