THE STRUGGLE FOR CHICANO POWER IN LOS ANGELES: THE CONTRIBUTION OF A GRASSROOTS ACTIVIST

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> "What we're doing here will take years. We are going to build a political base of community power. Our people are poor, uneducated. They have been told they are criminally inclined and some of them have been made to believe it."[1]
>
> Rosalío Muñoz

Grassroots activists have too often been ignored in the written history of the Chicano struggle for political representation. Chicanos/Latinos, one of the fastest-growing minority groups, now have a political voice, which led to the election of a Chicano Mayor in City of Los Angeles. It is important to acknowledge the efforts of grassroots activists in gaining that power.

Some historians claim that after the surge of the Chicano Movement in the 1970s, young activists forgot about their commitment to the struggle for social justice and political empowerment. Historians credit politicians and established organizations with creating Chicano empowerment while disregarding the role of grassroots activists in achieving political representation. This article re-evaluates and challenges the existing school of thought that ignores the grassroots element as a critical contributor to the struggle for Chicano political power.

Rosalío Muñoz is one such activist. Muñoz worked in electoral precincts to change the Los Angeles City and County Master Plan, fought for the rights of tenants and immigrants, advocated for a citizen's police review board, built labor and community coalitions, and trained and

[1] Myron Roberts, "The New Alumni: What Happens to Campus Activists After They Graduate?" *Los Angeles Times*, November 1970, 32-35.

mobilized clergy to support urban Chicano/Latino social concerns. Muñoz raised these same issues in his two campaigns for public office. Although Muñoz is well known for his work in the Chicano Moratoriums of East Los Angeles, his activism beyond the Movement is relatively unknown.

My interest in the history of the Chicano Movement was piqued after reading an article by Rosalío Muñoz on women activists in the Chicano Moratoriums, the two-year long Chicano-led anti-Vietnam War activities that called for ending the war and social justice at home. Later, when I had the opportunity to interview Muñoz, he suggested that I research the aftermath of the movement. That research brought to my attention the scarcity of records recognizing the contributions of grassroots activists. Muñoz both created and joined organizations, such as the National Chicano Moratorium Committee (NCMC), to initiate coalitions and gain support in the struggle for political power.

La Marcha de La Reconquista (The March to Reconquer), led by the NCMC, which was a march to protest police brutality and in opposition to Governor Ronald Reagan's anti-Chicano policies, ended after a three-month journey from Calexico to California's State Capital. Following the march, the CMC was disbanded because the previous four marches, though peaceful in nature, ended with police brutality and death. After those incidents, Muñoz and other Chicano leaders decided to continue their fight for social justice using different methods.

La Marcha de La Reconquista received limited media coverage from major news publications, much of which was biased. The *Sacramento Bee* reported the arrival of the *La Marcha de La Reconquista* marchers, describing "a throng of young Chicanos, trying to dramatize discrimination that they contend members of their race encounter, arrived in Sacramento."[2] Smaller publications such as, *The People's World,* however, cited the major concerns of the marchers, "oppression against Chicanos—in welfare, the war, immigration, education and police brutality and prisons."[3] Although those who marched in *La Marcha de La Reconquista* did receive limited media recognition, other events promoted by grassroots activists received almost none. Following *La Marcha de La Reconquista* where activists had gathered signatures to help qualify La Raza Unida Party (LRUP), an alternative political party, Chicano grassroots activists realized the need to increase local electoral power. Through their involvement in LRUP, they made it clear that they expected their concerns to be addressed by candidates, regardless of party

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2 "Chicanos End 600-Mile Trek," *Sacramento Bee,* August 7, 1971, A1.

3 Juan Lopez, "March on Capital," *People's World,* August 14, 1971, 1.

affiliation.

Even scholars such as University of California Los Angeles historian, Juan Gómez-Quiñónez, in discussing LRUP's electoral efforts, failed to acknowledge the grassroots contribution. Gómez-Quiñónez states, "La Raza Unida Party of California's influence as a vehicle in local government was tested, and it failed. In the process, LRUP demonstrated some of the most incompetent electoral efforts ever witnessed in Los Angeles."[4] By overemphasizing what he saw as the failure of LRUP, Gómez-Quiñónez overlooks the dedicated contributions of Chicano Movement activists as they continued fighting for political representation. Even though Gómez-Quiñónez discounted grassroots efforts, other publications such as the *People's World* noted the role of activists in the local city elections. "[An active campaigner]…estimated that about 1,000 persons…registered in La Raza Unida Party…."[5] This publication, unlike academic writings, recognized significant growth in the grassroots campaign.

