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Panel 3: Coalition Building: A Question of Common Problems, Goals & Agenda

Comments by Mike Hernández†

First of all, let me start by letting you know that I do not know why I am here, because I do not think politicians make very good coalition builders. I think organizers do, and I do have a history of being an organizer. I have a history of working with people, and on the Los Angeles City Council, for some reason, people look at me as a “Human Relations” Councilman.

There are a few rules of coalition building I have learned from others that I want to share today because I have found them successful in a lot of the efforts I have been working with. The first I learned from reading Jesse Jackson’s book. There he writes about the first rule of coalition building as identifying your self interest. Many times people claim to identify a community self interest or to represent a particular self interest. As a community, it is important that our representatives represent those self interests. I know that the African American Community has a longer history of identifying their self interests, and because of that, they tend to be very defensive, similar to the Jewish community. We as Latinos in Los Angeles are just beginning to develop that maturity, and so we must first ask ourselves, “why is it that we need to build this coalition? Maybe we don’t need it in the first place.”

Another concept I would like to share today concerning coalition building is the art of communication; stay in contact. The only way you can develop trust, is by fulfilling the commitments you make. Too often, a lack of communication affects the trust in the building of coalitions. This is a very important process.

I like to describe a third concept in coalition building by using a story from The Speaker of the House, “Beyond Politics” by Tip O’Neil. Mr. O’Neil writes that he learned politics from his father, a baseball umpire, on the little league baseball field. In the story, a kid hits a fair base hit over the first baseman’s head, decides that it could be a double and tries to stretch it into a double. It’s a close call, and the umpire runs out to second base, and asks, “how many people thought he was out?” Nine

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hands went up. "How many people thought he was safe?" Nine hands went up. "How many people thought he was safe at first base?" Eighteen hands went up. So the umpire sent the runner back to first base. So many times in building coalitions our aims are to try to stretch the coalition to do things that it cannot do. This can destroy the whole issue. Whenever we are talking in these terms we must deal with some safer bets.

I want to describe a little about the Los Angeles landscape, and I think some of the reasons why I was asked to be here. The demographics of Los Angeles, are such that 40 percent of the city's population has a Spanish surname. Twelve percent of the city's population are Asian Americans and 15 percent are African Americans. That means that the city of Los Angeles is 67 percent minority—people of color. This means that six out of 15 on the City Council have to represent the interests of 63 percent of the city. And, nine people on the City Council represent the interests of approximately 40 percent of the city. I feel that one of my first tasks on the Council is to take away the discussion of people of color, black vs. brown, white vs. brown, and start talking about have vs. have-nots. That is where we have things in common and we can talk about the issues and our resources. I am known as one who always talks about the have vs. the have-nots, and common ground. I do not talk about African Americans, Asians, Latinos. I do not want to divide the city.

In understanding our power as a group we must understand that at least one third of the Latino population is not eligible to vote because of age. Sixty-four percent of the Los Angeles Unified School District has a Spanish surname. Another one third of the Latino population is not eligible to vote because of a concept called citizenship; 1992's poll tax. I have had arguments on the City Council where I have talked about the definition of a citizen. My mother in law came to this country in 1947 and tried to become a citizen three times in the mid 1950's and early 1960's. She owns property, pays taxes, her son was a sergeant in the Marines and she cannot vote. On the other hand, someone comes from Kansas, that other Central America, and can vote after 62 days.

I want to redefine what constitutes immigrant status in California. As far as I am concerned, it is anybody who comes from outside of our borders. Not just the borders to the south. The reason I mention that to you is because as Latinos, even though we might be the majority of the population, the realities are that age and citizenship are affecting our power base in terms of the ability to vote and make a difference. What other group shares that reality? The Asian community. The district I represent, which is 68 percent Latino, also happens to be 20 percent Asian, and a strong coalition between the Asians and the Latinos has to be formed.
The issues that we have to deal with are not necessarily issues of poverty, but they are issues of bilingualism, biculturalism, and immigrant status. We talk a lot about Los Angeles being the anchor to the free trade agreement and making sure this claim has substance. We are concerned with how the Latino community can protect this interest. But, we also talk about Los Angeles being the heart of the Pacific Rim, and how it is that the Asian community can protect that. But, when you look at the contracts being issued by the city of Los Angeles, both of these communities are not allowed to participate. In terms of Minority Business Enterprise contracts, bond issues and so forth, there is a real neglect. I am developing a strong coalition because I recognize that Asian Americans are forced to live in certain communities, and fight for a small increase in development opportunities in a manner no different than in Latino communities.

