

As Central Valley Latinos go politically, so should others

In the 1960s, there were few visible Latino political leaders. For Southern Californians, indeed throughout the state, the dominant face of Latino politics was that of Cesar Chavez. Migrant. Activist. Of the Central Valley. The social fervor of the Delano-based founder of the United Farm Workers union came to define both the political and geographic base of Latino activism.

But times have changed. And so have the Central Valley, Southern California and the dynamics of Latino politics. It is no accident that the highest-ranking Latino elected to statewide office this century is Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, a self-styled "moderate guy" from the Central Valley.

As the economic dominance of agribusiness eroded, the power of Chavez and his agrarian-centered, social-movement politics began to wane.

Later, the Big Green environmental regulation initiative of 1990 underscored the split between urban and rural interests which had come to define Latino politics. Farm workers liked the initiative's pesticide ban and other environmental protections but many urban Latinos who worked in light industries felt economically threatened by Big Green's strict chemical bans.

With the urbanization and sprawling suburbanization of the Central Valley, the "agrarian" — nationalistic — model of Latino politics has been replaced, says political analyst Gregory Rodriguez, by an "ethnically transcendent" prototype more reflective of the Valley's changing economic and political profile. This new Latino leader doesn't desert his or her ethnicity but, in the words of another analyst, "doesn't put ethnic identity first."

Assemblymember Dean Florez (D-Shafter) fits that mold. Florez, a former staffer for state Senator Art Torres, defeated GOP incumbent Robert Prenter in 1998. Despite Prenter's attempt to "Los Angelize" Florez by attacking his ties to Torres, Florez, a Harvard-educated investment banker with strong community roots, effectively distanced himself from the Latino political elite and ran as a local with "Valley values."

Until recently, the predominant Southern California model of Latino politics remained what Assembly Speaker Antonio Villaraigosa has labeled

the "enclave politics" of Los Angeles' urban core. Many of its leaders emerged from the urban Chicano movement of the 60s and 70s. The district now represented by Democratic Assemblyman Gil Cedillo reflects that tradition. A former union organizer backed by Villaraigosa, labor and immigrant rights groups, Cedillo handily won a 1997 special election in the predominantly Latino East L.A. district, hammering home the message that he could best oppose then-Governor Pete Wilson's anti-immigrant policies.

But as California enters the 21st century, the state's diversity continues to increase; ethnic enclaves are dispersing as minorities move up the socio-economic ladder and look for lifestyles beyond the inner cities. And demographics continue to reshape the dynamics of Latino politics in this state.

New political leaders — emerging from both major parties — are following a formula similar to that which has elected moderate Latinos in the Central Valley. Nowhere is the changing profile of Latino political leadership more clearly outlined than in that other

"Valley" political powerhouse — the San Fernando Valley.

Throughout California, Latino candidates are now winning in non-Latino districts. In 1998, Republican Robert Pacheco replaced outgoing Assemblyman Gary Miller (R-Diamond Bar) in an Inland Empire suburban district. In Sacramento, Deborah Ortiz, a former Sacramento city councilmember and staffer for state Senator Richard Polanco, defeated Republican Chris Quackenbush, wife of the state's Insurance Commissioner, to win a moderate state Senate district. In a truly "ethnically transcendent" move, Ortiz used mailers showing her with Governor Wilson and Dan Lungren, the GOP's nominee to replace him.

To survive politically in 21st century California, every demographic group and political party must learn from those candidates who have successfully moved beyond ethnocentricity. And Central Valley Latinos have helped to lead the way. 🏠

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by Sherry
Bebitch Jeffe



Contributing Editor Sherry Bebitch Jeffe teaches at Claremont Graduate University. Comments may be sent to editor@statenet.com.

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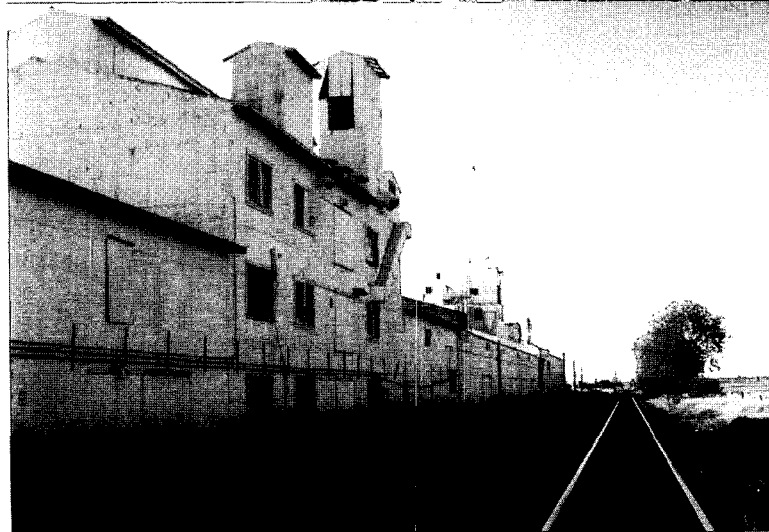
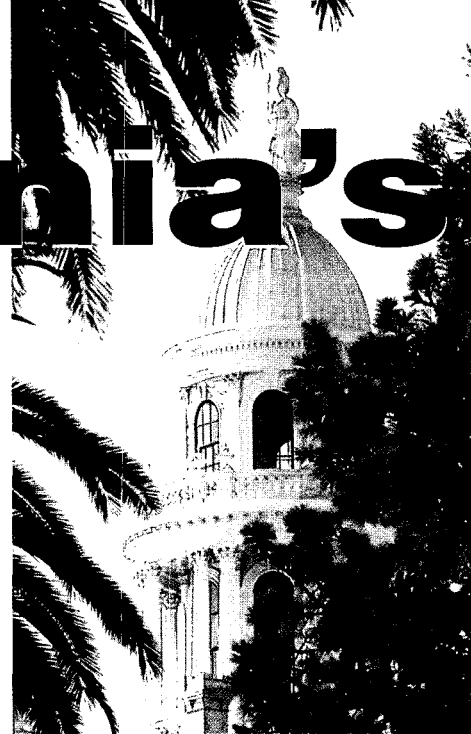
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California's

Though it is much more than just a "land of cotton," the Central Valley shares some important political similarities with the southern United States.

But the Valley's changing demographics could dramatically alter the way the region votes in the 21st century.

By Steve Scott



History will record that California's Central Valley was the scene of one of the defining moments of the 1996 presidential campaign. During the September stretch drive of what turned out to be a crushing defeat at the hands of Bill Clinton, former Kansas Senator Robert Dole whisked into Chico for one of those in-and-out campaign appearances. Before addressing supporters from a makeshift platform, Dole leaned down to shake some hands, and tumbled head-first off the stage into a nest of photographers.

Video from the spill aired nationally that night, and for days afterward, with national pundits gleefully using the incident as a metaphor for a campaign that just couldn't "find its footing." But for many California

Republicans, Dole's mere presence in the Valley was every bit as revealing as his slip of the foot. The 1996 GOP hopeful spent a lot of time traversing California's spine, an indication of its importance to the party's statewide election math. A large margin of victory in the Central Valley (which Dole eventually failed to get) has become almost as critical to statewide victory for the GOP as heavy turnout in Orange County. Some argue that it has become even more important.

"If Republicans are going to carry the state, they almost have to carry the Central Valley," said Mark DiCamillo, director of the statewide Field Poll.