

Represented at Last!: Latinos

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June 14, 2024

A Changing Demographic

The 2020 Census saw the Latinx population in Long Beach climb to over 43% making it the largest ethnic group in the city.

However, Latinos did not always enjoy those large numbers and that, along with the city's longstanding policy of electing representatives without requiring them to live in the area they served, encumbered their ability to ascend to elected office for decades.

At the start of the 1970s, Latinos made up approximately 7% of the city's population and it would be over a decade before the first member of their community was elected to office in Long Beach.¹

However, that decade marked the start of a flurry of immigration to the United States by Central Americans that quickly saw the Latino population rise across the country, especially in large metropolitan areas.

Between 1970 and 2000, the Latino population in the country nearly quadrupled going from 9.6 million in 1970 to 35.3 million in 2000. In LA County, that figure shot up from about 15% in 1970 to 46% in 2000.²

Long Beach and other Los Angeles County cities saw smaller increases in their overall populations, but the share of the city that was Latino rapidly changed over the next few decades.

Long Beach's population increase of Latinos, Blacks and Asians began to chip away at the supermajority of white residents in the city that has been the norm since midwestern farm workers began to settle in Long Beach and created the "Iowa by the Sea" moniker in the early 1900s.³

White residents accounted for nearly three-quarters of the city's population in the 1980s but that quickly dwindled to about 63% by the early 1990s. The Latino population more than doubled during that same stretch, climbing closer to 20% by 1992.⁴

But despite the gains in population, the growing community in the city had failed to see one of its own hold a position of power.

Student activists energized by the Chicano movement in the prior decade and frustrated by the lack of political clout in the city would play a pivotal role in the Long Beach Latino community organizing in the 1970s to improve their lives.

Organizing politically

A federally funded war on poverty in the 1960s laid the groundwork for what would become some of the earliest grassroots organizing in Long Beach.

With money secured through President Lyndon B. Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act, the city established five neighborhood centers to focus on employment, education and other avenues to benefit impoverished communities.⁵

The East Long Beach Neighborhood Center, which came to be known as the Centro de la Raza, served thousands of residents during the 1970s and 1980s. But perhaps more importantly, it helped connect student activists tied to the Chicano political movement who wanted to improve the lives of Latinos living in the city.

Long Beach State University students had picketed alongside the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) led by Cesar Chavez in the late 1960s. Eventually, some of those activists later went on to work at the Centro and even taught courses there.

Future Latino leaders including Carmen O. Perez, Jenny Oropeza, Ron Arias, Armando Vazquez Ramos and Tonia Uranga either spent time working at the Centro before becoming involved in politics or made critical connections with other organizers through it.

Perez, affectionately referred to as “Godmother,” worked her way through the school systems, which she said helped her learn how the city worked before she obtained held public office. Perez was deeply involved in her children’s PTA before being introduced to the Centro and joining Latino organizing groups like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

She gained a reputation for being relentless in pursuing the issues she organized for or against and said that she recognized early on that “Power is never given, it’s taken.”

Perez raised the issue with then-Mayor Ernie Kell that no Latinos were serving on city commissions and he soon after appointed her as the first Latina on the powerful Long Beach Harbor Commission. She was later elected the vice chair of the National Democratic Party, another first for Latinas.

There were other trailblazing Latinas who helped break through the glass ceiling that seemed to exist for the Latino community for decades.

Oropeza would become the first Latina to be elected to the Long Beach Unified School District Board of Education and the Long Beach City Council before leaving to join the state legislature in 2000.

Tonia Uranga served on the council for two terms and she remains involved in local politics as did Vazquez Ramos, who co-founded the Chicano and Latino Studies department at the university and continued to advocate for Latino representation.

But before any of that could happen, the Latino population needed to make their voices heard at the ballot box.

The Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project was launched in 1974 in an effort to register more of the growing Latino population to vote across the Southwestern United States.⁶

The group not only helped to register millions more Latinos in the country but also fought against gerrymandering tactics in states that had drawn political lines to disenfranchise minority votes.

Similarly, Centro employees and residents formed the Long Beach Chicano Political Caucus in the late 1970s to help register Latino voters in Long Beach and to amplify the voice of the community.

The group's early work was spent forging relationships with progressive candidates. Caucus members worked on campaigns for former city Councilmember Renee Simon, an early women's movement advocate when she ran for the California State Senate. They also worked on Governor Jerry Brown's bid to become President in 1980.

One of the first successful campaigns Latinos worked on in the city was that of Jim Wilson, the city's first Black city councilmember who was elected in 1970. Latino organizers at the time said that it was important to unite with other minority groups to create larger, more powerful voting blocks.

Tonia Uranga said that the unity was driven by "anything that would allow for something other than ten white men," which was what the city council had historically been composed of heading into the 1970s.⁷

Perez, who would become the city's first Latino to serve on the powerful Harbor Commission in 1991, organized against the passage of the Briggs Initiative in 1978, a law that would have banned gay and lesbian people from working in California schools.⁸

The joining of forces between Latino organizers and the LGBT community came as politicians and the community itself began to notice the political power that the gay community possessed.