We are developing a strong relationship between the Latino and Asian communities in my district. Councilmember Michael Woo spends a lot of time in Chinatown, which is located in my district. Mike Woo supported my opponent in the run off election—an Asian woman named Sharon Low—and many believed I was going to hold a grudge. However, I spend a lot of time in Chinatown in order to understand what the Latino and Asian communities have in common. I respect the fact that Mike Woo is a leader in our city, and recognize that the two of us together can accomplish more than each of us could as individuals. Mike Woo and I do a lot of work in Chinatown and I found that I gained a lot of respect from the community and community leaders by the fact that I was not fighting Mike Woo. I would not say to him “stay out of my turf.” I accepted the reality up front that I could not take that away from him and it was important that I support him. This is all part of coalition building. Together, these two communities make up 52 percent of the population of the city of Los Angeles. However, when we talk about voting strength, we probably make up about 18 to 20 percent of the city’s votes.

Now, how are we building our coalition with African Americans? It is not just Latinos, it tends to be Mike Woo or myself meeting with Rita Walters, Mark Ridley Thomas, and Nate Holden. The mayor tends to work with us also and so part of coalition building is discovering how to establish strengths. I have found it easier to develop coalitions with the Asian community than with the African American community. When working with either community, however, I do not have the pride that says I am different from you guys. I have the pride that says I have a lot to share with you, and, I am hoping you can share with me.

What are some of the issues we are dealing with in the city of Los Angeles? There is no question in my mind that the city of Los Angeles
has de facto segregation. I feel this is the result of years of fair housing laws, years of funding cycles where grant money was denied to areas of recreation, and high unemployment. I have census tracks in my district with 6,000 people living in them. This breaks down to 150 persons per acre when the city average is 10 to 12 per acre. I have six elementary schools in my district that have over 2,000 kids attending them, with no junior high to send them to. I have an eight block radius where 38 homicides occurred last year. My district has the highest crime rate, suffers from a lack of educational opportunities, and has the highest immigration population, not just from Latin America, but also from the Pacific Rim. In addition, my district has few services for seniors, and my colleagues, whether they be African American or Latino likely compete in all of these categories. This fact represents an opportunity for us to form coalitions and get a bigger piece of the pie.

The district I represent was not created by the City Council, but it was the courts that gave it a voice in 1987 as the result of the reapportionment process. You must understand that in giving it that voice, I have had to deal with hard questions, because it was a district that would have been neglected. What has happened since 1987 is that my district has about 2,000 people more than is necessary to constitute a Council District in Los Angeles. Richard Alatorre, who is another Hispanic on the Los Angeles City Council, has about 900 people more than he should in his district. Rita Walters, who is African American, has about 13,000 people more than she should in her district. Joan Milke-Flores, who is not Latina, has about 900 people more than she should in her district. Mark Ridley Thomas, who is African American, has 6,000 people less than he should in his district. Nate Holden, who is African American, has 9,000 people more than he should in his district. And, Mike Woo, who is Asian, has about 2,000 people more than he should in his district. This is the coalition of six Councilmembers I was talking about previously.

Now, let us look at the rest of the city. Ruth Galanter, who represents Venice and part of the Westside, is short 21,000 people. Marvin Braude, who represents the Westside including the Santa Monica mountains and Westwood, is short 38,000 people. Zev Yaroslavsky, who represents the areas in between them is short about 19,000 people. When you get north of Councilmember Yaroslavsky’s district, you have Joy Picus, who is short 6,000 people. Hal Bernson’s district, in the valley, is short 16,000 people. Now, that leaves 3 seats, two of which are gerrymandered the most. Councilmember John Ferraro has plus 13,000 people in his district. Councilmember Joel Wachs, who has the areas in his district where only four people per acre live, is plus 22,000 people. The
last district is Councilmember Bernardi's seat in the San Fernando Valley. He is plus 40,000 people in his district.

