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The Tangled Political Roots of Hispanics

Guest
Columnist

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The resignation of Senator Mel Martínez as general chairman of the Republican National Committee has directed fresh attention on the GOP's Latino outreach.

Martínez's departure follows months of immigrant bashing. This expression of anti-Latino attitude reached a crescendo during the debate over federal immigration reform, but it has persisted. Most recently, the Republicans have injected the issue into the debate over expanding federal support of health insurance for children.

These GOP attacks on immigrants coincided with the exodus of United States Attorney General Alberto Gonzáles.

Gonzáles, once touted as a rising star destined to become the first Latino on the Supreme Court, instead became an embarrassment to many Latino leaders.

ELDER QUEVEDO LED ROOSEVELT CAMPAIGNS

The subject of Republican attitudes has come up at signings for my new book, *The Search for a Civic Voice: California Latino Politics*. The most common Latino refrain: "They just don't like us."

Serendipitously, I heard from Henry Quevedo, who long ago ran the Latino outreach for President Richard Nixon. He reminded me that "we were able to get more community programs funded" than had Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Nixon also appointed Romana Bañuelos as Treasurer of the United States. This made her the first Latino Cabinet-level member. Her selection was even more impressive because at the time few women held such high positions in the federal government.

Quevedo also revealed a tension in the Nixon administration that may well mirror present divisions within the Bush White House and the Republican Party.

Quevedo described the "sad and often humorous clashes between the 'tactical' Chicano Republicans and 'ideological' ones during the Nixon years."

Quevedo symbolizes yet another dynamic. His father, Eduardo Quevedo, was a Democratic partisan. The elder Quevedo led the Roosevelt campaigns in California, starting in 1932. Three decades later, in 1967, he was among five Mexican Americans to dine privately with President Johnson in the White House to discuss ways to aid the community.

Born in New Mexico, the elder Quevedo knew that many Latinos were part of the Party of Lincoln prior to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

Roosevelt incorporated the foreign-born and their children into the Democratic Party. This included Spanish and Cubans in Florida, *Hispanos* in New Mexico, and Mexican Americans in the Southwest. Add Puerto Ricans on the U.S. island territory and in New York.

Roosevelt also helped elect Dennis Chávez as the U.S. Senator from New Mexico in the 1930s, and in 1940 picked a vice president — Henry Wallace — who spoke Spanish.

NIXON SAW VALUE IN LATINO VOTE

President Roosevelt championed policies that helped the small but growing Latino community during the Great Depression. This included supporting the rights of workers to form unions and federal jobs programs for the unemployed.

The first modern Republican to court the Latino vote was Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s. A moderate, Eisenhower benefited from being Roosevelt's Allied Commander during World War II. A sizable number of Latino voters were veterans.

Richard Nixon narrowly prevailed in the 1968 election, and believed he could secure reelection by winning over Latinos in a number of key states. Thus, he instituted a Southwest Strategy to court Mexican Americans; ironically at the same time he pushed a Southern Strategy that undercut civil rights gains made by African Americans.

Henry Quevedo stated that his father supported his activism in the Republican Party, in part, to keep the Democratic Party from taking Latinos for granted. In his unsuccessful campaign for the California State Assembly, Quevedo won the backing of the Mexican American Political Association.

HISPANICS TURNED TO DEMOCRATS

The younger Quevedo also benefited from upward mobility. While his father was self-educated, leaving school to work in a mine at age 14, Henry and his siblings went to college, earning a host of advanced degrees.

President George Bush, like Nixon before him, recognized that segments of the Latino vote were reachable and could be decisive in a close election.

Yet Latinos are becoming more Democratic, not less. This is based on family tradition and public policy, but it is also shaped by a visceral reaction to the anti-Latino outbursts that, despite GOP outreach efforts, seem to permeate Republican rhetoric.

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