

# A Political Machine That Creates a Sense of Belonging

By Xandra Kayden

Selecting a presidential candidate is a problem for any political party, but so is sustaining the party at the grass roots. What happens there largely determines popular commitment to the political system.

There are many reasons for the demise of party influence at the local level, but there is a new experiment in Los Angeles that, if not a resurrection of the party machine, is as close as you can get to one in a nonpartisan world. It is the Empowerment Congress, created four years ago by Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas and Anthony Thigpen, in the 8th Council District.

Whatever evils party machines brought to U.S. cities, they were powerful mechanisms for integrating individuals and communities into turn-of-the-century politics. This tradition spawned many generations of committed partisans who believed in the political system. They felt there was a place for them, their families and their communities.

By contrast, every immigrant group in Los Angeles today is left to its own

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devices in learning how to adjust to and cope with the new world. Organizations that could pilot and ease their integration lack the power to do so. "No one listens to us," almost every organization in Los Angeles says. "We have no access." If political parties can't be recreated, something akin to them must be created, and that is the genius of the Empowerment Congress.

The congress divides the council district into four sectors, which, in turn, are divided into smaller units, down to the neighborhood level. The constituency includes block clubs, churches, residents, businesses and community-based organizations. There are 75 elected leaders; the issues they work on percolate up through the structure. Each sector also has a member of Ridley-Thomas' staff working with it, providing necessary logistical help. The leaders meet regularly within their sectors and within the district.

Recently, more than 500 attended the 4th annual "congress of the whole district." Besides the plenary session, it featured workshops on economic and community development, accessing City Hall and combating gang violence. There are continuing districtwide councils on community standards and community safety, and smaller ones on neighborhood development and planning. The district office provides not only a place for meetings, but also learning opportunities, such as Spanish-language training, to



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make their neighborhoods work better.

The 8th district is one of the most ethnically and economically diverse areas in the city. It is predominantly black and about one-third Latino, with Asians and whites making up the rest. It includes the memorable intersection of Florence and Normandie, where Reginald O. Denny

was beaten in 1992, and the highest concentration of African American wealth in the nation. It is also the district where Alfredo Perez was shot in the head while teaching at Figueroa Elementary School. But the 8th is also home to an organization that could rebuild community faith in government because it is a link to government. It is politics at its best—being the intermediary between citizens and government.

Supermarkets have been built, and a Broadway has been turned into a Macy's, in this store-poor community. Mark Durrell, an off-duty policeman, created the first Little League ever in South-Central, with the help of his friends and the Empowerment Congress. The lesson in these accomplishments and many more is an important one for every diverse community in Los Angeles County: pick issues carefully; focus on what unites people.

Last year, Councilman Ridley-Thomas was reelected with 89% of the vote. When asked what would happen when he is forced to leave office because of term limits, community leaders have a ready answer: No one can win unless he or she has the support of the Empowerment Congress.

Is the congress a machine? Certainly. But its potential for the kind of corruption that was so pervasive in urban machines a half century ago doesn't exist anymore. No powerful organization will please or

benefit everyone, however honorable. This does not mean they are unnecessary. The decline of local political parties has had serious consequences for the decline of citizen participation and belief in the political system.

The keys to the long-term survival of the Empowerment Congress include the staff support that Ridley-Thomas provides (four full-time professionals plus clerical support); a real devolution of power so that the organizations that comprise the congress have a common purpose; and careful attention to the development of congress leaders, which would enable them to empower their communities. Another key is not letting itself get carried away with the personal agendas of those who would use it for their own advancement.

Will it work? It has in other cities, though none as large as Los Angeles. The net effect, according to a study by Jeffrey Berry, Kent Portney and Ken Thomson in a book titled "The Rebirth of Urban Democracy," is that those at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale have a greater feeling of empowerment. What those scholars would not have realized about Los Angeles is that no one here has a feeling of empowerment. Believing that you can make a difference is the first step toward believing that you belong to a community. The 8th district is an important model for the entire city. □