

The Kennedys and Latino Politics

By Kenneth Burt



President Kennedy met in the Oval Office with Congressmen Joseph Montoya (NM), Edward Roybal (CA), & Henry Gonzalez (TX).

There has always been a special relationship between the Kennedys and Latinos. John F. Kennedy formed the **Viva Kennedy Club** in 1960 which served as the midwife of Latino politics. Robert F. Kennedy embraced Cesar Chavez and helped bring the farmworkers' grape strike national attention. Edward M. Kennedy continued in their footsteps, most recently proposing comprehensive federal immigration reform.

My own interest in the Kennedy-Latino connection goes back to the 1970s. when I saw Senator Edward Kennedy address a United Farm Workers convention in Fresno. A few years later, as an undergraduate, I was one of the senator's youngest delegates to the 1980 Democratic National Convention in New York, before attending the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Like most things in politics, **Viva Kennedy** grew out of earlier political developments and is wrapped-up in both ambition and happenstance.

James Carlos McCormick was born in Santa Barbara, California, the son of a truck driver and a Mexican American mother who was active in community affairs. While attending the University of Arizona, he met and married Mercy Estrada, whose father - a prominent attorney - arranged a patronage job in the nation's capitol for McCormick through Senator Carl Hayden (D-Arizona).

McCormick initially introduced himself to Senator Kennedy by volunteering to translate JFK's press releases into Spanish. Kennedy was receptive to McCormick's help because it was free and, according to senior advisor Clark Clifford, because the senator was becoming aware of Latino groups in the Southwest. In the spring of 1960, McCormick's role changed dramatically when he visited Arizona as part of the Kennedy entourage. This upset Senator Hayden, a supporter of Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson who was also seeking the presidency, and he responded by firing McCormick from his patronage post. Kennedy immediately hired the young man for his senatorial staff.

McCormick founded the Washington, D.C. chapter of the rapidly expanding American GI Forum, whose members had learned leadership skills in World War II and Korea. Though not himself a veteran, McCormick recognized the Forum's national reach. He was shortly appointed Chairman of its National Legislative Committee, as *"he had the most contacts, so we asked him to show us how the national political system works."* McCormick then met Cesar Chavez, the executive director of the California-based Community Services Organization (CSO), through his mother.

John F. Kennedy received his party's nomination at the July 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. In his acceptance speech he stressed that *"we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier,"* including *"unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus."* Following the convention, Carlos McCormick joined Kennedy and his top advisers at Hyannis Port to plan their strategy. Kennedy decided to focus on the big states that held most of the electoral votes needed to win. Kennedy's inner circle talked about the *"problems and possibilities in organizing the Spanish-speaking"* and gave McCormick the task of organizing the Latino outreach efforts.

McCormick rented space for **Viva Kennedy** in Washington, D.C., and became its national Executive Director. He obtained the assistance of Arthur Valdez, who was loaned to the campaign by Congressman Joseph M. Montoya of New Mexico. McCormick also facilitated the appointment of Dr. Hector Garcia as Vice Chairman of the Democratic National Committee's

Foreign Nationalities Branch. These initial moves strengthened **Viva Kennedy's** operational ties to the Congressional Latinos, the GI Forum, and the Democratic Party. McCormick also secured from the national Kennedy campaign a commitment for at least three Latino-oriented candidate events. JFK ultimately addressed audiences in East Los Angeles, San Antonio, New York and Tampa.



*Above:
1-1/8" Lithos from the
1960 JFK Campaign*

*Below:
1-1/4" Celluloids from
RFK's 1968 Campaign*



These 1-1/2" pins are from RFK's 1968 campaign. It is unknown whether they were connected to 'Viva Kennedy'.

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Through the continued efforts of McCormick, organizations were built in some two-dozen states, utilizing local community leaders and surrogate speakers such as Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico and the young Ted Kennedy, who sang “Jalisco” at a barbecue in San Diego.

Among Latinos, the attacks on Kennedy’s religion reinforced Kennedy’s appeals to organized labor and to minority groups. Cesar Chavez noted that *“Every time that he got put down for being a Catholic this made points with the Mexicans who are all Catholics. [Latinos] looked at him as sort of a minority kind of person.”* Latinos ultimately played a critical role in the election, and accounted for the margins of victory in Texas and New Mexico. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley, a **Viva Kennedy** member, told McCormick that Latinos had helped him carry Illinois. In California, a half million Latinos had helped make the election very close.

Kennedy also incorporated Latinos into his administration. For his part, McCormick created a new role as presidential Latino liaison. He alternatively worked out of the Democratic National Committee and the U.S. State Department, while enjoying access to former colleagues now serving in the White House.



[Editor's Note:](#)

Kenneth Burt (left) is the political director of the California Federation of Teachers. He has written a new book called [The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics](#). It is based on extensive research, including exclusive interviews with the architects of Viva Kennedy in 1960 & 1968, and with local Latino leaders from many states. Kennedy advisors Clark Clifford and John Seigenthaler also provided insights based on their vantage points within the two respective presidential campaigns. The book is available from Barnes and Noble as well as Amazon.com.

