

Elite and Electoral Coalitions: An Analysis of the Secession Campaign in Los Angeles

Abstract

On November 5, 2002, Los Angeles voters rejected Measures F and H, which proposed to break Los Angeles into as many as 3 smaller cities: A downsized City of Los Angeles, a City of San Fernando Valley, and City of Hollywood. The paper focuses on the Valley secession campaign and explains where and why elite coalitions formed, and why each was successful or unsuccessful in mobilizing electoral coalitions. The paper highlights the importance of studying the interplay between elite and electoral coalitions. It is argued that the secession election is emblematic of the current state of coalition building in Los Angeles in which short-term alliances or ‘anti-regimes’ form to prevent, rather than advocate, major political change such as secession. Some implications for future coalition politics in Los Angeles are discussed.

On November 5, 2002, residents in the City of Los Angeles voted on not one, but two, secession proposals, Measure F for San Fernando Valley and Measure H for Hollywood. Overall, voters resoundingly defeated both Measure F, 67 percent to 33 percent, and Measure H 69 percent to 31 percent. However, Measure F passed in the Valley with a 51 percent majority.

Simply bringing the issue to a vote represented an historic accomplishment of an unusual ‘small property’ coalition of mostly white small business and homeowners (Lo, 1990). Calling themselves Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment (Valley VOTE), the group faced long odds in confronting a powerful anti-secession coalition of regional business elites, government officials, public employee unions, and ethnic and non-profit groups. Mayor James Hahn led the main anti-secession group, the L.A. United, which far outspent secessionists in the weeks leading up to the election.

Primarily an effort to reconfigure coalitional power in Los Angeles, the secession campaign offers a unique case study of the current state of coalition politics in Los Angeles. The paper¹ explains why elite coalitions formed to push for or against secession and why they were successful or unsuccessful in mobilizing electoral coalitions. Emphasis is placed on studying coalitions as an interplay between elite and electoral coalitions. It is argued that the secession election is emblematic of the current state of coalition building in Los Angeles in which ‘anti-regimes’ form to prevent, rather than advocate, major policy change such as secession. Because new institutional arrangements pose barriers to sustained leadership, durable coalitions such as existed under Bradley may be a thing of the past in Los Angeles. The city’s new coalition politics is characterized by formation of ‘anti-regimes’ that mobilize to protect existing power arrangements. Finally, it is proposed that the major fault lines of future coalition battles in Los Angeles will be drawn less around race and ethnicity, and more around class and place-based conflicts between small property coalitions and growth elites over land development.

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URBAN COALITION LITERATURE

In Peterson's felicitous phrase "urban politics is above all the politics of land use" (Peterson, 1981). We might add to Peterson's dictum the notion that urban politics has always been about *the process of building coalitions* to govern land use. Indeed hardly any strain of the urban literature does not relate at least indirectly speak to the question of coalition building.

PRO-GROWTH COALITIONS

Traditional debates about "who rules?" speak directly to questions of urban coalition building. Elite theorists such as Hunter (1953; 1980) argued that cities are governed by insular business-dominated coalitions along with government officials – a power elite. Other scholars rushed to the defense of American democracy to argue that power in cities was not concentrated, but rather diffused and fluid, allowing for a variety of coalition partners to form on any particular issue (Dahl, 1961).

Recent theorists offer a more nuanced take on much the same debate. They generally argue that cities are governed by "informal arrangements that surround and complement the formal workings of governmental authority" (Stone, 1989:3). Like elite theorists, regime scholars view business interests as the dominant entity in these alliances. However, they generally distance themselves from traditional elitists by acknowledging important limits on business influence resulting from the political mobilization of well-organized opposition.

The inability to fashion a single all-encompassing explanation of urban power has prompted scholars in this tradition to generate a typology of urban ruling coalitions. Stone identified the "corporate" regime (similar to Elkin's "entrepreneurial regime") which consists of major downtown corporations that dominate development decision-making in the city. This perspective generally argues that due to the inherent systemic failure of popular control, cities are "unduly hospitable to the preferences of businessmen concerned with land use..." (Elkin, 1987:6).

Writing from a political economy perspective, Peterson (1981) also found that cities were likely to be governed by business interests, not because of systemic failures, but rather due to a logic of capital mobility over which cities have little or no control. In Peterson's "survival of the fittest" account of urban politics, cities that engage in redistribution and other anti-business policies are likely to be squashed by the invisible hand.

Theorists of urban growth have also made important contributions to coalition studies (Molotch 1976, Logan and Molotch 1987, Gottdeiner, 1985). This well-known model argues that local ruling coalitions are properly conceived as "growth machines," operated for the most part by a "mosaic of competing land interests capable of strategic coalition and action" (Molotch, 130). According to this theory, alliances of government and business (mostly real estate) elites – growth machines – have a shared interest in maximizing a city's productive land use, often at the expense of the public good.

For the most part, there is general consensus that lasting, durable power in cities is likely to be linked in one way or another to private economic power acting in concert with government officials. Little is made, however, of the role that electoral coalitions play in sustaining elite ruling coalitions.

SLOW GROWTH COALITIONS

Urban scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the formation of slow-growth coalitions. Although both regime and growth machine theorists view urban politics as a game dominated by business interests, both take into account the mobilization of anti-growth or progressive forces that mobilize to fight external threats. According to Stone, these "progressive" regimes¹ are openly hostile to short-term business gains and are concerned with preserving historic amenities, planned growth, environmental quality, and ensuring cultural diversity and quality of life (Stone, 1987:272-281). Studies by Stone, Logan and Molotch, Elkin, DeLeon (1992), Gottdiener (1985), Vogel and Swanson (1990), and others find that because of the transitory nature of growth threats, such "anti-regimes" are far more difficult to sustain than

traditional pro-growth coalitions. Still, there is considerable evidence that under the right conditions, slow-growth alliances are a force to be reckoned with in urban politics (Fulton, 1997; Purcell, 1997; 1998; 2001; Diaz, 1994).

MULTI-RACIAL COALITIONS

Much of the direct literature on urban coalitions revolves around questions of minority political incorporation. The thrust of this inquiry seeks to explain the conditions under which multi-racial coalitions form or fail to form. Early scholarship in this tradition sprang from debates during the Civil Rights Movement about how best to achieve Black political incorporation. Some argued that durable Black empowerment could only be achieved without dependence upon other ethnic groups, particularly liberal whites. During the 1980s in the City of Boston, for example, supporters of the minority community of Roxbury's secession from the city argued, "No benevolent white hand will pull up the black people. *We* have to take power" (Doherty, 1986). According to this view, although liberal whites may occasionally support Black causes when short-term interests converge, whites will eventually succumb to racial or other appeals to protect white interests. For Blacks, lasting power is not likely to be achieved in partnership with other groups (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967).

