

POLICY BRIEF: EAST COACHELLA VALLEY POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"IT IS A COMMON OBSERVATION THAT POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES TEND TO BE DRAWN FROM THE ELITE STRATUM OF SOCIETY. EVEN WHERE REPRESENTATIVES ARE CHOSEN THROUGH FAIR AND DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS, IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES REMAIN "UNREPRESENTATIVE," AND, IN PARTICULAR, THAT THEY ARE UNDER-REPRESENTATIVE OF WOMEN, ETHNIC MINORITIES, AND THE POORER AND LESS EDUCATED SOCIAL CLASSES."

KAREN BIRDi

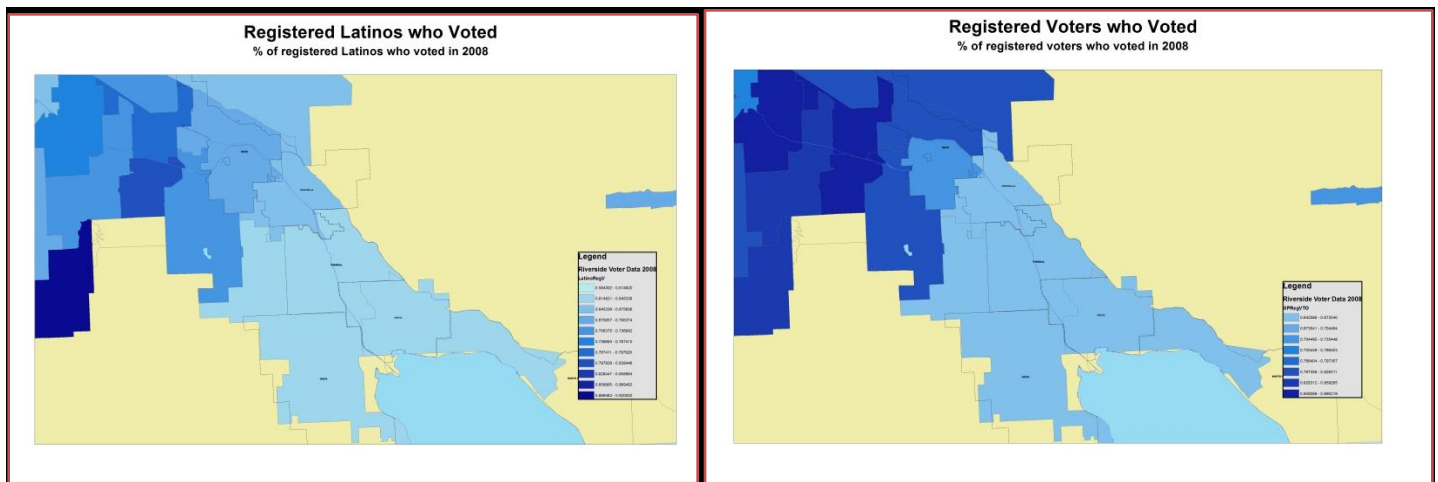
STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

The East Coachella Valley has a high percentage of Latinos who are living in poverty. Poor air and water quality, housing and land use planning affect the health of residents. In order to make change, residents need to know that their elected officials represent them and are responsive to their needs.

The election of 2012 was historic. More Latinos were voted into office than at any other time in US history. In the United States Congress, the number of Latino members has increased to 30. However, if the number were proportional to the US population, the total number should be 86.

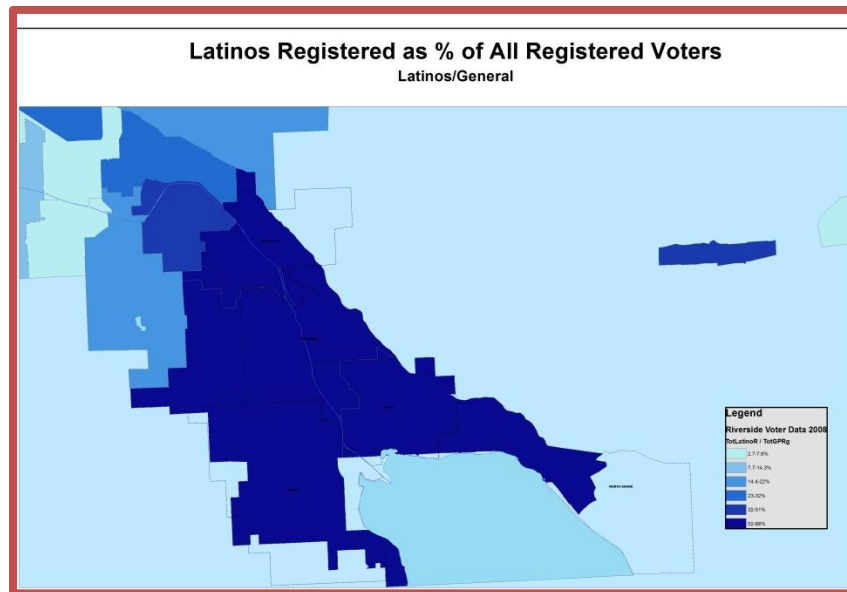
In the Coachella Valley, a first-generation Mexican-American will serve the 36th District, Dr. Raul Ruiz. This victory over a seven-term incumbent is very important to the small rural communities in the East Coachella Valley that are primarily Latino. These communities are home to farm worker families and others who work at low-paying service jobs supporting the economy of Palm Springs and other resort towns in the West Coachella Valley.

