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Interview with  
Gilbert C. Garcia  
March 3, 1969

Place of Interview: Fort Worth, Texas

Interviewer: Robert Cuellar

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Oral History Collection

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Mr. Cuellar: March 3, 1969. This is Robert Cuellar from North Texas State University speaking with Mr. Gilbert Garcia from Fort Worth, Texas. Mr. Garcia has been prominent in the reform work of the Mexican-American people in Texas. He played a prominent role in the American GI Forum and the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations. Mr. Garcia, will you give us a background of yourself as to where you were born, where you were raised, and how you became interested in social work?

Mr. Garcia: Yes, Mr. Cuellar. I was born in Brownsville, Texas. I went to school in Brownsville for two years and then I moved with my parents nine miles out of Brownsville to a farm. I went to San Pedro and Indio Nuevo schools which only went through the sixth grade. I was bussed into Brownsville. I've only completed the eighth grade. My family was in difficult financial position. In order that my younger brothers might secure an education and I could help my family, I went into the C.C.C. camp. I was gone for a year, and, of course, it did help both my parents and myself.

While I was in the C.C.C. camp I completed approximately thirty-eight subjects, ranging from arithmetic to geography, from the University of Southern California Correspondence School, jointly sponsored by the C.C.C. camp with interviews of teachers once a month. I received credit for these courses when I returned to Brownsville.

At a later date I continued my education. In early 1941, I came to Fort Worth because job opportunities were more plentiful. I immediately found a job through my uncle's assistance. He lived here. Immediately I started going to a night school, two nights through free W.P.A. school, and then for three nights I went to Fort Worth Technical School which was a continuation of my high school.

In August of 1941, I was called by the draft board for an examination. In order that I could get my year in in a hurry, I volunteered for the service. I was in Pearl Harbor on December 7th when the Japanese bombed. We went to war with the Japanese people. I remained in the service for five years, serving in Pearl Harbor, the Midway, Gilberts, Marshall Islands, and in the South and Southwest Pacific.

I was discharged shortly after the end of the war, and I chose to live in Fort Worth. I married Miss Urlinda Baldera, who was from Cleburne. I stayed in Fort Worth, and took on-the-job training for one year, learning the dry cleaning business. After I had been in training for one year, I decided to begin my own business. My business was started on a very small scale with a sub-station.

After that, I started going to T.C.U. and taking some courses at night, whenever possible. I had two children, David Anthony Garcia and Gilbert Garcia, Jr., who are now in their second year at Tarrant County Junior College.

Later Dr. Hector P. Garcia came to Fort Worth and organized the American GI Forum. We had several people that were interested in the organization, and I was elected the vice-chairman. Subsequently, I served in that capacity.

I became interested in social work at the time this organization was formed. We dealt with people, and with their problems. We would go to the people and discuss their problems. We had no knowledge of where to refer these people to help service their problems and needs. If people needed welfare, we didn't even know where the welfare agency was located. Thus, it was quite an experience. We began to learn the agencies of the city in order to help service the people with whom we were involved. The G.I. Forum became sort of a social organization, a little war on poverty, long before the war on poverty was born. We were doing much earlier the very things that people today in the poverty programs are now getting paid for.

Most of the cases in the beginning involved mainly discrimination --discrimination in jobs, discrimination of services and, of course, the dual system. Those of Mexican descent, a lot of times, didn't get the relief or the help needed, because of the language barrier, other times because the people didn't know where to go for services. Many times the people in charge believed that Mexican-Americans

were entitled to help, particularly those people that should have been entitled to it.

Problems proved quite frustrating in the beginning, but this is how I became interested in social work. We kept building and working with the G.I. Forum. We traveled within a 100-150 mile radius around the Dallas-Fort Worth area organizing in all these places: Dallas, Wichita Falls, Mineral Wells, Waco, and Temple. We tried to organize American G.I. Forum groups so that these people involved could learn to help themselves. At the beginning we were also interested in veteran's rights, trying to see that the returning veterans were treated as equally as when they were in the service. Often when we Mexican-Americans returned from the service, we were not treated on an equal basis in many of the areas. Some of the areas were not as bad as others.

Cuellar: What year did Dr. Garcia organize the groups here in Fort Worth?

Garcia: Dr. Garcia organized the group here in Fort Worth a year after the American G.I. Forum was organized in Corpus, which I think was in 1948. Thus, we were organized here early in 1949.

Cuellar: How would you define or describe the American G.I. Forum?

Garcia: The American G.I. Forum is a family veteran's organization of Mexican-Americans. It wasn't so at the beginning. At the time it was organized the American G.I. Forum was solely a veteran's organization.

Cuellar: Why did they make it a veterans' organization do you believe?

Garcia: In many areas, specifically in parts of the Valley and parts of the smaller cities throughout the state, the Mexican-American was not

allowed, or it was not admitted to existing veterans' programs, period. This is one of the reasons.

Cuellar: When did you become prominent in the American G.I. Forum? You were organized in 1949 here in Fort Worth; when did you hold the first state office?

Garcia: I actually held the first state office in 1950 as a district representative. The district was composed of Dallas, Fort Worth, and Wichita Falls, which we organized all at the same time. The state was divided then into about ten or twelve districts. There were two persons selected from each district, a district chairman and a district representative, who represented the district on the state board of directors. These were elected positions within the boundaries of the particular district. Incidentally, this district was not constructed along geographical lines the same as Representatives or Senators. These were boundaries that were formed to serve the nearest of the town and the nearest of the groups within the surrounding 100 or 150 miles area.

Cuellar: Has that changed since then?

