

# Watsonville Hispanics: A look at how they vote

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When Watsonville voters scan their sample ballots in the next City Council election, they won't see somebody from across town on the list of candidates.

That's because the next election will be under a district system, which will split the city into seven sections of roughly equal population. It will be a sort of neighborhood election, with voters in each district picking one member of the City Council.

The district system is being imposed because the federal courts ruled in favor of a lawsuit by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund against the city. The suit charged that the voting power of Hispanics was being diluted by the Anglo voting bloc under the at-large system. The city is about half Hispanic, yet it wasn't until 1987 that a Hispanic was elected to the City Council.

The district alignments haven't been decided, but one provision of the court decision is that there be two predominantly Hispanic districts. MALDEF and the city have each drawn a district plan; both plans contain two districts where the population is more

than 75 percent Hispanic. Negotiations over which plan will be implemented begin tomorrow.

Some interesting theories can be drawn from how those predominantly Hispanic areas voted in recent city elections, but there are simply too many variables to say with any degree of certainty what would have happened if the district system had been in effect.

The map proposed by MAL-

side and downtown voters generally liked the same candidates the rest of the community did.

There have been six Hispanic candidates in the last three elections: one each in the 1983 and 1985 council races; three for the council in 1987, and one for mayor in '87.

In 1983, Vido Deretich and Betty Murphy received the most votes citywide, and they also had

**'A lot of Mexican American families are very conservative.'**

—Councilman Tony Campos

DEF has one district for downtown (80 percent Hispanic) and one for the west side (79 percent Hispanic). It's possible to trace the voting patterns of people in these proposed districts because the districts closely follow current voting-precinct lines.

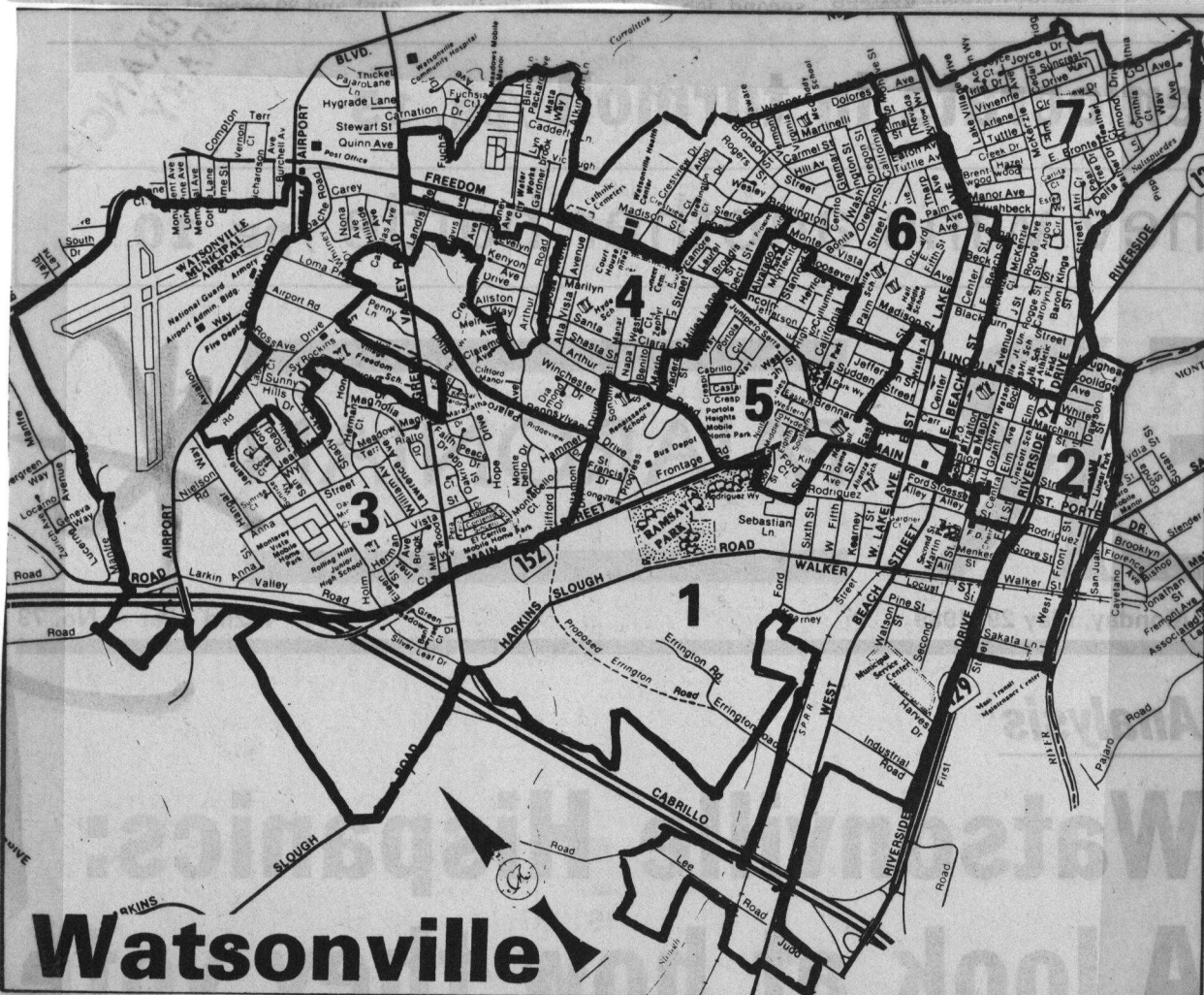
In the last three city elections, voters in the west side and downtown gave a higher percentage of their votes to Hispanic candidates than the rest of the community did. But that was their only deviation — when it came to Anglo candidates, west