The demographic shift in the district that includes the Coachella Valley mirrors a national shift since the 2000 decennial census, showing an increase in the Latino population. In 2011, Latinos made up less than 28% of registered voters but that number rose to 46.6% in the 2012 election. Overall, Latinos are not voting proportional to their share of the population. In 2012, Latinos only accounted for 10% of all voters despite being 17% of the total US population. Some of this disparity may be due to immigration status with many Latinos being either residents but not citizens or undocumented residents.



Map 1 on the left shows the percentage of registered Latino voters who cast ballots in 2008 next to Map 2 on the right which shows the percentage of all voters who cast ballots in 2008.ⁱⁱ

The maps show the percentage of registered Latino voters in the East Coachella Valley who voted in the 2008 election compared to the total percentage of registered voters who cast votes in the 2008 election. Across the US in 2008, **61.6%** of registered voters cast ballots.ⁱⁱⁱ In the ECV Latino voter turnout overall was above the US average. Only the communities of Mecca and North Shore were within the national range with between **58 and 63%** voting. Coachella, Oasis and Thermal Latino turnout was between **63 and 67%** with Indio Latinos voting between **67 and 70%**. When looking at data for the entire population of these communities, voting overall was above the national average with **64-70%** of all registered voters in Coachella, Oasis, Thermal, Mecca and North Shore voting in 2008 and **70-75%** of Indio registered voters casting ballots. Even with the higher than the national average voting rates Latinos are voting at a lower percentage than the general population in all ECV communities except Indio.



“THE RECORD NUMBER OF LATINOS WHO CAST BALLOTS FOR PRESIDENT THIS YEAR ARE THE LEADING EDGE OF AN ASCENDANT ETHNIC VOTING BLOC THAT IS LIKELY TO DOUBLE IN SIZE WITHIN A GENERATION, ACCORDING TO A PEW HISPANIC CENTER ANALYSIS BASED ON U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DATA, ELECTION DAY EXIT POLLS AND A NEW NATIONWIDE SURVEY OF HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS.” PAUL TAYLOR, ET ALiv

The California Latino Legislative Caucus is now made up of 27 members. In the California State Assembly, the number of Latino legislators rose by four to a total of 19 (24% vs 38% of population) and in the California State Senate, Latinos are 20% of state senators.

EAST COACHELLA VALLEY REPRESENTATION

United States Congressional District 36 is represented by Raul Ruiz, a child of farm laborers who was raised in Coachella and lives in Indio.

United States Senator Barbara Boxer has an office in Riverside.

United States Senator Dianne Feinstein has an office in San Diego.

California State Senate District 40 is represented by Juan Vargas, the child of Braceros, who lives in San Diego.

California State Assembly District 80 CA is represented by V. Manuel Perez, who was born in Indio to farm worker parents, raised in Coachella and lives in Coachella

Coachella Valley is represented on the Riverside County Board of Supervisors by John J. Benoit who lives in Bermuda Dunes

In Riverside County, the Latino population grew by 78% between 1990 and 2000. In the 2010 census, Latinos account for 45% of the entire population of Riverside County. According to the 2010 census the percentage of Latino or Hispanic of any race in East Coachella communities are: Coachella 96%, Mecca 99%, North Shore 95%, Oasis 98% and Thermal 95%.

No members of the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, whose policies and representation most directly affect the unincorporated communities of the Eastern Coachella Valley, are Latino. The District 4 supervisor representing the Coachella Valley is John Benoit, who is Anglo. He served as a member of the California State Assembly and as a State Senator. Benoit is a Republican. Prior to his elected offices, he worked in law enforcement. In addition to his responsibilities on the Board of Supervisors, Benoit serves as representative on the Riverside County Transportation Commission, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District, the Coachella Valley Association of Governments, the Coachella Valley Enterprise Zone Authority, the Salton Sea Authority, Sunline Transit Agency, Riverside Local Area Formation Commission (LAFCO), the Mobile Home Park Review Committee and many more committees and agencies.

EXISTING POLICIES

The 2012 election was the first in which redrawn districts were implemented. A recent analysis of the competitiveness of national elections determined that California has become the “most competitive” state in the US. This designation is based on the change in the percentage of incumbents facing a challenger in the primaries, and this change has been dramatic: climbing from 9.7% in 2010 to 35.7% in 2012.

This is good for voters because it indicates that incumbents are being held accountable as they face more viable challengers.

Two political reforms passed by the 2010 ballot took effect for the election in 2012.

