

Interview with Rudy Flores, aide to governor Dolph Briscoe, Austin, Texas, December 11, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: How is the term chicano used by Mexican-Americans in Texas?

Flores: Well, you have the situation where some people prefer to use the word chicano and others prefer the word Mexican-Americans. Others prefer the word Mehicanos and others prefer latins and others prefer Spanish speaking. The chicano has been more related with the Raza Unida party. They use that word or description. And Mexican-American is the term used more or less by the majority of the professional Mexican people in their forties. Some prefer to use the word latin and usually it's the older group or the older generation. People in the sixties when they started using the word latin some time ago. Now you have, maybe it's the middle of the road, use the word Mehicano, which means Mexican. Of course that has been used interchangeably. Now that the terms are used more in English, Mehicano is known, you know, like chicano is, to designate a certain. . . Mexican-American or Spanish speaking. . . . Becoming common in English. Then you have the people that are interested in progress and they have no hang ups about chicano, Mehicano, Mexican-American, whatever description.

Walter de Vries: Do the descriptions symbolize political differences? Different ways to approach politics.

Flores: When used among Mexicans themselves, or Mexican-Americans,

the word chicano does not necessarily indicate political difference. Because the word chicano has been in use for many, many years. Even before the laraza unida came into being. But it would be politically different when you associate it with laraza unida party. But when it's used among Mexican-Americans or Mehicanos--let's say in a group--it doesn't necessarily mean political differences. Because some people use the term interchangeably.

W.D.V.: Do other people who are not chicanos view it differently? It seems to me when you come down here and talk about chicano politics, you're talking about all Mexican-Americans. That's how whites look at it. Is that right?

Flores: Well, whites, or the Anglos, look at the term chicano more so like you explained it, all in general.

W.D.V.: What I'm saying, they tend to perceive the Mexican-American community as kind of a monolith. . . . It's almost like the black community. Do Anglos perceive Mexican-Americans different than Mexican-Americans perceive themselves, in terms of labels?

Flores: To a certain extent I would imagine that would be true because the Anglo looks at the chicano community. . . they describe it just as a chicano community, in most cases. But the Mexican people themselves have a little difference there when they designate different political groups to someone else except themselves. In other words, I could be speaking with a Mexican-American here and we could be using the term chicano interchangeably and it doesn't necessarily mean that either

one of us belongs to the laraza unida party. Or we could use Mexican-American or Mehicano. But the Anglo, he looks at the community and he is more familiar, I would imagine, with the word chicano and he used that for the overall community. For example, you go to a south Texas town and you speak to some of the leaders there who have been politicians practically all of their lives. They don't refer to the community as the chicano community. You speak to the county judges, the sheriffs and the district judges. They generally would not say our chicano community. You know, in a speech or something of that nature.

Jack Bass: Would they use the term Mexican-American or just not use any term?

Flores: I would assume they would use Mexican Americans. And then the ones who, like I say, don't have any hang ups. . . in making a speech it's very common to say chicanos, Mexican-American or Mehicano. And just follow it up, to let the people know who are listening that he doesn't designate himself as so, as belonging to any particular group. That he's just interested in the overall.

J.B.: In the 1972 and 1974 governor's races, I understand the laraza unida candidate received roughly the same percentage of vote in each race. You see fewer votes in '74 but fewer people voted. Percentage wise it remained about the same. Does that suggest that they have peaked in strength in terms of state wide influence as a political party?

Flores: I would say they have decreased. Mexican-American, or

chicano communities have been voting about the same. I haven't made a study of it yet, but I would imagine that the Mexican-American communities voted about the same in number, but that the Anglo and the blacks didn't come out as strong. Therefore, the percentage remained the same. Do you follow me in the explanation?

J.B.: In other southern states most third party movements have been black parties. The effect in many of them has been to make the Democratic party in those states more responsive to blacks. More open, bring them into a larger role in party affairs. Has Laza Unida had the same effect in Texas insofar as Mexican-Americans are concerned in the Democratic party?

Flores: I would say that the Mexican-Americans have become more active in the Democratic party. And they have been able to gain strength not only from the Mexican-American people themselves but from the Anglos.

