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Opinion

L.A. was built on zero-sum politics. Can its Latinos chart a new path?

By Miguel A. Santana

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It is particularly painful that Latino leaders are at the center of an ugly scandal about racial representation in Los Angeles, given the hard-fought battle that Latinos waged over decades to gain fair representation in the city's government in the first place.

Now, as the city attempts to heal, the question is: Will the new Latino-led governing majority follow the same zero-sum political framework that for so long benefited Whites. Or will they pursue a new, multicultural, coalition-based governance?

The racial power-brokering apparent in a [taped conversation](#) among three powerful Latino members of the Los Angeles City Council, recorded in October 2021 but only made public this month, is nothing new, nor is it unique to Los Angeles. Rather, it is part of the long American tradition of those in power working to stay in power, often by marginalizing others.

But the particularities of Los Angeles history are important: The modern-day city was built on the premise that by keeping power in the hands of the majority population, the iconic California Dream could be realized for some, while others, primarily people of color, were kept in roles in service to the dream.

That dream is centered on homeownership. And until the 1940s, it was legal in Los Angeles to [deny homeownership](#) to Black, Latino and other people of color, to keep them from buying homes in largely middle- to upper-class neighborhoods. This redlining also allowed the White-majority council to draw district lines limiting the political representation of non-Whites, along with their access to quality education and good-paying jobs. These racist practices cemented the segregated Los Angeles that exists today. Racial disparities persist, and generations of disinvestment in some of the same communities remains evident.

Decades of organizing, power building, coalition work and civil rights litigation have chipped away at this history. Seats for Latino representation on the council and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors — among the most powerful local governments in the nation — came as a [direct result of litigation](#)

where evidence from backroom conversations revealed intentional discrimination based on race. Power wasn't relinquished easily. The case eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court.

Latinos today represent half the [population of Los Angeles](#) and have power at every level of state, county and city government. Many leaders have brought important gains for the Latino community and beyond, including the council members recorded in the leaked audio. Gil Cedillo fought for driver's licenses for undocumented Californians. Nury Martinez, the first Latina to serve as council president, fought for investments to support poor families. Kevin de León championed environmental and climate justice.

In a way, the conversation between the three Latino councilmembers exposed that even those who are champions for racial and social justice can be seduced by power and succumb to the zero-sum framework.

In this difficult moment, I joined Latino civic leaders this week [calling for the resignations](#) of the three councilmembers and demanding that we separate ourselves from Los Angeles's legacy of racist policies. (Martinez has since [resigned](#).) As a community, we must demonstrate that we can govern in a different way — one that is inclusive and based on shared values.

This is the path to justice and fairness, but it is also right as a matter of practical politics. Latinos cannot advance the issues most important to us by ourselves. Police accountability, equitable access to services, good jobs, quality education, access to health care — in all these areas we require multiracial coalitions to make real and lasting progress.

As a Latino community leader, I've seen evidence of Angelenos forging cross-sectoral and multiracial coalitions to bring resources that benefit all. Since the pandemic, nonprofits led by Black, Latino, Indigenous, Asian American and Pacific Islander communities have come together and successfully fought to ensure that federal relief money is directed toward those most in need.

We can only make progress on issues that matter to the Latino community when we ensure that *everyone* in Los Angeles has a voice and is represented fairly. Doing so means holding our Latino leaders accountable.

One immediate way to ensure this is to take the ability to draw district lines out of the hands of those already in power. We should create a truly independent redistricting body whose role is to consider all factors — representation of all communities being one — and set district lines accordingly. And we need to require that those in power accept the district lines without insisting on substantive changes to benefit themselves.

Just as important, we need vibrant civic leadership that is multicultural, grounded in community and willing to raise tough questions when it matters most.

What gives me hope is that much of that leadership has been present since the recording became public. Voices from Latino, Black, Indigenous, [LGBTQIA+](#) and other marginalized communities have joined in a powerful show of solidarity to express their feelings of anger, hurt and betrayal.

The message is loud and clear: Angelenos demand accountability and systemic change. No more backroom deal-making. As Latino leaders, it is our duty to ensure that we break free from hurtful, archaic zero-sum politics.