Garcia: The only thing that has changed is that more districts have been added within the state in order that more cities were able to be represented in the organization. Again, as I said, the boundaries are set up by the board of directors, themselves, in order to give wide representation to the groups.

Cuellar: Now as far as the American G.I. Forum is concerned, how did it deal with the social problems of the Mexican-American when it first started?

Garcia: When we first organized we had no dues and no organization on a statewide basis. We organized and paid 25¢ membership fee. This fee was all the money that was required for the first two or three years. There were no local or state dues. A membership card was issued. During the first year the state representatives and the board of directors were appointed by the chairman, Dr. Hector P. Garcia, I believe. Among the people that he knew were the people that helped him organize because we were just getting the foundation laid for organizational work. And little by little we began to form on an organizational basis.

My first job was with the board of directors as district representative. Later, subsequently, I ran for vice-chairman of the state and lost. I was appointed state treasurer. Again the following year I ran for state chairman. I became the vice-chairman. Then I became state chairman. I was state chairman in 1959, '60, and '61. During my chairmanship in the state I traveled over 150,000 miles. Incidentally, the organization bought a station wagon so that the state chairman would travel. I didn't have transportation at that particular time because I wore out my car traveling, subsequently, before I became state chairman on other duties I had in the organization. And, of course, we did not get paid for the work that we did except when the money was available. We were paid for mileage expense . . . rather gasoline expenditures. In a lot of the cities that we visited we were hosted by the people that lived there. They opened their homes for us so that we could continue on the organization of the American G.I. Forum and good

will.

Cuellar: Where else did the G.I. Forum get its money besides from dues, or how did it operate?

Garcia: The American G.I. Forum, like I said at the beginning, didn't have anything but a quarter dues. For the first four or five years the brunt of the expenditure and the brunt of the money that was put in the organization was furnished by Dr. Hector P. Garcia and other people like him. Some who contributed did not have as much as Dr. Garcia. Nevertheless, the brunt of it was contributed by Dr. Hector P. Garcia, and later we became organized, like I said, into a unit.

We established a queen contest, and with this we were able to raise money by promoting queen contests among all the cities. Half of the money that was raised from the queen contests went to the state.

Our first real windfall came from contributions that we received from a foundation in Austin by Dr. Sanchez. At this time I don't recollect the foundation if you might like to have that information. They were able to set us up, and this foundation gave us money for the full salary of the executive secretary for the first year. Every year the full expenses amounted to \$7,000 or \$8,000. And every year it was diminishing so that in three to five or six years the organization was supposed to be self-sustained. Ed Idar was our first executive secretary, and he was the recipient of this grant. It was the one that paid for his work, and, of course, it gave us an opportunity to set up a mailing list and to set up



a semblance of a state organization for information which could be sent to the groups. And the groups could write to the central office, and this gave us our beginning in the American G.I. Forum as a state organization.

Cuellar: Can you recall any of the projects or cases which the American G.I. Forum handled as an organization to alleviate or to help the problem of the Mexican-American in Texas and by which it grew and became stronger or became more popular?

Garcia: The very, very first cases that we had and which we took to court as an organization were the school cases. We had several school cases, the Driscoll case, and even more famous among our people was the Delgado case which was definitely a school segregation case in South Texas.

Cuellar: Can you go into the specifics of the Delgado case?

Garcia: Not too much of the specifics, but I will see that you get a copy of the Delgado case for your files. I have one somewhere in my files, and I will make it available to you. But in effect it was the fact that the Mexican-Americans were actually segregated in school. The reason was that the Mexican-American didn't speak English. It was a custom among the school districts and the schools that you go the first year to first grade and the second year to low first and the third year to high first. And consequently most of the Mexican-Americans stayed two or three years in the first grade and actually that created quite a confusion. The boundaries were gerrymandered. We had gerrymandering in the school boundaries. But even in cases where Mexican-Americans lived in a school district

to which Anglo children went, they were sent to the Mexican-American school. In this particular Delgado case, there was no excuse to do that to a child of the Delgado family. Not only could they speak fluent English, they also lived in the district in which they were supposed to go to school. And, consequently, we won the case. The then Judge Allred was the one who handled it, and that's where he became more popular among our people.

Cuellar: Mr. Garcia, let's move on to the time when you became state chairman of the American G.I. Forum of Texas. You then became more involved in the affairs of the organization and its accomplishments. Can you go into it and tell us more about what you think are the important accomplishments during the years when you were the first man in that group?

Garcia: When I became state chairman I began traveling on weekends. Of course, that was the only time that I had. Then in 1959 after I became chairman the organizations of the American G.I. Forum chipped in and bought a station wagon for the use of the state chairman. And I traveled on weekends.

We usually had meetings for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday throughout the state, and every weekend. We feel that we've accomplished a tremendous amount, at least have learned a lot while helping the organization at the same time. We learned first-hand of the problems that existed in each town even if we were there just for a few hours sometimes. In many of these towns that were organized, this was the first time that a state officer had come and visited them, and, consequently, it was of great importance

to these people, especially in the smaller towns. They were far off in West Texas. West Texas became really interested in the American G.I. Forum.

The problems were probably the same throughout the state. I'll give you an example. In Abilene we had some members of the American G.I. Forum who were school teachers and even as of today the school board would not hire Mexican-Americans as school teachers in the city of Abilene. And that was 1959. And, of course, this is 1968 right now and I don't think that there's one yet. Problems of that sort. Then again in Sweetwater which is only divided by about 25 to 30 miles we have at least one assistant principal, Mexican-American, there and other school teachers. These are the things that we had to deal with.

