

Interview with Gonzalo Barrientos, state representative, Austin, Texas, December 12, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: Just sort of explain to us about Mexican-American politics in Texas, both its role, its effect, its conflicts and where it's at and where it's going.

Barrientos: That would take a few days. The politics for a Mexican-American is tied in with just a whole lot of things. For lack of a better word right now shall we say the movement, the . The being the overall effort of the Mexican-American people in this state, this country, to progress better standards of living for American people. I suppose you have to understand the whole history of the Mexican-American in Texas, in this country. The history of the Mexican in Mexico. The history of the Hispanic-Indian situation in Mexico. Just exactly where the Mexican-American comes from, who he is and what's he done. What has been there in the past. In order to really get the overall picture of politics right now. Let's take it from 1848, for example. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. When the people on that side of the border were Mexican and the people on this side were US citizens, but of Mexican ancestry. The rights that were supposed to be there. The battles that took place over land grants, over prejudice and racism. And then what happened to the Mexican-American as a group or as a people. There's a whole history from that

point to now. Generally speaking, that of a people with a different culture and now we could say a bi-culture, if you will. That of an American, US culture and a Mexican-Spanish culture. And what that has meant in terms of economics and social progress for the people. Generally speaking in the past you've heard of all the stereo-typing that took place. The Mexicans, the spics. Mostly labor, agricultural worker type image that one got. There, of course, was the other individuals who had been in politics, but more of a politics of the old style, what was called the patrone system. A person got elected in an area where more than 50 percent of the population was Mexican-American. Let's say close to the border. But usually in the past those individuals were kind of patrone type office holder. Then we progressed with individuals in the past like--

J.B.: Define the patrone type office holder.

Barrientos: He'd be the big boss type of office holder who did not necessarily get elected or what to be elected to help the people but just to help himself out and line his pockets. Almost like a little dictator with everybody going to him for this favor or that favor. Really not putting forth the effort to make everyone aware of their rights and progress as a group. That's the patrone.

Walter de Vries: Has that pretty well disappeared?

Barrientos: Not really. I was surprised to see quite a bit of it in some areas right on the border, on this side of the border, the US border. There would be some interesting situations. You would find around the border, let's say Brownsville to the lower valley around

MacAllen. And then maybe some others, perhaps to a less degree, around Laredo and Eagle Pass.

W.D.V.: But these are Mexican-American office holders who act on behalf of Anglos? More oriented that way than toward Mexican-American interests?

Barrientos: Right.

J.B.: And also can deliver votes more or less and tend to be more or less paternalistic.

Barrientos: Yes. Paternalistic is the right word there.

J.B.: But don't get involved in terms of political issues that basically effect the well being of the underprivileged.

Barrientos: Or I think when that type of an individual does get involved in those types of issues, it's not because he cares for the people's welfare but because it will help him get a few more votes and make him look good.

W.D.V.: And there are quite a few of those left along the border?

Barrientos: What is quite a few? There are some there, yes. As to how many, I don't know how, . . .

W.D.V.: That's the only place you find them in Texas?

Barrientos: Generally speaking, yes. I don't know why that is. Perhaps it's because of the close proximity to Mexico and similar situations in Mexico that have been that way. Maybe it's a way of some of the Anglo power brokers. . . since the population is over 50 percent Mexican-American in those areas. . . to use one of these individuals as

a puppet for their benefit. Like what we were talking about a while ago. But that, as I said, exists almost exclusively along the border. You might find some of that in other cities, like maybe San Antonio a little bit. But generally speaking the border areas.

W.D.V.: But that's the way the Mexican-American got involved in politics, in that capacity?

Barrientos: In those areas. Now as you come forward in years, there were other individuals like Henry B. Gonzales, from San Antonio. I don't know if you're going to interview him. You might get a perspective from him. And then from San Antonio north there were just not that many Mexican-Americans percentage wise that could elect a Mexican-American just with those votes. Aside from that, there was a lot of real prejudice and racism and any Mexican-American that ran just wasn't going to make it. The first ones I can remember, when I was a kid, in terms of politics, was having gone to San Antonio to see a parade when I was around ten or twelve and seeing Henry B. Gonzales on a horse with a hat. I never forgot that. I don't know if that had any influence on me running later.

J.B.: Was he in Congress then?

Barrientos: Let me see, he, I believe, had been a state representative and then a senator if I'm not mistaken. Then ran, I believe, for governor. Then ran for Congress. There were some other individuals. Joe Bernal came later, was a state rep, I believe, and then a state senator. And then, of course, there were certain cases where there might have been some city councilmen or county commissioners

elected. But pretty much only in areas where there was a significant number of Mexican-Americans. Which brings up a situation. . . . I'm sure you're going to be talking to Munes. . . of just exactly where the party politics fit into. . . in terms of relations to the Mexican Americans. Texas being pretty much a one party state. The Democratic party. And in the past it just hadn't done that damn much with and for the Mexican-American people of this state. That really didn't come out fully in the open until the Raza Unida party started running. I think during the McGovern election the party opened up a great deal more than it had ever been to the Mexican-American and blacks in this state.