A number of scholars writing about Western cities have taken issue with this narrow view of ethnic coalition building, arguing that what may be true for traditional eastern cities may not be true elsewhere. Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's (1984) landmark study of political incorporation in ten Northern California cities concluded that bi-racial electoral mobilization had improved the political representation and social conditions of Blacks. The authors sounded a cautionary note, however, emphasizing that increased minority representation did not necessarily translate into sustained policy influence. However, re-examining the state of coalition building and minority empowerment in those cities, the authors struck a more positive note, concluding that where Blacks formed successful alliances with whites, they "went within a decade from

virtually complete exclusion to positions of substantial equality...” (Browning Marshall and Tabb, 2003, p. 30).

Sonenshein’s *Politics in Black and White* (1993) also provided a more upbeat view of cross-ethnic coalitions. The study advanced our understanding of coalitions by modeling the conditions under which sustained bi-racial alliances might emerge. Sonenshein’s account of Los Angeles’ Bradley coalition – primarily between South Central Blacks and Westside Jews – concludes that a shared liberal ideology, mutual self-interest, and trust among community leaders forged during the Civil Rights Movement helped sustain Bradley’s five terms in office. According to Sonenshein, a confluence of factors, including an aging Bradley, political scandal, and divergent interests over growth and other issues finally ended this bi-racial alliance in 1993.

Like Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984), Sonenshein found that the benefits of the Bradley *regime* did not always translate into benefits for the Bradley *coalition*. One of Bradley’s most important economic legacies, downtown redevelopment, offered few tangible benefits to minority communities. Forced to ally with growth elites in order to carry out major policy initiatives, Bradley’s major redevelopment initiatives resulted in “uneasy coexistence with the minority-liberal coalition that sustained its electoral success” (Sonenshein, 2003:60).

In his critique, Regalado went further, stating that the extent of minority incorporation under Bradley was “oversold” and “symbolic.” He concluded that despite winning some representation, the city’s communities of color still “are not politically incorporated” (Regalado, 1998, pp. 396). These divergent assessments highlight the need to draw sharper distinctions both between elite and electoral coalitions, as well as between elite coalitions and regimes. Though elite coalitions may control the formal levers of power, it is in concert with the informal power of non-governmental elites that governing regimes actually rule.

THE SECESSION CAMPAIGN: LOS ANGELES’ NEW COALITION POLITICS?

As Purcell (1997) argued, the resurgence of secession movements during the 1990s can be attributed in part to the collapse of a strong governing regime in Los Angeles. At base, secession

was an argument to fill the power void by narrowing the scope of conflict in Los Angeles' increasingly diverse and competitive political environment. Sparked by resurgent secessionist agitation in the San Fernando Valley in 1996, secession furor surfaced in virtually every community in the city during the late 1990s.

The most well organized effort emerged in the Valley, while 'sister' movements soon developed in Hollywood and San Pedro-Wilmington.² Signature-gathering efforts by groups in Hollywood and San Pedro-Wilmington followed Valley VOTE in forcing a county agency – the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) – to study whether the question of secession could be placed before voters. LAFCO's Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis found that San Pedro-Wilmington's small tax base was insufficient to sustain cityhood and thus only the efforts in comparatively wealthier Valley and Hollywood were allowed to proceed.

The following section analyzes efforts at the elite level to build coalitions around the issue of secession. It is argued that secession forged two fundamentally opposed elite and electoral coalitions in a struggle emblematic of future coalition politics in Los Angeles.

[Insert Map of City of Los Angeles about here]

ELITE COALITIONS: THE SECESSIONISTS

Discontent with the center has been a recurring theme in Los Angeles history, and San Fernando Valley has been the most predisposed to pursue secession as an empowerment strategy. After almost forty years of informal sporadic secessionist agitation in the Valley, the first political movement, Valleywide Better Government Committee, emerged to push for Valley independence from 1961-1963. After its collapse, a second effort, Committee Investigating Valley Independent City/County (CIVICC), emerged from 1975-1978 (Hogen-Esch, 2001; 2002).

Both were chamber of commerce-led efforts protesting poor services, inadequate political representation, and the need for local control over development (Addeo, 1961; Marks, 1977, p.

SC-2). Notably, the CIVICC effort emerged within the context of two important trends: 1) the collapse of the growth consensus; and 2) the rise of the liberal Bradley coalition (Purcell, 1998; Fulton, 1997; Sonenshein, 1993). Thus, like Valley VOTE, CIVICC can be seen as a direct outgrowth of shifting political coalitions, and in particular, the transfer of political power to South Central and the Westside (Hogen-Esch, 2001; 2002).

VALLEY VOTE'S 'SMALL PROPERTY' COALITION

In 1995, Granada Hills Assemblywoman Paula Boland, a former CIVICC board member, introduced AB 2043 to remove the city council veto over secession proposals.³ That legislation died, but the idea spurred Jeff Brain, a Sherman Oaks-based commercial real estate broker, and Richard Close, longtime president of Sherman Oaks Homeowners' Association, to form Valley VOTE and resurrect the goal of secession.

In 1997, Valley VOTE recruited Granada Hills Assemblyman Tom McClintock and longtime Sherman Oaks Assemblyman, Robert Hertzberg, to sponsor a revised secession bill. Signed by Republican Gov. Pete Wilson in 1997, the new law replaced the old standard with the current LAFCO process, which culminates in a dual-majority voting requirement for all 'special reorganizations.'⁴ Eventually, a coalition of Valley business groups and Valley homeowner associations threw their support behind Valley VOTE. In March of 2000, LAFCO announced that the group had successfully gathered the signatures of 25 percent of the area's registered voters, triggering a Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis of secession. After a lengthy process, the LAFCO fiscal study found that secession could be accomplished without fiscal harm to either party, paving the way for the November 2002 election (Hogen-Esch and Saiz, 2003).

Purcell (1997; 1998; 2001) identified several factors to explain the formation of Valley VOTE's unusual coalition of pro-growth business and slow-growth homeowner associations. His explanation centered on a shared philosophy of small government and low taxes, but predicted a Valley ruling coalition fractured along traditional pro-growth vs. slow-growth lines. Others argued that Valley VOTE's coalition was more united, sharing a common land-use

vision, based on preserving the integrity of the Valley as suburban space (Hogen-Esch, 2001; 2002).

