

# Author's corner

## Kenneth Burt

By Malcolm Maclachlan

*Kenneth Burt is the political director for the California Federation of Teachers and the author of the new book "The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics." He'll be appearing at noon Friday in room 4203 in the Capitol. For more information, go to [www.kennethburt.com](http://www.kennethburt.com) and click on "upcoming events."*

### How did you get interested in the subject of Latino politics?

I came of age in the 1970s at the height of the farmworkers movement. I did my thesis on the history of the Mexican American Political Association and participated in rallies at the Capitol demanding the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

The other part is I married a Latina whose father helped organize the GI Forum in California in the 1950s. Through my new family I had access to many of the early Latino politicians. What I discovered is that no one had told their story.

### Sounds like you had some interesting experiences back in the day.

Yes. As an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, I was active in the anti-apartheid movement, worked for the United Farm Workers, and turned a summer internship with the Senate Democratic Caucus into a paying gig for a semester.

I also attended the 1980 Democratic convention as a Ted Kennedy delegate. I flew to New York with Dolores Huerta. She was an icon, even back then. We were walking down the hall and ran into Bobby Kennedy Jr. He invited us to go to Studio 54 as his guest, which at the time was the most exclusive nightclub in New York. It was an amazing experience.

After graduating from UC Berkeley, I attended the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. That summer I went to Washington with Congressman Bob Matsui as his Lyndon B. Johnson intern. We were the only interns in Congress who got a paycheck, even if modest. It was the time in your life when you look for the receptions so you don't have to buy dinner. Later I had the honor of getting to know a number of "old-timers" in politics. I got to know Carlos McCormick, a Santa Barbara native and the architect of Viva Kennedy, who was the first Latino to advise a president of the United States.

One of the other treasures was Gus Hawkins, the first Democratic African American Assemblyman in California history. He was elected in 1934. Gus said to me, "You won't believe this, but I was elected by white folks." Back in the 1920s and '30s, most blacks were Republicans because of Abraham Lincoln. Hawkins started his race with support of the black unions and then reached out to the sizable number of Dust Bowl refugees in the Central Los Angeles district. He told them, "You're for Franklin Roosevelt and so am I." He won with these white votes and got rid of a black Republican establishment. I love those kinds of old stories.

### Tell me more about the book. Did you get any pushback from people who thought this book should be written by a Latino?

No, I didn't. In fact, the old-timers were so happy to have someone to talk to about this because some of their own kids were getting tired of hearing the stories. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa graciously wrote the foreword to "The Search for a Civic Voice."

What the book shows is that Latino politics began earlier than it is commonly assumed. It goes back to President Roosevelt and the New Deal. Latinos helped elect Governor Culbert Olson in California in 1938. He rewarded them by appointing a Latino judge

and naming a couple of activists to state boards and commissions.

### You worked for Willie Brown. Have you read his new book?

I haven't, but I plan to. Mr. Brown loved the art of the deal. He also lived life on a grand scale. I recall one staff meeting where he spent nearly an hour describing in rich detail his interaction with the Southern gentry at the Kentucky Derby.

I was in Member Services. I'd go off the payroll and do campaigns. I took the photo of the "security guards" hired by Curt Pringle to intimidate Latino voters in Orange County. I said, "I've got to shoot this because otherwise no one will believe us." I got my hands on a Polaroid camera. Pringle and the Republicans eventually settled out of court for \$400,000.

### You also worked for John Garamendi.

Yes, during his first term as insurance commissioner, in the early 1990s. We sought to make the department the most consumer-friendly agency in the nation. We also sought to use the office to shape public policy. I organized health care and redlining forums, and dealt with earthquake insurance. It was an exciting time because the commissioner was also gearing up to run for governor.

### Tell me more about what you're up to these days.

For the past 10 years, I've been the political director for the California Federation of Teachers. In fact, I'm the first and only political director they've had. My job is to oversee the endorsements of state legislators and constitutional officers. I also spend a lot of time focused on voter initiatives.

Policy questions also interest me. For many years I have served on the board of the Pat Brown Institute and am a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley. And my two kids keep me busy. My son, Stephen, is 16 and Kate, my daughter, is 11. It was exciting to take them to the last Democratic convention in Boston.



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