

Eligio (Kika) de la Garza II

1927–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1965–1997
DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

With his election to the U.S. House in 1964, Kika de la Garza broke through the barrier of Anglo-American political dominance in his South Texas district. The first Hispanic to chair a standing committee in the House since 1945, he steadfastly promoted programs to strengthen and support the country's agricultural sector throughout his 32-year tenure in Congress.¹ "There is a tremendous gap between the consumer and the fellow who rides on the tractor or who is picking the fruit," de la Garza said. "I would like to be remembered as the chairman ... [who was] a factor in legislative programs in bringing together groups that represent agriculture, the farmers and ranchers and consumers—that somehow each one would admit that he couldn't exist without the other."²

Eligio (Kika) de la Garza II was born September 22, 1927, in Mercedes, Hidalgo County, Texas, to Darío de la Garza and Elisa Villarreal. Descended from Spanish land grantees, his family had lived in South Texas since the first part of the 18th century. Kika was educated at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic School and Mission High School and served in the U.S. Navy from 1945 to 1946. He continued his education at Edinburg Junior College and the U.S. Army Field Artillery School in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. From 1950 to 1952 he served in the U.S. Army, fighting in the Korean War as a second lieutenant with the 37th Division Artillery. De la Garza earned a law degree from St. Mary's University in San Antonio after he was discharged from the army and later received an honorary Doctor of Law degree from the same institution.³ He married Lucille Alamia, and the couple raised three children, Jorge, Michael, and Angela.⁴

De la Garza began his political career after he returned from his army service in Korea, winning election to the Texas house of representatives in 1951.⁵ He served in that body from 1952 to 1964.⁶ During his tenure in the Texas

house, he was involved in the absorption of Pan American University into the University of Texas system and in the creation of the Texas Water Commission and a coastal wetlands preserve. He was also influential in establishing the nation's first state-run system of English instruction for preschool children.⁷ Additionally, de la Garza was employed during this time by a law firm, as the Texas legislature met only for a total of four months every two years.⁸

In 1964 five-term Democratic Representative Joe Kilgore of Texas announced his intent to retire from the U.S. House of Representatives. His district encompassed the southernmost portion of Texas, bordering Mexico, and most of the population was concentrated along the Rio Grande. The majority of his constituents were Hispanics who were predominantly employed in irrigation or in farming cotton and produce. In many instances, large numbers of poor Mexican-American farmhands were financially dependent on a single landowner. This large Hispanic population ensured that the district would consistently vote Democratic in national elections, but the region's political structure was dominated by the powerful, more conservative Anglo ranchers, bankers, and lawyers in Brownsville, Harlingen, McAllen, Edinburg, and Mission.⁹

As Kilgore prepared to step down, de la Garza and fellow state representative Lindsey Rodriguez prepared to secure the Democratic nomination for the open seat. An ardent supporter of President Lyndon B. Johnson, Rodriguez was significantly more liberal than de la Garza. With the backing of the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASSO), Rodriguez characterized de la Garza as disconnected from the needs of poor Hispanics in the district and as a puppet for Anglo business interests. Despite Rodriguez's attacks, de la Garza won Kilgore's endorsement and significantly outraised his opponent, cruising to a primary victory by a margin of nearly two to one. With a



solidly Democratic constituency behind him, he easily defeated his Republican opponent, veterinarian Joe Coulter from Brownsville, with 69 percent of the vote.¹⁰ De la Garza became the first Mexican American to represent the region and the second Mexican American from Texas to be elected to Congress, after Representative Henry B. González from San Antonio. De la Garza was re-elected by considerable margins throughout his tenure in the House, securing at least 70 percent of the vote in the 1966 to 1990 elections. In 1992 he received 60 percent of the vote, and in the Republican wave of 1994, he won with 59 percent.¹¹

On January 4, 1965, Eligio de la Garza became a Member of the 89th Congress (1965–1967). He was given a seat on the Agriculture Committee, where he served for the rest of his congressional career. He sat on the Merchant, Marine and Fisheries Committee during the 92nd to the 96th Congresses (1971–1981) and on the International Relations Committee during the 95th Congress (1977–1979).¹²

