

Caucus closes door on Latino Republican

Rocky Chávez could have brought useful perspective

By [Steven Greenhut \(/staff/steven-greenhut/\)](/staff/steven-greenhut/) 1:39 p.m. April 25, 2014



Rocky Chavez

SACRAMENTO — The California Legislature’s [Latino Caucus \(http://latinocaucus.legislature.ca.gov/\)](http://latinocaucus.legislature.ca.gov/) boasts on its website that its mission “is to identify, promote and advocate on behalf of the professional, educational, social, political and cultural interests of the Latino community.” Who can argue with that?

So after winning a seat to the Assembly in 2012 representing northern San Diego County, [Rocky Chávez \(http://arc.asm.ca.gov/member/AD76/\)](http://arc.asm.ca.gov/member/AD76/) decided to sign up and see what he can contribute. Education tops the group’s legislative priority list, and it tops Chávez’s also. He spent years operating a charter school.

“I said, ‘Hey, so when do we meet and how does this happen?’”, Chávez said in an interview on Thursday. “They said, ‘You’re not invited.’ I go, ‘Why would I not be invited?’” The obvious reason is that Chávez is a Republican, although he was never given an official explanation.

In a [recent statement commemorating Cesar Chavez Day \(http://latinocaucus.legislature.ca.gov/news/2014-03-31-statement-california-latino-legislative-caucus-celebrating-cesar-chavez-day\)](http://latinocaucus.legislature.ca.gov/news/2014-03-31-statement-california-latino-legislative-caucus-celebrating-cesar-chavez-day), the caucus urged all Californians to live up to Cesar Chavez’s example of “treating each other with dignity and respect, no matter their background.” It didn’t say, “unless one’s background is in the Republican Party.”

The Latino Caucus is operated with state support. That above-mentioned web site is an official legislative site. A staffer confirmed that its legislative activities are managed by Assembly and Senate employees, so it’s not an outside party operation.

There’s no question the caucus is a liberal group with a policy agenda that includes supporting the Affordable Care Act, providing “a pathway for citizenship for undocumented residents,” and overturning Proposition 209 — the 1996 initiative that bans racial and ethnic quotas in the university systems.

Yet the caucus also wants to “Engage with the business community on proposals and programs that create new jobs and expand economic opportunities throughout the state.” One would think a Republican — especially one with some business and military experience — would bring a valuable perspective to the table.

Furthermore, Chávez has worked on veteran’s issues with the Mexican consulate general, specifically on the issue of providing benefits to Mexican nationals who have served in the U.S. armed forces. He told me he lived in the Central Valley and even picked grapes in his younger days, so he could help on farm-related issues.

It’s not like Chávez is some right-wing infiltrator. He is fairly liberal on immigration-related matters and is a mixed bag on the caucus’ legislative proposals. He would, in essence, offer a constructive, alternative viewpoint. Most California Latinos are Democrats, but not all of them. The caucus has 24 members, so it’s not as if Chávez’s lone vote would change its political orientation. It wouldn’t

change if all GOP Latinos joined in, either. Others have tried but were not admitted.

“I was stopped by a member today in the lounge, another Latino ... who was saying, ‘Rocky, I give props to you all the time Sometimes you’re with us, sometimes you’re not, but you always listen.’ And I joked with him and I said, ‘Well, I’m still not in that caucus yet,’” he added.

The Women’s Caucus, the Outdoor Sporting Caucus, the Rural Caucus and the Environmental Caucus have members from both parties. The Black Caucus, the LGBT Caucus and the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus only have Democratic members, but it’s not clear if they would reject Republicans. Sen. Marty Block, D-San Diego, has started a [Jewish Caucus \(http://blogs.sacbee.com/capitolalert/latest/2014/01/california-legislature-launches-a-jewish-caucus.html\)](http://blogs.sacbee.com/capitolalert/latest/2014/01/california-legislature-launches-a-jewish-caucus.html) that is open not only to the five Jewish legislators but to those from any religion and either party.

These caucuses bring real political benefits and potential problems, too. They have separate Political Action Committees that let them [raise unlimited amounts of cash \(http://www.sacbee.com/2014/04/23/6349058/california-senate-undergoes-ethics.html\)](http://www.sacbee.com/2014/04/23/6349058/california-senate-undergoes-ethics.html). The Latino Caucus recently has gotten a black eye after the FBI investigation of Ron Calderon, the Montebello Democrat facing federal bribery charges. No wonder Chávez joked that when he told a colleague that he wanted to join the Latino Caucus, he was told to be careful what he asks for.

There’s good reason to question whether the Legislature should even have caucuses that advocate for ethnic concerns rather than for the concerns of all legislators’ voters. But since they do exist, shouldn’t they be open to all members who fit the bill — and not just those who belong to one political party?

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