

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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## HISPANIC LEADERSHIP

# Ex-Gov. Castro recalls beating odds

By Yvonne Wingett  
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Raul Castro stood on his wooden wraparound porch in Nogales, overlooking the twin city to the south just across the border in Mexico.

Much has changed for Latinos since he served as Arizona governor three decades ago, he said. Castro is the only Hispanic ever elected to the state's highest office. The crow's feet that web from his hazel eyes moved as he reflected on how far Hispanics have come.

"In my days, discrimination was rather heavy, rather obvious. It doesn't exist now. It's a paradise," he said in a low voice, still strong at 89.

Castro was at home last month during the biggest pro-immigrant march in Arizona history. Many years ago, he would have marched himself. The U.S. and Mexico could resolve the issue of illegal immigration, he believes, with a little more diplomacy and better border security.

Castro was a poor Mexican immigrant who grew up on the border. Determined to make something of himself, he worked through college and became a lawyer. Conviction helped him become governor. Charisma helped make him a U.S. ambassador to three Latin American countries.

His life has served as an example to many Latinos. He overcame poverty and open discrimination to become a powerful politician and statesman. For them, Castro reshaped the way they viewed themselves and proved they could succeed. In his golden years now, Castro has slowed down and returned to the border, where he tries to stay involved.

Deportation of millions of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. is unrealistic, he said. He believes they should be allowed to apply for legal entry and pay a fine.

He pointed to a pink house next door. A coyote used to stash immigrants there and prepare them to head north.

"When I was living in Douglas I would say to myself, 'So close, so far apart,'" he said, dressed in a suit ensemble and spit-shined shoes. "Eighty years later, I'm standing here. I look across to Mexico and I say, 'So close, yet so far away.'"

## Becoming a leader

As a young boy, Castro's parents, Rosario, a midwife, and Francisco, a miner, legally immigrated with their 13 children to southern Arizona. They lived in Pirtleville, an impoverished town outside Douglas. His father died when he was 12.

He studied hard through high school, then college. He plucked chickens and waited tables to pay for tuition at Northern Arizona University and earned a teaching degree in 1939 at age 23. That same year, he became a naturalized citizen. But no one would hire him.

"I was Mexican. In my days, I couldn't even be a mail carrier," he said. "I had to clean trains, haul garbage."

He left Arizona and, over the next two years, rode freight trains across the country, picked sugar beets in the Pacific Northwest and staged boxing matches at carnivals for money.

On his return home, he became a foreign-service clerk in Agua Prieta, Sonora. Unfulfilled, he went to law school and then opened a law office in Tucson. There, in 1951, he became deputy Pima County attorney.



JACK KURTZ/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC  
Raul Castro has served as governor of Arizona and as a U.S. ambassador.

"A lot of Hispanic people were complaining (of discrimination in the justice system and in schools and jobs)," he remembered.

What better way to fight it, he reasoned, than becoming part of the system.

He ran for Pima County attorney even though few believed a Hispanic could win. His own brothers didn't even vote for him, but he won in 1954 by 65 votes.

## A foreign affair

A few years later, Castro met President Lyndon Johnson while both were campaigning in Tucson. They hit it off, and with a bit of politicking through Arizona Democratic Sen. Carl Hayden, Johnson appointed Castro in 1964 as U.S. ambassador to El Salvador.

He accepted the post. There was just one problem.

"My name was the same as Fidel Castro's brother in Cuba," Castro explained. "Lyndon Johnson said, 'I'd like you to change your name.'"

# Ex-Gov. Castro looks back, urges close U.S.-Mexico Ties

Castro refused. Soon after, he and his family packed their bags and moved to El Salvador.

Castro became a popular diplomat, promoting trade, shaking hands and attending community events. He hosted Johnson and his family, along with other world leaders, at his home. He found himself hobnobbing with the rich and powerful in El Salvador, Washington and New York. He had the time of his life, and he was good at it.

“It made me feel proud,” Castro said in his sitting room, surrounded by marble statues, mirrors and armoires collected from all over the world. “But I was out of place. I wasn’t in their class.”

Johnson was happy with him and in 1968 sent him to Bolivia. Castro traveled the country on horseback, making friends with the Bolivians. He came home the following year when Johnson left office.

## Arizona governor

Castro returned to practicing international law in Tucson but missed the political limelight. He decided to make a run for governor after friends and community leaders urged him. He was the Democratic nominee in 1970 but narrowly lost to the incumbent, Republican Gov. Jack Williams. Still, he didn’t give up.

With the slogan “A choice for change,” Castro ran again, this time against Republican candidate Russell Williams in 1974. He campaigned across the state in English and Spanish on developing stronger business and cultural relationships with Mexico, bilingual elementary education, and growth.

