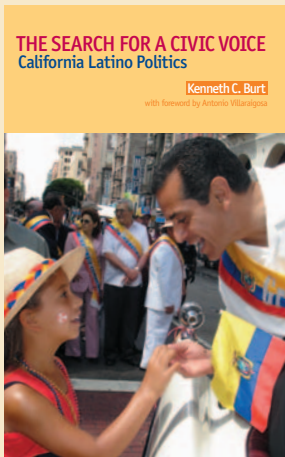


# *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics*



Author Kenneth Burt, the political director of the California Federation of Teachers and an award-winning historian, wrote *The Search for a Civic Voice* while he was a Carey McWilliams Fellow at IGS. The article below, adapted from the book, tells the story of the successful struggle for noncitizen old age pensions, including the role of Latinos.

The overheated national debate over immigration has obscured the fact that U.S. policy fluctuates between welcoming and demonizing immigrants. In completing my new book on the birth of Latino politics, *The Search for a Civic Voice*, I discovered a little-known but significant decision to make noncitizens eligible for state old age pensions.

The Community Service Organization (CSO) transformed the role of Latinos in California politics, starting with the election of Edward Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council in 1949. By the early 1960s, the organization had registered more than 400,000 voters, helped elect city council members in a number of cities, and—guided by CSO lobbyist Dolores Huerta—shaped public policy in the state Capitol.

The issue of assistance for the elderly poor had emerged in 1947 during a series of “house meetings” conducted in Boyle Heights, where CSO leaders would ask the neighbors about their grievances. The nascent organization decided to start with the issues that were easiest to resolve. These included the installation of streetlights and stop signs, which became necessary as people started to buy automobiles after World War II.

By 1953, CSO had become an established force in Los Angeles, San Jose, and Madera. It was then that the group felt strong enough to organize around a statewide issue.

L.A. Assemblyman Vernon Kilpatrick, a realtor and an ally of the labor movement, introduced Assembly Bill 2059 to enable long-term noncitizens to be eligible for state old age pensions. The bill lost in the Republican-dominated legislature but was reintroduced in 1955 and again in 1957, each time making greater advances.

After the election of Gov. Pat Brown and a Democratic legislature in November 1958, the bill was once more introduced. Seeking bipartisanship, Bruce Allen, a Republican from San Jose, and Edward Elliot, an East Los Angeles Democrat, jointly introduced the pension bill as Assembly Bill 1.

The bill soon ran into trouble because it was not part of Brown’s package of social service reforms, and the chair of the policy committee charged with reviewing the bill in the Assembly refused to hear it.

In an unusual parliamentary move that underscored the depth of support CSO (with the help of labor) enjoyed among its legislative allies, bill backers voted 54 to 19 to withdraw it from committee over the chairman’s objections.

The bill then went to the fiscal committee where its fate rested in the hands of Ways and Means Chairman Jesse Unruh, who was not a friend of CSO. In addition, it faced objections from Brown, whose staff told Huerta the bill was “too expensive.”

Still, the pressure on the governor and other legislators continued to build as CSO brought to bear the power of its coalition partners. Supporters included the County Supervisors Association of California, Catholic Welfare Agencies of Los Angeles, Catholic Welfare Agencies of San Francisco, Los Angeles Federation of Jewish Welfare Agencies, California Federation of Labor and California CIO Council.

By the end of the legislative session, it appeared that a majority of lawmakers would approve the bill. However it still faced opposition from the governor and Unruh, and on the final day of the session it was referred to the Senate Rules Committee, where it died.

Believing that the 1960 presidential election would be close, the AFL-CIO provided CSO

the funds to hire 20 organizers to register voters across the state. The Kennedy campaign bragged about the additional 140,000 voters in *Time* magazine.

With Kennedy's victory, CSO once again sought to reform state law to make long-term non-citizens eligible for old age pensions.

Assemblyman Phillip Burton of San Francisco introduced the measure, Assembly Bill 5, along with 4 co-authors. They reflected a range of organizational relationships and included Assemblyman James Mills, who won his election because of the mobilization of Latino voters in San Diego for Kennedy.

"We did a big campaign," said Huerta. CSO generated thousands of letters, and delegations lobbied their legislators in the state Capitol. Such efforts by CSO were reinforced and magnified by old friends in the larger civil rights coalition. Bill Becker and Max Mont of the Jewish Labor Committee delivered labor, Jews, and other minority groups. Monsignor Thomas O'Dwyer rallied religious leaders. All tapped into their long-established relationships with legislators.

Still, the measure faced multiple obstacles. The least problematic was Brown, who was sympathetic but was still concerned about the bill's fiscal impact. The greater problems came from Unruh, then in the process of putting together the votes to become speaker, and Senate Social Welfare Committee Chair James Cobey, who represented Madera and Merced counties in the Central Valley.

Burton began to alleviate Brown's concern and to clear legislative hurdles by locating federal money to cover almost half of the \$5 million additional costs anticipated in the first year, a prospect no doubt enabled by a political alliance with the Kennedy administration.

At the same time, Brown held out a carrot to Los Angeles and other counties seeking financial relief by noting that individuals covered by state pensions would no longer apply for General Assistance for which the counties paid 100 percent. Burton also emphasized the modest nature of the bill, claiming that it would add only 8,000 seniors to the rolls.

The Brown administration, confident that federal money would come, adopted the bill as part of its "welfare reform" package and budgeted for the added expense.

Soon thereafter, AB 5 passed the Unruh-controlled Assembly Ways and Means Committee and

sailed through the full Assembly. CSO focused its attention on Sen. James Cobey, of Merced, within whose committee the bill now rested.

"We went to barber shops, grocery stores, and door-to-door to get people to sign letters," recalled Huerta. They also went to the lawmaker's office.

Some of the seniors "had four or five children in World War II, but they didn't speak English," Huerta recalled. "I dropped them off at Cobey's office [in Sacramento]. They sat there and held the pictures of their children in the service, some of whom had died for their country. They were told only to say, 'Pass AB 5.'"

Burton also got Cobey's attention. He "held up all of his bills" in the assembly committee, recalls Huerta. She noted, "This broke the logjam." The full Senate then passed the measure 28 to 1.

Brown signed the bill on July 14, 1961, before an audience of 200 CSO members from 30 chapters who had carpooled to the state Capitol in Sacramento. In applying his signature, Pat Brown stated that "Simple justice is done, at last." He added that it was a "significant part of the New Frontier," thereby linking his action and the successful CSO efforts to the Kennedy administration.

CSO explained the victory to its members in terms of Latino self-organization, voter registration, and coalition politics.

"In 1961, with 400,000 votes behind them and support from many other groups, the bill was passed and signed," according to CSO. The bill's legislative odyssey also illustrated the power of leadership. The bill would never have passed without the extraordinary efforts of Assemblyman Phillip Burton. But it also would never have happened without the support of Gov. Brown and the Kennedy administration.



Author Kenneth Burt speaks at the UC Berkeley Labor Center during a book talk co-sponsored by IGS.

For more on the book or to order a copy, go to: [www.kennethburt.com](http://www.kennethburt.com)