Every district that is in excess of the number of people who should be in a district, is in excess because of Latinos, not because of African Americans or Asians. When we look at the demographics in the city of Los Angeles, we find that Latinos are where the majorities are. These districts with excess persons have pockets of crime, lack of housing, lack of schools, and transportation needs, no different than in my district. That is why I talk about de facto segregation in the city of Los Angeles.

The reapportionment process is extremely important as is the coalition process when you talk about the quality of life of people, and when you talk about the opportunities for people. This is what I am basing my politics on. It does not matter what color we are or where we come from. What matters is the quality of life for us as Angelinos and where we are headed. What is going on in the city right now is going to destroy the city. For example, I like to talk to developers who are building 50 story skyscrapers and ask them the question: "Who is going to work in them?" There is a 15 percent vacancy rate now, and millions of dollars are being invested in these buildings. This is occurring at a time when children are not getting an education, so money will be lost. This is how we got them in our development agreements to build housing and set aside space for schools. We must invest in people and develop people. One of our problems is that in the inner city, it makes more sense to some people to develop space to park cars, where more money can be made than to develop space for children to play with each other and learn from each other. This is part of the reason our kids are killing each other.

These are some of the realities facing the City of Los Angeles, but the Council this year is having some interesting debates. We are discussing issues like the street vendors in the City of Los Angeles. We wrap ourselves around the American dream and the importance of letting people earn an honest dollar, as opposed to a dishonest dollar. Initially, some of the reluctance in allowing street vending was from the African American community. However, they realized they had street vendors also, and they were not Latino.

The City Council has also dealt with the issue of check cashing institutions. The State allows banks to charge one to three percent when cashing a person's check. I was listening to some of my colleagues argue, "what's three percent?" One of my colleagues actually said, "I go to the banks, there's been a few that I've gone to in minority communities and people don't trust banks, they don't put their money there, they keep it in their mattresses." So the banks lose money, how can you blame the banks? We heard people say, "what's the difference between one and three percent on a check of 400 dollars?" Listening to the debate got me
mad. I had to stand up and say, I wish I could represent the Santa Monica mountains, as I was pointing that out to one of my colleagues. Or I wish I could represent smoke free environments in restaurants, and I pointed that out to one of my colleagues. Or you know, the ability to protect the rights of animals, and I was pointing that out to one of my colleagues. I kept on breaking it down, each one of their issues. I then stated that I worry about the person who has to take three buses from MacArthur Park to General Hospital with a child who is sick. And I have to worry about the parents who try to figure out if they can put enough coins together to buy a loaf of bread. It does not seem right that the difference between one and three percent shouldn't be important, when these persons are the only ones who have to pay those fees.

These are the kinds of things we are discussing on the Council right now. And whether it be the check cashing fee, or the selection of a new police chief, in dealing with those bottom line issues and the quality of life, the coalition must stand together. I do not want to sound pretentious in discussing coalition building with you and tell you that I am a "pro." What I want to do is let you know the realities that we are dealing with now. If we know where we are going as a coalition, it makes things easier.

I am also known as the Councilmember who to this date, and I have been in office eight months, has not held a press conference. Quite frankly, I do not care who gets the credit for the work we do, but I do want to communicate with my constituents, so I write a lot. We put items in the paper every week, dealing with the people and the issues important to our district, and how we are trying to develop people. We deal with issues and I review editorials that say "everybody likes Mike." The reality is that we do not talk to the media. As a result, the media wonders, "what's Mike thinking?" and they always want to get my opinion. In this respect, the media has been treating me very well. I point that out because one of the mistakes coalitions make is trusting the media. Coalitions believe that the media is going to work with them. What coalitions do not understand is that the media's job is to sell newspapers. I tend to stay away from the media and it is amazing that I am the top story on various news programs. I do not trust the media, but I do use them.

