

Octaviano A. Larrazolo

1859–1930

UNITED STATES SENATOR 1928–1929
REPUBLICAN FROM NEW MEXICO

In 1928 Octaviano A. Larrazolo, a free-thinking Republican lawyer from New Mexico who immigrated to the United States as a boy, was elected the first Hispanic Senator in U.S. history. A champion of equal opportunity who was known throughout the state as the “silver-tongued orator”—a reference to his eloquent rhetoric in Spanish and English—Larrazolo built a political career around his persistent defense of Hispanic civil rights. He managed to transcend New Mexico’s machine politics, and though he made enemies in both parties, he was “the great champion of the Spanish-American people, always uncompromising in his concern for their welfare.... He was their acknowledged spokesman,” said his fellow New Mexican Senator Sam Bratton.¹

Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo was born on December 7, 1859, to Octaviano Larrazolo, an affluent landowner, and Donaciana Larrazolo in El Valle de Allende, Chihuahua, Mexico.² Larrazolo grew up in relative comfort and was taught to read and write while he was young. He later attended school in town but withdrew after being beaten by his teacher.³ His situation changed rapidly during the mid-1860s when the Larrazolo family was left destitute after supporting Benito Juárez’s revolt against the French occupation of Mexico. In 1863 French troops ransacked the Larrazolos’ home after forcing the family to give them quarter.⁴

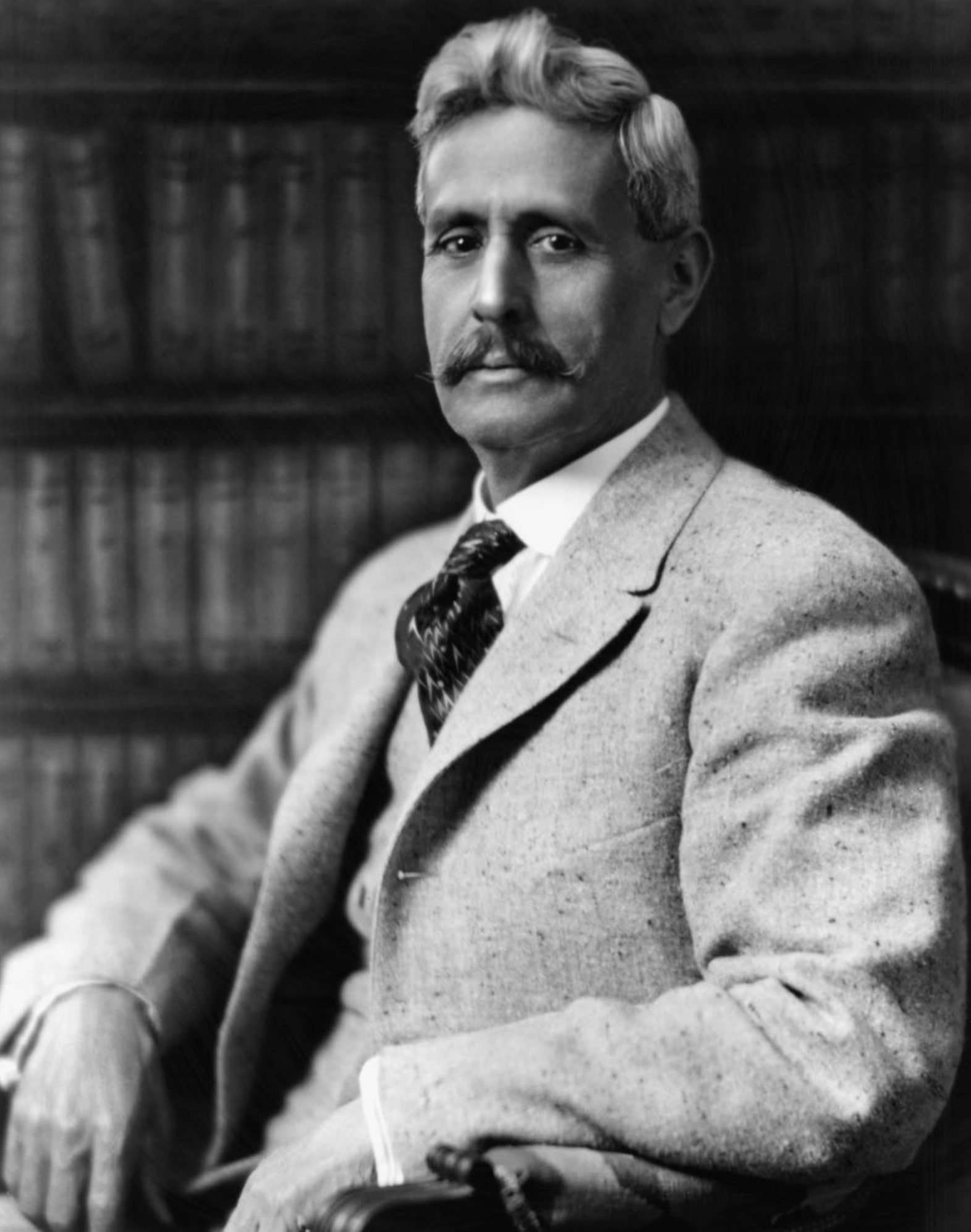
In late November 1870, as his family struggled with insolvency, Larrazolo left home to attend school in the United States under the care of John B. Salpointe, a Catholic bishop.⁵ For the next five years, Larrazolo attended private schools in Tucson, Arizona, and Las Cruces, New Mexico. After completing his primary studies in 1875, Larrazolo enrolled at St. Michael’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico.⁶ A year later, he left St. Michael’s and returned to Tucson, where he worked odd jobs, selling

