

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

From At-Large to District Elections: The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 and Latino School Board Representation

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/81c5w7g2>

ISBN

9798189271588

Author

Quintero, Kevin

Publication Date

2026-05-01

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

From At-Large to District Elections: The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 and
Latino School Board Representation

By

Kevin Quintero

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Lisa Garcia Bedolla, Chair
Professor Bruce Fuller
Professor G. Cristina Mora

Spring 2026

© Copyright 2026
Kevin Quintero
All right reserved

Abstract

From At-Large to District Elections: The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 and Latino School Board Representation

By

Kevin Quintero

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Lisa Garcia Bedolla, Chair

Although Latino students constitute the majority in California schools, Latinos remain significantly underrepresented on school boards. In California, Latinos make up about 30 percent of all school board seats across the state's nearly 950 school districts, even though Latino students make up 56 percent of the student population. This representational gap raises questions about how board members prioritize community needs and whether they consider the needs of Latino students and families. While multiple factors contribute to this underrepresentation, scholars have identified at-large elections as an institutional mechanism that dilutes the voting strength of Latinos, thereby limiting their ability to elect their preferred candidates. Research further shows that Latino candidates are more likely to be elected in district elections, though transitioning and implementing these electoral structures requires a complex political and legal process. However, scholars have largely overlooked the local political and legal work required to challenge the discriminatory effects of at-large elections and institutionalize district elections. This dissertation examines how policy can be leveraged to advance electoral reform, with particular attention to the processes and actors that shape these efforts. Drawing on 40 semi-structured interviews, primary source material, and archival research, this qualitative study uncovers the process and effects of electoral reform in the Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD) after it was found to violate the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001. The analysis reveals that the complexity of the law requires lawyers to activate and drive the reform process, that communities must be prepared to engage and hold governing boards accountable, and that even when electoral reform is achieved, institutional barriers may limit its capacity to produce substantive change. This dissertation extends legal mobilization theory into local education politics, demonstrating how communities leverage legal frameworks to pursue electoral reform and advances the theory by examining the post-reform phase, revealing that electoral reform does not always equate to substantive change.

Like a Phoenix Rising from the Ashes

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	1
TABLE OF CONTENTS	II
LIST OF TABLES	IV
LIST OF FIGURES	V
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	VI
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	1
INTRODUCTION	1
GENERAL STATEMENT	2
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	7
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	8
IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY	8
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	9
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	11
SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY	12
KEY TERMS	13
LIMITATIONS	14
STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION	15
THE NOT SO “FRIENDLY VILLAGE”: FALLBROOK, CALIFORNIA	16
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE	23
INTRODUCTION	23
LEGAL MOBILIZATION: LAW AS A LEGAL TOOL FOR REFORM	23
<i>Legal Mobilization Theory: A Review of Research</i>	24
LATINO POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: THEORY AND EVIDENCE	28
<i>Theories of Representation: Descriptive, Substantive, and the Case of Latino Political Representation</i>	28
<i>Latino Representation on School Boards</i>	31
<i>Demographics and the Representation Gap</i>	33
<i>Latino Population and Student Enrollment in California</i>	34
VOTING SYSTEMS, ELECTORAL BARRIERS, AND LEGAL TOOLS	36
<i>Two Voting Systems: At-Large and District Elections</i>	37
<i>At-Large Elections: A Bias for Latinos</i>	39
<i>District Elections and Latino Representation</i>	41
<i>The Limits of the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965</i>	43
<i>California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001: State-Level Protections Against Vote Dilution</i>	45
MOBILIZATION FOR ELECTORAL REFORM	47
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY	49
PURPOSE STATEMENT	49
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	50
METHODOLOGY SELECTED	52
GROUNDED THEORY AS AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH	54
RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY	57
STUDY PARTICIPANTS	58
DATA COLLECTION	59
<i>Recruitment of Participants</i>	59
<i>Interview Protocol Design</i>	60
<i>Conducting the Interviews</i>	61

<i>Recording, Transcription, and Memoing</i>	61
DOCUMENT COLLECTION.....	62
PROCEDURES FOLLOWED.....	62
DATA ANALYSIS.....	64
<i>Open Coding</i>	65
<i>Focus Coding</i>	66
<i>Theoretical Coding</i>	67
DEDOOSE.....	68
CHAPTER IV. THE ROLE OF LAWYERS IN ADVANCING ELECTORAL REFORM	69
INTRODUCTION.....	69
PROFILE OF CVRA LAWYERS.....	72
FINDINGS.....	74
<i>I. Lawyers as Advocates: Unexpected Pathways to Voting Rights Commitment</i>	74
<i>II. Lawyers as Experts: Limited Community Knowledge of the CVRA</i>	76
<i>III. Lawyers as External Actors: Building Trust in Local Communities</i>	79
<i>IV. Lawyers as Investigators: Building an Evidentiary Case for CVRA Violations</i>	81
DISCUSSION.....	84
CHAPTER V. POLITICAL LEADERS MOBILIZE FOR FAIR REPRESENTATION	87
INTRODUCTION	87
REDISTRICTING: FROM LEGAL COMPLIANCE TO LOCAL ACTION.....	89
POLITICAL LEADERS PROFILE.....	91
FINDINGS.....	92
<i>Factor 1: Racialized Exclusion</i>	93
<i>Factor 2: Unequal Political Structures</i>	98
<i>Factor 3: Preexisting Organizing Infrastructure</i>	102
<i>Factor 4: Legal Mobilization Through the California Voting Rights Act</i>	107
DISCUSSION.....	113
CHAPTER XI. THE PROMISES AND LIMITS OF LATINO REPRESENTATION ON SCHOOL GOVERNANCE	117
INTRODUCTION.....	117
FINDINGS.....	119
THEME I: THE PROMISES OF DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION.....	119
<i>I: Language Access and Recognition as a Form of Representation</i>	119
<i>II: Symbolism as a Form of Representation</i>	122
<i>III: Advocacy as a Mechanism of Representation</i>	126
THEME II: THE LIMITS OF DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION.....	131
<i>I: Limits of Language and Communication Access</i>	131
<i>II: Limits in Translating Latino Representation into Observable Change</i>	134
<i>III. Institutional and Political Constraints on Representation</i>	136
CHAPTER XII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	145
INTRODUCTION.....	145
REFERENCES:	153

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: 2000 - 2020 CENSUS ANALYSIS OF FALLBROOK..... 18

TABLE 2: 2000 - 2020 STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS..... 20

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: WHITE VS LATINO POPULATION (2000 - 2020).....	19
FIGURE 2: WHITE VS LATINO STUDENT POPULATION (2000-2020).....	20
FIGURE 3: AT-LARGE ELECTIONS	38
FIGURE 4: DISTRICT ELECTIONS	38
FIGURE 5: AT-LARGE VS DISTRICT ELECTIONS.....	41

Acknowledgments

Throughout this doctoral journey, I have been blessed with the support of many individuals who have played an instrumental role in shaping both my academic and personal growth. Without their support, I would not have been able to finish graduate school and complete this dissertation. First, I want to thank my dissertation chair and advisor, Lisa Garcia Bedolla, for her utmost support throughout graduate school. When I took her class as an undergraduate in the Spring of 2016, her explanations of the racial and social inequities in education systems and their political dimensions sparked a strong interest in me in pursuing educational research. When I decided to pursue a graduate degree, I reached out to Lisa, who provided guidance, answered my questions about graduate school, and ultimately gave me the opportunity to attend graduate school at UC Berkeley. Thank you for believing in me and reassuring me that I had earned my opportunity to attend UC Berkeley. During this last year and a half, as I took on the challenge of writing this dissertation, thank you for providing the space to engage in conversation, for taking the time to read the multiple revisions of this work, and for your honest feedback. Thank you for being patient with me, never giving up on me, and for pushing me to excel. Without this support, I don't know if I would have been able to finish this work.

Secondly, I want to thank my advisor, Bruce Fuller, who always nudged me to think critically and precisely about my writing and arguments. Our conversations about Latinos, suburbs, education, and politics provided a great opportunity not only to question my own biases and knowledge but also to build new knowledge. Still, receiving your rich and honest feedback was not always easy. Thank you for providing space during research groups to engage in dialogue with my work and that of my peers as we advanced in our educational journey.

Third, I want to thank my advisor, G. Cristina Mora, for her mentorship and for reminding me that I belonged at the university. Her honest conversations about pursuing graduate school, what it means to be a faculty member, and the responsibilities of a researcher to help our Latino communities reminded me that our work is important. Thank you for always grounding me whenever I had doubts in the work I was doing. In addition, thank you for hosting the research group and for making sure we always had food at our meetings. Overall, thank you for helping build community at UC Berkeley and for welcoming me into your classroom, office, and home.

Fourth, I want to thank my friends and peers whom I have had the opportunity to meet during my time at the School of Education and at UC Berkeley. At times, while pursuing a graduate degree, I felt isolated as I carved my path through the academy, yet the friendships I made reminded me that the journey need not be so lonely. While there are too many friends to thank in this limited space, I am grateful for the friendship and for the opportunity to be in community. To my closest friends, thank you for being patient with me while I used the excuse that I needed to write, and for all the endless times you saw me staring at my computer. Nataly's comment, "I see Kevin on the computer when I go to sleep, and I see him on the computer when I wake up," will always make me laugh. Thank you for providing the space and for being patient with me. I could not have done this without your support and your reminder that I could do it. To my partner, Ana, thank you for being patient with me as I brought this research to a close. For all the late nights I spent looking at my computer, questioning my every sentence, yet reminding me that I could do it. Thank you for providing the support that I needed along the way.

Finally, this journey would not have been possible without the utmost support of my parents and family. Mi mamá y mi papá, Irma y Rogelio, yo los quiero mucho. El sacrificio que

han hecho por mí es incondicional. Gracias por siempre apoyar, por escucharme cuando estaba estresado, y por la comida. Yo me fui de la casa a los 18 años y ahora llego con un doctorado en la mano. As I have aged, I understand the sacrifices you have made for me, and I thank you. I know it has not always been easy, pero por fin lo logramos juntos. To my sisters, I am sorry for being away for so long. I have missed birthdays, family parties, and the growing up of my nieces and nephews, but thank you for always supporting me.

Overall, over the past 12 years at UC Berkeley, I have had the opportunity to pursue a higher education that I did not imagine upon graduating high school. At the young age of 18, I left my small hometown in the pursuit of higher education, not knowing what that path would look like. My path to pursue higher education was driven by the hardship my family and I endured when our house burned down in a wildfire, and the path to rebuilding was much more difficult than anticipated. Undergoing that experience provided the foundation to pursue higher education, to one day be in a position to fight against racial and social inequities that Latino and immigrant families experience. Graduating not with one, not with two, but with three degrees was the ultimate prize. Earning this graduate degree puts me one step closer to a position where I can fight racial and social inequities.

This work is presented to my family and to all the immigrant families. This is a reminder that we are valued, seen, and members of this society.

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Although Latino students constitute the majority in California schools, Latinos remain significantly underrepresented on school boards. In California, Latinos make up about 30 percent of all school board seats across the state's nearly 950 school districts, even though Latino students make up 56 percent of the student population (California School Boards Association, 2022; California Department of Education, n.d.). This representation gap raises questions about how board members prioritize community needs and whether they consider the needs of Latino students and families. While multiple factors contribute to this underrepresentation, scholars have identified electoral systems as a key institutional mechanism shaping who is elected to local office (Leal et al., 2004; Molina Jr. & Meier, 2018). In particular, research shows that at-large elections may contribute to vote dilution, disadvantaging Latino candidates and communities (Avila et al., 2007). However, existing scholarship has largely overlooked the local political and legal work required to challenge and transform these electoral systems.

This dissertation argues that while the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 creates a legal pathway to challenge at-large elections and expand Latino representation, the pursuit of electoral reform is neither automatic nor straightforward. Instead, the law operates as a conditional and uneven policy tool — one that is activated and driven by legal actors and institutionalized through the actions of local stakeholders. However, even when reform is achieved, the resulting outcomes are shaped by local political conditions and institutional constraints. By examining the electoral reform process under the CVRA of one school district, the dissertation illuminates the key stakeholders involved, the actions they undertook to institutionalize electoral change, and the varied outcomes of increased Latino representation.

General Statement

As local governance institutions, school boards play an active role in setting educational policy, which influences the education outcomes of students (Kogan et al., 2021). School boards oversee major responsibilities, including budgeting, curriculum implementation, and the hiring and evaluation of superintendents and staff (Fraga et al., 1986). In addition to making educational decisions, school boards are responsible for promoting state and federal education standards while balancing the interests and politics of the local community (Houston & Hartney, 2025). Houston and Hartney (2025) describe school boards as occupying a unique space between local community representation and broader ideological politics. However, over the past decade, controversies over school vouchers, American history, and LGBTQ+ rights have entered school board politics; issues that have created a partisan divide in education (Anglum & Manion, 2026). The significant role board members play in responding to these issues and setting local educational policy raises questions not only about who serves on these boards but also about the policies that they implement.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA, 2018) found that although school boards are becoming increasingly diverse, they do not reflect the demographics of the K–12 student population. According to NSBA, most school board members were 78 percent White, 10 percent African American/Black, 3 percent Latino, and 1 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native. Similarly, an EdWeek Research Center survey of school board members found that 86 percent reported having no Latino colleagues on their boards and 81 percent reported having no Black colleagues (Samuels, 2020). A stark difference when compared to the student population enrolled in public schools, where as of 2022, out of the 50 million students, 44 percent identified as White, 28 percent as Latino, 14 percent as Black, 5 percent as Asian, and less than 1 percent

for both Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native, and nearly 5 percent as two or more races (NCES, 2024). With demographic projections indicating that Latino student enrollment will grow, board representation becomes increasingly important for school systems serving diverse student populations (NCES, 2024).

Persistent Latino educational inequities make board representation increasingly important for Latino educational opportunity. Latino students often navigate structural barriers such as poverty and language differences, which contribute to lower academic achievements and increased dropout rates (Schneider et al., 2006). Patricia Gander and Frances Contreras identify this educational disadvantage as “The Latino Education Crisis”—the persistence of systemic inequities and failed social policies that have produced an academic achievement gap for Latino students (2009). According to their work, addressing these inequities requires governance structures responsive to the needs of Latino students, underscoring the critical role of representation on school boards.

A growing body of research has examined how Latino representation on school boards shapes governance and influences educational outcomes for Latino students. In a national study of 35 large urban school districts, Fraga and colleagues (1986) found that greater Latino representation on school boards led to more Latino teachers, which, in turn, improved educational outcomes for Latino students. In the central valley of California, Reyes and Neiman (2011) found that Latino school board members leveraged their personal experiences with educational inequities to guide efforts to improve equity for English Learners and other marginalized groups. In analyzing the relationship between school board representation and student achievement, Kogan and colleagues (2021) find that minority student achievement increased within six years of the election of a minority school board, with an effect size of 0.1

standard deviations, or approximately 46 additional days of learning. In a similar analysis, Fischer (2023) found gradual improvement in math and English following the election of a Latino school board member, emphasizing that the achievement gains came from a more equitable distribution of resources. Overall, these findings demonstrate that Latino representation plays a critical role in influencing the educational outcomes of Latino students.

However, improving Latino representation on the school board is challenging, as Latino candidates often face barriers in the electoral process that limit their chances of election (Fraga et al., 1986; Meier & Stewart, 1991; Leal et al., 2004; Polinard et al., 1990). To elect school board members, school districts often use either at-large or district elections. In at-large elections, all eligible voters within a jurisdiction cast votes for all available seats, and the candidates with the most votes win the election. On the other hand, district elections divide the jurisdiction into smaller geographic subdistricts, and all eligible voters in each subdistrict cast a vote for a representative who must reside in the subdistrict. According to Leal and colleagues (2004), Latino candidates are less likely to be elected under at-large elections. In contrast, they argue that district elections increase the likelihood that Latino candidates are elected.

Understanding the relationship between at-large elections and minority representation is critical because this electoral system remains the dominant form for electing school board members (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020). In at-large elections, voting patterns between majority and minority groups may become polarized, resulting in vote dilution. According to Elmendorf and colleagues (2016), voting is polarized when the political preferences of majority- and minority-race voters diverge substantially and the racial majority votes with enough cohesion to usually defeat the minority's candidates of choice (p. 589). When vote dilution occurs, it disadvantages minority voters, limiting their ability to elect their preferred candidates.

Although federal law, specifically Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), prohibits practices such as vote dilution, two drawbacks limit the protections the law offers. The VRA protections apply to federal elections, and proving vote dilution remains challenging. Under federal law, plaintiffs must meet three stringent requirements to establish vote dilution, commonly known as the Gingles Test:

- 1) Size and Compactness: A minority group must be large enough and geographically compact enough to form a majority in a single-member district.
- 2) Political Cohesiveness: A minority group must show that it votes together for the same candidates.
- 3) Majority Bloc Voting: The majority group must vote together to defeat the minority's preferred candidate.

If all three requirements are unmet, plaintiffs cannot establish voter dilution, leaving at-large elections in place. Most plaintiffs find it difficult to meet the size and compactness requirements. Additionally, the VRA protections apply to federal elections as each state sets its own voting scheme, leaving at-large elections intact at the state level.

Recognizing the difficulty of meeting the three requirements under federal law, California state officials passed the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 to strengthen protections against vote dilution and make it easier to establish claims (Richomme, 2020). Built into the legal framework of the CVRA is the notion that, in at-large elections, voting patterns may become polarized, leading to vote dilution, which contributes to the low representation of minority groups. When this vote dilution occurs, it requires immediate corrective action, often redressed by implementing district elections. Additionally, the CVRA removes the size and compactness requirement established under federal law, making it easier for minority groups to challenge at-large elections in jurisdictions.

Over the past twenty years, lawyers and voting rights activists have been responsible for ensuring jurisdictions comply with the CVRA by threatening litigation. Despite their efforts to

reshape elections across the state, only about one-third of California cities and roughly thirteen percent of all jurisdictions (including special districts) have transitioned to district elections. According to the National Demographics Corporation (2022), as of May 1, 2020, 155 California cities elected their councils by district; the remaining 327 have retained at-large elections. In addition, 282 special districts have transitioned to district elections; however, over 2,667 retain at-large elections. Of the 950 school districts in California, 785 continue to use at-large elections, underscoring the widespread use of this voting system (National Demographics Corporation, 2022).

While the transition to district elections has been gradual, a body of literature has examined this shift and found a positive impact on minority representation. Abbott and Magazinnik (2020) found a 31 percent increase in minority representation in areas where minority groups constituted at least 40 percent of the population. Similarly, Collingwood and Long (2021) found that this transition led to a 10 to 12 percent increase in minority representation in jurisdictions, and in minority-majority areas, this effect increased to 21 percent. While this research emphasizes the positive effect of electoral change on increasing minority representation, it overlooks the political processes communities must undertake to achieve representation, a critical gap in the literature.

This study addresses that gap by examining the contextual factors a local community leveraged to successfully catalyze the redistricting process for a California school district after receiving a CVRA violation. Through archival work and semi-structured interviews, this analysis provides an insight into the local political and legal work required to influence electoral system reform. This study extends a theory of legal mobilization in education to explain how a state-level policy created a window of political opportunity that local actors leveraged to influence

governance and advance Latino representation on a school board. Additionally, this study also examines how local stakeholders make sense of increased Latino representation on a school board.

Statement of the Problem

Research demonstrates that at-large elections may produce vote dilution, reducing the opportunity for minority candidates to be elected (Scarrow, 1999). In contrast, research finds that district elections are associated with a greater likelihood that more minorities get elected to school (Leal et al., 2004). District elections require jurisdiction to create subdistricts of equal population, and in areas where minority groups reside, creating these subdistricts may make minority groups the majority. According to Trounstein and Valdini (2008), under these conditions, minority groups may leverage their population size to improve their likelihood of electing a preferred candidate. Despite this empirical evidence, at-large elections remain the dominant voting structure across jurisdictions, perpetuating a disadvantageous voting system.

Given the structural disadvantage that at-large elections pose for electing minority candidates, understanding how minority groups can leverage policy to advance electoral reform is crucial. In California, the CVRA provides a legal framework for minority groups to challenge at-large elections, which has gradually reshaped local elections, including city councils, school districts, and special districts (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020; Collingwood & Long, 2021). By lowering the threshold for proving vote dilution, the CVRA makes jurisdictions with at-large elections and sizable minority populations susceptible to legal challenges. One drawback of the CVRA is that it functions largely as a passive law, requiring an individual actor or an organized group to initiate claims rather than mandating proactive compliance by jurisdictions. Despite its transformative change, research overlooks how the legal framework is activated, the political

processes through which electoral reform unfolds, and the conditions under which such reform translates into increased minority representation. This study investigates the political and social conditions that enabled local actors to leverage the CVRA to reform the school district's electoral systems and advance minority representation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to theorize how local actors leveraged election law to influence the redistricting process and advance Latino political representation and to reveal how they mobilize within school board politics. The study focuses on a school district that violated the CVRA of 2001 and examines the political and social conditions that enabled local education stakeholders to respond to and reshape electoral structures. Using qualitative methods, this study draws on archival research and semi-structured interviews with educational stakeholders in the Fallbrook community to examine how state-level policy created a window of opportunity for local actors to leverage it and advance Latino representation.

Importance of the Study

Over the past two decades, legal advocates and local actors leveraged the CVRA, bringing challenges against jurisdictions that use at-large elections and drive the implementation of district elections. Research shows that reforming electoral systems is associated with increased minority representation, especially in jurisdictions with sizable minority populations (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020; Collingwood & Long, 2021). However, while these studies establish a causal link between district elections and political representation, they do not examine the political process communities must undertake to advance minority representation.

More importantly, this suggests that electoral change under the CVRA is not automatic; it must be deployed and institutionalized by local actors to achieve favorable outcomes (Coreas et

al., 2023). For example, consider the divergent outcomes in representation for some jurisdictions found to be violating the CVRA and transition to district elections. After being identified as violating the CVRA in 2017, the Modesto City Schools District transitioned to district elections, prompting Latino voter mobilization and the election of the first Latino school board member (Superville, 2023). By contrast, in 2018, after being found to have violated the CVRA, the Martinez Unified School District transitioned to district elections, but this did not increase minority representation (Fagone & Lempres, 2023). These contrasting cases reveal that while the CVRA creates opportunities for political change, realizing these opportunities depends on local conditions, strategic actions, and political mobilization.

Understanding the electoral change and the mechanisms that influence minority representation is critical for increasing democratic representation on school boards. The removal of at-large elections may facilitate minority representation, but the process requires local communities to mobilize and institutionalize the change. Findings from this study may equip local actors with actionable knowledge to pursue equity-oriented redistricting processes and guide other jurisdictions in advancing fair electoral change. The stakeholders participating in this research offer practical insights for navigating electoral reform and achieving sustainable, inclusive governance.

Theoretical Framework

Legal mobilization theory (LMT) provides a foundational framework for this study because it theorizes the use of legal strategies by social movements, as well as other individuals and collective actors, to effect social change. LMT conceptualizes law as a political resource that social actors deploy to pursue institutional reform or social change, especially for marginalized groups historically excluded from the polity. Lehoucq and Taylor (2020) define legal

mobilization as the use of law in an explicit, self-conscious manner through the invocation of formal institutional mechanisms¹. Scholars in this field have examined how social movements and other collective action efforts leverage law to pressure governing bodies to implement or reform policy (Epp, 2009; McCann, 1994). LMT emerged from the study of social movements, particularly from debates over how to conceptualize collective action, the mechanisms through which social change unfolds, and the use of legal strategies (Jenkins, 1986; McCann, 1994). In this study, LMT serves as a lens for understanding the conditions under which local actors leveraged the CVRA to reform voting structures and advance Latino representation.

To understand why law can function as a political resource, it is necessary to consider how law operates not only as a system of rules but also as a cultural and symbolic order. In the United States, law operates as a system of rules created and enforced by government bodies to regulate individual behavior, maintain order, and resolve disputes. It binds individuals and institutions to established standards of conduct, with violations often resulting in penalties such as fines or imprisonment. Yet, law operates beyond a system of rules; it also functions as a system of cultural and symbolic meaning. As legal scholar Marc Galanter observes, law is “a system of cultural and symbolic meanings... it affects us primarily through the communications of symbols—by providing threats, promises, models, persuasion, legitimacy, stigma, and so on” (1983, p.127). Through these symbols and discursive dimensions, law provides citizens with interpretive resources they can reconstruct and deploy to advance their interests in everyday political life. Building on this insight, McCann (2006) argues legal mobilization centers on the relationship between law and power and the degree to which this relationship challenges the

¹ The invocation of a formal institutional mechanism refers to the use of a venue within the state to file a claim against another actor, which can be done through administrative procedures, quasi-judicial procedures, and litigation.

status quo. Put differently, law provides social actors with resources and opportunities that they can strategically leverage to challenge the status quo.

Most research on legal mobilization has focused on analyzing social movements and the legal strategies that social actors use to advance their agendas or reform policies (Jenkins, 1983; Lehoucq & Taylor, 2020). Scholars argue that successful legal challenges depend not only on legal frameworks but also on strategic action and sustained organization among social actors (Epp, 2009; McCann, 1994). For instance, McCann (1994) shows how local actors used the threat of litigation to advance pay equity reform, improving the wages of workers. Building on this, Epp (2009) demonstrates that legal mobilization requires not just laws on the books; it depends on organized support structures and strategic use of litigation threats. He argues that activists and professionals need to work together through lawsuits and media attention to press for institutional reforms. Yet, most legal mobilization research has focused on constitutional litigation (Epp, 2009), labor rights (McCann, 1994), and social movements (Lehoucq & Taylor, 2020), leaving an empirical gap in understanding how communities leverage legal frameworks to institute electoral change and advance minority representation. By examining how legal advocates and local actors leveraged the CVRA to reform at-large elections and expand Latino representation on a school board, this study extends LMT into the education context.

Research Questions

Existing scholarship emphasizes a positive relationship between Latino representation and student outcomes (Fraga et al., 1986; Reyes & Neiman, 2011), while overlooking the political and legal work to effect change. For this reason, this study examines how mandated electoral reform created a window of opportunity for local actors to leverage and advance Latino

representation, highlighting the strategies, challenges, and opportunities that emerged in the pursuit of representation. The following question guide this study:

- 1) How did voting rights attorneys and local political actors leverage law to influence redistricting and advance Latino representation on a school board, and how did local stakeholders make sense of increased descriptive representation in local education governance?

This dissertation addresses the overarching research question through three sub-questions, each corresponding to a distinct empirical chapter.

- 1) What role do voting rights attorneys play in leveraging election law to reform voting structures?
- 2) What factors enabled local leaders to take advantage of the electoral opening created by a legal challenge to at-large elections to mobilize community support and influence the construction of new electoral structures?
- 3) How do parents, teachers and district staff, and school board members make sense of increased Latino representation, and what do they perceive as its possibilities and limitations?

By addressing these questions, this study highlights the strategies, challenges, and opportunities that arise in the pursuit of representation, illustrating the processes through which legal and local actors influence educational governance and reshape representation on school boards.

Summary of Methodology

To conduct this study, I employed qualitative methods and used a grounded theory approach to my data analysis. I drew on 40 semi-structured interviews with local educational stakeholders, including parents, local political leaders, school staff, and voting rights attorneys, as well as primary source materials such as school board minutes, meeting notes, newspapers, and reports. These interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded using an audio recorder, then transcribed using Whisper Transcription, a transcription software. Given the focus on Latino parents, some interviews ($n = 9$) were conducted in Spanish. These interviews were

transcribed in Spanish and then converted to English. After the transcripts were complete, I reread them while listening to the audio recordings to verify clarity and accuracy.

To analyze the data, I uploaded the interview transcripts to Dedoose, a qualitative research software that facilitates the organization, coding, and visualization of qualitative data. Using this software, I examined the transcripts with line-by-line coding to break them down into manageable data, or open coding. Given the limited prior research on leveraging law to advance voting reform, I used inductive coding, allowing codes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed. I followed an iterative process of refining code definitions, reapplying codes, and revising the coding scheme to ensure consistency and analytical depth or selective coding. When patterns emerged from the data, such as recurring concepts or ideas, memos were written to help clarify their significance. Related codes were then grouped to develop theories that captured the underlying meanings and patterns in the data, providing a foundation for interpreting how legal and political actors influenced redistricting and representation.

Key Terms

- **At-Large Elections:** In this study, at-large elections refer to a voting system in which all voters in the entire jurisdiction elect members to the governing body.
- **California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001:** In this study, the CVRA refers to a state voting rights policy that makes it easier for minority groups in California to prove that their votes are being diluted in "at-large" elections by expanding on the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. It removes the clause requiring evidence of a specific geographic district in which a minority is concentrated enough to establish a majority.
- **District Elections:** In this study, district elections refer to a voting system in which the jurisdiction is divided into geographic areas of roughly equal population, with each district electing a single member to the governing body.
- **Descriptive Representation:** In this study, descriptive representation refers to when elected officials share the same demographic characteristics, such as race, gender, ethnicity, or background, as the constituents they serve.

- **Electoral Structures:** In this study, electoral structures refer to the formal rules and arrangements that govern how elections are conducted and how political representation is determined. This includes the design of electoral districts, voting systems (e.g., at-large versus district-based elections), candidate eligibility, and procedures for translating votes into representation.
- **Racially Polarized Voting (RPV):** In this study, RPV refers to a voting pattern in which voters of different racial/ethnic groups consistently prefer different candidates or political parties, resulting in electoral outcomes that reflect divisions.
- **Redistricting:** In this study, redistricting refers to the process by which a jurisdiction must implement district elections, often requiring the creation of subdistricts. Jurisdiction must follow the CVRA guidelines, which require hiring a demographer, hosting community meetings, and formally adopting district elections, all within 135 days.
- **School Board Members:** In this study, school board members are elected or appointed public officials who are directly responsible for governing local public school districts, such as setting district policies, approving budgets, hiring the superintendents, and establishing goals. Most board members are elected or appointed to serve two or four-year terms.
- **School Governance:** In this study, school governance refers to the systems of rules, processes, and structures used to direct and manage school districts, typically carried out by school boards, administrators, and community members, rather than to day-to-day management.
- **Substantive Representation:** In this study, substantive representation refers to the elected officials advocating for and advancing the specific interests, policy goals, and needs of their constituents, rather than just sharing their demographic traits.

Limitations

The CVRA is a complex election law that can have various impacts on communities; however, in each community, different conditions contribute to its success. Throughout my interviews with key stakeholders, I found that successfully leveraging the law required collaboration between lawyers and political leaders to address community grievances and mobilize action to ensure the school district adopted equitable subdistricts that advanced Latino representation. However, my analysis relies on stakeholders who responded to my call for participants. As someone interested in the experiences of Latino families, many of the

respondents who were targeted were Latino parents who had children enrolled in the school district within the last decade. Yet, there was variation in participants' responses, as many were well-informed about the process occurring, having participated in the redistricting, while others were not. Hence, there is variation in the information provided by many respondents.

When the study began, recruitment was broad-based, which meant I interviewed stakeholders from the two local school districts. As the project progressed and the research became clearer, I focused on the interviews with the stakeholders from the elementary school district. Thus, some interviews from participants were not considered in the analysis. Moreover, participants, including school board members and local educators, were limited to those who responded to my interview request. In essence, many of the findings may not be generalizable to other communities; however, they reveal the impact of the law on their daily interactions with the school district.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured into six sections. In Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature that forms the empirical and theoretical foundation of the study. This chapter synthesizes the major research findings of the field on Latino political representation on school boards. In Chapter 3, I discuss the qualitative methodology I used to collect data and the research approach I employed to analyze the data. In Chapter 4, I analyze interviews with two lawyers who serve as catalysts for electoral reform. This chapter reveals that without legal actors initiating electoral reform, the CVRA remains a passive law. In Chapter 5, I analyze the interviews of six political leaders who were the main drivers of electoral reform at the community level. The chapter reveals that community members must remain engaged in the reform process because, without their participation, it can turn into a bureaucratic change rather

than an electoral reform. In Chapter 6, I analyze the interviews of local stakeholders to reveal the impact of Latino representation on school boards. The chapter reveals that increasing descriptive representation does not always equate to substantive representation. In Chapter 7, I offer a brief conclusion and future research.

