

Traditional Politics Versus Community Organizations

2 Latino Activists Travel Separate Paths

By FRANK del OLMO, *Times Staff Writer*

In their undergraduate days at Texas A&M University, both Ernest Cortes, class of '63, and Henry Cisneros, class of '68, were members of the school's corps of cadets. An ROTC unit of clean-cut male students, the corps epitomizes the A&M "Aggies" to many Texans—both those who admire the university's traditions and spirit, and those who mock it with Aggie jokes.

The two natives of San Antonio have moved along different, but parallel, career paths since they were students at Texas A&M. But their Aggie discipline served them well. In recent years, each has been responsible for a noteworthy political advance by Mexican-Americans.

Their success in Texas has been significant for Latinos in California, for both Cisneros and Cortes have accomplished things that political professionals and community activists here talk about, but have yet to match.

Cisneros went east from Texas A&M to study at Harvard. He returned to be elected mayor of San Antonio, the nation's 10th-largest city, at age 33. Last April he was reelected with 94% of the vote, and is setting a pace that other Latino politicians envy. He is the most

school for professional organizers. He has since set up some of the most effective Latino community groups in the Southwest, including Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in San Antonio and the United Neighborhoods Organization (UNO) of East Los Angeles. At 39, Cortes is the most successful of those Latino activists wary of traditional politics, and seeking new ways for Latino residents to assert their rights.

The two men do not consider themselves rivals, but each will argue that his success points the way that other Latinos must move in the future if their growing numbers are ever to result in political power.

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Cisneros has not actively sought national recognition, and even tries to downplay it, because he believes

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Another in a series of special reports on Latinos in the Southland.

visible of those Latinos working for political progress in the traditional manner, holding down public service jobs and active in the two main political parties.

Cortes went north from Texas A&M to study in the Midwest with the late radical organizer Saul Alinsky and other directors of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a

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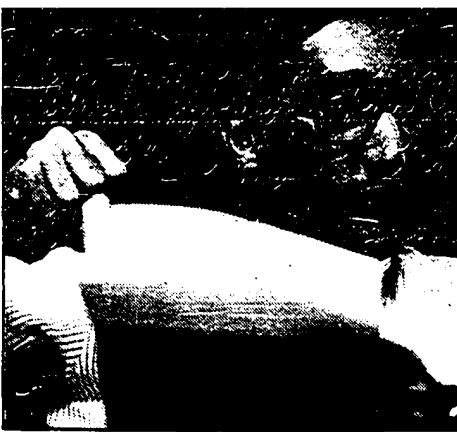
—Henry Cisneros,
Mayor of San Antonio

"Until Latinos in Southern California, and everywhere else, learn about political power in this country and how it really operates, the Decade of the Hispanic will be just so many beer commercials."

—Ernesto Cortes,
Latino community organizer



JOSE GALVEZ / Los Angeles Times



ACTIVISTS: Leaders Travel Diverse Paths

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it detracts from his duties as mayor of San Antonio. But while there are Latinos holding more visible public offices than he does, Cisneros is probably the best-known and most popular Mexican-American politician in the country today.

In his only appearance in Los Angeles since being elected, for example, the San Antonio mayor drew a capacity audience to a fund-raising dinner for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. And although he delivered a fairly standard speech, he got a standing ovation afterwards. More than one Latino in the audience was heard to remark on his exciting, charismatic style.

Articulate and photogenic, the young Democrat was the focus of attention by the national news media almost as soon as he was elected. More important, they reported on him as a Sunbelt politician with a bright future because of his appeal to non-Latino voters.

Certainly Cisneros is as well-prepared for a career in politics as any other young politician in the country, Latino or not. After studying urban planning at Harvard, he served a White House fellowship during the Nixon Administration. There Cisneros worked as a top aide to then-Secretary of Health and Welfare Elliot Richardson, with whom he remains friendly.

Cisneros returned to his hometown in the fall of 1974, after teaching for a year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. By the next spring, Cisneros had won a seat on the San Antonio City Council, where he served three terms before being elected mayor.

Unprecedented Support

The aura of success about Cisneros increased last April when he easily won reelection with the highest percentage of votes, 94%, that any mayoral candidate in San Antonio had received in more than 30 years. No Latino politician in California or elsewhere in the country can claim such broad support from both Latino and non-Latino constituents.

Although he faced no serious opposition in the mayoral campaign, Cisneros still campaigned hard. He says his intent was to make the election a "referendum" on his plans for San Antonio, which he has summarized in a slick report entitled "Target '90."