Between 1960 and 1990, global economic forces and aerospace industry downsizing significantly reshaped urban space in Southern California (Waldinger et al., 1996; Davis, 1991, Boudreau & Kiel, 2001). Nowhere were these changes more dramatic than in the Valley. By the late 1980s, the region's thriving manufacturing-based economy that had sustained a quintessential white, middle-class automobile suburb in the 1960s and 1970s, had given way to an increasingly low-wage manufacturing and service-based economy reliant upon cheap immigrant labor. In order to house the workers in the new economy, many areas of the Valley and other inner-ring suburbs rapidly densified during the 1980s and 1990s (Davis, 1991; Teaford, 1997).

Demographic and housing shifts were particularly dramatic in areas in the Valley's flatland communities such as Van Nuys, Panorama City, and North Hollywood, where rates of single-family home ownership and the percentage of whites dropped precipitously. Although more affluent areas in the south and west Valley also witnessed changes, they still remained predominantly white,⁵ owner-occupied, single-family areas fiercely resistant to the encroachment of graffiti, gangs, and other urban ills (Davis, 1991).

Just as spiraling property taxes had forged a "small property" tax revolt coalition in the 1970s (Lo, 1990), the area's rapid disinvestment during the 1980s and early 1990s set the stage for a comeback, this time focusing on protecting the Valley's middle-class suburban character. In particular, both coalition partners coveted local government (particularly zoning) power to protect single-family areas and to attract revenue-generating, high-end retail and white-collar firms (Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, 2002a). Implicitly, Valley VOTE's vision also sought to reverse disinvestment trends by excluding or containing undesirable businesses, the poor, and other land-use threats (Hogen-Esch, 2001).

Valley VOTE's coalition of business and homeowner associations represented a significant expansion not only of the potential support for Valley secession, but also of a new and

potentially powerful coalition of interests capable of challenging growth elites. Yet the key question facing this coalition in the election was whether it had brought together sufficiently broad elite support to mobilize a winning electoral coalition.

ELITE COALITIONS: THE ANTI-SECESSIONISTS

Although Valley VOTE had been operating as a political organization since at least 1997, it was not until summer of 2002 that a full-fledged anti-secession campaign began to coalesce. Most latent opposition had waited for the LAFCO study before taking a formal position on secession, while others assumed secession would not make it onto the ballot.

As Purcell predicted (1997; 2001), a growth-centered model anticipated that groups aligned with downtown growth elites would oppose secession: the city's downtown business organizations, most elected officials and other prominent city officials, members of the region's powerful public employee unions, and joined by local non-profit and ethnic lobby groups.

DOWNTOWN/REGIONAL BUSINESS

Since the city's founding, downtown-based interests assumed the helm of Los Angeles' business community. The Owens Valley Aqueduct, San Pedro Harbor, and later the California and the Colorado River Aqueducts and other catalysts for regional growth in the early 20th century were all projects of notorious downtown growth boosters such as the *Los Angeles Times* (Erie, 1992; Fogelson, 1967, Crouch and Dinerman, 1963). Representing a classic "corporate" regime (Stone, 1987) and operating under a wide consensus, its designs for growth were virtually unopposed until the slow-growth revolts of the 1970s and 1980s (Davis, 1991; Purcell, 1997; Fulton, 1997).

In recent years, observers have commented on the decline of the city's traditional business elite (Fulton, 1997; Boudreau and Kiel, 2000; Sonenshein, 1993; Davis, 1991; Purcell, 1998). Victims of Petersonian (1981) capital mobility, many of downtown's largest corporations – including the *Los Angeles Times* – have either moved operations elsewhere, been swallowed up

by a larger conglomerates, or both. However, despite the decline of the downtown business elite, most agree that a regional business class has begun to fill the power void⁶ (Davis, 1991).

After initially taking a ‘wait-and-see’ approach, downtown and regional business interests assumed active roles in opposing secession. Groups such as the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the Central City Association (CCA), and the Los Angeles Realtors Association, as well as the shadowy Los Angeles Business Advisors (LABA),⁷ a hybrid organization of downtown and regional business elites, all opposed secession.

Secession threatened a number of growth elite interests. First, secession jeopardized their vision of a vibrant downtown (Crouch and Dinerman, 1963; Davis, 1991). From redevelopment projects under Bradley to more recent success in attracting Staples Center, a new cathedral, a newly retrofitted City Hall, the Disney Concert Hall, redevelopment of the Figueroa Corridor, and a host of other downtown projects, secession would have cutoff downtown redevelopment from Valley tax dollars.⁸ Second, business feared secession might reinforce images of a city again embroiled in political, race and class turmoil.⁹ Finally, secession threatened to further fragment land development politics, and place downtown business in competition with a new, powerful – and possibly hostile – Valley growth alliance.¹⁰

THE POLITICAL CLASS

In 2001, Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn assumed the mantle as chief spokesman for keeping the city together from out-going mayor Richard Riordan. Like his predecessor, Hahn made numerous appearances throughout the city to denounce secession as a ‘hairbrained idea’ and a ‘disaster of Biblical proportions’ (McGreevy, 2002b). Before leaving office, Riordan even solicited longtime friend LA Cardinal Roger Mahony to assemble a group of area religious leaders to question the morality of secession (Sheppard, 2002b). Amid heightened political tensions with Black leaders over the recent dismissal of Police Chief Bernard Parks, Hahn eventually won over former Laker-turned-developer Ervin “Magic” Johnson to the anti-secession team. The Los Angeles City Council, especially Council President and Valley resident Alex

Padilla, also took on leading roles. Most of their anti-secession arguments emphasized one of three themes: 1) clichés such as “a city is stronger united than divided”; 2) raising the specter of higher taxes and diminished services; or 3) denouncing secession as white flight.

In short, secession threatened the city’s political establishment, particularly the Mayor and City Council, whose members are often accused of ruling 15 quasi-independent fiefdoms. During the charter revision effort from 1997-1999, a majority of the Council had opposed reforms ranging from increasing the size of the council, to increasing mayoral power, to decentralizing land use authority. As the ultimate challenge to existing power arrangements, secession unified the political establishment like few other issues could.¹¹

PUBLIC EMPLOYEE UNIONS

Logan and Molotch (1987) identify public employee unions as frequent and stable growth machine partners. Although often at odds with business and government officials over working conditions, pay and benefits, the fortunes of public employee unions are nonetheless often tied to a larger growth agenda that secession threatened to undermine.

City unions such as the Service Employees International Union Local 347, the city’s largest public employee union offered several reasons to oppose secession. First, it feared secession would harm its organizational capacities by splitting its workers into two or more unions. Second, unions feared a new Valley city would seek to undermine the city’s living wage law and contract to cheaper private firms, eroding the standard of living of union workers (Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, 2002).