The Not So “Friendly Village”: Fallbrook, California

The remainder of this chapter provides a brief background on the community of Fallbrook and the Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD), which underwent an electoral change as a result of the CVRA. Fallbrook is a suburban-exurb community located in Southern California, in the northern part of San Diego County. Nestled between the mountain ranges and the Pacific coastline, the small-town rural setting makes it a popular destination for those looking to escape San Diego's busy city life. Surrounded by acres of avocado groves, century-old oak trees, and scenic landscape, Fallbrook is often described as a “Friendly Village,” reflecting its close-knit community identity. However, a closer analysis reveals that Fallbrook is more than a “Friendly Village”; it is a community shaped by a racialized history that continues to structure its social and political dynamics, especially for the lives of Latinos. Fallbrook offers a critical lens for understanding how the growth of Latinos in a previously majority-White community reshapes its social and political context.

Fallbrook's tumultuous racialized history dates back to the early 1970s when a white supremacist leader, Tom Metzger, moved to Fallbrook. He openly opposed Latino and immigrant communities, advocating for segregation between white and non-white groups and arguing that immigration would undermine the United States. Tom would later become the Grand Dragon of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and after leaving the KKK, he started his own white supremacist group. These beliefs fostered deeply anti-Latino and anti-immigrant

sentiments that became embedded in the social fabric of Fallbrook. The legacy of this history did not disappear over time — it shaped the social and political culture of Fallbrook, influencing who held power, whose voices were heard, and how institutions were governed. However, before examining this legacy in more detail, it is important to contextualize Fallbrook's population characteristics.

According to the American Community Survey (2024), the most common job groups in Fallbrook are Office & Administrative Support Occupations, Sales & Related Occupations, and Management Occupations. However, agriculture is a significant sector of the local economy, as Fallbrook is surrounded by acres of farmland that produce avocados, nursery plants, and various fruits. This agricultural economy makes Fallbrook a primary destination for Latino migrant workers, whose children then attend the local school district. For instance, the FUESD served one of the largest populations of migrant students in San Diego County. Economically, 11 percent of households fall below the poverty line, a figure that rises to 18.3 percent among children under 18 — a disparity that has direct implications for the students served by the school district in this study.

Like many suburban and exurban communities, Fallbrook has undergone a gradual demographic shift, marked by growth in its Latino population and a decline in its white population. Immigration has played a central role in this transformation: according to the American Community Survey (2024), 23.4 percent of residents are foreign-born, 87 percent of whom originate from Latin American countries. As a result, the Latino population in Fallbrook is diverse, including immigrants, first- and second-generation individuals, and native-born Latinos.

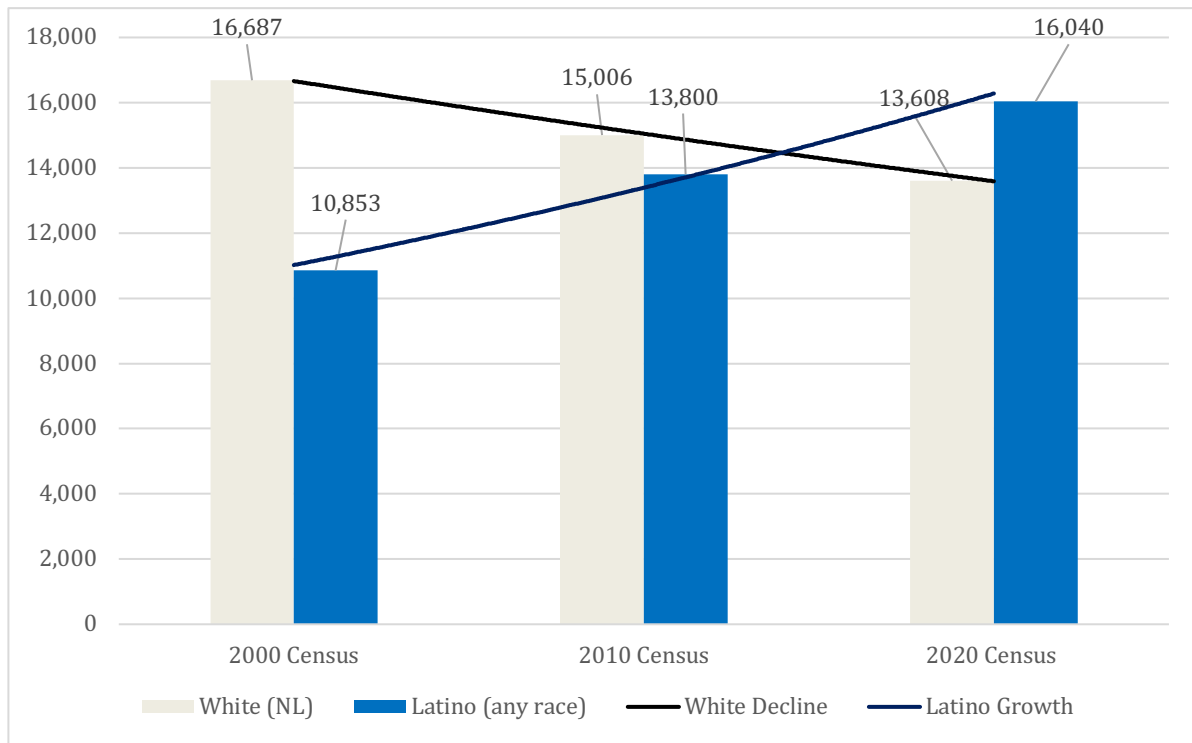
Analysis of the past two decades highlights a clear change in population composition: the Latino share has increased, while the white share has decreased (see Table 1). In 2000, white

residents accounted for 57 percent (16,687) of the population, while Latino residents accounted for 37 percent (10,853). Over the next decade, white residents saw a decline in their share of the population, while Latinos experienced growth. In 2010, white residents accounted for 49 percent (15,006) of the population, while Latino residents of any race accounted for 45 percent (13,800). This trend continued into 2020, where white residents accounted for 42 percent (13,608) of the population, and Latino residents accounted for roughly half of the population at 50 percent (16,040). Figure 1 presents a bar chart of population counts with trend lines showing the decline of the white population and the growth of the Latino population over time. At some point between 2010 and 2020, a tipping point occurred in which Latino residents became the majority while white residents became the minority. Together, the table and figure illustrate both the trajectory of Fallbrook's demographic transformation. Despite these shifts, political structures continue to exclude Latinos from positions of political power.

Table 1: 2000 - 2020 Census Analysis of Fallbrook

Fallbrook Population	Total	White	Black or African American	Native American and Alaska Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	Mixed race or Multiracial (NL)	Hispanic or Latino
2000 Census	29,100	16,687 (57%)	362 (1%)	134 (>1%)	435 (1.5%)	76 (>1%)	513 (2%)	10,853 (37%)
2010 Census	30,534	15,006 (49%)	411 (1%)	107 (>1%)	550 (2%)	57 (>1%)	555 (2%)	13,800 (45%)
2020 Census	32,267	13,608 (42%)	462 (1%)	102 (>1%)	718 (2%)	85 (>1%)	1,114 (3%)	16,040 (49%)

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data, 2000–2020

Figure 1: *White vs Latino Population (2000 - 2020)*

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data, 2000–2020

Following the community's population shifts, FUESD experienced a demographic change in student enrollment, becoming a majority-Latino school district. Analysis of the past two decades of student enrollment highlights a clear demographic shift: the share of Latino students increased, while the share of white students decreased (see Table 2). In 2000, White students accounted for 51 percent (3,013) of the Fallbrook student population, while Latino students accounted for 40 percent (2,364). By 2005, the two groups were nearing parity, with White students comprising 46 percent (2,726) and Latino students 45 percent (2,686) of the student population. Over the next decade, White student enrollment continued to decline, while Latino enrollment grew. In 2010, White students represented 39 percent (2,252) of the population, and Latino students reached 50 percent (2,860). This trend continued into 2020, with White students comprising 29 percent (1,549) of the student population and Latino students accounting for 61 percent (3,256). Figure 2 presents a bar chart of population counts with trend lines showing the

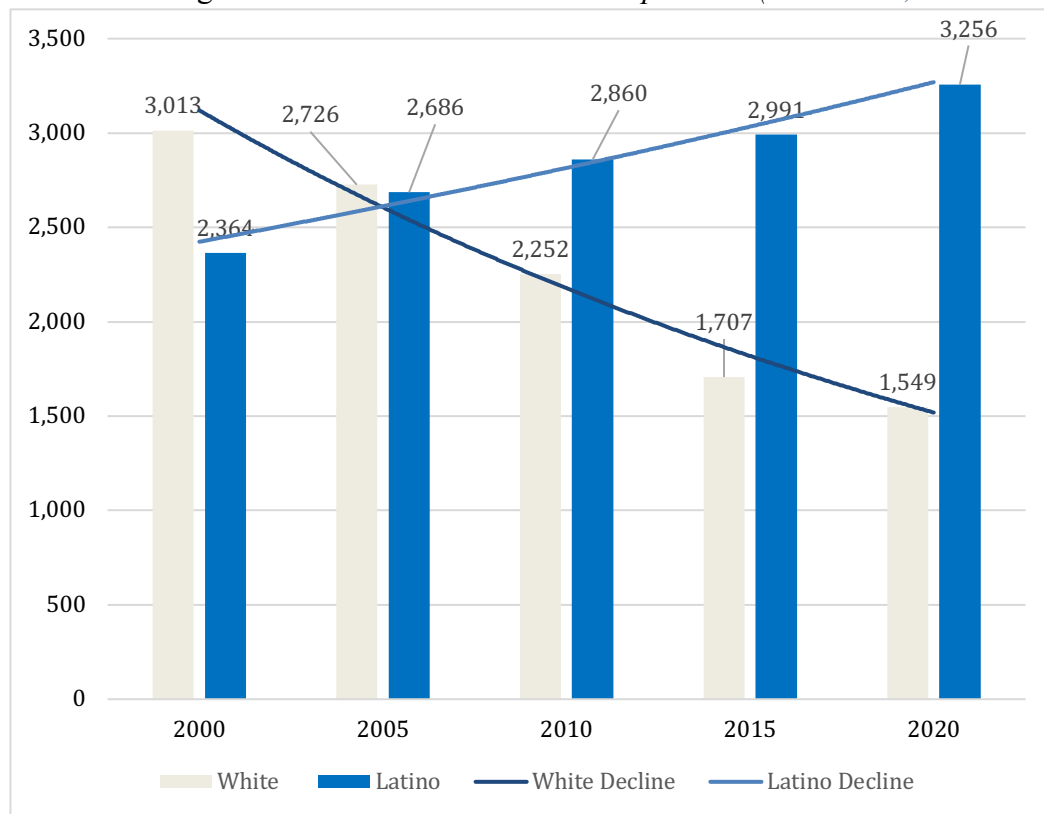
decline of the white population and the growth of the Latino population over time. A notable point in this visual is the tipping point in 2005, when Latino student enrollment reached parity with white students, then surpassed it in the following years.

Table 2: 2000 - 2020 Student Demographics

Fallbrook Student Demographics	Total Population	White	Black or African American	American Indian and Alaska Native	Asian	Hispanic or Latino
2000	5,845 (100%)	3,013 (51%)	288 (4%)	32 (>1%)	34 (>1%)	2,364 (40%)
2005	5,923 (100%)	2,726 (46%)	287 (4%)	43 (>1%)	52 (>1%)	2,686 (45%)
2010	5,666 (100%)	2,252 (39%)	306 (5%)	44 (>1%)	68 (1%)	2,860 (50%)
2015	5,109 (100%)	1,707 (33%)	172 (3%)	6 (>1%)	29 (>1%)	2,991 (58%)
2020	5,278 (100%)	1,549 (29%)	133 (2%)	5 (>1%)	36 (>1%)	3,256 (61%)

Source: California Department of Education (2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020), Student Enrollment by Ethnicity. Author's analysis.

Figure 2: *White vs Latino Student Population (2000-2020)*



Source: California Department of Education (2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020), Student Enrollment by Ethnicity. Author's analysis.

Despite the growth of the Latino residents, these demographic gains had not translated to political influence on the school board or other local governing boards. Much of this political underrepresentation extended from the political dominance that the white supremacist Tom espoused, which created a racialized environment for Latinos. The anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiments excluded Latinos from feeling part of the community and kept them politically marginalized. For example, when Latino residents advocated for the construction of a community park, Metzger recommended that the person be shot (Informador, 2025). Although this white supremacist no longer lived in Fallbrook, the racialized environment he advocated still transcended through the local institutions, which contributed to the underrepresentation of Latinos. The Voice of San Diego (2022) described this underrepresentation as another form of white power: “But years after card-carrying members of the KKK had moved away or died, a different kind of White power persisted in Fallbrook – the political kind.” Thus, despite comprising a majority of the population, Latinos remain politically marginalized, illustrating how entrenched institutional structures continue to limit their access to power.

Although Latinos comprised roughly half of Fallbrook’s population and a majority of its student body, none had secured a seat on the school board—a striking disconnect between their demographic majority and their lack of political power. A review of local newspapers, online archives, and election data spanning the past 20 years revealed that no Latino candidate had been elected to serve on the FUESD school board during this period or on any other local governing boards. A central factor underlying this gap has been the district's long-standing use of at-large elections. At-large elections have well-documented historical roots as a mechanism for maintaining white political dominance by diluting the voting strength of non-white voters, reflecting what Voice of San Diego (2022) characterizes as a “different kind of white power.” In

Fallbrook, these dynamics remained very much alive. Despite significant demographic change, at-large elections created structural barriers that prevented Latino candidates from converting demographic growth into electoral representation. As the Latino population has grown, these long-standing political dynamics have been increasingly contested.

In 2018, when the FUESD school district received a letter indicating that its electoral system violated the CVRA, it set in motion social and political changes that created an opportunity for Latinos to influence the design of subdistricts. However, the subsequent redistricting process was not conducted fairly and required active participation from Latino and other community members to hold the school board accountable. This dissertation examines this process in detail to uncover the critical factors that enabled one community to leverage the law to pursue fair redistricting and increased Latino representation on the school board.

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review is organized into five sections, each serving as a foundational block for this study's theoretical and empirical framework. First, I review scholarship on legal mobilization theory to emphasize how legal advocates and local actors leverage the law to pursue political and institutional reform. Second, I review theories of representation and extend this scholarship to Latino representation, then I demonstrate how Latino representation on school boards shapes educational opportunity and policy outcomes. Third, I examine the growth of the Latino population in California to contextualize the demographic change and illustrate the demographic gap between school boards and the communities they serve. Fourth, I review electoral systems, the disadvantages Latinos face under at-large elections, and discuss how the CVRA serves as the legal mechanism for challenging them. Finally, I provide a brief discussion that synthesizes the literature and highlights how existing research overlooks the political processes and actors that influence electoral reform, an empirical gap this study addresses.

Legal Mobilization: Law as a Legal Tool for Reform

In the United States (US), law functions as a system of rules created and enforced by the government to regulate individual behavior, maintain social order, and resolve disputes among people and institutions. Beyond these regulatory functions, scholars have emphasized that law can also serve as a tool for challenging inequities and advancing social reform (McCann, 1994; Scheingold, 1974). For example, the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) leveraged the U.S. Constitution to challenge the legality of racially segregated public schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 1994). In this case, plaintiffs argued that segregated schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, even if the facilities were equal in quality. By demonstrating the detrimental effects of segregated schools on the

education of Black students, plaintiffs challenged the claim that Black and white students had equal access to educational opportunity (Smith, 2005). While the Supreme Court ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional, this case demonstrated how the law could challenge school segregation and unequal educational opportunity. Scholars characterized this legal strategy as legal mobilization, which helped frame how individuals and collective actors invoke the law to pursue social reform. The following section traces the historical development of legal mobilization theory, illuminating the relationship between law and reform.

Legal Mobilization Theory: A Review of Research

In the last half-century, social movements have deployed various tactics in their repertoires to pressure institutions to reform, including invoking the law to advance social reform (Boutcher & Stobaugh, 2013). Social movement scholars have become interested in how these legal strategies are deployed and how the law is used to advance these reforms. This interest led to the development of legal mobilization theory (LMT), which describes how social movements and actors use legal strategies to challenge institutions to reform (McCann, 1994). This field of research examines how social movements, individual actors, and legal advocates leverage law as a resource to pursue social change, shape narratives, and pressure institutions to change.

Legal mobilization theory (LMT) draws from the scholarship on social movements and the strategies collective actors use to pursue political and institutional change (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Early social movement scholarship conceptualized social movements as a form of collective behavior that emerged in response to racial and social inequities (Jenkins, 1983). However, the proliferation of social movements between the 1950s and 1970s, including the Civil Rights, anti-war, gay liberation, and countercultural movements, challenged the assumptions of the origins of collective action. The emergence of these movements prompted

scholars to reconsider how social movements organize, mobilize resources, and pursue change (Jenkins, 1983).

As scholars examined why some social movements were able to organize and sustain collective action while others failed, access to resources emerged as a key factor in facilitating mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This shift led to the development of resource mobilization theory (RMT), which posits that social movements succeed not just from shared grievances but also through the acquisition and strategic use of resources — money, labor, social networks — to achieve their goals (Jenkins, 1983). According to Jenkins (1983), RMT emphasizes organized, rational collective action over loosely organized collective action and the mobilization of resources to achieve its goals. For example, traditionally forms of social movements are seen as collective behavior encompassing both movements of personal change and those focused on institutional change, whereas resource mobilization theories in contrast, observe social movements as

extensions of institutionalized actions and have restricted their focus to movements of institutional change that attempt to alter elements of social structure or the reward distribution of society, organize previously unorganized groups against elites, or represent the interests of excluded groups from the polity. (Jenkins, 1983, p. 529)

From this perspective, social movements arise not simply from social strain but from changes in a group's access to resources and opportunities for collective action.

Jenkins (1983) identified five core principles that distinguished RMT from earlier collective behavior theories: (a) movements are rational, adaptive responses to the costs and rewards associated with different courses of action; (b) the goals of movements are defined by conflicts of interest embedded in institutionalized power relations; (c) because grievances generated by such conflicts are widespread, the formation and mobilization of movements depend on changes in resources, group organization, and opportunities for collective action; (d)

centralized and formally structured movement organizations are more typical of modern social movements and more effective at mobilizing resources than decentralized and informal structures; and (e) movement success is largely determined by strategic factors and the political processes in which movements become embedded. In other words, social movements are more likely to succeed when they have clearly defined goals, strategically pursue collective action, and rely on structured organizations to mobilize resources.

While some scholars identified resources as central to movement success, others identified law as a resource that could be leveraged to achieve collective goals (Scheingold, 1974). Scheingold (1974) argues that law functions as a resource that social movements can leverage to pursue political goals. This perspective suggests that collective action seeking social change may use the legal system to achieve meaningful reform. Scheingold frames “rights” under the law not as legal guarantees but as a political tool that local actors must actively pursue. According to Paris (2018), Scheingold was among the first scholars to argue that litigation and court decisions could function as part of a broader strategy to organize and mobilize political action. Overall, Scheingold (1974) reveals that law is not neutral, but embedded within existing power structures, and must be leveraged by social actors to achieve political objectives.

A more formal name for the use of legal strategies to pursue social reform emerged with McCann (1994), who led the development of legal mobilization theory (LMT) through his analysis of the pay equity movement’s legal mobilization in the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing on RMT and law as a strategy, McCann argues that legal strategies can serve as a powerful resource for mobilizing collective action, leveraging in negotiations, and legitimizing political claims, even when litigation itself does not succeed. His study highlights how two federal statutes, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, created legal opportunities

that activists could mobilize around, using both the threat and reality of litigation to pressure employers and governments to address wage inequities. McCann (1994) argues that law is not neutral in settling disputes, but as contested terrain, “subject to constant battles over official enforcement, extension to different relational contexts, and substantive reformulation by variously situated citizens” (p.304). This perspective views law as politically malleable — subject to interpretation, reinterpretation, and strategic deployment — which allows social movement actors to leverage it as a resource that both constrains and enables social change.

Epp (2009) extends LMT by identifying the organizing infrastructure necessary for successful rights enforcement. His work argues that a collaboration between activists and lawyers led to a law-inspired reform of American bureaucracy, producing sweeping institutional change. Through concerted efforts that invoked legal liability, publicity, and managerial innovation to force bureaucracies to implement civil rights, these actors pursued and institutionalized reforms that made institutions safer. Epp demonstrates how activists and lawyers can leverage lawsuits and media attention to make institutions accountable through rules and regulations. The success of institutional reform is contingent on the pressures and negotiations between activists and professionals to implement; “both activist pressure and managerial conflicts were necessary to the development; neither was sufficient” (pg. 14). Without each other to complement and increase pressure, neither would be sufficient to bring reform to institutions. Epp (2009) argues that organized collection action, which coordinates the efforts of activists and lawyers, is essential for achieving social reform.

Despite extensive research, scholars disagree on what constitutes legal mobilization, resulting in conceptual slippage in how the term is used (Lehoucq & Taylor, 2020). According to Lehoucq and Taylor (2020), early literature on legal mobilization emerged while dominant

theorizations of social movements and contentious politics tended not to explicitly account for the role of law in mobilization. Through an extensive review of empirical evidence on legal mobilization, Lehoucq and Taylor (2020) conceptualize and define legal mobilization as the use of law in an explicit, self-conscious way through the invocation of formal institutional mechanisms. Their definition of legal mobilization is not limited to the use of legal strategies by social movements, as both individual and other collective actors also engage in legal mobilization. This perspective emphasizes that legal mobilization occurs when social movements and other social actors strategically leverage legal institutions to pursue social reform.

Latino Political Representation: Theory and Evidence

Scholars have long debated the relationship between Latino representation and educational outcomes for Latino students in public schools (Fraga & Elis, 2009; Hayes & Hibbing, 2017; Leal et al., 2004; Meier et al., 1999). While findings are mixed, a growing body of scholarship suggests that a greater number of Latinos on school boards is associated with substantive benefits for Latino students, including improved academic outcomes and more equitable resource allocation (Fischer, 2023; Kogan et al., 2021; Reyes & Neiman, 2011). Understanding whether Latino representation is associated with educational outcomes requires situating this relationship within the theory of representation. To address this, the next section reviews the theory of representation and empirical evidence on Latino representation on school boards.

Theories of Representation: Descriptive, Substantive, and the Case of Latino Political Representation

In her foundational work, *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Pitkin (1967) defines representation as “the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present” (p. 143). She argues that elected officials must make decisions on behalf of their constituents

even in their absence — a challenge that has long motivated debates over which kind of representative best advances the interests of particular groups. Representation, in political theory, involves making the interests and perspectives of constituents present in the public policy processes. While Pitkin distinguishes among four distinct meanings of representation, political science scholarship has most extensively theorized two: descriptive and substantive representation.

Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which elected officials resemble the racial, ethnic, or social identities of the communities they serve. The central premise is that shared identity can improve how representatives interpret the experiences and concerns of their constituents (Mansbridge, 1999). According to Mansbridge (1999), in racially stratified democracies, descriptive representation strengthens both the legitimacy and responsiveness of governance. Descriptive representation can also enhance trust and communication, especially in contexts where historical or systemic marginalization has generated skepticism toward public institutions. For example, the presence of Black officeholders can elevate the quality of discussion around issues affecting Black communities by bringing marginalized experiences directly into the deliberative process. Descriptive representation suggests that shared identity between elected officials and their constituents may help advance key issues in policy deliberations.

While descriptive representation highlights shared identity and its role in building trust and deliberation, substantive representation holds that elected officials prioritize and act on the interests and policy priorities of their constituents, regardless of their own identity. The central concern is shared interests rather than shared traits, with the key question being whether officials translate those interests into policy action. For example, Mansbridge (1999) argues that in a

male-dominated society, women are better positioned to advance policy choices that address gendered concerns, such as sexual harassment or domestic violence — issues that male legislators have historically been less likely to prioritize. Substantive representation suggests that minority candidates prioritize and advance policies that reflect the interests of minority groups.

Although descriptive representation emphasizes shared identity between representatives and constituents, such identity does not always result in effective or meaningful representation. Recent research demonstrates shared gender identity — particularly among racial out-groups — is not consistently associated with voters' perceptions of being substantively represented (Montoya et al., 2022). In their study, ethno-racial identities consistently yielded the highest level of perceived representation, but gender identity was much more complicated. These findings underscore that shared identity alone is insufficient to explain perceptions of representation. As Garcia Bedolla (2007) argues, identities are multiple and relational, shaped by how race, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect within specific political contexts. Understanding representation, therefore, requires attention to how these identities work together, rather than assuming that any single shared trait will lead to meaningful advocacy.

Much of the foundational scholarship on representation has focused on the experiences of Black people within the white political structure of the US; however, a growing body of scholarship applies these concepts to Latino representation. The rapid growth of the Latino population has raised questions about their inclusion in the political system and whether they are equally represented within political institutions. A central question is whether coethnic representatives, such as Latino elected officials, can advance policies that benefit their communities. Hero (1998) suggests that increasing social diversity can reshape political institutions to better respond to demographic changes. He explains that:

social diversity predicts that more heterogeneous states would tend to have more powerful and/or professionalized legislatures and governors because the complexity associated with heterogeneity necessitates that governments manage that complexity and diversity (p. 21).

In this context, his argument suggests that diverse school boards may be better equipped to respond to the needs of diverse school districts. Studies of descriptive representation in Congress and policy outcomes show that greater Latino representation in Congress leads to more favorable policy outcomes for Latinos (Hero & Tolbert, 1995). Taken together, the scholarship suggests that descriptive representation is associated with improved policy outcomes for marginalized groups, like Latinos.

Latino Representation on School Boards

Research on educational outcomes consistently documents significant inequities between Latino and white students (Rivera-Batiz, 2008). Several studies suggest that these inequities stem from the policies and practices implemented by administrators and teachers, such as academic grouping and unfair disciplinary procedures (Meier et al., 1999; Polinard et al., 1990). However, increasing representation on school boards can mitigate these adverse effects, as diverse school boards are more likely to employ a greater number of diverse administrators and staff (Reyes & Neiman, 2011). This concept, often called "representative bureaucracy," holds that when a minority candidate holds a governance position in a school district, they can actively advocate for policies that promote equal access to educational opportunities (Grissom et al., 2015).

Scholarship examining the association between representation and education outcomes has found modest improvement in student achievement. Fraga, Meier, and England's (1986) study of Latino representation shows that increased representation on school boards has a positive effect. Their research, which examined 35 large urban school districts, found that a one-percentage-point increase in Latino representation on school boards is associated with about a

one-percentage-point increase in Latino teachers. The increase in Latino administrators and teachers led to Latino students being less likely to be sorted or disciplined, which improved educational outcomes for Latino students. Building on this research, Polinard, Wrinkle, and Longoria (1989) found that as the number of Latino school board members increased, so did the number of Latino administrators and teachers. In Texas school districts, each one-percentage-point increase in Latino board members corresponded to a 0.21-percentage-point increase in Latino administrators, and each one-percentage-point increase in Latino administrators was associated with a 0.44-percentage-point increase in Latino teachers. Similarly, Ross, Rouse, and Bratton (2010) analyzed over a thousand school districts in Texas and found similar evidence: an increase in Latino representation led to increases in the number of administrators and teachers. In their model, a one-percentage-point increase in Latino board members is associated with a 0.656-percentage-point increase in Latino administrators and a 0.209-percentage-point increase in Latino teachers. They also found that one percentage point in Latino board members is associated with a small but significant 0.039-percentage-point increase in Latino student achievement. While the effects across these studies were minimal, these findings demonstrate a positive relationship between Latino board members and the diversity of the educator workforce.

Additionally, districts with a greater number of Latinos on school boards saw reductions in class size, increases in bilingual teachers, and expanded teacher recruitment strategies, which positively impacted the educational experiences of Latino students (Reyes & Neiman, 2011). However, not all studies found a positive relationship between Latino representation and student achievement. Fraga and Elis (2009) found a weak relationship between Latino staff and test scores, but confirmed that board representation increases administrator diversity, suggesting the pathway to improved outcomes may be more complex than direct teacher effects. Overall, these

findings indicate that greater Latino representation on school boards can influence who is hired and how schools are run, potentially creating conditions that better support Latino students.

In a more recent analysis, Kogan and colleagues (2021) find that increases in minority representation in California school boards lead to cumulative achievement gains of approximately 0.1 standard deviations among minority students by the sixth post-election year, or approximately 46 additional days of learning by the sixth year. They linked these student achievement gains to increased capital funding and a higher proportion of diverse school staff resulting from greater minority representation on school boards. Their study reveals the long-term effects of increased representation on student outcomes and explains how those outcomes were achieved.

In summary, this body of evidence confirms that representation matters: Latino school board members are associated with increased hiring of Latino staff, policy changes that address the needs of Latino students, and measurable improvements in student achievement. Together, these works highlight why communities would be compelled to mobilize for electoral reform. However, this scholarship emphasizes effects and outcomes, largely ignoring how communities achieve representation. While theory suggests that increasing descriptive representation can benefit minority groups, it overlooks the political challenges of electing representatives in a system that requires a majority of voters to win. More specifically, it overlooks the political difficulties involved in electing a racially underrepresented group in a majority-white electorate.

Demographics and the Representation Gap

As one of the nation's most populous and racially diverse states, California is widely recognized for its dense urban centers, expansive agricultural regions, and longstanding status as a majority-minority state, where no single racial or ethnic group constitutes a numerical majority

(Johnson et al., 2023). With an estimated population of 39 million people, approximately 40 percent of Californians are Latino, 34 percent are white, 16 percent are Asian American or Pacific Islander, 6 percent are Black, 3 percent are multiracial, and fewer than 1 percent are Native American or Alaska Natives (US Census Bureau, n.d.). These demographic patterns have been shaped by decades of immigration, migration into and out of the state, declining birth rates, and more recent population shifts driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson et al., 2023). This next section contextualizes demographic change in California, highlighting its impact on student enrollment patterns.

Latino Population and Student Enrollment in California

Demographers have long debated whether Latino population growth translates to increased Latino political power, yet evidence shows that Latinos remain significantly underrepresented in California public office. One report on Latino representation in California's government found that Latinos make up just 18 percent of board and commission members, despite accounting for four in ten residents. In contrast, white non-Latinos, who make up roughly 36.5 percent of the state population, make up 48 percent of elected officials (Carmona & Barragan-Monge, 2022). This underrepresentation carries significant consequences, as many of these boards and commissions have massive budgets and oversee regulations affecting everything from prisons to agriculture to education. In short, Latino demographic growth has not translated into proportional political representation.

While Latino growth has not translated into proportional political power, it has fundamentally reshaped the demographics of local institutions, particularly public schools. California's public school enrollment trends reveal a dramatic shift: the student population has become less White and more Latino over the past two decades (Deng et al., 2025). In 1998, the

share of White and Latino students was similar, almost 40 percent of enrollment, but by 2024–25, the share of Latino students had risen over 16 percentage points, while the share of white students had fallen by 18 percentage points. In 2024–25, Latino students accounted for about 56 percent, while White students accounted for about 20 percent of the student population, a near-complete reversal in the composition of California’s classrooms.