shoes and teaching classes.⁷ Unsure about his future, he briefly considered joining the priesthood before he accepted a teaching position in San Elizario, Texas.⁸ Fluent in English and Spanish, Larrazolo taught during the day and studied law at night. In preparation for a legal career, Larrazolo became a U.S. citizen on December 11, 1884, and registered with Texas’ Democratic Party. In 1885 he was appointed clerk of the U.S. District and Circuit Courts for the Western District of Texas.⁹ He married Rosalia Cobos in 1881, and they had two sons, Juan Bautista and José Maria, and a daughter, Rosalia. His wife died in 1891, the day after their daughter was born, and the following year Larrazolo married María Garcia, with whom he had nine children: Octaviano Ambrosio, Josefina, Carlos G., Luis Fernando, Heliodoro A., Maria, Justiniano Santiago, Pablo Frederico, and Rafael E.¹⁰

Larrazolo began his political career in the winter of 1886, winning the clerkship of El Paso’s district court. He was re-elected in 1888 and admitted to the Texas bar the same year. Larrazolo was elected district attorney for Texas’ 34th Judicial District in El Paso in 1890 and again in 1892.¹¹ After his second term, Larrazolo moved to New Mexico and opened a law office in Las Vegas, where he quickly became enmeshed in Democratic politics and earned a reputation as a captivating speaker.

In 1900, 1906, and 1908, Larrazolo ran unsuccessfully for the office of Territorial Delegate to the U.S. Congress. As a Democrat, Larrazolo faced an uphill struggle from the start because New Mexico’s majority-Hispanic population leaned Republican. Moreover, he ran for office as New Mexico’s political structure underwent a fundamental change.

