This is an analytical case study of the fall and rise of Latino urban agency in San Francisco, with a sharp focus on the city’s predominately Latino Mission District over the period 1967–2006. The argument to be made here, based on the case study, is that San Francisco’s Latino community is at once politically empowered and economically threatened by the special conditions that define the city’s local political economy. That is to say, Latino agency in San Francisco is defined by the very conditions that threaten its existence. On the one hand, San Francisco’s liberal political culture, celebration of diversity, and assertion of local autonomy has provided the ideal conditions for the development of Latino urban agency. On the other hand, the wide appeal of the city’s spectacular physical setting and its status as one of the nation’s top “creative cities” in the emerging new economy have frequently combined to attract business interests and capital investment on a scale that has threatened massive displacement of all low-income working-class residents, especially in the Mission.1 Indeed, the most impressive testimony to the power of Latino urban agency in San Francisco is the fact that the Mission District neighborhood, where many of the city’s Latinos live, has defended itself well over the last forty years against repeated waves of proposed economic development that have threatened the very existence of the Latino community in the Mission District.

San Francisco officially became a majority-minority city in 1990 when the US Census reported that the Anglo population had dropped below 47%. In
2000, the city’s Anglo population dropped to 43.6% with the Latino population growing to 14.1%, the Asian/Pacific Islander population at 30.7%, while the city’s African American population dwindled from 10.7% to 7.6%. Cross-cutting the city’s racial and ethnic diversity is a large and politically active gay and lesbian community that represents 10–15% of the city’s adult population and 15–20% of its active electorate. Thus, combined with other forms of cultural difference and class stratification, San Francisco’s racial and ethnic diversity greatly complicates any attempt to mobilize solidarity along only one dimension. What Bailey calls “identity-multiplexing”—the “layering and ranking by individuals of their different identities in different arenas”—has increasingly become an essential political skill. Similarly, leadership skills in building multiracial and multicultural coalitions are increasingly vital for achieving electoral success and political incorporation.

The Rise and Fall of the Mission Coalition Organization

The roots of the MCO were struck in late 1966 with the formation of the Mission Council on Redevelopment (MCOR). The MCOR was a coalition of churches, Latino service agencies, and radical Latino nationalist groups (including the Brown Berets) that stopped a major urban renewal project threatening demolition and displacement in the Mission. The MCOR disbanded after the threats had passed, but its brief life and political success laid the groundwork for the creation of the MCO in early 1968, when the city’s newly elected mayor, Joseph Alioto, applied for a federally funded Model Cities program targeting poverty and blight in the Mission and in the predominately African American Hunter’s Point neighborhood. Seeing an opportunity to move beyond the mainly defensive stance of the MCOR and toward a more comprehensive community development agenda funded by new federal money, 600 delegates representing 66 neighborhood-based organizations held a convention in October 1968 and gave birth to the MCO. The assembly elected Ben Martinez as MCO’s first president, hired Mike Miller (an Alinsky-trained community organizer) to direct a small staff, and outlined key neighborhood priorities and a mobilization strategy.

By the summer of 1971, the city was approved for a $15 million, five-year Model Cities project. The MCO had demonstrated its political power when the mayor ceded administrative control of the new program in the Mission to MCO. The MCO was given the power to appoint 14 of the 21 members of the new Model Mission Neighborhood Corporation (MMNC),
which was charged with giving highest funding priority to producing more low-income housing and job opportunities for Mission residents. Among many other projects, the MCO-dominated MMNC created a hiring hall to compel employers to follow MCO guidelines in the non-discriminatory hiring of job candidates from the neighborhood; established a seed-money fund to encourage local banks to end red-lining practices and invest more in building more affordable housing in the Mission; and offered financial incentives to the school board to promote parents’ participation in shaping education policy and the curriculum. The MMNC expanded funding of existing social service agencies and created new agencies and programs.

Despite these impressive achievements, however, the MCO began to come apart at the seams as early as 1972. A crucial split developed between the MCO and the MMNC. As Castells writes: “As a result, the confrontation between the MCO, now controlled by the Latino social agencies, and the MMNC, now managed by the Alinskyite cadres, replaced the anticipated confrontation between Mission residents and city hall.” Mayor Alioto, rather than facing a unified leadership, common agenda, and grassroots mobilization in the Mission, instead played the role of mediator between the rival factions while exercising overall control of the Model Cities program. By early 1974, most of the MMNC programs were placed under the authority of various city bureaucracies with reduced funding. What had once been an incipient neighborhood-based social movement was now reduced to interest-group politics as usual, leading Castell’s harsh words about the opportunities lost: “[H]aving established their legitimacy exclusively on the basis of their capacity to deliver immediate rewards, they reproduced the social fragmentation of different interest groups fighting for the diminishing pieces of an unquestioned pie of dubious taste.” During MCO’s brief life, it did succeed in bolstering neighborhood defenses against the ravages of urban renewal. And it did provide federally-funded services that benefited thousands of Mission residents. But the price paid for thinking so defensively and so small (the Mission only, services only, Latinos only) was the continued fragmentation of leadership, the lack of allies outside the Mission, and the lack of formal representation or political clout in city hall.

