

An Anatomy of Defeat: Why San Fernando Valley Failed to Secede From Los Angeles

TOM HOGEN-ESCH and MARTIN SAIZ
California State University, Northridge

On November 5, 2001, voters in the City of Los Angeles defeated Measure F,¹ 67 percent to 33 percent. The referendum, which represented the culmination of decades of secessionist politics in the city, would have created a separate city from Los Angeles encompassing much of the San Fernando Valley. Although the measure barely passed in the Valley with a 50.7 percent majority, the effort was seen as something of a failure, given the strong support for the idea in polls conducted a few months before the election. Moreover, because Valley voters make up a disproportionately large number of city voters, proponents hoped that high turnout and support for Measure F would have been enough to win the required dual majority.²

This paper seeks to understand why—despite deeply rooted secessionist sentiment—a broad, cross-ethnic Valley coalition failed to support Measure F. We begin with an analysis of eight county-level secessions attempted in California between 1976 and 1988, and argue that lessons from these prior efforts could have predicted that classic tax and service arguments were insufficient to win broad support for secession. We then trace the historical evolution of secession movements in the Valley and show that secession is a long-standing goal of the Valley business community. We also argue that Valley VOTE represented a new and potentially powerful urban coalition between two habitual growth adversaries, business and homeowner organizations. Despite a common land-use vision for the Valley, their reliance upon traditional, exclusionary arguments centering on tax and service disparities and the perils of urban heterogeneity largely failed to resonate with voters in the heavily minority east Valley. We posit that if the campaign had been based on

preserving the Valley as a “multicultural suburbia,” it may have been sufficiently inclusive to win a supermajority of Valley voters. Finally, we contend that Valley secession represents a classic conflict between two fundamentally opposed intentions for urban space in Southern California—one emphasizing “growth with equity” and the other seeking to protect the region’s historically dominant spatial vision, the suburban ideal. We conclude by suggesting that the case represents the pivotal role that minorities, especially Latinos, may play in determining the future spatial development of Southern California.

COUNTY-LEVEL SECESSION MOVEMENTS

During the 1970s, a series of county secession movements, mostly in southern California, erupted during a period of continuing urban growth and rising property taxation. As in the Valley case, arguments for secession centered on the desire to escape high taxes, receive better services and representation, and win control over land development. Although these movements failed to form a new California county, indispensable lessons can be drawn from their efforts. Most important, these cases provide the only instances that illustrate the difficult challenge of producing voting majorities in both the seceding and remaining areas. That is, unlike elections for municipal incorporation, a dual majority is required by state law to split an existing governmental union. As such, these examples show why, from a political standpoint, secessions fundamentally differ from their nearest cousin, municipal incorporations (Burns, 1994; Miller, 1981; Musso, 1994), and help explain why they are prone to failure. Conversely, in helping us understand the dual majority dilemma, these cases also reveal the possibilities for developing a winning strategy.

In 1974, a change in state law (AB 1394) permitted new county formation when 25 percent of voters in the proposed county signed petitions to separate from an existing one, provided that a majority in the existing county and the proposed county approved. This liberalization of the county detachment statutes led to a rash of secession attempts between 1975 and 1978, most of them in Southern California. Over the following

decade, other proposals were attempted in Fresno, Santa Barbara, and San Bernardino counties³ (Detwiler, 1996, p. 3-5). Figure 1 summarizes the results of these elections. Despite the fact that each movement secured the required number of signatures to put a secession measure on the ballot (no small feat in itself), and was successful in six of seven cases in securing a majority of votes in the seceding area, each was resoundingly defeated in the county as a whole. Perhaps better than any other, this representation illustrates the political challenge of achieving the required dual majority.

Canyon County I and II

In 1976, a group calling itself the Canyon County Formation Committee attempted to split off 67,000 inhabitants and 760 square miles from the northwest corner of Los Angeles County. The new county would have included the unincorporated communities of Saugus, Agua Dulce, Newhall, Valencia, Val Verde, Canyon Country, Acton, Gorman, and literally thousands of acres prime for residential expansion spilling over from San Fernando Valley. Supporters of the effort argued that LA County's taxes were too high and that its size did not allow for adequate citizen input. However, LA County Supervisor Baxter Ward, who repre-

Figure 1.
County Secession Elections (1974–1988)