J.B.: Have the Anglos in the Democratic party sort of made more effort to bring more Mexican-Americans in as a result of the existence of Laza Unida as a threat?

Flores: it would be more appropos to an Anglo as to how he felt that this would be a threat. I mean your question.

J.B.: Whether or not it's been a threat, has there been an appearance that the Anglos in the Democratic party have made more effort to bring Mexican-Americans into the party. Provide greater roles. In effect open the door a little wider.

Flores: I would think not because of that. I would think the

Mexican-American has made himself more prominent in the Democratic party. For instance, he's more active in the conventions in precinct and county and state. For example, you had a candidate for the state Democratic chairman, Leonel Castillo. And we had our executive chairman who was also our chairman. And I believe that Leonel Castillo got around 2,000 votes out of around 5,000. Laraza Unida wasn't involved in the party there. And his strength came mostly from Anglos, because he only got about one hundred and some Mexican-American votes out of this 2,000 votes. So I would imagine that Mexican-Americans have become more prominent in politics. I would assume that they get to know the people and then they realize that one is just as competent as the other, just like in this past election.

J.B.: Do you know of anyone who has made a real study of Mexican-American voting in Texas?

Flores: Not state-wide. I would assume that in one or two counties there may be one or two fellows that do it for their own particular area. But nothing else to my knowledge, unless the university has a report on that. One interesting thing is that in south Texas where it is predominantly Mexican-American and chicano, they have always voted Democratic in state-wide races. I mean the state-wide candidates have always carried the counties. You have a little different situation in the local situation. Because even though a man may be laraza unida or Democratic, the people in all cases align themselves with association or because they know the man. You hear about laraza unida candidates

winning locally in some counties. Well, you have Mexican-Americans in south Texas who have been elected officials for fifty or more years. So locally I think people vote more on the person than on the party. However, the Democratic party seems to have helped the candidates moreso than the laraza unida, even locally.

J.B.: How do you characterize laraza unida in terms of philosophy and impact?

Flores: State-wide, of course, they haven't been able to make a strong impact except make their issues prominent. Locally, in some places, they have been able to get some people elected because, I would imagine, they are able to tell the people "here's a party with whom you can associate yourself more close." On a local basis. Some of the counties where the Democratic party has not been strong to begin with. That would be mostly your small counties. Where voting has been passive, in other words. But take your big south Texas counties, which are also predominantly Mexican-American or chicano. They haven't been able to make an impact there. Still the Democratic candidates get elected.

J.B.: Am I correct that in 1972 several Mexican-Americans, incumbents, lost. And the general interpretation is that they lost because Laraza Unida split the Mexican-American vote.

Flores: I would imagine that that's true to a certain extent because I would imagine that those votes that went laraza unida would have gone Democrat.

J.B.: Was there much reaction to that in the Mexican-American community? Any resentment?

Flores: There was no actual resentment, but of course people were unhappy. But not from the standpoint of hate or bitterness. They were unhappy, naturally.

J.B.: Was the net effect of that to weaken laraza unida within the Mexican-American community? The fact that they challenged incumbent Mexican-American Democrats.

Flores: It would be hard to say whether it weakened them because they were just getting started. When one starts a party, you don't know how much strength it has to begin with. It would appear, on the results of the election, they have lost support. Now. But of course in '72 it would be difficult to say because they were just getting started.

J.B.: Is that one of the reasons, in your opinion, that they did lose support?

Flores: No, I'm sure enough to be emphatic. I don't think that because of the fact that they ran candidates that that would be held against them. That in itself, I would think, would be very minor.

J.B.: Even though it resulted in some losses for incumbents.

Flores: I would say there were people who were naturally unhappy but not to the extent. . . .

W.D.V.: Are there any political goals on which all Mexican-Americans agree?

Flores: Yes. Reports have indicated that first of all, a survey showed, that Mexican people. . . their first priority has always been education. I don't know the order. Whether it's housing or employment. But those three top priorities have always been. Education and then,

like I say, I don't know whether it would be housing or employment. Education, employment and housing.

W.D.V.: Why haven't they been able to unite, as a people, on those three goals? There are political divisions, are there not?