De la Garza's primary focus was agriculture, and he used his seat on the Agriculture Committee to further the interests of his rural constituency. In the 1960s the salinity of the Rio Grande was a matter of great importance to his district, as crops were being destroyed as a result of irrigation drainage in Mexico that increased the level of salt in the lower portion of the river. De la Garza introduced H.R. 11880, which divided the responsibility for maintaining the river between the two countries. "This is the type of legislation, Mr. Speaker, that I favor," he said on the House Floor shortly before its passage. "Where two nations share jointly the costs of a project, and where the local people also share. This is truly democracy at work; this is truly the good neighbor policy at work."¹³ In the 90th Congress (1967–1969), de la Garza was named chairman of the Agriculture Committee's Departmental Operations Subcommittee, which he led through the 96th Congress (1979–1981).¹⁴ De la Garza worked throughout his career to pass legislation that would benefit sugar and cotton farmers, such as the Sugar Act Amendments of 1971 and the Emergency Agricultural Act of 1978, which included an amendment authored by de la Garza

to raise rates for cotton loans from 44 to 48 cents.¹⁵ He successfully amended the Food and Agricultural Act of 1977 to establish a support program for sugar prices that was similar to the government's support program for the prices of commodities such as milk and honey.¹⁶ Speaking in support of the amendment on the House Floor, he said, "[The] situation is this: The sugar industry in the United States is in very serious, drastic circumstances because of the chaotic situation that the sugar industry finds itself in throughout the world ... this is a small attempt to assist the American producer to just hold his head above water."¹⁷

De la Garza also worked to further the influence and visibility of Hispanic Americans in Congress. In 1976 he joined with Herman Badillo of New York, Henry B. González of Texas, Edward R. Roybal of California, and Puerto Rican Resident Commissioner Baltasar Corrada del Río to form the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC). De la Garza served as chairman of the caucus from 1989 to 1991, when the Hispanic community was becoming more politically diverse. While Hispanics had traditionally been affiliated with the Democratic Party in the 20th century, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida and Delegate Ben Blaz of Guam were elected as Republicans in the 1980s. "The fact is the Hispanic community politically is a spectrum from right to left, like any other community," de la Garza said. He suggested that the Hispanic community could operate like a European parliamentary system, with distinct divergent blocs forming coalitions on core issues. In the end, "jobs are jobs, and homes are homes, and schools are schools," he said.¹⁸ However, like fellow Texan Henry B. González, de la Garza did not seek membership in the CHC to legislate solely for the Hispanic community. "There are people here in Washington, for example, who make a living of ethnic legislation," de la Garza said. "But [if] a fellow doesn't have a job, I try to get him a job whether his name is González or Smith."¹⁹ De la Garza and González had also declined to attend the 1971 Brown Power Meeting that predated the CHC because they believed isolating "Hispanic" issues was an ineffective way to secure Latino rights and equality.²⁰ De la Garza's votes for key civil rights legislation evidenced

his egalitarianism; he voted in favor of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (and its extensions in 1970 and 1975), the Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1967, and the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987.²¹

At the opening of the 97th Congress (1981–1983), Agriculture Chairman Thomas Foley of Washington stepped down to serve as Democratic Whip, and de la Garza was the expected successor. Many younger Democrats on the committee, including subcommittee chairmen, supported Ed Jones of Tennessee, viewing de la Garza as an “autocratic hatchetman for Foley” who would not defer to the subcommittees. But the Democratic Caucus rejected the effort to scuttle de la Garza in a vote of 110 to 92.²² “Be calm. Be courteous,” Foley counseled de la Garza as the Texan prepared to accept the Agriculture Committee gavel.²³ Throughout his tenure as chairman, de la Garza sought to foster a conciliatory and collaborative environment among the committee members. He allowed subcommittees considerable latitude to craft legislation within their specialties, often sitting in on hearings to educate himself on the issues. “[H]e has been completely fair and balanced in handling the committee,” commented Representative Jim Weaver of Oregon, who chaired the Forests, Family Farms, and Energy Subcommittee.²⁴

Chairman de la Garza was tested early on when the Agriculture Committee crafted the 1981 farm legislation. Constrained by budgetary caps, and by a presidential veto if Congress exceeded the caps, de la Garza was at the center of intense negotiations, particularly regarding price support.²⁵ After the House passed a \$16.2 billion measure by a 192 to 160 vote, the House and Senate struggled to close the \$6 billion divide between their proposals.²⁶ “This is perhaps one of the most difficult moments I have had in my legislative career, which is some 28 years,” de la Garza lamented as he introduced the final \$11 billion omnibus bill that had been crafted through conference committee.²⁷ The legislation passed the House 205 to 203.²⁸ De la Garza also effectively used his chairmanship to form coalitions opposing cuts in agricultural spending proposed by the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations. De la Garza defeated two such measures that were being

considered as part of the 1990 Food and Agricultural Resources Act; one barred subsidies to farmers earning more than \$100,000 annually, and the other reduced the price support per pound of sugar by 2 cents. Likening such measures to “sending a mechanic who works on diesels to do brain surgery,” he proclaimed that supporting agriculture was necessary for American prosperity.²⁹ On the House Floor, de la Garza declared, “So the bottom line is, it is jobs in the United States of America, farmers in the United States of America.... You cannot cut it anymore. You cannot hide it anymore. It is jobs, jobs, jobs in the USA.”³⁰

