

How a 'minority' controls the city

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Minorities still control Watsonville politics, but not the kind of minorities preferred by Hispanics, two Chicano educators indicated Thursday night at a meeting of a local Latino organization.

"When the Constitution was instituted, only white males with property were allowed to

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vote. It guaranteed only a minority of people would vote ... only a minority would rule," said UC-Santa Cruz Professor Pedro Castillo to members of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

Castillo and Cabrillo College Professor Manuel Macias agreed that much the same kind of person described in the

Constitution controls Watsonville politics.

In an effort to explain why this minority continues to stay in control, the professors were invited to the LULAC meeting held at the Watsonville High School library to address the question — the title of their talk — "Why Don't Chicanos Vote?"

Macias responded to the question by taking a look at events in history that shaped Hispanic voting behavior.

Castillo also used history to try to answer the question, but referred more to U.S. political practices.

Macias divided the topic into four categories: Mexicans in the United States, the nature of Mexican immigration, the work experience of Mexican-Americans and the organizational structures of ethnic groups.

In regard to the first category, Macias said Mexicans were different from other minority groups that have worked their way up the political ladder.

While Italians, the Irish and the Jews came seeking a better way of life, Mexicans in what is now the United States were conquered and colonized during the Mexican-American War, Macias said.

As a result, he said, Mexican institutions were replaced with

Anglo institutions and Mexican culture was suppressed.

Macias explained that, later, Mexicans added to their own disenfranchisement by basing social position on citizenship and by forming clubs that, unlike other minority associations, did not seek to organize the mass of people.

But it wasn't all the Mexicans' fault.

One of the most powerful forces that has kept Hispanics from gaining political clout, according to Macias, has been the threat of deportation.

"It's always been 'move them in when you need them, move them out when you don't need them,'" Macias said, citing the deportation efforts of the 1920s and '30s, and the 1950s' "Operation Wetback."

Another factor that held back Hispanics was a lack of Latino political machines.

Other minorities were able to use the machines to move into the middle class, but by the time Hispanics began to establish theirs, the old-time political machines were being dismantled in an effort to clean up politics.

"We came too late," Macias said.

He said a political "ward system" could help Hispanics in Watsonville elect city officials and eventually assist the Latino community in obtaining better representation.

Currently, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund is trying to bring just such a system into being. It has filed a suit against Watsonville to get rid of at-large elections and replace them with a seven-district system.

Castillo used demographics in his talk, displaying a chart to make the points that young people generally vote less than older people, poorer people vote less than wealthier people, less-educated people vote less than

those with higher education, and blue-collar workers don't vote as much as professionals.

Hispanics, as a whole, are younger, poorer, less educated and work more frequently in blue-collar jobs — all of which results in low voting percentages.

He also said English-language requirements, literacy tests, poll taxes, intimidation, gerrymandering, at-large elections and alienation have added to the low turnouts in the past.

"Chicanos have to learn the ropes and they are doing that," Castillo said.

"You can't just sit back and say, 'It would be really good to have a Chicano on the City Council.' You have to become politically active. It takes a long time. You have to pay your dues," Castillo concluded.

REFERENCE