The Dot-Com Boom and an Awakening Grassroots Resistance

Latino urban agency, to a large extent, lay dormant for a twenty-year period from 1975, when George Moscone was elected mayor and the
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Manhattanization of San Francisco’s skyline took hold, to 1996, when Willie Brown took office as a business-friendly pro-growth mayor. But it was during this period that certain key trends and events occurred leading to the emergence of a Latino resistance in the Mission district. For example, Latino immigration accelerated, Republican Governor Pete Wilson endorsed the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 as a wedge issue to win reelection, and Latino community leaders and their allies successfully declared San Francisco an official City of Refuge. Most important, in 1996, the city’s voters also approved a highly significant change from at-large to district elections of supervisors (SEE FIGURE 1), which became effective in the November 2000 elections.

Figure 1: Map of Districts, San Francisco Board of Supervisors

Starting around 1997, shortly after Mayor Brown took office, the local economy turned from cold to hot, the commercial real estate market revived after ten years of doldrums, and a rogue wave of capital investment hit the city. The economic forces that threatened San Francisco in the late 1990s, however, were different from those that had “Manhattanized” the city’s skyline in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The political response also was different. That earlier investment surge had been driven by high-rise office developers funded mainly by commercial banks and tax syndicates. The
negative impacts of unregulated growth on transportation and housing were confined mainly to the city’s downtown financial district. The political response was the emergence of a grassroots slow-growth movement led by white, middle-class professionals, environmentalists, and historical preservationists. In 1986, as a result of their efforts, the city’s voters approved Proposition M, which imposed stringent caps and controls on future high-rise office development.7

This latest surge of investment, however, was fueled mainly by Silicon Valley venture capitalists who poured billions of dollars into hundreds of Internet and other high-tech start-up firms.8 This sudden onslaught of well-funded, dot-com start-up firms and their voracious demand for space quickly bid up the low rents in places like the Mission that had made it possible for low-income families, nonprofit workers, artists, and musicians to live in an expensive city like San Francisco.9 A swarm of local “place entrepreneurs,” particularly residential and commercial landlords and developer lobbying groups like the Residential Builders Association, took advantage of the economic opportunities.10 Between 1997 and 1999, average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the Mission rose 26%, and the median sales price for homes jumped 62%.11

Mayor Brown, his allies on the Board of Supervisors, and his downtown business friends all welcomed this latest chaos of capitalism with open arms. Brown, the most brazenly pro-business, pro-growth mayor in recent memory, was in his element. “Mayors are known for what they build and not anything else,” Brown declared, “and I intend to cover every inch of ground that isn’t open space.”12 At a city-sponsored “Multimedia Summit” in early 1998, Mayor Brown called the burgeoning multimedia industry “our modern day gold rush.” He promised the gathered entrepreneurs and developers that he would provide tax incentives, streamline the permitting process, and improve transit policies to attract more start-up firms to the city.13 Stacked with Mayor Brown’s obliging appointees, the Planning Commission and Board of Permit Appeals approved dozens of building projects and live-work developments. Many of these decisions violated the spirit, if not the letter, of Proposition M, ignored the city’s neighborhood preservation priorities, and made mush of other planning codes.

The sudden gentrification and displacement impacts of this high-tech gold rush on the low-income residents, merchants, artists, and nonprofit workers living in the Mission, South of Market, and Portrero Hill neighborhoods provoked a new grassroots, slow-growth movement. It began with spasms of anarchic revolt in 1998, starting with the Yuppie Eradication
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Project, whose leaders urged residents of the Mission to engage in acts of politically-motivated vandalism, including keying and tire slashing, against the “yuppie” sports cars and SUVs that increasingly clogged the streets around the new trendy restaurants and office buildings where dot-com firms were setting up shop. Later, mobilized by new umbrella organizations, principally the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition (MAC) and the South of Market Anti-Displacement Coalition (SOMAD), growing numbers of low-income, working-class renters, and people of color would join the movement, many of them in leadership roles.

In 1999, as the NASDAQ continued to climb along with the skyrocketing rents and massive evictions, Mayor Willie Brown launched his re-election campaign into the first winds of a brewing political storm. Initially, his chances looked good to win an outright majority in the November 2 mayoral election, despite his plummeting popularity. His two declared rivals—former mayor Frank Jordan and local political consultant Clinton Reilly—posed no real threat. One potential challenger who did scare Brown a bit, however, was Tom Ammiano, president of the board of supervisors and a nationally known gay rights advocate. Ammiano, who lived in the Mission district, strongly opposed Brown’s pro-growth policies and was a tough political fighter. But he had announced much earlier that he would not run for election as mayor and was all but counted out. Then, six weeks before the election, sensing the spread of the anti-Willie Brown backlash and the surge of a new slow-growth movement in the making, he changed his mind. He and his supporters mobilized an intensive, last-minute, grassroots write-in campaign that succeeded in winning enough votes on November 2 to place him in the December 14 run-off against Brown.

Many outside reporters at the time framed the run-off election campaign in identity politics terms as a contest between a straight, black, liberal incumbent and a gay, white, progressive challenger. Locally, however, the discourse of racial and sexual identity politics was rarely heard. The main content of the candidate forums and debates focused on issues like affordable housing, public transit, schools, and, most prominently, the destructive impact of the dot-com invasion and what to do about it.

