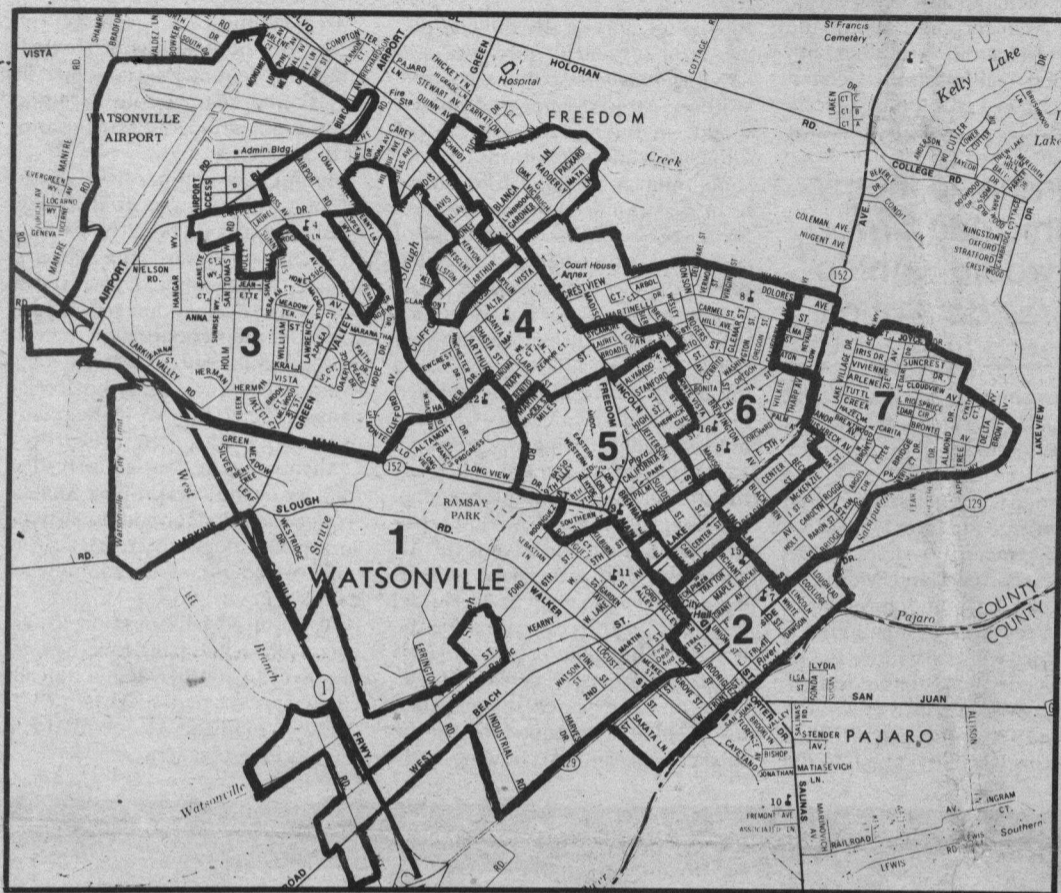


# WATSONVILLE WAKES UP

## LATINO ACTIVISTS WIN DISTRICT ELECTIONS



Watsonville community activist Cruz Gomez

By Bob Johnson

**D**owntown Watsonville is the northernmost section of a vast agricultural labor housing camp that extends beyond the bridge over the Pajaro River to the North Monterey County communities of Pajaro and Las Lomas and, at the southern end,

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Castroville. Hispanics in this region outnumber by seven to one the Anglos (according to the conservative estimate of the U.S. Census) and Anglos are also outnumbered at least three to one by immigrants from Mexico. A slight majority of all employed Wat-

sonville Hispanics work in the fields, nurseries and processing plants of the Pajaro Valley, but agriculture is the source of survival for the overwhelming majority of residents in the downtown labor camp.

Except for the relatively small blemish on Santa Cruz righteousness (whiteousness?) in the Beach Flats area, no other place in Santa Cruz County breeds such a profound awareness of the conjunction of class and race as downtown Watsonville. When the two largest packing plants in town were struck three years ago, for example, employers were forced to seek replacement workers from outside the county because not even the most desperate among the downtown's unemployed would risk the stigma, which would pass on to the children, of being a scab.

While the downtown community is powerfully aware of who it is, however, that same community has been for decades the most politically impotent group in the county. No one from this vast labor camp has ever been elected to office in Watsonville, and candidates who receive strong support downtown have been buried by overwhelming rejection in the more comfortable districts of town: A series of Hispanic candidates for local office over the past decade have received, on the average, 95 percent of the Hispanic votes cast downtown but only 13 percent of the vote in pre-

dominantly Anglo precincts.

After decades of winning nothing from the political process, however, the downtown Watsonville community achieved what could be the most important political triumph ever won by California Hispanics when the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled 11 months ago that Watsonville must adopt district local elections in order to ensure the voting rights of the Hispanic half of town. That decision will lead to the election later this year of two representatives on the seven-member Watsonville City Council from downtown districts where Hispanics comprise 80 percent of the

population. But that decision could also trigger a move toward district local elections throughout California that, with a chance at victory, would bring an increase in Hispanic voter turnout finally making the state's largest minority a force in the state's politics.