Flores: There are political divisions, but probably not as far as education is concerned. It's the main priority. Everybody wants to send their kids to school.

J.B.: So the division is on the means or tactics, rather than the goals?

Flores: Methods.

W.D.V.: How do they differ?

Flores: Probably on the methods for other things. But I think when education. . . it would be a solid front.

W.D.V.: How about on taxation?

Flores: Taxation, actually, has never been a very prominent issue to the Mexican-American. I'd say it's been taken in relation to education and now it has become very prominent.

W.D.V.: Would there be groups that favored the corporate income tax, personal income tax, against increased sales tax?

Flores: No big groups. Let me put it that way. I'm sure there are some small groups, but I would imagine there's no big groups. Naturally ~~laraza~~ laraza unida favors corporate income tax, an increase in corporate tax on the profits.

W.D.V.: Do you have any figures on the percent of Mexican-Americans that say identify and vote Democratic? Is there any guess?

Flores: No.

W.D.V.: Laraza unida doesn't have any significant Anglo support

does it?

Flores: Just students.

W.D.V.: So out of the Mexican-American community, what percentage do you think are identified with and vote for that party?

Flores: I'm trying to analyze the different counties. It's hard to get some kind of a

J.B.: What percentage of the population of Texas is Mexican-American?

Flores: There are two different figures. People say between 18 and 20 percent. I think it's around 18 point something.

J.B.: How about of the registered voters?

Flores: I don't have that figure.

J.B.: Do you know whether or not Mexican-Americans register in the same percentage as Anglos?

Flores: I would assume now yes. Used to have the carry over of the older people that always registered. You know, have to register to vote and pay your poll tax. And then there was always say the middle group from the thirties or forties--what difference does it make for whom I vote. My candidate will not get elected. But now you have the young people that are very interested in politics and then you have the forty year old people who know it does make a difference now. And they register. Of course the older people always register. Surprisingly.

W.D.V.: Of the Mexican-Americans who register and vote, are more

than half Democratic? More than three-quarters of them?

Flores: Yes. Don't have very many Republicans. The Republicans are mostly with your professional people. There are a few, I would imagine.

J.B.: Who would you rate as the most influential Mexican-American political figure in Texas at this time?

Flores: In Texas we have a situation where you have different areas that have their own political leaders. In other words, we don't have a leader from San Antonio that can go into Houston and carry the same identity and the same strength. And vica versa. Or you don't have one from Brownsville that can come into Laredo and vica versa. There is not one political leader per se. Each different area has its own people.

W.D.V.: Who are some of the regional leaders?

Flores: Laredo, naturally you have mayor Martin there, who's been mayor for twenty or twenty-five years and his people. He's very influential in this area. There are some young people coming along. There are some county commissioners. To a certain extent I think they either have the blessings or are able to get along with the so-called other party in the party itself.

W.D.V.: Is there a chicano officials, or governmental officials caucus?

Flores: I don't think there's a governmental caucus. I think there's a school board association of chicanos state-wide. You mean, for example of all elected officials? I don't think so. I'm not aware of it. With the exception of the school board members.

J.B.: Where does Congressman Gonzales fit in there?

Flores: He's influential in his area, in San Antonio. Very influential and very well respected.

W.D.V.: But there is no state-wide. . .

Flores: Like I say, you can't take a man from San Antonio and put him in Brownsville and have the people. . . they'll respect him, but they may not follow him. Their following would be with someone else.

W.D.V.: Were there ever any state-wide leaders? Say in the last twenty-five years. Leader from the standpoint of people identifying with him, listening to him.

Flores: Not from the standpoint of following. They may respect and listen to that extent, but then they get back into their own local politics. There has never been anybody like that to my knowledge. Different groups have been concentrated in different areas. For example, you have Dr. Garcia in the Corpus area, the founder of the GI Forum. He's around the Corpus area. Then you have your people in the valley and El Paso. I would imagine the people would unite behind a leader on a state-wide election.

W.D.V.: But there hasn't been one yet.