J.B.: Do you attribute this primarily to the McGovern guidelines or to the effect of the Raza Unida?

Barrientos: I attribute it to a number of things. I attribute it to ten years or so of black movement and chicano movement and student movement and women's movement and people movement. The war, also, had an effect. The marches, the riots, the demonstrations. A lot of things had an effect on this. I think that the McGovern rules had a great deal to do with it. I don't think the Raza Unida party had that much to do with it in terms of the Democratic party opening up, no. I might just start rambling here. You'll have to ask me some specifics. I don't know how well you know Texas.

J.B.: What has been the effect of Raza Unida?

Barrientos: I have worked with the guys in Raza Unida. See, people get all these terms confused. The words Raza Unida--if you were to translate them literally--would mean the united race. But it doesn't

mean that at all. It means united people, actually. The guys got that from the movement of the Mexican-American. We call ourselves la raza, you know, just the people, for lack of a better word in English. It's not anything particularly ethnocentric. It's just a term we use for ourselves. Mexican-Americans. Chicanos. la raza. In the movement, there developed this name, which has been used for years and years by Mexican-American people. Eventually we put it on some bumper stickers that said : la raza unida. United people. Let's get together and work out some of our problems. Get with it. About three years ago, more or less, a few of the people within the movement took that and put the party on it, label on it. la raza unida party. Therefore taking advantage of the movement and tying it into a political situation, a party. Which is smart. They started out--I say they, I was in on some of the thinking--saying the Democratic party, the Republican party, nobody has really helped out the Mexican-American, paid any attention, given us representation. So to hell with them. We can form our party and bring enough votes to deal from a bargaining position and win some offices. Well, that was good, in order to get more representation and benefits for the Mexican-American people. What happened, in my opinion though, was that it got corralled by a few individuals in the leadership that took it off on a tangent. I think that this is what happened this last election. They got wiped out. It had been my opinion that in order to benefit the Mexican-American people, for us to progress, we have to attack the problems from a multi-pronged attack on all problems. Using all the resources that are available. If an Anglo person says I want to

help out in this effort, or if a black person wants to help out in that effort, fine. But to isolate ourselves so much that it pushes all other individuals that want to help out of the situation, it's doing the same thing that perhaps has been done to us in the past. So that my idea-- and many other individual's ideas--about working for progress for the Mexican-Americans and to further everyone in the state would be to work on these things together. I as a Democrat, as a politician. Those guys as la raza unida folks in local offices. Lawyers, unions, any number of things. Together. But what happened was, in so many words, they were saying if you're not with the raza unida party you're against the Mexican-Americans. Which was not true. In many, many cases. I'm sure there are some cases where there are some Mexican-Americans that just are out for their own good, line their own pockets. But it was very difficult to have to fight another Mexican-American out in public when we don't have the base in some areas. Like this county, for example. We've got 14 percent Mexican-American people. Not an overwhelming percentage of those 14 percent vote. It's getting a lot better, especially in the last two years here that we've worked on. And the people here are realizing that. . . the power of the vote then and what can be done. But one of the problems has been that we've had to run, if we wanted to, in a multi-member district. Let me get back a minute. Fourteen percent Mexican-American. About 11 or 12 percent black. And the rest Anglo. Well, certainly a person can't go out and say I'm running as a black only for the black people and the hell with everybody else. So they get beat, every time. As I was telling you a while ago, the first person

that got elected here was a fellow named Richard Moya. First chicano that got elected. He got elected pretty much because it was a single member district. The southeast area of the county, where most of the Mexican-American people live. In our situation. . . I ran three years ago, but I had to run the whole county. In spite of the fact that I came out as. . . well, I was Mexican-American and I wasn't going to deny that part of it and so on. But I came out just campaigning on issues. I think the people that voted against us--if you could break them down in percentages, and this is just a guess on my part. Over half the people that voted against us may have voted against us just because we were Mexican-American. Not necessarily because they didn't agree with our views. This last time we did make it. But then again, this county is different from the rest of the state of Texas. It's one of the most progressive areas in the state. Although we won in a multimember district, that's not to say we don't need single member districts anymore here. I think we absolutely do.

W.D.V.: Did the '74 election resolve that question: if you're not for us, you're against us? Because of the defeat. Or is that still an important issue?

Barrientos: It just depends on the thinking of some of the raza unida leadership. If they saw some of their mistakes and are willing to work together with all areas of the community, then some good will come out of it. If they didn't see their mistakes and they're going to be keeping on this same track, I think they're dead as a political party. That particular party anyway.

W.D.V.: But the existence of that party doesn't really help Mexican-Americans in the Democratic party the way you read it?

Barrientos: Oh, to a certain extent. I think it could help a lot to help the Mexican-Americans in the Democratic party a whole lot more if handled differently. But the way it has been, I don't think it has helped that much. But for the Mexican-American to make more progress in the Democratic party, I don't think it's helped that much.

J.B.: How has it helped?

Barrientos: Well, I think simply by just being there and Ramsey getting a few votes. The Democratic party says, listen, traditionally the Mexican-American voted Democrat. And looking at the national situation, what with Nixon and all that, saying "we're in trouble. And here's an area right here where we're going to be in more trouble if we don't shape up." I'm sure those thoughts have passed through some of the Democratic leaders. If they haven't passed through, some of the leadership is dumber than I thought.

