



BLACK, WHITE, AND BROWN ALL OVER

Villaraigosa's deep roots in the African-American community have forged a new coalition in mayoral p

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

When Oreatha Hensley walked precincts for mayoral candidate Antonio Villaraigosa in 2001, she could barely engage her African-American neighbors in conversation about the candidate. James Hahn had already won instant credit as the son of revered County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, remembered by older voters as the man who always delivered for the black community.

Four years later, Hensley is walking for Villaraigosa again, but this go-round is different. "People are willing to listen this time," she says. They also tell Hensley, an African-American and a South L.A. resident for 35 years, what's on their minds. "'These Mexicans' - that's the word people use - 'take care of their own,'" she paraphrases.

The plain-spoken Hensley uses a blunt Socratic method to move the discussion. "I say, 'You think it's okay not to give 'this Mexican' a chance, even though Jim Hahn hasn't lived up to his promises to us? That maybe he'll do better next time?'" She tells them about Villaraigosa's long-term relationship with the African-American community, starting with his co-founding, as a 15-year-old, the Black Student Union at Cathedral High School. "They say, 'Let me think about this a little bit more.'"

The mayor's race may be a snooze to lots of people - a 30 percent turnout is expected. But Hensley's front-porch chats as she goes door-to-door lay bare an underlying drama: the blistering racial subtexts of the contest. In addition to the undercurrents that Hensley confronts in her community, there is the white anxiety about a Latino in such a prominent position of leadership. Hahn successfully exploited racial/ethnic fears in

the 2001 mayor's contest with a last-minute attack ad that featured a grainy, darkened, distorted photo of Villaraigosa above a smoking crack pipe, playing into stereotypes about Latinos and drug use.

This time, Villaraigosa may have more of an advantage in the African-American community, now that Hahn's links there may be shattered over perceived neglect and, most dramatically, his firing of former police chief Bernard Parks. But Villaraigosa supporters suggest the reasons run deeper, pointing to relationships forged in the black community while out on the political barricades, fighting for common issues and values.

"There's a group of people in this city who are activists who have a long history of working across racial lines," says Assemblywoman Karen Bass, an African-American, who met Villaraigosa when they were activists barely in their 20s. During the '70s and '80s, they both coordinated work against police abuse and organized marches - Bass on the South side, Villaraigosa in the East. In 1991, Bass founded the thriving South L.A.-based Community Coalition, made up almost entirely of African-Americans and Latinos.

Villaraigosa's labor background gets a lot of attention, but less-noticed is entry into labor activism as president of the Association of Government Employees, when he worked in the Los Angeles office of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), founded to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Villaraigosa was uncertain about his bid for president, since a majority of his colleagues were African-American, recalls Antonio Rodriguez, an attorney and long-time friend. But Rodriguez says that Villaraigosa's mother, then working for the Equal Employment office of CalTrans, reassured him: "Hey, if you work fairly and represent everybody, you'll get elected." He won the election.

The mid-'80s saw Villaraigosa participating in what was known as the Black-Brown Roundtable with, among others, Mark Ridley-Thomas, now a state assemblyman but then director of the L.A. chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Villaraigosa was an SCLC board member.

Two weeks out from the May 17 election, Villaraigosa enjoys a wide lead in the polls, but winning could still depend on getting that story out among the African-American electorate, which is split evenly between the two candidates, with 20 percent undecided, according to a recent poll by the African-American Voter Registration and Education Project. [An L.A. Times poll puts it at 52/32 percent in favor of Villaraigosa].

A poll by the Public Policy Institute of California shows the majority of white and African-American respondents worrying that Villaraigosa will make "Latino issues" his priority, notes Jaime Regalado, of the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at Cal State L.A. "It's been a black and white world, and suddenly they have to contend with brown," observes Regalado.

It was a black and white world for Hahn in 2001, when he triumphed in the mayoral runoff by not only winning over white voters from the San Fernando Valley, which holds the treasure trove of 40-plus percent of the electorate, but also grabbed the overwhelming majority of the African-American vote, which made up 14 percent of the total vote.

Hahn's unlikely to pull off that mystery achievement this year, given his snub of his erstwhile African-American base. During the 2001 Hahn-Villaraigosa face-off, Congresswoman Maxine Waters endorsed Hahn and all but called African-American supporters of Villaraigosa race traitors. But this time she has endorsed Villaraigosa. In an interview in the Wave newspaper, Waters expressed frustration about the lack of contact from Hahn's office during his four years as mayor, and pointed out that Parks hasn't been the only African-American leader Hahn has sacked.

Hahn's polls among white voters are also dire: 52 percent favor Villaraigosa, as opposed to his 35 percent, according to the Times. And since Villaraigosa seems to have pretty much sewn up the Latino vote, which now comprise 45 percent of L.A.'s population and 23 percent of the electorate, Hahn has to go hat in hand to just about everyone else. The incumbent's strategy seems to be to plant doubt about Villaraigosa's leadership abilities among both black and white voters to encourage them to vote for the known quantity over a new direction. This is a tactic, Regalado points out, that worked for George W. Bush against John Kerry in the November national election.

Villaraigosa's campaign inadvertently handed the incumbent an opportunity to do that recently as questions arose about \$47,000 in campaign contributions from employees of a Florida-based company that has been reportedly eyeing a contract at LAX. The Daily Breeze reported that employees appeared uncertain about having even made the donations. Villaraigosa has returned the money.

The issue is likely to dissipate, says Regalado, but if it does get legs, he says, "It remains to be seen whether they are ankle short or femur long."

What he does see is a racialized attack coming from the Hahn camp: the continual hammering on the issue of gang injunctions, which Villaraigosa has opposed. "Hahn continues to demean Antonio by implying that he carries favor with people who commit crimes rather than support the victims," Regalado says.

Anthony Thigpenn has been an organizer in South Los Angeles for some 25 years and worked with Villaraigosa years ago on strategies to stem the hemorrhage of manufacturing jobs from L.A.'s urban core. Thigpenn, an African-American who has founded two powerful multiracial grassroots organizations, has signed on as Villaraigosa's field director and sees the injunction issue as playing much more to white voters than to the African-Americans.

The black community suffers a lot of crime, he says. "But again, they also have the historic and contemporary experience of discriminatory law enforcement, and a blanket injunction just opens the door to that," Thigpenn says.

He also acknowledges anxiety among African-American voters about a Latino candidate, rooted in the long history of black people being "last hired and first fired" and displaced by other groups. "The real question, besides whether African-Americans will vote for a Latino candidate, is even if they're persuaded they should vote for him, will they turn out to vote?"

His job in that demographic is winning over the approximately 78,000 "always voters" who tend to be older and more conservative, plus making sure new voters get to the polls. Thigpenn is cautiously optimistic he can persuade voters to focus on what Villaraigosa represents: "A new power equation in Los Angeles" for a multiracial coalition that will vote "not based on fear, but based on the understanding that it is one city."

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