As with business interests, unions also coalesced regional opposition to secession as the powerful County Federation of Labor joined the fight against secession. In perhaps its most effective political maneuver, union officials publicly threatened to withhold future political support from anyone announcing their candidacy for office in the proposed Valley city. Many observers believe the warning forced State Senator and popular Valley Latino Richard Alarcon (D-Sylmar) and others to rethink plans to run for Valley mayor. The threat helped deprive

secession supporters the legitimacy that high profile candidates such as Alarcon would have lent. Lacking candidates with name recognition or credibility with East Valley leaders and voters, the secession campaign faltered badly in trying to broaden the measure's appeal beyond its West Valley base. Finally, the lack of viable candidates muted media coverage, severely constraining secessionists' ability to raise funds and mount an effective campaign.

ETHNIC/NON-PROFIT GROUPS

Leading up to the vote, groups such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), Los Angeles' National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as non-profit groups such as Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, actively sided with the anti-secession coalition. These interests charged that a new Valley city would likely be less supportive of city government programs that benefit the poor, seniors, the disabled, and minority communities (MALDEF, 2002; Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, 2002).

On the important question of housing, such groups feared aggressive code enforcement of garage and other illegal units, and other types of housing violations in a new city. Whether the new city would retain the city's rent control ordinance also emerged as a prominent issue. These groups pointed to many secession leaders' connection to real estate interests and history of opposition to tenant protections. More generally, ethnic and housing advocates charged that a new Valley city would be less open to citing affordable units in the area's single family neighborhoods, imposing further social costs on communities already burdened with higher housing densities.¹² As with union opposition, ethnic and non-profit groups also cited concern that the new city would not honor existing living wage, worker retention, domestic partner, and a host of social service and job programs benefiting the city's poor. Finally, these groups also voiced concern that secession would negatively impact city services (MALDEF, 2002; Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, 2002).

KEEPING L.A. UNITED

Leading up to the secession vote elite opposition coalesced, and began operating on several fronts. Although several city unions as well as City Council members Garcetti, LaBonge, and Pacheco had organized separate efforts, the largest and most well-funded group that formed to fight secession was Mayor Hahn's L.A. United. On the fundraising end, the group alone raised nearly \$5 million to defeat secession.¹³ Underscoring the political class' alliance with business, L.A. United's contributor list read like a 'who's who' of downtown business elites. Topping the list were two of the region's most prominent developers and political insiders, Ed Roski, and Eli Broad.¹⁴ Roski's firm, Majestic Realty, a veteran of numerous downtown redevelopment projects, topped the list with a \$250,000 donation. Billionaire developer Eli Broad contributed \$100,000. Other notable contributions came from British Petroleum,¹⁵ and several of the city's largest construction and lobbying firms (McGreevy, 2002b).

The financial support of city unions was also critical to L.A. United. The city's largest police union, the Police Protective League, donated \$100,000, and thousands more in independent expenditures and precinct walking to defeat secession (McGreevy, 2002b). L.A. United's contributor list also included donations from several non-city unions with city contracts including the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (\$50,000), and the Southern California District Council of Laborers (\$25,000). Even United Teachers of Los Angeles, which had helped defeat a November 2001 ballot measure by Carson-area communities to secede from the dysfunctional Los Angeles Unified School District, chipped in \$10,000 (Rabin and McGreevy, 2002; Barrett, 2002). Secession's threat to upset the balance of power in Los Angeles brought together growth elites and ethnic and non-profit groups into a formidable political alliance determined to defeat Measures F.

ELECTORAL COALITIONS: THE SECESSION VOTE

The task facing secessionists was daunting. Under state law, secession differed from a municipal incorporation in that the measure needed a majority both in San Fernando Valley, as

well as a majority in the city as a whole, including the Valley. Essentially, secessionists needed to conduct two entirely separate political campaigns, with one message targeting voters in the Valley, and another targeting voters in remaining areas of Los Angeles. The central problem was in selling secession to the Valley without conveying to the rest of Los Angeles that the benefits would come at their expense. Both campaigns would have to be conducted in one of the nation's most expensive media markets. In addition, supporters faced the burden of explaining to voters a dizzying array of uncertainties surrounding secession.

Unlike supporters of Measure F, the anti-secession coalition had a relatively easy task. Opponents only had to raise sufficient uncertainty about higher taxes and the impact on city services. Results show that the anti-secession campaign largely resonated both in Los Angeles, but also with liberal and minority voters in the Valley's eastern half, a key battleground in the election.

THE VOTE IN SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

As seen in Table 1, Measure F won a bare 51 percent majority in San Fernando Valley. The result was disappointing for secessionists because polls had consistently shown public support there in the 60 percent range prior to the election. Moreover, there was a glimmer of hope even on election day that low turnout in the rest of the city, combined with high Valley turnout, might translate into victory.¹⁶ In one regard secession supporters got their wish. The election was one of the lowest turnouts on record for a November election, due in large part to public distaste for a gubernatorial election pitting unpopular incumbent Governor Gray Davis against his uninspiring Republican challenger Bill Simon. Turnout in Los Angeles ended up a dismal 39 percent citywide. However, despite the historic secession vote, only 44 percent of Valley voters made it to the polls, far fewer than supporters needed (Bebitch-Jeffe, 2001).

**Table 1
Results of Measure F**

	'yes' Votes	Percent 'yes'	'no' Votes	Percent 'no'
SFV	136,737	51%	132,831	49%
Remaining Los Angeles	68, 813	20%	283,914	80%
City Total	205,550	33%	416,745	67%

Source: Los Angeles City Clerk

As seen in Figure 2, Measure F passed with highest support coming from the heavily white, wealthy, and conservative northwest Valley. Neighborhoods in Granada Hills, Chatsworth, and Porter Ranch voted overwhelmingly (many precincts over 65 percent) for secession. Support was also above 60 percent in the West Valley communities of West Hills and Woodland Hills. Historically conservative and largely rural Sunland-Tujunga also voted heavily for secession.

While the movement won its base, it was unable to win over voters in the East Valley. In polls conducted several months before the election, a majority of Valley Latinos had favored secession, the highest among any ethnic group (McGreevy, 2002; Garza, 2002). On election-day, pockets of support could be found in some East Valley neighborhoods in Van Nuys, Valley Glen, North Hollywood and Sun Valley. However, much of the northeast Valley, including heavily Latino Arleta-Pacoima, Sylmar, Van Nuys, Panorama City, and Sun Valley, as well as Southeast communities Sherman Oaks and Studio City voted against secession. Although a sizeable number of Latino ended up supporting secession, enough were swayed by the opposition's campaign emphasizing negative economic and political impacts on Valley Latinos, minorities and the poor to deprive the measure of wide geographic support.

