

# **Dennis Chávez**

## **The First Hispanic US Senator**



**Cissie Coy**

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Spanish translation by Gabriela Baeza Ventura



PIÑATA BOOKS  
ARTE PÚBLICO PRESS  
HOUSTON, TEXAS

*Dennis Chávez: The First Hispanic US Senator* is funded in part through a grant from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance. We are grateful for their support.

*Piñata Books are full of surprises!*

Piñata Books  
An imprint of  
Arte Público Press  
University of Houston  
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg 19, Rm 100  
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Victoria Castillo  
Photos courtesy of Cissie Coy

Names: Coy, Cissie, author. | Ventura, Gabriela Baeza, translator.

Title: Dennis Chávez : the first Hispanic US senator = Dennis Chávez, el primer senador hispano de los Estados Unidos / by / por Cissie Coy ; Spanish translation by / traducción al español de Gabriela Baeza Ventura.

Other titles: Dennis Chávez, the first Hispanic US senator | Dennis Chávez, el primer senador hispano de los Estados Unidos

Description: Houston, TX : Piñata Books, an imprint of Arte Público Press, [2017] | today."—Provided by publisher. | Audience: Grades 4-6. | Audience: Ages 8-12.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017027820 | ISBN 9781558858527 (alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781518504419 (kindle) | ISBN 9781518504426 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Chavez, Dennis, 1888-1962. | Legislators—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. | Hispanic American politicians—Biography—Juvenile literature. | United States. Congress. Senate—Biography—Juvenile literature. | Politicians—New Mexico—Biography—Juvenile literature. | United States—Race relations—History—20th century—Juvenile literature. | New Mexico—Politics and government—Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC E748.C523 C69 2017 | DDC 328.73/092 [B]—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017027820>

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*Dennis Chávez: The First Hispanic US Senator* © 2017 by Cissie Coy

Printed in the United States of America  
September 2017–October 2017  
Versa Press, Inc., East Peoria, IL  
5 4 3 2 1

To my sister Imelda and my husband Wayne,  
with gratitude for joy on my journey.



## ❧ Chapter One ❧

Dennis Chávez was the first American-born Hispanic to serve in the US Senate. When he went to Washington, DC in 1935, he stood out as the only minority in the Senate. There was no diversity in that powerful place. There were no other Hispanics, no African Americans, no Native Americans and no Asian Americans. Just Dennis Chávez, speaking for all those people who were left out.

He is an American hero. His story is inspirational and has good lessons for people of all ages. It's an adventure story that stretches from the old Wild West of Indians and cowboys to the jet age.

An ancestor of Dennis Chávez was among the first Spanish explorers to come to New Mexico in 1598. To understand how long ago that was, remember that the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts in 1620. Pedro Durán y Chávez marched into New Mexico 22 years earlier in 1598.

Dennis was born on April 8, 1888 in the little farming community of Los Chávez. Located almost in the middle of what was then the territory of New Mexico, the small village may have been named for a distant relative of the Chávez family. David and Paz Chávez gave their second child the name Dionisio. That was later translated to Dennis in English. At the time of his birth, large parts of land in the West belonged to the United States but were not states. Then in 1912, New Mexico became a state. That meant the people living there could elect two senators and a congressman to the US Congress and take a place on the national stage.

Dennis' childhood home had dirt floors and no indoor plumbing. He spoke only Spanish as a child. He never went to high school or college. However, he went on to graduate from Georgetown Law School in Washington, DC and represented New Mexico in the US Senate for 27 years. Two things inspired him: first, love of family and, second, a deep faith in God. He had a positive outlook on life. Even as a little boy he was optimistic. And from his early days, he was hard working and ambitious. He read everything he could find about the American system of government. It was the best system in the world, he concluded.

When Dennis was born, most people living in the territory of New Mexico were native americans or descendants of early Spanish and mestizo settlers. Mestizos were the children that Spaniards and Native Americans had together. The Native Americans, of course, had lived on the land long before the first Europeans arrived. That's why many like to be called Native Americans instead of Indians.

The Spanish and mestizo settlers had marched north 1,000 miles from the mining center of Zacatecas, in what was then called the New Spain (later Mexico). They drove livestock and carried supplies over a vast wilderness with little water or food to make New Mexico their new home. Generation after generation of settlers and their children spoke only Spanish. They were different from the people in the United States because they lived in a territory that was a separate country and had a different language and heritage. New Mexico was far from the east and west coasts of the continent and from Mexico City, which allowed New Mexicans to develop their own special culture. Their children and grandchildren lived isolated from other communities. There was little travel outside the territory. Distances were too great, mountains and deserts too hard to cross and the people too

poor to take such challenging trips. Life in general on the frontier was hard.

Dennis and his family lived in a small house made of adobe bricks (clay and sand mixed with water and hardened and shaped into bricks). As a boy, a barefoot Dennis tended his father's crops and sheep.

When he was seven, he and his family moved a few miles to New Mexico's largest city: Albuquerque. It had schools that taught English. Learning English opened the door into a wider world for young Dennis. And he found another treasure in his new hometown: a public library where he could read and read.

Dennis took the opportunities he found in his new life. He learned English, studied hard in school and added to his education by reading. He also followed his conscience in some early decisions.

In a long career in the Senate, Dennis took positions that were not popular. He was a champion of civil rights for all Americans. He spoke out against discrimination at a time when it was legal to keep people of color separate from white people. Minorities didn't have the same legal rights as white citizens.

Laws since that time have made discrimination illegal. These laws giving people of color equal rights came about because of people like Dennis Chávez.

He spoke out against bullies who ruined many folks' reputations by saying they were un-American. The bullies had their own idea of what un-American meant and they didn't offer evidence of what they said. Many senators and others were afraid of these bullies, but Dennis was not. He made speeches and condemned them.

Dennis Chávez always fought for the underdog. He himself was a person of color and he suffered life-long discrimination. Despite this, he never became bitter.

"I have been fighting for the so-called underprivileged all my days," he said more than once, "because I was one of them."

New Mexico is called "The Land of Enchantment." That refers to the sunny, warm climate and the glorious mountains and deserts. For Chávez, it also meant endless opportunities. Despite many hardships as a young person, he had a long, successful life helping others. For him, his birthplace was enchanted.