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# Villaraigosa's Challenge: Governing Los Angeles in the Bush and Schwarzenegger Era

by Peter Dreier

Antonio Villaraigosa's landslide victory (59 - 41 %) May 17 over Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn has raised hopes about moving the city in a new direction. It was a personal victory for Villaraigosa -- a high school drop-out who later graduated from UCLA, became an organizer with the teachers union and president of the local ACLU chapter, and served as Speaker of the state Assembly and City Council member -- whose election immediately makes him a national figure, including his photo on the cover of Newsweek, headlined, "Latino Power."

It was also a victory for LA's progressive movement, which since the 1992 riots has forged an increasingly powerful grassroots organizing and political coalition of unions, community organizations, religious institutions, and ethnic civic groups. For example, the city has adopted a living wage law, an ordinance that effectively stops low-wage big-box stores like Wal-Mart from setting up shop, an anti-sweatshop policy, and a municipal housing trust fund. At the end of his victory speech on election night, Villaraigosa asked for a moment of silence to honor Miguel Contreras, his close friend, political ally, and leader of the LA County Federation of Labor, who died May 6. In many ways, Villaraigosa's victory was built on the political foundation that Contreras had built over the past decade.

In 1973, Los Angeles was the first major U.S. city with a white majority to elect an African-America mayor -- Tom Bradley, who served for 20 years. This sprawling city of four million people is now 48 percent Latino, 31 percent white, 11 percent Asian and 10 percent black. The demographic changes have triggered racial tensions, but the past decade's groundswell of grassroots labor and community organizing has helped refocus much of the frustration in positive directions. As a result, LA is a much more progressive city than it was three decades ago. According to exit polls, 47% of voters identified themselves as liberals, compared with 27% moderate and 26% conservative.

Villaraigosa's wide victory margin was spread across all key demographic, racial, ethnic, economic, and geographic groups. He won majorities among all income groups, from 54% among those earning over \$100,000 to 67% among

voters below \$20,000. Villaraigosa's progressive politics and charisma helped him carry a whopping 77% of voters between 18 and 29 and 70% of those between 30 and 44.

Four years ago, Villaraigosa lost a close run-off against Hahn, a moderate Democratic, but the incumbent's lackluster record - including ongoing pay-to-play corruption scandals -- gave Villaraigosa another chance. Compared with 2001, he strengthened his base of Latinos (he won 84% of their vote), union members (60%), and Jews (55%). Four years ago, Villaraigosa won only 20% of the African-American vote, due in large measure to their loyalty to Hahn's late father, Ken Hahn, a long-time County Supervisor who represented black neighborhoods and had been a civil rights ally. But this year Villaraigosa won 48% of the black vote, including 59% among blacks under 44 years old. He also expanded his support among white voters in the suburban middle-class San Fernando Valley, garnering 48% of their votes compared with 34% in 2001.

How can Villaraigosa possibly live up to such high expectations, especially when, in formal terms, LA's mayor has very little power and the city has very limited authority to raise revenues to address the day-to-day problems confronting LA's residents?

In some ways, this is a terrible time to be mayor of a major American city. The Bush administration and the Republican Congress have turned their backs on cities and inner-ring suburbs -- and working class and poor people who live there. Federal funds for affordable housing, schools, public transit, public safety, and health care are woefully inadequate. The Bush administration's priorities -- cutting taxes for the rich, weakening regulations on business that protect consumers, workers, and the environment, and reducing spending for domestic programs while increasing military spending -- come at the expense of cities and inner-ring suburbs. Bush has imposed many new mandates on cities - such as increased homeland security and No Child Left Beyond requirements for schools - without providing the funds necessary to comply. Let's call it fend-for-yourself federalism.

Washington was once a partner with America's cities in addressing urban problems. No longer. Since 1977, federal aid as a share of total city revenues has declined from 15 percent to 5 percent. State aid has not even come close to filling the gap. As a result, most big-city mayors are trapped in a fiscal straitjacket. Demands for public services and expenditures are inexorable and often beyond municipal control (as in the case of the local share of Medicaid expenditures). As a result, even economically successful cities like LA face chronic difficulty balancing their budgets. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has exacerbated this situation. He has all but declared war on poor and working class people by cutting funds for schools, seeking to put a limit on spending for social programs, attacking unions (especially teachers, nurses and state employees) as "special interests", while taking huge donations from corporations and giving business a freer hand on environmental and workplace safety issues.

