

**The Political Representation of Latinos in Washington**

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## **Introduction**

The focus of my research is the political representation of Latinos in Washington. The main question my research seeks to answer is; What are the main causes of the discrepancy between Washington's growing Latino population and the level of Latino representatives on city councils around the state? In a true democracy, political representatives reflect the constituency of the people they represent. True representation is manifested in policy decisions, as implemented by representatives, that match the desires of the general public. The basis of this study is derived from cities around Washington State, in which Latinos comprise a much larger percent of the population than their political representation would suggest. In answering my main research question I employ the well documented necessity for minority racial groups to gain political representation in the pursuit of true democracy. The historical struggle to obtain this democratic goal continues today, and my research provides information about the successes and failures of localities in Washington State. The methodology of this project includes the collection of demographic data of cities around the state, an examination of specific city council elections, interviews of politicians and voters, and an attempt to create conclusions and policy suggestions as based in the scholarly texts that have informed my understanding of the issue at hand. Especially important to my comprehension and inspiration for the project was the assistance of Joaquin Avila, assistant professor of Law at Seattle University School of Law. Professor Avila's previous work and expertise was central to creating the direction that my project was to take and the conclusions it has produced. Those conclusions include that: 1) the at-large elections in Sunnyside disadvantage the Latino population as voting patterns are related to racially polarized voting. 2) a. Latinos in Sunnyside are registered to vote, and partake in the act of voting at a much lower rate than non-Latinos in Sunnyside, b. there is a lack of social programming aimed at encouraging voter participation, and education in Sunnyside. As a result, I suggest reexamining the general election format in Sunnyside as well as actively pursuing voter participation through more voter mobilization programming that is focused on voter education and encouragement.

## **Scholarly Literature Discussion**

In order to advance conclusions about racially polarized voting and the political marginalization that general elections can cause minority populations, it is necessary to examine both the Voting Rights Act as amended in 1982 and the *Case of Gomez V. City of Wastonville*, 863 F.d2 1407 (9<sup>th</sup> circuit 1998).

The voting rights acts of 1957, 1960, 1964 and 1965 were all created with the intention of removing the barriers to voting and representation for African Americans. More recently, America's Latino population has been recognized as a politically marginalized group. An important example can be drawn from the connection between the amendments of the Voting rights act in 1982 and the *Gomez V. City of Watsonville* case.

The aspects of the 1982 Voting Rights Act amendments that are essential to the conclusions advanced by this study are summarized by Texas University School of Law Assistant Professor Samuel Issacharoff. In, *Polarized Voting and the Political Process: The Transformation of Voting Rights Jurisprudence*. Issacharoff purports the importance of voting rights litigation as supported by the Voting rights act. He discusses the history of voting rights litigation and its continuing transformation by citing its historical necessity. Issacharoff focuses on the amended Voting Rights Act and its importance as an instrument to combating electoral systems that result in majority populations receiving disproportionate amounts of political power, which in turn, leads to a similarly disproportionate amount of access to the goods and services allocated by the legislative process. He writes, “The paradigmatic claim of minority vote dilution under the amended Voting Rights Act would now incorporate three basic features: (1) structural obstacles to the electoral success of minorities, such as at-large elections; (2) behavioral patterns that interact with the social obstacles to exaggerate the political power of the majority- - i.e., racially polarized voting; and (3) a resulting under representation or even complete lack of representation of the minority community relative to its proportion of the population.”<sup>1</sup> The mentioned amendments, in conjunction with this summarization, are in direct connection with my main research question and the reasoning behind my case study of Sunnyside. Sunnyside’s city council elections are conducted in the at-large format and have resulted in a grave under representation of the Latino community on its city council relative to its proportion of the population. The data collected from my research provides evidence of racially polarized voting, hence my suggestion that as forwarded by the 1982 amendment of the Voting Rights Act, the general elections format in Sunnyside should be re-examined.

This re-examination would likely result in a restructuring of city council elections in Sunnyside. The current at-large election format is resulting in a grave under-representation of Latinos. A possible solution would be to change the at-large election system to a district election system. As Engstrom and McDonald write in, the *Election of Blacks to City Councils: Clarifying the Impact of Electoral Arrangements on the Seats/Population Relationship*, “In comparison with single-member districts, at large elections seriously reduce the level of black [minority] representation.”<sup>2</sup> This assertion is generally accepted in the literature surrounding the subject. The effectiveness of single-member districts to amending the under-representation caused by at-large elections is complicated by the impact of several factors including, the geographical concentration of the minority population and the size of the minority population. Such complications lead to claims such as, “District elections do not generally facilitate the election of Hispanics, though they may do so in some cities with a high degree of residential segregation. However, Hispanics appear to do somewhat better in cities with both at-large and district elections than in either of the pure types, a finding which confounds expectations.”<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Issacharoff, Samuel. “Polarized Voting and the Political Process: The Transformation of Voting Rights Jurisprudence”. *Michigan Law Review*, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Engstrom, Richard; McDonald, Michael. “The Election of Blacks to City Councils: Clarifying the Impact of Electoral Arrangements on the Seats/Population Relationship”. *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 75 No. 2. 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Welch, Susan. “The Impact At-Large Elections on the Representation of Blacks and Hispanics.” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 52. No. 4. 1990.

statement addresses the complexities of redistricting without denying the efficacy of district elections in comparison to general elections. It also appeals to a combination of the two structures which illuminates the fact that different municipalities warrant different structural changes. Despite these complexities, it remains that when an at-large election, such as Sunnyside's, produces a grave under-representation of a minority community on its city council, redistricting is an effective solution. In this report I will not pretend to be an expert on redistricting techniques but instead thoroughly establish the fact that the current election format in Sunnyside is not producing a true representative democracy and therefore necessitates a change in the election structure as established by the Voting Rights Act.

The case of *Gomez V. City of Watsonville* offers an example of another city that held at-large elections that resulted in a similar under-representation of Latinos on its city council. The case was brought forth by the Mexican American citizens of Watsonville as represented by counsel Joaquin Avila, with the claim that the City's at-large system of mayoral and city council elections violated section 2 of the 1982 amendments of the Voting Rights act, "by lessening the opportunity of Hispanics to participate in the political process and to elect representatives of their choice."<sup>4</sup> The district court ruled in favor of the city but upon appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in California, that decision was reversed and the Appellants won their case. If such a case were tried today in Washington, this study would provide evidence that at-large elections are lessening the opportunity for Latinos to gain proportionate political representation, as related to the trend of racially polarized voting in Sunnyside's city council elections.

Among the scholarly cynics of studies that claim to present evidence of racially polarized voting in the United States is Morris P. Fiorina. In, *Culture War?* Fiorina argues against the current media and public portrayal of a politically polarized United States. She argues that researchers often have self-serving motives and aim at producing interesting studies rather than obtaining a true analysis of political situations. Of political polarization in the United States Fiorina writes, "There is little evidence that Americans' ideological or policy positions are more polarized today than they were two or three decades ago, although their choices often seem to be. The explanation is that the political figures Americans evaluate are more polarized."<sup>5</sup> In relation to racially polarized voting and my research, this statement is shown to be problematic. My research demonstrates racially polarized voting in a bi-candidate election in which a Latina ran against a Non-Latino. The Latina candidate testifies in interviews that she strategically did not run a Latino based campaign when she won an election for a city council position in 2001. She then ran for re-election in 2005 and lost by a landslide while running the same sort of non-Latino based campaign. She attributes this apparent change in public opinion and her subsequent defeat to her activism on the city council for Latino issues. She states that, "many Latinos make the mistake of running Latino campaigns which ostracize most of the voters."<sup>6</sup> In her campaign history and this quotation it is clear that as a politician, she is responding to the polarization of the voting body rather than emphasizing her Latino

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Fiorina, Morris. *Culture War?: the Myth of a Polarized America*. Pearson Education Inc, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> See appendix B.

identity as a strategy to polarize the voting body in her favor. Racially polarized voting is present and detrimental in the United States today as confirmed by the necessary amendments to the Voting Rights Act and cases like *Gomez V. City of Watsonville*.<sup>7</sup>

The VRA has also been successful in ending other barriers to minority voting and representation. Joaquin Avila summarizes, “These devices [strategies to curtail minority voting] included literacy tests requiring a potential voter registrant to read, write or interpret a provision of a state constitution to the satisfaction of a voter registration official or clerk[...]. Other devices included limiting voter participation in political party primaries to white and imposing a poll tax.”<sup>8</sup> The poll tax was a fee charged to a voter when they came to the polls to vote. The poll tax marginalized the poor and by demographic association, minority populations like African-Americans and Latinos. These successes of the VRA are necessary to understanding the context of my research. They demonstrate the historical utility of the VRA in remedying the structural barriers to minority political participation as my research suggests would be possible by restructuring the city council elections in Sunnyside Washington.

