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## B Latinos, Flexing Political Muscle, Come of Age in L.A.

A new generation of leaders now debates how to use its power to shape public policy.

By PATRICK MCGREEVY  
Times Staff Writer

When Latino leaders gathered recently to celebrate the election of Antonio Villaraigosa as mayor of Los Angeles, White House aide Ruben Barrales told them it was great to welcome "a dynamic Latino leader" with "unlimited political potential."

"But, enough about Alex Padilla," he concluded, nodding at the Los Angeles City Council president.

The joke underscored a point

not lost on the Latino community: The wealth of Latino political talent in key offices in Los Angeles is unprecedented in the city's modern history.

When Villaraigosa takes office Friday, Latinos will hold the positions of mayor of Los Angeles, president of its City Council, Los Angeles city attorney, president of the Los Angeles school board, chairwoman of the county Board of Supervisors, county sheriff and chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

And that does not include the state Assembly speaker, Fabian Núñez, who is also from Los Angeles.

Seven years ago, only one of those eight jobs was filled by a Latino: Villaraigosa was then As-

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GARY FRIEDMAN Los Angeles Times

**'SYMBIOTIC':** Among L.A.'s Latino leaders are Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa, left, and City Council President Alex Padilla.

## Latinos Mark a 'New Era' of Political Clout

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sembly speaker.

"It's a huge accomplishment," said Jose Huizar, who heads the board of the Los Angeles Unified School District. "I remember in the '80s people were talking about the decade of the Hispanic but, really, 20 years later it's finally coming to fruition in terms of political advancement."

Gloria Molina, chairwoman of the county Board of Supervisors, talks of a "new era" and tells of being stopped in the supermarket by Latino constituents who talk excitedly about the remarkable alignment of Latino political stars.

Much was made during the election of the possibility that Villaraigosa would be the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles since 1872.

But Padilla is the first Latino president of the Los Angeles City Council since 1868, and Rocky Delgadillo's staff can find no record of a Latino city attorney as far back as 1851.

Beyond the excitement and the ethnic pride, the dramatic shift in the political landscape has Latino politicians debating how to use their new power to shape public policy, how this wave of Latino leaders will change Los Angeles and the state and who will advance to higher office, becoming, say, the state's first Latino governor since 1875.

Delgadillo is eyeing a bid to become the state's first Latino attorney general, and Padilla is weighing a run for state office.

Villaraigosa hasn't taken office, and already there is talk of whether he will run for governor. In an appearance before the National Assn. of Hispanic Journalists, he was asked, about the White House.

"I am focused on being the mayor of Los Angeles," he said, when asked about higher office.

Los Angeles has reached a point in the maturing of its Latino political class at which it has an ever-increasing talent pool. "There is a much stronger and deeper bench preparing to take the reins of responsibility," said public affairs consultant Mickey Ibarra, a friend of Villaraigosa and former director of intergovernmental affairs for the Clinton White House.

In the 45th Assembly District, where incumbent Jackie Goldberg will be forced out by term limits, candidates lining up include two Latinos, one of whom is United Farm Workers co-founder Cesar Chavez's granddaughter Christine Chavez Delgado.

Maria Lou Calanche, 36, who has been teaching political science at East L.A. College for eight years, said she will run for Huizar's school board seat if he wins his race to replace Villaraigosa on the City Council. Calanche said one of her closest friends, Monica Rodriguez, who works for the California Assn. of Realtors, is prepared to run for Padilla's council seat if he wins higher office.

"There are a lot of us out here," Calanche said.

Molina recalls that she became interested in politics in the

1970s as a Chicana activist.

"At that time, we were basically outside the system throwing rocks at it," she said. "We've all learned to work within the system. You have to understand the responsibilities and duties aren't just to Chicano power any more."

Molina, who founded a Chicana feminist advocacy group called Comision Femenil de Los Angeles, was one of the pioneers. She won election in 1982 as the first Latina in the state Legislature, in 1987 as the first Latina on the City Council and in 1991 as the first Latina on the Board of Supervisors.

The last two wins were made possible when seats were created after suits challenged districts that diluted the voting strength of minorities.

Term limits and the gradual growth in the Latino vote also opened opportunities to new political talent, said Ricardo Ramirez, a USC political scientist.

The percentage of voters who are Latino reached a record 25% in the May 17 mayoral election, up from 10% a dozen years ago.

Early Latino victories made it easier for those who followed.

"There is a symbiotic relationship that we all have with one another," Villaraigosa said. "It was Alex's [Padilla's] election, the election of Rocky Delgadillo as city attorney, that served to lay the foundation for my own election."

Villaraigosa was backed in the mayor's race by L.A. County Sheriff Lee Baca, Molina, Huizar, Núñez and Padilla. All of these leaders have close working relationships. Huizar, Padilla and Villaraigosa are collaborating on a major education reform initiative.

In addition, Padilla has appeared with Villaraigosa several times, pledging to help his agenda in the council.