Although both the national media have emphasized Villaraigosa's stature as LA's first 20th century Latino mayor, he has more in common with recent progressive big-city mayors like Chicago's Harold Washington (an African-American) and Boston's Ray Flynn (Irish Catholic) than with other Latino

mayors, most of whom have been moderates.

Villaraigosa will be judged by his ability not only to take care of the municipal housekeeping chores (such as fixing potholes, reducing traffic congestion) but also whether he can address the plight of the poor and the struggling lower middle class -- to promote what activists call a "growth-with-justice" agenda. The city's economy is booming, but the divide between the rich and everyone else is widening. LA has more millionaires than any other city but it is also the nation's capital of the working poor. It confronts a shortage of decent jobs that pay a living wage and access to health care. Housing prices are skyrocketing. Rents now average over \$1,200 per month and the median sales price exceeds \$350,000. Traffic congestion and inadequate public transit make LA the most polluted (and unhealthy) metro area in the country. Overcrowded and underfunded schools, including a severe shortage of pre-school programs, threaten the city's economic future. Despite a decline in the crime rate, LA is still one of the most dangerous cities in the country.

Villaraigosa needs to educate LA that there are many problems that cannot be solved by the city government alone. The new mayor will need to reach out to the suburbs within the region to forge a sense of common purpose -- for example, to avoid bidding-wars for jobs and investment -- to improve the region's business climate. He will need to be a voice for LA in Sacramento by working closely with the Democratic legislature to challenge Schwarzenegger's agenda, raise taxes on the state's wealthy residents and corporations, and expand funding for public schools, health insurance, urban parks, and public transit.

When he served as Speaker of the state Assembly, Villaraigosa surprised many skeptics by his effective coalition-building skills that enabled him to pass progressive legislation to expand funding for urban parks, health insurance, and school construction. Given the limited powers granted LA's mayor, Villaraigosa's personality and leadership skills will be critical. He needs to be a new kind of pro-business mayor -- by redefining a "healthy business climate" to mean prosperity that is shared by working people.

This includes using the power of the mayor's office to leverage the city's diverse and strong economy. In contrast to Bush and Schwarzenegger, who want to loosen regulations on business and promote voluntary compliance with environmental, consumer and workplace protections, Villaraigosa can promote a more enlightened view of business' responsibility to the broader community. He can encourage employers to support workers' rights to unionize - whether its janitors and security guards in office buildings, or nurses at hospitals. He can support ordinances that require developers to share in the city's strong housing market by setting aside 20% of units for low-income and moderate income families. He can champion a linked-deposit policy that uses the city's deposits to encourage banks to end redlining and predatory practices and, instead, make loans to small businesses, would-be homebuyers, and developers of affordable housing.

As a long-time organizer and activist, he understands the importance of mobilizing people to help-themselves. He can encourage people who live and work in the city to participate in more volunteer activities -- in the city's schools, neighborhoods, churches and synagogues, and workplaces. He can encourage tenant groups to help the city enforce housing codes in slum

housing. He can encourage parents to spend more time reading to their kids and working with parents to mobilize for school reform.

As mayor of the nation's second largest city (and with the largest city headed by a Republican mayor, Michael Bloomberg), Villaraigosa will have a forum to challenge the misguided priorities of the Bush administration and the GOP-controlled Congress that have ignored urban areas and the poor. But Villaraigosa also understands that while it's nice to see your picture on the cover of Newsweek, voters expect him to get their potholes fixed, hire more cops, and make Los Angeles a more livable city.

*Peter Dreier, who teaches Politics and directs the Urban & Environmental Policy program at Occidental College, is coauthor of [The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City](#) (University of California Press, 2005) and [Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the 21st Century](#) (University Press of Kansas, 2005)*

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