

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Its economic and social vitality requires that Los Angeles provide more than just a place to live, learn, and work. Los Angeles must also provide a civic community — a place where residents feel connected to the city and to each other. Overcoming interwoven problems such as neighborhood safety, poverty, unemployment, and inadequate schools requires hard work by sustained coalitions and networks that include community organizations, business leaders, government officials, and individuals. Achieving important community objectives is difficult in cities fragmented by intergroup tension and conflict. However, social scientists have found that effective alliances are more likely to develop when individuals and organizations work together to solve collective problems.³³

Indeed, several experts who testified before the Commission identified widespread civic engagement as the cornerstone of good human relations. “The challenge for our city is to bring various races and cultures into the process that we call government,” attorney Carl Douglas observed. “We cannot afford a generation of people who feel detached or disconnected from their city and its leaders.” According to Tony Massengale, Program Director of the Center for Civic Capacity Building, human relations in Los Angeles require widespread opportunities for civic engagement in the city. “Can L.A. be governed?” Massengale asked. “Can all the people in this city have a sense of stake, have a sense of ownership, have a sense of responsibility about making this city not only peaceful, but making this city work?”

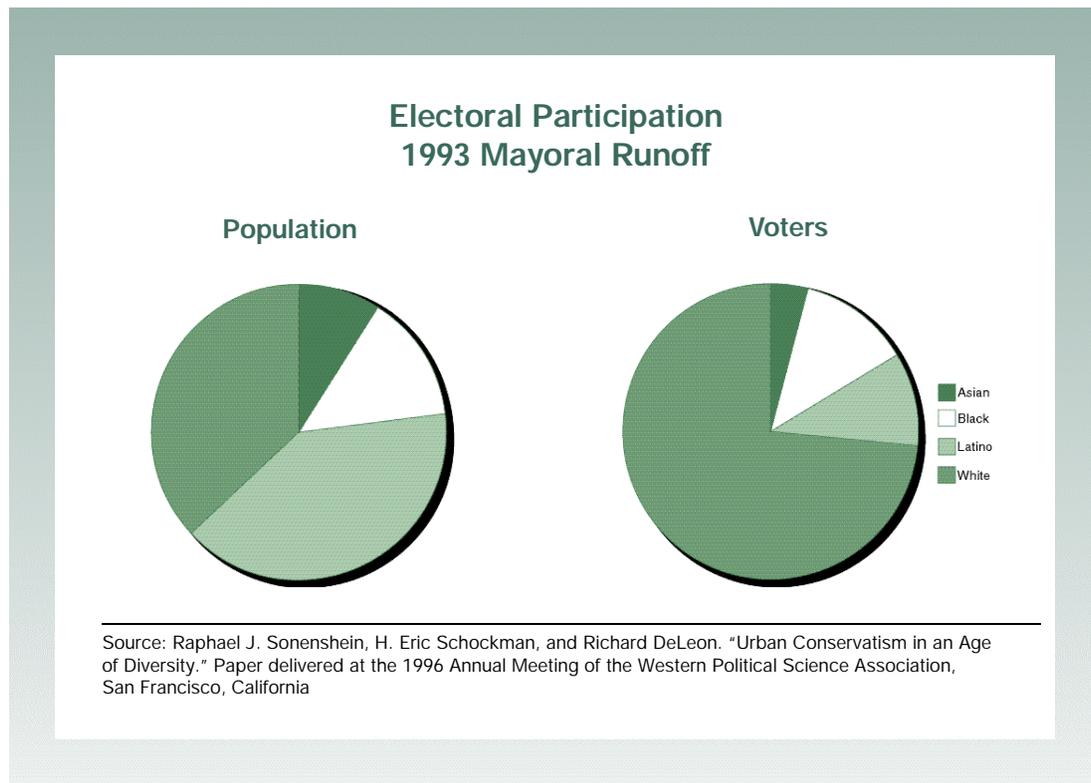
Attorney Virgil Roberts echoed this assessment, telling the Commission that to survive and thrive, Los Angeles must “knit together a real social fabric.”

Voting in municipal elections is an important way to participate in civic affairs. By this measure, political scientist Raphael Sonenshein told the Commission, civic participation in Los Angeles remains anemic. On average, almost three-quarters of registered voters cast ballots in national elections over the past twenty years. In contrast, not even one-fifth of those registered bothered to vote in municipal elections. Sonenshein also told the Commission that the voting rates of Los Angeles’ different ethnic groups vary significantly. The 1993 mayoral runoff drew 45 percent of the city’s registered voters to the polls. The loudest voice in that election came from a shrinking segment of the city’s population. Non-Latino whites, then about 37 percent of the population, cast 72 percent of the

“The challenge for our city is to bring various races and cultures into the process that we call government. We cannot afford a generation of people who feel detached or disconnected from their city and its leaders.”

Attorney Carl Douglas
August 5, 1999 Testimony before the
Human Relations Commission.





votes. Latinos, about 40 percent of the population, cast only 10 percent of the votes. Asians, only 9 percent of the population, constituted an even smaller 4 percent of the voters. African Americans, then 14 percent of the population, cast 12 percent of the votes. Increased Latino mobilization in the 1997 mayoral primary boosted their share of the vote to 15 percent, but this level was still far below their share of the population. The large voting differentials reduce prospects for forging a multiethnic political consensus.

In a city where 37 percent were born outside of the United States, it should come as no surprise that large numbers of residents are not eligible to vote on the issues affecting their communities. In particular, large portions of Los Angeles' Asian and Latino residents are excluded from participating in local elections because they lack American citizenship. The longer immigrants reside in the U.S., the more likely they are to become citizens, to gain the right to vote, and to take an active role in civic life.³⁴ For now, however, vast intergroup differences in voting participation undermine the ability of municipal institutions to mediate adequately among societal interests and to fairly allocate power and resources.

Neighborhood councils, created under the new city charter approved by voters in June 1999, provide a golden opportunity to engage a more representative cross section of Los Angeles' residents in local affairs. Several experts encouraged the Human Relations Commission to provide the neighborhood councils with training in leadership, mediation, and diversity. Without support, neighborhood councils could exacerbate intergroup tension and competition in the city's changing neighborhoods. Sonenshein, who served as executive director of the City's appointed Charter Reform Commission testified, "If you go into this

with your eyes open, you'll see right away that this could become a vehicle for groups to fight over small stakes." Sonenshein warned the Commission, "We can't just roll out the ball and expect people to play nicely. It's going to take tremendous mentoring and organization to support neighborhood councils." To the extent that neighborhood councils expand opportunities for Los Angeles' diverse population to take an active role in local affairs, they will help create the sense that residents' personal fortunes are intertwined with the fortunes of the City.³⁵ The Human Relations staff will work closely with the newly created Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and the neighborhood councils as those bodies begin to operate. With the support of human relations experts, neighborhood councils could help neighbors forge positive relationships across lines of ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and other differences.

