

GOP Wins Los Angeles by a Landslide

By Susan H. Pinkus

Last April's Los Angeles mayoral election may have been a prelude to the changing political power in the city—and possibly in the state of California. In the 1997 election, 15% of the ballots were cast by Latinos, a dramatic rise from the 1993 mayoral primary when 8% of the voters were Latino and in the 1993 mayoral runoff when 10% of the voters were of that ethnic group, according to *Los Angeles Times* exit polls. Although 15% is still disproportionately lower than the Latino share of the adult population (at 34%), it represents a substantial increase in Latinos who voted for mayor this year. More significantly, though, Latinos surpassed blacks in voting for the first time in city-wide elections. In the 1993 mayoral primary, blacks were 18% of the electorate, slightly more than their share of the adult population (at 13%), but their portion of the electorate slipped to 12% in the 1993 runoff and remained virtually unchanged at 13% in this past election.

“ Three out of five Latinos voted for [Republican incumbent Richard] Riordan, according to the recent LAT exit poll, reversing their largely Democratic vote in the 1993 mayor's race. ”

Factors that Led Latinos to the Polls

One reason for the rise in Latino voting this year was Proposition BB, a school bond ballot initiative that would impact Latino families. This measure would provide \$2.4 billion for public school repairs and construction. There was a major effort by the teachers' union, principals, and teachers themselves to get parents to the polls. Since Latinos comprise about 70% of the Los Angeles Unified School District student population, many Latinos who usually don't vote did so this time. Proposition BB passed 70%-30%. LAT exit poll data showed that Latinos overwhelmingly voted for the school bond initiative (82%)—more so, in fact, than any other racial or ethnic group. Blacks (76%) easily gave the measure the two-thirds majority needed to enact the proposition; whites just barely passed it (67%) while 63% of Asians voted for it. When asked what motivated them to vote in this election, the top mention cited by Latinos was education (53%). No other racial or ethnic group mentioned this issue more than Latinos who have realized that the best way for their children to better their lives is through education.

Another reason for the increase in Latino turnout was a “get out the vote” campaign among Latino community organizations and media (i.e., *La Opinion* newspaper and KMEX television station). Black groups, incidently, have been waging these campaigns for years and understand the power of the vote.

Additionally, this rise in Latino voting is at least in part a legacy of Proposition 187, the 1994 initiative which sought to restrict illegal immigrants' access to public services. Fearing immigrant bashing and the effects of Proposition 187, more Latinos are becoming citizens and these newer citizens tend to vote. They are more likely to become Democrats because Republicans have pressed for anti-immigrant measures. The GOP rhetoric (including favoring Propositions 187 and 209, which sought to eliminate affirmative action programs in state run programs and universities) has mobilized this group to vote.

However, the increase in Latino voter registration wasn't felt until recently. For instance, 8% of voters were Latinos in 1994, compared to 10% in 1996 and the more recent 15% in this year's mayoral election. “Latinos are the largest minority and they will become a significant player as their share of the electorate increases in the city and the state,” says political analyst Sherry Bebitch Jeffe.

The Making of a Republican Landslide on Democratic Turf

In some ways the story of the election was one of strange bedfellows. In Los Angeles, Democrats outnumber Republicans two to one. Yet, in the 1997 mayoral race between incumbent Richard Riordan, a Republican, and Democrat Tom Hayden, the mayor received a landslide victory (61%-34%) with broad-based support. He kept his strong Republican following and formed a new coalition of Jews, Latinos, the economically affluent, Westsiders, and San Fernando Valley residents. He also won among almost every other group (including whites, Asians, the economically downscaled, moderates, conservatives, men, and women). Three out of five Latinos voted for Riordan, according to the LAT exit poll, reversing their largely Democratic vote in the 1993 mayor's race.

What happened in those four years to turn Latinos into Riordan voters? Although Riordan is a Republican, he is considered a moderate. He was, for example, endorsed by Richard Alatorre, a city councilman and a staunch Riordan ally, and he has not been at the forefront of anti-immigrant measures. Local Latino leaders support Riordan and have recognized his work in the Latino community. These factors boosted his favorability among this group.

Moreover, residents feel better about the city, crime is down, and jobs are available. A majority of Los Angeles voters said that things in the city

1997 Los Angeles Mayoral Results

	Riordan	Hayden	Other		Riordan	Hayden	Other
Total	61%	34%	5%	Income			
				Less than \$20,000	53%	42%	5%
Gender				\$20,000-\$39,999	54	41	5
Men	62	33	5	\$40,000-\$59,999	62	34	4
Women	59	38	3	\$60,000-\$74,999	58	37	5
				\$75,000 or more	71	27	2
Age				Ideology			
18-24	49	45	6	Liberal	33	62	5
25-39	55	40	5	Middle	66	30	4
40-64	60	37	3	Conservative	81	16	3
65+	70	26	4	Party ID			
Ethnicity				Democrat	47	49	4
White	71	26	3	Independent	58	34	8
Black	19	75	6	Republican	91	7	2
Latino	60	33	7				
Asian	62	35	3				

Source: Exit poll by the *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1997.

were going well, a turnaround from the 1993 election when Los Angeles was in a recession, businesses were leaving the city, and unemployment was high. Riordan won in 1993 (54%-46%) by campaigning that he wasn't a habitual politician, that he would bring business into the city (since he was a businessman), and that he wasn't beholden to special interests (since he didn't take campaign contributions).

Race Relations Remain a Touchy Issue

When asked why they chose their candidate last April, Riordan voters mentioned his emphasis on improving public safety, his record as mayor, and his reputation as pro business. He was also perceived as interested in education. Voters felt that the adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" applied. Riordan is well liked in the city—two-thirds of those polled on election day approved of his handling of his job although blacks disapproved of him. And two-thirds had a favorable impression of him except, again, for blacks. On the other hand, the overall electorate was split in their feelings about Tom Hayden.

Hayden, to most voters, was not a viable candidate. He came with too much baggage including past protests against the Vietnam war and a liberal record. Surprisingly, Democrats, his core constituency, were virtually split in their vote. Hayden's support came mostly from liberals (62%) and blacks (75%). In fact, he courted the black vote, going into black neighborhoods and talking one-on-one with voters. He portrayed Riordan as a mayor who doesn't serve the needs of all groups in the city.

And that remains a sore spot for Riordan. Not all is rosy in the City of Angels. There is racial polarization and Riordan is not perceived as accessible to all ethnic and racial groups. He needs to consider how he and his administration can improve race relations. In *LAT* pre-election surveys and in the April mayoral exit poll, blacks were the only racial group that did not give Riordan majority support. One reason for this was the decision not to renew Police Chief Willie Williams' contract (Williams is black). Even among all voters, Riordan got low marks on serving the needs of all the people and on race relations over the last four years. In the *LAT* exit poll, more than half of Hayden's voters (who were predominantly black) said that race relations have gotten worse, 9% better, and 40% the same. Similarly, among Riordan voters, 31% said worse, 21% better, and 48% the same. Eight percent of all voters cited race relations as the most important issue in deciding how to vote (17% of Hayden voters and just 3% of Riordan's voters).

Los Angeles has become a truly multicultural melting pot of many racial and ethnic groups. If all minorities are taken together, they constitute a majority. The city's adult racial and ethnic group breakdown is whites at 42%, Latinos at 34%, blacks at 13%, and Asians at 10%. Los Angeles has become a complex city with many different groups vying for attention and power. It will be interesting to see how this plays out in the 1998 California governor's election and in other elections to come.



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