I was escorted by the police department in many of the smaller cities or the sheriff's department especially during the months December and January when we were encouraging our people to pay their poll tax. At that time we still had the poll tax drives. And they certainly didn't appreciate and didn't like somebody to go out there and stir up these people into becoming first class citizens. And this is what we were encouraging them to do. We encouraged them to pay their poll tax and vote, particularly politically. We encouraged them to send their children to school --back-to-school drives--and to prepare themselves for college. Especially the kids that were in high school, we encouraged very specifically with the Junior Forum that they prepare themselves for the future. Only an educated man would have the opportunity,

and we need the leadership to carry on this program, the organizational programs that were needed very thoroughly by a Mexican-American person.

We were short of leadership. Myself, I did not complete my school until three years after I got out of service with a period of about ten to fifteen years after I had left school. So many of our younger people, especially in the Second World War, were given the wonderful opportunity to go back to school, and many, many of the veterans took advantage of that. Thus, we were encouraging them to continue to do that because it opened wide avenues.

We've had many, many problems that beset us that were different in some little towns, but the principles were the same. Job opportunities often were denied because of a specific racial background. There was no other question. It is this way even now. In many of the bigger companies, even with all the laws that we have, they can get the jobs but we have to fight all the way for promotions in some of the bigger companies. And even in government itself in some of the agencies of the federal government we are still fighting tendencies, for example, of the civil service people there. And again 90 per cent of the people employed are Mexican-American. It's an uphill battle all the way through. This is more particularly so in the Valley where, in many of the cities, 90 percent of the people are Mexican-American citizens, and yet the ruling class, as per se as we say, are all the names of Jones and Smith and so on.

This proves that we are trying to achieve a first class citizenship, and we are showing our people and trying to help our people to be educated, to get better jobs. At least we want them to be educated so that when the opportunity comes they will be able to take over, to help, to promote, to be a first class citizen.

Our biggest problems that we had in the American G.I. Forum, I mean, our biggest cases that we had were in the field of education. We had to fight for the end of segregation in effect. Although we did not have any segregation, we did have to fight to hire our people to be in juries and jurors. In many areas, again, we come to the point where 90 per cent of the people were of Mexican descent, and in the history of jury picking for as many as thirty years there has never been a man by the name of Cuellar or Gonzales or Garcia as a member of even a picked jury much less a Grand Jury. And yet these were the people that try the cases and that try the innocence or guilt or at least in the sense of jurisprudence that we have.

So we had to fight these cases, particularly the Delgado case that went all the way to the Supreme Court. It was specifically a joint project between the American G.I. Forum and LULAC, a sister organization, where it went all the way to the Supreme Court, and it was reversed in our favor. Many, many problems that we had we were not able to solve, but again I repeat we were fighting a war on poverty long before Washington heard of it.

Cuellar: Do you think that the American G.I. Forum was instrumental in bringing about the war on poverty that the government tried?

Garcia: I think yes, not by itself because I'm sure that there were many

other organizations similar to ours with the same aims that were interested in the welfare of the people that helped in that direction. But it took many groups and many organizations like this to bring about this help. I think that this is a great thing that happened because it has helped us tremendously in this field.

Cuellar: Well, would you feel that the Negro revolution, as they call it today, helped the Mexican-Americans realize that they needed something of the same sort?

Garcia: Yes. I think that it has helped us tremendously in this field because it has given us the opportunity to say, well, here is something that would benefit all members of a minority group, or minority groups.

Cuellar: Is the G.I. Forum today as effective as it was, you believe, in the early 1960's or the late 1950's?

Garcia: I believe that the American G.I. Forum is definitely more effective now than it was. Some people disagree with me in this respect, but we are effective because we are recognized. You must remember that in 1950 the American G.I. Forum was called everything under the sun--radicals and what-have-you--because we were bringing the light to the people we were petitioning. We were trying to turn ourselves into first class citizens. And therefore the ruling class or the elite, the people in power, the power structure, did not like this because here was another minority group or another group that they would have to cope with. So we have, I believe, done more now because we are definitely recognized on the state level, and we're definitely recognized by our politicians, our governors.

We are definitely recognized all the way to Washington, D.C. by our senators. They pay attention to us even if they don't do the things that we want to. They do it in spite of it or to spite us. At any event the job gets accomplished or partly and is a step in the right direction.

Cuellar: Do you believe the American G.I. Forum contributed to the election of individual politicians, for example, Henry B. Gonzales, today's Representative to the United States House of Representatives, or Eligio de la Garza from Mission, Texas, and others?

Garcia: I don't know that we laid the foundation. The American G.I. Forum is not a political organization, but we encourage our members to participate and take active roles politically in the towns. To be a citizen, in the first class, you have to participate in everything but not to use the organization as a sponsor nor to endorse anyone. But we are just like the American Legion and other veterans' organizations that try to promote and see that its members vote for good candidates for legislative purposes. So we even encourage this, and we have done a great deal in the field of political education. And I believe that the leadership has contributed magnificently in the election of several of these people. Incidentally, I would like to point out that we have eleven representatives of Mexican-American extraction in the Texas House and one state senator, Mr. Bernal of San Antonio. We have Spanish-American representatives from Houston to El Paso and San Antonio and the Valley, of course, is better represented. This is the greatest number of elected officials that we have ever had.

Cuellar: Was Henry Gonzales one of the first in the state for a long, long time?

Garcia: Yes. Henry B. Gonzales was the first Mexican-American that was elected to the Senate in Texas. And, of course, I do think that he was the first man to be elected to Congress from the state but not from the nation.

Cuellar: Going back a little bit in the American G.I. Forum, do you recall the name of the organization that was formed in McAllen, Texas, to promote the voting of the people by Baldes, Sanchez, and others? They published a bulletin named "Texas Needs Four Million Votes."