As a Hispanic Democrat, Larrazolo was a minority member of the state’s minority party, and as the new, predominantly Anglo-Democratic population grew, it became more resistant to the ambitions of Hispanic





politicians. Despite receiving little support from his own party's base in east New Mexico, Larrazolo nearly won the elections of 1906 and 1908 because he managed to court Hispanic Republicans in the central and western parts of the state.¹² "The election would have been won if the eastern Democratic counties had but given the head of the ticket the same support they gave the balance of the ticket," a frustrated Larrazolo told the Democratic Territorial Central Committee.¹³ Tensions peaked in 1910 when Democrats refused to send Hispanic delegates to New Mexico's constitutional convention and ultimately opposed provisions that guaranteed Spanish speakers their civil rights.¹⁴

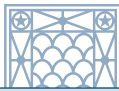
Chastened by his experiences, and unwilling to associate with "a party whose principle of 'equal rights to all'" was "but a shining platitude," Larrazolo broke with New Mexico's Democrats in 1911.¹⁵ In many respects it was a difficult decision, since the Republicans offered few alternatives. Throughout the 1900s, Larrazolo's relationship with the Republican Party had been notably confrontational, and while Anglo-Democrats shunned him, the GOP repeatedly mocked him and accused him of race-baiting.¹⁶ Republican newspapers criticized Larrazolo and his supporters for "working the race prejudice racket for all they are worth," and claimed that Larrazolo had "appealed to race hatred in the Spanish-speaking sections of the Territory."¹⁷ As late as 1908, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* accused Larrazolo of "posing as a high-toned descendant [*sic*] of the kings of Spain and as a noble Spaniard of the bluest blood, although he was born in Chihuahua, Mexico in what the New Mexican is informed, is an Indian settlement."¹⁸

Abandoned by Democrats and a perennial target for Republicans, Larrazolo began to set his own course. In 1910, as he stumped in favor of New Mexico's constitution, Larrazolo attacked the machine politics that he felt were exploiting Hispanic voters across the state. "I do not believe that it is the duty of a citizen to surrender his conscience to any man or any set of men, or to any party of any name," he said.¹⁹ "If it is true that there are bosses over you and you are not free," he told his listeners,

"you ... have allowed yourselves to be controlled by other men but you will be controlled by bosses only as long as you permit the yoke to rest on you." Larrazolo asked if New Mexico would approve a constitution guaranteeing civil protections, or whether Hispanic New Mexicans would essentially "remain in slavery." Larrazolo seemed to sense that New Mexico was dangerously close to following the lead of the American South, where Jim Crow laws had systematically stripped African Americans of their rights in the half-century since congressional Reconstruction. "Every native citizen must unite in supporting this constitution because it secures to you people of New Mexico your rights—every one of them; the rights also of your children and in such a manner that they can never be taken away," he continued. It was imperative that Hispanics support the constitution, he told them, "if you want to acquire your freedom and transmit this sacred heritage in the land hallowed by the blood of your forefathers who fought to protect it." "Do not wait until you are put in the position of Arizona which in two years will be able to disfranchise every Spanish speaking citizen."²⁰ Larrazolo feared that without voting rights, Hispanic landowners would be forced to sell out to the railroad.²¹

His speech in 1910 was a milestone. Larrazolo had forced both parties to acknowledge the concerns of Hispanic New Mexicans, and in doing so he became the most vocal leader of his generation. A year later, still attacking New Mexico's political system, Larrazolo said he had registered as a Republican so that he could "administer equal rights to all." Addressing a group of Hispanic Republicans, Larrazolo said, "I have not come to you to ask you to wage war, my friends who are descendants of the noble conquistadores, with the Anglo-Saxon race," because whether they liked it or not New Mexico needed the Anglos' capital investments.²²

Having been cast by both parties as a race agitator, Larrazolo remained nonetheless a powerful influence in state politics. Many Republicans blamed him for the numerous Democratic victories in the first election after New Mexico attained statehood. Though neither Anglo-Democrats nor Anglo-Republicans, nor even moderate



Hispanics, liked what he said about “slavery,” “bosses,” “freedom,” “war,” and their “sacred heritage,” they could not ignore him. Larrazolo had wide name recognition, spoke eloquently, and was not afraid to break with his party to protect Hispanic civil rights.²³ Though a registered Republican, he campaigned for Hispanic candidates of both parties, among them his close friend Democrat Ezequiel C. de Baca, who became governor in 1916.²⁴