Source: Detwiler, 1996; archival sources, County Elections Divisions.

| Proposed County | Existing County | Year | Vote in Seceding Area | Countywide Vote |
|-------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Canyon County I | Los Angeles | 1976 | 55% | 32% |
| Canyon County II | Los Angeles | 1978 | 59% | 36% |
| South Bay County | Los Angeles | 1978 | 77% | 28% |
| Peninsula County | Los Angeles | 1978 | 77% | 26% |
| Los Padres County | Santa Barbara | 1978 | 43% | 22% |
| Ponderosa County | Fresno | 1982 | 52% | 24% |
| Mojave County | San Bernardino | 1988 | 61% | 34% |

sented the area at the time, charged that the tax and representation issues were a smoke-screen, hiding the real reasons for the movement:

[The secessionists] want control of zoning or development...and they are utilizing the people's concerns about the tax dollars as a means of gaining the control they selfishly seek (Simmons, 1976, p. 117-119). There is one underlying issue in the secession effort, and that is the control of land. [The Santa Clarita Valley] has one of the richest opportunities for fortunes to be made in land development... (Rolfe, 1976, p. 9).

The proposal qualified for the November 2, 1976, ballot as Prop. F, and despite a door-to-door opposition campaign by LA County firefighters, it managed to win a 55 percent majority in the proposed Canyon County. However, the measure only managed 32 percent approval in LA County, thus killing the effort (Langius, 1996, p. 5).

In 1978, Canyon County secessionists organized a second effort and again succeeded in collecting the required number of signatures to place the measure, Proposition K, on the November 7 ballot. At the time, a Los Angeles County Economy and Efficiency Commission report sympathized with the area's grievances, agreeing that a new county would provide better representation and more local control over service delivery. However, it also concluded that "[p]olitical separation would be the equivalent of creating a relatively affluent enclave, dependent economically on the region, but with little responsibility to contribute to the social costs of the metropolis" (Economy and Efficiency Commission, 1978, p. 38-39). The Commission also expressed concern that the political influence of low-income residents might be diluted (Canyon County Formation Review Commission, 1978, p. 140). Proposition K received 59 percent approval in the seceding area but was again resoundingly defeated 64 to 36 percent in Los Angeles County (Langius, 1996, p. 5).

South Bay and Peninsula Counties

In 1977, around the time of the Canyon County movements, secessionists from the cities of El Segundo, Palos Verdes Estates, Redondo Beach, Torrance, Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, and two small unincorporated areas submitted a petition to the LA County Clerk propos-

ing to create South Bay County. The population of the new county would have totaled 280,000, or roughly 4 percent of LA County's population. At the time, the County Formation Review Commission warned that the detachment of South Bay County could "alter both the price and demand for housing in the South Bay...and may also accelerate the rate of commercial and industrial land development...[attracting] development away from the remainder of Los Angeles County." Moreover, the Commission pointed out that the proposed county contained only 1.4 percent of the county's ethnic minorities and feared it would negatively impact the goal of racial and class integration (South Bay County Formation Review Commission, 1978, p. 61-88).

In 1977 in neighboring Palos Verdes Peninsula, the cities of Rancho Palos Verdes, Rolling Hills, Rolling Hills Estates and a few small, unincorporated areas also campaigned for an independent Peninsula County. Examining the rash of county secessions at the time, the 1978 Economy and Efficiency Commission found that each individual county would separate "a relatively affluent, predominantly white community from the relatively poor remainder" (p. 28-30). The County Formation Review Commission for Peninsula County agreed on the "detrimental" impacts of furthering socioeconomic stratification. It also noted that "both residential and commercial property will become more attractive in the Peninsula area, resulting in an increase in real estate values..." (Peninsula County Formation Review Commission, 1978, p. 7-8).

Both the South Bay and Peninsula efforts successfully gathered the requisite 25 percent of the signatures to trigger a study and subsequent vote. In June of 1978—in the same election as Proposition 13—voters in the seceding areas approved Propositions C (South Bay County) and D (Peninsula County) with 77 percent of the vote. However, each was thwarted by voters in the rest of LA County by a wide margin (Keppel, 1978, p. 16).