Garcia: Yes, it was done by a correlation of people, labor and other groups. I think that was in 1960, if I remember, '58, or . . . do you recall the year?

Cuellar: 1958, I believe.

Garcia: This was the first type, more or less, of a coalition that was done to promote in the field of the poll tax. At that time we had to pay a poll tax, and if we didn't pay it by the 31st of January, we were ineligible and were prevented from participating in the vote. We would do the same thing now, but it's free so we don't have its continuation. At any rate, the thing that was done here was, initially, to promote (again, I think the G.I. Forum was contributed some money--I don't recall how much, but some little that we had--for sending people out to make poll tax sales talks) and encourage our people to vote. I was one of the participants that helped in that campaign.

Cuellar: It seems like labor was involved in this, also. Is this correct?



Garcia: I believe that labor did help to some respect in the printing of materials that we had and things like that, yes.

Cuellar: It seems like labor has always been involved or has cooperated with the American G.I. Forum and other Mexican-American organizations. To what extent can you describe this relation of the two groups, labor and the Mexican-American leaders?

Garcia: When I became state chairman of the American G.I. Forum in 1959, we had some people from the CIO organization who aided us. At the very first voters' registration meeting Mr. Formas Maijore had talked to them, and they had something like a \$5,000 contribution to make to the American G.I. Forum for our work. At that time, after much debate, we decided not to accept the money and thanked them very politely. We would be glad to work in any field or on any specific project, but we would try to contribute at least part of whatever the project would take, and we didn't want to accept any money for no particular purpose from any group even if they happen to be our friends, especially not this amount. We wanted to be completely independent.

We have cooperated with labor. Our first big effort in which we did cooperate was in regard to what price wetbacks worked for and got. And a member of the AFL-CIO went . . . I mean of the AFL (at that time they were separate organizations), throughout the Valley and made a complete survey of about a million people. We had illegal immigrants at that time and, of course, this brought about subsequent changes in the federal legislation which at least

legalized them to come over here. But then at least they had a little more protection than before.

There were other jobs later that we did. This poll tax drive was held in cooperation, I think again, with the CIO or AFL-CIO. About that time I think they were combined, and they helped in promoting. I think we contributed a third of the cost, they contributed another third, and some other group contributed. None of the people that were involved were paid. I think that we've ended up paying expenses only for the printing materials, for whatever actual guidework involved in the traveling. All the work was done voluntarily by members of the American G.I. Forum.

Cuellar: I'd say, perhaps, that we have already discussed the American G.I. Forum to a great extent. Let's progress to a discussion of the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations. Can you tell us, for example, when it began?

Garcia: Yes, the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations actually began in the '60's. Just prior to that in '59, in early '60 we had a somewhat similar organization. We called ourselves MAPO--Mexican-American Political Organization. We were in existence about six months, and then we decided to change the name to PASO.

Cuellar: You know the reason why you changed it to PASO from the original name?

Garcia: Well, I was at both of the meetings when we organized MAPO, and then when we reorganized and changed the name to PASO. And I think that the real reason for changing the name was to coincide with the national because at that time we had just finished a big campaign

of the J. F. Kennedy Club throughout the United States. And we acted, sometimes, with California and New Mexico, Arizona, with all these other states politically. Well, we had been doing work in the G.I. Forum and with other organizations and, well, we became real interested in the election of the late John F. Kennedy. The Mexican-Americans were very influential, and this is the first national organization that we had, politically, in Texas. And, of course, this is where the PASO was born shortly afterwards.

Cuellar: Of course, PASO was a national organization; however, let's concentrate a little bit on the Texas side. Where was the first group organized in Texas? Do you recall?

Garcia: I think the first group was organized in San Antonio.

Cuellar: San Antonio, Texas. I see, as PASO already.

Garcia: As PASO, yes. Well, actually that's where we had our convention, and that's where we changed the name. It was still PASO-Kennedy . . .

Cuellar: Where was the first political participation of PASO in the state?

Garcia: Our first real political campaign came in the gubernatorial race where John Connally was then running for governor, Price Daniel, Don Yarborough and quite a few others.

Cuellar: Are you familiar with the meetings of the political associations that they had concerning the endorsement of any of these candidates . . .

Garcia: Yes, I was very familiar. I was in San Antonio when we had that convention, and I was a member of the board of directors. I was a state organizer for PASO at the time, and we had our meeting in San Antonio, and we had all these candidates come over.

Cuellar: Before we go any farther, actually, do you remember any of the other leaders of PASO at that time--state leaders?

Garcia: Oh, yes.

Cuellar: Can you name a few of them?

Garcia: Well, Dr. Garcia, Albert Pena, Ed Idar, Judge Robert Benevides, Bob Sanchez (Dr. Sanchez from Austin and professor at the University of Texas) were some of our biggest state leaders. They were more . . .

Cuellar: Would you say that most of these leaders that were in PASO had come from the leadership of American G.I. Forum?

Garcia: I would say that the majority of them did, yes.

Cuellar: Then how were they allowed to transfer from one organization to the next?

Garcia: Well, we had some people over there who were from LULAC, active in the LULAC organization. And then we had a few of the smaller leaders--by smaller leaders I mean that were just local leaders in the particular towns or counties--who had never been active participants in any organization.

Cuellar: Let's go back to the election of 1962. Who actually was endorsed by PASO in 1962 for governor?

Garcia: Governor Price Daniel.

Cuellar: Can you tell us why?