The second conclusion advanced by this study is based upon scholarly literature about voter education and mobilization. In the United States, Latinos are registered to vote and participate in elections at a much lower rate than Non-Latinos while constituting the nations largest minority group. The low rate of Latino voter turnout is reflected in the lack of Latino representation. In 1994 the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEAO) estimated the total number of Hispanic Elected Officers to be 5,459, most of which could be found in city government and local school boards.<sup>9</sup> This is a large increase in Latino representation after the implementation of the VRA in comparison to the 3,128 Hispanic Elected Officers in 1984<sup>10</sup>, but the number of Latino representatives today is well short of the ideal of a true democracy our government pursues. The severity of the under-representation of Latinos is made clear by the findings of this report in terms of the disparity between the percentage of Latino population and their lack of political representation in Washington’s city governments.

This research focuses on the impact of at-large elections upon Latino representation. This is not to imply that the demographic factors that impact Latino voting are decisively less important than the structure of election systems. My research aims at creating a focus on the structural barriers to Latino representation that have been brought into question by the VRA and its amendments. In *The Election of Blacks to City Councils: Clarifying the Impact of Electoral Arrangements on the seats/Population Relationship* the authors discuss the relationship between socioeconomic factors and the impact of electoral frameworks. They find that the relative impact of each set of factors, one demographic and one structural are dependent upon the population percentage of the minority

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<sup>7</sup> Gomez v. City of Watsonville, 863 F. 2d 1407 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Avila, Joaquin. “The Washington 2004 Gubernatorial Election Crisis: The Necessity of Restoring Public Confidence in the Electoral Process.” *Seattle University Law Review*. Vol. 29, n. 2 (2006).

<sup>9</sup> Cafferty and Engstrom, 331.

<sup>10</sup> [www.naleo.org](http://www.naleo.org)

involved.<sup>11</sup> In terms of this particular study, the Latino populations of Washington make up large percentages of several localities in which the level of Latino representation is very low. In accordance with the body of literature surrounding the subject, this would suggest a need to examine the likelihood that at-large elections are playing a significant role in fostering the under-representation of Latinos on city councils around the Nation.

Focusing solely on the structural factors that impact Latino representation and voter turnout is not to suggest that demographic factors do not make an impact as well. In *Meeting the Challenge of Latino Voter Mobilization* Melissa Michelson writes, “While some of the disparities can be attributed to low levels of Latino citizenship, socioeconomic status, and age, lack of mobilization by political parties and candidates also contributes to the problem.”<sup>12</sup> Demographic factors then can be recognized as having an impact while also noting that Latinos are largely responsive to voter mobilization efforts. Factors such as age, socioeconomic status and low levels of citizenship do contribute to the problem but focusing on these factors leads to more difficult problem solving strategies than the evidence of a lack of Latino mobilization efforts. An increase in mobilization efforts offers an active approach to rectifying low participation of Latinos. As a result, my study investigates both the presence and effectiveness of voter mobilization and education efforts in Sunnyside.

### **Discussion of Research Methods**

The gathering of my quantitative data began with census information. I used census information, as published on the internet, to rank Washington’s counties in terms of the percentage of their population that was Latino. From that data, and again with the use of census information, I focused on Yakima County as a local that has a high Latino population percentage. The next step was to rank the Latino population percentages of each city in Yakima County and compare those population percentages with the percentage of representation that Latinos held on their respective city councils. From that data, the overall under representation of Latinos in the cities of Yakima County became quite clear. There is an example of a city (Granger) with a high level of Latino representation but it is an exception in Yakima County and given that the aim of my research is to assess the general level of the political representation of Latinos in Washington, I used the example of Sunnyside, a city with a high Latino population percentage and a low level of Latino representation. Important to selection of Sunnyside and the direction of my report is the conclusion as advanced by scholars, including my community partner Joaquin Avila, that general elections often contribute to the under representation of minority groups.<sup>13</sup> With that proposition I began the task of researching whether or not general elections contribute to the under-representation of Latinos in Sunnyside.

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<sup>11</sup> The election of blacks...Cafferty and Engstrom

<sup>12</sup> Michelson, Melissa. “Meeting the Challenge of Latino Voter Mobilization.” *The Annals of the American Academy*. 601 (September 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Avila, Joaquin. “The Washington 2004 Gubernatorial Election Crisis: The Necessity of Restoring Public Confidence in the Electoral Process.” *Seattle University Law Review*. Vol. 29, n. 2 (2006).

In order to reach any conclusions about Sunnyside's general elections it was necessary to obtain the election returns and voter files from Sunnyside's most recent city council elections. I obtained this information through a series of phone calls and emails with the Yakima County auditor's office. Once I had that information, I began the task of recording whether a voter was Latino or Non-Latino (by use of a Spanish Surname list), whether or not they were registered for each city council election (the three I focused on being the three most recent) and whether or not they voted in each election. Once I had completed those tasks for more than 4,000 registered Sunnyside voters in each of the three elections, it became clear that non-Latinos were both registered to vote and voting at much higher rates than Latinos. The next step in my quantitative research was premised on the fact that the percentages of voters who voted for both Latino and Non-Latino candidates were closely related to the number of Latinos and Non-Latinos that voted in each election. With the help of several advisors, I then conducted an ecological bivariate regression analysis on the voting data I obtained in order to determine whether or not racially polarized voting was affecting the outcome of elections in which a Latino ran against a non-Latino. The conclusions from this analysis were important to demonstrating the affect that a general election can have on the probability of minority population obtaining political representation, as I will describe in detail later in the report.

The conclusion that Sunnyside currently lacks effective voter mobilization programs was reached by conducting of interviews of voters and politicians in the city. Very few voters expressed that any organization had encouraged them to vote in any election and those that did, mentioned Universities or personal motivation rather than any explicit program. I also traveled to the United Farm Workers center of Sunnyside and inquired about any such programs. The secretary there provided me the name of a politician in Seattle whom I was unable to contact. The only program I was able to obtain information about was through my interview with Bengie Aguilar. That interview, among others, will be discussed in detail in the following sections of the report.

### **Data Presentation**

This data is presented in order to put my case study into a statewide context.

#### **Washington's Counties as ranked by Latino Population Percentage**

1. Adams County 48% Latino
2. Yakima county 37 % Latino
3. Grant County 31% Latino
4. Walla Walla County 26% Latino
5. Douglas County 20% Latino
6. Chelan County 19 % Latino
7. Okanogan County 14% Latino
8. Skagit County 11% Latino
9. Klickitat County 8% Latino
10. Columbia County 6.4% Latino

From this data the prevalence of the Latino population across the state of Washington is quite clear. I chose to focus on Yakima County as it represents a county with a prevalent Latino population and because was a locality I could travel to in order to complete my case study.

It was then necessary to decide which city I would focus on as a case study within Yakima County. In order to make this decision I ranked the Latino population in each city in comparison to its percentage of Latino representation on each city's city council.

<b>Latino Percentage of City Council ( 2005 Election Returns)</b>	<b>Latino Population Percentage (2000 Census)</b>	<b>Discrepancy Between Population and Representation</b>
Sunnyside 14.3%	73.1%	-59%
Tieton 0%	54.3%	-54%
Toppenish 28.5%	75.7%	-47%
Grandview 28.5	68.0%	-40%
Wapato 42.8%	76.2%	-34%
Yakima 0%	33.3%	-33%
Moxee 0%	31.0%	-31%
Union Gap 0%	29.6%	-30%
Mabton 60%	89.0%	-29%
Selah 0%	11.0%	-11%
Naches 0%	10.9%	-11%
Zillah 20%	26.9%	-6%
Granger 80%	85.5%	-5%
Harrah 60%	44.1%	+16%

This chart displays the general under-representation of Latinos on city councils in Yakima County. The first 8 cities listed have a clear discrepancy between their Latino population and the percentage of representation they receive, which illuminates the absence of a true democracy in which representatives are reflective of the citizenry they ideally embody, as discussed in the introduction.