**T**he long march through the legal system that led to court-ordered district elections in Watsonville began with a meeting of the minds more than four years ago between Watsonville community organizer Cruz Gomez and voting rights attorney Joaquin Avila. Gomez had lost badly in her 1983 city council campaign despite strong support downtown and, seeing YWCA director Maria Bautista suffer the same fate in 1985, was ready to make a federal case of it. Avila had won a series of court victories in similar cases in Texas while serving as the lead voting rights attorney for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and was looking for a case to set a precedent in his new home state of California.

"Were it necessary to decide this issue, we would consider the propriety of taking judicial notice of the pervasive discrimination against Hispanics in California," the court warned in its ruling on the case of *Gomez v. City of Watsonville*. "Including discrimination, committed by the

state government, this has touched the ability of California Hispanics to participate in the electoral process." Days after the ruling, the effect of this case began rippling through the jurisdiction of the Ninth Circuit Court, which includes all of California, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii.

Barely a month after the Court of Appeals ruled that at-large elections violate the voting rights of Watsonville Hispanics, Avila walked into U.S. District Court in San Jose and filed papers challenging at-large elections in the City of Salinas, where Mexican-Americans comprise 40 percent of the population but had never seen one of their own on the city council. "The difficulty we had with this case before is there was no precedent established in the Ninth Circuit," said Avila, as he began his long march through California cities. "Now we have a clear precedent."

In the early days after the suit was filed late last August partisans on both sides of the issue wondered if Salinas, like Watsonville, was headed toward years of bitter litigation over the voting rights of Hispanics. "The initial reaction in Salinas was heated," recalled Alisal Elementary School Board member Jesse Sanchez, who took part in the difficult negotiations with the Salinas City Council. "The city council charged that district elections would lead to corruption and we responded that the at-large system



Voting rights attorney Joaquin Avila

had never shielded us from corruption."

Following a few ill-humored sessions between Hispanics and the powers that be, however, cooler heads and a desire to avoid legal bills prevailed in Salinas. A district system was negotiated last summer, approved by the voters in December, and implemented this month.

Voters in the overwhelmingly Hispanic Alisal neighborhood on Salinas's east side chose one of the four councilmembers elected on June 6. (Under the six council district system, with the mayor still elected at large, two more district representatives will be elected in 1991, including a second from the Alisal.) The campaign in Alisal was a hard-fought contest among two Hispanic men and a black woman that resulted in the election of the first Mexican-American to ever serve on the Salinas City Council: Simon Salinas, who is an elementary school teacher and was one of the three local plaintiffs when Avila filed his Salinas suit.

Perhaps even more important than the results of the Salinas election, however, was a voter turnout that confirmed the hope of Hispanic activists that a district system, finally offering the chance of victory, will bring large numbers of previously disenfranchised working class Hispanics to the polls. Voter turnout for local elections has traditionally been lower than 15 percent in the Alisal; Sanchez's 1985 council campaign attracted a 25 percent turnout; and on June 6 nearly 40 percent of Alisal voters showed up, marking the second time in Salinas history that Hispanic precincts have shown stronger voter turnout than Anglo precincts.

The first time Hispanics led the march to the Salinas polls came last December, when high turnout and overwhelming support in the Alisal gave the district system a scant 107-vote margin of victory. The higher turnout followed voter registration drives by partisans of the district system, and of the three candidates, that increased registration by at least 20 percent in the Alisal neighborhood in just a few weeks.

**T**he million California Hispanics who are registered to vote are matched by an equal number—this second group overwhelmingly lower income—of Hispanics who are eligible to vote but express their opinion of the process by not registering. The low rate of

participation in the political process, coupled with the related lack of clout in the process of drawing the district lines for Congress and the State Legislature, have left Hispanics severely underrepresented in Washington and Sacramento.

With nearly a quarter of the state's population, Hispanics can claim less than six percent of the seats in Congress and the State Legislature. The case of *Gomez v. Watsonville* is being watched closely as a catalyst that could set in motion activism on the local level that would end decades of

Hispanic disenfranchisement in the state and nation.

"The Watsonville case can be as powerful in importance as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was in catalyzing the civil rights movement," said Armando Navarro, director of the San Bernardino-based Institute for Social Justice. "But for us the issue is not civil rights, it is empowerment."

The Watsonville decision could provide the leverage to overthrow at-large election systems that have limited Hispanics to barely over 400

positions on all of the state's county boards of supervisors, city councils, school boards and countless water, fire and other special district boards. Although it has been less than a year since the Court of Appeals ruled against at-large elections in Watsonville, and less than four months since the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review that decision, the case has already been felt in communities up and down the state of California.