Other County Movements

From 1978 to 1988, three other county secession movements made it to the ballot. In almost every instance, residents in the proposed county voted to create a new county. In each case, overwhelming opposition in

other parts of the existing county thwarted pro-secessionists. In the cases of the Los Padres, Ponderosa, and Mojave County movements, rural residents and landowners drove the secession efforts. Historically, rural communities in California have long resented the perceived political domination of urban and suburban interests. In addition to the perceived urban-suburban political domination, the central issue behind the rural county efforts were private landed interests hoping to skirt land-use and building restrictions (Detwiler, 1996, p. 3).

In 1977, a group called Citizens for Los Padres County, comprised mostly of Santa Maria-based business-development interests, agitated for the secession of the northern half of Santa Barbara County. The area contained roughly 41 percent of the county's population and 51 percent of the land (Rankin, 1978). On July 24, 1977, the group filed a petition containing 11,666 signatures with the Clerk of Santa Barbara County, triggering a study of the proposal. As in other movements, proponents of Los Padres County claimed they did not receive their fair share of services, that the county seat was too far away to serve their needs, and that smaller units of government could better respond to a diversity of constituent needs. Again, proponents contended that north county areas constituted a distinct environmental and economic community and that their vision of future development conflicted with that of south county cities such as City of Santa Barbara.

In its study, the Los Padres County Formation Review Commission noted that unlike recent secession efforts in Los Angeles County, the Los Padres County proposal was "clearly not an effort by the affluent to escape the burden of supporting public services to the poor" (Los Padres County Formation Commission, 1978, p. 17). Despite the demographic similarities of both regions, the Commission recognized that "differences in history, climate and economic base... affect the attitudes of many citizens toward growth and development..." (Los Padres County Formation Commission, 1978, p. 17).

As in other cases, the Commission concluded that a separate Los Padres County would be economically viable and that its impact on the remaining Santa Barbara County would be minimal. Although the effort faced little organized opposition in the south county, a split emerged in

the pro-secession coalition among agricultural proponents, who feared that developers would dominate the government in a new county. At the November 7, general election in 1978, Measure A failed even to get a majority in the proposed Los Padres County. Countywide, the measure fared even worse, tallying only 22 percent approval.

In 1979, a group of disgruntled residents in eastern Fresno County formed the Mountain Alliance. Activists argued that the area was deprived of services and ignored by distant Fresno-based officials unfamiliar with the specific needs of the foothill and mountain communities. Again, control of land and an urban-rural split figured prominently in the effort. Rural landowners in the eastern county were frustrated by their lack of control over the existing development process.

In its study of the fiscal impacts of forming a new county, the Ponderosa County Formation Review Commission concluded that the proposed county would be economically viable and provide services generally comparable to similar counties statewide. It also concluded that the Ponderosa area was not receiving its theoretical fair share of services and that the remaining Fresno County would suffer a probable loss of revenue of roughly \$2.5 million annually (Ponderosa County Formation Review Commission, 1982). At the November 1982 election, voters in the proposed Ponderosa County approved with a 52 percent majority. However, as in other county formation efforts, proponents failed to win a dual majority, effectively halting the movement.

In 1986, a group of rural residents of San Bernardino County—the largest county in the United States outside of Alaska—attempted to form a separate Mojave County. The group complained that more-populated urban areas, such as the cities of San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ontario, dominated their area politically and had different overall service needs. The group, known as Mojave County Advocates, gathered more than 20,000 signatures, compelling the creation of a County Formation Review Commission. In its March 1988 report, the Mojave County Formation Review Commission concluded that the proposed county would be economically viable. However, it also concluded that the remaining San Bernardino County would suffer a net loss of as much as \$14 million in its first year. Nevertheless, it allowed the matter to proceed to election,

arguing that contracting arrangements between the two counties would help offset the county's revenue loss (Mojave County Formation Review Commission, 1988, p. 206-225).

As in many of the other county secession efforts, the Mojave movement claimed that the area was deprived of its fair share of services and the right to self-determination, and that residents of the high desert had different local government needs than urban residents. Supporters freely acknowledged that the effort was driven to a large extent by land-use issues (*Mojave County Advocate*, April 1989, p. 4). On June 7, 1988, although 61 percent of voters in the seceding area approved the measure, it received only 34 percent in the county as a whole. A second attempt to collect the necessary 30,000 signatures for a new ballot measure fizzled (*Mojave County Advocate*, December 1993).