The final five cities have smaller discrepancies with the exception of Harrah, which has a positive relationship between its Latino population and their political representation. These cities are an exception the trend in Yakima County especially as articulated by the fact that in 5 cities (Sunnyside, Tietan, Toppenish, Grandview, Wapato) non-Latinos comprise less than 50 percent of the population, yet hold from 100% to 67.2% of the positions on the city council in each city. As the goal of my research was to investigate the trends of Latino representation across the state, I chose Sunnyside as a case study as it was likely to provide the clearest explanations for the trend of under-representation of Latinos in Washington.



## **Case Study**

The 2000 census lists that 73.1 percent of Sunnyside's population is Latino.<sup>14</sup> This is an important statistic to this study when applied to the fact that Sunnyside's city council had only one Latino representative after the 2005 election. As a result, Sunnyside provided an example of a city that holds general elections and has a large discrepancy between its Latino population and their political representation. These circumstances provided an opportunity to thoroughly investigate my main research question and decipher whether or not the at-large elections format disadvantaged Latino voters and candidates in elections in which a Latino ran against a non-Latino candidate.

I will first discuss my findings that Latino voters in Sunnyside are an example of the National trend that Latinos are registered to vote and participate in elections at a lower rate than non-Latinos. This portion of the research included determining the number of Latinos and non-Latinos that were registered to vote and voted for each of the elections I would examine. I chose these three elections because they pitted a Latino candidate against a non-Latino candidate. Such a contest allows for a comparison of the voting patterns of Latinos and non-Latinos, as reflected in the outcome of an at-large election. In such a contest it is possible to then determine whether or not racially polarized voting exists in a given election. I chose the three most recent city council elections in which a non-Latino candidate ran against a Latino candidate as they best exemplify the current voting trends in Sunnyside. The results are as follows:

<b>2001 Sunnyside City Council Election</b>		
<b>Non-Latinos Registered</b>	<b>Non-Latinos that Voted</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Percentage</b>
<b>1682</b>	<b>1051</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Latinos Registered</b>	<b>Latinos that Voted</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Percentage</b>
<b>1541</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>30%</b>

<b>2003 Sunnyside City Council Election</b>		
<b>Non-Latinos Registered</b>	<b>Non-Latinos that Voted</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Percentage</b>
<b>1440</b>	<b>838</b>	<b>58%</b>
<b>Latinos Registered</b>	<b>Latinos that Voted</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Percentage</b>
<b>1152</b>	<b>239</b>	<b>21%</b>

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Fact Finder. 2000. Oct. 2006. <Factfinder.Census.Gov>.

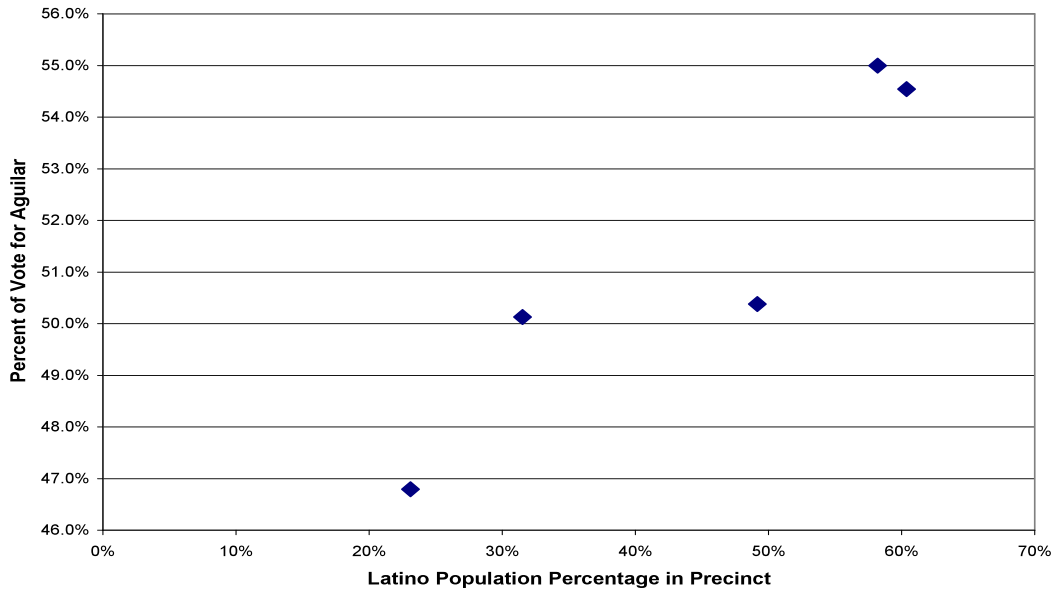
<b>2005 Sunnyside City Council Election</b>		
<b>Non-Latinos Registered</b>	<b>Non-Latinos that Voted</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Percentage</b>
<b>1682</b>	<b>1051</b>	<b>62%</b>
<b>Latinos Registered</b>	<b>Latinos that Voted</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Percentage</b>
<b>1531</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>35.2%</b>

In each of the three elections non-Latinos were registered to vote, and turned out to vote, in much higher numbers than Latinos despite the fact that Latinos constitute 75% of Sunnyside's population. This can be explained by low levels of Latino citizenship, socioeconomic status, and age but the lack of Latino participation would be likely to improve with a voter mobilization effort, as previously discussed. This data also shows a steady decline in non-Latino participation since 2001, providing more evidence for the need of a voter mobilization effort.

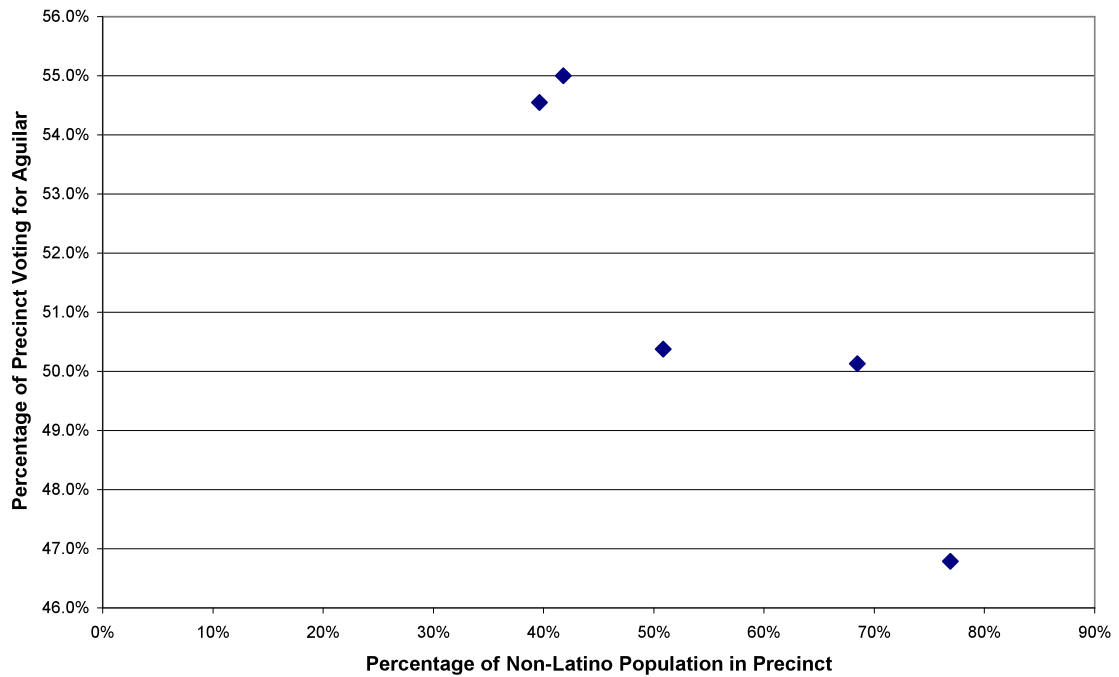
In each of these three elections a Latino ran against a non-Latino candidate. By comparing the relationship between the percent of Latinos that voted and the votes the Latino candidate received as well as the percent of Non-Latinos that voted and the votes the Non-Latino candidate received, it appeared there was a possibility of racially polarized voting. I then performed an ecological bivariate regression analysis which consisted of taking all the data I had collected, determining the Latino population percentage in each voting precinct of the city, and then comparing that number to the number of votes a Latino or Non-Latino candidate received from those precincts. This ecological bivariate regression conclusively shows that there is a pattern of racially polarized voting in Sunnyside, especially in the most recent 2005 city council election. The results are as follows:

