

Política: Nuevomexicanos And American Political Incorporation, 1821 - 1910

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Review

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Gonzales, Phillip B. *Política: Nuevomexicanos and American Political Incorporation, 1821 – 1910*. University of Nebraska Press, \$90.00 ISBN 9780803284654

Creating Political Parties in New Mexico

Most historians do not pay much attention to New Mexico during the U.S. Civil War. There are exceptions, of course. Donald S. Frazier's *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest* (1995) analyzes rebel general Henry H. Sibley's invasion of New Mexico and his quest to capture the territory, and its mineral resources, in an attempt to carve out a rebel empire in the Southwestern United States. Jerry D. Thompson's *A Civil War History of the New Mexico Volunteers and Militia* reminds readers that New Mexicans fought in the war, and illuminates some of their motivations. Other historians have written about the battles of Valverde and Glorieta Pass. However, New Mexico tends to be overlooked or minimized in the scholarly literature. This is likely because the Trans-Mississippi theater is the least studied of the three theaters of the U.S. Civil War (Eastern, Western, and Trans-Mississippi). For years, historians overlooked this theater or derided it as the junkyard of the Confederate army. Recent scholarship has begun to rectify this neglect and to consider the Trans-Mississippi more carefully. However, New Mexico remains an enigma. What, for instance, did the people of New Mexico, both Euroamericans and Nuevomexicanos (New Mexicans), think about the U.S. Civil War? For that matter, how did they feel about the U.S? What did political incorporation look like in New Mexico? Did the territory have a functioning two-party system?

Thankfully, historical sociologist Phillip B. Gonzales has written a very large book offering answers to these questions. Currently Professor of Sociology at the University of New Mexico, he has published widely about New Mexican history. In *Política*, he argues that Nuevomexicanos were very involved in territorial politics. As he observes, "the United States conquered

Nuevomexicanos through military coercion, but the latter realized substantial participation in the American polity from the start” (3). In other words, Nuevomexicanos were not passive actors who had little to no agency. Rather, they became involved in politics very quickly and played an integral role in the political life of the territory.

Gonzales divides the book into five parts. The first covers the period before the annexation of New Mexico by the United States. Here the author includes useful background for readers who are not familiar with the history of New Mexico. He describes life and society in New Mexico and highlights the three groups that controlled New Mexico’s government: the rich (*hombres de bien*), military and militia officers, and the Catholic Church. Although many people have images of vicious fights between newcomers and natives, this image does not capture the entirety of the situation. Cooperation, as well as conflict, characterized relations between the two groups. Once the U.S. Army arrived, during the U.S. War with Mexico, Stephen Watts Kearny did his best to co-opt Nuevomexicanos. Some New Mexicans found they had much in common with Kearny, but others resisted the lure of the occupier. Therefore, mistrust of U.S. rule, combined with accommodationism, fueled a politics of factionalism.

In the period between annexation (1848) and the beginning of the U.S. Civil War (1861), elections for a delegate to Congress and the territorial legislature “generated a relatively constant attention to politics among Nuevomexicanos” and “encouraged territory-wide political networks” (184). Nuevomexicanos were vital players in elections and the political life of the territory. In addition, many of them sought and won political offices. Gonzales disagrees with the notion that, for the first three decades after annexation, New Mexico had no political parties, only disorganized factions. Rather, he contends, New Mexicans quickly developed an American Party (not at all related to the Know-Nothing Party) and a Mexican Party. The designations “American” and “Mexican” should be utilized with some caution because both parties had Euroamerican and Nuevomexicano members. In other words, after annexation, Nuevomexicanos quickly joined Euroamericans to create political parties. These party labels were not static. In a few short years, the Mexican Party took a new name: the Democratic Party. The American Party, on the other hand, became the People’s Independent Party (290).

At the beginning of the U.S. Civil War, Republican operators went to New Mexico and began the process of creating a Republican Party. As in other

regions of the U.S., nonpartisanship and unity characterized the initial months of the war. This unity quickly fell apart and Nuevomexicanos began to use the label “Copperhead” and charge political enemies with draft resistance. Political foes of the delegate elected in 1863, José Francisco Perea, grumbled that he owed his election to the Copperheads and that he held Copperhead sentiments. In a fascinating chapter, Gonzales explores the 1865 delegate election between Perea and his cousin José Francisco Chávez. Chávez became involved with politics because of the furor over General James H. Carleton’s proposed Indian reservation at Bosque Redondo. This issue “drove New Mexico’s binary cleavage to Grand Canyon depth” (431) because many Nuevomexicanos despised Native Americans as bloodthirsty raiders. This is a particularly interesting discussion because historians have begun to pay more attention to the story of Native Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Parts Four and Five analyze politics during Reconstruction. Chávez defeated his cousin Perea in the delegate election of 1865. During the election of 1867, however, Chávez faced Charles Clever in a grueling contest. Gonzales devotes a great deal of attention, perhaps at times a bit too much, to this election. For instance, he spends a rather long chapter exploring the anti-Semitic language of some of Chávez’s supporters. While interesting and revelatory, the material could easily have been compressed. Clever won the election, likely through fraud, and Chávez contested his election. Chávez eventually won the seat, but the time it took to render a verdict is instructive. The Republican-dominated House of Representatives had two claimants, both of whom claimed to sympathize with Republicans. Republican and Democrat parties, although in the midst of forming, had yet not fully coalesced. However, by the late 1860s, the New Mexico Republican Party solidified and dominated the election of 1869. Democrats, despite some shakiness, were not far behind. During the election of 1871, José Manuel Gallegos defeated Chávez. Thus, despite Republican strength during 1869, the resurgence of the Democrats meant both parties were established players in territorial politics by 1871.

There are two critiques worth exploring. The first concerns the chronological period of this study. The subtitle of the volume suggests that the book covers the period 1821 – 1910. In actuality, *Política* ends in 1871. The election of Gallegos, the author contends, “inaugurated a new political era for New Mexico” (785). To be sure, Gonzales discusses 1871 – 1910. However, he does so in a few dozen pages in the conclusion and the result feels rushed and cursory. The central issue here is that, in these few pages, he describes the

erosion of Nuevomexicano political power. Given the limited space, his explanation of why this occurred is rather brief. Given the subject matter of this book, and his attention to Nuevomexicanos as political actors, this decision makes the ending feel discordant. One wishes he would have included a sixth part and probed this erosion of power. On the other hand, perhaps he will consider this topic in another volume.

The second critique concerns the material. Some scholars do not include many people in their books, preferring to focus instead on big forces and ideas. This is not a critique one can level at *Política*. This book is teeming with people, many of whom will be unknown to readers. Gonzales, therefore, should be lauded for featuring the voices of so many people in this volume and for making sure to include both Euroamerican and Nuevomexicano voices. On the other hand, at times one cannot but feel as if there were too many people, too many voices, and too many details. The coverage of New Mexican politics is exhaustive. However, that can be both good and bad. Political historians will appreciate this volume, but other scholars, not to mention a non-academic audience, might get lost in the thicket of details and not be able to see the big picture. In addition, the book does contain some errors, ranging from incorrect names and dates, to problems of interpretation.

The critiques raised by this review do not diminish the importance of this volume. Gonzales has produced a comprehensive discussion of politics in New Mexico and the linkages between territorial and national politics. This book will appeal to anyone interested in New Mexico, political history, and citizenship. It also demonstrates how rich this topic is and how much additional research could be conducted on politics and political incorporation in New Mexico during this turbulent period.

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