Flores: There's been some candidates. I think Henry Gonzales ran for governor some time ago. He himself got about 250,000 votes. He ran on the Democratic ticket. 250 or 240. But I can't think of anyone that would be recognized per se as a leader where he would go into a community and people would not only listen but follow his advice and carry out the

program. Not that they actually disagree with him, but they have their own little thing, their own thinking there.

J.B.: Has the Briscoe administration done anything differently in regard to the Mexican-American community than previous administrations?

Flores: I would say very definitely. For example you have more Mexican-Americans and chicanos appointed to more and more important commissions and boards than ever before. You have people in state employment as directors of agencies who are Mexican-American. You didn't before. By having those things it has made it possible for more communication between the state office and the people throughout the state of Texas.

J.B.: You're saying then that state services to the Mexican-American community have improved as a result.

Flores: Very definitely.

W.D.V.: Are you the first Mexican-American on the ^{staff}~~desk~~ of the governor's office?

Flores: No, I think was with Preston Smith
for about two-three months. I think he's the only other one.

W.D.V.: Did he hold a comparable position to yours?

Flores: I really don't know because he only stayed for about two or three months. They had some kind of falling out.

W.D.V.: What is your position? And what does that mean?

Flores: I'm special assistant to the governor. I work in all areas. For example, naturally, being the Mexican-American or chicano I

deal with the Mexican-American programs and situations that come up. But I'm not limited to that. I do a lot of work with legislation. I work with the budget. I work with appointments. I offer my advice in certain issues. May be education, or overall government. Just government in different areas. See, I used to work for the governor before.

W.D.V.: What's your background?

Flores: I was born in Uvalde where the governor's from. Originally migrated all over the country as a migrant worker. I guess I migrated ever since even before I was in school, with my parents. Migrated all through public school and college and law school. Off and on. Then I worked practically everything around town. After I got my degree in law, started practicing. And have investments. Then I started working for the governor in '67 in the bank in ~~Guande~~ Uvalde. Before coming up here I was senior vice president and director there at the bank. So my background is diversified. Practically in all areas.

W.D.V.: Is it like what you expected when you came up here?

Flores: To tell you the truth I didn't have an idea because I have never been, say, as active in state government or in politics as people of that kind. I've been involved, like everybody else, locally. You vote for your city councilmen and your school trustees and county officials. But I had always been just a supporter. I never had gotten actually involved in the work. But it's very interesting work.

W.D.V.: Do you have any numbers as to how many appointments you've made to boards and commissions?

J.B.: But do those plans include specific provisions for hiring more Mexican-Americans?

Flores: To be truthful, I haven't seen the plans, so I don't know whether they are specified by minority names or not.

[End of side of tape.]

W.D.V.: There's no state-wide personnel policy?

Flores: No quota per se, for example. Not because you have 18 percent ^[of the population] should there be 18 percent employment. Or because you have 10 or 12 percent black that you should have 10 or 12 black employment.

J.B.: Are there any Mexican-Americans among the Texas Rangers?

Flores: Yes. I just visited with a fellow by the name of Rudy Rodriguez and there was a fellow from ^VUvaldi who was a Ranger also. But I think he went with the department of justice. The Rangers come under the DPS, department of public safety. That's the highway patrol. There have been one or two other Mexican-American rangers. The reason I know this fellow is because I've met him. Of course I've known Arturo for many years. Young fellow.

W.D.V.: Are there any formal or informal communications between the black political groups and the Mexican-American groups? Is there any effort to put together some kind of a coalition?

Flores: There's been communication. Probably the coalition proposal has not been very strong.

W.D.V.: Why not? Don't blacks have the same general goals in education, housing?

Flores: I really don't know what their classified priorities are. I would imagine they would be very, very similar.

W.D.V.: But you don't know of any effort to coalesce the two.

Flores: Let's say no state-wide effort.

J.B.: Not even in the legislature?

Flores: They communicate, but the black caucus and the brown caucus don't necessarily go in the same bloc when they vote.

W.D.V.: Is the Mexican-American caucus called the brown caucus?

Flores: Sometimes called the brown caucus, sometimes called the Mexican-American caucus.

W.D.V.: How many legislators are in that caucus?