The report's goals range from upgrading San Antonio's drainage system and increasing the size of the police force and Fire Department, to building a modern arts

Views on Politics

Results of a statewide Los Angeles Times Poll on voter registration issues.

When you select your candidate, is he or she more often than not a Democrat or a Republican?

	Latino	Anglo	Black
Democrat	65	49	90
Either party	3	8	2
Republican	15	39	6
Independent	0	1	0
Not sure	17	3	2

In what party are you now registered?

	Latino	Anglo	Black
Democrat	34%	39%	83%
Republican	8	38	1
Unregistered	58	23	16

What is the main reason why you aren't registered to vote?

	Latino	Anglo	Black
Not a citizen	45%	8%	0%
Not interested, find it pointless	19	33	19
Can't satisfy residency requirements	9	35	23
Distrust politics or don't want to get involved	5	10	8
Too difficult or unable to register	10	10	27
Language problems	1	0	0
Not sure, won't say	11	4	23

center and 60,000-seat sports stadium.

"I am going to implement them step by step," Cisneros said of the goals outlined in the document. "I have the mandate to proceed, and I have the City Council to do it. There is a momentum in the community. . . . I am going to move San Antonio, pure and simple."

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Cortes has also never sought national recognition, and tries to



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discourage it because he believes it detracts from his work as a community organizer. But despite the fact that other Latino activists get more attention—or try to—Cortes is probably the most effective Latino grass-roots organizer in the country today.

It took Cortes only three years to graduate from Texas A&M, which he entered when he was only 16. He then studied economics for three years at the University of Texas, Austin, where he was first drawn to organizing by the same man who

attracted many other young Chicanos to activism in the 1960s, United Farm Workers President Cesar Chavez.

It was while working as the UFW's grape boycott coordinator in Texas that Cortes first became interested in the organization that had helped launch Chavez's career in the 1950s—Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, known as the IAF.

Returns to San Antonio

After working for various anti-poverty programs in Texas, Cortes decided to link up with IAF. In 1974, he returned to San Antonio and organized the COFS community organization. Two years later he moved on to organize UNO and, in 1979, he helped set up The Metropolitan Organization in Houston, whose membership includes Anglos and blacks as well as Latinos.

For the last two years, he has overseen several other IAF organizers working with Mexican-Americans and other minorities to set up similar groups in Fort Worth, El Paso, Austin and the Rio Grande Valley.

With the recent successful start of a new IAF organization in South-Central Los Angeles, with a mixed black and Latino membership, Cortes believes the time is ripe for IAF to now expand further in California. Before the establishment of the South-Central Organizing Committee, IAF's only project in California was East Los Angeles' UNO.

Since its inception, UNO has received more public attention than any organization on the Eastside. A key reason is that its contributions

to the area have been substantive—it has successfully campaigned for innumerable municipal improvements throughout the barrio, the closure of a toxic waste dump, lower automobile insurance rates and low-interest home improvement loans for area residents, and an innovative program to reduce youth gang violence.

Important financial and moral support for the IAF's organizing process has come from the Roman Catholic Church (almost 90% of Latinos are Catholic) and several main-line Protestant denominations.

"There is nothing more conservative, nothing more American, than these types of organizations," said Bishop John McCarthy, explaining the support that the Galveston-Houston Roman Catholic Archdiocese has given the IAF organization in that city.

Buffer Against Forces

At a time when many traditional social structures are weakening, these organizations "create a buffer for individuals, families and neighborhoods against the big, impersonal forces that can affect them," he said.

Eventually, Cortes hopes there will be dozens of organizations similar to UNO and COFS in urban areas throughout the Southwest, and possibly even in northern Mexico. The "Southwest Strategy" is Cortes' term for the effort to create this network by the next century.

"But the number of organizations we help set up is less important than the quality," Cortes said, explaining IAF's slow, methodical organizing process. "We would like to see three UNOs in L.A., and similar organizations from Stockton to San Diego. But we also want them to be sophisticated and effective—to know how to leverage issues with all the allies they can get."

Any Latino activist in Los Angeles can talk about the political limits that Latinos face locally because so many people in their community are not citizens. But nothing illustrates the problem so poignantly as the experience of Assemblywoman Gloria Molina (D-Los Angeles).

"When I was elected to the Legislature last year, my own mother couldn't vote for me because she isn't naturalized," Molina said.

"She has studied to become a citizen, but I guess she's intimidated by the test," the first Latina ever elected to the California Assembly added sadly. "I may have to take her by the hand and just tutor her

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