## Graphs I. & II.

2001 Sunnyside City Council Elections



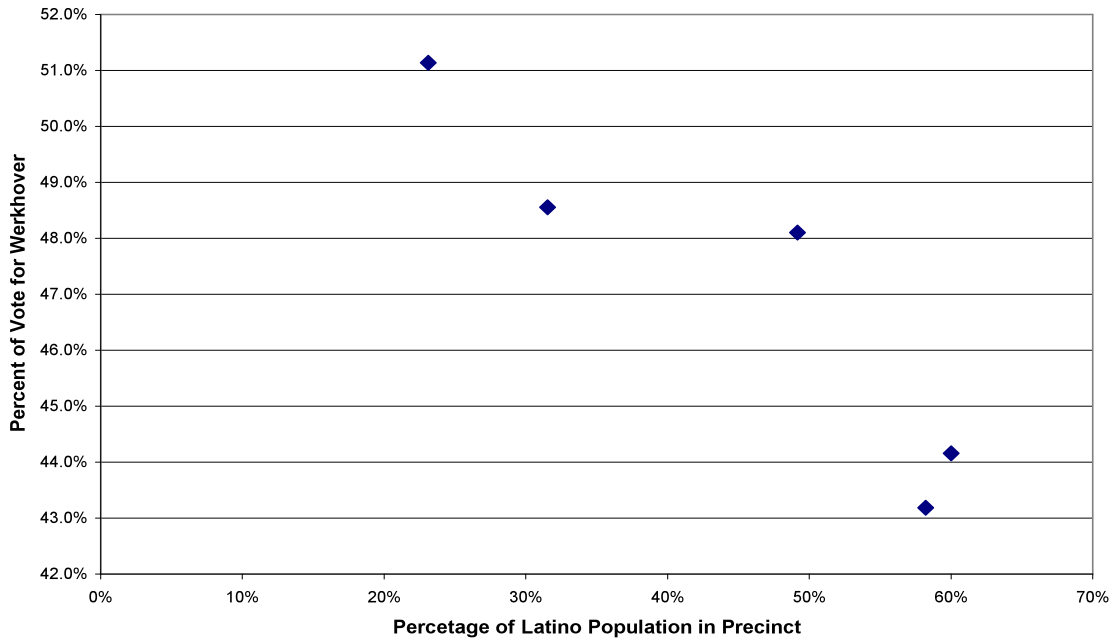
2001 Sunnyside City Council Election



This data on these graphs demonstrate racially polarized voting. This conclusion can be reached by the demonstrated trend in graph I, that as the Latino Population in each precinct rises, the number of votes for the Latino candidate, Bengie Aguilar, rises as well. In graph II the inverse is demonstrated in that as the percentage of non-Latinos in each precinct increases the number of votes for Aguilar decreases. Charts III and IV below display a similar situation in terms of the Non-Latino candidate:

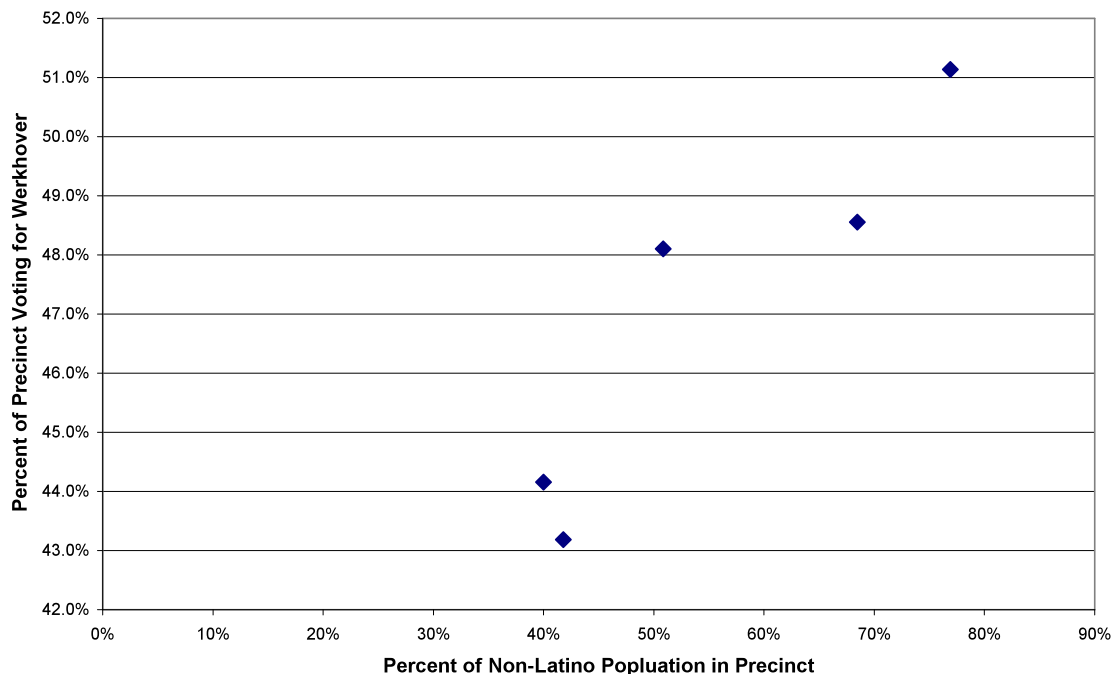
### Graph III

2001 Sunnyside City Council Elections



## Graph IV

2001 Sunnyside City Council Election



The data on graph III displays the decline in the percentage of votes for the non-Latino candidate as the Latino population percentage increases. The data on graph IV demonstrates the increase of votes for the non-Latino candidate as the non-Latino population percentage increases. The same conclusions reached in Graphs I and II apply to Graphs III and IV.

In this 2001 election 962 Non-Latinos voted as compared to 327 Latinos. As a result Bengie Aguilar needed a significant number of Non-Latino votes to win. The election ended with Aguilar receiving 50.66% of the vote and the Non-Latino candidate receiving 47.7%. The results demonstrate that the majority of non-Latino voters voted for the Non-Latino candidate but that a significant number also voted for Aguilar. In an interview, Aguilar described her campaign that year as a “people campaign” and not a Latino campaign which she feels gained her a lot of the Non-Latino vote.<sup>15</sup> She strategically did not emphasize her advocacy of Latino issues and Latino voter mobilization. This being the situation in 2001 is especially important as Aguilar ran again in 2005 in an election clearly impacted by racially polarized voting. After this 2001 victory Aguilar became the only Latino on the city council. In her term she raised issues that had not previously been