Flores: I think last time there were around ten, which included the two senators. There were two representatives that did not belong to the Mexican-American caucus. Henry Sanchez and Terry .

W.D.V.: So there were twelve Mexican-Americans in the legislature.

Flores: I think that's correct. One of them is Billy Hawk from Laredo. He's an Anglo, but being from Laredo he associates himself very much with the Mexican-Americans.

W.D.V.: So your background is not necessarily the determinant to get into office? You don't have to be a Mexican-American to be in the caucus?

Flores: I would say no, because of Billy Hawk. But he associates himself very close with the Mexican-Americans. I think in Laredo there's not that much difference between Mexican-Americans and Anglo.

They make division. He's there. So I would imagine it would not be limited. I don't know what the actual policy is, but I don't think it would be limited.

W.D.V.: What are the differences between the Mexican-American community and the Anglo community, say in places like
How do you distinguish?

Flores: Well, like I said, in Laredo there's not that much difference. If you take some other place. . . . Like I say, in Laredo, you've had elected Mexican officials for many, many years. Your economic situation. You can have rich Mexicans and rich Anglos. And the culture seems. . . both cultures have assimilated to a great extent. Customs and traditions. But take some other place, where there's a lot of economic differences and a lot of educational differences. Naturally it would create for social differences. You have your economic, social and educational differences

You don't have as many professional Mexican-Americans. Or you don't have as many financially comfortable Mexicans.

J.B.: Is there any difference in campaigning by Anglo candidates in state-wide races? Do they campaign any differently among Mexican Americans than they do among Anglos?

Flores: I would imagine that naturally a man that's running for office would make the issues more prominent that relate to that particular group.

J.B.: What did Briscoe do, for example?

Flores: Let's take education. For example Briscoe campaigned on bi-lingual education. That's one of the things he campaigned on. And that being one of the top priorities of the Mexican people, that was campaigned on quite a bit. And fortunately, when he became our governor bi-lingual education became a law.

J.B.: How does bi-lingual education work?

Flores: I don't recall the exact words of the statute, but it provides that--it doesn't necessarily have to be a chicano kid--but bi-lingual education is for the purpose of the kid who starts school who is deficient in the English language. The bill provides that^{if} there is a certain number--I think 20--then he will be given instruction in his native language or mother language in grades one, two and three and possibly up to the sixth grade. Or, if he is able to have some proficiency of it, when he gets into the second grade he doesn't necessarily have to take whatever the native language may be. But bi-lingual education is not to create a second language but just to help someone become proficient in the English language. It's very difficult. I know from personal experience. When I started school I couldn't speak English. So there was a problem there, up through the primary grades, just to understand what was going on.

J.B.: So the teachers in this program have to be bi-lingual?

Flores: I would imagine they would either be bi-lingual or have a bi-lingual aide. But if they're teaching bi-lingual education, they would have to be bi-lingual.

J.B.: It's not a substitution, Spanish for English. It's using

both languages.

Flores: Yes. What happened in the past, say when I was going to school, a Mexican kid or some other kid who didn't understand the English language would probably have to repeat the first grade right away twice. He might get by the second grade, but when he got to the third grade he would have to repeat it again because there was a little difference in the curriculum and it just made it impossible. Or let's say he didn't have the same equal opportunity as some one that was proficient in the English language. But it's no substitution.

Briscoe also campaigned on vocational training which additional employment. Where you have a number of people unskilled and at an age where they couldn't very well go to school to get a high school and then a college education. educational programs have expanded. I would assume that if he was going to Houston he would campaign on industry. A candidate campaigns on issues that are relevant to each group. Doesn't necessarily mean that he's not interested in the other people. But I think maybe it just saves time for people who don't have interest or are not necessarily interested in industry. a job or education.

J.B.: Anything else you wanted to add?

Flores: Gov. Briscoe carried all the Mexican-American counties *[with majority]* chicano population, with the exception of Crystal City, which is where the Laraza Unida party started over the I think there were 2,000 votes and then the governor got a little over 1,600. So, you can see that even in the county where the Laraza Unida

should be the strongest, I would say it wasn't that strong. Even against Gov. Briscoe. Of course a lot has to do with the man.

[End of interview.]