[Insert Map 2 of Measure F Vote by Precinct]

Although the vote was not a clarion call for secession, the overall results partially mask the depth of support for secession in the Valley. As seen in Figure 3, precinct analysis for which data were available reveal that out of a total of 685 Valley precincts, Measure F received less than 40 percent support in only 18 percent of Valley precincts. Moreover, the measure was resoundingly defeated (less than 25 percent support) in only 5 Pacoima-area precincts where Latino union and political leaders had campaigned against secession. The measure also failed to resonate in heavily liberal and Jewish Studio City and Sherman Oaks. Geographically closer to the city center, many Studio City and Sherman Oaks residents maintain economic and cultural ties ‘over the hill.’¹⁷

Despite losing the East Valley, closer inspection of the vote reveals a surprising depth of support for secession in the Valley. If precincts that were in ‘striking distance’ of a majority are taken into consideration, many communities that voted against secession did not do so overwhelmingly. As seen in Figure 3, of the 685 Valley precincts, 82 percent voted 40 percent or higher for Measure F. Thus, closer examination of Measure F highlights the fact that secessionists nearly pulled off a broad victory within the Valley. Had the political campaign been better organized and funded, particularly at the end of the campaign, and had a more diverse elite coalition emerged within the Valley (particularly among Latino and Jewish groups, unions, and the Democratic Party), the results may have been quite different. To be sure, higher support would almost certainly have left secessionists with far more political clout in the aftermath of the election than they otherwise have.¹⁸

[Insert Map 3 of Vote in San Fernando Valley]

VOTE IN LOS ANGELES

Including Valley voters, 67 percent of all city voters went against Measure F. If the rest of Los Angeles is examined separately, 80 percent were against Measure F. The secession campaign had counted on, and received, some sympathy support in Hollywood, San Pedro-

Wilmington, Westchester, and parts of Eagle Rock, all areas that had recently discussed secession. Yet, precinct data reveal that even in those communities, support rarely surpassed the 30 percent level. South of Mulholland Drive, which separates the Valley from the city, the measure passed in only one Hollywood-area precinct.

Supporters had also hoped that African Americans angry at Hahn, and tempted by the likelihood of increased voting power in a smaller Los Angeles, might be attracted to secession. In the end, arguments emphasizing the loss of tax base and diminished services resonated loudly in South Central, as well as the Westside and Northeast Los Angeles. Wealthier Westside voters, who also voted heavily against, may have also feared they their communities would become the new cash cow for a downsized City of Los Angeles.

Leading up to the election, television ads and direct mail paid for by anti-secession groups highlighted fears of higher taxes, suggesting that secession was “a gamble not worth taking.” The most frequent television spot portrayed a spinning roulette wheel with bold red and black letters warning of “no rent control” and “higher Department of Water and Power rates” (Sheppard, 2002). Unlike proponents, anti-secession arguments could be aimed both at voters in the Valley, as well as the rest of Los Angeles.

In contrast, Valley VOTE’s campaign was consigned to public appearances, mailers, and spots on local cable access channels for its media coverage. In its television ad “Imagine” secession leaders portrayed a safer, cleaner and better run city, messages that may have alienated non-Valley residents had they run in the rest of the city (Sheppard, 2002a). Lacking funds for a more sophisticated campaign, supporters could only counter tax and service concerns by referring voters either to its website, or to LAFCO’s several-hundred-page study describing a variety of complex contracting, alimony and other highly technical arrangements to make secession ‘revenue neutral.’ Faced with complex and uncertain answers to a myriad questions, many voters simply said “no.”

Although anti-secession ads did not overtly connect secession with issues of race, political and religious leaders in the city’s minority communities alluded to secession as a

sinister attempt at minority political disenfranchisement. Irene Tovar, Executive Director of the Valley-based Latin American Civic Association, frequently raised the issue in public appearances, asking: “Many of us question the purpose of secession.... We are at the beginning of the first time that minorities have had a chance to get elected officials coming out of their neighborhoods. Will we be turned back?” (Commission on Local Governance for the 21st Century, March 5, 1999).

Coverage in ethnic media such as the Spanish-language *La Opinion* and South Central’s *Los Angeles Sentinel* also echoed community leaders’ fears that secession would undermine Latino and Black political power. Using funds donated by its CEO Jerry Perenchio, Spanish language television station Univision ran ads raising uncertainties about secession (Barrett and Gao, 2002). In addition, Asian American groups such as the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, and the 80-20 Group also opposed secession. Facing tax and service worries, coupled with fears of minority political disenfranchisement, communities of color in the remaining areas of Los Angeles overwhelmingly rejected Measure F.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ELITE AND ELECTORAL COALITIONS

At the elite level, secessionists assembled an historic small property coalition, united by a suburban vision emphasizing middle class themes of low taxes, smaller government and essential services, and defense of single family neighborhoods. The incorporation of increasingly assertive homeowner organizations represented an important expansion of support beyond its roots as a business-dominated project during the 1960s and 1970s. By providing a forum for building mutual trust among elites of these traditionally hostile interest groups, Valley VOTE served as an important vehicle for collective action.

Yet, the failure to expand its elite support beyond the West Valley probably doomed the effort (Hogen-Esch and Saiz, 2003). Unions deprived secessionists of a much-hoped-for synergy from a campaign offering legitimate candidates for Valley offices, while attack ads paid for by business elites undermined the rationale for independence. In particular, Valley VOTE’s

inability to attract established Latino leaders devastated outreach efforts in the East Valley. Voters in the south Valley's heavily Jewish and liberal communities also turned away from secession,¹⁹ despite being a stronghold of Valley VOTE's leadership.

In contrast, anti-secession elites forged strong electoral opposition to secession. A "revisit of the ghost of the Tom Bradley coalition" (Sonenshein and Drayse, 2003), the anti-secession arguments were an easy sell to both elites and voters. At the electoral level, zero-sum arguments about taxes and services made a natural anti-secessionist out of eight out of 10 voters south of Mulholland Drive. Whatever their outstanding disagreements, anti-secession elites could agree on the need to beat back the Valley's challenge. Given the result, does the success of the anti-secession campaign signal a new era in which old alliances reunite and set aside differences to govern the city?

THE FUTURE OF COALITION BUILDING IN LOS ANGELES

As an attempt to reconfigure coalitional power in an era of increasingly diverse and complex politics, the case of San Fernando Valley secession offers an opportunity to assess coalition building in Los Angeles at the start of the 21st Century.