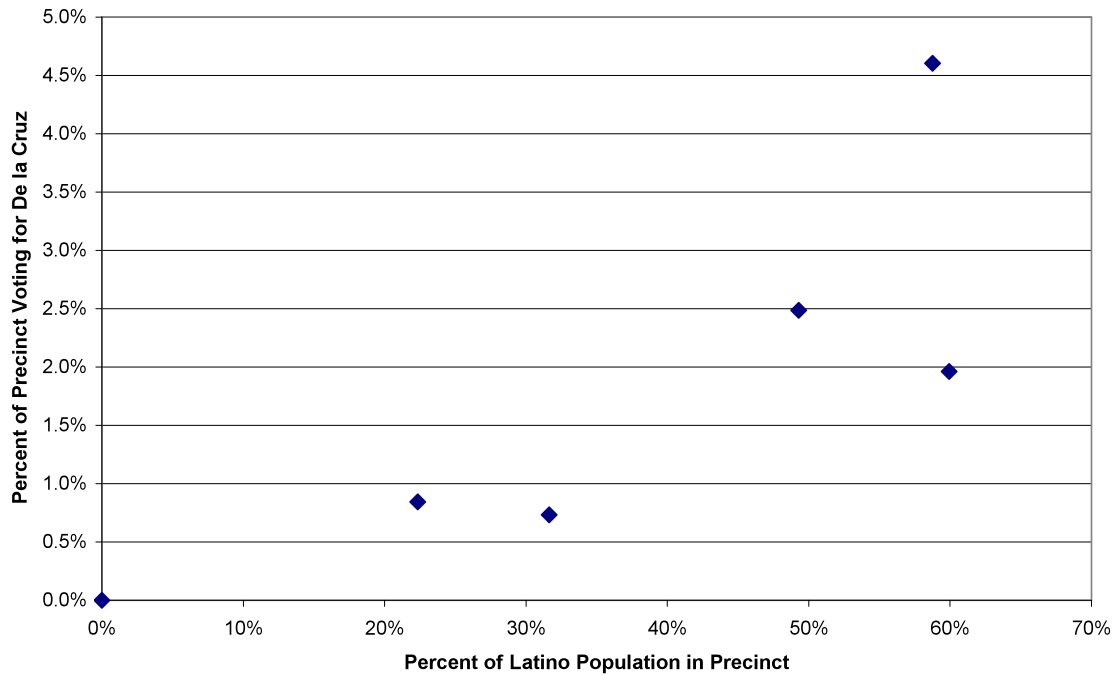
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<sup>15</sup> See appendix B.

raised in terms of interests of Sunnyside’s large Latino community. Being the only Latino on the city council along with her advocacy of Latino interests, such as a bilingual newsletter about the activities of the city council aimed at reaching the broader community, Aguilar became recognized as a Latino candidate. This provides evidence that while Aguilar’s strategy to run a “people campaign” in 2001 gained her some of the non-Latino vote, those gains were lost in 2005 when she was publicly recognized as a Latino advocate.

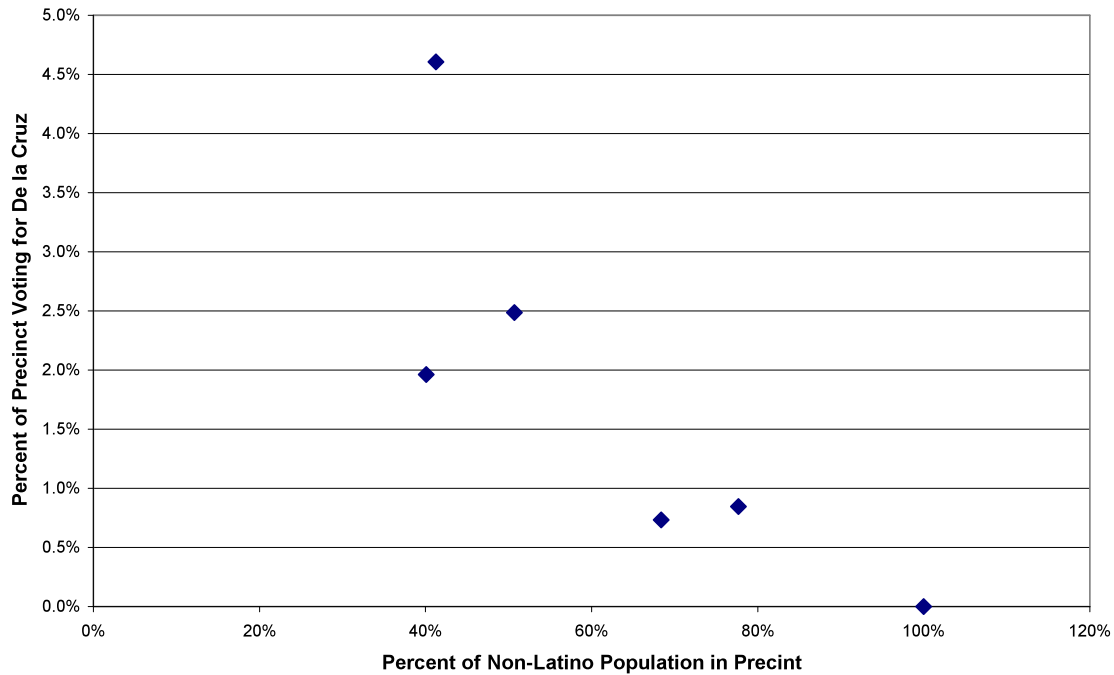
### Graph V

2003 Sunnyside City Council Election



## Graph VI

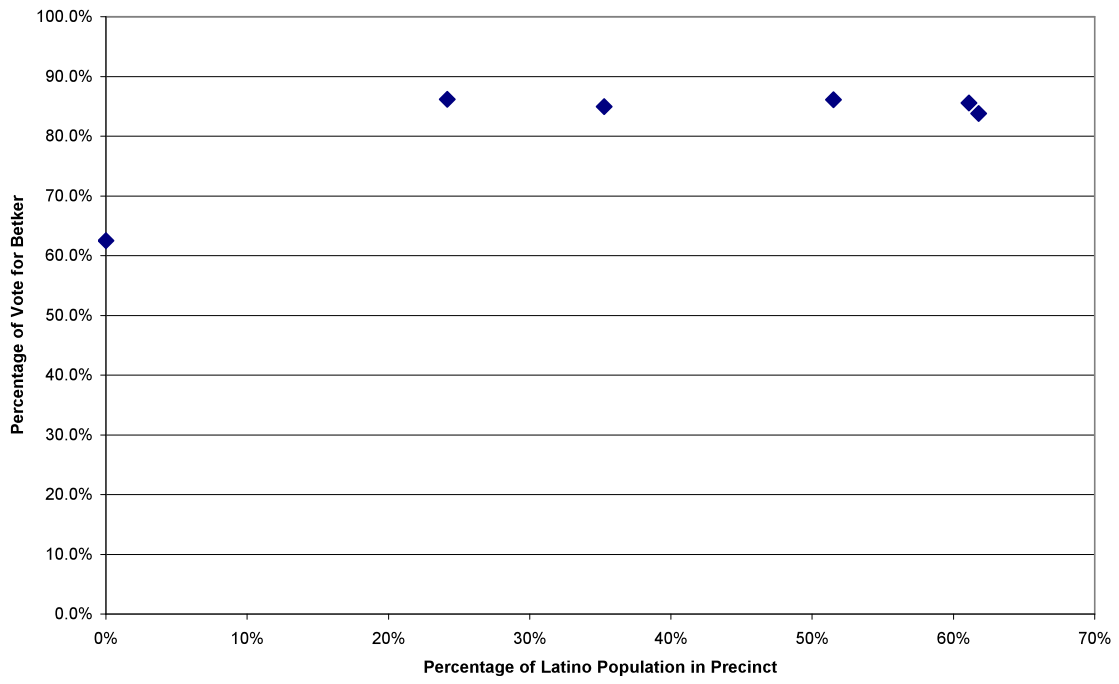
### 2003 Sunnyside City Council Election



It is difficult to make any concrete conclusions from the 2003 city council election data alone because the outcome of the election was such a landslide. Despite this, graph V demonstrates that as the population percentage of Latinos in each precinct increased so did the number of votes received by the Latino candidate. In graph VI the number of votes for the Latino candidate decreased as the percentage of non-Latinos in each precinct increased.

