

Probing the Demographic Depth of Villaraigosa's Mayoral Victory: Shifting Weights and Preferences

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By all accounts, Antonio Villaraigosa's 17-point landslide victory over Jim Hahn was sweeping. He dominated almost every demographic.

Which group of voters made the biggest difference? Comparing the 2001 and 2005 elections, we can assess exactly where the balance of support shifted most and which groups were most important to Villaraigosa's victory. A few points are obvious: Latinos were the strongest supporters (84% backed Villaraigosa over Hahn), and African Americans yielded the largest swing in support (from 20% in 2001 to 48% in 2005).

The purpose of this short research memo is to probe a little deeper into the changing demographic basis of support. The overall voting outcome is a product of two factors: percentage preferences for Villaraigosa among voters in each demographic group and the weight that each group comprises in the total (its share of all voters, or voting strength). Some groups showed a very high preference but had a smaller weight; others a moderate preference but a larger weight. Between 2001 and 2005 both dimensions shifted. The fact that the 2005 election is a rematch of the same two candidates allows us to compare exit poll data from the two elections in a way that yields some insights that may prove useful.

Table 1 summarizes exit poll data from the Los Angeles Times, reported May 19, 2005 for both the 2005 and 2001 elections. The data are percentages showing each group's weight in the election (its share of the total number of voters) and the percent of the group that preferred Villaraigosa (termed "preference" here). These exit poll data have a slight inaccuracy due to their survey nature and the lack of precise decimal fractions. Nonetheless, they recreate the actual voting outcome very closely. The final election outcome in 2005 was Villaraigosa 58.7%, Hahn 41.3%. The data in Table 1 can be used to form a weighted average that simulates the total voting outcome, by multiplying the weights and preferences of all the respective groups, and then summing. In this manner we arrive at an estimated outcome of 58.5% for Villaraigosa. This is so close to the actual that in calculations that follow, for internal consistency, we treat this figure as if it were the actual outcome.

Importance of the Latino Vote

Much has been made about the ascendancy of the Latino vote and its importance for Villaraigosa's support. In this election, all groups were important, but so large was the margin of victory that none may have been crucial. We can test this proposition by hypothetically varying the inputs to the weighted average calculation. For example, what would have happened if each group retained the same level of support for Villaraigosa in 2005 that it previously showed in 2001? Or, what if there were no shift in turnout or voting strength, or, in other words, what would have happened if all groups retained the same share of the total voters in 2005 as they had comprised in 2001?

We begin with one particular calculation. What if Latinos in 2005 exhibited the same level of support for Villaraigosa as did white voters the same year, i.e., 50% support instead of 84% support? How much lower would have been Villaraigosa's margin of victory? The estimated outcome in this scenario is that the total vote would have been 50.0% for Villaraigosa, too close to determine whether he would have actually won. Thus, the extra high support among Latinos was in fact crucial to Villaraigosa's victory.¹

Viewed another way, the Latino vote in favor of Villaraigosa was so high that it protected him from sub-50% votes by other groups. The most important group based on voting weight are the white voters, comprising half of all the turnout. This group split evenly between Villaraigosa and Hahn, and so was not a factor in the final result. But what if the white vote had fallen below its actual level of 50% support? How low could support among the large number of white voters have been depressed and yet still yield a victory for Villaraigosa? The answer is that if white voter support fell as low as 33%, the total outcome of the election would have remained in Villaraigosa's favor.

Evaluating the Shift in Support Between 2001 and 2005

Voting strength shifted between the 2001 and 2005 elections, as shown in the changes in weight of each group in Table 1. Latinos increased their share of the voters in the election from 22% to 25%. Most other groups fell slightly. What impact did this shift have on the election? Results for this and other changes are summarized in Table 2. We find that had all the demographic groups voted in the same relative numbers in 2005 as in 2001, i.e., retained the same weight, the final outcome in favor of Villaraigosa would have been reduced marginally to 57.1%, a reduction of -1.4 percentage points. Thus the gradual increase in numbers of Latino voters, accompanied by declines in others, had a small effect favoring Villaraigosa.

