

*Del Queblo PASO political action Spanish Organiz*

THE EXPANDED horizons of Houston's Latin American community took definite political shape in 1958. Until then most political observers considered the Latin American vote in Houston negligible, being relatively small and with little unity.

In the summer of 1958, however, the Civic Action Committee (CAC) was established. The CAC evolved from the support of Roy Elizondo, Alfonso Vazquez, E. P. Leal, and Dr. Alfredo Hernandez for the candidacy of State Senator Henry B. Gonzalez for Governor of Texas. Gonzalez came to speak in Houston and his vitality inspired these individuals to rally Houston Mexican Americans in support of his campaign.

This nucleus of people enlisted the help of friends, relatives, and neighbors, and key figures from various community organizations including Mary Lopez, Al Matta, David Ortiz, and Roy Soliz. Many of the men were veterans of World War II and Korea. The group was comprised of a mixture of longtime Houstonians and relative newcomers to the city.

The CAC was truly a grassroots organization, resembling other spontaneous political groups coalescing in Mexican American communities across the Lone Star State. Its core membership consisted of twenty to thirty people and their families who met regularly in homes and in popular restaurants.

Houston's CAC broke political ground in 1959 by holding several extremely successful fundraisers for Gonzalez during his energetic though unsuccessful bid for the state's highest office. These events involved husbands, wives, children, and other relatives, thus making the political process a family affair.

Responding to the alarming reality that in 1958 only 1200 Latin Americans had paid poll taxes in Houston, CAC members launched a systematic poll tax drive within the Houston Mexican community during late 1958 and early 1959. They organized a group of over thirty people led by Alfonso Rodriguez, Walter Avalos, Genaro Flores, Ruth Valdez and Carmen Lopez. They concentrated their efforts in Magnolia Park, the North Side and the Second Ward, in such places as theater

lobbies and food markets. On Saturday nights they would mount the stage at local night clubs during the bands' intermissions to implore Mexican American audiences to pay their poll tax so that they could make their political will felt. They solicited at predominantly Mexican American Catholic churches on Sundays.

In addition to advocating direct political participation of Latin Americans, early in 1960 the CAC joined with LULAC and the G.I. Forum to study and promote a free lunch program in the Houston Independent School District. Their action was sparked by a school board member's remark that Mexican American children did not need free lunches because they would rather eat "pinto beans".

In 1960, the CAC became absorbed in the presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy. Enthusiasm for the candidacy of the charismatic, progressive, Catholic Senator was overwhelming among Mexican Texans. Because of their support for Gonzalez, the CAC leadership was contacted by state-level officials of the Viva Kennedy-Johnson Clubs in Texas to head a local effort in Houston. The CAC responded by establishing an office in Second Ward, and the Viva Kennedy-Johnson Club attracted many local Mexican Americans to its ranks.

The club sponsored letter-writing campaigns, poll tax drives, bumper sticker brigades, telephone banks, and community get-out-the-vote rallies in support of the entire Democratic slate. These efforts incorporated both longtime Mexican American political activists and new participants in the political process.

The momentum of the successful 1960 campaign led to the CAC becoming the Harris County chapter of the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO) in October 1961, with Genaro Flores and John Castillo as chairman and vice-chairman, respectively. Roy Elizondo became district chairman of PASO and eventually state chairman.

Harris County PASO expanded its membership among the middle and working classes and held political functions of up to a thousand people. PASO members saw themselves as among the political vanguard of Texas Mexicans,