Garcia: At that time we were organized for the first time politically, and we had a number of people there, and this was the first time that we were working together--people from different walks of life and from different organizations from different towns. Some of the other people besides the incumbent, Price Daniel, who were running

for governor were our friends, had been in our conventions, and we had worked with them before. Certainly Price Daniel was not our friend. He never had done very much for some of my people with the exception of the elected officials. But more than anything else, this was done to prove that we could be united behind one candidate and work toward the selection and election of a candidate. We would show a complete independence or that we were not run by labor, that we were not run by the liberals or the conservatives or anybody when we come to connotations of specifics in Texas politics.

Cuellar: Well, wasn't John Connally one of the candidates that year?

Garcia: Yes, sir. John Connally was a candidate that particular year, and he spoke at our convention, like all the candidates.

Cuellar: Why wasn't he endorsed by the Mexican-American?

Garcia: John Connally was not endorsed by the Mexican-American because first of all he was not close to the people. He was questioned in our interviews, and in the convention itself when some questions came from the people he was indecisive as to what part he would play for the Mexican-American people. He would always refer that he would study the problem.

Cuellar: Well, did Daniel make any promises to the Mexican-American leaders at that convention--promises of political favors in any way?

Garcia: No, since he was governor he said that he would try to do something for the Mexican people and that he would do it now. As he was governor, he had had the opportunity to do it. A promise of giving equal opportunity was made by him. He made that not only at the board meeting but also unto the leadership committee to the convention

itself. He would open appointments on boards and see that Mexican-Americans were represented.

Cuellar: Also, in this convention wasn't Don Yarborough a candidate for governor?

Garcia: Yes, sir. Don Yarborough was a candidate for governor.

Cuellar: He was considered the liberal candidate, and the Mexican-Americans traditionally are considered liberally oriented. How come, if he was favored by most of the people, how come he was not endorsed by the convention?

Garcia: Here was a man that is a liberal candidate. The biggest part of the Mexican-American leadership had supported him when he ran for lieutenant governor the first time. And he ran a very good and magnificent race. I would say that traditionally the Mexican-American people and its leadership have been liberal in their voting. We worked in the liberal wing of the Texas Democratic Party because the other wing, the conservative part, had done very little for the Mexican-American people. But then again we wanted to show our independence of the liberal wing because too many times they had an opportunity to represent us at the national conventions saying that they, including organized labor, had the Mexican people's vote in their hip pocket.

Cuellar: Did Don Yarborough make a statement to the effect that he actually had the Mexican-American vote in his pocket without the endorsing of PASO?

Garcia: Don Yarborough contributed more and lost a lot of support in the PASO organizations at that convention when he made some statements

to the effect that he had the Mexican vote, and he was going to get it with or without the help of PASO. He said that he would get it anyhow, and he would work to destroy the organization. He made such a statement at the convention and said he was going to get elected anyway.

Cuellar: Mr. Garcia, in 1961 during one of the organizations's meetings, you were selected by the group to be a state organizer. Is this correct?

Garcia: Yes.

Cuellar: What was your responsibility under this selection?

Garcia: My responsibility was a dual responsibility. First, primary responsibility was to promote as much as possible the sale of the poll tax--the encouragement of the people to buy the poll tax because that was our main objective at that particular time. Of course, the secondary responsibility was to organize them politically where there was not any organization of PASO.

Cuellar: In other words, you were trying to spark poll tax drives and also, at the same time, organize PASO groups.

Garcia: Yes.

Cuellar: Is that correct? Did you have a lot of success in these?

Garcia: Very definitely. I organized over a hundred groups of PASO throughout the state. Since I had been doing this in the American G.I. Forum, I had the experience, we had the know how, we knew whom and where to contact people very easily. Thus, we were able to do this in the promotion of buying the poll tax.

Cuellar: Going back to the gubernatorial election of 1962, was the Mexican-American leadership at that convention in San Antonio divided as

to whom to endorse?

Garcia: Well, there were several divisions because we had some people there that were for John Connally; we had some people that were for Yarborough; we had some people that were for Daniel; some people that worked for Will Wilson; some of them that worked for some of the other candidates. In a sense we were not divided with the exception that they were pulling for the individual candidates that they thought would be the best man for the organization to support.

Cuellar: Did you believe, since you were there, do you believe that there was a lot of sincerity on the part of the political candidates to attract the Mexican-American vote?

Garcia: Most of us were new in a state-wide political campaign. And this was the first time in the history of Texas that we were united. All the leadership of Texas, both from the conservative and the liberal sides, have not been able to accept this. And, of course, I do believe that the candidates were very sincere in trying to attract the vote. We believed that this would be a good source of not only getting the vote but also would have a profound psychological effect. The endorsements of these approximately 500,000 to 700,000 votes, or at least potential voters in the state of Texas would help.

Cuellar: Do you recall Les Proctor being present at the convention?

Garcia: Les Proctor?

Cuellar: Yes. Wasn't he an attorney who was a candidate?

Garcia: Yes, yes. He was a candidate for some office. I think he was on the Republican . . .



Cuellar: Attorney General?

Garcia: Attorney General?

Cuellar: Yes.

Garcia: Yes.

Cuellar: Do you recall what town he was from?

Garcia: No, I don't.

Cuellar: Continuing with the convention again, what role did Dr. George E. Sanchez from Austin play here?

Garcia: Well, prior to the convention we had a meeting with the board of directors of the organization to interview the candidates. This was composed of the chairman, the vice-chairman, and all of the officers and directors that had helped to build the organization. We were to have made a recommendation to the state board for the candidate that we thought would be the best. But our recommendation, of course, would have come after the candidate had spoken to the convention at an open meeting. Anyway, Dr. Sanchez was very friendly with Governor Daniel at that time.

Cuellar: Let's see, did he campaign for Governor Daniel?

Garcia: No, sir. He campaigned for Yarborough, Don Yarborough.