Two years later, in 1918, New Mexican Republicans nominated Larrazolo for governor. Democrats had already selected their own Hispanic candidate, Felix García. Despite Larrazolo’s reputation as a political liability, Republican leaders hoped he would draw votes both from older Anglo conservatives and Hispanic voters. Accepting his party’s nod during World War I, Larrazolo challenged the GOP to exert the strong leadership it had shown during the Civil War. “The Republican party is the only one which knows the science of making men free,” he said. “It made this union free. Why is it not the party in conjunction with the allies in these later days to be entrusted with the task of making the whole world free?”²⁵

Though Larrazolo touted the Republican Party’s “noble heritage,” he struggled to clarify his own past, and his reputation for generating controversy gave many voters pause.²⁶ Factionalism and personal rivalries continued to divide Hispanic voters, and some worried that Larrazolo’s bold approach would undermine his earlier accomplishments. Anglos, too, were skeptical, and to allay fears that he would favor Hispanic interests over New Mexican interests, Larrazolo declared, “I shall put into practice the principles that I have defended and on account of which undoubtedly I have made many enemies. Those principles are: ‘Equal rights and privileges for all citizens of New Mexico without regard to ancestry.’”²⁷ Amid a crippling drought and a statewide outbreak of the flu, Larrazolo won by a scant 1,319 votes.²⁸

Larrazolo’s ambitious agenda as governor (1919 to 1921) was alternately supported and attacked by Republicans. Larrazolo appealed to the federal government for drought relief, created a department of public health, and as a pioneer in the idea of public domain, urged the national

administration to cede unused federal lands to the states. For his efforts he was named president of the League of Public Lands.²⁹ In 1919 Larrazolo declared martial law to quell a strike by coal miners in McKinley and Colfax Counties, and with a majority-Republican legislature, passed measures that restricted child labor, mandated regular school attendance, raised schoolteachers’ salaries, and ensured that bilingual instruction was available in New Mexico’s schools. But Larrazolo had an independent streak during a period in New Mexican politics when independent minds were scorned, and he had spent his formative years as a Democrat. He backed the passage of the 19th Amendment, and unlike the state and national legislatures, supported President Woodrow Wilson’s call for a League of Nations. He was derided nationally after he pardoned Mexican troops accused of killing American citizens during Pancho Villa’s raid, prompting the *Chicago Daily Tribune* to observe, “New Mexico seems to have been reclaimed by Mexico ... without even taking the trouble to secede.”³⁰ But it was his decision to pass income tax legislation that finally alienated his party at home. Business owners and miners threatened lawsuits, and the Republican legislature, led by old guard conservatives, repealed the measure. But Larrazolo vetoed the repeal, at great political cost, and the income tax remained.³¹ As his term ended, Republican dissenters vowed, “No more Old Mexico in New Mexico.”³²

Though Larrazolo was not renominated for governor, he was not away from politics for long.³³ He moved back to El Paso and opened a law office, but returned to New Mexico two years later. Despite his chronic asthma, Larrazolo spoke throughout the state, and in 1923 he was nominated by the state legislature for the governorship of Puerto Rico. Although President Harding appointed another candidate, Larrazolo used his renewed popularity as a springboard back into public service. He lost election to a seat on the state supreme court in 1924, but was elected to the state house of representatives from Bernalillo County in 1927.³⁴ As a state legislator, Larrazolo addressed some of the same concerns he did as governor, chief among them state land ownership and land reclamation.³⁵