Mayor Brown had the support of the state and local Democratic Party establishment, the downtown business elites, most labor union chiefs, nearly all African American voters, most Asian voters, and many gay and lesbian voters. Ammiano’s main support came from the Haight-Ashbury and Portrero Hill white progressives, gays and lesbians affiliated with the progressive Harvey Milk Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club, some sectors
of organized labor (especially in the public employee and teachers’ unions), and the growing cadres of militant slow-growth organizers in the Mission and South of Market. Brown raised a mountain of corporate soft money for his campaign through his affiliated PACs, overwhelming Ammiano’s paltry sums. Brown also tipped the scales strongly in his favor by appealing to the politically conservative white homeowners in the Sunset, Lake Merced, and West of Twin Peaks neighborhoods. He won most of their votes, helped by an official endorsement from the San Francisco Republican Party.\footnote{15}

At the end, on December 14, Mayor Brown soundly defeated Supervisor Tom Ammiano by a 60-40 vote to win a new term as mayor.\footnote{16} But the winds of a voter revolt were blowing.

\section*{Year 2000: Birth of the MAC}

In April 2000, at the peak of the dot-com feeding frenzy, Stein Kingsley Stein Investments (SKS) sought the planning commission’s approval for a huge project at Bryant and 20th Streets, the biggest to hit the Mission in years. SKS, a major financial contributor to Brown’s reelection campaign, proposed to build 160,000 square feet of new high-tech and multi-media office space on a site that then housed a garment factory employing twenty Mission residents and an artist loft structure used by eighty local artists, all of whom would have to be evicted. Other development projects in the Mission were on track at the same time, including one backed by Eikon Investments that proposed to convert the former National Guard Armory into 260,000 square feet of dot-com office space.\footnote{17} But the Bryant Square project, in particular, was the critical tipping point that galvanized neighborhood resistance and gave it political form. Angry and beleaguered, neighborhood activists, community organizers, and nonprofit service providers formed a partnership called the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition (MAC) to fight the Bryant Square project and others like it that threatened the sudden and massive displacement of Mission residents, small businesses, artists, and service providers.

By several accounts, among the dozen or so groups and agencies involved, the key founders of the MAC were the Mission Housing Development Corporation (MHDC) and Mission Economic Development Association (MEDA), both of which dated back to the old MCO of the 1970s; tenant organizers from the Mission Agenda and St. Peters Housing Committee, and an important new local environmental justice
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group, People Organizing to Demand our Economic and Environmental Rights (PODER). The MAC’s declared mission was to “eliminate the displacement of low-income and working-class people from the Mission District—who are primarily Latinos and other people of color, tenants, artists, and community serving businesses and nonprofits.”

From the beginning, MAC established itself as a grassroots operation; it held weekly meetings open to everyone; forged alliances with displaced artists, low-income whites and other groups; and made decisions by consensus. One observer reported, however, that there was “a determination to let the movement be led and defined by working-class Latinos.” When asked if the “struggle faced by artists and low-income whites was similar to the struggle faced by Latino families,” many of the white artists said yes, but Latino activists “overwhelmingly said no.” MAC member Paola Zuniga said: “It’s extremely different. A lot of us lack the language skills and social skills required in this society to be able to navigate. As for families, it’s harder to move.”

By assuming leadership of MAC, Latino activists accelerated the process of what Ronald Inglehart has called “cognitive mobilization” in the Mission’s Latino community. As they prepared to do battle with city hall politicians and the planning bureaucracy, protest alone was not enough. “In their struggle at the Planning Commission,” Gin writes, “MAC activists realized that they had to learn about and educate their members about the technical minutiae of the planning process.” To be effective in this new arena, they were forced to learn a great deal about urban economics, land use policies, zoning regulations, and the local politics of planning. “We have been learning and developing an understanding of the planning process and have become much more sophisticated in understanding it,” said Eric Quezada, a MAC organizer and program director for the Mission Economic Development Corporation. “People thought it was just about the market forces. As if there was no facilitation process by the city.”

Orchestrating what June Gin has called a “bricolage of movement strategies,” MAC leaders and their followers engaged in a wide range of tactics to capture public attention and influence city hall politicians and planners: rallies, marches, sit-ins, shut-downs of meetings, mock funerals, and other forms of mass mobilization. On May 4, in a last-ditch effort to persuade planning commissioners to reject the Bryant Square project, MAC activists crowded the meeting room and lined up more than twenty opponents to speak against it. The commissioners, all mayoral appointees, turned a deaf ear and voted six to one in favor of the project, causing
The Rebirth of Latino Urban Agency in San Francisco

widespread anger and disappointment in the Mission. The commission’s decision was affirmed by the board of supervisors on appeal in late June. Thus, MAC leaders lost this first battle with the dot-com developers and their city hall backers. But they also attracted media attention to the cause and established MAC’s street credentials as the new champion and defender of the barrio. 25