As of 2024, approximately 5.8 million students are enrolled in California’s public schools, making it one of the largest school systems in the nation (California Department of Education (CDE), n.d.). The student body includes an estimated 3.2 million Latino students, 1.2 million non-Latino white students, 281,000 Black students, and 586,000 Asian students (CDE, n.d.). This extensive diversity makes California’s public school system among the most racially and ethnically diverse in the nation. However, this diversity coincides with significant economic inequality: an estimated 71 percent of Latino students enrolled in public schools come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (CDE, n.d.).

A major shift in Latino population growth has been the reported increase in suburban and rural areas—places where few Latinos previously settled. With the rising cost of living in major urban cities and the suburbanization of jobs, many Latino families have relocated to suburban and rural communities (Singer, 2004). Reed (2021) found that 2.6 million students were enrolled in suburban schools compared with 2.8 million students in urban schools. A misconception of suburban schools is that they are homogeneous and largely white enclaves, yet Reed (2021) found 52 percent of suburban students are Latino, followed by 24 percent white, 10 percent Asian, and 5 percent Black. In many of these places, school segregation is expanding as students are attending school with fewer white students. Fuller and colleagues (2019) found that Latino

students are less likely to attend schools with White peers and are enrolled in highly segregated schools.

The increase in Latino students has brought new challenges for school districts as they work to respond to students' diverse needs. The growth of Latino students comes at a time when the California K-12 teaching staff remains predominantly white. California currently employs approximately 155,000 white teachers compared to 75,000 Latino teachers, a significant gap given that Latino students comprise 56 percent of enrollment (CDE, n.d.). This racial mismatch between students and teachers is consequential for educational outcomes. Research demonstrates that schools employing more racially diverse teachers are more likely to improve academic outcomes for all students, especially students of color (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). The shortage of Latino teachers means that many Latino students progress through their K-12 education without experiencing a co-ethnic teacher.

Overall, the demographic shifts in California have profound implications for schools, as these institutions are primarily affected by population changes. School boards must respond to changes in student composition, address growing diversity in suburban and rural areas, close the teacher workforce diversity gap in the teacher workforce, and improve educational attainment for Latino students. However, when 56 percent of students are Latino, but 70 percent of school board members are white, fundamental questions arise about whose interests, perspectives, and priorities shape these critical decisions. The following sections examine the electoral structures that have contributed to this representation gap.

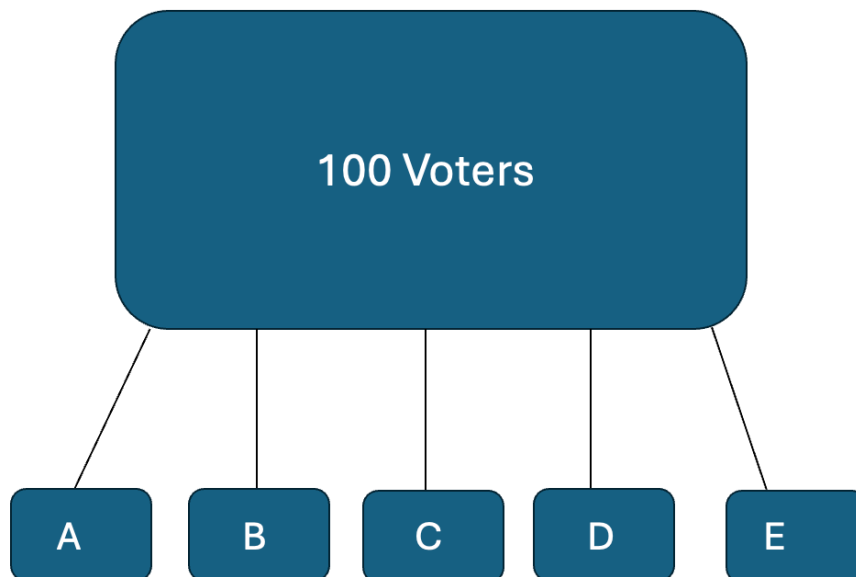
Voting Systems, Electoral Barriers, and Legal Tools

Scholarship has explored the relationship between electoral systems and Latino representation, finding that at-large elections may pose a significant barrier to increasing Latino

representation. According to Avila and colleagues (2007), at-large elections may lead to voter dilution, which disadvantages Latino candidates. Yet, at-large systems remain the dominant form for electing candidates to office throughout California. As of May 1, 2020, 155 California cities elected their councils by district; the remaining 327 have retained an at-large voting system (National Demographics Corporation, 2020). The disparity is even starker among special districts — which include school boards, community college districts, and water and health boards: while 282 have transitioned to district elections, over 2,667 continue to use at-large systems. This section examines the history of at-large elections, explaining how these systems achieved their discriminatory power through racially polarized voting. Then, it reviews empirical evidence on the relationship between district elections and Latino representation.

Two Voting Systems: At-Large and District Elections

In most modern democracies, elections for elected office require some type of system to capture, count, and certify results. The United States uses two common voting systems to elect candidates to office: at-large and district elections. In at-large elections, one seat represents an entire jurisdiction (such as a city or town) and is elected by eligible voters in that jurisdiction's electorate. To be declared the winner, candidates must receive a majority of the vote, typically 50 percent plus one. At-large elections require candidates to appeal to all voters and secure their support, which requires substantial name recognition and financial resources for citywide advertising, making it challenging for less wealthy candidates to compete. Figure 3 provides a visual of the at-large elections. In this figure, 100 voters will vote on a list of candidates, and the top five candidates with the most votes will be declared the winners. Supporters of at-large elections argue that they attract higher-quality candidates who are more attuned to the city's overall interests rather than just those of a single area (Wittman, 2024).

Figure 3: *At-Large Elections*

An alternative method is district elections, which divide political jurisdictions into smaller subdistricts. In district elections, a jurisdiction's electoral map is divided into five subdistricts of equal population; the number of subdistricts varies depending on population size. When political candidates are interested in running for office, they must reside in a subdistrict and be elected solely by voters in that district. Figure 4 provides a visual of district elections. In this figure, 100 voters are distributed evenly across 5 districts, with 20 voters per district. Each voter may cast only one vote for a candidate in their district.

Figure 4: *District Elections*

According to Davidson and Korbel (1981), at-large elections originated during the Progressive Era, a time marked by growing inequality and political corruption in American cities. Political machines dominated American politics, leaving no room for voter influence. In many respects, political machines enabled the creation of monopolies and corruption in most major cities. Intending to abolish monopolies, rid politics of corruption, and limit the participation of immigrants and people of color, the Progressive movement led to numerous social and political reform efforts aimed at establishing a more transparent and accountable government that would improve U.S. society. As part of these efforts, at-large elections were introduced to ensure that candidates were not beholden to party machines and to increase democratic representation (Davidson & Korbel, 1981). Most of these reforms were implemented in the Northeastern and Western cities, which were rapidly expanding and home to large immigrant populations. Progressive advocates for the adoption of at-large elections not only to weaken political machines but also to improve government efficiency.

While these reforms reduced the influence of political machines, they also produced new inequalities. To be declared the winner in at-large elections, candidates must receive a majority of the vote, typically 50 percent plus one. Requiring candidates to appeal to all voters and secure their support ensured that they remained attentive to their constituents' needs. However, at a time of great racial resentment towards Black people, especially in the South, at-large elections diminished the voting power of Black people through voter dilution. For example, Black candidates must secure the support of white voters across the broader electorate who may be hesitant to vote for a Black candidate, making it challenging for them to be elected (Davidson & Korbel, 1981).

At-Large Elections: A Bias for Latinos

Researchers have specifically identified at-large elections as a key reason for Latinos' underrepresentation on school boards (Leal et al., 2004; Meier & Melton, 2012; Molina Jr & Meier, 2018; Reyes & Neiman, 2011). Under this voting method, Leal and colleagues (2004) found significant evidence that Latinos are less likely to be elected because their votes are diluted, making it more difficult for them to elect their preferred candidates. They describe the dilution of Latino votes as the bias in the at-large voting method, which hinders the descriptive representation of Latinos.

At the core of vote dilution is the concept of racially polarized voting (RPV). Elmendorf and colleagues (2016) argue that voting is polarized when 1) the political preferences of majority and minority voters diverge substantially and 2) the racial majority votes with sufficient cohesion to defeat the candidates preferred by the minority. When RPV exists, racial minorities are unable to elect their preferred candidates. RPV occurs because a key feature of an at-large voting system is its winner-takes-all model², meaning that a racial majority can control all seats, effectively preventing racial minorities from electing their preferred candidates. In this context, the votes of minorities are diluted by those cast for rival candidates supported by the racial majority (Scarrow, 1999).

This system often advantages elite individuals and can dilute minority votes, as minority voters are absorbed into a larger pool of white voters. If white voters tend to vote along racial lines, minority candidates face a significantly reduced chance of election. Figure 5 shows at-large vs district elections.

² A winner-takes-all electoral system is one where a voting bloc can win all seats in a legislature or electoral district, denying representation to any political minorities

Figure 5: *At-Large vs District Elections*

In an at-large election, assuming that white and Latino voters have different voting preferences, then the 80 white voters “drown out” or “dilute” the 20 Latino voters. At-large elections disadvantage Latinos, making it harder to elect a candidate of their choice. By contrast, district elections divide voters into equal subdistricts, and if the 20 Latino voters concentrate in one district, their likelihood of electing a preferred representative increases.

District Elections and Latino Representation

Most research on Latino voting behavior conclusively finds that, as a group, Latinos vote at lower rates than other racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Jones-Correa et al., 2018). The low levels of voting rates have significantly impacted the representation of Latinos in terms of policy preferences and preferred elected candidates. The desire to increase voting rates among Latino voters has spurred research identifying conditions that may facilitate the voting process. Researchers have found that district elections can make it easier for Latino voters who do vote to elect their candidate, increasing the likelihood of Latino representation (Gay, 2001). Under district elections, jurisdictions create smaller subdistricts, and because of the segregated nature of neighborhoods, this often leads to the formation of majority-minority districts. According to Trounstein and Valdin (2008), under these electoral conditions, minority groups can leverage their population size in district elections to achieve descriptive representation.

Barreto and colleagues (2004) found that in majority-minority districts, Latino voters were more successful in electing Latino candidates. Examining turnout data from five Southern California counties in the early 2000s, they found that Latino voters were more likely to turn out when living in majority-Latino districts, leading to the election of Latino candidates. In majority-minority districts, Latino candidates were more likely to run for office, and in these districts, a higher percentage of Latino voters participated (Barreto et al., 2005).

Moreover, Leal and colleagues (2004) found that Latino representation on school boards significantly increased when school districts used district elections. However, Leal and colleagues cautioned that these effects are contingent on population size, which is a factor in determining representation. In district elections where Latinos were a minority, Latino representation only increased 43 percent effectively; however, when Latinos were a majority in the district, Latino representation increased by 72 percentage points.

Studying the effects of the transition to district elections in school boards, Abbott and Magazinnik (2020) found an increase in Latino representation on school boards after the transition from at-large to district elections. In school boards that converted to district elections, the proportion of seats won by Latinos increased by 31 percentage points. Collingwood and Long (2021) found supporting evidence that transitioning from an at-large to a district voting system for city councils boosts minority representation. In California, city councils that transitioned from at-large to district elections experienced a 10 percent to 12 percent increase in minority representation. In cities with a higher percentage of Latino residents, the boost in Latino city council representation after switching to district elections was even more significant, a 21

percent increase. Both studies indicate that the shift to district elections has boosted minority representation in political offices.

However, some research has cautioned that implementing district elections may not yield better policy outcomes for minorities. Wittman (2024) contends that, in some cases, minorities may achieve more favorable policy outcomes under at-large elections. Drawing on voter convergence and the median voter theorem, she argues that in at-large voting systems, winning council candidates represent the median over all voters. In contrast, when there are district elections, each council member represents the interests of the median voter in their district. In essence, council policy is determined by the median council member, whose district represents few, if any, minorities. While Wittman (2024) raises important issues, voters in a subdistrict elect a candidate who represents their district's best interests. The candidate will then represent their interest and work with other members to arrive at a decision that best reflects the needs of the districts. This will involve some convergence, but if the ultimate goal is to increase descriptive representation in governance, then district elections are the best approach.

The Limits of the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965

Despite the existence of federal law, the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, outlawing practices that limit the voting rights of Black and other racial minority eligible voters, voter discrimination persists in the United States (Fraga et al., 2023). Identified as the cornerstone of Civil Rights legislation, the VRA has been weakened (see *Shelby County v. Holder*, 2013), exposing the fragility of voting rights in the United States (Engstrom & Haynie, 2014). Under the guise of enhancing election security and preventing election fraud, states have slowly amended their election laws and enacted more restrictive voting practices. Between 2021 and

2024, states enacted 79 restrictive voting laws, making it more difficult for eligible Americans to register to vote, remain on the voter rolls, or cast their ballots (Brennan Center for Justice, 2024). According to Hajnal and colleagues (2017), the enactment of restrictive voting laws harms minority group turnout, thereby reducing their voting influence in elections.

While the VRA protects against vote dilution in at-large elections, it does not extend this protection to state elections. To claim voter discrimination under the VRA, plaintiffs must demonstrate that the jurisdiction's election practices contribute to vote dilution and meet the guidelines established by the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986). This established precedent limits claims of voter discrimination filed at the state level, reducing the number of such cases and allowing at-large elections to persist. Known as the Gingles Test, the Supreme Court outlined three factors that must be satisfied to recognize a practice of voter discrimination.

- 1) The minority group must be large enough and geographically compact enough to form a majority in a single-member district.
- 2) The minority group must be politically cohesive, meaning that most minority voters vote for the same candidate.
- 3) The majority group votes as a bloc to defeat the minority group's preferred candidate.

The Gingles Test established a legal precedent for bringing charges under a jurisdiction's voting laws and practices that could lead to vote dilution. However, for the legal system to recognize vote dilution, plaintiffs must demonstrate that a minority group concentrates to form a majority. Meeting this threshold is challenging at the state level, where minority groups may constitute only a small share of the population. In response to ongoing concerns about voter suppression and dilution, several state legislatures have enacted or strengthened their own voting rights protections, often going beyond federal rights (Marschall & Rutherford, 2016).

California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001: State-Level Protections Against Vote Dilution

Over the last decade, at least eight states—California, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, Illinois, New York, Virginia, and Connecticut—have enacted policies that strengthen voting rights and democratic representation. Among these laws, the CVRA is recognized as the strongest and most progressive policy, providing a framework for other states and a powerful tool to combat vote dilution (Gomez & Salceda, 2025). The CVRA rests on the assumption that at-large elections may result in voter dilution, thereby reducing the likelihood that minority candidates elect their preferred candidates. When a jurisdiction is found to be violating the CVRA, it must take corrective action, including removing at-large elections and implementing district elections, or face significant financial penalties.

In 2001, the California state legislature passed the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA), gradually enhancing the state’s protections of voting rights. The CVRA provides a broader definition of voter dilution, allowing minority voters to claim voter discrimination when a jurisdiction uses at-large elections. However, unlike the VRA, the CVRA does not mandate that a minority group be concentrated. Instead, a violation of the CVRA is established if it is shown that, as a result of RPV, members of a “protected class”³ have been denied the opportunity to elect their preferred candidates, as seen in *Pico Neighborhood Association et al. V. City of Santa Monica* (2023). The CVRA reads:

An at-large method of election may not be imposed or applied in a manner that impairs the ability of a protected class to elect candidates of its choice or its ability to influence the outcome of an election, as a result of the dilution or the abridgment of the rights of voters who are members of a protected class.

In essence, any jurisdiction where a member of a protected class resides, and they have failed to elect a candidate of the same race/ethnic background, can be accused of violating the CVRA.

³ A class of voters who are members of a race, color, or language minority group

Despite the enactment of the CVRA, jurisdictions have been slow to comply with the law, raising concerns about how it is enforced and by whom. Since 2002, the CVRA has prompted more than 165 school districts, 28 community college districts, over 100 cities, and 10 water and other special districts to switch from at-large to district voting systems (National Demographics Corporation, 2018). However, this accounts for only about one-third of California cities and roughly 13% of all jurisdictions (including special districts) that have transitioned to district elections; the remaining 327 cities and over 2,667 special districts still use an at-large voting system. It raises the prospect that voter discrimination may still be occurring across jurisdictions.

Although the CVRA lowers the legal threshold for proving vote dilution, its passive enforcement framework creates significant barriers for communities with limited legal and technical capacity. The law requires communities to raise formal claims of voter discrimination rather than obligating jurisdictions to comply proactively. As a result, communities must translate experiences of political exclusion into legally actionable claims, a process that often demands specialized legal and statistical expertise. Although the law lowers the burden of proof to establish voter dilution, it still requires technical expertise—such as statistical analysis of voter data—that many local communities are unable to conduct on their own. Instead, the law requires that professional demographers or lawyers advocate on behalf of communities. In this sense, the CVRA functions as a passive law that requires enforcement rather than proactive implementation.

Despite these enforcement barriers, the CVRA has proven to be a legally robust statute consistently upheld by California courts. Over the past two decades, numerous lawsuits have sought to limit the CVRA's far-reaching impact on local voting systems, but none have

succeeded. Two major cases have enshrined the constitutionality of the CVRA, establishing a strong legal precedent to advance minority representation. In *Sanchez v. City of Modesto* (2004), the California Supreme Court (CSC) upheld that the CVRA did not violate any constitutional rights in California. The City of Modesto argued that the CVRA was unconstitutional because it uses race to identify polarized voting to prove that it causes vote dilution. But the CSC rejected the City of Modesto's interpretation, finding that the CVRA was a colorblind policy. Then, in *Jauregui v. City of Palmdale* (2012), the CSC held that the CVRA applied to charter cities, finding that the city of Palmdale's at-large voting system for its elections violated the law. In this case, the court relied on statistical models to demonstrate voter dilution, which set a legal precedent for all voter discrimination cases.

Mobilization for Electoral Reform

In summary, the literature demonstrates that school board representation matters for educational outcomes. When Latinos are represented on school boards, they can influence local governance decisions that directly shape the educational experience of students, such as reducing class size, expanding access to culturally competent pedagogy, and increasing teacher recruitment. However, scholarship has demonstrated that at-large elections may disadvantage Latino candidates, limiting their chances of being elected to the school board. In contrast, district elections reduce these barriers and can facilitate the election of Latino representatives, as Latinos can leverage their population size to elect a candidate. As discussed, the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) provides a legal framework to challenge at-large elections; however, because the law is largely passive, legal and social actors must actively mobilize it to address electoral inequities. How communities achieve this change remains an empirical gap in the literature and

forms the foundation of this study. This study examines how one community engaged in legal mobilization to challenge at-large elections and advance electoral reform.

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative study that examines how one community engaged in legal mobilization to reform electoral systems and advance Latino representation on a California school board. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and primary source documents, this study used a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) for data analysis, allowing theoretical insights to emerge inductively from participant accounts. Using a grounded theory approach enabled a deeper understanding of individual perspectives while situating them within the broader context of the legal mobilization phenomenon under study. This chapter includes the research design, study participants, data collection procedures, analytical methods, and ethical considerations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how one community leveraged the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 to reform its electoral system and advance Latino representation on its school board. Guided by a grounded theory approach, this study examined the perspectives of lawyers and political leaders to identify the strategies and contextual factors that facilitated mobilization around fair representation. It also examined the perspectives of local stakeholders to understand how increased descriptive representation was experienced and perceived by parents, school board members, and teachers in school governance. Through iterative coding and constant comparison across interviews and archival documents, this study extends legal mobilization theory by revealing a multi-stage process linking legal opportunity, community mobilization, and representation outcomes in the context of education politics.

Research Questions

As Latino students continue to grow in public schools, school districts face an unprecedented challenge of delivering a culturally response education. Understanding the role that school districts, and more specifically school boards, play in shaping local education policy is an important avenue for advancing educational change. This study seeks to broaden this discussion by advancing research on Latino representation and electoral systems. This study is situated between two distinct areas of research: the relationship between Latino representation on school boards and student outcomes (Fischer, 2023; Fraga et al., 1986; Kogan et al., 2021; Meier et al., 2005; Polinard et al., 1990), and the relationship between electoral systems and the election of Latinos to school boards (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020; Collingwood & Long, 2021; Fraga et al., 1986; Leal et al., 2004; Meier & Melton, 2012; Molina Jr & Meier, 2018; Reyes & Neiman, 2011).

The first area of research that informs this study is the relationship between Latino representation on school boards and student outcomes. Scholars have long emphasized a positive relationship between Latino representation on school boards and student outcomes through various mechanisms (Kogan et al., 2021; Reyes & Neiman, 2011). This body of literature has demonstrated that greater Latino representation on school boards translates into districts employing more Latino administrators and teachers (Fraga et al., 1986), showing greater attention to student needs (Reyes & Neiman, 2011), and distributing resources more equitably (Fischer, 2023), all of which contribute to improved student achievement.

The second area of research that informs this study is the relationship between electoral systems and the election of Latinos to school boards. Leal and colleagues (2004) have demonstrated that when school districts use at-large elections for board seats, Latinos are less

likely to be elected, suggesting that an electoral bias exists against Latinos. Similarly, Molina Jr. and Meier (2018) reveal that the at-large elections contribute to the persistent low representation of Latinos on school boards. These findings have established a common understanding that electoral structures play an important role in electing Latino candidates. Recent research by Collingwood and Long (2021) revealed that reforming electoral structures from at-large to district-based elections increases the likelihood of Latino candidates being elected by 10 to 12 percent. In areas with a larger share of the Latino population, this effect rose to 21 percent. Similarly, Abbott and Magazinnik (2020) demonstrated that in jurisdictions with a higher proportion of Latinos, Latino representation increases by 31 percent, suggesting that changes to electoral structures can impact who is elected.

However, a critical gap remains between the two areas of research: the political work required to reform electoral systems and advance Latino representation. Despite the demonstrated value of Latino representation on school boards, Latinos remain vastly underrepresented in school governance. As scholarship demonstrates, reforming electoral structures can increase Latino representation, but research has yet to examine how communities can achieve this. This study aims to bridge the two areas of research by examining how one community leveraged law to reform the electoral systems and advance Latino representation on a school board. The guiding research questions for this study are as follows:

- 1) How did voting rights attorneys and local political actors leverage election law to influence redistricting and advance Latino representation on a school board, and how did local stakeholders make sense of increased descriptive representation in local education governance?

However, to address the overarching research questions, the analysis is guided by the following three sub-questions:

- 1) What role do voting rights attorneys play in leveraging election law to reform voting structures?
- 2) What social, political, and institutional factors enabled local leaders to organize and mobilize community support to influence the construction of new electoral structures?
- 3) How do parents, teachers and district staff, and school board members make sense of increased Latino representation, and what do they perceive as its possibilities and limitations?

By addressing these questions, this study highlights the strategies, challenges, and opportunities that arise in the pursuit of representation, illustrating the processes through which legal and local actors influence educational governance and reshape school board decision-making.

Methodology Selected

The purpose of this study was to understand the social and political context that contributed to the mobilization of one community to pursue electoral reform and advance Latino representation on a California school board. Examining this phenomenon required an approach that could capture the experiences, social processes, and political actions as understood by those who lived them. A qualitative research design was the most appropriate, as it aims to gain insight into phenomena, groups, or experiences by probing for subjective meaning through exploratory questions (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative methods focus on exploring the “why” and “how” of individual experiences, often done through interviews and observations. Rather than testing a hypothesis, as is often done in quantitative methods, this study sought to understand how participants experienced and made meaning of a complex social and political phenomenon.

For this study, examining the phenomenon required in-depth interviews with individuals who had firsthand experience with the electoral reform process and who were directly impacted by Latino representation on the school board. To accomplish this, I selected a semi-structured interview format as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews balance pre-planned questions with the flexibility to explore participant responses through open-ended, follow-up probes. Unlike fully structured or unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews

use an interview guide — often with themes or open-ended questions — to ensure core research areas are covered while allowing the interviewer to adapt to the flow of conversation. This approach was particularly appropriate because the phenomenon involved multiple stakeholder groups, each bringing distinct perspectives and experiences that required flexible and responsive questioning.

In addition to interviews, I collected primary source materials to triangulate and corroborate interviews. Primary source materials are original, firsthand documents that provide direct evidence of a phenomenon, event, or experience. For this study, primary source materials included legal correspondence, op-eds, board meeting minutes, demographic data, and newspaper articles. Legal correspondence revealed the communication strategies among key actors, while op-eds and newspaper articles situated the phenomenon within its broader public and political context. Board meeting minutes and demographic data served as evidence, documenting both how the political process unfolded and how the population shifted over time. By analyzing both interviews and primary source documents, I examined the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings.

After collecting the data, I analyzed it using a grounded theory approach, which comprises a systematic, inductive, and comparative method for constructing theory (Charmaz, 2006). This approach was particularly appropriate for understanding how one community leveraged the CVRA to reform electoral systems and advance Latino representation on a school board. I selected grounded theory over other qualitative evaluation methods because it focuses on developing a theory of a process or action, rather than constructing life stories (as in narrative inquiry) or examining a bounded case in a real-life, contemporary context or setting (case study) (Creswell, 2013). While these qualitative evaluation methods commonly inform studies of school

districts, this study primarily aimed to extend legal mobilization theory by uncovering the process through which one community leveraged law to advance Latino representation on a school board.

Grounded Theory as an Analytical Approach

Two approaches to grounded theory exist in social research: the traditional method introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the constructivist grounded theory approach developed by Kathy Charmaz (2006). While both approaches focus on examining data to allow theory to emerge inductively, they differ in how the researcher engages with the data and in how they conceptualize theory construction. In the traditional approach, the researcher is an objective observer who collects data and discovers patterns that reveal underlying social processes. In contrast, Charmaz's constructivist approach argues that researchers inevitably bring their own backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences to the research process, which shape how they interpret and construct meaning from the data. However, before discussing the differences in data analysis between these approaches, it is important to first review the principles of grounded theory.

Introduced in the 1960s, grounded theory is "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.2). Glaser and Strauss (1967) identify five primary objectives for grounded theory in research: to enable prediction and explanation of behavior, to contribute to theoretical advancement, to support practical applications by providing practitioners with understanding and some control over situations, to offer a perspective on behavior, and to guide research on specific areas of behavior. In this context, grounded theory serves as a strategy for handling data and provides conceptual tools for describing and explaining social phenomena.

To accomplish this, Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend a systematic, inductive theory generation from the data, meaning that hypotheses and concepts are not only derived from the data but also continuously developed and refined throughout the research process. Grounded theory methodology emphasizes coding as a central analytical tool, in which terms are used to succinctly and conceptually summarize each phrase, line, or even word in interviews. A defining feature of grounded theory is its focus on processes or actions that unfold over time, enabling the researcher to show how the theory operates in practice.

In practice, data for a grounded theory study are often collected through interviews and primary source materials, providing opportunities to capture real-world accounts of a social phenomenon. However, epistemological differences emerge in the research process between the two approaches to grounded theory. The traditional approach views the researcher as being objective, a passive neutral observer in the data collection, often defined as positivism, which Charmaz (2025) argues

fragments the respondent's story, relies on the authoritative voice of the researcher, blurs difference, and uncritically accepts Enlightenment grand metanarratives about science, universality, human nature, and world views (pg. 12).

From this perspective, objective inquiry assumes that theory exists independently of the researcher and is discovered through the research process, implying that the researcher remains detached from it. However, the constructivist perspective recognizes that the researcher brings their privileges and preconceptions, which shape the analysis and the very facts they can identify (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2025) writes

[that] if we start with the assumptions that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, then we must take the researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. (pg. 12).

In this perspective, the researcher's backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences shape not only the research process but also how they interpret and construct meaning from the data. By recognizing the perspectives and experiences a researcher brings to the research process, the researcher can engage in reflexivity about their actions and decisions. In essence, the constructivist perspective emphasizes that the researcher constructs theory rather than discovers it, a process that unfolds throughout the research.

While these epistemological differences shape the research process, both approaches employ similar procedures for analyzing data. Grounded theory follows an iterative process of coding, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling. To begin, three forms of coding are used: open, selective, and theoretical coding (Glaser, 1992). Open coding is the initial step of theoretical analysis, in which codes develop from the data. This form of coding ends once all data has been analyzed and the researcher moves on to generating categories that connect open codes to larger concepts in the data, often described as selective coding. Theoretical coding occurs when the codes and categories that emerged from selective coding are compared, and relationships among them are identified. While a similar approach is followed in constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) argues that during the open coding process, researchers should apply active language to codes. This immersion is enacted through coding that uses active voice and "helps to keep that life in the foreground" (p. 526). By using active language, the researcher keeps the participant's voice, experience, and meaning central to the analysis, rather than losing them in abstract, detached theorizing.

In both approaches, memoing is critical, allowing the researcher to record ideas and reflections as data are collected and analyzed, supporting the iterative development of the theory. However, Charmaz (2000) goes a step further, suggesting that throughout the memoing process,

inclusion of raw data aids the construction of theory. Including raw data in memos helps ensure that emerging concepts and categories remain grounded in the data. This iterative process is what Charmaz describes as constructing theory rather than finding theory in the data. Additionally, the memoing process allows for the researcher to document their personal feelings, biases, and assumptions, separating them from the participant's data, identify how and why the researcher made research decisions, and build theoretical sensitivity to detect nuances and patterns within the data. These principles guided the coding and analysis of interviews to illuminate the process through which one community leveraged law to advance Latino representation on a school board.

This study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach, allowing the researcher to integrate their background, perspectives, and experiences into the research process. Examining how one community leveraged the law to reform electoral systems and advance Latino representation required understanding the local social and political context that helped explain why the community mobilized. Without the researcher's ability to understand these perspectives, it would have been impossible to grasp the significance of electoral change and political representation in the local community.

Researcher Positionality

I am a Latino male in his late twenties and a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. I hold a Bachelor's in Political Science and American Studies and a Master's of Education from UC Berkeley. Through my coursework at the Berkeley School of Education and in qualitative research design, as well as extensive research experience, I have developed the training and expertise necessary to conduct this study. I am also fluent in English and Spanish, which allowed interviews to be conducted in both

languages. Speaking Spanish helped establish rapport with Spanish-speaking participants, allowing them to express themselves in their dominant language.

I occupy a dual positionality as both a member of the local community of the research site and the principal investigator. Being native to the community provided familiarity with complex social and political contexts, which facilitated the understanding of participants' experiences and interpretation of data. Additionally, being native helped build rapport with participants, fostering trust and enabling the collection of detailed accounts of their lived experiences, especially on sensitive topics around race and class. At the same time, I had no direct personal relationship with the participants, which ensured there was no conflict of interest or undue influence on participation or responses. Moreover, prior studies in the community on educational opportunity and demographic change enabled me to build social networks over time, which I leveraged to disseminate the study.

Study Participants

This study explores how one community leveraged the CVRA to reform electoral structures and advance Latino representation on a school board. To accomplish this, the study drew on a diverse set of education stakeholders, including lawyers, local political leaders, parents, school board members, and teachers and district staff, to provide insight into this reform process and its impact on school governance. I interviewed two lawyers to understand their roles in the reform process. I interviewed six political leaders to understand the social and political context that enabled them to mobilize the community. I interviewed sixteen parents, nine teachers and two school administrators, and five school board members to explore how they made sense of Latino representation and what they perceived as its possibilities and limitations. I provided more descriptions of participants in Appendix C.