Shortly after Larrazolo won re-election to New Mexico's house of representatives in 1928, Democratic U.S. Senator Andrieus A. Jones died. Republican Bronson M. Cutting, who had been appointed to Jones's seat, asked Larrazolo to run for the unexpired term set to end six months later on March 4, 1929. The Republican Party ran Larrazolo for the unexpired term and Cutting for the full term. By the time Larrazolo reluctantly accepted his party's nomination in September 1928, the unexpired term was nearly complete. In a final, lasting attack on New Mexico's political arrangement, he demanded at the nominating convention that the 1928 Republican ticket be split evenly between Anglo and Hispanic candidates.³⁶ Larrazolo's stance troubled some Pecos Valley Republicans, but older party stalwarts noted that he had advocated for split tickets as early as 1911, and that his nomination passed because he had long been "an outstanding champion of the native people."³⁷ Larrazolo promised he would work in Washington "to keep respected the name and reputation of the Spanish-American people," and New Mexico's Republican press rallied behind him.³⁸ Larrazolo won the Senate race that year with nearly 56 percent of the vote, becoming the first Hispanic Senator. The *Los Angeles Times*, which had once charged Larrazolo with race-baiting, believed he would make a fitting ambassador to Mexico once his term ended.³⁹ But Larrazolo's doctors cautioned him against moving to Washington since he was 69 and in poor health.

Larrazolo presented his credentials and was sworn into office on December 7, 1928, but his arrival in Washington garnered little national attention. The *Washington Post* commented only that his election was "a striking illustration of the melting pot" before noting that Larrazolo had violated the rules of decorum and shocked fellow Senators by lighting a cigarette on the chamber floor.⁴⁰ The Mexican Senate, on the other hand, proud that a native son had climbed to the heights of American politics, wired Larrazolo a message with its "greetings and best wishes," which a Senate clerk read on the floor.⁴¹

In keeping with his legislative interests, Larrazolo was appointed to the Agriculture and Forestry, Public Lands

and Surveys, and Territories and Insular Possessions Committees, but shortly into his tenure he came down with the flu.⁴² Having missed votes because of his illness, he went home over the winter recess. Returning to Washington shortly after the beginning of the new year, Larrazolo introduced S. 5374 "to provide for a military and industrial school for boys and girls in the State of New Mexico."⁴³ It would be his only legislative action. Ten days later, on January 25, a gravely ill Larrazolo returned to New Mexico for good. On his behalf in early February, Senator Otis F. Glenn of Illinois introduced S. 5682, to settle outstanding claims with Mexico. While at home, Larrazolo suffered a stroke, and his formal term in the Senate ended in March as he recuperated with his family.⁴⁴ Larrazolo's health continued to deteriorate over the next year. He died on April 7, 1930.⁴⁵

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Córdova, Alfred C. and Charles B. Judah. "Octaviano Larrazolo: A Political Portrait," Division of Research, Department of Government (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1952).

Gonzalez, Phillip B. "Race, Party, Class: The Contradictions of Octaviano Larrazolo," in Norman Gross, ed., *Noble Purposes: Nine Champions of the Rule of Law* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

Larrazolo, Paul F. *Octaviano A. Larrazolo* (New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1986).

Vigil, Maurilio E. *Los Patrones: Profiles of Hispanic Leaders in New Mexico History* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980).

Walter, Paul A. F. "Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo." *New Mexico Historical Review* 7 (April 1932): 97–104.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

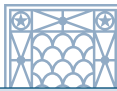
New Mexico State Records Center (Santa Fe) *Papers*: Governor Octaviano A. Larrazolo Papers, 1918–1920, 12 linear feet. The collection contains the official papers of Octaviano A. Larrazolo during his time as governor. *Papers*: Luis E. Armijo Papers, c. 1911, 1916, one linear foot. Collection includes letters written and received by Octaviano A. Larrazolo.