I wanted to share that with you because I think ego tends to destroy coalitions more than anything else. When I deal with my colleagues, I sometimes have to point out that as far as I am concerned, they have an ego trip going, and I do not have time for that. I might get mad, I might do certain things, but I do not walk out and I always smile when we get back and are working together again. Thank you very much.
My sister recently explained to me that a pessimist is an optimist with all the facts. With that in mind, I continue to be an optimist in assessing the potential for meaningful coalitions among those groups who continue to be denied the opportunity to participate fully in the political process and to elect candidates of their choice. In reviewing the research relevant to such coalitions, the good news is that all the facts are not in, so we should all approach the issue as optimists.

The facts we do have seem to lay some good bricks in the foundation of coalition-building. For example, we have a 3-judge federal court in California turning its back on claims of disenfranchisement with an outrageous assertion of "abstention" and a California Supreme Court Justice so enraptured in ignorance, racism and Abigail Thernstroms that he could proclaim that the Voting Rights Act "was unnecessary for California"; that "[w]e need not be reminded of California's traditional acceptance in the political arena... of all persons regardless of ethnicity". Justice Stanley Mosk claims this acceptance is evident in the voting process and in candidacies and election to high office.

Justice Mosk says the record of minority candidate success in statewide, legislative and local elections shows that "California... has demonstrated maturity in matters of ethnicity in elections without the need for racial quotas, preferences or special entitlements." This is the record of minority candidate success to which he was referring: in the last 20 years, California has elected two African-Americans and one Asian woman to statewide office. Currently, of the 120 members of the statewide legislature, only seven are Hispanic, none are Asian and ten are African-American. Of the 45 members of Congress, only three are Hispanic, two are Asian, while four are African-American. Of the 2,861 elected representatives in California (city council, county boards, state officials, including state assemblypersons and
senators, U.S. Congresspersons and Senators), only 216.5 (or 7.6%) are Hispanic, although 25.8% of the state population is Hispanic; only 46.5 (or 1.6%) of officeholders are Asians, although Asians are 9.6% of the population, and, only 87 (or 3%) of officeholders are African-American, although 7.4% of the population is African-American.

Referring to the report of the special masters accompanying their redistricting proposals, Justice Mosk was clearly agitated by Voting Rights Act protections: "The masters referred over and over to the federal Voting Rights Act. . . . That legislative enactment was obviously aimed at states, mainly in the South, that sought directly or indirectly to disenfranchise minorities or to curtail their potential political influence. It is obvious that such an enactment was unnecessary for California, and in some respects it may be counterproductive."

With an opposition like this, how can disenfranchised minority groups fail to find common ground for coalition-building?

I was asked to discuss what potential there is for finding common groups among politically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. But I do not quite agree with that phrasing. As a voting rights lawyer with fourteen years experience representing minority citizens disenfranchised by discriminatory election systems and voting practices, the reality of my experience frames the issue in terms of having a representative democracy. For those who are denied the opportunity to participate fully in the political process — whether that denial is effected by gerrymandered districts, at-large election systems, political party policies and rules, or campaign finance inequities — the reality is that for us there is no representation. There is no democracy. Political scientists may review statistics and consider Hispanics to be "underrepresented" in the state legislature; but the reality is also that for a large group of Hispanics there is no representation. We are talking about disenfranchisement even though it is not accomplished by such crude instruments as poll taxes, literacy tests, and physical intimidation to prevent registration and voting. We should not use nice phrases like "underrepresentation" when discussing the violation of fundamental rights.

So part of the good news is that we have people like Stanley Mosk to let us know how much we have in common — whether Asian, Hispanic, or African-American.

