

## **The Political Representation of Latinos in Washington**

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*Every time I would bring an issue up it would get shot down. Was it because I was a woman bringing it up and they were all men, was it because I was Latina, I don't know. But it didn't feel like was accomplishing much except that I was bringing issues up that they never discuss, things that they never considered in the past. And maybe they didn't consider them but at least they were brought forward. They were brought into the public.*

**Topic:** The general topic area of this report is the political representation of minority populations. The main question my research seeks to answer is; What are the main causes of the discrepancy between Washington's growing Latino population and the low level of Latino representatives on city councils in key areas of the state?

**Methods:** This report began by collecting census data about Washington State's Latino populations. By compiling election returns and voter lists the report presents detailed information about current voting trends and their impact on city council elections in the state. The report specifically focuses on Sunnyside, Washington. Sunnyside was chosen because it accurately represents the apparent discrepancy between Latino populations around the state and their political representation. 75% of Sunnyside's population is Latino while there is currently only one Latino on its city council. The report details the impact of at-large elections and racially polarized voting upon the political representation of the states largest minority population. The statistical presentation of racially polarized voting is accompanied by testimonials of voters in Sunnyside and an interview of a Latina politician involved in several recent elections. The report employs the scholarly research of academics in order to establish the historical importance of voting rights litigation and the relationship between the Voting Rights Act and my findings.

**Findings:** The most significant aspect of my report is in reference to the 1982 amendments of the Voting Rights Act. Sunnyside constitutes a situation in which all three requirements for a minority population to bring suit against the state are fulfilled. **(1)** Sunnyside has structural obstacles to the electoral success of minorities, such as at-large elections; **(2)** in Sunnyside behavioral patterns that interact with the social obstacles to exaggerate the political power of the majority- - i.e., racially polarized voting exists; and **(3)** a resulting under representation of the minority community relative to its proportion of the population is present in Sunnyside. These facts provide grounds for a re-examination of the use of at large-general elections in Sunnyside and other cities around the state.

**Recommendations:** My research demonstrates that that the at-large election format in Sunnyside is in violation of the Voting Rights Act. An alternative election format, such as district elections, should be implemented. In addition, there should be a renewed effort in Sunnyside and elsewhere to increase voter participation.

**Community Partner:** The inspiration for my project was initiated by my community partner Joaquin Avila, assistant professor of Law at Seattle University School of Law. Professor Avila's previous work and expertise was central to creating the direction that my project was to take and the conclusions that it has produced.