Fresh off of the Stonewall Riots in New York in the 1960s, the gay and lesbian community began to organize in cities across the country.

In Long Beach, its Imperial Court chapter, which is part of one of the oldest and largest LGBTQ organizations in the world, held its first coronation fundraiser in 1971.

By the early 1980s, the community would start its fight to establish the city's first Pride parade, something that city hall initially opposed. Decades later, the city's first Latino mayor would also be the city's first openly gay mayor.

Latino organizations also partnered with neighborhood groups like Long Beach Area Citizens Involved (LBACI) to enact change through the local ballot initiative process.

LBACI was seen as a liberal watchdog group but was part of the Council of Long Beach Organizations that included city employee unions, the National Organization of Women and the Lambda Democratic Club, a group dedicated to protecting the civil rights of all minorities, especially the LGBTQ community.

Proposition X, which was put on the ballot in 1976 after a signature-gathering campaign and it sought to level the political playing field by changing how the city's voters elected their representatives.

For decades, the city elected councilmembers through a citywide process that didn't require members to actually live in the district they represented, but Proposition X would require candidates to live in the areas they served.

This old policy led to elected offices being dominated by white men for most of Long Beach's history with many of the city councilmembers coming from a few affluent neighborhoods.

However, the charter reform achieved through Proposition X would upend that pattern in the decades to come. Women, minorities and members of

the LGBTQ+ would all gain seats on the council after the 1976 approval of Proposition X.⁹

Latinos also worked with LBACI and other groups like the League of Women Voters and the Council of Seniors to successfully create a police oversight commission in the city, something communities across the city said was necessary amid years of complaints of police abuses.¹⁰

The issue was inflamed by a 1989 incident that was caught on a hidden camera by NBC News that showed former police officer turned activist, Don Jackson, having his head pushed through a window by Long Beach Police Department officers.

The groups organized to get the issue before voters and it passed with nearly 58% support.

That ballot measure push also gave rise to a new progressive ally, Alan Lowenthal, who would win a city council seat with the help of Latino organizers.

The change to how voters picked city council members placed a new importance on how political maps were drawn going forward.

Until recently, the city council helped draw the political lines in Long Beach, which opened the door for gerrymandering and other underhanded tactics to help keep incumbents safely in their seats.

But in 2018, an independent commission was created and residents now handle the drawing of new city districts every ten years.

However, with representatives now having to live in the areas that they sought to serve, an opportunity presented itself for Latino organizers to create a district that was saturated enough with Latino voters to give them a viable opportunity to see their first representative elected to the city council.

Breaking through the barrier

While Latino pioneers like Edward Roybal and Richard Alatorre had been elected to city council and state legislative seats decades earlier, Long Beach was approaching the 1990s without seeing similar victories for its Latino voters.

As the Latino population continued to grow in Long Beach during the 1980s, its political clout had yet to manifest. It had been over a decade since district elections were implemented and the group had yet to see one of its own elected to office.

That would change in 1988 when Jenny Oropeza completed a successful campaign to serve on the Long Beach Unified School District board of education, finally breaking the elected office barrier for Latinos in the city.

Oropeza had broad support from sitting city councilmembers, the Long Beach Police Officers Association, Democratic clubs and neighborhood groups like LBACI en route to her 1988 victory, which was preceded by a 1986 charter amendment that switched board elections from citywide to district events.¹¹

The change allowed people who lived in Oropeza's community to vote for her and for a more concentrated campaign within the districts rather than trying to appeal to all voters in the city.

Latino organizers were not done after her victory.

After the 1990 Census was completed, groups like El Concilio, a coalition of Latino business, political and education groups, launched a campaign to register 10,000 new Latino voters and ensure that there was a city council district that had a Latino majority.¹²

The goal; elect the first Latino the Long Beach City Council in 1994.

Future Councilmember Roberto Uranga was part of El Concilio's efforts to register more voters and, like other Latino organizers, became part of LULAC where he ascended to be the state's deputy director of the group.

Being part of these groups helped teach people like the Urangas the inner workings of city halls and public meetings and allowed activists to be better prepared when they would bring an issue to a city council meeting or other governing body.

It allowed them to have an upper hand because they understood the rules even if their political clout had yet to be recognized.⁷

El Concilio successfully fought for a new 1st city council district that included less of the affluent Downtown Waterfront and Alamitos Beach areas and went deeper into West Long Beach and Central Long Beach, areas that historically had more voters of color.

That year, Oropeza and Tonia Uranga were on the ballot seeking to become the first Latinas elected to the city council and despite both of them scoring initial victories, only one would become a member of the body that year.

Perhaps playing in the favor of Latino candidates that year was a controversial statewide ballot measure, Prop. 187, which sought to bar undocumented immigrants from accessing state resources like public education and healthcare.

Prop. 187 roiled Latino activist groups across the state and sparked a youth movement in activism with children young enough to be in grade school taking public stances against the proposition. Protests and student-led walkouts bookended the vote on Prop. 187, which was adopted by voters, but ultimately blocked by the courts.¹³

City officials opposed the proposition because of the immense financial impacts it was projected to have on Long Beach's school system, with an

estimated \$73 million expected to be lost. In a split vote, the city council voiced its opposition to Prop 187.¹⁴

Oropeza scored a decisive victory in June 1994, beating her opponent by over 10 percentage points to secure her 1st city council district seat, but Uranga faced a tougher fight.