The Lessons of California's County Secessions

The history of California's county secession movements reveals a remarkably similar pattern. First, in each case, secession supporters offered essentially the same line of reasoning in support of their cause. Proponents argued that the county was not responding to the unique needs of their area, and that secession would result in better representation, more local control over land use, and better services at lower tax rates.

Second, each was successful in bringing the proposal to a vote, no small achievement given the significant legal and financial hurdles facing secession proposals. Third, all but one case was successful in garnering a majority of votes within the seceding area. In four of seven cases, secessionists achieved overwhelming majorities of 59 percent or more. In the one case that failed to produce a majority, a split occurred within the pro-secessionist forces. Thus, the county cases clearly show the efficacy of classic tax, service, local control, and representational grievances in one important regard: bringing secession to a vote.

However, the last and most important outcome of each county secession movement was its decisive defeat. Unlike incorporation, creating a new government through secession requires concurrent majorities in both the seceding and original jurisdictions. In each case, voters outside the seceding area overwhelmingly rejected the proposal, high-

lighting the difficulty proponents face in making the case that reorganization would benefit voters in the remaining district. In the end, secessionist's arguments over tax and service disparities, while successful in getting the measure on the ballot and garnering a majority within seceding areas, simultaneously alienated voters in remaining areas who feared a loss of tax base.

This perception of a zero-sum outcome appears to be especially strong when the seceding group has expressed concerns about growth and urbanization, because such fears are commonly exploited in incorporation movements as a means to exclude high-density development associated with low-income groups (Burns, 1994). The county cases suggest that although traditional service, tax, and land-use claims may work in the case of municipal formations (Burns, 1994; Miller, 1981; Musso, 1994), these same arguments appear to doom campaigns that require a dual majority, particularly where the population of the seceding area is small.

Still, the county secession cases reveal that developing a winning strategy for secession of the San Fernando Valley from the City of Los Angeles is at least possible, if only because voters in the seceding area comprised nearly 50 percent of the city's total registered voters. Indeed, Valley secessionists were aware of this scenario, revealing that their strategy was to win a supermajority in the Valley as well as a significant minority of sympathy support in other areas of the city.

The question we ask is: Given the region's long history of secession, and the need to win a supermajority or greater of Valley voters, why did the secession campaign fail to build a coalition encompassing the diversity of interests in contemporary San Fernando Valley? Before tackling this question directly, we offer a brief history of secession in the Valley.

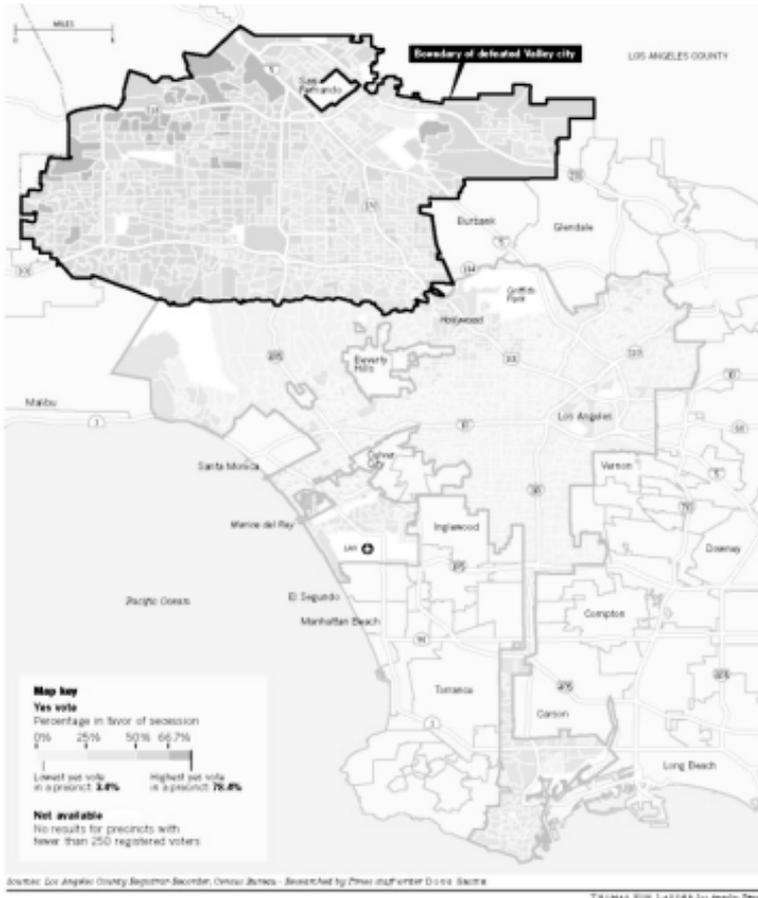
VALLEY SECESSION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Secession has been a recurring theme in Los Angeles politics, and San Fernando Valley has historically been the most predisposed to employ secession as a political strategy. The first Valley movement was organized during the 1920s, shortly after the area voted to join to the city



Figure 2.
????????? Title???????
Source: ????