MAC leaders went on to organize a number of protest marches and rallies in the Mission; chants of “Aquí estamos y no nos vamos” (we’re here and we’re not leaving) became a common refrain, and red signs bearing the words “residentes orgullos de la Misión” (proud residents of the Mission) were distributed and placed in windows throughout the district. 26 In early June, after staging another loud protest outside the city’s planning department offices on Mission St., MAC leaders scored a major victory by compelling the planning director, Gerald Green, and two planning commissioners to meet with them and hear their demands. On June 28, more than four hundred people showed up for that meeting at Horace Mann Middle School “in a show of solidarity not seen in the Mission in decades.” 27 Responding to some of MAC’s demands, Green agreed, among other things, to support and fund a community planning process. But he claimed he lacked authority to impose a temporary moratorium on new office buildings, lofts and housing in the Mission, which was MAC’s top priority and most urgent demand. 28 Ultimately, the mayor and the supervisors would have to make those kinds of decisions, and it was clear at the time that they were not so inclined. Nonetheless, MAC had once again flexed its organizing muscle, and angry voices in the Mission were at last being heard. Renee Saucedo, a MAC member, boasted that “MAC is known not only citywide but nationally…. The eyes are on San Francisco as to how city officials can be held accountable for the makeup of the neighborhood.” 29

“A Perfect Political Storm”

In August 2000, weeks before the November 7 general election, Richard Marquez, a leader of the recently formed MAC, spoke to a crowd at a MAC-sponsored rally in the Mission: “We have the potential in November to build the perfect political storm,” he said. “We’ve got no choice, because our backs are up against the wall. We’ve got to come out swinging.” 30 The “perfect political storm” he envisioned combined three
powerful forces that were converging to cause political ruin for Mayor Brown on election day.

The first was the continuing and unabated fury of the anti-Willie Brown backlash that had fueled Tom Ammiano’s write-in campaign for mayor in November 1999. That backlash intensified in late June 2000 when the mayor bolted from a compromise slow-growth plan offered by a group of stakeholders and went his own way with Proposition K, a pro-growth ballot proposition favored by his downtown business allies that did nothing to solve the problem. Meanwhile, the cresting dot-com tidal wave was at the peak of its sharpest impacts on commercial real estate, housing prices, and low-income neighborhood communities, especially in the Mission and South of Market. Now certain they could expect no help from the mayor or board of supervisors, MAC organizers began mobilizing direct action and civil disobedience against individual dot-com firms. Illustrative of the kinds of battles that took place, fifteen local activists were arrested in late September after engaging in a non-violent, sit-in protest at the Bay View Bank building in the Mission. The action was aimed at Bigstep.com, a business service firm that had moved into two floors of the building months earlier, displacing two Spanish-language newspapers, a radio station, and a number of small businesses and nonprofit organizations serving the local Latino community. MAC leaders demanded that the firm obtain a conditional use permit for its operation and that it relocate the businesses and nonprofits it displaced. Bigstep’s executives, fearing a community backlash and the wrath of MAC, offered concessions, such as internships to low-income students and discounts on rents charged to nonprofits, but these were refused. Finally, backed by city hall, Bigstep rejected the protesters’ demands and called the police.

The second force was set in motion by a citizen-initiated ballot measure, Proposition L, placed on the November 2000 ballot by a citywide signature-gathering campaign led by MAC and other community activists. Proposition L would have banned new development in parts of the Mission and South of Market districts; imposed an indefinite moratorium on new development in certain other neighborhoods; raised exaction fees to pay for growth-induced demands on housing and public transit; halted further live-work loft construction; redefined zoning codes to place more dot-com firms in a business class requiring higher exaction fees, and allowed only a few of the exemptions demanded by high-rise developers and dot-com entrepreneurs from the growth caps imposed by Proposition M in 1986. Dubbed the “daughter of Proposition M,” Proposition L would have closed all the loopholes and barred all the gates that had allowed the dot-com firms to enter the city so suddenly and displace its most vulnerable populations.
The third force at work that converged with and magnified the other two was the scheduled change to district elections of supervisors. Thanks to voter approval of Proposition G in 1996, all eleven seats on the board were now up for grabs. The consequence of this institutional reform was that all of the mayor’s loyal allies on the board who sought reelection would now have to stand trial before angry neighborhood electorates. The timing of this shift from at-large to district representation coincided perfectly with the cresting of the dot-com wave, the peaking of the grassroots revolt against Mayor Brown, and the reemergence of Latino urban agency in San Francisco.

Mayor Willie Brown versus MAC and the Neighborhoods: The 2000 Board of Supervisors Elections

By August 2000, a total of 87 candidates had filed for candidacy in the 11 new districts. Eight of the candidates were board incumbents seeking reelection in different districts, guaranteeing that at least three new supervisors would serve on the board. Of those eight, four (Michael Yaki, Mabel Teng, Alicia Becerril, and Amos Brown) were loyal allies of Mayor Willie Brown; two (Mark Leno and Gavin Newsom) agreed with Mayor Brown on most issues and supported his pro-growth agenda; and only two (Tom Ammiano and Leland Yee) consistently opposed the mayor and voted against his development plans and land use policies. Two of the incumbents faced little opposition and were assured of victory: Newsom, running in District 2, and Ammiano, running in District 9, which included the Mission. In the remaining nine districts, the mayor pulled out all stops to maintain his working majority on the board. Mayor Brown had created that majority by appointing six individuals to board vacancies over the 1996–1999 period, vacancies which he had arranged through artful shuffling to allow his new allies on the board to run as incumbents in later elections. His organized network of corporate executives, political action committees, and political clubs now spent an unprecedented $1.6 million in soft money to fund the campaigns of loyal incumbents and anointed candidates. For many voters, however, this mayoral orchestration of political careers, funding flows, and district campaigns confirmed their suspicions that Mayor Brown really did own and operate a political machine in a city renowned for its neighborhood activism and grassroots democracy.