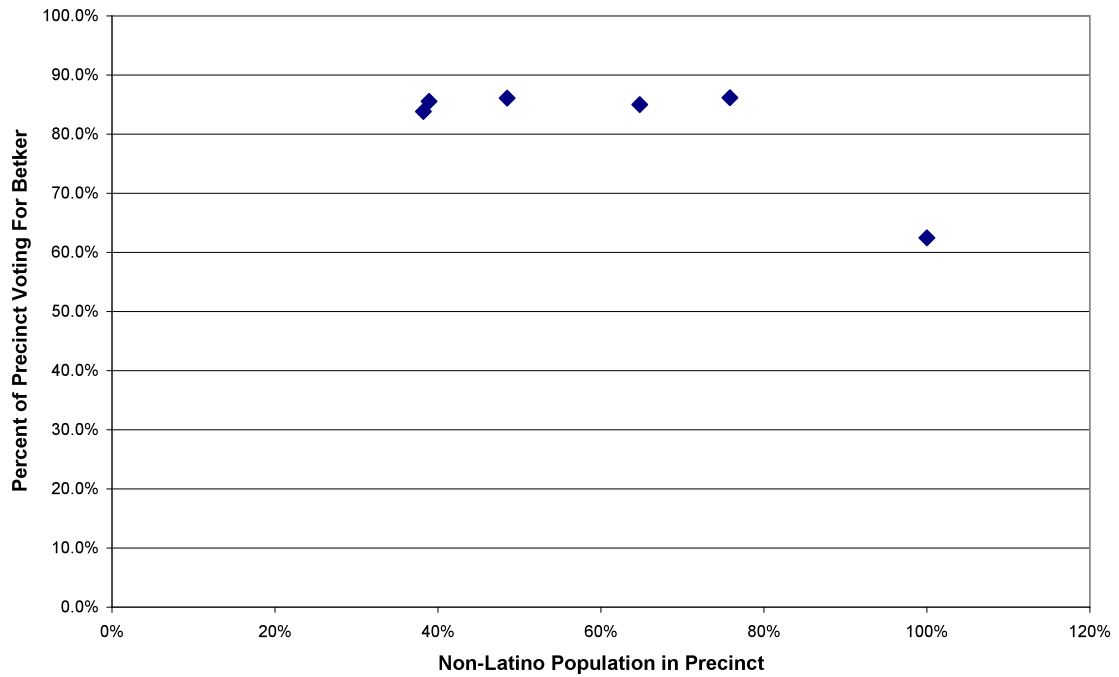
## Graph VII

2003 Sunnyside City Council Elections



## Graph VIII

2003 Sunnyside City Council Election

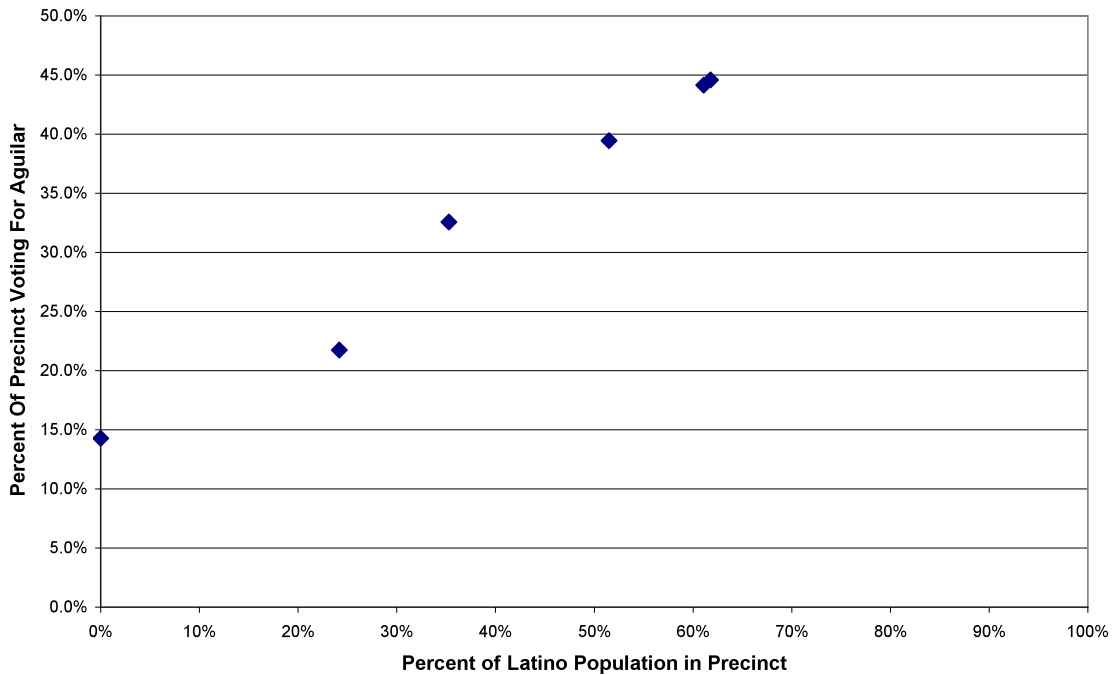




Graphs VII and VIII are also compromised by the fact that the 2003 Sunnyside City Council election was such a landslide. The percentage of votes the non-Latino received stays close to 90% as the percentage of Latinos in each precinct increases. It is also difficult to make assertive conclusions because so few Latinos, 239 in comparison to 838 non-Latinos, voted in this election. This discrepancy put the Latino candidate at a disadvantage so that even if nearly all of the Latinos that voted supported him, he would not win the contest. In light of the fact that 75% of the city is Latino and that the majority of Latinos voted for De La Cruz it is likely that the election would have been much closer or had a different outcome if their had been more Latino voter mobilization. Despite the shortcomings of assessing the 2003 election, the graphs do show that racially polarized voting existed in terms of the votes received by the Latino candidate.

