

TEXAS Legends

Raul A. Gonzalez Jr.



Raul A. Gonzalez Jr. rose from picking crops alongside his parents to serving on the state's highest court. Along the way, he earned a reputation as a hard-working judge who was never afraid to speak his mind. Whether picking crops or serving on the Supreme Court of Texas, Gonzalez was determined to do whatever it took to achieve success, once stating, "I've got big hands and a big drive to succeed."ⁱ

Born in 1940, Gonzalez grew up in Weslaco, Texas, near the Mexican border.

After graduating from the University of Texas in 1963, he earned a law degree at the University of Houston in 1966. Gonzalez first became a judge in 1978, and over the course of his career won the support of both Republican and Democratic governors. Governor Dolph Briscoe appointed him to fill a vacancy in the 103rd District Court shortly after he first took the bench. Gonzalez was soon appointed associate justice on the Thirteenth Court of Appeals by Governor Bill Clements in 1981, becoming the first Hispanic to serve in that role. One year later he won election to a four-year term in the same position, but before it could be completed, Governor Mark White in 1984 appointed him to the Supreme Court of Texas, and Gonzalez made history by becoming the court's first Hispanic member. This also led him to become the first Hispanic elected for statewide office in Texas in 1986.

Gonzalez's focus and determination paid off in 1994 when he was challenged in the Democratic primary by Rene Haas, a well-funded challenger backed by powerful trial lawyers groups. While Gonzalez eventually won the nomination and reelection, the race was one of the most expensive judicial races in the state's history, with almost \$4.5 million spent by both sides. Like

many veterans of the state's highest court, Gonzales is uneasy with the expensive, partisan races that the state uses to elect judges.

Gonzalez's service on the court was more than a symbolic victory for Hispanics. As one historian of the court noted, "Not merely a Latino in surname, Gonzalez's life embodied the struggle of Mexican Americans."ⁱⁱ The court had a justice who understood the general challenges of being Hispanic in Texas. As a child he had labored in the fields with his family. As the son of parents born in Mexico, Gonzalez understood the plight of immigrants as they found their way in a new country. Gonzalez brought more than a Hispanic surname to the court, he brought a broad understanding of the needs and challenges of a population moving from the fields of south Texas to the highest posts in the state's justice system.

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- i. Robert B. Gilbreath and D. Todd Smith, "An Interview with Former Justice Raul A. Gonzalez," *The Appellate Advocate*, 2004, www.hptylaw.com/media/article/24.rob.pdf, 25.
 - ii. James L. Haley, *The Texas Supreme Court: A Narrative History, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), Kindle edition, 214.