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## Ruben S. Ayala dies at 89; known as a maverick state senator

The Chino Democrat favored gun control and had a pro-labor voting record but opposed abortion and blocked the appointment of actress Jane Fonda to a state arts council.



Ruben S. Ayala served in the state Senate for more than two decades. (California State Legislature / August 1, 1997)

By Elaine Woo, Los Angeles Times

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Former state Sen. Ruben S. Ayala, a scrappy Democrat from Chino who fought for a controversial water project and **helped create the California Conservation Corps** during a legislative career that ran for 24 years until term limits forced him out, died of natural causes Wednesday in Ontario. He was 89.

His death was confirmed by his son Maurice.

After two decades in local government, Ayala was elected to the Senate in 1974, representing a district that encompassed the western San Bernardino County cities of Ontario, Fontana, Rialto, Colton and Chino in addition to Pomona in Los Angeles County.

He developed a reputation as a maverick who was more conservative than most Democrats and more liberal than most Republicans. He favored gun control and had a pro-labor voting record but opposed abortion and blocked the appointment of actress Jane Fonda to a state arts council.

**He was a principal co-author of the bill that created the California Conservation Corps, which was signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown in 1976 and puts youths to work in environmental conservation.**

A powerful voice in state water policy as chairman of the Senate Agriculture and Water Resources Committee, he also championed legislation to create a peripheral canal that would have delivered water from the northern to the southern half of the state. The proposal was roundly defeated by voters in 1982.

Although he was the first Mexican American elected to the Senate in 60 years, he was often criticized by Latino activists for not using his clout to advance their causes and, after more Latinos took office in Sacramento, he refused to join their caucus.

"I'm of Mexican descent and I'm proud of it," he once told the Riverside Press-Enterprise, "but I don't wear it on my sleeve.... I don't want to be segregated."

The grandson of Mexican immigrants, Ayala was born in Chino on March 6, 1922, and grew up with segregation. He remembered seeing "white trade only" signs in downtown Chino and attended a segregated elementary school.

His mother died when he was a young boy, and his father dug wells to support Ayala and five siblings. Ayala helped out by shining shoes and working in the beet fields now occupied by the state prison in Chino. He credited his father with teaching him the value of hard work, education and rising above the prejudices that prevented the elder Ayala from buying property in white neighborhoods.

After graduating from Chino High School, he attended Pomona Junior College, now Mt. San Antonio College. During World War II he saw combat in the Pacific with the Marines. Returning to Chino after the war, he worked as a television repairman and later in the insurance business.

Raising three sons with his wife, Irene, he joined the local PTA and began his political ascent. He won a seat on the Chino school board in 1955 and the Chino City Council in 1962; two years later, he became Chino's first elected mayor. In 1966 he joined the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors.

In 1972, he suffered his only political defeat when he lost a primary run for a congressional seat won by Democratic Rep. George E. Brown Jr. Two years later, Ayala became a state senator when he beat then-Assemblyman Jerry Lewis, a San Bernardino Republican.

The legislator survived his toughest reelection challenge in 1990, when he had to raise nearly \$1 million to fend off a challenge from Assemblyman Charles W. Bader, a Pomona Republican. Voters statewide approved term limits that year, which eventually brought an end to Ayala's tenure, in 1998.

Ayala is survived by his sons, Ruben Jr., Maurice and Gary; three grandchildren; and a great-grandchild.

Services are being planned for later this month.