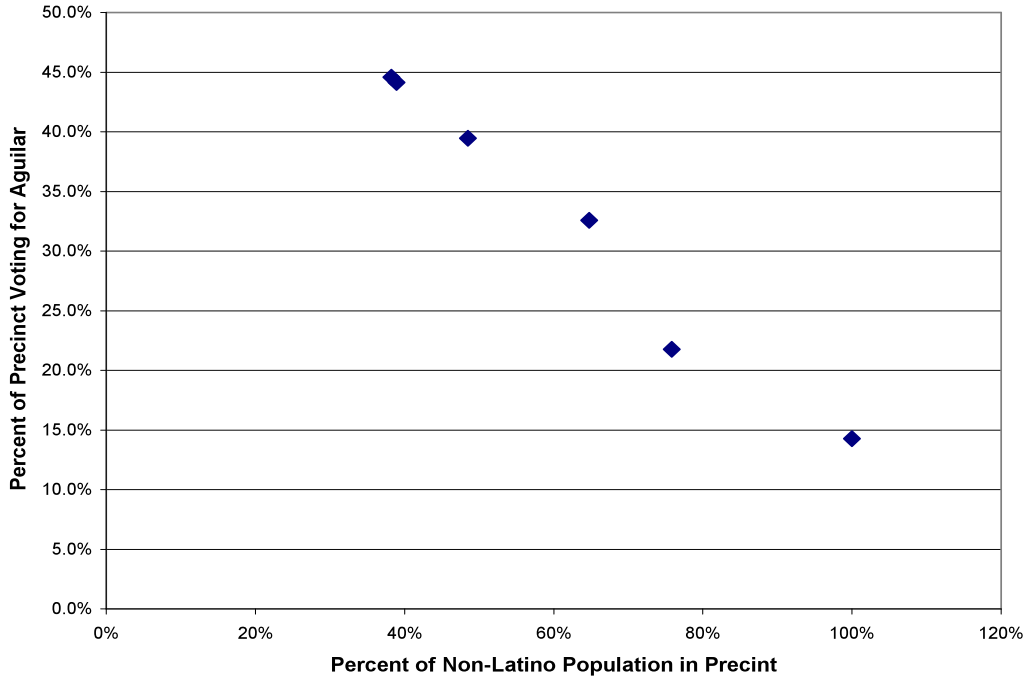
### Graph IX

Sunnyside 2005 City Council Election



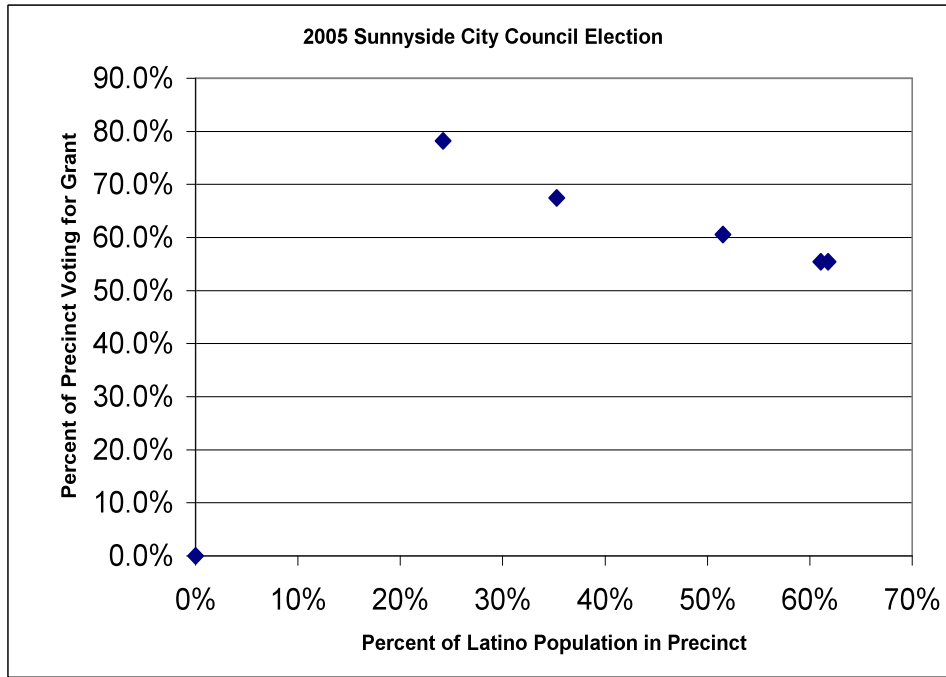
## Graph X

2005 Sunnyside City Council Elections

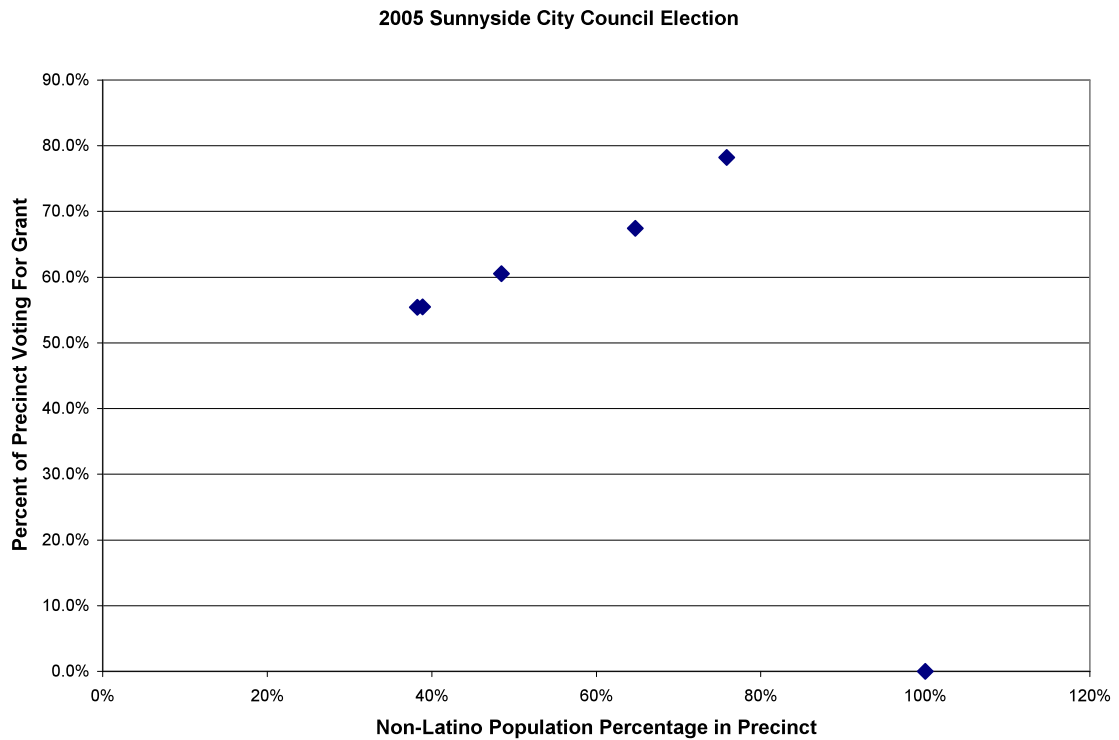


Graph IX shows a direct relationship between the increases in Latino population percentage and the number of votes received by Bengie Aguilar, the Latino candidate. Graph X demonstrates a clear decrease in the number of votes by the Latino candidate as the percent of Non-Latino population increases. 533 Latinos turned out to vote for this election and Aguilar received 616 votes in total. Graph IX demonstrates that many of those votes were from Latino voters. A specific example can be drawn from precincts 1703 and 1705. In precinct 1703 where the Latino population percentage is 35.26% Aguilar received 32.6% of the vote. In precinct 1705 the Latino population percentage is 24.16% and Aguilar received 21.8% of the vote. The correlation between the Latino population percentage in these precincts and the percentage of the vote received by Aguilar suggests that Aguilar received the large majority of her votes from Latino voters and very few otherwise. This is supported by the fact that in total, 35% of the votes in the election were made by Latinos, and Aguilar finished with 35% of the vote. The trend continues in that 62% of the vote was constituted by non-Latinos and the non-Latino candidate received 65% of the vote. This is a clear case of racially polarized voting.

### Graph XI



### Graph XII



Graph XI conclusively demonstrates a decrease in the number of votes received by Grant, the non-Latino candidate as the Latino population percentage in each precinct increases. Graph XII shows the inverse situation in which the number of votes received by the non-Latino candidate increases as the non-Latino population percentage increases.

As a group, these twelve graphs demonstrate a pattern of racially polarized voting. The 2001 and 2003 elections show a less drastic relationship between the number of Latinos and the number of votes the Latino candidates received but it is clear that on average the higher the Latino population percentage in the precinct, the more votes the Latino candidate received and the fewer votes the non-Latino candidate received. The 2005 election shows a clear case of racially polarized voting in which the relationship between the number of Latinos or non-Latinos and the number of votes received by the Latino or non-Latino candidate are closely related.

This demonstration of racially polarized voting in a general election in a city where Latinos are greatly under-represented on the city council fulfills the three requirements of the 1982 amendments of the Voting rights act as summarized by Issacharoff<sup>16</sup>. To reiterate the summarization with the inclusion of Sunnyside as a case study example: The paradigmatic claim of minority vote dilution under the amended Voting Rights Act would now incorporate three basic features: (1) structural obstacles to the electoral success of minorities, such as at-large elections, are present in Sunnyside; (2) behavioral patterns that interact with the social obstacles to exaggerate the political power of the majority- - i.e., racially polarized voting, as demonstrated in the above graphs, and (3) a resulting under representation or even complete lack of representation of the minority community relative to its proportion of the population, as demonstrated by the data above.

### **Interview Discussion**

I interviewed Bengie Aguilar, the Latino candidate from the 2001 and 2005 Sunnyside City Council elections in order to advance my ability to construct conclusions concerning my main research question. The purpose of the interview was to ask Aguilar about her perspective on the impact of racially polarized voting in recent city council elections, along with her ideas about the causes and possible remedies for the under-representation of Latinos in her city. The following selections from that interview directly pertain to my main research question and the conclusions advanced by this study.

Aguilar commented that, “One of the strategies that I used to get on council is that I didn’t run a Hispanic or Latino campaign. I ran a people campaign, you know. I think that sometimes our folks make the mistake of running a Latino campaign, that they are here to represent the Hispanics...”<sup>17</sup> This statement is in reference to her 2001 campaign in which she successfully defeated her Non-Latino opponent in a closely contested election. This statement becomes even more interesting in comparison to a comment she makes in reference to the outcome of the 2005 election and her time on the council, “I ran again and a former principle ran against me... very well known in the area and he beat

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<sup>16</sup> See appendix B.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

me by a landslide. And I think a big part of that was all the controversy I caused while I was on the council. I was very controversial. I wasn't afraid to challenge something I didn't agree with and unfortunately people don't like that sometimes. Again, we get back to who is the voter? In Sunnyside its not our Latino population unfortunately, but were trying to change that..."<sup>18</sup> From this statement a connection to the rise in racially polarized voting from the 2001 election to the 2005 election can be drawn. The controversy Aguilar mentions made her recognizable as a Latino advocacy candidate in the 2005 election, where as in 2001, she focused so heavily on running a "people campaign" rather than a Latino campaign and thereby avoided being labeled as a Latino candidate.