• Avila has been approached by activists interested in forcing a district system in Gilroy, where half the population is Hispanic but only one Hispanic sits on the city council. The issue has also been discussed by the Morgan Hill City Council, which includes no one from the Hispanic fourth of town.

• The case has added new ammunition

## The staggering potential of Hispanic voters—and the even greater potential as Hispanic children come of age—has political strategists of every ideology looking for a way to capture this decisive bloc in future elections.

to the attempt to prevent the City of Stockton from abolishing a district system which, since adopted in the 1970s, has led to the election of numerous minorities to the city council.

• A coalition of blacks and Hispanics in Pomona who lost a case against at-large elections in U.S. District Court are on appeal to the same Ninth Circuit Court that handed down the Watsonville decision.

• The City of Ontario, where Hispanics comprise 40 percent of the 125,000 people but have no representation on the city council, is studying the possibility of switching to a district system.

• The Watsonville case has also added strength to efforts by the Department of Justice and MALDEF to force redistricting in Los Angeles County, where three million Hispanics have never been represented on the five-

member board of supervisors.

"We are looking at numerous other local governments—county boards of supervisors, city councils, and boards of education," said MALDEF staff attorney Denise Hulett after the Watsonville decision. "We are looking at the entire state of California."

**A**round 1 million California Hispanics are already registered to vote, another million are eligible to vote but remain unregistered, and yet another million will become potential voters if they achieve citizenship. The staggering potential of Hispanic voters—and the even greater potential as Hispanic children come of age—has political strategists of every ideology looking for a way to capture this decisive bloc in future elections. But for the powerful potential to become a reality, Hispanics will have to register and vote in unprecedented numbers, and California activists are looking to the Watsonville case to trigger a movement leading this state the way of Texas, where district elections have led to Hispanic victories at the local level and to voter turnouts that have made Hispanics a force in the Texas Democratic Party.

A little publicized 1982 amendment to the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (enacted to guarantee Southern blacks the right to vote) opened the door for district elections in Texas. Congress reworded the law to specify that electoral systems that deny representation to ethnic minorities are illegal even if the discrimination is not intentional, a point on which the original law was ambiguous.

Armed with this stronger language, the Southwest Voter Education Project (SVEP) and the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) looked for a test case in Southern Texas and picked Corpus Christi, where the Hispanic half of town was not represented on the city council. Victory in court, with Avila arguing the cause, led to a district system in Corpus Christi and the election of three Hispanics to the city council.

Scores of other Texas cities, towns, and school boards adopted district systems as a result of lawsuits or negotiations and the result was a dramatic increase in Hispanic power. Not only were large numbers of Hispanic officials elected but, according to California Assemblyman Peter Chacon (D-San Diego), Hispanic turnout in Texas increased by 75 percent in less than a decade.

## A Comfortable Mixture

**W**hile the Mexican-American working-class neighborhood extending west from downtown Watsonville toward the frozen food plants, cold storage firms and trucking companies of the industrial district has been without representation for more than three decades, the comfortable Brewington Avenue-Martinelli Street east side neighborhood has no less than five representatives on Watsonville's seven-member governing body.

Watsonville Mayor Betty Murphy and councilmembers Tony Campos, Rex Clark, Vido Deretich and Dennis Osmer all live in the Brewington-Martinelli district under the seven-district map approved by the Watsonville City Council after negotiations with Hispanic activists. The home neighborhood of this council majority has, not coincidentally, the highest concentration of Anglos of any of the seven districts.

If the members of the Watsonville City Council are like most of us and see most clearly the people closest to their daily lives, the stubborn refusal to negotiate an end to the divisive voting-rights conflict for four years can be explained by the fact that the councilmembers literally did not see the problem.

When residents of the Brewington-Martinelli district step out the front door, what they see is not the overwhelmingly Hispanic downtown, where working families are forced to double up in deteriorating homes. Instead they see a comfortable neighborhood where Anglos and Hispanics live side by side.

In the integrated Watsonville seen by the councilmembers two-thirds of the residents are Anglo, more than a fourth are Hispanic, and more than a few are Filipino, Japanese, Chinese and Ohlone Indian. Substantial numbers of Watsonville Hispanics have moved out of the fields and beyond the food processing production line to achieve modest economic success and, with it, the ability to leave downtown.

(Although the Brewington-Martinelli district has the largest Anglo majority of any area in Watsonville, this most exclusive area of Watsonville is more integrated than any place in Santa Cruz—where 85 percent of the residents in 1980 were Anglo and the figure was more like 90 percent outside the Beach Flats—which gives a clue to why Watsonville leaders are reluctant to hear Santa Cruz residents talk about integration and ethnic justice.)

Life on the integrated side of town leads to a view of ethnic harmony that was ably expressed by Watsonville City Attorney Don Haile. "I really feel the voting rights act was written for minorities who live in ghettos, like blacks in the south or in eastern cities," said Haile, who retired this month and was replaced as city attorney by Luis Hernandez. "Hispanics do not keep to themselves like blacks do, or Chinese do, they mix with others more than other minorities do."

—Bob Johnson