De la Garza was also on the front lines crafting multibillion-dollar disaster relief legislation. By July 1988, 43 percent of the country was suffering from one of the worst droughts in the nation’s history. As co-chairman of the Congressional Drought Relief Task Force, de la Garza urged Congress to provide relief. “We want to give these farmers hope,” he said.³¹ He then guided through the chamber a \$3.9 billion relief bill, stressing the positive effects of the legislation. “We provide help for the farmer now, because by helping him, we help all of our rural citizens. There is an interdependence between the farmer, the agri-businessman and all others who go to make up the fabric of rural America,” he said.³²

De la Garza’s efforts to protect the agriculture industry extended to the debates on immigration reform that took place in the 1980s. An initial immigration reform package faltered in 1983, largely because of the Hispanic Caucus’s influence. When the Immigration Control and Legalization Amendments Act of 1986 (H.R. 3810) was brought to the House Floor, de la Garza sponsored an amendment to prohibit immigration officials from entering agricultural operations without a search warrant or the owner’s consent.³³ “[Fourth Amendment] constitutional protections are applicable to persons conducting businesses in office buildings and it is not apparent why persons conducting businesses in fields are less deserving of this basic constitutional benefit,” de la Garza said when he introduced his amendment. “This amendment is particularly important ... because it will ensure that farming operations will not be disrupted by broad scale,

random raids. Work stoppages are very costly to the farmer, especially when the crops need harvesting in a timely manner.³⁴ The amendment was adopted by a 221 to 170 vote.³⁵ De la Garza voted against the final bill, however.

In the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), de la Garza was at the center of efforts by the William J. (Bill) Clinton administration to reorganize the federal government, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Federal Crop Insurance Group. While he supported the administration's objectives, de la Garza opposed efforts to reduce the federal deficit solely by cutting agriculture. Yet he acknowledged that the complexity of the department and its agencies were leading to severe inefficiencies. "People have to wait for months to get the department to say yea or nay. Somehow there appears to be a breakdown in communications," he said. De la Garza backed the administration's proposals to reduce employment, close or consolidate field offices, and merge department agencies, believing it was vital "to consolidate, to streamline, and to make, in 1994, the Department of Agriculture [that] President Lincoln wanted it to be in 1862."³⁶

In 1993 de la Garza lobbied forcefully for passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), arguing that the trade deal would increase the nation's agricultural trade surplus. "Open access to the Mexican market will lock in the export gains we have won and allow trade growth to continue," he argued. "NAFTA is in the best economic interests of most family farmers here in the United States and for the vast majority of our agriculture-related businesses."³⁷ While the majority of Hispanics from the Southwest supported the trade agreement, Members of Congress representing Puerto Rico, Cuban-American constituencies, and some Mexican-American constituencies opposed the agreement for economic and foreign policy reasons. Florida Representatives Lincoln Diaz-Balart and Ros-Lehtinen, for example, who were of Cuban descent, opposed the agreement because they objected to Mexico's cordial relationship with the Fidel Castro regime in Cuba. Representative Robert Menendez of New Jersey, who was also of Cuban descent, opposed the agreement because he believed it did nothing to protect American jobs and would

encourage companies to invest outside the United States.³⁸

The 1995 shift in the House majority ended de la Garza's 14-year chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee—the second longest in that panel's history.³⁹ In the 104th Congress (1995–1997) he served as the ranking Democrat on the committee. While in the minority, de la Garza opposed Republican efforts to transition the nation's agricultural business to a market-driven industry by ending the federal government's 60-year-old subsidy program. The proposal sought to cut \$13.4 billion in farm subsidies and to free producers to choose their own crops. However, de la Garza and many of his fellow Democrats, as well as farm-state Republicans, were apprehensive about how the plan would affect farmers.⁴⁰ "Farmers in every region of this country have very grave concerns" about this "sudden and dramatic abandonment by the government of its role in sharing the farmers' risk," de la Garza cautioned.⁴¹ Although he opposed the portion of the Republican welfare reform plan that would cut billions from the food stamp program, he was not wholly opposed to Republican initiatives. Viewed in the House as a conservative lawmaker, de la Garza frequently aligned himself with conservative Democrats and Republicans. He introduced a constitutional amendment for a balanced budget in every Congress since his election, except for the 98th (1983–1985), and he introduced a constitutional amendment to allow prayer in schools in every Congress since the 90th (1967–1969).⁴² While no Democratic Congress was willing to pursue these amendments, Republicans made the balanced budget amendment a pillar of their agenda. "I've always been one to say that sometimes the impossible just takes a little longer," de la Garza remarked.⁴³