The issues of land use, displacement, and growth controls defined the main agenda for debate in most of the district campaigns. MAC leaders
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and their allies made sure of that by sending campaign organizers and volunteers out from Mission, South of Market, and other growth-impacted neighborhoods into other areas of the city to educate the residents and do battle. They demanded that candidates in every district address those issues and state their positions on Propositions K and L.

Meanwhile, the city’s long tradition of divisive racial and identity politics was suspended, at least for this election (there is a very apt saying in San Francisco that “truce is stranger than friction”). In particular, MAC leaders resisted any temptation to endorse Latina incumbent and Brown-appointee Alicia Becerril in District 3. They also decided not to advance Latino candidates for the seats in District 6 (South of Market) and District 9 (the Mission). Instead, they backed three Anglos in those campaigns: Aaron Peskin in District 3, Chris Daly in District 6, and Tom Ammiano in District 9. Peskin was a tenant organizer in the city’s North Beach neighborhood. Daly was a community organizer in the South of Market area and a member of MAC. Ammiano had stood up to Mayor Brown while serving on the board and in his 1999 campaign for mayor. All three strongly endorsed Proposition L and spoke out against Proposition K. And all were popular in their districts and highly electable. MAC leaders and many Latino voters backed Latino candidates in two other districts—Matt Gonzales in the predominately white District 5 and Geraldo Sandoval in the racially diverse District 11. In their campaigns, however, neither appealed to ethnic identity, and both stressed their credentials as slow-growth progressives and sworn political enemies of Brown and his political machine.

Matt Gonzalez, in particular, dramatically signaled the priority he placed on ideology over identity by announcing his switch from the Democratic Party to the Green Party following the November election and before the December run-off in District 5. Upset with the centrist positions taken by presidential candidate Al Gore and with the state Democratic Party establishment for excluding Green candidates from forums and debates, Gonzalez wrote: “I decided I am not going to vote for candidates who support the death penalty or oppose gay marriage. I’m not going to vote for candidates who oppose campaign-finance reform or value the corporation over the individual. Nor will I give the local machine party any legitimacy by remaining a part of it.” At a time when many local Democrats blamed the Green Party for Bush’s likely victory over Gore, Gonzalez’s conversion was seen by many observers as a risky political move. Nonetheless, disgruntlement with Brown and the local Democrats was widespread, especially among the city’s Latinos in the Mission. MAC spokesman Eric Quezada
acknowledged that he would like to see more Latino representation on the board. His primary goal, however, was to elect supervisors who could take on Brown and protect area residents from eviction. “It’s not enough to be Latino right now, to run in the Mission.”

Many of the city’s other leading political organizations and clubs also put identity politics on hold to maintain coalitional solidarity in opposition to Mayor Brown and his pro-growth agenda. The Chinese American Democratic Club, for example, endorsed white progressive Jake McGoldrick in his race against incumbent Chinese American Michael Yaki in the heavily Asian-populated District 1. And the Harvey Milk Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club endorsed several progressive straight candidates in opposition to a “lavender slate” of pro-growth gay candidates supported by Brown and funded by his political machine. One could argue that a communal sense of place identity was strongly asserted in this campaign. Even the conservative columnist Ken Garcia made that point in characterizing the Mission’s battle against the dot-coms as a struggle for the “soul” of the city. Overall, however, this election was not fundamentally about group interest or ethnic identity narrowly defined but about land use and ideology—and Mayor Brown

The November 7 general election (and nine December 14 district run-off elections) produced three significant outcomes. First, Propositions K and L both lost, the former overwhelmingly (39.2% yes) and the latter just barely (49.8% yes). As a result, Proposition M’s tight restrictions on growth would continue to apply by default. Second, many Latino voters, expressing the same disenchantment with the Democrats later voiced by Matt Gonzalez, defected from that party to vote for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader in the presidential election. Politicians like Brown, who would be viewed as liberal or even radical almost anywhere else, are often labeled as conservatives in the local political discourse. Consistent with this trend, majorities of voters in the Mission helped to elect two Green Party members, including Latino Mark Sanchez, to the school board in a citywide election.

Third, and most important, Brown’s carefully crafted slate of well-funded candidates was blown to smithereens. Most were eliminated in the November election, and nearly all the rest were crushed in the December 14 district run-offs. Among Mayor Brown’s allies, only the incumbents Newsom and Leno survived the onslaught. Tony Hall, a maverick independent, defeated incumbent loyalist Mable Teng in District 7, but could be counted on to vote with the mayor on most issues. On the other side, most of the progressive, slow-growth, anti-Willie Brown candidates for supervisor won in
their districts. Incumbents Ammiano and Yee were reelected, joined by the insurgents McGoldrick, Peskin, Gonzalez, Daly, and Sandoval. These seven supervisors, along with Sophie Maxwell, an African American community activist elected by voters in District 10, formed a unified and veto-proof 8-3 progressive supermajority on the board that would thwart Mayor Brown and clip his wings over the rest of his term.41

At the end, Mayor Brown’s political machine was in ruins. Its moving parts, lubricated by corporate money, worked well enough under the old, at-large system. Under district elections, however, the MAC-led neighborhood revolt ultimately brought down the machine.42 The result was a ghastly political nightmare for Brown, who now had to look forward to a progressive super-majority voting against him on the board of supervisors and to demands from the downtown corporate CEOs for an accounting of how their huge financial investment in local political control could have been so wildly misspent.