Headlines in The Phoenix Gazette predicted a razor-thin race. Working against Castro was his surname. But in news stories and speeches, he made it clear that he would represent all Arizona, not just Hispanics. “The hardest thing in political life is to impress on people that you’re sincere,” he said. “And that you have conviction.”



REPUBLIC FILE PHOTO

Rual Castro (shown in 1975 while the governor of Arizona) rides the Bolivian countryside on horseback while a U.S. ambassador.

Hispanics were elated that one of their own was running, Castro recalled. Several times at debates and news conferences, they wanted to display the Mexican flag behind him.

“I said, ‘Look, I’m running for governor of Arizona, not Chihuahua,’ “ he said. He declared victory early Nov. 5, 1974. He won by 4,100 votes, ending an eight-year Republican hold on the office.

## Missing something

Castro enjoyed state politics but missed foreign politicking. Then one day in 1976, Castro answered his phone. Jimmy Carter was on the other line. He was in Phoenix and wanted to meet with Castro.

“He said, ‘This is Jimmy Carter.’ I was like ‘Jimmy Carter, who the hell is that?’ “ Castro said. “I was getting ready to dedicate the plumber’s union, and I wanted to get going.”

# Ex-Gov. Castro looks back

Carter asked him if he could stop by.

“Ten minutes later, Jimmy Carter was at my door. He said, ‘I need your help because I’m running for president.’ I thought, ‘What kind of nut is this?’ By God, he got elected and said he wanted me to be an ambassador.’”

In 1977, Carter asked Castro, who had just served two years as governor, to be a U.S. ambassador in Argentina. Castro wrestled with his decision and stepped down to leave for Argentina. Castro angered some Hispanics, who felt betrayed.

“But I represented a whole country,” he said. “I represented the president, the White House. My role as governor was for the whole state, not just the Mexican community.”

After three years in South America, Castro returned to Tucson to practice law.

## Issues at home

It has been 12 years since Castro moved to Nogales, back on the border where he is most comfortable.

“I get a feeling of living in Central America,” he said, as people greeted him in a local restaurant. “English is the second language here.”

At night, he sits on his back porch with his wife, Patricia, drinks martinis and looks toward Mexico.

He pointed to his dirt backyard where many undocumented immigrants trek. Some ask for water, and he gives it to them. They’re breaking the law, he said, but they’re good people wanting jobs and opportunity.

But the U.S. and Mexico need to work harder together to stop the flow. “We have a right to defend our borders,” he said. “America needs to get with Mexico and say, ‘We have a problem, and it exists mostly because your people are coming across our borders.’”

The U.S., he said, should put money into Mexico to help build its economy and slow illegal immigration.

## Raul H. Castro Institute

**What:** The institute opened in February at Phoenix College. Educators and community leaders are raising money and searching for staff. Over the next few months, they hope to raise \$150,000 to \$500,000 to fund the project.

**Who:** Organizations involved include the Maricopa County Community College District, Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University and the University of Arizona.

**Why:** It was created to strategize ways to address issues facing the Latino community, including education, health, politics and economics. The institute will sponsor independent, nonpartisan research, provide technical assistance to policymakers, and distribute findings to the public.

**Details:** (602) 285-7500

He closed his law firm two years ago, but he has worked on some cases from a home office. People come by and ring his doorbell asking for help with immigration-related cases. He does what he can to help them and does it for free.

## Bored with retirement

Sitting on a wicker chair on his front porch after lunch waiting for his mail, he said he is bored with retirement.

## Hispanic Governors

Raul Castro is one of eight Hispanics to serve as governor in the United States.

**Bill Richardson**, New Mexico, 2003-present

**Robert Martinez**, Florida, 1987-91

**Toney Anaya**, New Mexico, 1983-86

**Jerry Apodaca**, New Mexico, 1975-78

**Raul Castro**, Arizona, 1974-77

**Octaviano Larrazola**, New Mexico, 1919-20

**Ezequiel C. de Baca**, New Mexico, took office in 1917, died a month later.

**Romualdo Pacheco Jr.**, California, 1875-76

Source: National Association of Latino Elected Officials Education Fund

He still drives, usually a PT Cruiser, and occasionally travels around southern Arizona, speaking to schoolchildren and civic groups.

Lately, as co-chairman of Gov. Janet Napolitano’s re-election campaign, he has been giving speeches and “putting in a good word for her.”

His latest project, he said, is trying to decide where he wants to be buried. “My wife keeps asking me,” he said. “I don’t know. That’s a major decision. “My choice will be Tucson, probably.”

Standing from his chair, Castro said he has had a good life but has two regrets.

“I always had the feeling that I wanted to get more education,” he said, walking inside the house. “My biggest disappointment is that I haven’t seen Mexico and America be buddies.”

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