There is more good news from Texas. A massive study of minority voting rights in Texas from 1865-1990 is about to be completed. It reminds us that the first successful case claiming at-large vote dilution was brought by Blacks and Mexican-Americans who joined together to attack at-large countywide legislative districts asserting vote dilution. The

6. Id. 1 Cal. 4th at 735, 4 Cal. Rptr. 2d at 449, 823 P.2d at 615.
three-judge federal court agreed, mandating single-member legislative districts for Dallas and Bexar counties. That decision was unanimously affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court and is known to us as *White v. Regester*. 7

The good news is that today in Texas, a study of 257 districts showed that minority coalitions are electing minority candidates. In Texas, Blacks and Hispanics often reside in contiguous or overlapping neighborhoods, numerous political districts contain significant numbers of both groups, although not a majority of either. The study found that when districts are plurality-Black or plurality-Hispanic, and when, in addition, about a fifth of the district's population consists of the other minority, the prospects of minority candidates are about as good as, if not better than, in districts where one or the other ethnic group is in the majority. This appears to be true whether Blacks or Hispanics constitute the plurality.

There is also a bit of good news from California. Though not ultimately successful in challenging the return to a discriminatory at-large election system, Blacks and Hispanics in the city of Stockton formed a strong coalition to change to a district election system in 1971 and joined together again in 1988 to maintain that system.

Bruce E. Cain and Byran Jackson provided good news at a voting rights conference in 1990. They were studying perceptions that Black respondents in Los Angeles have of other racial and ethnic groups and of alternative means for building coalitions. Cain and Jackson felt that the study results showed that at least with respect to the Black community, the prospects for coalition formation with other racial and ethnic groups are good (although not inevitable).

On the not-so-good news side, Cain and Jackson also found strong and consistent evidence that older Blacks are more inclined than younger ones to view other racial and ethnic groups favorably.

In 1990, Cain and Jackson warned that aspects of recent trends in redistricting may ruin prospects for coalition-building. Since we have just come through the first round of litigation concerning state-wide redistricting, we have an opportunity to reconsider that warning. They noted several aspects of redistricting that could obstruct coalition-building among minority groups:

1) Recent court rulings indicate that it will be hard if not impossible for plaintiffs to win a case based on the dilution of "minority votes" as opposed to the dilution of the votes of a single racial or ethnic group. It

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will have the effect of forcing disadvantaged minorities to "go it alone" when it comes to seeking legal redress for historic under-representation.

2) Defendants in Voting Rights Act Section 2 cases have taken the position that ethnic categories such as "Hispanic" are not truly cohesive political entities (Gingles\(^8\) criterion). The same will no doubt be alleged if Asian-American groups bring Voting Rights Act claims in the Nineties. This could prove to be an incentive for more intra-group cooperation; however, this incentive to form coalitions will also be offset by the need for Hispanic voters to prefer Hispanic candidates over Asian, Black, and Anglo candidates, or for Asians to always prefer one of their own to a candidate from another community. Even if many or some Anglo voters are racially polarized in elections involving a candidate from a given minority group, the Gingles criteria require that the group itself be cohesive. The incentive is for cross-nationality coalition-building, but not for cross-racial or cross-ethnic coalition-building.

3) Legal actions require demonstration of racially polarized voting by Anglo voters. The danger of alleging racial polarization is that one can alienate the white voters who have been good coalition partners in proving the existence of others who "are truly prejudiced". The court should resist simple characterizations and deal with the more complex electoral landscape by allowing Voting Rights Act remedies in some areas of a county or city while acknowledging that there might not be a problem in other areas of the same city and county.

I found this last "aspect" the most fascinating. First, having reviewed numerous studies showing racially polarized voting in California jurisdictions that look much the same as racially polarized voting in the South, I have never seen evidence of the "good white folk" who are somehow to be distinguished from the "truly prejudiced". Perhaps Bruce had white Democrats in mind. Second, why would Anglos who support minority candidates be alienated by proof that a group of other Anglos vote as a bloc usually to defeat the minority's candidate of choice? Somebody explain this to me.

I strongly endorse another thought presented by Cain and Jackson after noting that coalitional prospects are affected by the unwillingness of public and reform groups (the "good white folk" at Common Cause and the League of Women Voters, I guess) to think of alternative mechanisms to enhance minority representation in this state. For example, voters in Los Angeles have on several occasions resisted the idea of expanding the Los Angeles City Council and Board of Supervisors. The easiest way to ensure greater racial and ethnic representation and to head off what may be an unseemly and angry competition between minority

groups in this state for representation at various levels would be to make the pie bigger by adding seats.