J.B.: We've been told that Gov. Briscoe has made more Mexican-American appointments than any previous governor. Boards, commissions, agencies and these type of appointments. Who has he appointed? What type of people?

Barrientos: You know, I couldn't tell you exactly who they are. I can say this, and this is opinion not really based on too much fact. Just from what I've known in the past and history. First of all, he's made more appointments. Okay. That's probably true. But then again state government is much larger than it ever was, so you expect more appointments anyway. Secondly, who has he appointed? I have a feeling--

maybe not in every case--but I have a feeling that those are Mexican-Americans who are of the old style politics, the old mold. Not the younger people that express more freedom of thought and more aggressive. Probably some big businessmen, some people that might have contributed to the campaigns. I don't know. Something like that. That's the feeling I get. I'm sure he's done some good things. I don't know as he's burning up the road to including the Mexican-American in the mainstream of Texas government.

J.B.: Do you see any formation of a formal or informal alliance between Mexican-Americans, blacks, organized labor?

Barrientos: Oh, I think that's pretty much always been there in terms of the Mexican-American and the blacks. Because we pretty much had the same problems in the past.

J.B.: How about in terms of the legislature, say, the two caucuses getting together?

Barrientos: Oh sure, definitely. That includes labor to a great degree. I don't know if completely, but to a great degree. Because labor has its problems. In spite of the fact that labor has been one of the biggest helps to the minorities in this state, and I think in this country, there are parts of labor that are still closed, still racist, and are not opening up to minorities. But certainly the minority groups will be working together on almost everything.

W.D.V.: Is there a chicano elected officials conference statewide?

Barrientos: We are just working on that. Efforts have been

started in the past, but only in the last few years. We're working on that. We're working on establishing a Mexican-American lobby group. Real emphasis to bringing all elected officials in, providing communication channels among the officials. We're just getting places now in 1974. There have been a lot of things that have held the Mexican-American people back, especially in politics. Such as having to run in multi-member districts. Five, ten years ago I would have never thought of running in this county. You can say pretty much the same thing about Dallas or Houston and some of the other areas that have a significant number of Mexican-Americans but not enough to beat the whole county. So what has been done with, say, people like Craig Washington, Mickey Leeland, Ben Reyes, some of these individuals that have come into the state house in the last few years, are there because of single member districts. Now we can come into our own in terms of single member districts. Single member districts don't necessarily guarantee--at least here in Austin--that you will have a Mexican-American elected or a black elected. But it just gives those individuals a hell of a lot better fighting chance. I believe Austin is going to be having single member districts by the next election. You cut an area where most of the Mexican-Americans live. That will only be about 30-35 percent of the vote in that particular area. But that's a bargaining position within that area. If it's not a Mexican-American elected, it will be someone that sure as heck is going to take their wishes and problems into consideration.

W.D.V.: Any other barriers?

Barrientos: Economics. There have not in the past been just a hell of a lot of rich Mexican-Americans that could afford to run for office. A lot of these offices don't pay. Right now I'll be getting paid \$4,800 a year. It's going to be tough as hell on me. I'm not a businessman. I haven't had any large sums of money stashed away in a bank or anything like that. I've been a community organizer, social service worker. Working for the federal government, different foundations and programs. Economics. State legislature here pays \$4,800 a year. Only the people that were large businessmen or somebody's puppets could run in the past. Now, because of single member districts, there are some of us that are willing to take the chance and take on a \$4,800 a year and maybe work a little bit on the side or ask the wife to go to work also. City councils, the one here for example, they pay them \$10 a week. Who the heck is going to run for that. Only the rich. Voter registration. It was only a few years ago here that they did away with the poll tax in Texas. First of all, being outnumbered, they're going to say why the heck run for office? You're going to get outvoted. Why the heck vote? They're not going to pay attention to us anyway. So very few people registered to vote. Then they did away with the poll tax and a few more people started registering to vote. But then there was that obstacle, economics and whatnot, and they still didn't get into it. It's only been, around this area, in the last eight to ten years that they have been registering more and more people, people are starting to see the power of the vote.

W.D.V.: Are there any cultural or racial biases?

Barrientos: Yeah, well this is what I was going to say. Obstacles. There is still prejudice and racism against Mexican-Americans. It may not be as blatant as it was ten years ago, but it's there by a certain segment of the population here, Anglo population. It's a little more sophisticated, especially in the urban areas. You get screwed more sophisticatedly, put it that way. Those are some of the obstacles.

W.D.V.: Do you see the election of a chicano as a state-wide officer soon?

Barrientos: Sure I do. Some people may think this over-optimistic, but I think within the next five years we'll have a state-wide elected Mexican-American. I think we'll have a governor one of these days. Got a long way to go, but I think the ground can be covered. Through awareness, through education, through a lot of different efforts.

W.D.V.: Are there any state-wide recognized Mexican-American leaders?