Data Collection

Recruitment of Participants

A dual-method approach was used for parent recruitment, using snowball sampling and flyers. I began parent recruitment by contacting a personal connection established through previous studies on educational issues in the school district. Through these connections, I asked the participant to help distribute the flyer and to provide information on an additional contact. I recruited parents through snowball sampling ($n = 9$). An additional seven participants ($n = 7$) completed a Google form that collected their contact information and availability. After reviewing their responses, I contacted each individual to explain the study and, if they agreed to participate, arranged a time to conduct the interview.

To recruit school board members, I personally emailed them to participate in the study. As public elected officials, the school board members have district email addresses, and most are publicly available. When I emailed the board members, I provided a brief introduction and a summary of the study. If a board member did not respond to the first email, a second email was sent a few weeks later. By the second email, most board members had expressed initial interest and were open to scheduling an interview or to doing so in the near future. Board members who did not respond were considered not interested.

To recruit teachers, I leveraged my professional networks I developed during my graduate studies and through my engagement with educational issues in Fallbrook. In some cases, I established connections with individual teachers and asked them to distribute a recruitment flyer within their professional networks. I also directly contacted teachers with whom I had previously established relationships through prior studies or professional connections. I obtained school administrators' email addresses from the district website and sent personalized email invitations to participate in the study.

Recruitment of political leaders began after an interview with a parent who emphasized the challenges of at-large elections and the electoral change that had occurred in the community. The parent highlighted the role of local political leaders in shaping strategies and discussions around these elections and recommended I talk with them to understand the electoral change. Following the interview, the parent connected me with the political leader via email, suggesting that it would be a great opportunity to shed light and document the tactics. Political leaders were recruited through a snowball sampling approach, as each leader identified a colleague involved in the process and connected me with them.

After meeting with political leaders, it became clear that the perspectives of legal advocates were essential to the study. While the political leaders provided no personal information on the legal advocates, I searched the internet for contact information. Four candidates critical to the process were identified, and I sent each a personal email inviting them to participate. Two legal advocates responded and expressed interest in participating in the study. One declined to participate due to work obligations, and the other did not respond. Because these legal advocates were not located in the study area, I conducted interviews via Zoom. I anticipated approximately 20-25 participants for this study; the final number was 40, determined by saturation.

Interview Protocol Design

This study relied on semi-structured interviews, with both the interview protocol and my role as the interviewer serving as the data collection instruments. Across all three groups (parents, school staff, and local political organizers), I followed a common interview protocol, as shown in Appendix A. The interview protocol addressed the research question with four main categories: 1) Context (who the participants are), 2) Electoral Structure (how institutions

operate), 3) Process (how mobilization happens), and 4) Outcomes (what representation changes). The protocol had about 25 questions, about 6 six questions per category. Additionally, some questions pertained specifically to the position they held within the study. For example, questions directed at political leaders were more specific about mobilization, while those directed at parents focused on changes in the school district. When it became apparent that legal advocates needed to be included in the study, I developed a separate interview protocol, as shown in Appendix B. This new protocol included questions that probed the legal advocates' work, including their motivations for engaging in voting rights work, their legal strategies, their interactions with communities, and their outcomes.

Conducting the Interviews

Most interviews took place at local cafés, participants' homes, and the local library, and some on Zoom. I recorded interviews using a Sony voice recorder. Most interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes, with the shortest at 30 minutes and the longest at 125 minutes. When I used Zoom to conduct interviews, I recorded them and enabled the transcription function. I did not interview participants without first obtaining written and verbal informed consent. To establish rapport, I began each interview with questions about participants' backgrounds and experiences before transitioning to topics related to the school district, the redistricting process, and legal mobilization efforts. I conduct most interviews in English, while some were conducted in Spanish to accommodate participants who preferred to speak in their native language.

Recording, Transcription, and Memoing

I recorded all interviews using a Sony voice recorder, and used Zoom recordings for virtual interviews. Audio recordings were transcribed using Whisper and reviewed against the original recordings to ensure accuracy. Following each interview, I wrote memos to capture

reflections, insights, and preliminary ideas about emerging patterns. Memoing was central to the process, supporting constant comparison, helping identify gaps in understanding, and guiding the refinement of conceptual categories. Insights from memos also informed the need for additional interviews and adjustments to the interview protocol.

Document Collection

In addition to interviews, I collected and organized school district meeting minutes and agendas. I obtained these documents from the FUESD website, downloaded them, and organized them into files on Dedoose. I examined them for references to redistricting, at-large elections, electoral reform, voting rights issues, and CVRA. Moreover, I collected local newspaper stories through online searches and analyzed their content to trace how race, inequality, voting, and representation were framed in the context of redistricting. This analysis helped situate the timeline of electoral reform efforts within the broader social and political dynamics of the community. Additionally, some political leaders shared materials they used during the redistricting process, including email correspondence, electoral maps, and public event flyers. These documents provided additional context and allowed me to compare participants' descriptions of events with empirical evidence.

Procedures Followed

To begin the study, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of California, Berkeley. After receiving approval, I created a flyer that described the study, provided my contact information, the IRB approval serial number, and included a QR code linking to a Google Form. Interested participants could either fill out the Google form to be contacted or contact me directly. The flyer briefly described the study's interest: understanding the role of demographic change on school boards and its impact on school governance, as shown

in Appendix D. To disseminate the flyer, I posted it on social media (e.g., Facebook), on the local library bulletin board, and through my existing professional networks.

Recruitment began in May 2024 and concluded at the end of January 2025. This six-month recruitment window allowed for a flexible interview schedule. For parents, eligibility required having a student enrolled in the Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD) between 2018 and 2024. For school district staff, eligibility required: being currently employed with FUESD or having been employed between 2018 and 2024. I established this eligibility threshold to ensure that parents and school district staff were either directly affected or had been affected by the changes in representation on the school board. Political leaders were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the redistricting process. Legal advocates were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in voting rights cases and the redistricting process related to the district.

After participants expressed interest, I followed up to schedule a time and place to meet. Upon meeting with a participant, I explained the interview process and provided a consent form. I assured participants that I would be the only one with access to the recordings and that I would protect their personal information. If I used any material from the interview, I would anonymize their names with pseudonyms. I conducted most interviews at local cafes, participants' homes, and the local library, with some conducted via Zoom when necessary. I interviewed each participant in a single session.

An important aspect of grounded theory is that it allows the researcher to discover the phenomenon during the research process (Charmaz, 2006). In this approach, theory emerges from the data rather than the researcher entering the study with predetermined assumptions. As I developed a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, new questions emerged, and additional

individuals became essential to the study, e.g., legal advocates. To interview these new participants, I created a new interview protocol and obtained IRB approval.

After each interview, I uploaded the file to Whisper, which transcribed the interview. I review each transcript alongside the original recording to ensure accuracy. When necessary, I followed up with participants to clarify unclear portions of the transcription. To protect confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants and removed identifying information from all transcripts. After the transcription process was over, I moved the audio recordings to a password-protected hard drive and deleted the files from the recording device.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), saturation occurs when no new categories emerge from the data, and additional data collection does not yield new insights for the emerging theory. Saturation was reached in this study after the 40th interview, as no more information related to the phenomenon emerged from the interviews.

Data Analysis

According to the SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory, the conceptualization of data is the foundation of grounded theory development (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 265). Coding aids the researcher in fracturing the data and conceptualizing the underlying patterns to advance a theory that explains what is happening in the data. Coding of transcripts was completed in the order of the interviews conducted, in batches of four at a time, allowing me to reflect on and edit the interview questions as theories began to emerge from the data. I used the coding process to understand the participants' perspectives and analyze their combined experiences. I coded all the data on Dedoose, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

I organized the interviews into three stakeholder groups: 1) legal advocates, 2) political leaders, and 3) district employees and parents. These interviews were rich in data, and coding the

transcript was a critical part of the data analysis process, breaking it down into meaningful, manageable chunks. Prior to coding each transcript, I read the transcript, referenced the research question, and then began coding. In line with Charmaz (2006), I assigned codes using active language to keep the participant's voice central to the analysis.

In constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), coding often follows a similar path, unfolding in three phases: open, focus, and theoretical coding. I began open coding with line-by-line analysis, identifying participants' actions and experiences. After I completed open coding, I moved to focus coding, during which I analyzed and refined the codes to identify categories that could guide the analysis. After I completed focus coding, I analyzed the categories and codes to identify relationships that could help explain the phenomenon, a process often described as theoretical coding. The process of analyzing, reanalyzing, and comparing new data to existing data is known as constant comparison. Throughout each phase, I engaged in constant comparison — consistently comparing codes across phases, making connections, and rearticulating concepts until data saturation was reached.

In addition, I reviewed local newspaper articles to provide historical and contextual information about the phenomenon. I combined these sources with interview data and school board meeting minutes to identify patterns in the redistricting process. This process allowed for triangulation across multiple data sources and supported the development of grounded theory categories.

Open Coding

Open coding is the phase in grounded theory in which each line of the transcribed interview is examined and coded line by line. Line-by-line coding is a critical component of grounded theory methods because it allows the researcher to remain closely connected to the

data. During this process, I coded each line of the transcripts using short phrases or words that captured the meaning of the data. The goal is to identify concepts emerging from the data. This approach required careful attention to each interview and helped ensure that analytical insights were grounded in participants' responses rather than in the researcher's prior assumptions.

Throughout this process, I engaged in constant comparison, examining codes across interviews to identify similarities, differences, and emerging conceptual patterns. For example, more than fifty codes emerged from a single transcript during the early stages of coding. These codes were subsequently refined, resulting in approximately thirty codes that more clearly represented patterns within the data. Given that interviews were conducted across three stakeholder groups, I analyzed the data both within and across groups. While each group provided particular insight into specific research questions — for example, legal advocates on the legal strategy, political leaders on the mobilization context, and local education stakeholders on the impact on school governance — coding was conducted iteratively across all interviews. This approach allowed for constant comparison of themes across participants while also attending to the distinct perspectives each group contributed to the study.

The number of codes varied across interviews, with some producing relatively few codes due to limited information shared, while others generated a larger set due to the depth and richness of participants' responses. More importantly, comparing codes across stakeholder groups helped me understand how different actors perceived and experienced the phenomenon.

Focus Coding

Following open coding, focused coding began as initial codes were refined and consolidated into more analytical categories. Focused coding involves identifying significant or frequent initial codes and using them to synthesize and explain larger segments of data

(Charmaz, 2025). As Charmaz explains, “[focus coding] means concentrating on what your initial codes say and the comparisons you make with and between them” (pg.141). During this stage, I examined which codes were most central to the process and how they related to one another. This stage involved asking what processes were emerging from the data and how categories connected to the broader phenomenon. Through constant comparison, initial open codes were grouped into more focused codes that more analytically captured recurring patterns across interviews. For example, I developed focused codes that helped clarify mobilization, such as “racialized grievances fueling political engagement” when participants discussed being “racialized in the community” or “having no political representation.” Some focus codes became core theoretical categories that informed the development of legal mobilization and illuminated the meaning of Latino representation on a school board.

Theoretical Coding

Theoretical coding occurs when the codes and categories that emerged during open coding and focus coding are compared, and relationships among them are identified. A defining feature of theoretical coding is the constant comparison with existing data to determine whether new categories emerge and whether those categories are becoming more conceptually dense. Memos became an essential part of the theoretical coding process, helping explain how categories relate to one another. Through this iterative process, theory emerges from these relationships, generating an analytical story about the phenomenon under study. During theoretical coding, I identified relationships between codes and categories across the three stakeholder groups. Each group played an active role in advancing the emerging theory, and interviews captured this process, yielding a theory on legal opportunity, community mobilization, and representation outcomes.

Dedoose

A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose, was used to aid in data management and analysis. All coding was conducted using this software, as it helped visualize ideas and concepts, organize codes, and retrieve data during analysis. However, the research process was guided by the researcher rather than by the software.

CHAPTER IV. THE ROLE OF LAWYERS IN ADVANCING ELECTORAL REFORM

Introduction

In the landmark Supreme Court Case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), civil rights lawyers reshaped public education in the United States (US) after successfully challenging the claim that Black and white students had equal access to educational opportunity. In this case, plaintiffs argued that segregated schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the US Constitution, even if the facilities were equal in quality. In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court sided with civil rights lawyers, closing a chapter of *de jure*⁴ racial segregation in public schools. The ruling marked a significant milestone in educational litigation, emphasizing that actors could leverage the law to pursue educational equity in public schools. Since then, several cases have determined who has access to public education (Herrera, 2004) and expanded bilingual education (Sugarman & Widess, 1974). In each case, lawyers used the law to challenge structures of inequality and expand the promise of public education.

Just as these lawyers in these landmark cases leveraged the law to challenge unequal structures that contributed to educational inequity, a wave of legal activism in California is reshaping the structures that have contributed to the political underrepresentation of Latinos on school boards. In California, at-large elections remain the dominant electoral structure for electing school boards (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020), despite decades of research demonstrating that Latino candidates are less likely to be elected under these structures. Leal and colleagues (2004) argue that an electoral bias exists against Latinos when at-large elections are employed, which has led to their underrepresentation. The disadvantage of at-large elections is that they may contribute to vote dilution (Scarow, 1999), especially in areas where voting is racially

⁴ *De jure* is formal, authorized, and compliant with laws

polarized or when different racial or ethnic groups consistently vote differently (Elmendorf et al., 2016). In these areas, the votes of minority groups can deprive them of an equal opportunity to participate in the political process (Mulji, 2024).

To reform these electoral structures, lawyers have leveraged the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 as a legal resource. This chapter draws on legal mobilization theory (LMT), a theoretical framework that treats law as a political resource that strategic actors can leverage to reshape institutional practices (Epp, 2009; Lehoucq & Taylor, 2019; McCann, 1994). In the context of the CVRA, this means that the law alone is insufficient; its potential for reform is only realized when legal actors strategically invoke it. One drawback of the CVRA is that it does not compel jurisdictions to comply automatically; it must be strategically deployed and sustained — in this case by legal actors — to drive compliance. Despite the critical role lawyers play in this process, existing research has largely overlooked the factors that motivate their engagement, the legal expertise they bring to voting rights cases, and the specific tactics they deploy to challenge at-large election systems. This chapter addresses this gap by examining how lawyers advance electoral reform under the CVRA, focusing on the redistricting process in a California school district.

This knowledge gap is particularly relevant in California, where, despite the enactment of the CVRA, many local jurisdictions — including school districts — have resisted or delayed compliance. Over the past twenty years, lawyers have been the primary actors ensuring jurisdictions comply with the law, mainly by threatening litigation. Yet their efforts have produced mixed results. Only about one-third of California cities and roughly 13 percent of all jurisdictions (including special districts) have transitioned to district elections. According to the

National Demographics Corporation⁵, as of May 1, 2020, 155 California cities elected their councils by district; the remaining 327 have retained an at-large voting system. In addition, 282 special districts⁶ have also transitioned to district elections; however, over 2,667 special districts retain an at-large voting system. This uneven application raises important questions about how the CVRA is enforced and by whom and underscores that reform depends not on the existence of the law alone, but on the actors who leverage it to pursue change.

This chapter extends legal mobilization theory to education politics by examining the role of two lawyers in advancing electoral reform in the Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD), a California school district accused of violating the CVRA. A central research question guides the analysis: How do lawyers advance the redistricting process, and what do their accounts reveal about the strategies, tactics, and skills involved in enforcing the CVRA?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with two attorneys at the forefront of voting rights litigation and electoral reform in California, both of whom played central roles at FUESD, this chapter reveals the motivations, tactics, and skills lawyers use to advance electoral reform. The analysis reveals that lawyers act as catalysts of election reform, leveraging their legal expertise to initiate and shape reform efforts. Without lawyers at the forefront enforcing the law, jurisdictions remain complacent and continue to reproduce unequal electoral political structures. As Scheingold (1974) notes, law must be leveraged by local actors to achieve political objectives; in this case, lawyers must strategically deploy the CVRA to compel electoral reform. In other words, the CVRA provides a legal framework to pursue electoral change, but it relies on legal actors to strategically leverage it. These findings extend legal mobilization theory to the context

⁵ National Demographics Corporation (NDC) is a firm specializing elections in demographic analysis and the development of districting and redistricting strategies

⁶ Special districts include school boards, community college districts, water and health boards

of education politics (Lehoucq & Taylor, 2019), illuminating how lawyers translate rights into electoral reform in local school governance.

Profile of CVRA Lawyers

Across California, lawyers leverage the CVRA's legal mechanism to promote electoral reform and drive institutional change. In my interviews with two lawyers — one from private practice and the other from a nationwide voting rights organization — both described their work as advancing equity by increasing minority representation, even when the process is contentious or politically charged. Their accounts illuminate not only the promise of litigation under the CVRA but also its limitations, revealing the complex strategies and concessions required to translate state law into electoral change. Below, I provide brief profiles of the two lawyers whose efforts were essential to advance electoral reform under the CVRA.

Patrick⁷

Patrick, a White attorney in his mid-40s, is dedicated to advancing electoral reform in California. As a voting rights lawyer, his profession is committed to identifying jurisdictions that violate the CVRA. He practices law at a private law firm, and over the last decade, voting rights litigation has become his main area of expertise. Patrick described his work on voting rights as “an area where you can actually make a living and do some good for real people.” Although he did not explicitly frame his motivations in financial terms, each CVRA case Patrick initiated cost local governing boards about \$30,000 in legal fees, which pays for his work in identifying the violation. Under the CVRA, jurisdictions are responsible for covering litigation costs, and the state legislature has set the limit at \$30,000, which Patrick bills as compensation for his labor. In this context, Patrick had a financial incentive in pursuing CVRA cases, as this work provided his

⁷ pseudonym

livelihood. Nevertheless, he emphasized that his broader motivation was to advance electoral reform and increase minority representation.

Kathleen⁸

Kathleen, a Latina attorney in her mid-30s, focused on advancing Latino voting rights. Kathleen worked for a nationwide voting rights organization whose mission was to identify and remove barriers to Latino political engagement. She emphasized her Latina background as grounding her work in voting rights: “I am Latina. I’m Mexican American. My parents are from Mexico...When I work on cases throughout California, I see my community.” From Kathleen’s perspective, her Latina background enables her to understand the impact of underrepresentation in political office and to empathize deeply with Latino communities. Serving as a voting rights lawyer allows her to collaborate with Latinos and advocate for their inclusion in the political system. She described her work as “the opportunity to help people empower” Latino political engagement. Kathleen identified her political ideology as being very liberal.

In the context of FUESD, Patrick was the lead lawyer who served a violation letter to the school district, alleging that its voting system violated the CVRA. FUESD joined a long list of school districts that had been served with a violation letter, requiring them to act quickly or face significant penalties. Though the school board initially signaled it would comply with the demand to redistrict, the process soon became marred by inequitable decision-making. To increase pressure on the school board to adopt an equitable process, Kathleen advocated for the board to adopt one and provided legal support during deliberations between the community and the school board.

⁸ pseudonym

Findings

I. Lawyers as Advocates: Unexpected Pathways to Voting Rights Commitment

This section examines the motivations that drive lawyers to engage in electoral reform and advocate for equitable political representation. Electoral reform is a complex process that requires motivation and persistent dedication, as litigation may not always result in political change. Both lawyers reflected that voting rights were not their original area of legal practice. Instead, they entered the voting rights work unintentionally, as opportunities to engage in it arose unexpectedly. Over time, what began as an unexpected opportunity became a meaningful area of law practice, one through which they could support communities and advance equity.

Patrick's entry into voting rights law was largely unplanned. Growing up in the suburbs of Michigan exposed him to racial and social inequality that minority groups faced in the United States. In particular, he recalled the decline of opportunity and rising poverty rates among Black residents in the Midwest. Observing these racial and class dynamics, Patrick explained, "impacted the way I viewed race and class and certainly led me to do this work and enjoy the outcomes." While this early experience helped shape his awareness of structural inequality, his interest in voting rights did not emerge until after he completed law school.

After several years practicing patent litigation, Patrick received an unexpected call from a local party leader asking him to sue a California city for violating the CVRA. Patrick recalled, "I had vaguely heard of the CVRA. I really didn't have much of an idea of what the elements were, what was required to prove, or how a case went." That unexpected call became the foundation for his later specialization in voting rights litigation. Unfamiliar with the law, Patrick turned to the internet to learn as much as he could: "I did [what] any attorney does when we're completely out of our depth. I went and checked Wikipedia to read up about the CVRA, and it sounded

pretty straightforward... I tried to consume everything and anything that I could on the subject.”

His self-driven effort to understand the CVRA led him to take on the case, which went to trial and ultimately resulted in a successful ruling that the city had violated the law.

That victory became a turning point in Patrick’s career. He described how “seeing the impact that the case had and continues to have on the city and the positive impact it’s had on people’s lives” continues to fuel his determination to advance voting rights. Patrick understood this impact as the expansion of political representation—an issue central to the CVRA. Unintentionally, his litigation success sparked a cascade of CVRA cases, in which he became the legal expert.

Kathleen’s entry into voting rights work followed a similarly unexpected path. When she first began practicing law, she joined a civil rights organization where her legal expertise centered on immigrants’ rights. She described her early work as ensuring that police were not discriminating against Latinos during traffic stops, particularly in Arizona. However, when another attorney working on a voting rights case in California unexpectedly left, Kathleen was asked to step in and support litigation efforts. She explained, “I had to very quickly learn about what Section 2 [of the VRA], [what] vote dilution was.” Kathleen found herself working on a CVRA case aimed at advancing representation for Latinos in the Central Valley.

A highlight of this case, she noted, was the opportunity to work alongside Dolores Huerta. As a champion of civil rights, she learned from Ms. Huerta that political inequities had long existed in this region and that reform was essential for advancing representation. Kathleen described this experience as eye-opening: “I got to see both the issues and the reasons why we [needed] fair maps, the desire for incumbents to keep control and manipulate lines to keep that control.” Engaging in this work helped Kathleen recognize that meaningful change could occur

when communities are equipped with the proper tools and legal expertise. Reflecting on the case, she said, “[this] experience solidified my interest in voting... After that, I started doing more CVRA work, investigating jurisdiction and sending demand letters.” These efforts marked the beginning of her sustained commitment to advancing voting rights through litigation.

For Kathleen, this unexpected opportunity became the foundation for her ongoing work in voting rights and advocacy for fair political representation. She explained, “[What] makes me excited about voting rights is to see the impact that particular laws that address vote dilution can have” on political representation for minority communities. Over time, this experience not only sharpened her understanding of how law can remedy systemic exclusion but also inspired her to continue pursuing cases that expand access to political representation.

Across both accounts, the unexpected opportunity to engage in voting rights work became a defining feature of their legal careers. Despite beginning with limited knowledge of the CVRA, both lawyers quickly mastered the law’s technicalities and emerged as key advocates for using it to advance representation. Their early litigation successes not only deepened their commitment to voting rights but also solidified their belief in the power of law as a tool for equity.

II. Lawyers as Experts: Limited Community Knowledge of the CVRA

This section examines the expertise of lawyers and their role in advancing electoral reform. As legal experts, lawyers possess the technical skills needed to identify when the law has failed to fulfill its mandate and to translate complex statutes into actionable claims. The complexity of the CVRA requires that local communities have a significant understanding of the law to charge a jurisdiction. Yet many communities lack the expertise or resources needed to identify violations, such as access to voter data and voter analysis tools. In this context, lawyers

served as legal experts to ensure compliance with the CVRA and to bring electoral reform to jurisdictions.

Across California, Patrick has been at the forefront of identifying and sending litigation letters to jurisdictions that violate the law. When asked to describe how knowledgeable communities were about at-large elections, the CVRA, or the legal process, Patrick acknowledged that most communities were uninformed. As he explained,

In most places, [communities] are probably not very knowledgeable. I think it's just what has always been [the use of at-large election], and therefore it must be okay, because that's the way it is. And there's really no thought given to [different election structures].

In numerous jurisdictions, at-large elections have predominated as the prevailing voting system, leaving voters largely accepting them without questioning their implications. The complexity of election laws and their legal application has allowed at-large elections to go unchallenged in rural and suburban jurisdictions, despite state law recognizing them as contributing to voter dilution. Patrick's legal work has focused on identifying jurisdictions that violate the CVRA and has initiated the redistricting process. In his own account, most communities do not even know that such a process exists, revealing the importance of his work in jurisdictions.

Even when jurisdictions receive CVRA violation letters, Patrick revealed that local officials are resistant to change. Instead, they question the legitimacy of the claims or the validity of the law. For instance, Patrick said local officials often call him, "[a]mbulance chaser, scumbag, or other demeaning words." Yet, Patrick dismissed these labels, stating:

My own hurt feelings are nothing in comparison to what these [minority] communities have gone through and struggled to get, and so if this can move that ball forward, then I don't particularly care what city council members or school board members might think of me or say about me.

Put differently, the words have no impact on Patrick's personal well-being, unlike the continued usage of at-large voting systems, which directly impacts the personal lives of individuals,

especially those from underrepresented communities. The response by local officials suggests that, without Patrick's legal intervention, community members would not be able to charge a jurisdiction. It also reveals a weakness in the CVRA: if local officials doubt the law's legitimacy or authenticity, it indicates the law has not fulfilled its intended purpose.

Like Patrick, Kathleen shared how local communities are uninformed about the CVRA. Her work also centers on identifying jurisdictions with potential violations and sending demand letters to local officials. Kathleen highlighted how she uses her legal skills as an advantage to initiate electoral reform, "I have a skill which is lawyering. I can provide technical support for communities to make the changes that they need." She described being motivated by the substantial impact that voting rights laws can have: "What makes me really excited is just the ability to remove one barrier." Kathleen sees legal expertise as a tool for removing institutional barriers and enabling communities to pursue meaningful democratic change.

However, Kathleen noted that even though she identified jurisdictions with vote dilution, soliciting community engagement in the process was often difficult. To bring authenticity to the demand letter, local voters or community members are cited as plaintiffs. Yet Kathleen recalled that she frequently struggled to find residents willing or able to serve as plaintiffs, "More often than not, I identified just with data, [voting] problems [in] jurisdiction, and then from there I would try to identify community members to serve as a plaintiff to send demand letters." The challenge was not in identifying violations but rather in finding someone to initiate a voter dilution claim: "The difficult part was trying to find a plaintiff," said Kathleen. Without a plaintiff, it would be difficult to explain how voter dilution was impacting voters. Although electoral reform can be initiated if local voters participate, some may hesitate due to fear of legal

consequences or dealing with the implications of enforcement. Kathleen's experience illustrates the challenge in engaging or informing local voters about the CVRA process.

Both accounts reveal a broader structural pattern: lawyers play a critical role in initiating and advancing redistricting efforts, but their work is often constrained by limited community knowledge, engagement, and capacity. The lack of knowledge about these issues has allowed at-large elections to go unchallenged in some jurisdictions, and in others, the lack of interest in reforming the system has left lawyers scrambling to identify a plaintiff. More must be done to encourage communities to participate in the process and to leverage the skills lawyers bring to it.

III. Lawyers as External Actors: Building Trust in Local Communities

This section focuses on how lawyers establish trust with local communities during the CVRA redistricting process. Although the CVRA requires community engagement as a central component of reform, lawyers enter jurisdiction as external actors with no established ties to the community. Their legal expertise enables them to identify violations, but their unfamiliarity with local histories, networks, and concerns creates tension around whether the reform process is truly community-led or primarily driven by legal strategy. When asked how they built trust and communication with the community, both lawyers highlighted the tension between reform efforts and the need to establish trust among the community.

Patrick admitted that he lacked the necessary skills to foster community engagement in the process. Instead, he relied on his strengths as a trial lawyer and deferred to local organizers to help him earn community trust. As he explained:

I don't know what the hell I'm doing when it comes to community [engagement]. I'm a trial lawyer, that's what I know..I really have to follow the lead of [local organizers].

In this context, Patrick reveals a lack of authenticity in building community trust, highlighting tension in how he engages in his advocacy efforts. When pressed on how he ensured the

community trusted his legal practice, Patrick acknowledged the limits of his approach, “Yeah, that's interesting, oftentimes [communities] don't [trust me]. I think there's more trust now than a decade ago when I started doing this work.” Given his success in driving redistricting efforts across the state, he has built credibility in his reform efforts.

However, his admission raises questions about his communication and trust with local voters, as well as whether reforms reflect community priorities or legal strategies. Although his work aims to advance fairness in elections, Patrick’s limited skills in building relationships with communities raise important questions about whether such reforms are truly collaborative or primarily lawyer-driven.

On the contrary, Kathleen explained a different process for building trust with the community, revealing that she advocated for local voter needs only after establishing trust and consulting with them. She emphasized that her role was not to prescribe solutions to the redistricting process but to support communities in dismantling barriers:

My role is not to tell you what your community needs. My role is to tell you what structural barriers [exists] and how [I] can use the law to remove them. And [local voters] hold the wheel... [I] build trust essentially by recognizing that our world is in service of the community, not to save the community, or impose something that I think works.

In other words, Kathleen uses her knowledge of the law to help local communities navigate the complex process rather than dictating how the redistricting unfolds. By leveraging the law, Kathleen strived to help communities achieve the best reform process. Kathleen’s framing illustrates a more collaborative approach, positioning the community as the driver of reform while the lawyer provides technical support. She went on to explain why community trust is important to ensure that the transition effectively advances political representation:

[Community] is so key for even making sure that the transition is effective because a lot of times, if there's no community input, then there is no way for the [local officials] to know what or where the communities are [located]. Redistricting doesn't just involve looking at the subject matter. Community involves all communities. If you actually aren't

getting input from the community, a council member might have a sense of where to draw the lines. But they're not going to know, like the intricacies of where to [district] things off. And so community input period from anyone is key, but especially from the minority community, because they'll be able to tell you, don't include that corner, because that corner is not part of our community, and in fact, they're like, completely different, and might undermine our ability to elect people.

Community engagement in the redistricting process is crucial to ensuring it achieves its intended purpose: advancing representation. Kathleen's account illuminates how she recognizes community engagement is crucial to the success of the redistricting process. By contrast, Patrick's involvement reflects a lawyer-led approach, where reforms are initiated and carried forward primarily through his legal expertise rather than through community leadership.

Although community engagement in the redistricting process is essential, not all lawyers are equipped to build trust with the community. Both lawyers acknowledge the importance of creating trust, but approach it from two different perspectives. Patrick's lawyer-led approach highlights that the reform efforts initiated may not always be in consultation with the local community. Patrick relies on his knowledge and legal expertise to help foster community trust in the process and in him to be an advocate for the community. On the contrary, Kathleen explained how she leveraged the law to support the community, but highlighted that the community was the driver of the process.

IV: Lawyers as Investigators: Building an Evidentiary Case for CVRA Violations

This section focuses on how lawyers identify a jurisdiction that violates the CVRA. A central component of the CVRA enforcement is building a strong evidentiary case in a jurisdiction. The process requires access to voter data, analysis software, and legal expertise necessary to interpret findings. This complex procedure requires technical knowledge beyond that of a community member. As a result, lawyers, not community members, play the primary

role in initiating CVRA cases. Without their intervention, most violations would remain unchallenged.

To establish a CVRA case, lawyers must prove that some form of voter discrimination is occurring within a jurisdiction. Although California has expanded the definition of voter discrimination, the process still requires examining election results, demographic data, and patterns of RPV. When asked to describe how they identify a potential CVRA case, both lawyers offered accounts that revealed a multi-step, highly technical process dependent on legal and analytical expertise.

As one of the leading active voting rights attorneys in the state, Patrick described his complex process for identifying a violation:

There's a whole analysis that [I] go through, and [I] have tried to standardize that to some extent. Although each jurisdiction is a little bit different, and [I] will find something that [I] need to explore a little bit more. But [I] look at different elections depending on who's running and what election dates a jurisdiction has. Probably the most important thing that [I] look at in that process is whether there is or isn't racially polarized voting and I usually start with the elections for the governing board of that particular jurisdiction...If there is racially polarized voting, then maybe [I] go forward. If there isn't, that's the end of the road. [I] also look at history of discrimination [and] the likely effectiveness of various remedies.. That requires sort of both a demographics analysis and a general sense of the political environment.