the most votes in west side and downtown.

In 1985, Joe Marsano got the most votes citywide and also led in west side and downtown with 103 votes combined.

The Hispanic candidates in the 1983 and 1985 elections, Cruz Gomez (a plaintiff in the MALDEF suit) and Maria Bautista, had remarkably similar showings. Gomez, who ran in 1983, received 7.9 percent of the vote and finished fifth in a field of six people

See VOTERS page 2 ►



In 1986, MALDEF drew this map, with districts 1 (west side) and 2 (downtown), each more than 75 percent Hispanic.

# VOTERS

► From page 1

running for three seats.

Bautista, a former program manager at the YWCA in Watsonville, was last overall in a field of five running for three seats; she had 7.5 percent of the vote.

Gomez had 15 percent of the vote in the west side and 16 percent in downtown, and Bautista, in 1985, led the west side with 35 votes or 19 percent, but trailed Marsano in the downtown, with 40 votes to his 71.

But even if the election had been decided solely on the results of west side and downtown, neither woman would have won a seat.

To say these women lost solely because they were Hispanic is questionable. Both have political views considerably to the left of the prevailing political sentiment in Watsonville, regardless of race, judging from past elections.

In an interview last week, Gomez admits she was "literally unknown" in 1983. She has since made a name for herself, working for various causes affecting the poor and working class. Her politics are still far left for Watsonville, but she has toned down the rhetoric and seems more willing to negotiate with her political foes than in the past. She said she plans to run for a council seat under the district system.

In 1987, with three seats open, the conservative Campos finished second with 24 percent of the vote. The other two Hispanic candidates, Juan Morales (13 percent) and Leo Estrada (12

percent) were fourth and fifth, far out of the running.

Morales was the leading vote-getter in the west side and downtown (combined) with 181.

Right behind Morales in the west side and downtown votes (combined) were the men who finished 1-2 in the overall vote — Deretich (169) and Campos (158).

The conservative Campos was the first Hispanic ever elected to the City Council.

Morales is somewhat left-of-center, but not nearly as ideological as Gomez and Bautista. Gomez, interviewed last week, believes Morales did better than she and Bautista did because he "tried to appeal to the middle-of-the-road voter."

Campos said being well-known in the community is crucial to getting elected, and can sometimes be more important than having a particular political philosophy. Campos, who ran unsuccessfully for the council in 1979, admits he wasn't well-known then, even though he had grown up in Watsonville. He said he was getting started in real estate then, and also working a second job, and wasn't involved in the community.

"It takes a little time" to become known, said Campos, who now owns a real estate firm and has been active in a number of civic and charitable events.

Just because he's Hispanic doesn't mean he's going to be embraced by MALDEF supporters. Gomez said, "I'd rather have (current councilmen) Deretich or (Dennis) Osmer than Campos."

On the other hand, Campos said, MALDEF's liberal politics

aren't necessarily a reflection of the entire Hispanic community.

"A lot of Mexican American families are very conservative," he said.

One factor that's hurt previous Hispanic candidates is the low number of registered voters in the west side and downtown. For the 1987 election, those two precincts totalled 1,038 registered voters. That's an average of 519, below the 784 voters-per-precinct city average.

Gomez acknowledged that one reason for the lower percentage of registrants in the mainly Hispanic districts is that many Hispanics aren't eligible to vote.

Joaquin Avila, MALDEF's attorney, estimated "40 percent to 60 percent" of the adult Latinos in the city aren't eligible to vote, Gomez said. They're either legal residents, but not citizens, or not legal residents in the first place.

And when there is an election, the registered voters in the west side and downtown districts don't turn out. In the 1987 election, 45 percent of the registered voters in the city voted, but the turnouts in precincts 1 and 2 were 27 percent and 29 percent, respectively.

The low turnout figures are the basis of one of MALDEF's contentions: that Hispanics became discouraged from participating in the political process because of the stranglehold Anglos have had on the council seats.

But the low turnout in those mainly Hispanic districts won't matter under the district system, at least not on a citywide basis.

Each district stands on its own — it doesn't matter how many registered voters there are, or what the turnout is. The people who go to the polls, however many or few, will choose the representative for their district.