Breaking down the Valley secession vote: A breakdown of the vote by precinct shows sentiment for forming a separate Valley city was split along geographical lines. The measure won in a ring of hillside communities in the west San Fernando Valley and Sunland/Tujunga, but with only isolated spots of strong support. It failed across most of the East Valley and some of the West Valley floor. Opposition was overwhelming outside the Valley, where the measure failed to get a majority in any precinct and lost by more than 3 to 1 in all but three areas—near LAX, in Hollywood and in the South Bay.



to access water (Keropian, 1961). From the 1940s to the 1960s, various communities in the city threatened secession, usually frustrated with the city's failure to adequately respond to matters of infrastructure development, quality of life, and adequacy of political representation. During this period, various proposals for a borough system were studied, although none was placed before the city electorate (Crouch & Dinerman, 1963, p. 165-167).

After almost forty years of informal secessionist agitation in the Valley, the first political movement emerged to push for independence in December 1961. Calling itself the Valleywide Better Government Committee (VBGC), the group formed to discuss emancipating from city control the area's nearly 900,000 residents and 212 square miles. Business leaders complained of poor services, lack of political representation, and the need for local control over development as reasons to secede. The group comprised mainly leaders from the West Valley Associated Chamber of Commerce. Soon after its formation, the VBGC reached out to the 13-member North and East Valley Chambers of Commerce voted to join the effort (Keropian, 1961). Unsuccessful efforts were also made to bring in east and mid-Valley chambers, such as Panorama City, Studio City, North Hollywood, Sherman Oaks, and Van Nuys (Addeo, 1961). By early 1963, however, the group's success in drawing attention to representational and service inequities, greater attention given to the area by Valley resident and Mayor Samuel Yorty, and insurmountable legal obstacles forced the group to end the quest for cityhood.

In 1975, a group calling itself the Committee Investigating Valley Independent City/County (CIVICC), emerged to again push the idea of Valley secession. The group's activities coincided within the context of two larger trends, the beginning of the collapse of the growth consensus (Purcell, 1998; Fulton, 1994) and the rise of the liberal, multiethnic Bradley coalition (Sonenshein, 1993). CIVICC echoed the complaints of previous efforts, asserting that city government was too remote and unresponsive; that downtown, south-central, and westside interests received the bulk of the city's attention; and that residents were insufficiently involved in the decision-making process (Marks, 1977, p. SC-2).

Like its predecessor, CIVICC was dominated by chamber of commerce interests bent on becoming the dominant entity in a new Valley growth machine (Purcell, 1997, Logan & Molotch, 1987). CIVICC's most notable accomplishment came following the discovery of a loophole in state law that might allow the tiny neighboring City of San Fernando to annex the Valley and then later allow parts of it to secede.⁴ Fearful that it would forfeit political control to the new inhabitants, the San Fernando City Council narrowly decided against CIVICC's secession plan (Lo, 1990, p. 165). San Fernando leaders then turned the tables on CIVICC, and formulated their own plan to annex portions of Granada Hills and all of Mission Hills, without the rest of the Valley (Baker, 1978; Marten, 1978).⁵ Hal Bernson, one of the main architects of the annexation plan, later said of San Fernando's decision: "That's the double-cross that hurt the movement more than anything else" (in Willon, 1998).

Many observers believed the plan was destined to fail anyway because the City of San Fernando was unlikely to file the necessary legal documents with Los Angeles' Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) before new legislation closed the loophole (Marten, 1978). Still, the plot represented enough of a threat that city leaders recruited state Assemblyman John T. Knox (D-Richmond) to change state statutes governing detachment. Passed in 1977, the Municipal Organization Act included a "kiss of death" provision that authorized a city council veto power over detachment proposals, practically ending CIVICC's hope of securing a secession referendum.