Patrick's account underscores that identifying a CVRA violation requires multiple layers of assessment: reviewing histories, analyzing demographic changes, and determining if drawing district boundaries would enable minority voters to elect a candidate of choice. According to Patrick, he has standardized the analysis, allowing him to move swiftly between cases. This has led him to send numerous letters to jurisdictions across the state, requiring them to adopt district elections or face litigation. The overall key aspect that Patrick looks for is RPV in the jurisdiction. As he outlines, if evidence of RPV exists, he advances a case; if none exists, the analysis comes to a close.

A similar experience was shared by Kathleen Olsen, who described a more collaborative process, shaped by her work within a civil-rights organization: Kathleen explained:

The [voting rights] demographer would identify jurisdictions based on data. Often we were exclusively focused on the Latino community. We'd set a threshold, say, 15% Latino population. Then, on our end, the legal assistance, another lawyer, and I would look up the composition of their city council to see if it was all White. If it was very obvious, then maybe there's an issue here. We would pull up past elections... [if] Latinos, ran and lost, or no Latinos ever ran, the [demographer would check] for racially polarized voting and whether a strong Latino district, maybe not [a] Latino majority, but something close to it, could be drawn.

When asked what happened after identifying a jurisdiction, Kathleen explained, "From there, I would try to identify community members to serve as our plaintiffs to send the demand letter."

Kathleen's description highlights how race functions as a proxy for identifying potential underrepresentation. Although analyzing race is not an ideal way to assess RPV, if elected officials are homogeneous in a diverse area, it often signals deeper structural issues. By identifying racial proxy underrepresentation, they could quickly identify a jurisdiction and then conduct further analysis to check for voter discrimination.

Both lawyers emphasize that the analysis of potential involves far more than simply observing that minority candidates have not been elected. It requires interpreting election results, evaluating turnout patterns, and determining whether districting voting could remedy underrepresentation. This combination of data analysis and strategic assessment is critical for determining whether a jurisdiction may violate the CVRA. However, because California's CVRA broadens the definition of voter discrimination beyond the federal standard, many jurisdictions become vulnerable to CVRA challenges even when no minority candidate has run for office—particularly if demographic and electoral patterns indicate that the current system prevents minority communities from electing their preferred candidates. Overall, both lawyers

emphasize that their analytical and legal skills are crucial for drafting demand letters, initiating redistricting, and ensuring local jurisdictions comply with the law. irer.

Discussion

In California, electoral reform has increasingly emphasized how voting systems shape political representation in local elections, including city councils, school boards, and special district elections. Voting systems play a significant role in determining who is elected, especially for Latino candidates in majority-White electorates. The two central voting systems, at-large and district elections, yield different election outcomes for Latinos. In at-large elections, Latino votes are often diluted by the preferences of the majority, making it difficult for Latino candidates to win office (Leal et al., 2004). By contrast, district elections can create minority-majority districts, increasing the likelihood that Latino-preferred candidates are elected. These legal principles are at the core of the CVRA, which has facilitated the removal of at-large voting systems and the adoption of district elections across a wide range of jurisdictions throughout the state.

Despite two decades since its passage, jurisdictions have been slow to comply with the CVRA. This delay reflects not only political resistance, but also the law's passive enforcement structure: the CVRA does not compel jurisdiction to act. Instead, the burden of enforcement falls on minority voters, often requiring their involvement with legal counsel and organizations knowledgeable about voting systems. Successfully identifying and advancing a challenge against a jurisdiction requires familiarity with RPV, access to voter data, and an understanding of historical election results, expertise well beyond that of a typical voter. In this context, the law's promise of advancing representation depends on intermediaries who can translate its provisions into actionable reform.

In practice, lawyers are the key intermediaries in election reform, leveraging their legal expertise to enforce the law. Lawyers initiate this process by identifying voter dilution, drafting demand letters, and, if necessary, initiating litigation. By doing so, lawyers act as catalysts for election reform and help create conditions for greater Latino political representation, which has been applied to jurisdictions—city councils, school boards, and special districts—across the state. Without their intervention, many jurisdictions would likely maintain at-large elections despite the persistent underrepresentation of Latinos. Lawyers thus function as knowledge brokers, translating technical legal and demographic data into actionable claims that communities cannot pursue independently.

At the same time, community knowledge of legal rights under the CVRA remains limited. In many jurisdictions, residents remain unaware of how at-large elections dilute votes or that legal mechanisms exist to challenge such practices. This lack of understanding is particularly pronounced in areas with a growing Latino population and a majority White population, such as suburbs or rural communities. In these areas, Latinos have historically been excluded from local politics or lack access to organizations, civic networks, or legal expertise necessary to initiate the redistricting processes. As a result, efforts to advance electoral reform must rely on outside lawyers and advocacy groups to identify potential violations, educate residents, and initiate redistricting. This uneven reliance on external actors has contributed to the slow process of reshaping election systems across the state, even as Latino populations continue to grow.

Given that California has adopted a broader definition of voter discrimination, more jurisdictions may be susceptible to CVRA violations. This expansion has raised concerns that lawyers may be pursuing electoral reforms where they are not needed. At the same time, lawyers differ in how they engage with communities during the redistricting process, raising concerns

about their intentions. Some adopt a lawyer-led approach, initiating reforms primarily through legal expertise, with limited direct input from local residents. Other lawyers prioritize collaboration, leveraging their knowledge to empower community members to drive the reform process. Both approaches highlight the centrality of lawyers in implementing the CVRA, while also revealing tensions between legal strategy and community engagement.

Overall, the CVRA has reshaped some local elections across the state, yet more than half of the state's jurisdictions continue to use at-large elections. It is clear that lawyers have been catalysts in initiating this reform process, but it has been slow and has included different approaches. This chapter shows that the CVRA operates as a passive law, one that requires legal expertise to identify violations, initiate challenges, and translate the law's provisions into actionable political reform. Without lawyers being central to the process, the CVRA would remain largely unenforced, leaving discriminatory electoral structures intact. Understanding the role of these lawyers is critical to bringing changes in electoral structure that can improve Latino representation on school boards (and beyond), which remains low, despite more than half of K-12 students in California being Latino.

CHAPTER V. POLITICAL LEADERS MOBILIZE FOR FAIR REPRESENTATION

Introduction

Across California, the underrepresentation of Latinos in elected office has been widely documented (Carmona & Barragan-Monge, 2022). Scholars often attribute this pattern to the persistent use of at-large elections, which can disadvantage Latino and other minority candidates (Avila et al., 2007). For the past two decades, legal advocates, civil rights organizations, and local actors have slowly leveraged the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 as a legal mechanism to challenge at-large elections and advance reforms to local electoral structures. Built into the legal framework of the CVRA is the notion that, in at-large elections—where all voters elect all board members across the entire jurisdiction—voting patterns may become polarized, often referred to as racially polarized voting (RPV). As Elmendorf and colleagues (2016) explain, voting is polarized when the political preferences of majority-race and minority-race voters diverge substantially and the majority-race votes with sufficient cohesion to usually defeat the minority’s candidates of choice (p. 589). Under the CVRA, jurisdictions may not use at-large elections if they impair a minority group's ability to elect candidates of its choice or influence electoral outcomes. When this vote dilution occurs, it requires immediate corrective action, often redressed by implementing district elections.

However, more than two decades have passed since the CVRA was enacted, yet at-large elections remain the dominant voting system for electing political candidates to local office (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020). The weakness of the law is that it does not compel jurisdiction to comply automatically; it must be strategically leveraged by legal advocates and institutionalized by local actors (Coreas et al., 2023). Yet, very little is known about the local conditions that make this leverage possible and allow communities to translate this legal opportunity into

electoral change. This chapter draws on legal mobilization theory (LMT), a theoretical framework that treats law as a political resource local actors can leverage to reshape institutional practices (Epp, 2009; Lehoucq & Taylor, 2019; McCann, 1994). Scholars of legal mobilization emphasize that structural change is achieved through the deployment of legal strategies—such as lawsuits—to advance social reform or implement new policy. As McCann (1994) notes, the success of these legal frameworks is contingent on strategic action and organizational capacity among local actors. Still, most legal mobilization research has closely examined social movements (Lehoucq & Taylor, 2019) and workplace reform (McCann, 1994), leaving open questions about how other types of local actors—in this case, community-level organizers—leverage legal frameworks to address voting rights and minority underrepresentation.

This chapter extends legal mobilization theory to education politics by identifying the contextual factors⁹ that enabled local political leaders in the Fallbrook community to leverage the CVRA, challenge at-large elections, and drive the implementation of district elections. A central research question guides this analysis: What factors enabled local leaders to take advantage of the electoral opening created by a legal challenge to at-large elections to mobilize and influence the construction of new electoral structures?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with six political leaders, as well as analysis of public documents, legal correspondence, and primary sources, this chapter identifies four contextual factors that were necessary to activate mobilization. The four key factors that emerged are as follows: (1) a history of racialized exclusion that created collective grievances that local organizers could leverage into political action, (2) recognition of unequal political structures that disadvantaged Latino voters, (3) pre-existing informal organizational infrastructure from decades

⁹ In this study, contextual factors refer to the social, political, and institutional conditions that shaped how local actors organized and mobilized around the redistricting process.

of community organizing that leaders were able to activate, and (4) the CVRA as a legal tool for challenging at large elections.

This analysis reveals that legal mobilization by local actors is not a linear path from grievance to legal threat to social reform. Rather, it entails an ongoing, iterative process in which the achievement of social reform creates new arenas for mobilization. While leaders mobilized to leverage the law and institute electoral reform, the process required sustained effort to achieve the desired results. In other words, social reform restructures, rather than concludes, mobilization as new inequities and challenges emerge in response to the changes. While LMT (McCann, 1994) reveals how local leaders leverage the CVRA to achieve electoral reform, this case demonstrates that mobilization extends beyond securing district elections — leaders must sustain it through the redistricting implementation process to ensure fair representation. Leaders in Fallbrook did not simply leverage the CVRA and win representation — they navigated a complex process of sustained pressure, coalition-building, and contestation that predated and continued long after the board voted to transition to district elections. By examining this process, this chapter contributes to our understanding of how marginalized groups can achieve representation in the face of structural barriers, how legal tools can be activated, and how social reform may not always mark endpoints but rather new sites of contestation.

Redistricting: From Legal Compliance to Local Action

This section provides a brief overview of the redistricting process that jurisdictions — including school districts — must undertake after being notified of a CVRA violation. Under the CVRA, a jurisdiction that receives a violation letter triggers a mandatory 135-day redistricting process that the governing board must follow or face the threat of litigation. To comply, the law mandates that the local board: 1) appoint a demographer to review electoral boundaries, 2) hold

at least five community meetings to elicit feedback from local residents in developing new electoral boundaries, and 3) formally implement a new district jurisdictional map that closely reflects the community demographics. This prescriptive process is intended to ensure the community voice is taken into account and, in some instances, advance political representation for minority groups. However, a successful process hinges on the meaningful participation by local residents in community meetings, surveys, and advocacy efforts within a highly compressed timeframe—a process that not all communities are equally equipped to engage in.

To inform the design and implementation of fair district elections, a robust political advocacy and organizing infrastructure must be in place in the local community. When a jurisdiction receives a violation letter, a 135-day timeline is set, during which a complex redistricting process unfolds. This process requires the governing board to hold community meetings, facilitate the creation of new electoral maps, and adopt resolutions to implement district elections. In practice, the legal professionals who drive these reforms—such as attorneys—are often institutionally and socially disconnected from local communities, limiting sustained communication and community understanding of the legal process. In this context, local collective action becomes essential to prevent the process from devolving into a mere procedural exercise rather than a democratic reform.

In the case of Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD), the success of the redistricting process hinged on a small group of local leaders who transformed procedural compliance into political action. I refer to these individuals as the key players—six political leaders who drew on longstanding social and ethnoracial grievances to mobilize the community around claims for fair political representation for Latino residents. Their diverse experiences and motivations illuminate how local agency can shape redistricting outcomes. Below, I provide brief

profiles of these leaders, whose efforts were essential to translating legal compliance of the CVRA into meaningful democratic reform for the school district.

Political Leaders Profile

Alan¹⁰

Alan, a Latino male in his late forties, a part-time employee, described himself as a Latino political organizer and advocate for equitable representation. Alan is well-connected in the community, often organizing Latino community events and advocating for Latino issues in health, immigration, and education.

Billy¹¹

Billy, a retired White male in his sixties, described himself as a political organizer and serves on the governing board of the local fire district. He described his involvement in politics as seeking to improve the local services for residents.

Darian¹²

Darian, a retired White male in his seventies, described himself as a political organizer for the local Democratic Party, with the goal of advancing political equality. Darian also served as president of the Democratic Club of Fallbrook, but has now stepped down from that position.

Katie¹³

Katie, a retired White woman in her seventies, described herself as a political organizer for the local Democratic Party. Although she was well-connected to the Democratic Club of

¹⁰ pseudonym

¹¹ pseudonym

¹² pseudonym

¹³ pseudonym

Fallbrook, she has now stepped back from involvement and manages a weekly newsletter focused on local political issues.

Richard¹⁴

Richard, a full-time employed Latino male in his late thirties, describes himself as an advocate for improving opportunities for Latinos. Richard is also well-connected to the community and advocates for improving Latino education in Fallbrook.

Rosalia¹⁵

Rosalia, a retired Latina woman in her late sixties, described herself as an advocate of Latino needs. After the recent passing of her husband, she has turned her attention to politics, specifically on issues of education. She regularly attends school board meetings to learn about the local educational issues.

Findings

Successfully leveraging the CVRA to challenge at-large elections and increase Latino representation required four contextual factors to exist within a community. In 2018, when FUESD's school board received notice that its voting system violated the CVRA and required immediate corrective action, a window of opportunity for political change emerged. The necessary factors included: (1) a history of racialized exclusion that created collective grievances that local organizers could leverage into political action, (2) recognition of unequal political structures that disadvantaged Latino voters, (3) pre-existing informal organizational infrastructure from decades of community organizing that leaders were able to activate, and (4) the CVRA as a legal tool for challenging at large elections. This section examines each factor

¹⁴ pseudonym

¹⁵ pseudonym

and demonstrates how their convergence—rather than any single element alone—enabled the mobilization that led to the construction of fair electoral districts.

Factor 1: Racialized Exclusion

The first factor identified was a long-standing racialized history that shaped Latino experiences of exclusion from school governance and broader civic life. Racialized exclusion functioned as a necessary precondition for mobilization—without it, the grievances that drove leaders to engage in the redistricting process would not have existed. In Fallbrook, racialized exclusion was rooted in a long history of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment that shaped both social relations and political institutions over decades, producing the conditions necessary for collective grievances to emerge.

Scholars have documented that anti-immigrant sentiment has long been part of American political life. Since the early days of European immigration, natives have expressed concern that immigrants have failed to assimilate into American culture and adopt American values (King, 2000). More than 150 years later, these sentiments continue to be shared by many individuals who argue that immigrants harm the United States. After revisions to immigration law in the mid-1960s, Latin American immigrants became targets of these sentiments, raising new questions about how they would integrate into the American social life (Portes et al., 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). While changes to immigration law created new pathways for documented immigration to the United States, it was also followed by an increase in undocumented immigration, especially from Mexico (Massey & Pren, 2012). As undocumented immigration grew, a growing narrative emerged characterizing it as a Latino threat (Massey & Pren, 2012). Through the media coverage and politically charged rhetoric, this narrative gained traction, framing undocumented immigration as growing and uncontrollable. It resulted in the

racialized views on immigrants and Latinos, which provided the ideological foundation for the racialized exclusion that Latinos experienced in Fallbrook.

Like many other places, Fallbrook became a site where these anti-immigrant and anti-Latino ideologies took particularly organized and hostile form. In the 1970s, a white supremacist moved into a house in Fallbrook, reshaping the social fabric of the community. Tom Metzger, a white man associated with far-right political ideology, espoused anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiments, warning that immigration would undermine American culture. While living in Fallbrook, Tom became the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)¹⁶ and then later formed his own organization, the White Aryan Resistance (WAR)¹⁷. Through these organizations, he was able to articulate his perspectives and mobilize individuals who shared his beliefs.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (2025) documents that in 1979, Metzger led armed Klansmen to patrol the U.S.-Mexican border near Tijuana to deter undocumented immigration from Mexico. Metzger's support was strong, as shown by his congressional run in the 1980s, which, despite being unsuccessful, received around 40,000 votes—highlighting how deeply his anti-immigrant and anti-Latino ideology had taken hold in the district (Dotinga, 2020). The Los Angeles Times (1990) described him as “the 52-year-old local repairman who fixed televisions and VCRs for residents in his largely [Latino] neighborhood while heading a white supremacist organization that advocates violence against Latinos and other minorities.” This juxtaposition reveals the contradiction of his presence within the community and points to the broader racialized conditions in which Latinos lived. The presence of this figure and the far-right ideology he institutionalized in Fallbrook did not merely create hostility—it embedded racialized

¹⁶ An American white supremacist hate group, established in 1865, that advocates for racial segregation, white nationalism, and anti-immigration, often utilizing terrorism and intimidation to enforce its ideology

¹⁷ A white supremacist and neo-Nazi organization in the United States which was founded and formerly led by Tom Metzger.

exclusion into the social fabric of the community in ways that would later shape Latino political consciousness and grievances.

For one leader who grew up in Fallbrook, these racialized experiences shaped how he understood local racial hierarchies and the broader environment that Latinos encountered. Alan explained that growing up in Fallbrook meant living in “a very racialized community with a strong history of white supremacy.” He attributed this racialized environment to the presence and influence of the white supremacist ideology, which had shaped how local residents viewed and treated Latinos. In contextualizing this racialized environment, the *Voice of San Diego* (2022) explained that during the 1980s, white students asked the local high school administrators to form a WAR chapter and were ultimately approved (Huntsberry, 2022). Given that school clubs require membership to be open to all students, Latino students, in an act of resistance, signed up for membership, which eventually led to the chapter’s closure. These everyday experiences were shaping the social and political experience of Latinos in Fallbrook. Despite the racialized environment, Alan emphasized that Latino families actively resisted these conditions of exclusion, an experience that later influenced his own political involvement in local issues:

Ever since I was a teenager, there was a vibrant [Latino] movement and I'm talking about the early '90s, and even before I was in high school...Mexican families, parents, and students have been active since the '70s in trying to confront this environment of racism.

Rather than producing political apathy, the racialized exclusion Alan described fostered sustained traditions of resistance across generations. Reflecting on these resistance movements, he recalled hearing, “get educated, know your history, but come back to the community... because we need educated [Latinos] to struggle for this community.” For Alan, this resistance shaped a shared understanding that confronting racialized exclusion required active civic and political engagement. Sustained experiences of racialized exclusions fostered both a collective

consciousness and a sense of shared grievance within the Latino community. These experiences not only motivated Latinos to resist inequities but also laid the foundation for a broader collective identity that leaders could later leverage to mobilize around electoral reform.

The San Diego Union-Tribune (2006) reported that Metzger had relocated from Fallbrook in 2006, yet the exclusion he institutionalized continued to shape the community. The *Voice of San Diego* (2022) noted, “years after card-carrying members of the KKK had moved away or died, a different kind of White power persisted in Fallbrook – the political kind.” For instance, across multiple governance structures — including the school board, fire board, and other local governing bodies — Latinos remained politically underrepresented despite comprising the majority of the population (Huntsberry, 2022). In this context, racialized exclusion was not directly expressed by individuals but instead reflected in the structure of governing institutions. As the interviews of multiple leaders revealed, this exclusion was reproduced in the governance of the school board, which continued to treat Latinos as outsiders. Leaders recalled that board members failed to consider Latino needs, creating an environment in which Latinos felt invisible and feared speaking up in institutional spaces. Rosalia described attending board meetings and witnessing firsthand how this exclusion silenced Latino community members:

I have been involved in the community for a long time, and I started going to school board meetings because I [saw] that the board was making some decisions that I thought were not fair, and people were afraid to speak up.

For Rosalia, the problem was not simply unfair decisions but the fear that prevented Latino families from challenging them. This fear was not incidental but rooted in the institutionalized exclusion Metzger had created and continued to reproduce across community institutions. Her attention to school governance focused on the board's proposal to open an alternative school,

accessible only to students from affluent backgrounds, because it was located away from the main area where families lived. In doing so, board members overlooked the impact of this decision on Latino families. Recognizing that this proposal would produce educational inequities, she decided to speak up for Latino families. She emphasized, “That's kind of where I started feeling like, if there's something going on, I have to say something.” Rosalia's actions revealed that by speaking up, board members could be compelled to reconsider their decision. However, it also highlighted the burden placed on Latino communities to hold board members accountable—a burden compounded by fear that discouraged many Latino families from engaging in school governance. For Rosalia, this exclusionary practice generated the grievances that would later drive her involvement in challenging the district's electoral structure.

Similarly, Darian described how board members engaged in racialized exclusion during school board meetings. Reflecting on board meeting's discussions about educational access for Latino students, he noted board members “[not] really having empathy for minorities. To them, minorities were a problem.” Darian's reflection illustrates how board members characterized Latinos in Fallbrook as a problem rather than constituents. This racialized exclusion by board members underscored how Latinos were positioned as outsiders rather than recognized as active community members. While Darian was not personally affected by the decision of the school board, he recognized that board members consistently failed to extend the same consideration to Latino families that they afforded to white families. These experiences reinforced perceptions of Latinos as outsiders, producing the collective grievances that leaders would later draw upon to mobilize around redistricting.

Across these accounts, leaders illustrated how the racialized history that Latinos encountered in Fallbrook generated collective grievances. The persistent experiences of

racialization and exclusion fostered a growing desire within the Latino community for recognition as legitimate members of the community and meaningful political change. For many leaders, these conditions clarified that increasing political representation was necessary to address longstanding inequities, even as institutional barriers made such a change difficult to achieve. Together, these racial and social conditions laid the foundation for leaders to mobilize the community around the redistricting process.

Factor 2: Unequal Political Structures

The second factor identified was the persistent unequal political structures that prevented Latinos from achieving political representation. In Fallbrook, at-large elections were employed by local governing boards to elect candidates to serve local political office, creating a structural disadvantage for Latinos (Leal et al., 2004). In racially diverse communities like Fallbrook, where at-large elections are used to elect candidates to office, Latino candidates may struggle to build support across a white electorate, especially in areas where RPV patterns exist. According to Elmendor and colleagues (2024), when voters prefer candidates of the same racial or ethnic background, voting becomes polarized among the majority and minority groups, making it difficult for Latino candidates, who are often the minority, to win elections. In the case of Fallbrook, at-large elections not only contributed to the underrepresentation of Latinos but also to the entrenchment of Republican political dominance across local governing bodies. The persistence of this political homogeneity motivated leaders to challenge at-large elections, recognizing that structural electoral change was possible.

In Fallbrook, a long history of white supremacy and anti-Latino sentiment shaped a political environment in which Latino candidates struggled to be competitive. As an established majority-white community, electoral power was concentrated in a white voting bloc, making it

difficult for candidates who did not have broad support across that electorate to win. This electoral structure disadvantaged Latino candidates, often unable to secure the cross-racial support needed for electoral success. Even as the Latino population grew, these electoral barriers persisted. Latino candidates typically had fewer campaign resources and less name recognition, limiting their ability to gain visibility and attract voters in a system that favored established networks and familiarity.

For some leaders, recognition of these unequal political structures motivated their participation in challenging at-large elections. Yet, their paths into the process differed, as each brought a distinct understanding of how at-large elections disadvantaged Latinos. Rosalia emphasized that under at-large elections, Latino candidates were consistently unsuccessful because the system disadvantaged them before campaigns even began. She stressed that the problem was not simply a failure to elect Latino candidates but the structural disadvantage that the system created:

And the fact that [Latinos] never had representation...But the fact of the matter is that, even if we wanted to, we couldn't do it. Because with an at-large system, you've got 50,000 people to reach. And if you've got everybody from one area and they're the ones that have the money for outreach, you're not going to get elected.

The disadvantage Rosalia described stemmed from a resource disadvantage—Latino candidates lacked the financial and outreach capacity needed to reach voters across the entire electorate, which diminished their possibility of being elected. To be declared a winner in at-large elections, a candidate must receive either a majority of votes or a plurality, depending on the jurisdiction's electoral bylaws. Accomplishing this requires a political candidate to invest a significant amount of their time doing voter outreach, meeting voters, and holding candidate meetings—all of which demand resources that Latino candidates may be less likely to have. In communities like Fallbrook, Latino candidates would need to win over white voters in a community with a long

history of racial exclusion, making electoral success structurally difficult to achieve. By engaging in the redistricting process, Rosalia sought to address the disadvantages Latino candidates faced.

While Rosalia described the resource disadvantages Latinos faced in at-large elections, Billy placed these challenges within a broader historical context of vote dilution in the United States. For Billy, at-large elections were not fair, but a system designed to dilute minority voting power, with roots in the Progressive Era. He emphasized that these systems had remained in place for over a century, largely unchallenged despite their discriminatory origins. Billy identified vote dilution as the central mechanism that limited Latino political representation, explaining that it made it difficult for Latino candidates to get elected in Fallbrook. For him, the CVRA provided a legal pathway to challenge what Latino voters had long experienced—the structural barriers that prevented them from electing candidates of their choice:

What the California Voting Rights Act addressed was taking care of a majority minority community and making sure that they have the opportunity to choose a candidate whom they prefer. But I think what people misunderstand is that it's not the law; it doesn't say that a person of color or a person from the majority-minority area can join that board. It's just that the community gets to have a say in who represents them. So, at-large, it was intentionally designed to dilute the power of ethnic groups. It goes back to the progressive era. That's when it was changed, and it was changed intentionally to dilute the power of ethnic groups like Mexican-Americans, Irish-Americans, and Chinese-Americans. And so the at-large system that we had for 100 years wasn't questioned or challenged until the California Voting Rights Act. And that gave people challenging firepower because they didn't have to prove that this discrimination was intentional. It's just an inherent part of the process.

Billy's testimony highlights how at-large elections functioned as a structural barrier that limited Latinos' opportunity to elect their preferred candidates. His reference to the history of at-large elections demonstrated his knowledge of the issue and his recognition of how they continue to reproduce electoral disadvantages for Latino voters. In Fallbrook, the persistence of at-large elections, combined with the community's racialized environment, made it structurally unlikely

that Latinos would gain political power. Billy recognized that the CVRA provided the legal framework to reshape local elections—not by guaranteeing a minority candidate a seat on the board, but by ensuring all voters had a meaningful opportunity to elect someone who represented their interests.

While at-large elections disadvantaged Latino voters, the same system simultaneously entrenched Republican political dominance on governing boards. Despite Fallbrook's growing political diversity, leaders emphasized that at-large elections had produced a homogeneous board dominated by Republicans. Although leaders recognized that political change was necessary, during elections for local boards, it made it difficult to elect someone new. Elected candidates were established as the establishment candidates, making challenging them difficult. Darian illustrated this entrenchment through his own experience navigating local elections, revealing that Republican dominance was so complete that identifying a viable candidate was difficult for local voters:

And when the election came, our friends would call us and say, "What are these seats on the ballot for health district? "Who should we vote for?" All the candidates were Republicans in the fire district. Who should we vote for? At least I knew they were all Republican. Actually, on a local ballot, their political party is not listed. So, it takes some digging in to find out. And they were all Republicans.

Darian's account reveals how entrenched Republican dominance was that even engaged community members struggled to choose which candidate to cast a vote for. Given that candidates remained unopposed, they continued to be elected, resulting in a homogeneous leadership that did not reflect the community's growing diversity. For decades, Latinos had lived in Fallbrook yet lacked political representation, while a Republican majority continued to dominate local governing boards. For Darian, challenging at-large elections was not only an opportunity to dismantle the disadvantages inherent in this voting system but also to challenge

the entrenched Republican dominance that had created broader political homogeneity on local governing boards.

Across these accounts, leaders emphasized that at-large elections created unequal political structures that disadvantaged Latino voters. They recognized that at-large elections had helped maintain the political structure rather than introducing new political diversity in office. For many leaders, their motivation to participate in challenging at-large elections was to remove a structural barrier for Latinos. It was not framed as ensuring a Latino candidate got elected, but that Latino voters had the opportunity to elect a candidate that would best represent their needs, an issue that was not happening under at-large elections. By recognizing that the electoral structure needed to be changed, the structural disadvantage laid the groundwork for challenging at-large elections.

Factor 3: Preexisting Organizing Infrastructure

The third factor was the presence of a preexisting organizing infrastructure that leaders could rapidly activate when the opportunity arose. When FUESD received a letter stating that its voting system violated the CVRA and required a transition to district elections, it created an opportunity for a grassroots coalition of Latino activists and the local Democratic club to come together and push for fair redistricting maps. By aligning their efforts around a shared goal, leaders were able to merge these groups into a cohesive coalition capable of sustaining pressure on the school board. By combining their resources—particularly people and social networks—they strengthened their capacity to mobilize and challenge the district's entrenched electoral practices and decisions about the redistricting process. Without this shared goal, these groups would have lacked the collective capacity to challenge the school board.

In Fallbrook, the Democratic Club and a grassroots coalition of Latino activists provided the foundation for mobilizing individuals to engage in the redistricting process. The Fallbrook Democratic Club was founded in 2004 and was structured to provide factual information to Democratic voters so that they may make informed political decisions. Through regular chapter meetings, the club informed local Democratic voters about local issues and maintained an active contact list. The grassroots coalition of Latino activists dates back to the 1970s and was formed in response to the racialization of Latinos in Fallbrook (Huntsberry, 2022). Through many different iterations of this group, a collective group had been created with contacts, resources, and established credibility of advocacy for Latinos. While these two groups were distinct, each brought complementary resources: the Democratic Club brought political structure, an established voter contact list, and electoral expertise, while the Latino coalition brought decades of community credibility, trust among Latino residents, and a deep understanding of the racialized conditions that made redistricting necessary. Although the Democratic Club and Latino coalition had not previously worked together, combining their resources created a coalition with both the community legitimacy and political capacity necessary to challenge at-large elections and reshape local politics.

The Democratic Club contributed the structural foundation necessary to organize and coordinate the coalition's mobilization efforts. While the club's network was limited to registered Democrats who attended club meetings, it provided an established organizational structure capable of dividing labor, assigning tasks, and directing people toward collective action. Darian described the Democratic Club's role as the organizational backbone of the coalition,

[The role of the Democratic Club] was to provide a place where we could organize together, invite people to join us, give them jobs that they can help us with. And sometimes that job was just, "please show up for the meeting." And if you're really brave, get in line to speak up. And say whatever you feel.

Darian's account illustrates how the Democratic Club played an active role in coordinating individuals with specific roles and responsibilities to demonstrate an organized collective power. By providing physical space, dividing labor, and directing people towards concrete actions, such as attending school board meetings and participating in public comment, the Democratic Club made collective pressure organized and visible. In essence, the organized and sustained collective pressure made it increasingly difficult to dismiss as an isolated community concern.