Barrientos: Sure. . . . The question is an interesting one because depending on who you ask they might mention a number of different names for different regions. For example, what is the name most often heard, that people recognize? You might consider that a leader just because they heard it. Then who are some of the real leaders? Henry B. Gonzales' name is probably one of the top names that is heard.

J.B.: How old were you when you saw him that time on the horse? And how old are you now?

Barrientos: Ten or twelve. Thirty-three.

J.B.: How did you feel when you saw him?

Barrientos: I just remember I heard someone say "Here comes Henry B. Gonzales." I said he must be some kind of a big man. It was the first Mexican-American that I had ever seen that was a big man, in terms of prestige and position. And he was the first Mexican-American that I saw that was in that position that was not ashamed of being Mexican-American. There he was, riding down the street with a beautiful horse with a big Mexican sombrero. So it made me feel good, damn good, you know. Because I was raised--all my life until I was seventeen years old--as a migrant, picking cotton and the whole bit. Getting kicked out of restaurants with the family and all this. I didn't know how to speak English until I was about seven years old. And I didn't learn English through the schools. I learned it from playing with black children where I grew up.

Henry B. Gonzales at least he's got the name identity, state-wide.

J.B.: How do you evaluate him in terms of leadership?

Barrientos: Well, the kind of leadership that I look for these days is a person that gets out there and moves. If we're going to talk about state-wide leaders, moves state-wide. Not only in one particular geographic area. Of course Henry B. Gonzales' legislative effort is for everybody in the state, but I don't see enough of him traveling throughout the state, working with different groups of Mexican-Americans and different problems throughout the state. Joe Bernal does a whole lot more of that. State senator from San Antonio. He was one of the first people I met that impressed me and influenced me a great deal. And he's

a young man. He moves around a whole lot. There may be conferences in El Paso or Dallas or Galveston or in the valley. He moves around. See, one of the things that's helped out, I believe, a great deal in terms of politics and Mexican-Americans is when OEO was started it gave a great number of Mexican-Americans an opportunity to. . . well, first of all, positions, employment. But not only that, it set up the opportunity for communication. You could just pick up the telephone and call here or over there. OEO, if it did nothing else, provided the Mexican-American an opportunity to communicate with each other, among each other, throughout the state and the southwest and Washington. It did a whole lot in terms of that. And learning what was going on throughout the state with Mexican-Americans and with other different groups. Different efforts that were being made throughout the country. We were talking about state-wide leadership. Joe Bernal.

J.B.: What caused his defeat?

Barrientos: I hesitate to say. I do know that the raza unida party had an effect on it down there.

J.B.: Did his defeat and the fact that raza unida did have an effect weaken raza unida?

Barrientos: Yes sir. Absolutely.

W.D.V.: Did they have a candidate against him?

Barrientos: I don't remember, to tell you the truth. But the problem is that even if they didn't have a candidate against him, they had a primary during the time that he was running in the Democratic primary. Therefore any votes that went to the raza unida party were

automatically taken away from Joe Bernal. He lost in the Democratic primary, by less than 100 votes. Good man. That hurt the raza unida party. I know the people in raza unida party real well. They had wanted me to run under the raza unida party label. I said no, that I could not. They said Well, don't take it personally, but we're going to run somebody against you. I said well, if you take 100 or 200 votes away and you let the incumbent back in who has been doing nothing but sitting on his hands for fourteen years, I am going to take it personally. But further, if you run against people like Richard Moya, the county commissioner, like myself, I believe, like Ben Reyes, the state representative from Houston, like Joe Bernal, you're going to anger the local Mexican-American community. And not only are you going to lose those particular races, but you're going to lose votes for your gubernatorial candidate. Which is exactly what happened. We stomped raza unida here. My opponent got three percent of the vote in this county. In the Mexican-American community he got less than one percent. So we beat our opponent here. Moya, county commissioner, beat his opponent handily. Ben Reyes in Houston got 84 percent of the vote, something like that. And it did have an effect on raza unida party by running against these individuals. So it hurt them.

W.D.V.: What was the thinking, or strategy, in running the candidate for governor? Obviously they didn't expect to win.

Barrientos: Well, the raza unida people were saying they expected to win. I don't know. They probably thought that there would be a

toss up between Briscoe and his problems with Sissy Farenthold and the Republicans coming on stronger. Maybe there might have been a chance of a dark horse like Ramsey *Muniz* coming in there and upsetting the apple cart. I think, though, running a candidate for governor. . . they think it might have been to establish the party more in the state. To garner more votes and be able to show everybody, look we've got a significant number of votes, we can deal from a position of power now. I'm sure you'll get their opinion when you talk to Ramsey. But I think they really hurt themselves badly when they ran against these other individuals I was talking about. When the Mexican-American people saw the raza unida party running against individuals like Ben Reyes in Houston, like Richard Moya here, in areas where the Mexican-American population is not that large. And then comparing it to some of the places in the valley where there are Anglo office holders that are not that progressive and where the population is 50, 60, 70, 80 percent, and not running against those individuals, the Mexican-American people of Texas started thinking. It just doesn't make sense.

W.D.V.: Is it more accurate to say that there are regional Mexican-American leaders than state-wide?