On December 18, 1995, de la Garza announced his intent to retire from the House at the close of the 104th Congress in January 1997, expressing his desire to continue performing public service in the private sector. "I feel I can continue outside of elective office to make a contribution," he said. "There are many more things I would like to do and I want to do them while I am in good health and young enough."⁴⁴ Referred to as "a Secretary of State of Agriculture," de la Garza demonstrated a commitment to American

agriculture that was recognized on the House Floor by his colleagues' remarks celebrating his retirement.⁴⁵ In his honor, the USDA created the Kika de la Garza fellowship and designated its Subtropical Agricultural Research Center the Kika de la Garza Subtropical Agricultural Research Center. De la Garza also received the Texas Agricultural Lifetime Achievement Award.⁴⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "Eligio (Kika) de la Garza II," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

Ralph Nader Congress Project. *Citizens Look at Congress: Eligio de la Garza, Democratic Representative from Texas* (Washington, D.C.: Grossman Publishers, 1972).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Texas State Library and Archives Commission (Austin). *Papers*: Texas Governor Allan Shivers Records, 1946–1964, 92 cubic feet. Persons represented include Eligio de la Garza.

The University of Texas–Pan American Library (Edinburg). *Papers*: 1965–1997, 656 linear feet. The papers in the Eligio "Kika" de la Garza collection are arranged chronologically in subgroups. The items in each subgroup are generally arranged in the order they were received by the repository.

NOTES

- 1 Carmen Enciso and Tracy North, eds., *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–1995* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996): 30. Representative Antonio M. Fernández chaired the Committee on Memorials in the 79th Congress (1945–1947).
- 2 Ward Sinclair, "That Fresh Breeze Blowing through Congress Is Named Kika," 27 December 1983, *Washington Post*: A7.
- 3 Matt Meier, *Mexican American Biographies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988): 87; Enciso and North, *Hispanic Americans in Congress*: 29–30; interview with Eligio (Kika) de la Garza by Oscar J. Martinez, 1975, "Interview no. 208," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas—El Paso: 1, 14.
- 4 Ben Guttery, *Representing Texas: A Comprehensive History of U.S. and Confederate Senators and Representatives from Texas* (n.p., 2008): 54.
- 5 Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Citizens Look at Congress: Eligio de la Garza, Democratic Representative from Texas* (Washington, D.C.: Grossman Publishers, 1972); interview with Eligio (Kika) de la Garza by Oscar J. Martinez, 1975, "Interview no. 208," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas—El Paso.
- 6 For more information on de la Garza's activities in the Texas house, see Legislative Reference Library of Texas, "Eligio de la Garza," <http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/legeLeaders/index.cfm> (accessed 11 April 2011); Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Eligio de la Garza*.
- 7 Enciso and North, *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–1995*: 30.
- 8 Ralph Nader Congress Project, *Eligio de la Garza*.
- 9 *Almanac of American Politics, 1972* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal, Inc., 1971): 806; *Almanac of American Politics, 1974* (Washington, D.C.: National Journal, Inc., 1973): 995–996. For more information on the composition of Representative de la Garza's district, see David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans: In the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987): 79–82.
- 10 Robert E. Ford, "Texas Holds Runoff Today on Nominees," 6 June 1964, *Washington Post*: A6; "Texas Voters Decide Runoff Choices Today," 6 June 1964, *Los Angeles Times*: 6; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 11 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 12 Garrison Nelson, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 669.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 89th Cong., 2nd sess. (1 September 1966): 21658.
- 14 Hearing before the House Committee on Agriculture, *Agricultural Legislation in the 90th Congress*, 90th Cong., 2nd sess. (9 November 1968): iv; *Congressional Directory, 92nd–96th Congresses* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office). The name of this subcommittee varied during this period, as follows: Departmental Operations (90th–91st Congresses), Department Operations (92nd–93rd Congresses), Department Operations, Investigations and Oversight (94th Congress), and Department Investigations, Oversight, and Research (95th–96th Congresses).
- 15 *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (4 October 1971): 34807–34809; *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (12 April 1978): 9909; *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (4 May 1978): 12613.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (22 July 1977): 24560.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 24559–24560.
- 18 Dan Carney, "Untitled," 21 September 1989, States News Service.
- 19 Interview with Eligio (Kika) de la Garza by Oscar J. Martinez, 1975, "Interview no. 208," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas—El Paso.