On election night she held a 29-vote lead over her opponent, Mike Donelon, more Donelon votes were found shrinking Uranga's lead to seven votes, which prompted him to seek a recount.

The recount swung the election in Donelon's favor by one vote and he took office before a judge ordered a special election to be held in February 1995. Donelon won by over 600 votes and Uranga would have to wait seven more years before taking a seat behind the dais as a member of the council.

Long Beach now has a rule on the books that triggers an automatic recount paid for by the city if a race between candidates is within 0.5% and less than 50 votes. Uranga refers to it as the "Tonia rule."

The loss prevented Uranga from joining Oropeza in the historic 1994 election in becoming the first Latinas elected to the body at the same time but it served as a minor setback. Uranga was eventually elected in 2002 and served two four-year terms on the council.

She continues to work on local issues, most recently organizing with the Long Beach chapter of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, which focuses on economic issues like increasing the minimum wage for low-wage workers.

New leadership but continuing to look for representation

Oropeza's elections to the school board and the city council helped break through the glass ceiling in Long Beach politics, but it was just the first of several electoral victories for Latinos in the city.

As Oropeza exited the city council in 2000 when she was elected to the California Assembly, the body was left without a Latino again. But more victories were on the way.

That same year, Roberto Uranga won a seat on the Long Beach Community College District Board of Trustees, becoming the first Latino to serve on the governing board for the college. Two years later, Tonia Uranga won her bid for the 7th council district seat, a post she would hold for the next eight years.

A historic election in 2014 saw Robert Garcia become the city's first Latino mayor as well as the introduction of two new Latino members to the council with Roberto Uranga and Lena Gonzalez winning their elections.

Garcia's victory broke multiple barriers as he also became the first openly gay mayor of the city, a title he held until 2022 when he left that post to become a member of the House of Representatives.

With power came access to crafting important city policies. Latino leaders have been able to directly affect their communities through votes and by appointing high-ranking city officials who look more like the communities they serve.

As an employee in the city's civil service department, Uranga said he helped create the first bilingual skill pay test in the city. That helped ensure that employees being paid extra for speaking Spanish were fluent and able to assist community members in their native language.

While on the board of trustees, Roberto Uranga helped appoint the college's first Latino Superintendent-President, Eloy Oakley, who served as the college's top executive until being tapped to be the next chancellor of the California Community College system in 2016.¹⁵

When Roberto Uranga was later elected to the city council in 2014, he and his new colleague, Lena Gonzalez, helped select the city's first Latino police and fire chiefs. Gonzalez now serves as the majority leader in the California Senate.

Gonzalez was replaced by Councilmember Mary Zendejas in 2019, and two years into her term, she helped bring a 30-year-old idea to establish a mercado (market) to service the Latino population in the city.

In 2021, the city council unanimously approved a motion to create a Latino cultural district named El Mercado de Long Beach.

The idea was first pitched in the 1990s but funding never materialized.¹⁶

However, the city council approved a five-year, \$4 million investment in the idea in 2022 that could finally bring back the business development, educational and other economic opportunities that the Centro provided 50 years ago.

The project was pushed by Centro CHA, a group formed after the closure of the Centro de la Raza and is headed by Jessica Quintana, who participated in a mural project at the original Centro in 1972.

While Centro CHA has expressed a desire to find the Mercado its own home, it will begin within the Jenny Oropeza Community Center at Cesar Chavez Park.

The 1st city council district has become a dependable seat for Latinos with Oropeza's election in 1994 being followed by Garcia (2010), Gonzalez (2014) and Zendejas (2019) but the rest of the council seats have not matched Latino population growth.

But preserving Latino voting power hasn't come without its own fight. Latino groups across the state have sued numerous times over district lines arguing that they could dilute the Latino vote.

In an attempt to preserve Latino voting power in the city, the Long Beach Coalition of Latino Organizations filed a lawsuit challenging preliminary district boundaries released in 2021. The proposed map would have dropped Latino voters in the 1st city council district out of the majority.¹⁷

The coalition included Centro CHA, Latinos in Action and the California-Mexico Studies Center. The center was led by Vazquez-Ramos, who served as the Centro's second executive director.

According to the most recent Census, there are five city council districts where Latinos of voting age are the largest demographic including both North Long Beach seats and a Central Long Beach district but the city council has just two Latinos serving on the body in Zendejas and Uranga whose final term will end in 2026.¹⁸

Latinos now make up about 43% of Long Beach's overall population, and that number could continue rising with nationwide projections showing that Latinos could eventually become the majority in California and other states.

However, Perez cautioned in her oral history interview in 2023 that new leaders need to step up and people can't forget that the ceilings that were broken through paving the way for Latinos to exist as they do now was through a lot of hard work.

"I'm surprised that we don't have that," Perez said. "And a lot of them forget how in the heck they got there."

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