1. First, voters gave the power to create new voting districts to a nonpartisan commission instead of the legislature, creating the results stated above.
2. And secondly, voters implemented a new “top two” primary system in which voters of *any party* can vote for *any candidate*. Then, the top two candidates, *regardless of political party* advance to the general election. For the first time, in the 2012 election, voters in 28 races chose between two candidates from the same political party.

Even with the recent efforts at government reform in California, voters have yet to embrace the notion that the most essential ingredient for a truly representative democracy is active citizen participation in elections. Millions of California citizens are not registered to vote, and many of those who are registered do not take part in elections. The statistics for the 2012 election show that the turnout in rural regions in 2012 was lower across the board than the urban turnout. And this was not the case in 2008 when rural voters seemed to be more engaged. Additionally, the registered voter population “is skewed toward the “haves” who often say they would like fewer public services and excludes the “have nots” who often say they would like more public services.” v

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals was a memorandum issued on June 15, 2012 by U.S. President Barack Obama. This action directs U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to practice prosecutorial discretion towards some individuals who immigrated illegally to the United States as children.

POLICY OPTIONS

Engage emerging groups. Citizen participation in the electoral process needs to be increased, especially among groups shown to be emerging in the 2012 election. Younger voters, independents, and Latinos were key to the most recent election outcomes nationally but youth voters and Latinos have low rates of voter registration and are less likely to vote in elections even when they are registered. Some options for increasing engagement include:

- extend the time and location for voter registration and voting
- allow same-day registration
- pre-register 17-year-olds,
- offer voter registration forms and Internet links to voter registration on federal and state agency websites
- allow voting through county registrar websites

- explore use of the Internet, mobile phones, social media, and other new technology for registration and getting out the vote

Close the knowledge gap. The state of California asks voters to legislate. In order to be effective in this job, voters need all facts relating to ballot initiatives and candidates. With vast amounts of money being spent on advertising that contains less than truthful claims and emotional appeals, voters need clear and nonpartisan information.

The voter information pamphlet should be expanded and online information sources should be both accessible and promoted by the state as well as local municipalities. Public debates and direct discussions with candidates help to prepare voters for their role in lawmaking.

Make the initiative process more transparent. Again, due to private funding of elections and initiatives, voters may be unsure about who is supporting and opposing specific initiatives, and why. The interests of stakeholders in initiatives should be clear at each stage in the proposition process: signature gathering, advertising, disclosures on voter pamphlets, and on the ballot itself.^{vi}

Press for immigration reform and a path to citizenship. Current immigrants who are in the country legally need to know how to become citizens to increase their voice in political decisions. A poll released January 23, 2013 showed a nationwide increase in the support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. The Associated Press-Gfk Poll indicated 62% of Americans favor allowing undocumented immigrants to gain citizenship, up from 50% in 2010. The increase among Republicans has been greater from 22% in 2010 to 53% in this 2013 poll.^{vii} If Congress does as expected, an immigration reform package should take shape in 2013.^{viii}

Work for more local representation on agencies and boards that impact decisions in the East Coachella Valley. Representation on the County Board of Supervisors confers membership on many other boards and agencies and needs to reflect the views of the population.

REFERENCES

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ⁱⁱ Mindy Romero, Project Director, California Civic Engagement Project/Center for Regional Change and the William C. Velasquez Institute (WCVI).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.factcheck.org/2009/01/2008-voter-turnout/>

^{iv} An Awakened Giant: The Hispanic Electorate is Likely to Double by 2030. by Paul Taylor, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, Jeffrey Passel and Mark Hugo Lopez. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/11/14/an-awakened-giant-the-hispanic-electorate-is-likely-to-double-by-2030/>

^v At Issue: Improving California's Democracy. Mark Baldassare, With Research Support From Dean Bonner, Sonja Petek, And Jui Shrestha. 2012. Page 11. http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/atissue/AI_1012MBAI.pdf

^{vi} Mark Baldassare, et al. At Issue: Improving California's Democracy. http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/atissue/AI_1012MBAI.pdf

^{vii} http://ap-gfkpoll.com/main/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/AP-GfK-January-2013-Topline-FINAL_IMMIGRATION.pdf

^{viii} On January 28, 2013, a compromise package was introduced into Congress by a bipartisan group of eight Senators. Under this plan, millions of undocumented immigrants would get immediate but provisional status to live and work in America. While temporarily removing legal uncertainty for the nation's 11 million undocumented immigrants, the plan is a mix of legal immigration programs for undocumented immigrants and additional immigration enforcement measures. The path to citizenship will kick in only after additional border security and visa entry controls are implemented. Under the proposed plan, immigrants without legal status would be required to pay back taxes, fines and other penalties and learn English before they can apply for permanent status. Applicants will have to show they are employed.



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with technical support from the UC Davis Center for Regional Change and funding from The California Endowment. Data source for maps: Mindy Romero, Project Director, California Civic Engagement Project/Center for Regional Change and the William C. Velasquez Institute (WCVI).