After the Storm:

Consolidating and Expanding Latino
Urban Agency in San Francisco

Over the years since the watershed 2000 board elections, a number of important developments and events have worked to consolidate and expand Latino urban agency in San Francisco. These can be summarized under the headings of protecting the barrio; curbing mayoral authority; advancing Latino voting power and political incorporation; pioneering new policies and democracy reforms; and Matt Gonzalez’s run for mayor.

In January 2001, the board’s new progressive supermajority immediately passed a temporary moratorium on building additional live/work units in the Mission.43 Encouraged by that example, and with neighborhood-friendly district representatives now in power, activists in the South of Market and Portrero Hill districts pushed for similar bans in their communities and got them. Although it was true that the NASDAQ bubble had burst by this time and that the local dot-coms were dropping like flies, MAC leaders wanted to keep pressure on the city “to implement strict development controls before the next economic boom,” according to one reporter.44 “It’s especially obvious that planning cannot be left to the free market,” said Tom Ammiano, newly elected president of the board of supervisors and now the representative of District 9 and the Mission.45
MAC leaders were emboldened by these victories; they also felt empowered by a stronger and more sympathetic board of supervisors standing up against a weakened mayor and his planning bureaucracy (see below). In 2002, they formed the Mission Anti-Displacement Partnership in collaboration with other neighborhood groups and organizations and drafted a “People Plan” that would set priorities and regulate land use in the Mission (Mission Anti-Displacement Partnership 2005). In September 2003, MAC and PODER activists organized yet another sit-in at the city’s planning department office, this time to protest the planning director’s sluggish response to the People Plan. There were no immediate results, and seventeen of the protesters were arrested. But under the new regime at city hall, this action and others that followed eventually compelled the planning department to adopt a more inclusive and responsive “community planning” process in developing new zoning policies for the Mission district and the entire eastern side of the city.

As these examples illustrate, MAC did not simply fold its tent and fade away after its stunning electoral victories in the 2000 elections. Unlike the MCO of the 1970s, the coalition has consolidated its power in the Mission, maintained its grassroots base, and sustained its pressure on city hall politicians and bureaucrats. MAC also continues to keep a close and critical eye on all outside entrepreneurs seeking to build or invest in the Mission. Operating as self-appointed gatekeepers and toll-takers, and with the backing of key supervisors like Chris Daly and Tom Ammiano, MAC leaders have learned to bargain tough to exact the maximum “community benefits” from private firms and developers, including affordable housing and job opportunities for residents.

Advancing Latino Voting Power and Political Incorporation

As Browning, Marshall, and Tabb argued long ago, however, “protest is not enough” to convert growing numbers and demands for equality into responsive public policies and programs serving the Latino community’s needs. Political incorporation is key and involves a combination of formal representation and informal inclusion in the power centers that make policy. A group has achieved substantial political incorporation, argue Browning, Marshall and Tabb, when it “is in a position to articulate its interests, its demands will be heard, and through the dominant coalition it can ensure that certain interests will be protected, even though it may not win on every issue.”

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the political incorporation of San Francisco’s Latino population took a great leap forward as a direct result of the 2000 elections. Two Latino politicians, Matt Gonzalez and Geraldo Sandoval, were elected to the 11-member board of supervisors, and Mark Sanchez was elected to the School Board. In 2002, the voters elected progressive Dennis Herrera as city attorney, and reelected him in 2006. José Cisneros was elected as treasurer in 2006. Under the new district election system, with more Latinos serving as elected officials, the appointment of Latinos to the city’s various boards and commissions rose from a mere 6% of the total in 1993 to 11% in 2002, close to population parity.51

New Progressive Policies and Democracy Reforms

As members of the new dominant coalition on the board of supervisors, Matt Gonzalez and Geraldo Sandoval exercised considerable influence on the policy-making process. Gonzalez, elected by his colleagues in 2002 as president of the board of supervisors, was particularly effective in advancing legislation or ballot propositions that benefited the city’s Latinos, in particular, and low-income working class renters and their families in general. These initiatives included imposing greater board control over mayoral appointments to the planning commission and board of appeals; establishing a new elections commission along with restrictions on mayoral authority over redistricting and appointments to vacancies on the board; regulating growth and protecting neighborhoods, particularly the Mission; promoting the construction of additional affordable housing; strengthening tenant rights while preserving the declining stock of rental units under the city’s residential rent control policies; raising the city’s minimum wage; mandating feasibility studies of municipal ownership of PG&E and alternative energy sources, including solar and tidal power; and extending sunshine laws requiring greater transparency and accountability in the city’s bureaucracy. Gonzalez also took the lead in persuading voters to adopt instant run-off voting (IRV) in 2002, which was implemented for the first time with district elections for supervisor in 2004.52 Inspired by San Francisco’s success with IRV, voters in the city of Berkeley overwhelmingly adopted it the following year, and the IRV movement has since spread to other cities in California, Vermont, Washington, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Florida. Gonzalez also pushed for non-citizen voting rights in school board elections, an initiative that was barely defeated by the voters in 2004 but has good prospects of passage in the near future.53
For his part, Sandoval co-sponsored or endorsed most of Gonzalez’s legislative agenda, and was the principal author of pioneering legislation requiring all city agencies to officially honor “matricula consulaire” ID cards as legal identification. In the wake of September 11, he also took the lead in affirming San Francisco’s city of refuge policies, official non-cooperation with the Immigration and Naturalization Services in facilitating its raids and detentions, particularly in the Mission, and restrictions on local police cooperation with federal agents in the practice of racial profiling and arresting of foreign persons not suspected of a crime.