On the subject of whether or not racially polarized voting contributed to the outcomes of Sunnyside's Council Elections, Aguilar commented, "That's the way it is Ian. I mean you don't have to...well its good you're getting the numbers to prove it, but that's what's happening. You know Mr. Gant ran against me and I knew he would get the support... I knew that once he put in his name against me I didn't have a chance. You know because absolutely, because someone's going to...let me tell you Ian, I did not really understand that racial thing until I got on the council. Then I really understood it. And I'm not saying I didn't encounter it before because we encounter it in our everyday lives, but man did I encounter in on council." Thus the observations of a Latina candidate that has both won and lost in recent Sunnyside elections confirms the trend of racially polarized voting that the data and the above graphs demonstrate.

I will now move to the second conclusion this report advances which is the fact that there is a lack of voter mobilization efforts in Sunnyside. The following responses came from Latino community members in Sunnyside outside of the local mall. I was able to obtain successful interviews with five Latino community members. They were all asked the question; has any group or organization here in Sunnyside encouraged you to vote?

Community member I: "No"

Community member II: "No"

Community member III: "Yea I ah, I've gotten a lot more into politics the older I've gotten...I'm pretty...I know what I like."

Community member IV: Yea my college in Yakima YV tech has. I just haven't had time.

Community member V: "No".<sup>19</sup>

Zero out of the five Latino community members mentioned any organization or program in Sunnyside that has encouraged them to vote. This information, along with the low levels of Latino participation, led me to the conclusion that there was a lack of voter mobilization efforts in Sunnyside. The one mobilization effort I did come across was brought to my attention in my interview with Ms. Aguilar when she stated, "Well, I'm involved and have been involved for three years... with a group here called voters registration committee. It's just an *ad hoc* committee here in Sunnyside, trying to register voters... we were focusing on Latinos, but anyone who wasn't registered, we registered

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

them too but most of your Anglo population is already registered.”<sup>20</sup> Aguilar reiterated throughout the interview that the greatest hindrance to Latino turnout and registration is the fact that people are not educated about the voting process. This committee has made an effort to start mobilizing voters but as Aguilar describes has had mixed success, “This year for the first time the group that we work with, the group that’s working here in Sunnyside, we held a ballot party at the Church at St. Josephs that has about a 2000 membership, and a lot of them are Latinos... but unfortunately we had very low attendance at those.”<sup>21</sup> Further research into this program could provide a useful case study for forming future voter mobilization efforts as my conclusions advocate. One important shortcoming of the program Aguilar describes is that the all the committee members are working people that have to maintain their regular jobs while taking on the role of vote solicitors. A state funded program could help remedy this lack of resources that the local program currently faces.

Aguilar mentioned another interesting and low cost idea for educating Latino voters during the interview. She stated, “I’m not asking for a monthly basis, a quarterly basis... a news letter that would be in a bi-lingual format that would sit on that from desk so that when people came in to pay their water bill that they could just take it home with them. Something that would have information about the city.... Decisions that were being made in the city. You know people say, you know, we publish it in the Daily Sun News (city council decisions). Well guess what? Not everyone buys the Daily Sun News. In fact, a big chunk of this community (including the Latino community) does not buy the Daily Sun News. Wouldn’t it be nice for them to have something sitting on the front desk that would really educate them?”<sup>22</sup> This relates back to my main research question in that it provides an example of a way to educate Latino voters and remedy the low level of Latino participation in Sunnyside City Council elections. Aguilar also illuminates the fact that her idea for such a publication has been repeatedly rejected by the City Council.

As an entirety, these interviews support my two conclusions that I., there is racially polarized voting in Sunnyside’s city council elections and that II., there is a lack of voter mobilization efforts in order to rectify the low level of Latino participation in elections.

## **Conclusion**

The data, case studies, and interviews provided in this report provide a basis for the conclusions I have made in response to my main research question. The data provided demonstrates that throughout the State of Washington, Latinos are under-represented in comparison to the percentage of the population in various cities, as compared to the percentage of representation that Latinos hold on their respective city councils.

Narrowing from this state wide context, my case study of Sunnyside demonstrates that Latinos register to vote and turn out to vote at much lower levels than non-Latinos and that racially polarized voting in Sunnyside’s general elections hinders the ability of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Latinos to gain political representation. It is quite possible barriers to Latino representation in Sunnyside could be found in similar cities around the state in which there is a grave discrepancy between the population of Latinos and their political representation. Tietan and Toppenish are two other local cities that share the similarities of having at-large city council elections and a grave disparity between their Latino population percentage and the percentage of Latino representation on their respective city councils. A fourth case study of Harrah, a city with a higher Latino representation percentage than its Latino population percentage could provide some interesting insight into solutions for the under representation of Latinos in the State.

The most significant aspect of my report is in reference to the 1982 amendments of the Voting Rights Act. My case study provides that Sunnyside constitutes a situation in which all three requirements for a minority population to bring suit against the state are fulfilled. That is to say that: (1) Sunnyside has structural obstacles to the electoral success of minorities, such as at-large elections; (2) that in Sunnyside behavioral patterns that interact with the social obstacles to exaggerate the political power of the majority- - i.e., racially polarized voting exist; and (3) a resulting under representation or even complete lack of representation of the minority community relative to its proportion of the population is present in Sunnyside. These facts provide grounds for a re-examination of the use of at large-general elections in Sunnyside and other cities around the state. The *Gomez V. City of Watsonville* case provides a compelling precedent. The implementation of district elections would provide a way to remedy the barrier to Latino representation that at-large elections are creating in Washington today. My community partner Joaquin Avila has directed me to this research in an effort to uncover whether trying such a case would be possible in the future in the State of Washington. The results of this research imply that the circumstances in Sunnyside provide grounds for such a case.

On the basis of my findings I advocate an increase in voter mobilization and education efforts in Sunnyside along with a re-examination of the general election format in the city council elections. Again, these recommendations are based upon the conclusion that the main causes for the under-representation of Latinos, specifically in Sunnyside and hypothetically across the state, is that Latinos are registered to vote and turn out to vote at lower rates than non-Latinos, as accentuated by the lack of voter mobilization efforts and that racially polarized voting in Sunnyside is a barrier to Latino representation constitutive of a true democracy.

As reflected in the interviews and data previously provided, the extremely low turnout of Latino voters demonstrates the lack of resources and interest being devoted to voter mobilization efforts in Sunnyside. Addressing the problems highlighted in this report will require creative strategies at improving the level of education of voters in the area as well as the support of State Agencies for funding and other resources from outside of Sunnyside.

The problems as highlighted by this report do not heed easy fix it all solutions. Rather this report has aimed to articulate the specific problems causing the under-representation

of Latinos in Washington in order to provide a starting point for improving these circumstances. Creative solutions, such as Bengie Aguilar's suggestion of having a bilingual newsletter aimed at educating Sunnyside about the issues in the city and decisions made by the city council seems to be a very practical way to begin the effort to improve the level of Latino involvement in politics in Sunnyside. A reinvigoration of support and resources for the voter mobilization efforts that are present in Sunnyside could also go a long way in improving voter turn out.

The final and loftier goal of changing the current general election system is a possibility as exemplified by the *Gomez V. City of Watsonville* case but will require a ground breaking effort by Latino advocates and lawyers around the State. My community partner, Joaquin Avila, has mentioned such an effort as a possibility in the future and I hope that the information provided by this report can assist in changing the current barriers to the proportionate representation of Washington States largest minority population.



## **Appendix A:**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Interview Questions for Latino Voters:**

1. Are you registered to vote?
  - a. If no:
    1. Why is that?
  - b. If yes: Have you Voted in any recent Sunnyside city council elections?  
If no: Why is that?
2. Has any organization or anyone here in Sunnyside encouraged you to vote?
3. Possible Questions for Latino Voters depending upon direction of interview
  - a. Do you know about the current composition of the city council here in Sunnyside?
  - b. Sunnyside has a 75 percent Latino population but only has one Latino council member. What are your reactions to this composition?
  - c. Have you known any Latinos interested in being representatives here in Sunnyside?
  - d. A lot of Latinos that are registered to vote in Sunnyside don't vote. Why do you think that is?

#### **Interview Questions for Bengie Aguilar:**

1. Why is it that so many Latinos are registered to vote but do not vote in Sunnyside's City Council elections?
2. Are there any other programs or organizations aimed at encouraging more Latinos to vote in the area?
3. So you were on the council in 2003 is that when you ran? And then again in 2005?
4. Have you noticed any patterns of racially polarized voting in the city council elections here in Sunnyside?



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