Cuellar: After this, concerning this convention, Mr. Garcia, let me read to you what the Texas Observer, which is a Texas newspaper as you well know, had to say about the decision of the Mexican-American leadership. And I quote, "These Mexican-Americans by backing a conservative over a liberal candidate hope to show the liberally-oriented politicians, like Don Yarborough, that the vote of the Spanish-speaking citizenry was not to be taken for granted." Do you feel

that this is wholly true as pertaining to the convention of Mexican-American leaders at San Antonio?

Garcia: Yes, I believe so. Because we felt that ourselves and we, myself for one, felt that it was not a question of who we backed. We would not be taken for granted not only by the Democratic Party itself or a particular liberal-conservative part of the Democratic Party, but we could even go Republican if necessary, if it would help our cause or if it would help the bringing about of a better relation and more equitable benefits for the Mexican-American people.

Cuellar: What were the results of the first primary of these elections?

Garcia: Well, we lost every single race we backed.

Cuellar: Do you mean PASO lost?

Garcia: Yes.

Cuellar: Okay. Of course, you endorsed Kennedy and others. Who were they? Price Daniel . . .

Garcia: Price Daniel for governor. We endorsed Gerard Secrest for lieutenant governor, the late Gerard Secrest and . . .

Cuellar: Judge Bean.

Garcia: . . . Judge Bean from El Paso and several other ones. But we lost in every particular case.

Cuellar: Okay. Did you work politically with any of these candidates in the first round?

Garcia: Yes, sir. I worked directly with the late Senator Gerard Secrest who was campaigning for lieutenant governor. I traveled for two months with him throughout the state. We drove many places; we

flew to several of them. And I was in charge of setting up meeting places with Mexican-American people whenever we could, radio programs, advertising, passing out literature to the leaders, and everything possible to promote his candidacy--appearing and talking with the candidate and on behalf of the candidate whenever we had an opportunity to speak to a group of people.

Cuellar: Do you feel that the Mexican-Americans had plans during the endorsing convention for finding political jobs of influence for their leaders or for any member of the Mexican-American population in Texas?

Garcia: We felt that win, lose, or draw, it didn't make any difference. The Mexican-American people were going to be paid attention to politically and, whoever the candidates were, they would have to give some political jobs and they would have to recognize the Mexican-American people because the 500,000 to 600,000 potential votes were not to be ignored in the state of Texas.

Cuellar: Once the primaries were over do you recall the two men who stayed in the race for governor of Texas?

Garcia: Yes, after the primaries were over the two candidates that were left were Don Yarborough and John Connally.

Cuellar: Who did PASO endorse then?

Garcia: PASO did not endorse anyone. We had a meeting the following week. PASO decided that all the people were free to support whomever they wished, that they were not being bound to support any one particular candidate. We had just gone through a very hard campaign, and we had no money, and we were not committed to any one candidate. We left the delegations open to support whomever they wanted

Cuellar: Did you work for either of these candidates?

Garcia: Yes, sir. Even at the convention there were people from both parties trying to recruit workers for each of the candidates. I was approached both by Don Yarborough's people and by John Connally's people. At the convention I had been approached before to work on behalf of the candidate. I did work, eventually, for John Connally, but I did not make up my mind until I returned to Fort Worth.

Cuellar: So you ended up working for John Connally.

Garcia: Yes, I worked the last three weeks of the campaign and the runoff for the candidacy of John Connally. His headquarters was at Fort Worth. I thought that John Connally would make a better governor and that subsequently the Mexican-American people would be better off. I contacted Dr. Garcia and Albert Pena and told them of my decision, and they said that since we had already agreed to go for those that we wanted to that we were at liberty to do what we thought best.

Cuellar: Do you feel that because the candidates endorsed by PASO lost that PASO contributed or met with defeat in its first major contribution in politics?

Garcia: I would not call it defeat of PASO because we didn't have any experience. We got recognition. I think that this was the primary purpose that we wanted for the organization. It's hard to say the consequences after that, but we did get the recognition that we were seeking for the Spanish-speaking American people.

Cuellar: Do you recall a meeting held, let's see, in May of 1962 after the first primary in which the failures of the candidates were discussed

by PASO leaders?

Garcia: Was this in San Antonio?

Cuellar: This was in San Antonio, May 14, 1962, I believe.

Garcia: Yes. I don't remember that I was able to go at that particular time. We had traveled quite consistently, and I was pretty tired and pretty broke by that time. Incidentally, most of this work that we did was on our own time and at our own expense with the . . .

Cuellar: Does that mean the work associating with PASO?

Garcia: Yes.

Cuellar: Of course, you remember all the trouble that erupted between Connally once he became governor and the organization (PASO I'm talking about). Do you recall how this came about?

Garcia: The campaign headquarters had been moved to Austin. Is that what you were referring to?

Cuellar: Yes.

Garcia: And, of course, PASO was made a political football. Since it had suffered a defeat, well, they didn't want the organization workers. Does that answer your question, or does that make it more cloudy?

Cuellar: Well, I was referring to the fact that perhaps there was some indifference from Connally towards the Mexican-American leaders of PASO. Do you know any of this for sure?

Garcia: Again, we had a meeting that was held by Albert Pena and John . . . not John Connally but Wayne . . . one of the brothers of John Connally who was one of the campaign managers. And I was present at that meeting. And, of course, discussion was brought about as to helping in the political campaign. Subsequently, what happened

after that I do not know because I was not on it. John Connally was not there at that particular meeting, but the paper gave a different story the next day or two that not everything was running smoothly.

Cuellar: So, from the indication then, it would seem that there was quite a bit of disunity among the members of PASO, or leaders of PASO. Do you feel that this was true?