University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research (Albuquerque). *Papers*: 1841–1981, 1.25 linear feet and one oversized folder. The Octaviano A. Larrazolo Papers consist of material relevant to his political career and family, primarily between 1885 and 1930. Also included are a handful of photographs. A finding aid is available in the repository.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, Senate, Appendix, 71st Cong., 2nd sess. (12 May 1930): 9140. The most recent treatment of Larrazolo's life is Phillip B. Gonzalez, "Race, Party, Class: The Contradictions of Octaviano Larrazolo," in Norman Gross, ed., *Noble Purposes: Nine Champions of the Rule of Law* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007): 95–109.
- 2 Alfred C. Córdova and Charles B. Judah, "Octaviano Larrazolo: A Political Portrait," Division of Research, Department of Government (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1952): 1.
- 3 Octaviano A. Larrazolo, Unpublished memoir: 12 (MSS 614 BC, Octaviano A. Larrazolo Papers, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico).
- 4 Larrazolo, Unpublished memoir: 5–6, 15.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 16–29.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 25–26; Paul F. Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo* (New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1986): 28, 30–31.
- 7 Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 34.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 33–34, 37; Maurilio E. Vigil, *Los Patronos: Profiles of Hispanic Leaders in New Mexico History* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980): 122.
- 9 Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 43, 45–46; Córdova and Judah, "Octaviano Larrazolo": 2.
- 10 Vigil, *Los Patronos*: 122; Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 42, 46–47, 49, 85–87.
- 11 Vigil, *Los Patronos*: 122; Córdova and Judah, "Octaviano Larrazolo": 2.
- 12 Larrazolo lost all three races by close margins. In 1900 Larrazolo lost to Republican Bernard S. Rodey by 3,700 votes out of 39,414 total cast, or about 9 percent. In 1906 Larrazolo lost to Republican William H. Andrews, Jr., by .58% (266 votes out of a total 45,775). He lost to Andrews again in 1908 by .69% (388 votes out of a total 55,580). See *Report of the Secretary of the Territory, 1909–1910 and Legislative Manual, 1911* (Santa Fe: New Mexican Printing Company, 1911): 138–140. See also Charles Montgomery, "Becoming 'Spanish-American,'" *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20 (Summer 2001): 71; Phillip B. Gonzales, "The Political Construction of Latino Nomenclatures in Twentieth-Century New Mexico," *Journal of the Southwest* 35 (Summer 1993): 161. Though Larrazolo was a Hispanic Democrat in the predominantly Hispanic Republican section of north-central New Mexico, he benefited from what one political scientist calls "organized groups of dissidents from the majority [Republican] party." See Jack E. Holmes, *Politics in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967): 154. See also "Republicans Put Strong Ticket in Field at Capital," 4 October 1918, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 1.
- 13 As quoted in Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 75.
- 14 Charles Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption: Heritage, Power, and Loss on New Mexico's Upper Rio Grande* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 81. "Impending statehood portended the rapid expansion of Anglo American control in New Mexico at the same time that the importation of racial prejudice was palpably evident in the region," writes Phillip B. Gonzales. See Gonzales "The Political Construction of Latino Nomenclatures in Twentieth-Century New Mexico," *Journal of the Southwest*: 158–167, as quoted on p. 166.
- 15 "Gov. Mills and O. A. Larrazolo Fires [*sic*] Volleys at Democratic Party," 26 September 1911, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 3.
- 16 Republicans, too, incited racial strife, but given their dependence on Hispanic voters, they were quick to divert attention from such political maneuvering. Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption*: 79.
- 17 "Showing Larrazolo's Duplicity," 8 October 1908, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 4; "Larrazolo's Dirty and Cowardly Campaign Should Lose," 17 October 1908, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 4; "Campaign in Territory Is Bitter One," 18 October 1908, *Los Angeles Times*: 14.
- 18 "Should Be Defeated," 27 October 1908, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 4. For more information on race, ethnicity, and politics in New Mexico at the turn of the 20th century see Montgomery, "Becoming 'Spanish-American,'" *Journal of American Ethnic History*: 59–84; Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption*: 73–75.
- 19 "Vote for the Constitution Declares O. A. Larrazolo," 21 December 1910, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 3; Carolyn Zeleny, *Relations between the Spanish-Americans and the Anglo-Americans in New Mexico* (New York: Arno Press, 1974): 200.
- 20 "Vote for the Constitution Declares O. A. Larrazolo."
- 21 "Republicans Put Strong Ticket in Field at Capital," 4 October 1918, *Albuquerque Morning Journal*: 1.
- 22 "Gov. Mills and O. A. Larrazolo Fires [*sic*] Volleys at Democratic Party"; see also Gonzales, "The Political Construction of Latino Nomenclatures": 166.
- 23 Republicans branded such words as treason. Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption*: 82.
- 24 Montgomery, "Becoming 'Spanish-American,'" *Journal of American Ethnic History*: 72; Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 90–91.
- 25 "Fall and Larrazolo Last Night's Results; Fall States Case," 3 October 1918, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 1, 3.