Changes in voting preference were far more significant. Had all the voting groups expressed the same support for Villaraigosa in 2005 as they did in 2001, but maintained

¹ Latinos expressed a preference that was 34 percentage points higher than whites. Because Latinos were 25% of all the voters, they carried 25% weight in the election and, accordingly, their 34 extra points of support multiplied by 0.25 would have moved the total voting outcome by 8.5 percentage points.

their actual 2005 voting weight, the final outcome would have been 48.2% in favor of Villaraigosa, a clear defeat. But how much difference did each individual group's shift in support make for the outcome? If whites had retained their 2001 level of preference for Villaraigosa, the total vote outcome would have been lowered by 4.5 points from the actual (Table 2). If African Americans had retained their 2001 level of preference (which was 28 points lower than in 2005), the total vote outcome would have been lowered by 4.2 points. Even though African American voters are many fewer in number than whites, their enormous shift in support for Villaraigosa produced nearly as large an impact on the net change in his total support. Continuing with the other groups, if Latinos had retained their same 2001 level of preference (almost identical), the total outcome would have been reduced only 0.5 points. And, if Asians and all other groups not otherwise specified had retained their previous level of support, the total vote outcome would have been reduced by 1.2 points.

Given Villaraigosa's margin of victory in excess of 50% (8.5 percentage points in the exit poll data), no single group's preference change was necessary for his victory. However, if whites and blacks had both retained their 2001 level of support, that would have driven the total vote below 50% support for Villaraigosa. Each of these two groups also supplied about one-third of the total gain in Villaraigosa's increased support between 2001 and 2005 (36.9% and 34.4%, respectively, of the total gain of 12.2 percentage points—see Table 2). The total shift in different groups' relative weight in the election also netted another 11.1% of Villaraigosa's increased support in 2005 relative to 2001. The rise in Latino voting preference for Villaraigosa was a smaller contributor, contributing only 4.1% of the total gain. The rising preference among Asians and others added another 9.4% of the total gain. (Taken together, the contributions to Villaraigosa's gain from 2001 to 2005 cited in this paragraph sum to 96%. A residual of 4.0% additional contribution is an interaction product of the changing voting weights and changing voting preferences and cannot be directly allocated to any one group.)

In sum, the 2005 election victory for Villaraigosa was broad-based. It was greatly aided by white and African American voters combined, but Latinos held strategic importance, not simply for their growing share of the voters but mainly because of the relative unanimity of their voting preference.

Table 1. Exit Poll Data for Mayoral Elections of 2001 and 2005

	Weight 2005	Weight 2001	Change in Weight	Preference 2005	Preference 2001	Change in Preference
White	50	52	-2	50	41	9
Black	15	17	-2	48	20	28
Latino	25	22	3	84	82	2
Asian	5	6	-1	44	35	9
Other	5	3	2	62	48	14
Total	100	100				

Note: Weight is each group's share of the total turnout; Preference is the share of voters in each group that voted for Antonio Villaraigosa

Source: *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2005, page A19

Table 2. Contribution of Specific Voter Changes to the 2005 Election Outcome

	2005 Result	Increase from 2001 to 2005	Portion of the Increase***	Share of the Overall Increase
Overall Support for Villaraigosa *	58.5	12.2	----	100.0
Counterfactual factors**				
if all 2001 weights had been retained	57.1		1.4	11.1
if black 2001 support had been retained	54.3		4.2	34.4
if white 2001 support had been retained	54.0		4.5	36.9
if Latino 2001 support had been retained	58.0		0.5	4.1
if Asian/other 2001 support had been retained	57.4		1.2	9.4
Residual factor	58.0		0.4	4.0

Notes:

* Measured based on the exit poll data, slightly different from actual vote

** Counterfactual factors are hypothetical assumptions used to measure what would have happened in the absence of the actual change in the factor

*** Difference between the actual 2005 result and that produced by each counterfactual