A 1971 report by the California State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights regarding the political participation of Mexican Americans addressed a lack of Chicano political representation, especially in barrios like those in Los Angeles where Chicanos were a majority. According to Richard Garcia, the Civil Rights Commission report illustrated that, "among the 90 top officials, mayors, councilmen, etc.—in California's three largest cities—Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco—there is one Mexican American."[6] The report added that in California, "in cities with 50,000 to 500,000 populations, there are 64 mayors, one percent of whom are Mexican American; and 926 other officials, 15 percent of whom are Mexican American. Within these city governments, Mexican Americans represent 2.7 percent of the officials."[7] The Civil Rights Commission Report confirmed the discrepancy in Chicano representation throughout California. This inequity motivated grassroots activists to push forward to get representation.

Professor Emeritus at the University of California Berkeley, Carlos Muñoz, Jr. claims that the Chicano baby boomers reverted to the liberal, reformist Mexican American generation's methods of accommodation. He

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4 Juan Gómez-Quiñónez, *Chicano Politics: Reality & Promise 1940-1990* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico, 2003), 137.

5 "48th AD Primary Sees La Raza Unida Gains," *People's World*, November 6, 1971, 2.

6 Richard A. Garcia, *The Chicano in America 1540-1794* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1977), 154.

7 Ibid., 162.

states that, "[t]he politics of the 1970s and 1980s thus contributed to the return to prominence of the "old…pro-assimilationist and liberal reformist Mexican American organizations."[8] Although conservative politics were prevalent in this era due to the emergence of right-wing politicians, grassroots activism did not disappear. Muñoz's statement that Chicanos assimilated marginalizes the role of grassroots activists as they continued to work within the Chicano community.

Another issue that grassroots movement addressed was saving neighborhoods from urban renewal and empowering ordinary neighborhood residents. Activists were involved in property and zoning issues and initiated a movement against the City of Los Angeles Master Plan. The Master Plan (also called General Plan) was intended to aid in the City's development plans for housing and land use in Los Angeles. As Los Angeles prepared its Master Plan, the city referenced a study submitted by the Community Analysis Bureau (CAB), another city agency. The purpose of the CAB study, according to the *Los Angeles Times* was to "[provide] a detailed inventory of the city's assets and liabilities…[and] to assemble and catalogue data…from population characteristics to business failures."[9] The City's Northeast Plan included a proposal to change the zoning of the Albion Area of Lincoln Heights from residential to industrial, in order to widen streets and to facilitate suburban traffic into the civic center. Activists felt this would "reinforce high-density zoning where there were far lower Chicano homeowners."[10] High-density zoning refers to multi-level apartment buildings that make it possible to develop residential and commercial property. If the city implemented the plan, those affected the most would be low-income residents, which, in Lincoln Heights, was the majority of the Chicano population. Also, by dividing Chicano neighborhoods, the City would be eliminating the possibility for Chicanos to gain political representation in their communities.

To block the adoption of the Master Plan, neighborhood leaders in coalitions with other activists and clergy, formed the East-Northeast Committee to Stop Home Destruction. To aid in these efforts, the Committee published a newspaper, *Community Defender*, which they hoped would bring attention to the negative impact of the Northeast

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8 Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (London: Verso, 2007), 207.

9 Ray Hebert, "Blight-Warning Bureau Voted by City Council," *Los Angeles Times,* January 5, 1967, A1.

10 Rosalío Muñoz, interview with author, tape recording, Los Angeles, December 6, 2008.

section of the Master Plan. *Community Defender* reported, "the [Northeast] plan…advocate[s]…rezoning the housing projects to exclude families with more than two children."[11] The *Los Angeles Times* also covered the Northeast Plan and the grassroots efforts to prevent this Plan from being adopted. They reported, "Muñoz insists residents of the district are not against improving their neighborhoods…'we just want to have some control over the developments of our neighborhoods."'[12] Ultimately, Lincoln Heights residents united and helped elect a mayor who vowed to oppose the Master Plan, which they felt would have destroyed their neighborhoods.

One advocacy group, *La Organización del Pueblo* (The Organization of the people), used more aggressive tactics. Its mission statement announced, "*La Organización del Pueblo* is for Justice. It strives to help the people in their struggle against all forms of discrimination and economic oppression…"[13] The group included people also involved in a number of other grassroots organizations. *La Organización* helped organize a protracted rent strike in Lincoln Heights that lasted over two years that eventually resulted in cooperative ownership.