- 26 “O. A. Larrazolo, Republican Candidate for Governor, Issues Statement of Position to Voters,” 30 October 1918, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 3.
- 27 Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption*: 84–85. An earlier political scientist noted that “the shift of population [ran] strongly against areas at the base of Republican strength in the period 1900–1920.” See Holmes, *Politics in New Mexico*: 148; Córdova and Judah, “Octaviano Larrazolo”: 20. As quoted in Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 102.
- 28 Paul A. F. Walter, “Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 7 (April 1932): 102.
- 29 Córdova and Judah, “Octaviano Larrazolo”: 22–24; Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 107–108.
- 30 “Is New Mexico Quitting Us Cold?,” 30 November 1920, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 8.
- 31 For an overview of his time as governor, see Vigil, *Los Patronos*: 124–126; Walter, “Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo”: 102–103; Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 103–159.
- 32 As quoted in Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption*: 84.
- 33 In fact, Larrazolo was the last Hispanic governor of New Mexico until 1974. See Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption*: 88.
- 34 Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 169, 174.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 177–178.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 179. Larrazolo’s insistence on equal opportunity for Hispanic candidates sparked lasting change, but Anglos continued to control many offices, and the state in general remained relatively poor. Montgomery, *Spanish Redemption*: 88.
- 37 “Republicans to Put up Ticket Today,” 12 September 1928, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 2; “The G.O.P. Ticket,” 17 September 1928, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 4.
- 38 “Larrazolo Makes Eloquent Plea for Justice for Spanish Race,” 12 September 1928, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 4; “O. A. Larrazolo,” 17 September 1928, *Santa Fe New Mexican*: 4.
- 39 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; “From Adobe Hut to Senate,” 11 November 1928, *Los Angeles Times*: 10.
- 40 “From a Senator’s Diary,” 13 January 1929, *Washington Post*: M15.
- 41 *Congressional Record*, Senate, 70th Cong., 2nd sess. (17 December 1928): 733. The message was wired to Larrazolo by Bronson Cutting.
- 42 “Senate Hard Hit by ‘Flu’ Wave,” 13 January 1929, *Los Angeles Times*: 7.
- 43 *Congressional Record*, Senate, 70th Cong., 2nd sess. (15 January 1929): 1712.
- 44 “Republican Lead Rises in Senate,” 8 November 1928, *New York Times*: 4.
- 45 *Congressional Record*, Senate, 70th Cong., 2nd sess. (4 February 1929): 2738; Larrazolo, *Octaviano A. Larrazolo*: 188.



“EVERY NATIVE CITIZEN MUST
UNITE IN SUPPORTING THIS
CONSTITUTION BECAUSE IT
SECURES TO YOU PEOPLE OF
NEW MEXICO YOUR RIGHTS —
EVERY ONE OF THEM; THE RIGHTS
ALSO OF YOUR CHILDREN AND
IN SUCH A MANNER THAT THEY
CAN NEVER BE TAKEN AWAY.”

Octaviano A. Larrazolo
Santa Fe New Mexican, December 21, 1910