Going Against the Grain

In November 2003, Matt Gonzalez ran for mayor. He eventually lost to rival Gavin Newsom in the December run-off election, but he came close, and his electrifying campaign vaulted him into the national spotlight as a rising Latino star and a leader of an emerging urban-based progressive reform movement. Convinced that Tom Ammiano, icon of the local left, would only lose again, this time to Willie Brown’s protégé and heir apparent, Supervisor Gavin Newsom, Gonzalez threw his hat in the ring. That move angered Ammiano and his followers, and the internecine battle that ensued was aptly dubbed by one reporter as a “left coast brawl.” He and Newsom were the top two voter-getters in November, beating out four other candidates, and both waged furious campaigns in the five weeks leading to the December 9 run-off election.

Although city elections are officially non-partisan, the fact that Gonzalez was a Green and Newsom was a Democrat drew national and even international media attention. Afraid that Newsom might actually lose to a Green in the Democratic Party’s urban stronghold at a time when the Democrats were gearing up to challenge President George W. Bush’s reelection bid in 2004, top state and national Democratic Party leaders raced to the rescue. The California Democratic Party paid $153,000 for an anti-Gonzalez mailer, a part of the total of $4 million raised for Newsom’s campaign against only $400,000 for his rival. Leading a long parade of Democratic Party notables, Al Gore, Bill Clinton, and Nancy Pelosi flew to the city to endorse Newsom and praise him, prompting a Gonzalez spokesperson to ask: “What’s next? The Pope?”

Great pressure was placed on the city’s more progressive Democratic political clubs to stay in line. Even so, some members of the powerful...
Democratic County Central Committee (DCCC) abstained from the committee’s endorsement of Newsom, and several took the step of endorsing Gonzalez as individuals. Among others, the Harvey Milk Democratic Club rejected the entreaties and formally endorsed Gonzalez. Later, in 2004, angry state party officials demanded that the DCCC require its members to take loyalty oaths to the party; the DCCC refused to comply. In 2006, a faction of the DCCC attempted to rescind the Harvey Milk Club’s charter; the move failed. The Latino Democratic Club dutifully endorsed Newsom, as did the local chapter of the officially non-partisan Mexican American Political Association. But in the barrio, defection was in the air. The city’s Latino voters, most of them Democrats, had backed Newsom (30%) over Gonzalez (26%) in the November election, according to one poll. Results of another poll in late November, however, gave Gonzalez a lead of 68% to 28% among Latino voters.

Matt Gonzalez clearly had the momentum going into the last days of the campaign. Unfortunately for Gonzalez, thousands of conservative absentee voters had already registered their choice between a liberal Democrat and a progressive Green, and time simply ran out. On December 9, although Gonzalez won a majority of the election-day votes, Newsom’s absentee vote was overwhelming and he won the run-off 53% to 47% to become the city’s next mayor.

Figure 2, a scatter plot of precinct data showing the relationship between the vote for John Kerry for president in 2004 and the vote for Matt Gonzalez in December 2003, helps to visualize some important points about San Francisco politics in general and the voting tendencies of the city’s Latino voters in particular. First, the plot reveals a strong positive correlation between the precinct vote for Kerry, the Democrat, and the vote for Gonzales, the Green. In a city owned by Democrats, in which only 3% of voters registered Green, that is an odd correlation to find. Most Democrats voted for Gonzalez in 2003. The Democrat Newsom, like Mayor Brown in 1999, could not have won without significant help from Republicans and conservative independents. Second, however, as Figure 2 shows, the Latino (“H”) and white progressive (“P”) precinct electorates that voted Green in 2003 snapped to the party line in voting for the Democrat Kerry in 2004, joining the African American precincts (“B”) that voted loyally Democratic in both elections. The white conservative precincts (“C”) showed relatively little support for either Gonzalez or Kerry and are lumped in the lower left of the plot. The Asian/PI precincts (“A”), illustrating a general pattern of moderate/centrist voting in San Francisco, are grouped
in the center of the plot. Third, as suggested by the last point, the city’s Latino voters as a group are inclined to support the most progressive candidate in any given election (as in 2000 and 2003) and will shift to a default party-line vote for Democrats only if there are no electable alternatives (as in 2004). No doubt some Latinos voted for Gonzalez in 2003 out of ethnic solidarity alone, but clearly ideology trumped identity and partisanship in this election.