Barrientos: Oh sure, yeah. Regional and state-wide. You've got some leaders here locally. Some leaders that reach out in central Texas. And then some people that are leaders state-wide, like Joe Bernal. Certainly now our names are going to be around more state-wide because of the offices. And if we can pull things together more, we'll be in a

better position, not only to help the Mexican-American people, but--I know this sounds like a cliché--but really to make this a better place to live. Texas. For everybody. There's a hell of a lot of problems here. Problems that very often transcend ethnic lines. And they've got to be worked on.

J.B.: Are the problems in Texas basically the haves vs the have nots?

Barrientos: Yes, but not altogether. A lot of it is racial in Texas. I think racial and then the problem of haves and have nots.

J.B.: Do racial antagonisms exist between Mexican-Americans and blacks?

Barrientos: In some cases. Specifically some of the urban areas like Dallas and Houston.

J.B.: Did rivalries grow out of OEO?

Barrientos: To a certain extent, yeah. It was like that old situation. Throw a few crumbs out there and expect everybody to be fighting over them. Certainly the black people have had problems throughout the country. They were getting funded from OEO and federal government. When it came to the southwest, we are generally the majority minority. And so the Mexican-American wanted its share of the program moneys. There was some problems there. I would be less than candid if I didn't say that. But it wasn't anything where mortal wounds were inflicted and those situations we couldn't resolve. But that did come up. And it's still coming up to a certain degree. It just takes a lot of

good reasoning between the two groups to say what's fair is fair, you know. The black movement is very strong and it gets some things accomplished. But the Mexican-American does exist and by golly we have our problems, too. Let's just be fair about the whole situation, folks.

J.B.: Is there any communication or relationship at all between Mexican-Americans and Cuban-Americans politically?

Barrientos: Very little. Almost nothing. The Cubans are pretty much in Florida and those areas and they have very little contact with the Mexican-American, at least from Texas. The only time that I've seen some communication would be the last Hispanic-American conference we had in Washington, D.C., where we had all the Spanish speaking. Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and other individuals who have moved here from, say, South America. In that conference the Cubans didn't come off too well because most of the Spanish speaking that were there were working class people or people who had come from working class. And a lot of the Cubans that were there appeared to come from monied backgrounds. And therefore were not in step with the general direction of the conference. And they came off different than the Puerto Ricans and the chicanos. There weren't that many, either.

W.D.V.: They also tend to be Republican if they're from Miami.

[Interruption.]

J.B.: Are any of these various state-wide officers whose names are being projected as potential candidates for governor or Senator have any special ties within the Mexican-American community? Armstrong, Hobby, Hill, White. Are any of these guys viewed within the Mexican-

American community viewed as being particularly good or particularly bad or have any special quality that appeal?

Barrientos: Armstrong has some good appeal among many of the Mexican-Americans. That's about it.

J.B.: What's his appeal based on?

Barrientos: Kind of a down to earth fellow. It's not so much what has been done for the Mexican-Americans from his office but for a person who listens. He's young. Seems to be on the right sides of different issues. He comes down with the folks. Yarborough used to have a great appeal with the Mexican-Americans. Great appeal. He did many things--

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J.B.: A certain amount has been written that the Mexican-American vote and the black vote both were fairly light in Yarborough's race in which he lost. Is that true and if so is there any explanation of why?

Barrientos: I don't know that that is true. It might have been a light turn out but it was a light turn out all over, if I remember correctly. I would venture to guess that of the Mexican-Americans and blacks that turned out probably Yarborough got anywhere from 80 to 90 or more percent. I don't remember that he didn't get that much of a vote.

J.B.: My understanding was that he got most of it that came out but that the vote itself was fairly light within the Mexican-American communities. That there was not a heavy turn out.

Barrientos: I don't remember that. If it was light, it was because it was light all over, for whatever reasons it was light all over.

J.B.: What sort of issues are you especially interested in in the legislature?

Barrientos: Bunch of them. One of the most important is financing our public schools here in Texas. You may have heard about the very unequal education going on in Texas because of the way the money is raised and because of the way the school systems are funded. We have some very, very poor school districts in terms of money and in terms of academic excellence. And we have some very, very rich school districts in both those areas also. What we will be trying to do this coming session is come up with a method of taxation, in the area of property taxation, some reform there. And then also equalizing educational excellence and opportunity in this state. That's one of the most important ones. Of course added to that will be efforts in bi-lingual education and salaries for teachers increases, facilities, so on.

A number of other areas which have to do with regulating the utility companies here. I hope to have us establish a public utilities commission. I'm very interested in single member districts. That we do have them come about in this county and in a number of other counties in the state. So we give an opportunity to more minorities to participate in politics and also more individuals who aren't necessarily rich to participate in politics. It takes a lot less money to run in a single member district than it does in a whole county like this, or

multi-member counties. There are a number of other issues. Whole bunch. Those are a couple of them. I'm also interested, of course, in establishing some good laws with teeth for the environment. I'm interested in further developing our abilities to provide special programs for the disadvantaged--be they Mexican-American, black or white. Manpower training programs. Adult education programs.

J.B.: Does Texas have much of a junior college system?