We should examine how the 1990 statewide redistricting has fared in terms of minority coalition-building. I was peripherally involved in the California redistricting effort, so I do not have an insider's scoop on inter-group negotiations around line-drawing. From the pleadings, however, it is obvious that everyone did not join hands and 'tiptoe through the tulips'. Furthermore, the pleadings really tell us nothing about the damage done to relationships between the democratic party and its traditional minority group constituencies.

We can see that there were conflicts among Hispanics, Asians, and Blacks. Problems arose from the tension between creation of a Thornburg Hispanic district at the expense of an Asian "influence" district. Asians in the Bay Area and in Los Angeles all complained about the failure to link Asian populations, but the masters claimed that considerations affecting Blacks and Hispanics in Oakland, San Francisco, San Jose, and within two areas of Los Angeles necessitated the lines.

We also saw geographic criteria prevail, as Cain and Jackson warned. District proposals that would have a narrow corridor joining two minority populations were rejected. Better to have disenfranchise-ment than a funny-looking district.

Finally, it is impossible to leave a discussion about coalition-building without attempting to learn something from past experiences with political coalitions. Organized white women actively sought to form "coalitions" around redistricting with racial and ethnic minority groups here in California. I recall attending a conference in 1990 organized around such an agenda. (It was a memorible conference because the Filipino Caucus' first order of business was self-designation as Hispanic).

In order to form coalitions with minority groups, white feminists must reject the racist legacy of the early suffrage leaders. In 1890, the two suffrage factions, which had split over the 15th Amendment and over loyalty to the Republican Party in 1869, reunited under the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Under the guiding hand of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, NAWSA adopted a strategy of "expediency". The aim of this strategy was to prove that the enfranchisement of white women would further, rather than impede, the power of a white ruling class that was fearful of Black and immigrant domination. Some manifestations of this policy were quite crude. For example, in 1894, Susan B. Anthony asked Frederick Douglass not to attend the NAWSA Convention in Atlanta, claiming that his attendance would be an embarrassment for him and for the southern suffragists. NAWSA organized a huge suffrage march in 1913; for the sake of "expediency" the march was segregated with Black wo-
men consigned to walk in the rear. During the 1980 redistricting of the Virginia legislature, our "allies" Common Cause and the League of Women Voters supported plans which diluted minority voting strength.

Here in California, these same two "allies" Common Cause and the League of Women Voters have never promoted a redistricting reform in which the enhancement of minority representation was an important and explicit goal.

A noted voting rights scholar recently commented, "the bottom line in vote dilution cases... is still whether there is significant racism that prevent minorities from having equal political access. Experts and lawyers needed to continue hammering away at the basic fact of enduring white racism." That is the political expediency that should form the foundation for coalitions among California's racial and ethnic minority groups. It is that racism, manifested in the political arena, that silences the voice of our communities in decisions concerning the distribution of resources and the establishment of local, state and national policy, and the loss of human resources needed by society to address present and future challenges.
There is only one goal and one agenda in the area of voting rights, and specifically in redistricting: to gain political empowerment for a particular community. Everyone who seeks to do this has the same set of problems. Coalition building, in the realpolitik world of politicians and elections, is aimed almost exclusively at getting someone or some group elected. While there are many examples of coalition building around issues of social policy or legislative agendas, these coalitions, more often than not, collapse before the pressures of individual and group efforts to wrest power. I say this not because I believe it is in the best interests of Latinos, or because it is good for social progress, or for good government, but because in my experience this is what is real. To blind ourselves to the reality would be a mistake.

As we all recognize, the fight over redistricting is a fight for political power. Latinos want this power because we want to be able to control or influence the flow of resources, both jobs and money, that are allocated by government, and because we want to affect public policy. It is this very goal, political empowerment, that makes coalitions difficult, if not impossible, to maintain in this setting because other groups are seeking the same goal for themselves. Political power is something that those who have it do not want to give up, and those who do not have it, but are striving for it, do not want to share with others. Everyone wants to become empowered to the fullest extent possible.