Figure 2: Scatterplot of the Vote for Kerry 2004 versus Vote for Gonzalez 2003 in San Francisco Precincts. Legend: B = Black/African-American majority or plurality, H = Hispanic/Latino majority or plurality, A = Asian-American 55%+ majority, C = “White Conservative,” and P = “White Progressive” precinct electorates. *Note: This scatterplot is a purely heuristic graphical tool for roughly sorting out and identifying racial/ethnic and ideological voting patterns in the city’s precinct electorates. The plotting symbol “B” identifies the precincts in which Blacks/African-Americans were a majority or the dominant plurality of the estimated total 2000 precinct population, the symbol “H” the precincts in which Hispanics/Latinos were a majority or plurality, and the symbol “A” the precincts in which Asian-Americans were at least a 55% majority. The symbol “C” identifies the precincts which were at least 60% white and scored in the lowest quartile of a 22-item Progressive Voting Index (PVI), and the symbol “P” those precincts which were at least 60% white and scored in the highest quartile of the PVI. Precincts that did not meet these criteria were not plotted in the graph. For details on methods and data sources, see Rich DeLeon and David Latterman, “Updating the New Progressive Voting Index (PVI) with Tables, Map, and Precinct Scores,” San Francisco: SF Usual Suspects, April 16, 2004, http://www.sfusualsuspects.com/resources/docs/DeLeonFiles/DeLeon%20Latterman%20New%20PVI%20Report%20April%202004.pdf www.sfusualsuspects.com/deleon.shtml.
Leaders of the national Democratic Party were relieved to have dodged a bullet on their home turf in 2003. Still, in September 2006, they did not appear to have drawn any lessons from it about the need for their party to turn left from the center to recapture and hold its base in the cities. The message was not lost on Gavin Newsom, however.

Starting in 2004, the city’s new mayor went on to challenge his own party’s timidity on social issues by famously authorizing marriage licenses for same-sex couples. He also demanded that the city’s business elites, who had backed his run for mayor, submit to higher taxes to cover a revenue shortfall. He later joined the picket lines of Local 2 UNITE-HERE (a third of which are Latinos) to protest the lockout of striking hotel workers by the same hotel owners and managers who had funded his mayoral campaign. In November 2005, addressing a fund-raiser in Iowa for Democrats seeking to recapture the Senate, he urged the crowd to face issues like gay marriage head on: “I don’t think we have anything to be ashamed of in our party, standing up for the foundation of those principles which have been historic.”

And in April 2006, citing San Francisco’s City of Refuge laws, Mayor Newsom signed a resolution—sponsored by Geraldo Sandoval and passed unanimously by the board of supervisors—that advised the city’s law enforcement officers not to comply with the criminal provisions of any new immigration bill. The US House of Representatives had passed just such a bill, H.R. 4437, making it a crime to be in the United States illegally or offer aid to illegal immigrants. “San Francisco stands foursquare in strong opposition to the rhetoric coming out of Washington, DC,” Newsom said. “If people think we were defiant on the gay marriage issue, they haven’t seen defiance.”

Newsom saw that the 2000 board elections and the insurgent Gonzalez campaign in 2003 had shifted the city to the left, and now he was urging his fellow Democrats to do the same. Matt Gonzalez, perhaps because he saw no role for a loyal opposition—what was there to oppose?—decided not to run for reelection to the board in 2004, focusing instead on starting a new law firm and touring the country to build the Green Party in cities that seemed ripe for political change.

Conclusion: Is MAC the Vanguard of a New Urban Progressivism?

Unlike the MCO, which ultimately failed for lack of ambition, unified leadership, and federal money, the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition became
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the organizational core of a still-powerful grassroots social movement that seems to have longevity. MAC’s activities and initiatives reach far beyond the boundaries of what Paul Peterson has called the “allocational” arena of local government decision-making into the arenas of “developmental” and “redistributive” policy.62 The city’s development policy should be left to the business CEOs, planners, and technocrats, Peterson argues, and redistribution should be the exclusive responsibility of the federal government, not the locals. Writing at a time long before the federal government “devolved” its responsibilities for national welfare policy and urban assistance onto state and local governments, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb accepted these Petersonian “city limits” in defining very modest yardsticks for measuring Black and Latino political incorporation and progress toward equality.

What this case study demonstrates, if nothing else, is that San Francisco’s Latinos have adapted to the new political reality. They have learned not to depend on the federal government for needed resources, and have strongly emphasized the “urban” in their quest for greater Latino urban agency. Years ago the MCO fell apart when the federal money disappeared. As a result, Latino agency failed to make a claim on local state power or the resources of the private sector. In the current era, however, MAC serves as a model of how Latinos can wield land use planning tools to secure their turf in big cities; mobilize voters and elect Latinos to positions of power in local government; and sustain a grassroots movement to force the bureaucrats and politicians to do the right thing while extracting needed resources from the local private sector.63 In the Mission, where ethnic identity and place identity intersect, MAC has achieved significant power by combining multiple and overlapping forms of Latino urban agency as a grassroots movement, as a social service network, and as a disciplined political apparatus with electoral and lobbying clout.

Endnotes

5. Ibid., 116.
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6. Ibid., 130.
15. That endorsement, the final insult inflicted by Mayor Brown on state GOP warlords, caused a scandal at the California Republican Convention in early 2000. The San Francisco chapter was vigorously and formally rebuked. For more information, see Robert Salladay and Zachary Coile, “S. F. Republicans Rebuked for Endorsing Democrat,” *San Francisco Examiner,* February 6, 2000, A17.
20. Ibid.
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26. Ibid.
41. See DeLeon, 2003, for a more detailed account of the election and its outcomes.
42. Lelchuk. 2000.
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