More than a decade removed from Bradley, Los Angeles is still waiting for the next ruling coalition to emerge. As Sonenshein notes, the key transformation of the 1990s was the beginning of the incorporation of Latinos into city politics (2003a, p.73). During the 1990s the general assumption among observers was that because of increasing electoral strength, a Latino version of the Bradley coalition will soon emerge.

Was the Bradley coalition the beginning of a general pattern of bi-racial coalition rule in Los Angeles? Or was its longevity a product of unique historical events, a coalitional recipe we are unlikely to see again? The secession campaign may offer clues by suggesting the contours of a new coalition politics, based less on the formation of coalitions to *advocate* radical change, and more on a politics of retrenchment in which alliances form to *prevent* challenges to the status quo.

RECENT COALITION BUILDING IN LOS ANGELES

So far, the post-Bradley period has been characterized less by coalition stability than ethnic group competition and infighting (Sonenshein, 1994; Sonenshein, 2003a; Wright and Middleton, 2001). Sonenshein identifies this developing pattern in other major cities, describing urban coalitions as now having a “mix-and-match quality” (Sonenshein 2003b, p. 350). Yet it is not entirely clear why this is so.

The two-term tenure of White republican businessman Richard Riordan (1993-2001) produced a mild resurgence of the city’s conservative and pro-business elements. Riordan assembled a broad-based coalition of voters concerned about public safety and governmental efficiency, easily turning back Councilman Mike Woo who had hoped to assume the baton of the Bradley alliance.

In both the 1993 and 1997 mayoral elections, Valley whites and Latinos were the most reliable Riordan supporters, with both groups attracted to Riordan’s tough-on-crime stance in the wake of the 1992 riots, and Latinos to Riordan’s ties to the Catholic Church. Yet few saw this electoral alliance as anything more than a short-term convergence of interests. Riordan did little to lay a foundation for future coalitional stability, bringing neither Latinos nor Valley whites into significant leadership positions in his administration. By the end of his second term, Riordan’s support of Sunshine Canyon Landfill expansion in Granada Hills and his staunch opposition to Valley independence had largely alienated many Valley whites.

Riordan’s tenure was followed by the 2001 election of white liberal James Hahn whose electoral support came from an unlikely coalition of conservative and moderate west Valley whites and liberal South Central Blacks.²⁰ This electoral odd-couple seems to have coalesced around the threat of emerging Latino political power, despite Villaraigosa’s de-racialization strategy (Wright and Middleton, 2001). Like Riordan, Hahn has since destabilized the two pillars of his initial electoral coalition. Hahn’s withdrawal of support for Police Chief Bernard Parks shortly after the election enraged Black leaders and voters. To a lesser extent, his

opposition to secession strained relations with some West Valley voters. Like his predecessor, Hahn has done little to bring in leaders from either South Central or the West Valley into leadership positions. Without any semblance of a governing coalition in place, voters in both areas may be up for grabs approaching the 2005 election.

WHITHER ELITE COALITIONS IN LOS ANGELES?

A number of institutional factors now militate against the formation of Bradley-style coalitions in Los Angeles. First, one of the lasting impacts of a 1993 measure limiting any person from serving more than two, four-year terms in any city elected office has been to institutionalize short-term alliances in city politics (Regalado, 1998, p. 393; Jones-Correa, 2001). In the post-term-limit era, politicians are less able to maintain fragile alliances through the sheer force of leadership. Because the political horizon is shorter, many politicians are more concerned with meeting the demands of the most organized constituencies, raising funds for the next election, or looking ahead to their next political office, than nurturing a lasting coalition (Jones-Correa, 2001).

A second and related factor in assessing future alliances is the impact of charter reform, in particular neighborhood councils and area planning commissions, on coalition formation in Los Angeles. Passed in 1999, charter reform's decentralization measures may have taken the steam out of secession, but the new more diffused structure of city government may make elite coalition building more difficult. There is reason to believe that neighborhood councils and area planning commissions may become a training-ground for leaders whose interest and purpose are centered on the defense of place, further factionalizing the city's leadership and making elite coalition building more difficult.

Third, unlike the decades prior to the Civil Rights Era, minority power has become institutionalized in Los Angeles and other American cities. At that time, the return to district elections, and a shared 'outsider status' became part of a larger social movement conducive to the formation of multi-racial coalitions. Although increased representation has not always

translated into power (Browning, et al., 1984; Regalado, 1998), the sense of urgency and willingness to subsume narrow interests to a larger goal has clearly abated. In the meantime, the withdrawal of federal urban funds, combined with the region's declining high-end manufacturing base, has heightened ethnic group competition over increasingly scarce resources such as housing and jobs. Together, these structural changes have made multi-racial coalition formation in Los Angeles far more difficult than in the past.

At least for the foreseeable future, Los Angeles will not be a city with a dominant coalition. Rather, the city is likely to remain composed of many competing anti-regimes that unite when short-term political interests warrant (Sonenshein, 2003b, p. 346). The secession and 2001 mayoral campaigns are two such examples. Although unable to project sustained policy direction for the city, anti-regimes can coalesce to veto proposals such as secession that threaten two or more of the city's influential voting blocks.

In the new politics of retrenchment, Los Angeles' Black community will likely play a critical role. Although small in number, the community's tendency to vote as a block gives it disproportionate influence. Yet, there is tremendous fear about the community's eroding position in city politics. Long denied access to the system, the community's angry reaction to Mayor Hahn's dismissal of Police Chief Parks, the only remaining high-profile Black in city politics, may be illustrative.²¹ Despite his opposition to police reform, voters overwhelmingly elected Parks to represent the city's Eighth District, the last stronghold of black electoral strength in the city.²² Since his election in 2003, Parks has continued to thwart investigations into the Rampart police scandal²³ (Morin, 2003).

In 2001, fear of Latino ascendance became the rationale for the community's electoral alliance with many like-minded Valley whites. During secession, fears of minority disenfranchisement, taxes and services triggered unified Black opposition. As Sonenshein (2003b) notes, Blacks were the only major voting block in the city to oppose the 1999 charter reform measure. These examples illustrate that in Los Angeles' new anti-regime politics, fear of

the loss of power means that even groups once at the forefront of urban reform, now stand in its way.