Barrientos: It's starting. In the last few years there have been many more junior colleges set up by the state. Further, we are seeing more establishment of community colleges. Here in Austin we now have Austin community college and in different parts of the state they are setting up community colleges. Which is really good for the people, lower middle class and the poor, for them to have the opportunity to attend some of these educational institutions.

W.D.V.: Is there any work to get a human relations commission state-wide?

Barrientos: Yes. There is also work along that line. We seem to have so many problems that sometimes we forget about very important things like that. There is an effort to have the equal rights amendment rescinded. It seems to be an effort of right wing extremists to have the ERA rescinded. I don't think it will get anywhere. There are numerous other issues. Those are some of the ones I think are most important. One of the things I would hope to see, as I was talking a while ago, was one of these days having a living wage for state legis-

lators. California pays what? \$20-25,000 a year. \$4,800 just ain't going to make it.

J.B.: That would require a constitutional amendment, wouldn't it?

Barrientos: One of our state reps from Dallas, Paul Ragsdale-- if you talk to him you might ask him about this--was getting quite a bit of publicity because he was going to be eligible for food stamps. You'd have a state rep on food stamps. Which is not unusual if you don't have a lot of money in the bank. A lot of our state employees are on food stamps. I understand that some of our highway patrolmen are on food stamps. That's the kind of situation we have in Texas. There's a lot of money in Texas. Obviously we have not, in this state, put it in the areas of human need.

W.D.V.: Why not? Why does one of the wealthiest states, if not the wealthiest, rank so low in all the indices?

Barrientos: I think that the money is being controlled by a few people that just don't want to give it up and spread it around a little bit. I think they're greedy. I don't think they give a damn about human beings. And we're just going to have to do something about it. Through legislation and other ways. It's ridiculous, you know. Like you say. Texas has often been number one in the nation in football and number one in the southwest conference. Good strong football teams and other things like that. But in terms of mental health, in terms of state employee pay, in terms of education, in terms of poor, it's ridiculous. And we've talked, in the past few minutes, about why. The whys

of some of that. But the people that have been in control of Texas, the John Connallys, some of the old crowd, are responsible for a lot of this I think. They've had the money and they want to keep the money. I don't think it's going to be that way too much longer. I think we're progressing. We're coming into this century.

W.D.V.: Do you consider yourself a liberal? In the Democratic party.

Barrientos: Probably. I try to get away from labels during the campaign. They tried to label me, especially in the last campaign

I lost by a thousand votes. The opponent labeled me as a radical revolutionary with innuendoes of being a Cuban trained infiltrator and stuff. I've got, I suppose, some very liberal views in some areas. What I consider myself, I don't know. I've got my opinions. If some people think they are liberal, okay, they're liberal. Some people might think they're radical.

W.D.V.: Some people we talk to assert that in the future the old liberal bloc--whatever that was, the blacks, the Mexican-Americans--will coalesce in state government and then you'll get changes. But they tend to lump all of them together with the liberal wing of the Democratic party.

Barrientos: Yeah, I can see that and that's probably what will happen to a great degree.

W.D.V.: But do most Mexican-American political leaders see themselves as liberals with that group?

Barrientos: Not all, no. There are some Mexican-Americans which I consider pretty damn conservative. I suppose that generally speaking the people that you're talking about now--the liberals, black, white, brown so forth--those individuals who base their efforts on humane legislation. Legislation for the benefit and the welfare of the people. Versus special interests, legislation for the big oil companies, the tycoons, the lobbies. I went downstairs to get cigarettes and got cornered by three lobbies in the coffee shop.

J.B.: Is there likely to develop any fight over the speaker situation or does Clayton have it in already?

Barrientos: I think Clayton has got it. There's been a fight already. I think whatever fighting comes now is going to be inconsequential. He's got over 100 people committed to him and I think that's the way it's going to stay. I hope he makes a good one, or at least a fair one.

J.B.: That's a two year term, right?

Barrientos: Yeah. The next election we have we'll have to go all through it again. Have you spoken with Billy Clayton? It would be a good idea to get some of his views.

W.D.V.: What should we ask you that we haven't?

Barrientos: It's hard to say until you've talked to a great number of people that you're going to talk to. Be able to get sort of a picture in your mind as to what questions you should ask. What are some of the issues in Texas that. . . . For example, the question of the right to work law in Texas. The Republicans made a big to-do about

it. They tried to rip some of the more liberal legislators with it. It was good PR to name it the right to work law. Really big misnomer. But they tried to use that in this last campaign. Tell people that they're not going to be able to go to work where they want to and so on and so forth. Trying to move the limelight from Washington and Watergate. There was a big effort there. We had a constitutional convention here not too long ago. But it did not pass on the final vote. Did not get its two-thirds that it was supposed to get. There was a big issue about the right to work law. When they failed to pass the vote on the whole constitution, many of the Republicans and very conservative Democrats blamed it on labor, on right to work issues. And that wasn't it at all. The conservatives, the Republicans, I think, had that planned from the very beginning. To punish some of the liberals and labor in this state. The right to work law and that issue had something to do with it, but a number of other things at the constitutional convention.