Later in 1974, Muñoz "along with Gil Cano, and other grassroots activists, joined the Inter Religious Committee on Human Needs (IRCHN), a Committee started by activist, Gene Mc Dowell."[14] This Committee was formed after President Gerald Ford's Administration began eliminating benefits for undocumented immigrants, specifically Social Security benefits. One flyer by the IRCHN highlights the plight of a 109-year-old Mexican citizen, Mrs. Gila Lopez who "[was]…terminated from SSI because she is an undocumented alien."[15] The IRCHN fought to retain aid for dependent children of immigrants and also battled to ensure that undocumented parents were not deported and thus separated from their children. With the support of poverty law institutions, these activists mobilized the community, made calls to Congress, and wrote letters to Senators of the Ford Administration.

Grassroots activists believe that when an issue is unfair or

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[11] Rosalio Muñoz, "Master Plan, Forgotten But Not Gone," *Community Defender*, 1 no. 1, 197, 4.

[12] Frank Del Olmo, "Chicanos Pledge Fight Against Urban Renewal," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1972, OC, A7.

[13] "La Organización del Pueblo," flyer, date unknown, in author's possession.

[14] Rosalío Muñoz, interview with author, tape recording, Los Angeles, May 20, 2009.

[15] "Terminated from Social Security," flyer of the Inter-Religious Committee on Human Needs, Rosalío Muñoz collection.

unethical, one should speak against it and advocate for the defenseless. This tenet was applied to a number of struggles including immigration rights in 1976. Immigration issues became a primary focus of grassroots activists. Activists fought to overturn the Dixon-Arnett bill of 1971 that would have fined employers that hired undocumented immigrants, the Federal Rodino Bill of 1972 that would have made it a felony to hire undocumented immigrants, and the passage of the 1976 Eilberg Law that limited the number of immigrants from Latin America by 20,000 in addition to eliminating all federal aid for undocumented parents of children who were U.S. citizens.

Activists intervened after the Eilberg bill passed and created the Immigration Coalition. A declaration of the Immigration Coalition states, "[t]he Immigration Coalition grew out of an ad hoc effort of labor, community, and church activists who, at the call of *La Organización del Pueblo,* launched a national effort seeking the veto of the last minute passage of the Eilberg bill…electing Rosalío Muñoz as Chairperson."[16] The Immigration Coalition held letter-writing campaigns pressuring President Ford to overturn the bill. Despite these efforts, President Ford signed the bill into law. The grassroots Immigration Coalition changed tactics and pressured incoming President Jimmy Carter to overturn the law. Eventually, the Coalition gained the support of California Senator Alan Cranston who introduced a law that would overturn the Eilberg bill. The Cranston's act did not pass but the Immigration Coalition and other grassroots activists earned a victory with the Federal Court's decision to make thousands of visas available to immigrants that had been wrongly assigned to Cuban Refugees. The Federal Court's decision showed the impact of grassroots activists and organizations such as the Immigration Coalition.

Considering the Immigration Coalition's efforts, there is no doubt that grassroots activists were prominently involved in the 1970s struggles for immigrants' rights. Chicano Historian Rodolfo F. Acuña when discussing the immigration bills, however, does not mention those activists who fought "behind the scenes" to overturn the bills.

Instead, Acuña focuses on statistics associated with the issues. Acuña describes the Eilberg bill as "a bill reducing the immigration cap for Mexico from 40,000 to 20,000."[17] Acuña's preoccupation with statistics overlooks the individual efforts of grassroots activists who went

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[16] "Immigration Coalition: Positions and Policies," flyer, May 24, 1980, in author's possession.

[17] Rodolfo Acuña, *Anything But Mexican* (London: Verso, 1996), 115.

out to defeat harsh immigration policies. Similarly, Ernesto Chavez, a professor of history at the University of Texas, El Paso, disregards the impact of grassroots activism in the 1970s struggles for Chicano representation. Chavez contends, "by the late 1970s…[Chicanos] returned to smaller efforts like those of the 1950s that emphasized electoral politics."[18] Fighting deportation of immigrants and the relocations of tenants in the 1970s were no small efforts. Chavez's opinion that activists only acted within electoral efforts distorts the truth. In response to the Eilberg bill, the Immigration Coalition launched a letter writing campaign and staged a mass *Posada* (procession) in downtown Los Angeles. The candlelight protest "proceeded through the civic center, the Board of Education, the Board of Supervisors, City Hall, and the Federal building…Visiting these building symbolized the children of immigrants were unwanted as seen through the Eilberg bill that punished them… afterwards thousands of letters were mailed to the White House."[19] These grassroots activities were tactics to force politicians to act. Regardless of the effectiveness of Muñoz and other activist's efforts, they were important struggles that occurred from the bottom up.