The concept of a coalition in this fight for political power is further undermined when you consider who the primary players in this fight are: politicians. Everyone knows that politicians are driven by one thing, their desire to get themselves elected or re-elected. Even when there are good faith efforts to build coalitions either within the Latino community, or between the Latino community and other groups, these coalitions are often torn apart by the personal political desires of politicians.

We at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. (PRLDEF) have seen just how this works in practice. PRLDEF has been involved in redistricting fights throughout the Northeast. We submitted proposed city, state and federal legislative districts in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Our goal in each of these efforts has been to draw districts in which Latinos have a substantial majority of the voting age population, and where that could not be ac-

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accomplished, to cluster Latinos in large enough numbers so that they could exercise great influence. As could be expected, we have often been in conflict with others with differing political agendas.

Census figures indicate that the Latino population grew by more than 40 percent during the last decade. We grew at three times the rate of African-Americans, and six times the rate of whites. Our growth has made many uneasy. There is a feeling in some quarters that we may become empowered to a level somewhat commensurate with our numbers in the general population, before other groups do, that are attempting to accomplish the same.

In the redistricting of the New York City Council, we came into conflict with the African-American community over which group would constitute the majority within several districts. We also came into conflict with some Latino elected officials because when they proposed the lines for their districts, too often they insisted on packing them with Latinos to such an extent that Latino power in neighboring districts was diluted.

We did act in coalition with the African-American communities in Philadelphia and Buffalo. But in both of those instances Latinos did not constitute a large enough population to control districts and thus we could act in coalition because we posed no threat to African-Americans in districts that they sought to control. In Newark, New Jersey on the other hand, African-American elected officials, in concert with Italian-American elected officials acted to dilute Latino voting power by dispersing the Latino community in the redistricting process.

Coalition building in the redistricting context is a political expedient to power. Where the districting can be accomplished without threatening the quest for political power of the other members of the coalition, a coalition is attainable; where this cannot be done, conflict is certain to ensue. Perhaps an even clearer example is what occurred in the selection of a candidate to run against New York City's Mayor Edward Koch in 1985. Mayor Koch was considered to be a divisive mayor who many thought governed in a manner that was contrary to the best interests of African-Americans and Latinos. A city wide coalition of Latinos and African-Americans met over a period of time to choose a candidate to run against him in the Democratic party primary. It was well known that the coalition was going to choose Herman Badillo, a former borough president and former congressman, and a Puerto Rican. African-Americans from Manhattan (one of New York's five boroughs or counties), rather than support a Latino for a position that they believed should go to an African-American, broke from the coalition and supported an African-American state assemblyman and party political leader; someone who had very little chance of winning.
Frankly, we are no different from white ethnic groups who fight over political turf. Depending upon where you live, you may see the Irish going against the Italians, or the Jews against the non-Jews, or the Polish against WASPs, etc.

There is room and need for coalitions. But coalitions are possible where one group is not a threat to the other, or where one group is so dominant that another has little choice but to work with it. I believe this principle holds true not only between Latinos and other racial and ethnic groups, but within the Latino community. In New York City and throughout the Northeast, Puerto Ricans are the largest Latino group. Moreover, because we have been in that part of the country longer and are American citizens by birth, we are the most powerful Latino group there. Nevertheless, PRLDEF sees its role as supporting and facilitating the political empowerment of the Dominican community, and the South and Central American communities. In the redistricting fights in New York City, where these groups have shown very rapid growth, we have endeavored to create a Dominican district, as well as a district for Latinos from South and Central America, both for municipal and state legislative positions. There has been some resistance to these efforts from individuals within the Puerto Rican community who were concerned with losing their power bases. As these other Latino communities continue to grow and gain power, I foresee the day when there will be a real power struggle for control over the right to represent the Latino community.

I say all this not to dampen anyone's ardor or attempts at coalition building. I think it is effective in certain settings and under the right circumstances. But I think it is naive to think that voting rights and political redistricting is a fertile ground for the grand rainbow coalition. I advocate building coalitions where possible, but recognizing that there are going to be political fights and that we should not be embittered by them. We should concentrate more on building coalitions around issues of social policy where the possibilities of disheartening and enervating infighting is less, and the potential for effectiveness is greater.