Another thing I was going to say, I just remembered. Texas is pretty much a one party state. The Republicans are gaining to a certain degree. But there are a hell of a lot of people in the Democratic party that ought to get the hell out of the Democratic party and go into the Republican party. Like John Connally did. It's always been that way, you know. He finally just switched when he thought it was convenient. We just have too many Republicans in the Democratic party in Texas. And I wish they'd be honest about it and just go on and switch parties right now.

W.D.V.: Is the Republican party making any gains among Mexican-Americans?

Barrientos: Hell no. No way.

W.D.V.: So the only way they can build their base is to move the conservatives over.

Barrientos: No, there was quite an effort made by Nixon's people. If you saw some of the efforts that were made to try to get Mexican-Americans involved in the Democratic party. A number of appointments made when they first came in. And most of those appointments were rich Mexican-Americans who didn't necessarily have the welfare of the people in mind when they were appointed. There was that big to-do about

who was appointed what, secretary of the treasury. And her employing I don't know how many illegal aliens in her company in California. You can see now, as compared to when Nixon first came in, that there aren't a hell of a lot of Mexican-Americans in those positions any more. There has been a good deal of discussion as to what role the raza unida party played in this whole situation. A lot of people are saying that the Republicans were feeding them money under the table so that they could break the Mexican-American vote, which has always been traditionally Democrat. There might be something to that. If you talk to Ben Reyes he might give you a few more details on that, about just where the raza unida party was getting some of their money. I can't say for a fact that the Republicans were passing them money. But it was brought out to me and it might be of interest to you to look up in the Watergate testimony that testimony that had to do with raza unida party and monies

or grants or whatever. Somewhere in there in all that testimony.

W.D.V.: How do you evaluate Rudy Flores?

Barrientos: Well, Rudy Flores is an old friend of Gov. Briscoe's. Grew up with him down in *Uvalde*. And who was the president or vice president of his bank in , Texas. So, as an old friend and trusted confidant, I suppose he brought him up to Austin. I don't know that much about Rudy Flores. I know him. He's a very courteous gentleman. Calm. I don't know what he thinks. Don't know him that well.

W.D.V.: How much impact or influence does he have in the Mexican-American community?

Barrientos: Hardly anybody knows him outside of maybe a few of his personal friends in business or people in and of course some people here in Austin now. He's not a political man, I don't think. Hasn't been in politics that much. I'll be trying to talk with him a whole lot in terms of what can be done for some of the legislation that we hope to work with and different little efforts that can be made.

W.D.V.: Is he the first Mexican-American to be in the governor's office?

Barrientos: No, there have been others in the past. Not a hell of a lot. Can remember really only one in any position of consequence and that was in, I believe, Preston Smith's administration. And he was only there a few months.

W.D.V.: But he was the only one you can remember. John Connally didn't have any?

Barrientos: Was it John Connally or Preston Smith that appointed

Roy Barvera secretary of state? I think it was Preston Smith. But there have been very, very few. You can count them on one hand. And they didn't have that much of an impact. They really didn't have the power to move, the advocates.

J.B.: Who in the incumbent legislators is most influential among Mexican-Americans? Is there a chairman of the brown caucus as such?

Barrientos: Yes there is. The chairman I think is Pablo But I don't think he is the one that has the most influence. It would have been Joe Bernal, darn it.

J.B.: Was he defeated this year?

Barrientos: Well, he'd been out and then he came back and ran again this year. I see Ben Reyes, Paul Moreno, as a couple of the people with more leadership. They're newer. Some of the fellows that are there. . . . like Pablo's been there for a number of terms. Ben and myself talked a lot. I've got more in common with Ben than any of the other Mexican-American legislators. We're trying to come on with a new style, a new direction, a new advocacy in politics, Mexican-American politics. Using everything that we've been through. Our experiences.

W.D.V.: How important is the church?

Barrientos: In politics? It depends on the area that you go to, I suppose. But I consider the church more important in terms of the movement, which includes politics, of course, than I do right in politics. Worked with the church before. Our new direction there has been in getting the church to move. Getting the local priest to be not only priest

to serve the spiritual needs of the community but also to be community organizers and advocates for the real needs of the community. Like hunger and housing and employment and so forth. We've got many priests now, we need more, who think this way, that are doing that. Here in Austin two or three that I can name that are movers, you know, in a community. The church can do a lot better--

J.B.: Is the church politically active?

Barrientos: Not really. Only some parishes.

J.B.: Are these more activist, socially active priests also active say in encouraging voter registration and participation?

Barrientos: Oh yes, very definitely. And that includes Bishop Flores in San Antonio.

W.D.V.: Is that going up generally. Consistently going up. Voter registration among Mexican-Americans. Or has it leveled off?

Barrientos: Absolutely. No, it's going up. It's not like the blacks.

W.D.V.: What about younger Mexican-Americans? Are they being turned off by politics or are they getting interested in it?

Barrientos: I think they're getting more interested in it. I don't think they're being turned off. Some of the Anglo kids may be getting turned off, but I don't think Mexican kids are. I don't even know that Anglo kids are getting turned off by it, either. I think they're getting turned on, little by little. The situation here in Austin, for example. The Anglo population is staying stable. The black population is decreasing. And the chicano population is increasing.