ALTERNATIVE COALITIONS: GROWTH WITH EQUITY VS. SMALL PROPERTY

If Bradley-style coalitions are, for now, a thing of the past, are there other issues or interests that might sustain durable alliances in Los Angeles? Pro-growth policies formed the basis for legendary business-led coalitions in the city from 1900 to the 1960s, eventually becoming partners in populist Yorty, as well as Bradley coalitions (Sonenshein, 1993). History suggests that elements of a new pro-growth coalition will reassemble in Los Angeles. Rather than an insular, downtown business-centered regime, we may anticipate the formation of a more regional, less cohesive alliance of traditional growth interests (Davis, 1991).

To some extent, the heir apparent to past pro-growth coalitions is already settling into place. Some call this new alliance a “growth with equity coalition.” The alliance combines the emergent power of labor unions, non-profit groups such as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, and rising Latino and union political participation, to require living wages and increased benefits for workers as a prerequisite for development projects (Meyerson, 1998). The recent election of pro-union progressives Martin Ludlow (10th District) and Antonio Villaraigosa (14th District) to the City Council strengthens the prospects of this emerging alliance which maintains a solid majority on the city council.²⁴

However, there are also reasons to suspect that, under the right circumstances, an anti-regime may rise to the challenge. Since the late 1960s, slow-growth coalitions of homeowner and environmental groups have occasionally emerged to challenge growth alliances (Diaz, 1994; Fulton, 1997, Purcell, 1998). Currently, the heavily white and affluent West Valley and Westside contain the largest voting blocks of potential slow-growth activism. With the exception of homeowner alliances such as the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Homeowners, historical and ideological differences between these two regions have led to a lack of informal and formal cooperation networks, organizations that are preconditions for durable coalitional

power (Sonenshein, 1993). Yet under the right conditions, such as the 1986 passage of Proposition U during the development boom of the 1980s, this alliance could wield substantial veto-power over development.

Expanding the base of small property mobilization to include Latino and other minority property owners may hold the key to effective future slow-growth alliances in Los Angeles. Although Latino power is increasingly exerted through labor unions, it is far from monolithic. Factionalism between the traditional Latino leadership of the Eastside and the upstart Northeast Valley remains an ever-present obstacle to collective action. Declining ethnic identification among third and fourth generation Latinos, continuing national rivalries among the recently arrived, rising rates of homeownership, and other forms of upward mobility all may hinder ethnic-based alliances in the Latino community. As with prior generations of migrants to Los Angeles, Latinos have largely assimilated the region's legendary suburban ethos (Kotkin and Ozuma, 2002; Rodriguez, 1996). With more concerted efforts to build leadership networks across suburban communities, upwardly mobile Latinos may reject traditional ethnic bloc-voting in favor of joining protectionist small property coalitions.

The battle lines of the secession campaign, which pit growth elites against a small property coalition, may well represent the dominant pattern of durable coalitional formation in Los Angeles in the coming years. As the Valley VOTE case illustrates, if small property coalitions are to be successful, they must expand their alliances beyond middle class, mostly white support networks, and abandon entirely the exclusionary politics that have historically tinged the region's slow-growth politics (Hogen-Esch and Saiz, 2003).

The secession campaign also suggests that minority coalition politics should be studied alongside the general literature on urban politics. Peterson's admonition aside, clearly urban politics is not *only* about land use. As Regalado (1998) notes, much of the interesting and important coalitions are connected with social movements whose policy impacts are felt outside of the electoral arena. But nor is all urban combat necessarily rooted in ethnic conflict.

Marrying the literature on growth and minority coalitions may help lead to a fuller picture of how and why coalitions form, hold, and eventually lose, their grip on power

If secession is to ever return as a viable project, its coalition must expand beyond its white middle class base. Its leadership must lack connection with prior exclusionary movements and better represent the breadth of the Valley's diverse stakeholders. Before such an enterprise is again undertaken, elite coalitions based on mutual trust and equal standing need to be built between various communities in the Valley. The fact that the measure won significant electoral support in many minority Valley communities in spite of organized unified opposition among minority political and religious leaders may give supporters reason for optimism. History suggests that the politics of secession will again return in Los Angeles. The 2002 secession election reveals that the movement's success will depend on years, perhaps decades, of laying a foundation for the emergence of both elite and electoral alliances.

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NOTES

¹ Stone's typology also includes "caretaker" regimes which seek tax and service stability. Stone also distinguishes between middle class and lower class progressive regimes which are concerned with programs for the poor.

² Both adopted the name "Voters Organized Toward Empowerment."

³ Legislation providing for veto power was passed in 1977 to kill the CIVICC movement. Boland, as president of Finally Restoring Excellence in Education (FREE), has also been a central figure in efforts to breakup the Los Angeles Unified School District. Valley VOTE actively supported LAUSD breakup.

⁴ 'Special reorganization' is the legal term for a secession and subsequent incorporation. The new standard, as set forth in the revised Cortese-Knox Act requires a majority in the seceding area, as well as a majority in the entire city.

⁵ The Valley's "white" community is extremely diverse, including large numbers of Persians, Armenians and Jews.

⁶ The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce recently changed its official name to Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, reflecting a more regional approach to economic development.

⁷ Some have argued that LABA, formed in 1996 by 24 corporate executives to foster the regional business environment, is the modern day reincarnation of the Chandler-led corporate oligarchy known as the "Committee of 25" which ruled the city until the early 1970s.

⁸ The issue of downtown redevelopment is one that particularly irks Valley elites. The historical complaint is that the area is a "cash cow" milked to nourish downtown projects, at the expense of Valley improvements.

⁹ Particularly in the wake of the 1992 riots. Boudreau and Kiel (2001) argue that the anti-secession coalition's opposition was due to the need to attract international investment.

¹⁰ As Purcell (1997) notes, for historical reasons the Valley's business organizations such as the United Chambers of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley and the Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley compete with downtown-based business groups such as the LA Area Chamber of Commerce.

¹¹ On July 17, 2002 a Council majority rejected a last-ditch effort to avoid secession by creating an appointed commission to establish a borough system for Los Angeles. The proposal would have been placed alongside the secession question on the Nov. 5 ballot. The Council's resistance to reform was also displayed in its rejection of a separate plan to merely study the possibility of a borough system (Garza, 2002).

¹² Secessionists, many of whom were aligned with free-market oriented real estate interests, lamely attempted to allay fears on the issue of housing by asking all prospective candidates to sign a non-binding pledge promising to retain Los Angeles' existing housing ordinances.

¹³ In the end, Valley VOTE reported that it was outspent nearly 10 to 1.

¹⁴ The two were also involved in a secret last-minute effort to avoid a secession vote by striking a deal with secessionists Richard Close and David Fleming on a borough system. In the end, the negotiations failed. Close and Fleming damaged relations with some Valley VOTE members by appearing to 'sell-out' the secession effort.