The Latino coalition contributed a different but equally essential resource—decades of established community networks and credibility that gave leaders access to spaces and relationships that the Democratic Club could not reach on its own. Unlike the Democratic Club, which provided organizational structure, the Latino coalition's long history of advocacy meant they had already built trust within the Latino community through years of organizing. This established credibility allowed leaders to rapidly activate existing networks rather than build new ones from scratch. Alan described how these preexisting networks were mobilized to inform the community about the redistricting process, stating, "In terms of school districts, you are working with parent leaders, you're tapping into folks that have their own networks. People who are already organizing with other parents." His testimony illustrates how the coalition's preexisting relationships allowed leaders to move quickly through established channels—reaching parents, educators, and community members who were already organized and trusted the coalition's advocacy work. By merging contact lists and pooling networks, leaders were able to rapidly assemble what he described as "a good group of folks" capable of sustaining pressure on the school district. This rapid activation was only possible because the relationships and credibility already existed—without them, leaders would have had to build community trust from scratch, a process that would have taken far longer than the redistricting timeline allowed.

Beyond providing an organizational structure, the coalition's strength stemmed from a deeper ideological alignment between the Democratic Club and the Latino coalition. Darian reflected on how their goals, though distinct, converged around shared democratic principles:

Yeah, but our goals intersected. The Latino community was talking about social justice. Why wasn't their community getting the same treatment that they expected they should get because of their increasing numbers? Instead of being treated like a problem because they didn't all speak English. We were looking to get Democrats elected, but our goal of doing that totally intersected with the social justice thing. That's why we were Democrats.

What Darian's reflection reveals is that the coalition's strength stemmed from a shared ideological goal. The Democratic Club's electoral goals and the Latino coalition's pursuit of social justice were not separate agendas that happened to align—they were rooted in the same democratic principles of equal opportunity. This convergence transformed two distinct organizations into a cohesive coalition capable of sustaining collective action.

Building coalitions and a shared goal enabled the leaders to mobilize the community and inform it about how to challenge institutional structures. Leaders recognized that strong collective action required community members to understand the importance of the redistricting process. To accomplish this, leaders were strategic in the language that they used and how they communicated with individuals. For example, in announcing information meetings through Facebook, local newspaper, and community networks, leaders organized meetings with titles that explicitly connected redistricting to political empowerment: “Alzando la Voz ante la Formación de Distritos Escolares” (Raising Our Voices on the Formation of Districts), “Plática: El Poder Politico de la Raza en Fallbrook en Juego” (Talk: The Political Power of Race in Fallbrook at Play), “Nuestra educacion, nuestro voto, nuestra democracia” (Our education, our vote, our democracy). These titles revealed the strategic framing that connected governance to local community stakes. For example, “Alzando la Voz” framed collective empowerment rather than

individual input, “El Poder Politico de la Raza en Fallbrook en juego” explicitly named redistricting as a form of political power for Latino groups, and “Nuestra educacion, nuestro voto, nuestra democracia” linked district elections to multiple concerns: children's education, electoral voice, and democratic principles. This strategic framing of titles helped elevate the importance of these collective-action meetings for the community.

Leaders were also strategic about where they held information meetings, choosing locations that were frequently used by the community. These information meetings were held at local panaderías (bakeries), the public library, and community centers where parents regularly gathered. The meetings served not only as informational sessions but also as spaces for dialogue, where parents could ask questions about the process and its significance in political representation. By framing redistricting as a mechanism to secure equitable political power, political leaders engaged in a strategic effort to reshape the institutional norms and challenge the status quo.

Across the interviews, leaders revealed that they were strategic in building a strong collective action. Leaders needed to organize, educate, and demonstrate that the community demanded representation on the school board. But they needed to demonstrate to the school board that the community was well-informed about the redistricting process. By leveraging social networks and community organizations, leaders activated a preexisting organizing network that rapidly coalesced into a strong, well-informed collective action. Their efforts reveal that collective action is not a singular process, but a multi-front approach with political organization, mobilization, and formal strategy

Factor 4: Legal Mobilization Through the California Voting Rights Act

The fourth factor was the legal mobilization process that leaders engaged in to challenge at-large elections. Legal mobilization is the use of law by legal advocates or social actors in an explicit, self-conscious manner through the invocation of formal institutional mechanisms (Lehoucq & Taylor, 2019). In this context, the CVRA provided the legal framework that leaders leveraged to challenge at-large elections. Under the CVRA, the law recognizes that at-large elections may lead to vote dilution and requires jurisdictions to adopt district elections or face litigation. When lawyers sent demand letters to FUESD identifying them as violating the CVRA, they issued credible legal threats that required responses from board members (see chapter 4). It set in motion the redistricting process that local leaders leveraged to advance the fair design of subdistricts, with the goal of advancing political representation. Leaders recognized the CVRA as a legal opportunity that could reshape local elections, but it needed to be accomplished within a rapid timeline.

In the Fall of 2018, the FUESD school board confirmed that they had received a violation letter and moved to approve the redistricting process. Within a 135-day timeline, the school district needed to hire a demographer to redraw the electoral boundaries, set community meetings to engage the public in the design of new electoral boundaries, and finally approve new electoral maps. The intent of this redistricting process was to remedy the vote dilution identified in the lawyers' violation letter. Although the school board signaled its compliance with the law, the redistricting process shifted from a community-driven effort to a bureaucratic one that ultimately sought to preserve the existing power structure.

For some leaders, the community-driven process excited them, as it would allow the community to lead efforts and provide critical insight into developing maps that reflected the community. To ensure the school district remained fully compliant, some leaders pursued their own legal education on the CVRA and its requirements. Unfamiliar with the law, Rosalia undertook a self-directed legal education to ensure the board was following proper procedure, explaining, “[I] just started doing a lot of reading and a lot of studying. And I read the [results] from Palmdale and all these different cases from all over [the state].” Roslia’s account illustrates how leaders develop their understanding of an unknown California law reshaping local elections. She had to learn the legal principles behind the law to ensure the school district remained in compliance. By studying the statutory requirements and precedent cases, she gained the expertise necessary to monitor board compliance, identify specific violations, and demand accountability using the law’s own language. In Fallbrook, ensuring that community input was at the forefront of the redistricting process became a central priority for leaders. But when the school board decided to limit community input by shutting down discussions of the school maps, she recognized the inequity. She reflected on this strategy:

When the board members were systematically and deliberately excluding the community, I started getting pretty militant about it. And we demanded that they have their first public hearing, and they had their second public hearing. And the third public hearing was when they were going to vote. So, even at those public hearings, we were getting 20, 30, 40 people there.

Roslia’s account reveals how her legal knowledge transformed frustration into organized resistance. In this context, the board members left little room for community input in the redistricting meetings, prompting a strong reaction from Rosalia. By understanding what the board was legally required to do, she could identify specific violations and demand

accountability. The growing attendance at the community meeting demonstrated that this pressure was not individual but a collective action.

The power of collective action was central to the redistricting process. Alan recognized the power in organizing and mobilizing the community, having previously engaged in collective action to advocate for the fair treatment of Latinos and other minority community members. To build collective action, Alan explained that he began to organize the community:

[I] began to organize around 30 or 40 [people], a good core of people from the community involved in this. In fact, we were dubbed by one of the school board members as the same 30 or 40. And we felt like 30 or 40 people is not bad to have around you all the time. So we had a good core of community members involved in this.

Alan's account illustrates that the collective action required a significant number of people to participate. By attending board meetings with a significant following, the leaders could show a strong collective action. Given that leaders had organized individuals to ensure they understood the redistricting process, the significant number of people involved demonstrated strong collective action.

When the school district's demographer finally created three maps, Rosalia explained that they did not advance Latino representation or change the status quo. Rather, these maps perpetuated the same disadvantage that Latinos experienced. Leaders recognized that resisting the board map required them to present a new electoral map that could achieve their desired outcome. Rosalia emphasized that leaders gathered to design and hand-draw new electoral maps, highlighting their determination to achieve fair representation. She recalled:

We looked at how people do this and what communities of interest mean. And of course, the whole census thing. We had to get maps with the census tracts and the numbers on there. And there were physical maps, the demographers got it all in an app, right? So we printed out [maps], a big map. We had this section of the census tract, because there was a census tract and then there's a census block. We copied all of those, and then we taped them together, and we had this big map. And then each of those census tracts has a number. And we just kind of drew our own lines by the streets, added those up on an

adding machine. You've got these little strips. And then, when we had too many, we'd have to go back and say, "Okay, let's subtract this one."

What emerged from this account is how leaders took the initiative to design their own electoral maps to demonstrate that fair representation could be achieved, a feature that the district's map failed to incorporate. The complexity of drawing these maps shows the lengths to which leaders went to achieve representation. They manually printed electoral maps and designed subdistricts that were fairly distributed, a highly complex process. Without prior knowledge of districting, the leaders analyzed census data to draw new electoral boundaries, create subdistricts that represented the community demographics, and have a strong Latino subdistrict. In essence, they were determined to achieve a fair map despite their limited knowledge and computer software.

Despite the leaders' collective efforts to mobilize the community to attend the school district-sponsored community meeting to provide input to the board, the board members chose a map that did not advance Latino representation. The Village News (2019) reported, in February of 2019, the board approved a new electoral boundaries map; however, it emphasized that the chosen map was insufficient to remedy the CVRA:

The plan is insufficient to remedy the California Voting Rights Act violation and may violate federal statutory and constitutional law prohibiting intentional discrimination in voting because, in order to protect incumbents, the plan delays the election of the only Latino-majority district, District 1, until 2022, and includes a weak Latino-majority district.

The chosen map created new subdistricts and a weak Latino-majority district; however, it delayed the election for that subdistrict until 2022, a non-presidential-cycle election. As the Village News (2019) reported, critics argued that the map would "hinder chances for a Latino candidate to have a fair chance at winning in a 2020 election." Leaders emphasized that scheduling the election during an off-presidential-election year, it would lead to lower voter turnout.

Although the school board adopted district elections, leaders shifted their legal strategy, bringing their case to the San Diego County Board of Education (SDBOE)—the oversight body with authority to review the district's redistricting compliance. These efforts led to new tactics that relied on legal statutes to make their case that the chosen process by board members continued to disadvantage Latinos. Before the final chosen map was approved for implementation, the SDBOE had to discuss the map outcomes, and the leaders identified this as the final opportunity to reject the district's chosen map. Leaders recognized this avenue as the last opportunity to oppose the district's map and prepared documents and evidence from their meeting with community members, including signatures and testimonies detailing the disadvantages of the school board's map. Rosalia explained, "We put this package together to make sure that [SDBOE] was taking a good look at what the community was asking for and what the school district ended up doing." Their efforts culminated in a seventy-page document demonstrating that the community demanded a map that would create a strong majority-Latino subdistrict, rather than the one proposed by the school district, which offered a weak one.

To build a strong rebuttal to the school district's decisions, leaders strategically divided responsibilities to address the continued discriminatory intent embedded in the district's maps. Leaders moved beyond identifying discriminatory intent to strategically articulate how those decisions produced concrete harms for the community. Katie emphasized that the board's choices reflected a deliberate effort to maintain political power. By placing two incumbents who lived in close proximity rather than creating a new district, the board reinforced the status quo, preventing political change. She explained, "[The] school board map [was] obviously being gerrymandered." Katie's account demonstrates how leaders recognized the impact of

discriminatory intent embedded in the school board's gerrymandered maps by keeping the status quo.

From a similar perspective, leaders developed legal expertise that enabled them to identify and address the disenfranchisement of Latino political participation. Billy described the board as suppressing the Latino political participation, which was counterintuitive to the CVRA. He explained, "I spoke to the perpetuating disenfranchisement of the Latino community by having this gerrymandered map that did not [reflect] the demographics of the downtown." Billy emphasized that the map failed to advance Latino representation, especially in areas where Latinos were the majority, offering no alignment between district boundaries and demographics. Beyond the map itself, Billy also argued that the board's sequencing decisions would further disenfranchise Latino voters by placing the subdistrict election in an off-year cycle, which he believed would depress Latino turnout. Reflecting on his public comments to the board, he stated:

"I spoke urg[ing] them not only to adopt the community map, reject the district map, but also reject their sequencing, because the sequencing that, either intentionally or not, their sequencing was in an off-year election."

His comments reveal that leaders recognized the redistricting process as protecting the status quo rather than expanding political representation, thereby constraining the potential for transformative change. Billy's active participation at the SDBOE meetings and advocating for a fairer map illustrate the leaders' sustained efforts to challenge inequities and advocate for fair representation.

Through their advocacy efforts, the SDBOE rejected the district map and approved the community map as the new electoral map the school district would implement. Despite the setbacks that followed the school board's adoption of a gerrymandered map, political leaders did

not abandon their efforts. Instead, they re-strategized to confront institutional resistance and continued their advocacy at the county level. This outcome demonstrated the power of sustained, strategic grassroots advocacy to challenge institutional power. Yet it also reveals how meaningful change required not only mobilization but also the ability to navigate and contest the entrenched structures of governance that resisted equitable representation. Across these interviews, leaders demonstrated that they engaged in legal mobilization when the opportunity arose. It was through the collective efforts that they resisted and pushed back against the school board's chosen map.

Discussion

Latinos have long encountered electoral barriers that have limited their ability to elect Latino candidates to political office, leading to their political underrepresentation (Fraga et al., 1986; Fraga & Elis, 2009; Reyes & Neiman, 2011). A key factor of this underrepresentation is the use of at-large elections, which are commonly used for school board elections. These voting systems have been linked to vote dilution, in which majority-voting blocs can usually defeat the preferred candidates of minority-voting blocs (Elmendorf et al., 2016). Under these conditions, Latino voters, who often form a minority voting bloc, are less likely to elect their preferred candidates. However, the CVRA has provided a legal framework for challenging electoral barriers and addressing this underrepresentation (Gomez & Salceda, 2025). The CVRA was enacted to provide minority communities a legal tool to challenge the discriminatory intent in at-large elections, recognizing the impact of such elections on minority representation (Avila et al., 2007). As a legal requirement, school districts found to have violated the law must transition their voting systems to district elections or face significant penalties, including the threat of litigation. According to Trounstein and Valdin (2008), under district elections, electoral districts

are smaller, allowing Latino and other minority candidates to leverage their population size to improve their chances of being elected. In other words, the CVRA provides the legal framework to initiate a redistricting process that ultimately reshapes local elections.

Yet, the CVRA alone does not produce political change or create the necessary political infrastructure to guarantee the adoption of fair electoral maps. When a CVRA case is brought against a local government body, it must be accompanied by engaged local actors ready to enforce accountability. Contrary to the CVRA's intent, without local actors engaged in the process, the law may not address the disadvantages Latino voters encountered. The accounts of political leaders in Fallbrook reveal that legal reform alone cannot guarantee equitable representation; it must be sustained through strategic legal mobilization. The CVRA's design, while groundbreaking in its intent to advance representation, is passive rather than proactive, relying on local actors to identify inequities, initiate challenges, and sustain advocacy to ensure accountability. At a structural level, these experiences highlight a flaw in the implementation of the CVRA: when incumbents control redistricting, they can manipulate the process to maintain their political power, undermining the communities the reform aims to help empower. In this way, the law's implementation depends on the capacity and willingness of communities to mobilize, a process that inherently produces uneven outcomes across jurisdictions.

In Fallbrook, achieving reform required local political leaders to recognize inequities, mobilize the community, and hold the school board accountable. Drawing from legal mobilization theory (McCann, 1994), the CVRA provided the legal framework for pursuing political change, but it was the organizing of political leaders that brought democratic reform to the school board. This was only possible because of the four factors identified in this analysis: racialized grievances, unequal political structures, a preexisting organizing infrastructure, and

legal mobilization, which together enabled leaders to translate longstanding grievances into concrete electoral reform.

In this analysis, the CVRA created both an opening and a contest for political power, as leaders organized to pursue fair maps while simultaneously challenging the incumbents who sought to preserve their political dominance. While the CVRA provides guidelines for redistricting, board members who control the process can still engage in exclusionary practices, limiting political change in the electoral structure. This situation required political leaders to learn about the CVRA bylaws and use that knowledge strategically to confront institutional resistance. For instance, the school board violated the bylaws by failing to require active community participation in creating the new political map and establishing subdistricts to enhance minority representation.

However, the mobilization of leaders in these efforts was only visible after the CVRA highlighted the inequities in the current voting system. The CVRA revealed to leaders that Latino families were being disenfranchised, prompting many leaders and allies to challenge the existing political system. Leaders responded by highlighting how the historical exclusion of Latinos motivated them to partake in the process to ensure that fair and equitable maps were implemented. To demand a fair and equitable map, political leaders leveraged CVRA bylaws to hold the school district accountable during the redistricting process. Through these efforts, leaders politically mobilize to ensure that equitable representation can be achieved.

In Fallbrook, political leaders reframed redistricting from a bureaucratic process into a political act of resistance, turning the CVRA into a mechanism for asserting accountability and democratic reform. The resistance faced by political leaders underscores how institutional structures can adapt to reform while preserving existing hierarchies of power. The school board's

actions approving a gerrymandered map and scheduling elections in an off-presidential cycle show the extent to which the school board decided to protect incumbents. This outcome reveals the tension between formal compliance and substantive representation: while the district technically followed state law, its choices undermined the CVRA's intent to strengthen minority political voice.

The collective actions of political leaders allowed them to push for fair representation by supporting the creation of a strong majority-Latino subdistrict. Yet, the school board's decision to adopt a map that lacked community input and favored incumbents reflected the limits of legal compliance without accountability. In this context, engagement in the process was not prompted by the board's interest in including the community in decision-making, but rather emerged from collective action in response to the inequities perpetuated by the school board. In other words, the success of the CVRA hinges on how local actors interpret and mobilize.

In the face of institutional resistance, political leaders turned to organizing to assert accountability and democratic reform. Through public meetings, online petitions, and coordinated advocacy before the SDBOE, they transformed the redistricting process into a collective action and ensured fair representation. Their preparation and presentation of data, testimonies, and creation of new electoral maps demonstrate how their collective actions lead them to become agents of change. The success of their organizing efforts highlights how collective action can overcome institutional resistance and convert legal compliance into substantive representation. These dynamics highlight how legal reform operates as both a site of opportunity and a site of contestation.

CHAPTER XI. THE PROMISES AND LIMITS OF LATINO REPRESENTATION ON SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Introduction

One mechanism for addressing the underrepresentation of Latinos on school boards is to reform electoral structures, as this underrepresentation often stems from at-large elections (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020; Leal et al., 2004; Molina Jr & Meier, 2018). The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 provides a legal framework for voters to challenge at-large elections by broadening the definition of vote dilution and lowering the evidentiary burden required to prove it (Powell, 2018; Richomme, 2020). However, the CVRA does not automatically apply to jurisdictions; legal advocates and social actors must leverage it to institute electoral reform. As described in Chapter 4, lawyers act as catalysts in this process by issuing legal threats against jurisdictions that use at-large elections and where evidence of vote dilution exists, compelling jurisdictions to comply or face litigation. These legal threats set in motion a strict 135-day redistricting timeline that jurisdictions must complete, in which they must abandon at-large elections, establish subdistricts, and implement district elections. However, as described in Chapter 5, whether this process leads to greater minority representation and equally populated subdistricts depends on the engagement of local actors who hold governing boards accountable in constructing fair subdistricts. Legal mobilization theory (Lehoucq & Taylor, 2020) provides a framework for understanding how local actors leverage the law to advance electoral reforms. Yet, the theory leaves many questions unanswered about what happens after a reform is achieved and how individuals directly affected by increased representation make sense of that change.

This chapter addresses this empirical gap by examining the perspectives of parents, educators, and school board members in the Fallbrook community, where the transition to district elections resulted in the election of a Latino board member to the Fallbrook Union

Elementary School District (FUESD). After decades of underrepresentation in school governance, the election of a Latino board member introduced a new perspective into district decision-making, generating expectations among local stakeholders that longstanding patterns of Latino political exclusion would change. The central research question guiding this chapter: How do local stakeholders make sense of the impact of Latino representation, brought about through legal mobilization, on school governance?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 15 parents, 5 educators, and 3 school board members, I trace how local stakeholders interpret the election of a Latino board member. The analysis is organized around two major themes: the Promises and the Limits of Latino representation. The first theme examines how stakeholders experienced the tangible and symbolic gains of Latino representation, demonstrating how descriptive representation reshapes access and inclusion in school governance. The second theme interrogates the structural barriers that constrained what representation could achieve, demonstrating how institutional constraints limit the translation of descriptive representation into substantive change. These themes highlight how the impact of Latino representation both enables and constrains the extent of change in the school district.

The analysis reveals that stakeholders perceived Latino representation differently based on their proximity to the school governance process. Parents perceived the Latino board member as uniquely positioned to understand and advocate for their needs, especially regarding the expansion of language access. Educators recognized the symbolic importance of representation while remaining less optimistic about its capacity to produce substantive change. Board members acknowledged both the advocacy potential of Latino representation and the structural constraints — particularly majoritarian rules and political conditions — that limited its policy impact. These

perspectives illuminate both the promise and limits of Latino representation and reveal how its impact is interpreted differently across positions within school governance.

Findings

Theme I: The Promises of Descriptive Representation

At FUESD, the election of a Latino board member reshaped how stakeholders perceived access and belonging within the school district, highlighting the perceived benefits of descriptive representation. Stakeholders revealed that greater descriptive representation fostered greater inclusion of Latino students and families in the school governance process. The following sections present three subthemes that illustrate how a single Latino board member expanded language access and recognition, strengthened symbolic representation, and enabled advocacy in school governance.

I: Language Access and Recognition as a Form of Representation

This section examines how parents describe the impact of Latino representation on language access, highlighting how the presence of a Spanish-speaking board member expanded communication between Spanish-speaking Latino families and at least one board member. At the local level, educational policy is shaped through the participation of parents and community stakeholders in the school governance process, such as reviewing board agendas, attending board meetings, and voicing concerns. However, when these processes are conducted exclusively in English, they function as language barriers that limit participation for non-English speaking communities.

At FUESD, this language barrier was present in the school governance process. Before the election of a Latino board member, all five board members were monolingual English speakers, creating language barriers among Spanish-speaking parents. According to the

California Department of Education (n.d.), a quarter of FUESD's total student enrollment is designated as English Learners whose primary language is Spanish, suggesting that a significant portion of the households faced language barriers to participation in school governance. According to parents, the district attempted to address these barriers by providing interpreter services at board meetings, school events, and community interactions. However, parents consistently described these services as unreliable and insufficient. Several participants recounted instances in which interpreters inaccurately translated or only partially conveyed, leaving them feeling unheard and misrepresented. Drawing on these experiences, parents described the election of a Spanish-speaking Latino board member as reshaping language access in the district — expanding opportunities for participation and signaling greater recognition of Spanish-speaking families.

The presence of a bilingual board member altered parents' access to school governance by eliminating their dependence on interpreters. Ron¹⁸, a Spanish-speaking Latino father in his late forties with two children enrolled in the district, reflected on what expanding language access meant for him: “One speaks with more confidence [in Spanish], because you no longer need an interpreter.” For Ron, eliminating the need for interpreters reduced the risk of miscommunication and allowed him to raise concerns about his children’s education more directly and confidently. Although he knew some English, he preferred to communicate in Spanish, particularly after an incident in which an interpreter did not accurately translate his concerns. Ron’s experience highlights how language access was considered a mechanism for expressing his needs and participating in school governance. His account suggests that language

¹⁸ Pseudonyms

access not only reduced reliance on interpreters but also enabled parents to engage with school governance in their preferred language.

Leslie¹⁹, a Spanish-speaking Latina mother in her mid-forties with one child enrolled in the district, echoed this dynamic, describing how language access has reshaped her confidence in raising concerns with the school board. She explained, “Having a Latino [board member], that helps a lot, because you feel more confident when you [can] assert your voice [in Spanish].” For Leslie, speaking in Spanish made it easier to articulate her concerns and to feel assured that at least one board member would understand them. Like Ron, Leslie emphasized that language access opened channels for communicating with board members that had not previously existed on the school board. Her account suggests that having bilingual board members can encourage non-English-speaking parents to participate and raise concerns about their children’s educational needs.

While Ron and Leslie spoke from direct experience, Eduardo²⁰, a Latino father in his early thirties with two children enrolled in the district, reflected on the significance of Latino representation — what it promised for families like his own. As he explained,

It [is] impactful because it gives us so much to communicate with [one another]. The [Latino board member] will listen and probably understand what we are going through. What parents are going through, Latino parents and their students.

For Eduardo, having a Latino board member meant having someone with institutional authority who could better understand and respond to the experiences of Latino families. He recognized that the shared identity between the Latino board member and the broader Latino community addressed a structural communication gap: someone who understood the experiences of Latino families navigating a historically hostile racial environment. His account suggests that language

¹⁹ Pseudonym

²⁰ Pseudonym

access is not about communication, but also about creating the conditions for Latino families to feel understood and recognized within school governance.

These accounts illustrate that the addition of a Latino board member was not simply about language access but about transforming the conditions under which participation in school governance occurred. Language was more than communication — it was about being recognized as a community member and seen as an active stakeholder in children's education. Hence, the value a bilingual board member brought to the school district was an increase in the confidence of Spanish-speaking Latino parents to participate in local governance, a longstanding barrier in the district. In this way, Latino representation did not merely improve communication; it helped break down language barriers that hindered parents' engagement in school governance.

II: Symbolism as a Form of Representation

This section examines how stakeholders describe Latino representation as a form of symbolic representation that increases the political visibility of Latinos and positions them as active stakeholders in the community. In political science, symbolic representation refers to ways political actors or actions evoke emotions, meanings, and legitimacy rather than through direct actions (Stokke & Selboe, 2009). Among stakeholders, the addition of a Latino board member to the school board elicited various forms of symbolism, with each participant offering an interpretation shaped by their proximity to the school governance process. In this way, Latino representation functioned not only as a symbolic form of inclusion but also as a way of shaping how stakeholders saw themselves within the community.

Parents described symbolic representation as increasing political visibility and opportunity for the Latino community. Rosa²¹, a Latina parent in her early forties with one child

²¹ Pseudonym

enrolled in the district, described Latino representation as a symbol of their growth in size and associated it with recognition of unmet Latino needs:

[Latino representation has] helped the Latino community. We are stepping out of the shadows now. Before, I did not think that [the school board] took us into account; we simply didn't exist. But now that Latinos are growing and we are, it helps that the school board has a Latino because [he] know the Latino needs.

For Rosa, the election of a Latino board member represented more than symbolic inclusion; it marked a fundamental shift from political invisibility to visibility, ensuring that the board considered Latino perspectives. She recognized that the Latino board member could disrupt their underrepresentation in the school governance process. As she explained, “stepping out of the shadows” contextualizes the experiences of Latinos who had long existed within the district without being centered in governance decisions. Her account suggests that Latino representation served as political symbolism, signaling that Latino families were not only present but also deserving of recognition as equal contributors to the educational community.

Another parent described Latino representation as a symbol of opportunity for Latinos to hold political power and as a role model for Latino students. Teresa²², a Latina mother in her early forties with one child enrolled in the district, explained:

It is important to have Latinos in leadership positions, [as] it provides Latino students with an opportunity to see themselves and recognize that they are accomplished. It provides them [with] a future outlook.

For Teresa, seeing a Latino in a position of authority countered years of underrepresentation and demonstrated to students that elected office was accessible, serving as a role model. As she emphasized, “see themselves and recognize that they are accomplished,” speaks to the historical racialization of Latinos in Fallbrook, which limited their political inclusion and recognition as community members. Despite the racialized environment, having a

²² Pseudonym

Latino on the school board countered the many narratives that Latinos experience and served as a role model of the powerful achievements that Latinos could accomplish. Her account suggests that Latino representation serves as a symbolic model for parents, broadening their understanding of the possibilities for Latino leadership and civic participation.

Among some teachers, Latino representation on the school board was described as symbolic political power, increasing the presence of Latinos in the school district. Clare²³, a Latina TK teacher with almost three decades of teaching experience in the district, explained,

The fact that he is on [school board]— it gives [Latinos] a little bit of voice. He [is] involved in the community, especially being present at, whether it be school events or around the community, it shows that there is somebody representing [Latinos].

Clare associated Latino representation with the “standing in” aspect of symbolic representation by making Latinos present in areas where they have long been absent. As a teacher, Clare recognized the role of board members in influencing the school district's operations. However, given the historical Latino underrepresentation, this voice had long been invisible in school governance. Her account suggests that Latino representation functions as a symbolic “standing in,” producing Latino visibility through presence in school governance.

While parents and educators described the everyday relational effects of Latino representation, board members emphasized its symbolic and institutional meaning for Latino families. Rajni²⁴, an eighty-year-old white board member, recognized the symbolic value a Latino board member represented for Latino families in the racialized community environment. She reflected on this importance: “Latino representation is huge. Communities need to see representation. So important. I mean, I pat him on the back regularly, telling him he is doing a good job.” For Rajni, Latino representation was more than just a change in ethnic identities on

²³ Pseudonym

²⁴ Pseudonym

the school board; it signaled that Latino families were stakeholders in the school governance. She associated the one Latino board member with uplifting and advancing representation for Latino voters in the school district. Additionally, she recognized the challenge of holding the position of school board member and the symbolic value that the Latino board member carried by regularly acknowledging their work to improve the school district. Her account suggests that Latino representation served a symbolic function for non-Latino members as well, signaling their recognition of the importance of Latino inclusion in school governance.

Similarly, Alan²⁵, the forty-year-old Latino board member, recognized the symbolism that his position held for the community. His election to the school board signaled that Latinos had gained political power and representation in school governance. Reflecting on the symbolism of his election to the board, he emphasized his efforts to make the school governance process as relational and embodied as possible for Latino families:

It's important for this [Latino] community to see that not just my identity as, my ethnic identity, but also the fact that I come from a working class background. I don't like to wear a tie. I never saw my father wear a tie. I don't want that type of separation from the community. I'm a parent and I come from a migrant community. I want to make sure that that comes across. When I am speaking, managing the agenda, and the meeting itself, I have my own type of slang or accent. I grew up in the streets around here, I'm a bit self-conscious of that. But at the same time, it's like, hey, it doesn't matter. I've worked my way to get into this position and it's part of who I am as well. I think people need to see that, hear that, it's nothing to be ashamed of. I think it's important to embrace it, it's what this community needs to see more of.

For Alan, highlighting his ethnic identity and working-class background was essential to ensure Latinos felt connected to the school board. By demonstrating these personal aspects in school board meetings, Alan hoped that the school governance process would be welcoming to Latino community members. He recognized that his position brought symbolic representation to Latino families and tried to make it as relational as possible. The phrase “I don't want that type of

²⁵ Pseudonym

separation from the community” highlights his intention to ensure the community felt integral to the governance process. His account suggests that Latino representation was more than just symbolism; it was about establishing Latinos' presence in the school district.

Across these accounts, stakeholders assigned multiple forms of symbolic value to Latino representation, linking it to experiences at different levels of the school governance process. Depending on each stakeholder's proximity to school governance, their interpretation of Latino representation varied. Parents recognized the symbolic impact at the local level, such as reshaping visibility and local narratives, while educators emphasized the value representation had for school governance. School board members recognize the symbolic value representation has for Latino families. In this way, Latino representation functioned not only as a symbolic form of inclusion but also as a way of shaping how stakeholders saw themselves within the community.