Garcia: Disunity in which way?

Cuellar: Well, some leaders pulling one way and some leaders pulling the other, a lot of disagreement.

Garcia: Well, yes. You're going back again to the runoff election between Yarborough and Connally?

Cuellar: Right, yes.

Garcia: Yes, there was not disunity because we were not united to support any one particular candidate in the runoff campaign. Let me say that when I was working for Gerard Secrest in the primary naturally we were working for the endorsement of the whole ticket as much as possible. It was the same one that PASO supported, which was Price Daniel and the rest of them. But we had opportunities to visit all these cities, and I did travel throughout the state and visit all the important cities and counties and many of the smaller cities where we had time and we stopped. And, of course, we found out that it's true that some of the members of PASO had reneged on their promises to support the people that the majority decided to support, and they had gone and supported openly and used the name of the organization in some counties for Don Yarborough. So

naturally we tended to have some disagreements with some of the leadership because, well, here we had decided to support everybody and it was not done because we only had our word to give.

Cuellar: Was there any talk during the 1962 gubernatorial campaign about a liberal coalition made up of Mexican-American voters, Negro voters, and labor voters?

Garcia: There was talk, not only at that time, but there had been talk before that time. One of our poll tax drives that I worked in was largely financed by such part of the coalition with labor contributing one-third, PASO and G.I. Forum and other organizations contributing another part. There were some individual contributions which made it possible to put up a kitty with close to \$500 or \$600 for expenses to promote poll tax drives throughout the state, not only for Mexican-Americans. We had some Negroes that were promoting to pay the poll tax for the Negro. And, of course, the organized labor had their people to promote poll tax sales.

Cuellar: Now we can progress again a little bit farther and go to the next major political campaign of the Mexican-American people or the Mexican-American political organization, PASO, and that's in Crystal City. Do you recall how come Crystal City came about?

Garcia: Yes, sir. In 1960 I was invited by Juan Cornejo to come to Crystal City to give them a poll tax talk and to help them in the promotion. Representative Alaniz from San Antonio and myself went to Crystal City, and we talked to about 150-250 people in a theatre there and told them the importance of paying their poll tax so that they would be a first-class citizen. This was all. We stayed there

about half a day because we had another meeting that night in another little town close to San Antonio, Hondo, to be exact. Our job was only to help in the promotion and to give a talk specifically on the importance of buying the poll tax.

Cuellar: Now at this time when you visited Crystal City was Juan Cornejo working as an individual or was he connected with a particular group?

Garcia: At that particular time and to my best recollection, Juan Cornejo was working as an individual or perhaps through the union to which he belonged. We only had the Negroes of the PASO organization there. We were in the process of building that, and we were more interested at that time in seeing that more people paid their poll tax, not only in Crystal City but throughout the state than organization. The organization came later.

Cuellar: Well, how come PASO became involved in Crystal City?

Garcia: Well, in 1961, again we had another big poll tax sale, and again I went to Crystal City, and we had a little more success there. And PASO became interested. And, of course, after that I did not go because I came back to Fort Worth. By that time I wanted to take better care of my family and my business. I had devoted quite a lot of time to politics and had spent all my savings. So I came back to Fort Worth and tried to rebuild my business. Cornejo went to call on them or because of the organization then that was taking place. He asked for help in the city election, or rather in the poll tax drive first, and I'm sure that they were thinking in terms of running for office, but the main primary purpose, of course, was



that more people pay their poll tax. And this is where they got more help from San Antonio. Martin Garcia from Kingsville also went out there and was available to help. In the sale of the poll tax the other organizations came later.

Cuellar: What are the other organizations?

Garcia: Well, by that I mean that first they concentrated on the poll tax drive, and they were very successful. The first year we sold but a few poll taxes, the second year I think we doubled it, and the third I think they quadrupled the amount people that were registered to vote. And, of course, it was at this particular time I'm sure that they had made plans to have a slate of candidates running for the city election.

Cuellar: As far as you know, then, PASO contributed pretty heavily to this election in 1963?

Garcia: Well, in money, no, because we didn't have any money. But in leadership and ability and in talks and that, yes, I'm sure they did.

Cuellar: What do you mean in leadership? Who were the main leaders who participated there in the 1963 . . .

Garcia: Well, there were several people that participated. Of course, Martin Garcia was there and he was, I believe, vice chairman or some officer in the organization of PASO. And he was available to help them. So was Albert Fuentes who was then executive secretary, I believe, of PASO. And I think Albert Pena was available for one or two talks to the group. So this type of leadership was available to them. I also believe that there was some leadership made

available from organized labor, AFL-CIO, and I'm sure that since Juan Cornejo belonged to the Teamsters he was also helped very heavily from the Teamsters. To what extent I don't know, but I'm sure that in leadership they would help.

Cuellar: Okay. The Crystal City election caused a lot of turmoil in Texas. Do you feel that it was that important, in the politics of the Mexican-American in the state?

Garcia: Any election that causes turmoil is definitely important if only to show that the Mexican-American people are tired of being dominated to the extent of slavery in some cities. Crystal City was one of them.

Cuellar: What are they saying about the connection between labor and PASO in that city? Was it beneficial; was it detrimental to PASO do you feel?

Garcia: I don't think that perhaps it might have been detrimental in some respects. I think it was helpful. The fact that Crystal City was beneficial, definitely it was. Politics in Crystal City will never be the same because a lot of people opened their eyes. They realized what could be done with that leadership or any new leadership or other leadership. The Mexican-American people realized that their vote is important. And this is what counts. Whether we agree with what was done or not, it doesn't make any difference.

