

UC SANTA BARBARA

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New Book Recognizes Unsung Mexican-American Politician

Widely considered a recent phenomenon, the growing political clout of Mexican Americans can in fact be traced back more than four decades to El Paso, Texas, the setting of one of the century's most dramatic---and surprisingly little-known---election upsets, according to a UC Santa Barbara historian.

"No Mexican-American community had done what the Chicanos of El Paso managed to do in 1957, that is, mount a massive grass-roots campaign and elect one of their own as mayor of a major Southwestern city. The political influence that Mexican Americans enjoy today is in large measure the legacy of this milestone," said Mario T. Garcia, a professor of history and Chicano studies at UCSB.

El Paso's mayoral election of 1957 is the centerpiece of Garcia's newest book, "The Making of a Mexican American Mayor: Raymond L. Telles of El Paso" (Texas Western Press, 1998). Garcia opted to make Telles the subject of a biography because of his political trailblazing and, more importantly, because of his continued neglect at the hands of historians and other cultural observers.

"When Henry Cisneros was elected mayor of San Antonio in 1981, the national media trumped it up as this momentous breakthrough, the first time that a Mexican American had been elected mayor of a major Southwestern community. Well, that kind of treatment doesn't hold up in light of Telles' victory in 1957. Furthermore, in Telles' time there were still tremendous obstacles to Mexican Americans becoming

elected. Telles was truly a pioneering Mexican-American politician," said Garcia.

The son of politically active parents, Raymond Telles was among the thousands of Mexican Americans who returned from World War II to an El Paso of limited opportunity. Though the city proudly acknowledged its considerable Mexican-American heritage, and overt discrimination was rare, Chicanos were decidedly underrepresented in the business community, among the educated class, and particularly in politics. Determined to reduce these inequities, returning Mexican-American veterans helped fuel a fledgling political movement.

Telles had enlisted as a private but emerged at war's end as a major in the Army Air Force, a precursor to today's Air Force. His distinguished military record and his earlier service as a clerk in the New Deal's Work Progress Administration made him an attractive, if initially reluctant, would-be politician, and in 1948 El Paso's Mexican-American elite pressed him to run for county clerk.

"He won a stunning victory and it laid the groundwork for the election of 1957. Telles ran as a non-ethnic candidate, as a person who was interested in doing the job and who had the credentials. Even so, the Mexican-American community knew it had to organize if he were to have a chance," said Garcia.

Telles went on to serve as county clerk for several years, taking a leave of absence to join the war effort in Korea. In 1957 El Paso's Mexican-American leadership felt the time was right for Telles to pursue a larger political prize: the mayor's office. But even with their prodigal son on board, the obstacles to victory were daunting.

All of El Paso's Anglo power structure mobilized in opposition to Telles' candidacy, particularly a powerful coterie known as the kingmakers, which included bankers, business leaders, and representatives of the El Paso Times, one of the area's leading newspapers. More challenging still, many of the city's poor Mexican Americans were reluctant or unable to pay the \$1.75 poll tax required for registration.

For help in overcoming these and other hurdles, Telles turned to his politically savvy younger brother. Richard Telles was not only an effective fund raiser, he had a knack for creative campaigning. For instance, when it was learned that the upcoming election would be the first to include electric voting booths, the younger Telles obtained discarded refrigerator boxes from Mexican-American furniture dealers and fashioned crude likenesses of the polls to acquaint first-time voters with the process.

"Richard Telles masterminded that campaign and was in many ways a political genius. He understood the axiom that much of American politics is ethnic politics. Much like in 1948, there was a public campaign that de-emphasized ethnicity, but underneath was a feverish effort to get the Chicano vote out, which they did using, among other things, car caravans to get people to the polls," said Garcia.

On the strength of his extraordinary showing in El Paso's Mexican-American barrio districts, Raymond Telles miraculously defeated incumbent Tom Rogers, a historic upset that proved even more barrier-shattering than Telles' supporters had dared hope possible. Telles ran uncontested in the next mayoral election and came to be embraced by the city's Anglo establishment. He later served as ambassador to Costa Rica under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson---another first for a Mexican American.

Garcia first chronicled Telles' unlikely political triumph as a chapter in his 1989 book "Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, & Identity, 1930-1960" (Yale University Press). A UCSB faculty member since 1975, he is also the author of "Ruben Salazar, Border Correspondent: Selected Writings, 1955-70" (University of California Press, 1995) and "Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona" (University of California Press, 1994) among other books.

Garcia will discuss and sign copies of "The Making of a Mexican American Mayor" at 4 p.m. May 26 in UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center.

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