And so are the registered voters. Especially when the community can see in a race like ours, when we ran county-wide and we won. We beat the son of a guns. At least the two times I've run--I ran in '72 and I ran this year--we had, myself and the people helping us, had to beat nine opponents. Some of whom, of course, we ran twice against. The first time we ran we had to go into a run-off. We barely lost the run-off because the University of Texas--this is something else that you might be interested in. It seems that run-offs are held when universities have gone home for the semester breaks, which just killed me in that '72 election. I had come out 6,000 votes ahead of all of the other candidates in this particular position. Had the run-off and I lost, oh, between 10 and 15 thousand votes from the University of Texas when they went home. They had a chance to vote absentee, but it's very difficult to do here in Texas. So I lost 43,000 to 42,000. But this time we played the strategy a little different, taking that into consideration, and we beat them. Back to what I was saying. When the Mexican-American community can see that we can win and we get some good individuals up there that can move and do some positive things, more people register. I had hundreds of guys come up and tell me at the beer joints and the pubs, "Damn, I'm sure glad that you won. To tell you the truth I didn't vote. But I just registered last week and I registered my mother. We're just waiting for the next campaign to come up." I'm optimistic about it.

J.B.: So do you anticipate that the first time a viable Mexican-American candidate runs for state-wide office will further strengthen registration and voter participation?

Barrientos: Absolutely. And it's got to be types of individuals who are well-rounded, who can show some humility and be proud of where they are, have a pretty fair education, and keep the culture and respect. That's one of the areas, I think, where raza unida has made mistakes. My opponent here tried to out-radical me. In some of the groups where he talked he thought he'd out-radical me and he would come out with some profanity. One thing about the Mexican-American people in groups like that, you don't do that. I think in some cases some of the raza unida candidates were looking too much, taking too much from the black movement. Which doesn't work in our culture.

W.D.V.: Does the typical Mexican-American identify with the black? I didn't think so.

Barrientos: No. We've got our own bi-culture.

J.B.: But in terms of issues, there's very little difference, right? Educational opportunity, employment, housing. Aren't those the basic issues both blacks and Mexican-Americans project as number one?

Barrientos: Sure, exactly. The whole bit.

J.B.: Equal justice under the law. Do Mexican-Americans even come close to being proportionately represented in state employment?

Barrientos: Absolutely not, no way. That's part of the problem. There are some areas where we're very much different. Some of these testing procedures within state agencies, within police departments, are just out of it. Because they are culturally biased tests.

J.B.: What's the black population in Texas?

Barrientos: I think it's less than 12 percent.

J.B.: Combined between Mexican-American and black population, you're talking about close to 30 percent of the total population.

Barrientos: Yeah, about thirty some odd percent. That's a lot of people.

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

Barrientos: I sure hope that in the future--I think the desire is there generally by the black community and the Mexican-American community--to work with the overall Anglo community together on some of these problems. And I'm optimistic that we can come up with a new politic throughout the whole country, certainly I hope here in the South and Southwest. Where we can work more on people legislation and solve some of these problems together because I don't think we can do it just one particular group by itself.

J.B.: How do you view Lloyd Bentsen as a potential presidential candidate?

Barrientos: I don't think he will be making it as the candidate. I may be wrong in this, but I don't even think he'll make it as vice presidential candidate.

W.D.V.: Would he make it among the Texas delegation in 1976?

Barrientos: I don't think so. He's come to the middle a great deal in the past couple or three years. But his past is still with him. I don't know. I suppose that I would vote for him over a Republican, but I sure as heck am not going to back him at this point in time anyway.

J.B.: Why did you decide to run for office?

Barrientos: I couldn't answer that question in one or two sentences. It has to do with my whole background. Where I came from and who I am. As I said a while ago, I was raised as a migrant until I was 17. For all those years I just lived out in the fields. Housing which was not really housing. They were barns and dirt floors. Lived in poverty. Seeing a lot of racial discrimination. Being thrown out of restaurants. Where I went to school there were three schools. One for blacks, one for Anglos and one for Mexican-Americans. Talk about a waste. It was very difficult to go through those times economically. And then inside it hurt a lot to get pushed around, oppressed, like that. Fortunately my dad, having no formal education, saw to it that we did have an education by coming back from the migrant trains every September while the rest of the migrants stayed in the fields. We'd come back to school. I did get out of high school and came to the University of Texas after that. And I sort of lost touch with what we'd been through and what a lot of other people had been through and what a lot of people are going through even now. For a year or two there while I was going to the University. Coming from a small town and coming to a large university, it was kind of awesome and very impressive to me. But I sort of came back to thinking about people and got into being an organizer for the National Urban League for a year or two and then getting into various other programs as a trainer, cross cultural communication, migrants, manpower training so on and so forth. Worked for the federal government and state, for the church, for the US Catholic Conference.

Worked in Washington as a trainer. And then I decided that my role had changed and that I wanted to do something and perhaps this was the best place to do it, to make some changes. So very briefly that's kind of it. And here I am. It's scary.

[End of interview.]