- 20 Thomas J. Foley, "'Brown Power' Parley Opens This Weekend," 22 October 1971, *Los Angeles Times*: A18.
- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 89th Cong., 1st sess. (9 July 1965): 16285; *Congressional Record*, House, 91st Cong., 2nd sess. (17 June 1970): 20199; *Congressional Record*, House, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (4 June 1975): 16917; *Congressional Record*, House, 90th Cong., 1st sess. (15 December 1967): 37174; *Congressional Record*, House, 100th Cong., 2nd sess. (22 March 1988): 4791.
- 22 Sinclair, "That Fresh Breeze Blowing through Congress Is Named Kika."
- 23 Whitney L. Jackson, "Out of Office, Still a Public Servant," 31 May 2001, *Roll Call*: 22.
- 24 Sinclair, "That Fresh Breeze Blowing through Congress Is Named Kika."
- 25 Seth King, "No One Seems Satisfied with the New Farm Bill," 19 December 1981, *New York Times*: 16.
- 26 Ward Sinclair, "House, over White House Objections, Votes Expensive Four Year Farm Bill," 23 October 1981, *Washington Post*: A12.
- 27 *Congressional Record*, House, 97th Cong., 2nd sess. (16 December 1981): 31812.
- 28 Ward Sinclair, "Farm Bill Squeaks through House by 205 to 203," 17 December 1981, *Washington Post*: A5.
- 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 2nd sess. (25 July 1990): 19216.
- 30 *Congressional Record*, House, 101st Cong., 2nd sess. (24 July 1990): 18848.
- 31 Terry Atlas, "Congress Vows Farm Drought Relief," 23 June 1988, *Chicago Tribune*: 11.
- 32 Wendy Zentz, "Democrats Praise Drought Relief Bill," 13 August 1988, United Press International.
- 33 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong. 2nd sess. (9 October 1986): 30054–30055.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 30055.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 30059.
- 36 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (28 September 1994): 26293; *CQ Almanac*, 103rd Congress, 2nd Session, vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1995): 191.
- 37 Lisa Richwine, "De La Garza Announces Formation of 'Ag for NAFTA,'" 26 July 1993, States News Service; Lisa Richwine, "De La Garza Helping Secure Last Votes for NAFTA," 16 November 1993, States News Service.
- 38 *Congressional Record*, House, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (16 November 1993): 29209.
- 39 Representative Harold Cooley of North Carolina chaired the Agriculture Committee for 16 years, from 1949 to 1953 and from 1955 to 1967. *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, "Harold Dunbar Cooley," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.
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- 41 Anne Hazard, "House Begins Historic Farm Bill Debate," 28 February 1996, States News Service.
- 42 All the entries for these bills proposing constitutional amendments can be found in the *Congressional Record*, Index, 89th–104th Cong.
- 43 Lisa Richwine, "Ortiz, de la Garza Adjust to Life in the Minority Party," 4 January 1995, States News Service.
- 44 "Rep. de la Garza Won't Run Again," 18 December 1995, United Press International.
- 45 *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (28 February 1996): 3102.
- 46 E. Kika de la Garza Fellowship Program, USDA, www.hsi.usda.gov, (accessed September 16, 2011); Rod Santa Ana III, "Former Congressman Honored for Lifetime Service to Agriculture," *The Monitor*, www.themonitor.com (accessed 22 September 2011); Kika de la Garza Subtropical Agricultural Research Center, Weslaco, Texas, USDA, www.ars.usda.gov (accessed 24 October 2011).



“THE BIGGEST WEAPON KIKA HAS ARE THE LETTERS HE SENDS OUT TO PEOPLE ... EVERY KID WHO’S GOING TO GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL GETS A LETTER FROM KIKA.... THEY GO THROUGH ALL THE AREA NEWSPAPERS TO SEE WHO’S DIED, AND THEY SEND A LETTER OF CONDOLENCE. EVERY TIME SOMEBODY GETS A SPECIAL AWARD OR SERVICE MEDAL, KIKA SENDS THE PARENTS A LETTER ... [RECIPIENTS] ARE VERY, VERY PROUD OF THE LETTERS.”

A constituent of Eligio (Kika) de la Garza II,
Ralph Nader Congress Project, 1972