A number of coalitions and individuals in California became involved in the opposition of Proposition 13 in 1978, which "supported key austerity measures to control government spending and taxes such as weakening the Beilenson Act that required public hearings before health services could be cut."[20] Although Proposition 13 passed overwhelmingly, Muñoz asserts that, "Latinos in East L.A and elsewhere were in the thick of the fight against Proposition 13 and its aftermath."[21] Two weeks after the proposition passed, over 2,000 activists from all over California converged on the State Capitol. The Chicano contingent of approximately 200 "approached Los Angeles Assemblyman Richard Alatorre, who pledged to submit a bill restoring the Beilenson Act and to fight for developing more funds for jobs."[22] When the Assemblyman restored the Beilenson Act, Chicanos viewed it as a victory.

Muñoz worked as the "staff coordinator for the Chicano/Latino contingent of the [Citizens for a Police Review Board] campaign," which aimed to introduce an initiative on the ballot for an elected police review board to oversee complaints of police brutality.[23] The Campaign "…was a

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18 Ernesto Chavez, *Mi Raza Primero* (University of California Press, 2002), 118.

19 Rosalío Muñoz, interview with author, tape recording, Los Angeles, May 30, 2009.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Mary Schmich, "Latino Leaders Back Drive for Police Review Board," *Los Angeles*

bold challenge to the right wing rule of Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates."[24] Recognizing the significance of establishing a police review board, Muñoz led the campaign's Latino efforts, which received a significant number of Chicano signatures citywide. The campaign collected approximately 85,000 signatures, of the 150,000 total signatures required. The number of signatures reflected the willingness and motivation of Chicanos to voice their concerns electorally. Although the required number of signatures was not obtained, the Campaign for a Citizens Police Review Board was another positive step by activists. Chicanos demonstrated their growing political awareness, which would eventually lead to electing candidates of their choice.

Previously, "only white males had been elected to the board of supervisors in the twentieth century, and out of forty major cities, county, and school and junior college boards, none was Chicano."[25] According to Muñoz, "the rationale for growing grassroots and coalition support for Chicano representation resonated citywide."[26] Despite defeats, it appeared that more Chicanos realized that the time for Chicano representation had come.

In the 1980s, Chicano political representation dramatically increased. In 1983, Larry Gonzalez was elected to the Los Angeles Unified School Board. Then, in 1985, Steve Rodriguez narrowly lost the election for Los Angeles City Councilman to Arthur K. Snyder. The *Los Angeles Times* reported, "Rodriquez came within four votes of forcing Snyder into a runoff. The narrow margin was a surprise since Rodriguez' campaign was underfinanced and not supported by several major Latino political leaders."[27] The close election and support by Latino voters showed the growing electoral power among Chicanos in the 1980s.

Muñoz notes that his activism after Chicano Moratoriums arose amidst "an incredible array of grassroots energy and organizing in virtually every level, every niche of social and political reality."[28] The Chicano movement's commitment to struggle for political power did not end after the protest marches of the early 1970s. Muñoz adds, "we had Chicanos for Creative Medicine, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Foundation, MEChA, and many more groups and

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Times, April 11, 1980, D8.

24 Rosalío Muñoz, interview, May 30, 2009.

25 "Rosalío Muñoz for Supervisor," flyer, 1982, in author's possession.

26 Rosalío Muñoz, interview, May 30, 2009.

27 Janet Clayton, "Political Action Committee Focuses on Snyder Recall," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1983, 3.

28 Rosalío Muñoz, interview with author, tape recording, Los Angeles, June 10, 2009.

organizations."[29] Activists that had been involved in the Chicano movement became more experienced and better established on the job and in the community. By the 1980s, there was a larger group of activists with political backing contributing financially to Chicano political campaigns. There were larger grassroots constituencies, and diverse groups, which fought with and against established political institutions.

The history of Chicano representation has been a long and ongoing struggle. The majority of the Chicano/Latino elected officials in California, including Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, and Los Angeles County Supervisor, Gloria Molina, were young students during the Chicano movement and they have reaped the benefits of the grassroots struggle. Grassroots activists working in the streets increased political representation by utilizing multiple approaches. The lack of representation did not impede the progress that activists managed to achieve. More research and writing on this subject is required for Latinos and other cultural groups in this country to understand the origins and processes of the political power achieved by grassroots activism.

[29] Ibid.