III: Advocacy as a Mechanism of Representation

This section examines how stakeholders describe Latino representation as increasing advocacy for Latino communities within school governance. As Mansbridge (1999) argues, in a racially stratified society, descriptive representation can increase deliberation over policy topics and improve policy outcomes for minority groups. Before the election of a Latino candidate to the school board, the five white board members created a representation gap along racial and ethnic lines between themselves and the families they served. In this context, questions emerged about whether the white board members understood the educational experiences of Latino students or could effectively advocate for their needs. The election of a Latino board member was therefore perceived by stakeholders as introducing a new advocacy dynamic into school

governance, positioning the board member as uniquely situated to advance the interests of Latino students

The lack of Latino representation on the school board led parents to believe that their concerns were not a top priority for board members. For one parent, Latino representation on the school board signaled that someone in authority would begin to address the needs of Latino students. Nataly²⁶, a Latina parent in her early forties with one child enrolled in the district, shared that the Latino board member's ethnic identity made him more receptive to Latino needs, “Being Latino, maybe he understands us more.” This parent characterized shared identity as a necessary condition for equitable advocacy, suggesting that without shared ethnic and cultural backgrounds, board members cannot adequately understand or prioritize Latino family needs. This framing reveals how years of exclusion shaped parents’ expectations: they had come to believe that Latino representation was essential for advancing Latino interests and that a Latino board member would bring experientially informed knowledge of community needs that his predecessors lacked.

Another parent emphasized that the Latino board member demonstrated broad policy advocacy that enriched the educational experiences of all students, not just Latino students. Ruben²⁷, a Latino father in his late thirties with two children enrolled in the school district, described the scope of the board member's advocacy:

I've seen where [Alan] is advocating for academic services as well as artistic services and also athletic department services. He's behind a lot of policies that look to enrich the experience of all of our students as a whole, not only the [Latino] community. I've seen it to where, they've had meetings for the LCAP and [he] is informing parents of different type of data that, outlying data that demonstrates certain trends. He's a big part of the policy that's provoking change at that district.

²⁶ Pseudonym

²⁷ Pseudonym

Ruben recognized that the addition of the Latino board member fostered greater advocacy for improving students' educational experience. In doing so, he linked shared racial and ethnic identity to concrete opportunity outcomes that resulted from changes in policy and program implementation. As with Nataly's account, the addition of a Latino board member fostered trust that the board member would address issues affecting Latino families and students. Across these accounts, a consistent pattern emerges: Latino parents viewed shared identity not simply as a descriptive benefit but as a prerequisite for meaningful advocacy.

While parents spoke to the symbolic and observed dimensions of advocacy, educators offered more institutionally grounded accounts of how representation shaped policy priorities. Tania²⁸, a district administrator in her early forties with two children enrolled in the district, emphasized how advocacy transpired during the school governance process:

I would say resources and budgets and priorities, and funding again, [are] not necessarily driven by the board, but supported by the board because you have within your local control accountability plan. We have our supplemental concentration funds that are targeted to unduplicated pupils, and that's socioeconomically disadvantaged English learners and foster youth. And so that is a hot chunk of money that comes into the school, that is, must target those students in those demographics. Having a board member advocating for students need during the LCAP, its important because they recognize the disparities and inequities and could advocate for funding and designate how funding would work.

Tania's institutional knowledge of school funding and school governance allowed her to recognize that having a Latino board member benefited Latino students in concrete ways. By invoking the LCAP, California's Local Control Accountability Plan, she illustrated how a single board member's advocacy could shape and dictate the allocation of supplemental funding for historically underserved students. In essence, having an advocate on the school board who recognizes disparities and inequities could influence program allocation and the pursuit of

²⁸ Pseudonym

supplemental funding for the school district. Her account suggests that the shared racial and ethnic background shaped expectations of advocacy; the Latino board member brings a background that helps him recognize the disparities and inequities that could shape how funding would be allocated or targeted for students.

Advocacy also manifested at the classroom level, where some educators reported feeling empowered to promote more culturally inclusive practices. Jack²⁹, a novice male second-grade teacher, explained, “[Having Latino] leadership, I have [fostered] a more inclusive classroom community that presents other cultures and perspectives to students in an engaging manner.” The presence of Latino representation on the school board motivated Jack to adopt more culturally inclusive pedagogy without fear of reprimand. For Jack, the presence of a Latino board member offered a nuanced perspective, allowing him to discuss topics of race and ethnicity in the classroom. Jack went on to share how Latino representation boosted his confidence in teaching, underscoring the role of descriptive representation in fostering a sense of belonging.

I feel that, on a personal level, as an educator and person of color, I feel supported and represented by the [Latino] leadership team and board. I’ve become a more confident teacher as a result.

Jack’s account suggests that advocacy is not always achieved through direct policy change, but can also operate through the physical presence of an individual in positions of political power. Jack speaks to the symbolism that Latino representation advances for educators. In this case, Latino representation on the school board created the conditions in which a teacher felt empowered to center culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom.

While parents and educators described advocacy from the outside, the Latino board member himself offered a direct account of how he understood and enacted his advocacy role.

²⁹ Pseudonym

Alan shared how he advocated for increasing dual language programming as a mechanism for improving Latino student achievement and reshaping the educational experiences of all students in the district:

There are a few things coming in: cultural relevance, more dual immersion, language support, and language programs. I'm convinced that we need to expand the dual immersion program across the district. I believe it's the type of program that we need in our schools. It's the answer to the history of segregated schooling; it's the remedy for that. Because whether it's native English speakers or native Spanish speakers, they come in and there's no differentiation, both languages are seen as a goal to achieve.

For Alan, dual immersion was not merely a language program but a deliberate remedy for the historical inequities Latino students encountered. By expanding the dual language program, this board member expected to reduce the inequities among students and provide equal opportunity, one that valued both ethnic identities. His account suggests that shared racial and ethnic identity informed an advocacy perspective rooted in historical consciousness, translating lived experience into concrete policy action.

Tyler³⁰, a White school board member, offered a different perspective on advocacy, recalling an experience with Alan during a school board meeting in which they discussed Latino identity:

[Alan] dove into the non-monolithic nature of [Latino] culture... Because there are native-born and immigrant Latinos, there are large Mexican and Guatemalan communities. And so, we got these multiple layers that a lot of people just group into Latino. But it's actually way more beautiful and complex than that.

For Tyler, having a board member who understood the multiple and relational identities that Latino students and families held brought critical knowledge to the school governance process. By introducing the cultural complexity of Latino families, the Latino board member equipped the board to make more informed decisions about the students they served. Tyler welcomed the

³⁰ Pseudonym

concept that a board member had cultural knowledge of the students and families; it was knowledge that Tyler did not have. His account suggests that shared racial and ethnic identity among the Latino board members brought critical knowledge that had not existed in school governance.

Across these accounts, stakeholders describe advocacy in different capacities, depending on the unique positions and knowledge they hold of school governance. Each stakeholder group offered its interpretation of how the Latino board member advocated for Latino families, drawing on shared racial and ethnic identity between the board member and the Latino community. In essence, stakeholders considered advocacy through a racial and ethnic lens, highlighting that the Latino board member had the knowledge to advocate for Latino families' needs.

Theme II: The Limits of Descriptive Representation

At FUESD, the election of a Latino board member reshaped stakeholders' perceptions of access and belonging within the school district, highlighting the perceived benefits of descriptive representation in school governance. However, despite increased Latino representation on the school board, significant inequities persisted, underscoring the limits of descriptive representation. The following section presents three subthemes that illustrate the limits of descriptive representation by highlighting institutional barriers to school governance that hinder what representation can achieve.

I: Limits of Language and Communication Access

This section examines how stakeholders describe persistent inequities in communication between the school governance and local parents despite increased descriptive representation. Even when language access increases, parents still lack clear, actionable information about how school governance operates and decision-making. An essential aspect of school governance is

keeping parents informed about district processes in ways that enable oversight. Although the Latino board member advanced language access, allowing parents to communicate more effectively with the district, many Spanish-speaking parents still reported barriers to engaging in school governance. While Latino representation led to language access for Spanish-speaking parents, communication gaps persisted between the school board and the community, limiting parental engagement in school governance. In essence, there was greater Latino representation, but it did not address the fact that many parents remained uninformed about school governance.

As demonstrated in the previous section, parents emphasized that language access was a key mechanism for greater Latino representation. Yet, they remained uninformed about school governance and whether the Latino board member could influence the school district's policies. Mateo³¹, a father in his late forties with one child enrolled in the district, highlighted the lack of knowledge on the school governance:

I haven't heard anything from the school board about the Latino [board member]. Therefore, I haven't been able to follow what their agenda is and how they are willing or how they're going to be working to help out the Latino community. I think trying to get my own information and find out what their whole agenda is and how they're going to work with the community is getting informed.

Mateo's account emphasizes his lack of knowledge of the impact of school governance. He was unaware that a Latino candidate was on the school board, despite almost four years having passed since the Latino board member was first elected. While the responsibility may lie with parents seeking information about who serves on the school board, this demonstrates that a communication gap exists between school governance and the community. Being unaware of who serves on school boards or the goals board members pursue raises important questions about the effectiveness of the school board in facilitating the school governance process for parents.

³¹ Pseudonym

Unable to follow the impact of the Latino board member, Mateo identified a communication gap between the district and the community. He recognized that he needed to know more about the board member and the school governance process to understand their impact on the school district. His account suggests that communication is an integral part of the school governance process, yet the addition of a Latino board member did not disrupt this institutional barrier.

Another parent demonstrated how unaware they were of the school governance and who held these positions. Mike³², a father with two children enrolled in the school district, explained that he had previously communicated with the Latino board member but did not know the board member served on the school board.

I have met with the [Latino board member] but I did not know he was [on the board] if not I would had more conversations about the school board and the school district and stuff like that. [When] I met with them, [it was] hi and bye and just baby conversations about [the] weather and how their days are going.

Mike reveals a lack of information about the school district and school governance. The institutional mechanism that complicates school governance has left parents unaware of who serves on the school board. It highlights that the Latino board member was unable to overcome the institutional barriers that limit parents' engagement in school governance. His account suggests that Latino representation on the school board has neither made the process visible to parents nor increased parents' knowledge or willingness to become active members in school governance.

This sentiment was shared by Stephanie³³, a Spanish-speaking Latina mother with one child enrolled in the district, emphasizing that the school governance process was for White Americans:

³² Pseudonym

³³ Pseudonym

I didn't attend because of the language; it was always a fear of not speaking the language. But I did not participate because it was more for [white] Americans. It was [the] biggest obstacle for me.

For Stephanie, not speaking English created a fear of attending school board meetings and other events hosted by the school district. Although the Latino board member had reduced the language barrier, she emphasized the reluctance to participate in these events because it was for white Americans. In essence, she associated the school governance with a space for white people and not for Latinos to participate. Her account suggests that school governance remains disconnected from Latino families and is not considered a space for active participation, despite its significance in shaping students' education.

Across these accounts, stakeholders reveal a communication gap that shapes how parents engage in the school governance process. School board meetings occur regularly, yet parents remain uninformed about the process, how to get involved, or who is on the board. In essence, Latino representation has not narrowed the gap between the governance process and the communities it serves. Without transparency about the board members' goals and efforts, parents struggled to remain engaged in the school governance process. These accounts suggest that Latino representation alone is insufficient to break down the gap if constituents remain uninformed about their representative's work.

II: Limits in Translating Latino Representation into Observable Change

This section examines how stakeholders describe the impact of descriptive representation, emphasizing that there were limited observable changes within the school district. Even when representation increases, institutional changes remain invisible or illegible to stakeholders, limiting their ability to perceive their effects on the school district. Voters evaluate political candidates by the tangible improvements they deliver to their constituents and criticize

when they fail to do so. These same principles apply to board members, who are held responsible for delivering material goods and addressing inequities in the school system. Determining whether school boards deliver institutional change requires local stakeholders to follow school changes or pay close attention to school governance. The election of a Latino candidate to the school board raised expectations among stakeholders that he would deliver observable changes to the school district. However, despite four years having passed since the Latino candidate was elected, stakeholders were unable to identify any changes in the school district.

For some parents, tangible improvements were related to school supplies, such as textbooks, and facility stewardship, highlighting what they considered observable changes. One parent, Ana³⁴, a mid-forty Spanish-speaking Latina mother with one child enrolled in the district, explained that no visible changes had occurred in the district following the election of a Latino board member. She expressed that students are using “the same books” and attending school “in the same classrooms.” Ana equated increased descriptive representation with tangible improvements, but was disappointed that the Latino board member made no material changes. In this way, she evaluated Latino representation through the absence of observable, material changes in the school environment. Her account suggests that when such changes are not visible, representation is perceived to have a limited impact on the everyday experiences of students and families.

While some parents evaluated Latino representation based on whether it led to changes in material goods, educators provided insight into observable changes in the classroom and the broader school environment. However, educators described Latino representation as not resulting in any meaningful change. Jack noted, “So to speak, regarding [Alan], nothing that I'm aware of

³⁴ Pseudonym

specifically.” He emphasized that there were no observable changes in teacher salaries or student discipline following the election of a Latino board member. Similarly, Raul³⁵, a special education Latino teacher with a decade of teaching experience, expressed similar sentiments, stating, “I don't feel like there has been much change.” Like Jack, Raul was unable to identify any observable changes in the school district following the election of a Latino board member, reinforcing the perception that representation had not translated into meaningful institutional change. For educators, these types of changes — those that affect working conditions and institutional policies — served as key indicators of meaningful change within the school district.

Across these accounts, stakeholders demonstrate how descriptive representation did not translate to observable changes in the school district. Descriptive representation in education makes minority groups visible, yet it cannot deliver substantive change. As is demonstrated at FUESD, Latino representation on the school board served as a symbol to Latino families, but it did not translate into substantive change in the school district.

III. Institutional and Political Constraints on Representation

This section examines how stakeholders described institutional barriers as mechanisms that limit policy change in the school district. Even when Latino representation increases, institutional rules and political dynamics within school governance constrain its ability to translate into substantive change. School boards operate under rules and regulations that structure deliberation and maintain order, most notably through majority vote — requiring agreement among a majority of members to implement changes. These institutional rules ensure that no single member can unilaterally impose policies, requiring instead that changes emerge through collaboration, coalition-building, and deliberation among the full board. Without such

³⁵ Pseudonym

safeguards, individual members could pursue narrow or extreme agendas unchecked. While these constraints protect against unilateral action, they also mean that a single Latino board member cannot deliver change alone. Stakeholders expected the election of a Latino candidate to influence local policy and improve school funding to support Latino families. However, institutional constraints revealed the limits of what a single board member could address.

Parents were often unable to identify any policy changes in the school district, illustrating how institutional processes obscure governance outcomes. When asked about policy changes, many parents responded with “I do not know” or “No. I am not aware,” suggesting that board members did not clearly communicate their goals with the broader community. These responses point to a structural gap between school governance processes and parents' understanding of them. As described in the previous section, communication gaps regarding school governance limited parental engagement in the process, preventing parents from evaluating policy changes or measuring their impact. These accounts suggest that even with increased Latino representation on the school board, institutional processes limit the visibility of policy change, constraining how representation is understood.

Unlike parents, who experienced institutional constraints in engaging with school governance, educators interpreted the absence of change as a product of those constraints. One teacher, Clare, linked the lack of policy change to the Latino board member being in the minority when it came to voting on decisions:

The biggest challenge with the school board is [that] their experiences are different than what the actual district needs. So having that representation kind of opens, gives us the voice of saying, "This is what we need." But now it's a matter of convincing the rest. Because one against all the other ones, it's very difficult to convince them. Some might say yes, and then a lot of the times it's shut down. Like, "No, we're not going to do that." And it has to be [the] majority, so then we're dealing with that. Maybe we need to encourage others to fill those [other board] positions.

As a teacher, Clare possessed institutional knowledge of school governance, which allowed her to identify how majoritarian rules limit the translation of political representation into substantive policy change. When she describes, “one against all the other ones,” she depicted the majoritarian rule the Latino board member encountered: his lone ideas against others'. Her account suggests that even with increased Latino representation on the school board, majoritarian rules and institutional decision-making limit the extent to which representation can shape policy outcomes.

Board members provided a range of answers when asked about policy changes in the school district, demonstrating differences in the institutional constraints they considered influencing local governance. Sharon³⁶, a sixty-year-old previous white board member, identified majoritarian rules as the specific structural reason Alan struggled to achieve policy change. She was direct about what representation required to be effective:

Well, I think it's huge [for descriptive representation]. I would like to. But I think [Alan] still needs more support. I mean, it's hard to be a solo, and because of the political demographics in the country right now. There are a lot of issues that are being forced onto school boards that haven't been, banning of books, the whole transgender [issue] and critical race theory? I mean, we could spend a whole conversation on these things.

She went on to explain the precarity of school board elections and the significance of having a majority on the school board. Citing that, at one point, a conservative majority had taken over the board, Sharon emphasized that another Latino board member would provide structural support to governance in the school district. She explained:

And the thing is, they were able to take over our board for a short period of time. They had a 3-to-2 majority. Now, 2 of the 3 of them have already dropped off the board, because they want to make a change, but they don't want to do any work. They don't want to have to read a budget and do all the work that's really necessary to be a School Board member, but we need another Latino on the board.

³⁶ Pseudonym

After serving with conservative board members, Sharon recognized that it was difficult to govern the school district amid the national political rhetoric on cultural issues. In that reference, she emphasized that although Alan was an important figure in advocating for Latino issues, holding only one of the five board seats made it difficult to effect change. She highlighted that adding one more Latino board member would strengthen Latino political power in school governance advocacy. Although Sharon did not explicitly state it, she recognized that if Latinos held more school board seats, they could enact more changes or resist the political issues affecting school boards.

Tyler extended this analysis beyond the boardroom, identifying political polarization as an equally significant constraint. He acknowledged that Alan was well-positioned to address the challenges in the school district, but that the political climate made progress difficult: “I think [Alan] is positioned to do it. It's just the work that needs to be done from the sidelines to help that happen is a little intimidating, I think, for everybody.” For Tyler, the obstacles were not only institutional but deeply communal — rooted in nativist sentiments and political polarization that created a climate of fear around collaboration and change:

I'm aware that there is some nativist isolationist-type thinking in our community. And the polarization that kind of thinking can create is, I think, our biggest challenge, because if our goal and objective is to empower these kids and create good members of society who are compassionate and engaged and capable. Then we've got to. We've got to work on that together, because if one side is pulling one direction and one side's pulling a different direction, we're going to get nowhere, and it's going to tear people apart. I wish that our system were less polarized at this time. And now, polarization is the biggest challenge that we face, and it comes out. And this fear that working together is going to get us in trouble. And so the working together gets very contained.

Tyler's account highlights the difficulty board members face in pursuing equitable policy. They are not only bound by the opportunity to work together but also shaped by the community's local political conditions. Tyler discussed the idea of a more culturally relevant curriculum but

encountered resistance from the community. In Fallbrook, the racialized political environment made it difficult to introduce changes to the school district. His account suggests that board members are subject to the political pressures of the environment; they must balance community and district needs.

Across these accounts, stakeholders show how institutional constraints limit the translation of descriptive representation into substantive change. While parents were often unable to identify why policy changes were limited, board members pointed to constraints operating at multiple levels. In this case, majoritarian rules limited what a single board member could achieve, while local political conditions narrowed the policy-change arena. Both institutional constraints limited the influence of a single board member on school governance and stakeholders' understanding of why change remained limited.

Discussion

Scholars remain divided on the extent to which Latino representation on school boards impacts the educational experience of Latino students. Some studies associate Latino representation on school boards with a greater number of Latinos employed by a school district, emphasizing the role of board members in structuring employment (Fraga et al., 1986; Fraga and Elis, 2009). Other studies associate Latino representation on school boards with greater advocacy for equitable funding and investment in education, highlighting board members' responsibility for allocating school funding (Fischer, 2023; Kogan et al., 2021). While this body of research focuses on the outcomes of representation, far less research investigates how local stakeholders interpret its impact. This chapter shows that institutional dynamics shape not only the possibilities for change, but also how local stakeholders — depending on their proximity to school governance — interpret and recognize the impact of descriptive representation.

In the FUESD, the CVRA mandated a reform to district electoral structures for electing school board members, setting in motion a redistricting process. PrBefore020, the district used at-large elections to elect board members to four-year terms, an electoral system widely shown to dilute minority groups' voting strength and limit their ability to elect preferred candidates (Elmendorf et al., 2016). In Fallbrook, the large Latino population, the use of at-large elections, and the absence of Latino representation on the school board placed the district in violation of the law. To redress the violation, the district needed to transition from at-large to district elections by redistricting its electoral boundaries. Through this mandated process and the mobilization of local political actors, the school board adopted a map that established a majority-Latino district, creating a pathway for Latino voters to elect a Latino candidate.

In 2020, the Latino candidate was elected to the school board by voters in the Latino-majority subdistrict, becoming the first Latino board member in the district's history. Before this election, questions emerged about the priorities of the five white board members, highlighting perceived disconnects between their racial and ethnic background and those of the families they represented. The election of the Latino candidate generated expectations that shared racial and ethnic identity would enable him to articulate and advance Latino community needs within school governance. However, while stakeholders described an increase in descriptive representation, they did not always consider the institutional structures that shape school governance. As a result, increased representation remained constrained by the institutional mechanisms that govern board decision-making, limiting the extent to which it could produce substantive change in the district.

Before turning to the institutional constraints of school governance, it is important to consider how stakeholders described the impact of Latino representation. Stakeholders described

Latino representation as improving language access for Spanish-speaking parents, advancing symbolic recognition of Latino presence in governance, and increasing advocacy for Latino students and families. Through these mechanisms, participants described how the Latino board member fostered greater recognition of Latino families and needs within school governance. In doing so, descriptive representation facilitated more discussion of Latino needs within structured governance, where board members did not regularly address them.

While stakeholders emphasized that the Latino board member fostered greater recognition of Latino families and their needs, institutional barriers limited his ability to translate that recognition into substantive policy changes. Participants emphasized that while the Latino board member provided greater language access, this did not reduce barriers to engaging parents in school governance or make the process more relational. Educators reported no observable changes within the school district, highlighting the challenges of improving school conditions and the work environment. Stakeholders consistently reported that the Latino board member did not implement policy changes, while board members emphasized that majoritarian rules and local political conditions limited the board member's ability to enact change. In essence, while descriptive representation increased on the school board, the Latino board member did not achieve substantive changes in the school district, revealing how institutional barriers constrain the translation of descriptive representation into meaningful reform.

Overall, these findings underscore the institutional barriers that structure school governance and limit the extent of change possible. While increasing descriptive representation is important for political representation, there are also limitations that it can address. Although Latino representation increased on the school board, it did not produce substantive changes in the school district. The Latino board member did create opportunities to foster greater inclusion of

Latino families by expanding language access, symbolic recognition, and advocacy. However, institutional barriers in school governance constrained the extent of change possible. When discussing representation and the impact of school governance, researchers must consider the role of majoritarian rules and the political environment. Hence, descriptive representation can only operate within limited bounds, as institutional barriers to school governance extend beyond who sits on the school board.

While it is important to consider who sits on the school board, it is equally important to understand the institutional mechanisms that they must navigate. Although the Latino board member was limited in his substantive impact, he still created opportunities for Latino families where none had previously existed. These findings suggest that descriptive representation still has benefits in delivering meaningful outcomes. Advancing descriptive representation remains an important strategy for addressing the needs of minority communities, but institutional barriers within governance structures continue to limit the scope of possible change.

Moreover, it is important to consider the gap between stakeholders' institutional knowledge of school governance and the positions they held, which shaped their responses. Parents who are farthest from the school governance structure frame their answers around language and communication, as these are the primary mechanisms they use to engage with board members. Educators who occupy a middle ground within school governance offered insights into how Latino representation impacted the school district and working conditions. School board members who drive the school governance process provided the most detailed accounts of how Latino representation shaped it. These differences suggest that stakeholders' proximity to school governance shapes their interpretations of Latino representation.

This chapter demonstrates that the impact of Latino representation is not uniform across stakeholders but is mediated by institutional structures and shaped by stakeholders' proximity to governance. Parents valued representation for its cultural and linguistic benefits, educators recognized its symbolic importance while remaining less optimistic about substantive, classroom-level change, and board members acknowledged both its advocacy potential and the structural constraints that limited its policy impact. As a result, representation is experienced not only through its outcomes but through how those outcomes are interpreted and recognized by those closest to and farthest from the school governance process. These findings from this chapter contribute to the literature on descriptive and substantive representation (Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967), highlighting the promises and limitations of Latino representation in reshaping school governance toward greater equity and revealing how institutional barriers mediate what representation can achieve. Future research should examine these stakeholders differences more closely and interrogate the relationship between each stakeholder and the structures of representation that shape their experiences.

CHAPTER XII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The central tenet of American democracy is the right to vote (Chui and Chochrane, 2026). Yet evidence shows that this right remains vulnerable, as electoral structures and policy decisions can ultimately suppress citizen participation and disenfranchise voters (Fraga et al., 2023). Although the Voting Rights Act of 1965 protects voters from practices that may limit their fair participation in elections, the law has been slowly weakened over the past decade, as seen in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) and *Louisiana v. Callais* (2026). This has contributed to new waves of electoral redistricting and eroded efforts to establish majority-minority subdistricts, creating conditions under which tactics like at-large elections continue to dilute the voting power of minority voters. As discussed in this dissertation, the practice of at-large elections, designed to reduce electoral corruption and facilitate the election of candidates, can result in voter dilution, especially in politically polarized areas (Davidson & Korbel, 1981; Scarrow, 1999). When these conditions are present, minority voters may be unable to elect their preferred candidate, resulting in political underrepresentation. Despite empirical evidence highlighting voter suppression that may occur under at-large elections, they remain the dominant electoral system (Abott & Magazinnik, 2020).

In California alone, more than three-quarters of state elections are conducted using at-large elections, underscoring the widespread use of this voting system. According to the National Demographics Corporation (2022), as of May 1, 2020, 155 California cities elected their councils by district; the remaining 327 have retained at-large elections. In addition, 282 special districts have transitioned to district elections; however, over 2,667 retain at-large elections. Of the 950 school districts in California, 785 continue to use at-large elections. The gradual transformation of electoral systems in California can be linked to the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of

2001, which recognizes that at-large elections may produce vote dilution and creates a legal framework through which jurisdictions can be challenged to adopt district elections.

The CVRA requires local jurisdictions to follow a prescribed process to comply with the law or face potential lawsuits for voter suppression. However, the law is structured to require local communities to institute it and pursue electoral change, rather than mandating compliance by local jurisdictions. Put differently, the law is passive until acted upon by a local actor. Over the past two decades, CVRA cases have risen across the state as both lawyers and minoritized groups have pursued electoral reforms. Yet what is unclear is how this process unfolds for local communities and the steps they must follow to increase their descriptive representation in governance. This dissertation presents an in-depth analysis to uncover this process in a school district accused of violating the CVRA, illuminating the essential factors and key stakeholders that drove the electoral reform.

This qualitative study of a school district that underwent an electoral change after being found to be in violation of the CVRA shows that the electoral reform process is complex, requiring the engagement of lawyers, political leaders, and community members, to not only initiate the process but also to institutionalize the changes and sustain efforts to implement fair subdistricts. Once subdistricts were formed, stakeholders illuminated that the increase in descriptive representation does not automatically translate to improved social status for Latinos. Instead, increasing descriptive representation in a governance structure is complicated by institutional barriers that prevent substantive change within the school district.

To contextualize the actions of both lawyers and local actors, this study draws on legal mobilization theory (Lehoucq & Taylor, 2020). Legal mobilization conceptualizes law as a political resource that social actors deploy to pursue institutional reform. In the case of the

CVRA, because it places the responsibility for initiating the electoral reform process on external factors, this theory helps illuminate how lawyers and community actors leverage law to initiate reform and bring accountability to the governing board.

This research draws on 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a collection of primary source documents, and archival research, and includes a critical exploration of the mechanisms of legal mobilization, policy changes, and local forces. This empirical work illustrates the electoral changes in the Fallbrook Union Elementary School District (FUESD) that resulted from the CVRA. I examined how the legal framework interacts with local stakeholders to influence their role in driving the reform process. To address these research gaps, my dissertation was guided by the following research question:

1. How did voting rights attorneys and local political actors leverage law to influence redistricting and advance Latino representation on a school board, and how did local stakeholders make sense of increased descriptive representation in local education governance?

To address the overarching research question, the following three research questions guided the analysis, each corresponding to a distinct empirical chapter.

1. What role do voting rights attorneys play in leveraging election law to reform voting structures?
2. What factors enabled local leaders to take advantage of the electoral opening created by a legal challenge to at-large elections to mobilize community support and influence the construction of new electoral structures?
3. How do parents, educators, and school board members make sense of increased Latino representation, and what do they perceive as its possibilities and limitations?

This dissertation argues that the CVRA can advance political representation for Latinos, but its effectiveness depends on how it is implemented rather than on the policy alone. Placing the responsibility on local communities to leverage the policy leads to unequal application of the law, as not all communities are prepared to engage in the process or pursue accountability. To

pursue electoral reform, there must be knowledge of the law and the tools to leverage it — yet only lawyers or those with legal expertise possess them. Furthermore, when reform efforts are pursued by lawyers, not every community can become politically engaged to keep board governance accountable to the process. However, even when reform is achieved, it may not always lead to greater Latino representation or substantive changes within the governance. Yet increasing political representation remains one pathway toward greater deliberation in governance, which can greatly impact minority groups.

This study illuminates the transformation process of a jurisdiction after it violates the CVRA, with special attention to the process and the social actors involved. As a legal policy, the CVRA provides a framework for challenging at-large elections. But it is not a linear process from policy implementation to electoral reform; it entails a combination of lawyers and local actors to institute the law. The design of the CVRA requires a catalyst to activate the law, in that it requires lawyers or other legal actors to understand the law and use its tools to pursue reform efforts. Lawyers must understand vote dilution, methodological knowledge on voting rules, and access to voter data. They must understand how at-large elections contribute to vote dilution and provide sufficient evidence to pursue reform.

As demonstrated in chapter 4, most communities do not know that CVRA exists or have knowledge on how the law operates. Lawyers fill that void by leveraging their legal expertise. Lawyers bring credibility to the process by emphasizing that if a jurisdiction fails to align itself with the law, it will face a potential lawsuit. In this sense, lawyers drive the reform process and require that jurisdiction align with the law. The complexity of the CVRA requires that lawyers or others with relevant knowledge apply the law.

But while lawyers serve as catalysts for the reform process, local actors and communities must also be prepared to act. Local stakeholders bring accountability to the process by ensuring that governing boards comply with the law and implement equitable district maps. Throughout the reform process, governing boards remain directly responsible for overseeing redistricting. In other words, although the law is intended to redress inequities in political representation, it ultimately places responsibility for implementing reform in the hands of the very institution where the violation occurred.

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, board members may choose to implement maps that do not advance fair subdistricts or advance minority representation. Local political leaders recognized that changes to the electoral system provided an opportunity to advance political representation and address the long-standing underrepresentation of Latinos in the community. In this case, community leaders drew on the racialized exclusion of Latinos and recognition of unequal political structures as a mechanism to become engaged in the redistricting process. This movement by the group members demonstrates that communities must be ready to take action in the redistricting process. If communities are not ready or demonstrate interest in engaging in the process, then the process may devolve into just an administrative change rather than a fundamental change to the electoral system. In Fallbrook, the political leaders were able to quickly mobilize because they had a preexisting organizing infrastructure, and other community members recognized the significance of electoral changes. Yet not every community will have these mechanism in place which can lead to unequal application of the law.

While reforming electoral structures provides an opportunity for minority groups to pursue political representation, advancing descriptive representation does not always equate with substantive changes in the school district. School districts are governance structures bound by

rules that contribute to greater efficiency and provide structures for meetings. One of the institutional barriers present in school governance is majoritarian rules. Under these rules, to advance, change, or deliberate on an issue, a majority of stakeholders must agree to debate or advance the discussion. This means that one member alone cannot make drastic changes to school policies and provide sustainability in the school's governance. However, this also limits how much change a board member can make in the school setting.