¹⁵ Which acquired Los Angeles-based Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) in 1999.

¹⁶ With voters in the remaining Los Angeles voting 80 percent against secession, secession still needed more than 90 percent Valley support in order to tip the balance in the citywide vote.

¹⁷ Media outlets did not conduct any exit polling and therefore individuals reasons for voting against the measure can only be inferred.

¹⁸ Jeff Brain recently resigned as President of Valley VOTE while other secession leaders have assumed a surprisingly low profile.

¹⁹ Sonenshein and Drayse (2003) confirm these findings in their excellent precinct-level regression analysis of the secession vote.

²⁰ In 2003 the City Council voted to officially rename South Central, "South Los Angeles" in order to help disassociate it from negative stigma associated with the area.

²¹ Rather than further alienating the Black community by appointing the city's first Latino police chief, Hahn hired former New York City Chief William Bratton.

²² Jan Perry, an African-American, represents the overwhelmingly Latino 9th District primarily because of relatively high Black registration and turnout. The city's 10th District has a Latino plurality and is represented by Martin Ludlow who is of both Black and Latino extraction.

²³ Parks has refused to meet with members of the Blue Ribbon Rampart Review Panel, headed by respected civil rights attorney Connie Rice, claiming that none of his constituents has asked him to pursue the matter (see Morin, 2003).

²⁴ Only Dennis Zine (District 3), Cindy Miscikowski (District 11), and Greig Smith (District 12) could be considered unreliable supporters of the growth with equity agenda.

Figure 1: Map of City of Los Angeles

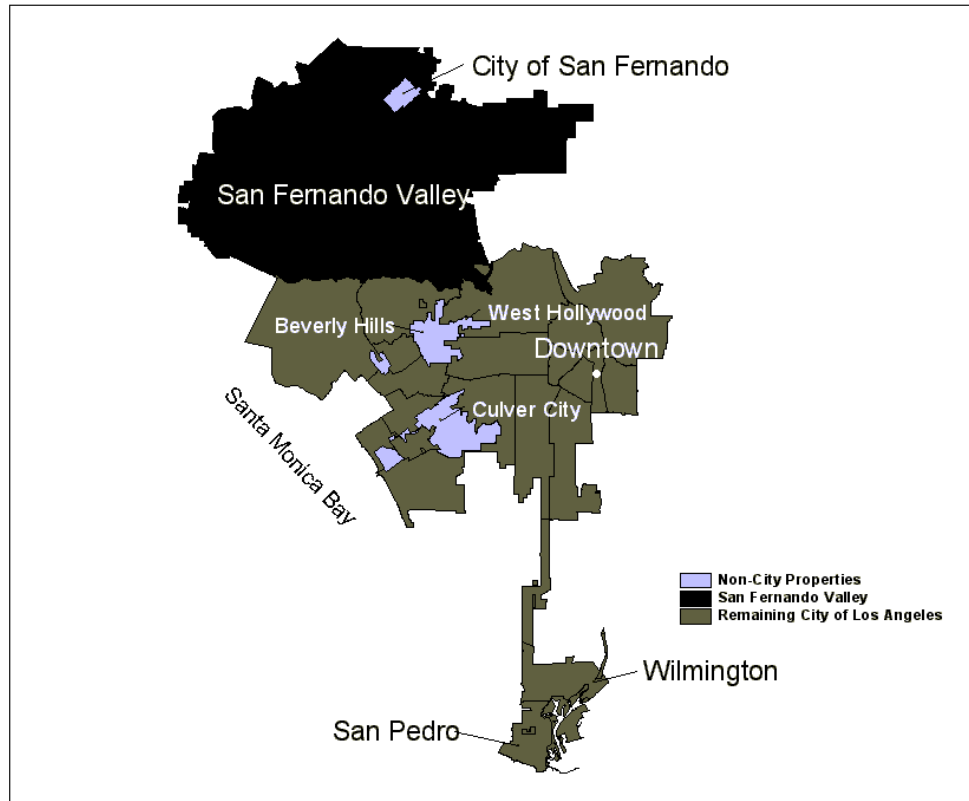
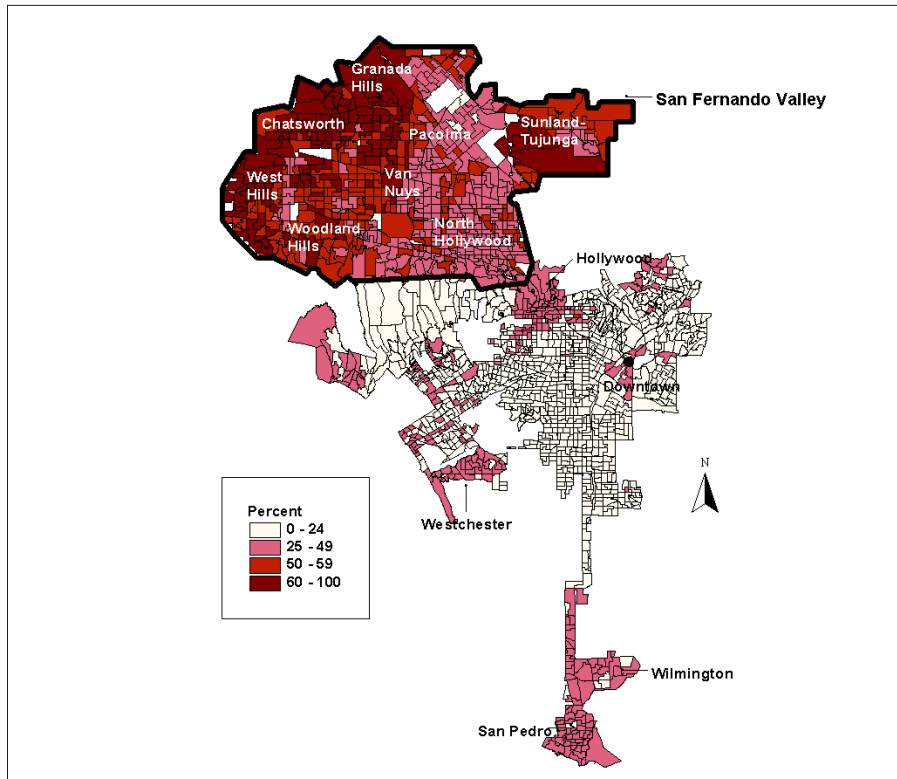


Figure 2: Results by precinct and selected communities for Measure F, Nov. 7, 2002.



Source: County Elections Division. Note: some precinct data are missing.

Figure 3: Precinct support above/below 40% in San Fernando Valley for Measure F, Nov. 7, 2002.