Villaraigosa, however, has consistently said he would be a leader for all Angelenos.

"I've always said the Latino agenda is the American agenda," he said. "It's an agenda of jobs and education, safe neighborhoods and healthcare."

Said Ibarra: "One of the great political myths is that there is a Latino agenda."

The success of Villaraigosa and others, in fact, has much to do with their work to build multi-ethnic coalitions by pushing broad-based agendas that appeal to white, black and Asian voters as well as Latinos, experts said.

"Although we all happen to be Latino, all of us in these positions push a very inclusive agenda that's very important for the well-being of the city as a whole," said Huizar, who recently pressed the L.A. Unified board to require college prep courses for all high school students.

That approach sometimes also means staying away from issues that might interest Latino voters but alienate others.

On the campaign stump, Villaraigosa did not voluntarily bring up hot-button issues, such as immigration.

When asked, he said he supported allowing illegal immi-

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*'I've always said the Latino agenda is the American agenda.'*

**Antonio Villaraigosa,**  
Los Angeles mayor-elect

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### Education Is Seen as a Priority

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grants to acquire driver's licenses as a public safety issue, but he countered that controversial proposal with the caution that immigration laws must be obeyed.

"We have every right to enforce our laws," he said last week. "I believe in a great America we should always enforce them, while observing the civil rights of people."

Ramirez, the USC political scientist, said Latino politicians don't often go out of their way to advertise their views on immigrant rights issues or immigration reform "because it's a touchy subject. You are bound to upset somebody when you talk about it."

The new generation of leaders may not tout a "Latino agenda," but the dramatic transformation of the city's political landscape has begun to shift the focus on efforts that could pull more Latinos into the middle class, such as education and healthcare reform.

"Polls show that way above everything else, education is a priority issue for the Latino community," Ramirez said. "Latinos

still see their kids in a sub-par system."

Reforming L.A. schools would affect the lives of whites, African Americans and Asians, but it would disproportionately affect the lives of Latinos, who make up more than 70% of its students, according to district figures.

"We have a significant issue there when over 50% of Latino students don't graduate," said Raul Ruiz, a professor of Chicano studies at Cal State Northridge.

Ruiz is not surprised that Villaraigosa, Padilla and Huijar have made education reform a high-profile issue.

Villaraigosa proposed earlier this month that the mayor be given the power to appoint all seven school board members, who are currently elected. He has also endorsed a proposal by Padilla and Huijar to form a commission to look into the role city officials should play in running the traditionally independent L.A. Unified.

The panel was proposed by Latino leaders with a personal connection to the state of city schools. "I'm a product of the LAUSD. Antonio is a product of the LAUSD," noted Padilla, who graduated from San Fernando High School. Villaraigosa graduated from Roosevelt High in Boyle Heights.

Community leaders also say a new focus on improving public healthcare stems from the election of Latino politicians who have seen what the lack of

healthcare does to the poor.

Villaraigosa made healthcare an issue in the mayoral campaign, even though the city does not have much direct involvement in providing such care. He has proposed a plan to help low-income residents buy low-cost Canadian medicine.

"A lot of this is they have lived through some of the problems that affect the Latino community," said Ruiz.

As a child, Villaraigosa was paralyzed from the waist down by a benign tumor in his spinal column that was eventually removed but has left him with chronic pain.

One test of the Latino leadership in the eyes of some community activists will be whether it can expand the Latino middle class by bringing more jobs to Los Angeles.

"There certainly has to be a lot more advancement for Latinos in the economic field," Huijar said. "Political empowerment doesn't necessarily mean economic empowerment at this time."

Villaraigosa recently helped settle a 14-month contract dispute between unionized hotel workers, many of them Latinos, and major hotel owners. In announcing the agreement, Villaraigosa pointedly urged organizations that sympathized with hotel workers to bring their conventions to L.A., mentioning the National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights group.

Villaraigosa and some of the

city's other Latino leaders will be contending with difficult local issues even as they wrestle with the demands of their growing state and national stature.

As the first modern-era Latino mayor of the nation's second-largest city, Villaraigosa captured imaginations across the country. Newspapers in Texas, which has no shortage of Latino politicians, heralded him as "the face of Latino power."

"The face of America is changing, and I think it's not unimportant that you have a person who has come up through the ranks and the streets of the city and is in a position to... lead it," said Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), a former presidential candidate and a friend of Villaraigosa. "I think that means something to people."

Villaraigosa's profile will be magnified when he exercises his option as mayor to take over the MTA chairmanship. Padilla also will see his profile grow in October, when he takes over as president of the League of California Cities.

As more Latinos fill political offices in Los Angeles and across the nation, their success has had a positive influence on the way Latinos feel about becoming involved in the political process, said Hector M. Flores of Dallas, president of the League of United Latin American Citizens. "It has put Hispanics up in the stars," he said, "in terms of the possibilities that are there for them now."