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, although Latino representation increased on the school board, he was still numerically in the minority, creating barriers for enacting substantive changes. Most changes were associated with language access and symbolism rather than substantive changes. In addition, board members are situated within the political context of the neighborhood. If the school district is in a politically diverse area, e.g., liberal vs conservative political ideology, enacting change may be difficult as there are competing visions over the education system. Although this was directly mentioned by board members, discussions over the national political landscape demonstrated that they were keenly aware of these impacts on the school governance.

The analysis of FUESD reveals that when a jurisdiction reforms its electoral structures under the CVRA, significant social and political work is needed to advance a fair process. As the CVRA becomes a prominent means of institutionalizing electoral reform within electoral structures, lawyers and local actors must ensure they follow the process closely. The process is not linear; it encompasses multiple aspects of reform. As demonstrated in this dissertation, if local actors had not followed the process, the goal of advancing fair subdistricts would not have been achieved.

Although more than 20 years have passed since the CVRA's implementation, the law has been slow to reform electoral systems across the state as demonstrated by the persistent of at-large elections. This study illuminates the process for reforming the electoral structures, but the process here may not be generalizable towards other jurisdictions. But it does demonstrate how one community accomplished electoral reform, the tools and mechanisms they leveraged, and the impact of this reform process. By understanding the tools and mechanisms, other communities can learn from the process, understand redistricting and subdistrict creation, hold board members accountable, and advance representation.

This study contributes to the dynamics of electoral reform and to understanding how policy can be leveraged to advance it. These dynamics were demonstrated by legal advocates and local actors as they leveraged the CVRA to initiate the reform process and the policy outlines to bring accountability to the governing board. While the reform process may lead to electoral reform and the advancement of political representation, it may not always yield substantive changes in the school district. The case of FUESD demonstrates how policy can be used to reform electoral opportunity for minoritized groups. While political representation may have increased, other dynamics at play prevented substantive change within the school district. In this case, the factors of majoritarian rules and political conditions limited the extent of substantive changes.

Moving forward, the CVRA can be used as a tool to reform electoral structures and advance greater political representation for minority groups, but more guidance is needed for communities. The CVRA places responsibility on local communities to hold board members accountable, but it also places final approval with the governing board. While adding an oversight or mediator to the process can strengthen it, it adds another layer of bureaucracy to an

already complicated process. The 135-day timeline this process compresses is the time communities must act. If communities are not ready to undergo this process, the reform process may not advance representation and result in unequal electoral structures, reinforcing the political marginalization of minority groups.

References:

- Abott, C., & Magazinnik, A. (2020). At-Large Elections and Minority Representation in Local Government. *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(3), 717–733.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12512>
- Anglum, J. C., & Manion, A. (2026). The Policy Preferences of Marginal Voters: Complicating Political Polarization in Education Policy. *American Politics Research*, 54(1), 102–119.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X251367381>
- Avila, J., Lee, E., & Ao, T. (2007). Voting Rights in California: 1982-2006. *S. CAL. REV. L. & SOC. JUST.*, 17, 131. <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/faculty/550>
- Barreto, M. A., & Ramírez, R. (2004). Minority Participation and the California Recall: Latino, Black, and Asian Voting Trends, 1990–2003. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 37(1), 11–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504003531>
- Barreto, M. A., Villarreal, M., & Woods, N. D. (2005). Metropolitan Latino Political Behavior: Voter Turnout and Candidate Preference in Los Angeles. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 27(1), 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2166.2005.00225.x>
- Boutcher, S. A., & Stobaugh, J. E. (2013). Law and Social Movements. In *The Wiley- Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (pp. 1–5). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm120.pub2>
- Brennan Center for Justice. (2024). State Voting Laws Roundup: 2024 in Review.
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-2024-review>

- Bristol, T. J., & Martin-Fernandez, J. (2019). The Added Value of Latinx and Black Teachers for Latinx and Black Students: Implications for Policy. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 6(2), 147–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219862573>
- Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (2007). The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory. SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607941>
- California School Boards Association. (2022). *CSBA fast facts and figures* . <https://www.csba.org/-/media/CSBA/Files/About/AboutCSBA/CSBA-FastFacts-2022-WEB.ashx>
- Carmona, G. N., & Barragan-Monge, P. (2022). *From Disparity to Parity: Latino representation in appointed positions within California's gubernatorial cabinet and state boards and commissions*.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory : a practical guide through qualitative analysis / Kathy Charmaz. Sage Publications.
<https://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0657/2005928035-d.html>
- Charmaz, K. (2025). *Constructing grounded theory* / Kathy Charmaz. (Third edition.). Sage.
- Chui, K., & Cochrane, E. (2026, April 30). How the Voting Rights Act bolstered black representation in the house. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/04/30/us/politics/voting-rights-act-black-population-congress.html>
- Collingwood, L., & Long, S. (2021). Can States Promote Minority Representation? Assessing the Effects of the California Voting Rights Act. *Urban Affairs Review*, 57(3), 731–762.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419896854>

Coreas, J., Coreas, B., Fujimoto, E., Ochoa, E., Ochoa, G., Oropeza Fujimoto, M., & Orozco, S.

(2023). ¡Juntos Podemos! Community Organizing, the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) and the Struggle for School Transformation in a Southern California School District. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 22(2), 804–817.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2020.1828088>

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Qualitative inquiry & research design : choosing among five approaches* / John W. Creswell. (Third edition.). SAGE Publications.

Davidson, C., & Korbel, G. (1981). At-Large Elections and Minority-Group Representation: A Re-Examination of Historical and Contemporary Evidence. *The Journal of Politics*, 43(4), 982–1005. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2130184>

Deng, B., Hill, L., & Lafortune, J. (2025). *California's Changing School Demographics*.

<https://www.ppic.org/blog/californias-changing-school-demographics/>

Dotinga, R. (2020, November 17). How a white supremacist won a primary. *Voice of San Diego*

Elmendorf, C. S., Quinn, K. M., & Abrajano, M. A. (2016). Racially Polarized Voting. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 83(2), 587–692.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43824025>

Epp, C. R. (2009). *Making rights real : activists, bureaucrats, and the creation of the legalistic state* / Charles R. Epp. University of Chicago Press.

Fagone, J., & Lempres, D. (2023, December 23). A powerful california law is reshaping how you vote. lawyers are making millions off it. *San Francisco Chronicle* .

Fischer, B. (2023). No Spending without Representation: School Boards and the Racial Gap in Education Finance. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 15(2), 198–235.

<https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20200475>

- Fraga, L. R. (2022). The Need to Enhance the Voting Rights Act: Practice-Based Coverage. *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, 36(2), 659–688.
<https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/ndlep36&i=553>
- Fraga, L. R., & Elis, R. (2009). Interests and Representation: Ethnic Advocacy on California School Boards. *Teachers College Record*, 111(3), 659–682.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911100304>
- Fraga, L. R., Meier, K. J., & England, R. E. (1986). Hispanic Americans and Educational Policy: Limits to Equal Access. *The Journal of Politics*, 48(4), 850–876.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2131003>
- Fuller, B., Kim, Y., Galindo, C., Bathia, S., Bridges, M., Duncan, G. J., & García Valdivia, I. (2019). Worsening School Segregation for Latino Children? *Educational Researcher*, 48(7), 407–420. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19860814>
- Galanter, M. (1983). The radiating effects of courts. In K. D. Boyum & L. Mather (Eds.), *Empirical theories of courts* (pp. 117–142). Longman.
- Gandara, P., & Contreras, F. (2010). *The Latino education crisis: The consequences of failed social policies*. Harvard University Press.
- García Bedolla, L. (2007). Intersections of Inequality: Understanding Marginalization and Privilege in the Post-Civil Rights Era. *Politics & Gender*, 3(2), 232–248.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X07000050>
- Gay, C. (2001). *The Effect of Minority Districts and Minority Representation on Political Participation in California*. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-effect-of-minority-districts-and-minority-representation-on-political-participation-in-california/>

- Glionna, J. M. (1990, October 24). Metzger remains mystery to fallbrook neighbors : Racist: \$12-million judgment on him and followers again puts his hometown in unwanted limelight. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-10-24-mn-2729-story.html>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory : strategies for qualitative research* / Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. Aldine Publishing.
- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis : emergence vs forcing*. Sociology Press.
- Gomez, J. A., & Salceda, A. (2025). *Securing Fair Representation in California*. ACLU of Southern California. <https://www.aclusocal.org/publications/securing-fair-representation-california/>
- Grissom, J. A., Kern, E. C., & Rodriguez, L. A. (2015). The “Representative Bureaucracy” in Education: Educator Workforce Diversity, Policy Outputs, and Outcomes for Disadvantaged Students. *Educational Researcher*, 44(3), 185–192. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15580102>
- Hajnal, Z., Lajevardi, N., & Nielson, L. (2017). Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes. *The Journal of Politics*, 79(2), 363–379. <https://doi.org/10.1086/688343>
- Hayes, M., & Hibbing, M. V. (2017). The Symbolic Benefits of Descriptive and Substantive Representation. *Political Behavior*, 39(1), 31–50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9345-9>
- Herrera, L. (2004). *Plyler v. Doe*. *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues*, 14, 479. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/contli14&id=509&div=69&collection=journals>

Hero R. E. (1998). *Faces of inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hero, R. E., & Tolbert, C. J. (1995). Latinos and Substantive Representation in the U.S. House of Representatives: Direct, Indirect, or Nonexistent? *American Journal of Political Science*, 39(3), 640–652. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111648>

Houston, D. M., & Hartney, M. T. (2025). *Who's on board? school boards and political representation in an age of conflict*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
<https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/whos-board-school-boards-and-political-representation-age-conflict>

Huntsberry, W. (2022, January 18). Fallbrook is nearly a majority-Latino town. until recently it had no Latino representatives. Voice of San Diego.
<https://voiceofsandiego.org/2022/01/18/fallbrook-is-nearly-a-majority-latino-town-until-recently-it-had-no-latino-representatives/>

Jenkins, J. C. (1983). Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9, 527–553. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2946077>

Johnson, H., McGhee, E., Subramaniam, C., & Hsieh, V. (2023). *Race and diversity in the Golden State*. Race and Diversity in the Golden State.
<https://www.ppic.org/publication/race-and-diversity-in-the-golden-state/>

Johnson, H., McGhee, E., Subramaniam, C., & Hsieh, V. (2023). *What's Behind California's Recent Population Decline—And Why It Matters*. Public Policy Institute of California.
<https://www.ppic.org/publication/whats-behind-californias-recent-population-decline-and-why-it-matters/>

- Jones-Correa, M., Al-Faham, H., & Cortez, D. (2018). Political (Mis)behavior: Attention and Lacunae in the Study of Latino Politics. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 44(Volume 44, 2018), 213–235. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112411>
- King, D. (2000). *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1mvw85v>
- Kogan, V., Lavertu, S., & Peskowitz, Z. (2021). How Does Minority Political Representation Affect School District Administration and Student Outcomes? *American Journal of Political Science*, n/a(n/a). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12587>
- Leal, D. L., Martinez-Ebers, V., & Meier, K. J. (2004). The Politics of Latino Education: The Biases of At-Large Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 66(4), 1224–1244. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3816.2004.00297.x>
- Lehoucq, E., & Taylor, W. K. (2020). Conceptualizing Legal Mobilization: How Should We Understand the Deployment of Legal Strategies? *Law & Social Inquiry*, 45(1), 166–193. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2019.59>
- Mansbridge, J. (1999). Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent “Yes.” *The Journal of Politics*, 61(3), 628–657. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647821>
- Massey, D. S., & Pren, K. A. (2012). Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Policy: Explaining the Post-1965 Surge from Latin America. *Population and Development Review*, 38(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2012.00470.x>
- Marschall, M. J., & Rutherford, A. (2016). Voting Rights for Whom? Examining the Effects of the Voting Rights Act on Latino Political Incorporation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(3), 590–606. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12182>

- McBrayer, M. (2020). Translating Descriptive Representation into Substantive Representation: The Role of Electoral Institutions in Urban School Districts in Texas. *Urban Affairs Review*, 56(6), 1687–1714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419844028>
- McCann, M. W. (1994). *Rights at Work: Pay Equity Reform and the Politics of Legal Mobilization*. University of Chicago Press.
- McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(6), 1212–1241. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2777934>
- Meier, J., & Stewart, J., Jr. (1991). *The politics of Hispanic education: Un paso pa'lante y dos pa'tras*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Meier, K. J., & Melton, E. K. (2012). Latino Heterogeneity and the Politics of Education: The Role of Context. *Social Science Quarterly*, 93(3), 732–749. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42864095>
- Meier, K. J., Wrinkle, R. D., & Polinard, J. L. (1999). Representative Bureaucracy and Distributional Equity: Addressing the Hard Question. *The Journal of Politics*, 61(4), 1025–1039. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647552>
- Molina Jr, A. L., & Meier, K. J. (2018). *Demographic dreams, institutional realities: Election design and Latino representation in American education*. 6(1), 77–94.
- Montoya, C. M., Bejarano, C., Brown, N. E., & Gershon, S. A. (2022). The Intersectional Dynamics of Descriptive Representation. *Politics & Gender*, 18(2), 483–512. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000744>
- Mulji, A. (2024). What is an at-large election?. Campaign Legal Center. <https://campaignlegal.org/update/what-large-election>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools.

Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cge>.

National Demographics Corporation. (2022). *Voting rights act & demographic analysis*. NDC

Research -. <https://www.ndcresearch.com/voting-rights-act-demographic-analysis/>

National School Board Association. (2018). Today's School Boards & Their Priorities for

Tomorrow. https://cdn-files.nsba.org/s3fs-public/reports/K12_National_Survey.pdf

Pantoja, A. D., & Segura, G. M. (2003). Does Ethnicity Matter? Descriptive Representation in

Legislatures and Political Alienation Among Latinos. *Social Science Quarterly*, 84(2),

441–460. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42955880>

Paris, M. (2006). The Politics of Rights: Then and Now. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 31(4), 999–1034.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2006.00043.x>

Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. University of California Press.

Polinard, J. L., Wrinkle, R. D., & Longoria, T. (1990). Education and Governance:

Representational Links To Second Generation Discrimination. *Western Political*

Quarterly, 43(3), 631–646. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106591299004300312>

Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies : the story of the immigrant second generation* /

Alejandro Portes, Rubén G. Rumbaut. University of California Press.

<http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/bios/ucal052/00061993.html>

Portes, A., Fernández-Kelly, P., & Haller, W. (2005). Segmented assimilation on the ground:

The new second generation in early adulthood. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(6), 1000–

1040. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870500224117>

- Reed, S. (2021). Beyond the White Picket Fence:. California Education Lab.
https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/suburban_schools_v6.pdf
- Reyes, B. I., & Neiman, M. (2011). System of Elections, Latino Representation, and School Policy in Central California Schools. In D. L. Leal & S. J. Trejo (Eds.), *Latinos and the Economy: Integration and Impact in Schools, Labor Markets, and Beyond* (pp. 37–60). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-6682-7_3
- Richomme, O. (2020). "Fair" Minority Representation and the California Voting Rights Act. *National Political Science Review*, 20(2), 55–75. <https://hal.science/hal-03878337>
- Rivera-Batiz, F. L. (2008). Educational Inequality and the Latino Population of the United States. Campaign for Educational Equity, Teachers College, Columbia University.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED524001>
- Ross, A. D., Rouse, S. M., & Bratton, K. A. (2010). Latino Representation and Education: Pathways to Latino Student Performance. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 10(1), 69–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27867134>
- Samuels, C. A. (2020). *Why School Board Diversity Matters*. Education Week.
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-school-board-diversity-matters/2020/11>
- Scheingold, S. A. (1974). *The politics of rights : lawyers, public policy, and political change / Stuart A. Scheingold*. Yale University Press.
- Schhneider, B., Martinez, S., & Ownes, A. (2006). Barriers to Educational Opportunities for Hispanics in the United States. In *Hispanics and the Future of America*. National Academies Press (US). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK19909/>
- Singer, A. (2004). *The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways*. 36.

Southern Poverty Law Center. (2025). Tom Metzger.

<https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/tom-metzger/>

Smith, K. H. (2005). The Jurisprudential Impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*. *North Dakota Law Review*, 81(1), 115–144.

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/nordak81&i=127>

Stokke, K., & Selboe, E. (2009). Symbolic representation as political practice. In O. Törnquist, N. Webster, & K. Stokke (Eds.), *Rethinking popular representation* (pp. 59–78). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230102095_4

Sugarman, S. D., & Widess, E. G. (1974). Equal Protection for Non-English-Speaking School Children: *Lau v. Nichols*. *California Law Review*, 62, 157.

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/calr62&id=175&div=12&collection=journals>

Superville, D. R. (2023). *A quest to give minority voters a bigger voice on school boards*.

Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/a-quest-to-give-minority-voters-a-bigger-voice-on-school-boards/2017/12>

Taylor, P., Gonzalez-Barrera, A., Passel, J. S., & Lopez, M. H. (2012). *An Awakened Giant: The Hispanic Electorate is Likely to Double by 2030*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2012/11/14/an-awakened-giant-the-hispanic-electorate-is-likely-to-double-by-2030/>

Trounstine, J., & Valdini, M. E. (2008). The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(3), 554–569. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25193833>

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates. *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Data Profiles, Table DP05*. Retrieved December 8, 2025, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP1Y2024.DP05?q=california>.

Wittman, D. (2024). District versus at-large voting: Why district voting results in worse policy for minorities. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 81, 102502.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2024.102502>

Appendices

Appendix A

The Search for Educational Opportunity: Racial and Ethnic Change in the American Suburbs

Interview Protocol

Basic Demographic Questionnaire

Name:

Gender: A: Male B: Female C: Non-Binary D: Prefer not to say

Age: A. 18-25 years old, B. 25 - 35 years old, C. 35 - 45 years old, D. 45+ , E. Prefer not to say

Race: A: White B: Black or African American, C: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Ethnicity:

What is your current employment status? A. Employed Full-Time, B. Employed Part-Time, C. Seeking opportunities, D. Retired, E. Prefer not to say

What is your annual household income? A. Less than \$25,000, B. \$25,000 - \$50,000, C. \$50,000 - \$100,000, D. \$100,000 - \$200,000, E. More than \$200,000, F. Prefer not to say

Where is your home located? A. Fallbrook, B. Bonsall, C. De Luz, D. Rainbow, E. Other _____

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed: A. Some High School, B. High School, C. Bachelor's Degree, D. Master's Degree, E. Ph.D. or higher, F. Trade School, G. Prefer not to say

How many children do you have?

How many are enrolled in the Fallbrook School System?

If yes, which school(s)?

How would you describe your political view? A. Very Liberal, B. Slightly Liberal, C. Slightly Conservative, D. Very Conservative, E. Prefer not to say

School administrator/board member questions:

1. What motivated you to pursue a position on the school board?
 - a. (Super) What motivated you to pursue a position in Fallbrook?
2. What district (1-5) do you represent?
3. When were you first elected to the school board?
- a. (Super) When did you get hired to lead the school district?
4. How would you describe the racial and social characteristics of your constituents?
5. Where is your home located?
6. How long have you lived in your current home?
7. What are some of the key objectives you aim to accomplish during your tenure?
8. Can you describe some of your school board position responsibilities?
- a. (Super) Can you describe some of the responsibilities of your superintendent position?
9. What are some of the challenges you have encountered in your position?
10. What are some of the most rewarding aspects of your position?
11. What have been some of the significant challenges the school board has faced during your tenure?
12. Who are the key figures and groups involved in shaping the conversation about demographic change?
13. How does your own racial identity influence these discussions?
14. How does student racial identity play a part in these discussions?
15. How does racial identity impact the broader local community?
16. In what ways do systemic issues related to race and ethnicity impact the school district, and what kinds of policies might address these challenges?
17. How does the school board maintain communication with the local community?
18. In what ways do you engage with the local community?
19. Who tends to be most active in attending school board meetings?
20. What concerns and issues do parents commonly raise during public comment or personal communication?
21. How has the growing presence of minority families in Fallbrook and its surrounding areas impacted the dynamics within the school system?
22. How has the school board responded to demographic change?
23. How has the community been involved in discussions around demographic shifts, policy modifications, or curriculum changes?
24. When policy and curriculum adjustments take place, how does the community typically react or respond?
25. How have specific school district policies changed since the election of two Latinos to the school board?
26. In what ways have organizational operations within the school district been impacted by the election of two Latinos to the school board?
27. Have there been any notable shifts in the representation or inclusion of Latino perspectives in school board discussions and decision-making processes?
28. How do stakeholders perceive the influence of Latino school board members on policy decisions and organizational practices within the school district?

29. Can you provide examples of initiatives or programs that have been introduced or modified since the election of two Latinos to the school board, specifically aimed at addressing the needs of Latino students or the broader student population?
30. How have the priorities and goals of the school board regarding student support evolved over the past ten years?
31. What initiatives or programs have been implemented by the school board to support student well-being, academic success, and overall development over time?
32. How do stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators, perceive the effectiveness of the school board's efforts to support students, both currently and in comparison, to previous years?
33. Have there been any shifts in the allocation of resources or budget priorities within the school district to better support student needs over time?
34. Can you describe any collaborations or partnerships that the school board has established with community organizations, service providers, or other stakeholders to enhance student support services over time?

Local Political Organizers

1. Where is your home located and how long have you lived in your home?
2. What factors influenced your decision to reside in your current location?
3. Do you have any children enrolled in the Fallbrook school system, and if so, what led you to choose this district for their education?
4. How would you describe the experience of your children in the Fallbrook school system?
5. When did you first become involved in local politics, and what motivated your initial engagement?
6. Can you describe some of the local political issues you've observed and your involvement in addressing them?
7. How do you feel the school district meets your expectations as a community member and parent?
8. Can you recall one of the most challenging issues the school board has faced, and how do you assess their handling of it?
9. What has been the most effective response by the school board to a difficult issue, and how do you believe they achieved it?
10. How do you personally engage with the local community on matters concerning the school district?
11. Do you host meetings or events to organize the community around school district issues, and if so, how often?
12. Who typically participates in these community meetings, and what are the main topics of discussion?
13. How actively do you participate in school board elections and engage with the community during these times?
14. Do school board members attend your organizing meetings to interact with the community?
15. In your organizing meetings, do conversations about race and ethnicity arise, and if so, what topics are commonly discussed?
16. Have you observed any policy or curriculum changes in response to demographic shifts, and what has been their impact on the school district?

17. What changes would you like to see in school district policies or curriculum to better address the needs of the community?
18. How have specific school district policies evolved or been amended since the election of two Latinos to the school board?
19. In what ways have the day-to-day operations within the school district been influenced or altered by the presence of two Latino school board members?
20. Have you noticed any significant changes in the representation or inclusion of Latino perspectives in school board discussions and decision-making processes following the election?
21. How do various stakeholders perceive the impact of Latino school board members on policy decisions and organizational practices within the school district?
22. Can you provide examples of initiatives or programs that have been introduced or adapted since the election of two Latinos to the school board, particularly focusing on meeting the needs of Latino students or the broader student population?
23. How have the priorities and objectives of the school board concerning student support changed over the past decade?
24. What specific initiatives or programs has the school board implemented to foster student well-being, academic success, and overall development over time?
25. How do you perceive the effectiveness of the school board's efforts to support students, both currently and in comparison, to previous years?
26. Have there been any changes in the allocation of resources or budgetary priorities within the school district to enhance support for student needs over time?
27. Could you describe any collaborations or partnerships established by the school board with community organizations, service providers, or other stakeholders aimed at improving student support over time?

Parents of students enrolled in School District

1. Where is your home located and how long have you lived in your home?
2. What factors influenced your decision to reside in your current location?
3. How many children do you have enrolled in the Fallbrook school system, and what led you to choose this district for their education?
4. Can you share your children's experiences within the school system?
5. How do you feel the school district is meeting your expectations as a parent?
6. What has been the most challenging aspect of having your children enrolled in the school district?
7. Conversely, what has been the most impactful or positive experience of having your children enrolled in the school district?
8. To what extent are you involved in the school community, such as attending school board meetings, participating in PTA meetings, or engaging with local community organizations?
9. Have you been actively involved in local school board elections, and do you know who your local school board member is?
10. How do you engage with your local school board member, if at all?
11. How do you perceive demographic changes within the community, and how do you feel about it?

12. Do you observe demographic changes reflected in student enrollment within the school district?
13. How effective do you believe the school district is at communicating with parents?
14. How have you noticed the increase of Latino families in Fallbrook and its surrounding areas affecting the school system?
15. Have you observed any policy or curriculum changes in response to demographic shifts, and what has been their impact on the school district?
16. What changes would you like to see in school district policies or curricula to better meet the needs of the community?
17. How have you noticed specific school district policies evolving since the election of two Latinos to the school board?
18. In what ways do you perceive organizational operations within the school district being influenced by the election of two Latinos to the school board?
19. Have you observed any noticeable changes in the representation or consideration of Latino perspectives in school board discussions and decision-making processes?
20. How do you and other parents perceive the impact of Latino school board members on policy decisions and organizational practices within the school district?
21. Can you share any examples of initiatives or programs introduced or adapted since the election of two Latinos to the school board, particularly aimed at meeting the needs of Latino students or the broader student population?
22. How have you observed the priorities and objectives of the school board concerning student support evolving over the past decade?
23. Can you provide insight into the initiatives or programs implemented by the school board to support student well-being, academic success, and overall development over time?
24. How do you perceive the effectiveness of the school board's efforts to support students, both presently and in comparison, to previous years?
25. Have you noticed any shifts in the allocation of resources or budget priorities within the school district to better support student needs over time?
26. Can you describe any collaborations or partnerships that the school board has forged with community organizations, service providers, or other stakeholders to enhance student support services over time?

Appendix B

Civic Challenger Question

1. Can you tell me about who you are?
2. How has your personal background influenced your decision to work on voting rights?
3. What motivated you to get involved with the CA Voting Rights Act (VRA)?
4. How did you first become engaged in this field?
5. What kind of work do you do, and what does it involve on a day-to-day basis?
6. Who are your main collaborators or partners in this work?
7. What specific contributions do you make to this work?
8. How do you perceive the impact of your work? How do minority groups perceive your role?
9. What role do you think minority communities have in this work, and how do they contribute to it?
10. How do you balance your legal strategy with community engagement efforts?
11. How do you foster trust and collaboration between your team and the communities you serve?
12. What strategies do you use to identify districts that are potentially violating the CA VRA?
13. Could you describe your process or approach when it comes to filing a lawsuit?
14. What are your ultimate goals in pursuing this work?
15. What has been the most significant challenge you've faced in your efforts?
16. How do you navigate setbacks or discouragement in this line of work?
17. In your experience, does engaging in this work lead to greater political mobilization for the communities you serve?
18. What are some challenges that are unique to working with minority communities in voting rights?
19. How do you think current political trends are impacting voting rights advocacy?
20. What do you believe are the most common misconceptions people have about the CA Voting Rights Act?
21. What are some key successes you've experienced while working on VRA cases?
22. Can you describe a particular case or moment that had a profound impact on you?
23. How do you measure the success of your work in voting rights advocacy?
24. How do you think changes in voting laws are impacting marginalized groups differently?
25. Are there any innovations or tools that are helping improve voting rights work today?
26. How important is coalition-building in your work, and how do you approach building those coalitions?
27. How do you handle pushback or resistance from those who oppose your work?
28. Who inspires you in your work, and why?
29. How do you work to ensure that your initiatives are sustainable and continue to make a difference even after legal interventions?
30. What changes have you seen in how voting rights issues are perceived over the years?
31. How do you envision the future of voting rights advocacy in the next decade?

Participants Demographics

Appendix C

Participant	Age Range	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Stakeholder Role	Employment Status
Alan	40–49	Latino	Male	Community Leader/ School Board Member	Part-time
Alyse	50–59	White	Female	High School Teacher	Full-time
Amanda	50–59	White	Female	High School Teacher	Full-time
Amery	50–59	Latino	Female	Parent/High School	Full-time
Ana	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Full-time
Billy	60–69	White	Male	Community Leader	Retired
Celestine	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Full-time
Chantelle	30–39	Latino	Female	Educator	Full-time
Clare	40–49	Latino	Female	Elementary School Teacher	Full-time
Clarette	50–59	Latino	Female	Parent	Full-time
Darian	70+	White	Male	Community Leader	Retired
Eduardo	20–29	Latino	Male	Parent	Full-time
Elise	50–59	White	Female	Former School Administrator/High School	Full-time
Isabelle	40–49	White	Female	Parent	Not employed
Jack	30–39	Latino	Male	Elementary School Teacher	Full-time
Janella	40–49	White	Female	Parent	Not employed
Kathleen	30–39	Latino	Female	Lawyer	Full-time
Katie	60–69	White	Female	Community Leader	Retired
Keanna	50–59	Latino	Female	School Administrator/High School	Full-time
Leslie	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Full-time
Lexy	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Full-time
Mateo	40–49	Latino	Male	Parent	Full-time
Mike	30–39	Latino	Male	Parent	Full-time
Nataly	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Part-time
Noreen	50–59	White	Female	School Board Member/High School	Full-time
Patrick	30–39	White	Male	Lawyer	Full-time
Raelynn	40–49	Latino	Female	High School Teacher	Full-time
Rajni	70+	White	Female	School Board Member	Retired

Participant	Age Range	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Stakeholder Role	Employment Status
Raul	30–39	Latino	Male	Teacher	Full-time
Rebekah	20–29	Latino	Female	Educator/ High School	Full-time
Richard	40–49	Latino	Male	Community Leader	Full-time
Ron	40–49	Latino	Male	Parent	Full-time
Rosa	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Not disclosed
Rosalia	60–69	Latino	Female	Community Leader	Retired
Ruben	30–39	Latino	Male	Parent	Not disclosed
Sharon	60–69	White	Female	Former School Board Member	Full-time
Stephanie	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Full-time
Tania	40–49	White	Female	District Administrator	Full-time
Teresa	40–49	Latino	Female	Parent	Not disclosed
Tyler	40–49	White	Male	School Board Member	Full-time

Recruitment Flyer

Appendix D



Parents Needed!

I AM A RESEARCHER FROM THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AT UC BERKELEY, AND I AM LOOKING FOR PARENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN THE FALLBROOK SCHOOL SYSTEM

Conducted under the direction of
Lisa Garcia Bedolla Ph.D.

WHO DO I NEED?

- Parents who are 18 years or older
- Have or have had children who attended the Fallbrook school system (K-12) between the years 2014 - 2024

PARTICIPATION INCLUDES

- 1- Demographic Survey
- 60 - minute in person audio recorded Interview

FOR MORE INFORMATION

KEVIN QUINTERO
KQUINTERO@BERKELEY.EDU
<https://tinyurl.com/bsestudy>

Berkeley School of Education

IRB: 2024-06-17542



Se necesitan padres!

SOY INVESTIGADOR DE LA ESCUELA DE EDUCACIÓN DE UC BERKELEY Y ESTOY BUSCANDO PADRES PARA PARTICIPAR EN UN ESTUDIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN SOBRE OPORTUNIDADES EDUCATIVAS Y CAMBIO DEMOGRÁFICO EN EL SISTEMA ESCOLAR DE FALLBROOK

Realizado bajo la dirección de
Lisa Garcia Bedolla Ph.D.

¿A QUIÉN NECESITO?

- Padres mayores de 18 años
- Tiene o ha tenido hijos que asistieron al sistema escolar de Fallbrook (K-12) entre los años 2014 - 2024

PARTICIPACIÓN INCLUYE

- 1- Encuesta Demográfica
- Entrevista grabada en audio de 60 minutos en persona

PARA MÁS INFORMACIÓN

KEVIN QUINTERO
KQUINTERO@BERKELEY.EDU
tinyurl.com/bse-studies

Berkeley School of Education

IRB: 2024-06-17542