Cuellar: If you were to compare the relation of the Mexican-American groups and labor groups in Texas today as to the way they were ten years ago, would you say they have improved or would you say that the Mexican-American are more skeptical of labor today?

Garcia: In some respects it has improved. In some respects I'd say they are more skeptical. But let me say that labor recognized the Mexican-American leadership and, of course, this is important.

Let me go back here and tell you how important the Crystal City election was in the eyes of the Latin American people, not only in Texas but in South America. This made headlines in the newspapers in Mexico and South America. It made tremendous headlines of such importance that finally a Mexican-American was made mayor, and a complete slate was elected in Crystal City. It made tremendous publicity. This is one of the reasons that I say Crystal City and many other cities where Mexican-Americans live will never be the same. The dominating factors, the elite, the ruling class, have recognized the problems, and whether they participate or not the Mexican-American will benefit.

Cuellar: By the ruling class, of course, you mean those who are the Anglo-American people?

Garcia: Well, in most cases, yes. The people that are the elected officials, the people that have been ruling the city. In many cities it's been an old fight where 90 per cent of the population is Mexican-Americans and yet all the elected officials are Anglo-American with the exception of the menial jobs given to the Mexican-Americans. It has been the standard in many cases, not all of them, but quite a few especially along the border.

Cuellar: Today, now, and we're talking about PASO. Do you believe that the organization still is as strong as it was when it began, or is it going down politically?

Garcia: Let me say that it has gone down. It went down when people like Don Yarborough and organized labor spent more money trying to defeat PASO or the Mexican-American organizations and elect their candidates. They try to divide us because out there we are opposed to them. I'll say that we have suffered and suffered tremendously. Given it time, perhaps, right now I think it's not as hard as it was at that particular time, definitely. I hope that maybe it will be.

Cuellar: How about going back again to the liberal coalition? Do you think that it still has possibilities today?

Garcia: The liberal coalition has been recognized by most of the Mexican-American leaders as a laugh and organized for a specific purpose. For example, it might work good in San Antonio or some towns where the Mexican people have more to give because there are more of them. There're more votes. But it has never worked in cities like Fort Worth, Dallas, and other cities where our vote is only a small vote, and naturally the coalition will sell us down the river any time that it suits their purpose. Oh, by selling us down the river I mean that if they stand to gain something they forget about the coalition.

Cuellar: Who represents the coalition in towns like Fort Worth, let's say?

Garcia: Well, usually organized labor, the liberal groups, and Mexican-Americans and Negroes, liberal organizations again. Now the coalitions have never supported a Mexican-American candidate. Let me give you an example. Henry Gonzales pulled 10,000 votes in Fort Worth and Tarrant County when he ran for governor in 1958, '59, somewhere around there. He had no organization. There was

no PASO. The AFL didn't endorse him. The liberals didn't endorse him. And nobody endorsed him. And then he ran against Price Daniel, too. And yet Albert Fuentes ran for lieutenant governor, a secondary place, and he had the endorsement of the Negroes. He had the endorsement of the liberals. He had the endorsement of the AFL-CIO. He had the endorsement of the coalition and of the PASO. And yet he didn't pull any more than 10,000 votes. What happened? Where is that strength of that coalition? And the same thing was repeated throughout the state. Henry Gonzales pulled something like 200,000 votes, and Albert Fuentes pulled about 25,000 or 30,000 votes more. This doesn't make sense, where he had the statewide organization and endorsement of all these people.

Cuellar: Well, where do you believe the solution lies for the Mexican-American in Texas to become politically active and politically important?

Garcia: Well, there are different versions from, naturally, as many people as you might hear and might have different ideas. I'm going to give you my idea. I think that we have to continue to get together and try to form some organization. We might have to come out and go Republican or independent once in a while especially in areas where we need to be, and not be dependent on one party. Specifically, in Texas the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are both conservative. We get very little cooperation from either party. Lately we have been getting some, but still token and very small. I don't know where the answer might be but somehow, some way, we must get together and really show some unity somewhere along the

line.

Cuellar: People have written books about Mexican-Americans in the United States. Pauline Cady and Carrie Williams have stated that one of the biggest mistakes of the Mexican-Americans today is that there are too many organizations and therefore this makes them weak. Do you agree with this or do you disagree?

Garcia: Well, I disagree with all these books about the Mexican-American people on their writing because they definitely know very little of the Mexican-Americans. They definitely are not true. So, of course, you must understand the books are old. Certainly we have a lot of organization if two or three recognized organizations are a lot. We only have the American G.I. Forum which is a non-political organization (a veterans' organization), the LULAC which is also a non-political organization, and we only have PASO which is a political organization. But PASO was not organized at the time that these books were written. So they must have been speaking of the G.I. Forum and LULAC, and if they call two too much, well, I certainly disagree with them.

Cuellar: Do you wish to add anything else in conclusion to the fight of the Mexican-Americans to reach equality in politics, social standing, and the economic standing in the state?

Garcia: I'd like to add that one of our biggest uphill fights has been in the field of education. I believe that through education, through sending our younger people to colleges, through learning and through efforts of this manner we'll be able to secure the leadership that would be necessary to continue and help the Mexican-Americans to

become first-class citizens. We have to continue to fight. The war on poverty has come a long way in helping our people and helping the minority peoples. But even then we've only scratched the surface. We need to continue more and more. We need to make available to our youth the education so that they could become leaders in their own field. We definitely need to make great strides in the field of education. I believe that through education we are going to solve our problems.

Cuellar: Okay, Mr. Garcia, I want to thank you very much for your time and hope that everything goes well.

Garcia: Thank you, Mr. Cuellar. I enjoyed the conversation with you, and I hope it can be useful in some way.