As with the VBGC (1961–1963), CIVICC's chief failure was its inability to build a broad coalition of Valley interests. In particular, the area's homeowner association (HOA) leaders viewed with suspicion CIVICC's interests in economic growth. CIVICC's pro-growth agenda manifested itself most prominently in its support of Van Nuys and Burbank airport expansion (Lo, 1991). Wary homeowners in neighborhoods impacted by the airports vigorously organized against expansion, arguing that increased noise, traffic, and pollution would harm their quality of life. Thus, although CIVICC's message of lower taxes resonated with Valley homeowners, the groups remained far apart on many high-profile growth issues.

By the late 1980s, however, and despite the sporadic conflicts and lingering suspicion between homeowner and business interests over growth issues, the region's rapid spatial changes were beginning to forge the ingredients for collective action between these longtime adversaries. One reason may be that by the 1990s, Valley HOAs had coalesced into an "institutionalized and durable social movement" (Purcell, 1997) capable of interacting with Valley business on a more or less an equal basis. Moreover, as Lo (1990) argues, collaboration on Prop. 13 and busing had provided Valley homeowner and business interests a critical blueprint for future collaboration. Above all, by 1990, issues of demographic change, increased density, and disinvestment had replaced taxes and busing as issues of prominence. With each Valley power broker increasingly frustrated with the pace and type of spatial change, and each increasingly unable to impose its will on growth issues, the stage was set for the emergence of a new and powerful urban coalition.

Expanding the Coalition: Valley VOTE's "Small Property" Alliance

In 1995, Granada Hills Assemblywoman Paula Boland, former vice president of the United Chambers of Commerce of the Valley and a CIVICC board member, introduced AB 2043 to remove the city council veto over secession proposals.⁶ That legislation died, but the near success spurred Jeff Brain, a Sherman Oaks-based commercial real estate broker, and Richard Close, longtime president of Sherman Oaks Homeowners' Association, to resurrect the idea of secession. Eventually, a coalition of 24 business groups, mostly area chambers of commerce, and 17 homeowner associations threw their support behind Valley VOTE. The group then embarked on a successful campaign to gather the signatures of 25 percent of the area's registered voters necessary to trigger a LAFCO Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis of secession.⁷

In the summer of 1997, Valley VOTE recruited Granada Hills Assemblyman Tom McClintock (R-38th district) and longtime Sherman Oaks Homeowners' Association member Assemblyman Robert Hertzberg (D-40th district) to sponsor a new and improved secession bill to remove the city's veto power over secession.⁸ After some initial hesitation, Gov. Pete Wilson signed the bill into law in October 1997.

Purcell (1997, 1998, 2001) identified several factors to explain the groups' "odd-couple" coalition of pro-growth business and slow-growth homeowner associations, including a shared philosophy of small government and low taxes. As Hogen-Esch has argued (2001), Valley VOTE's coalition also shared a common land-use vision, based on preserving the integrity of the Valley as suburban space.

Between 1960 and 1990, global economic forces and the downsizing of the aerospace industry significantly reshaped urban space in Southern California (Waldinger et al., 1996; Davis, 1990, Boudreau & Kiel, 2001). Nowhere else were these changes more dramatic than in the Valley. By the late 1980s, the region's manufacturing-based economy, which had sustained the region as a quintessential American automobile suburb in the 1960s and 1970s, had given way to an increasingly low-wage manufacturing and service sector-based economy heavily dependent upon cheap immigrant labor. In order to house the workers in the new economy, the Valley, and many other "inner-ring" suburbs in the region, rapidly urbanized areas during the 1980s and 1990s (Davis, 1990; Teaford, 1997; Fishman, 1987; Garreau, 1991). Demographic and housing shifts were particularly dramatic in areas in the Valley's flatlands, such as Van Nuys, Panorama City, Reseda, and North Hollywood, where rates of single-family ownership and the percentage of Anglos have dropped precipitously. Although more affluent areas in the hills of the south and west Valley also became more ethnically diverse and less single-family since 1980, they still remain predominantly Anglo,⁹ owner-occupied, single-family areas that have resented the encroachment of graffiti, gangs, and other urban ills.

Just as spiraling property taxes had forged a "small property" coalition in the 1970s (Lo, 1990), the area's rapid urbanization during the 1980s set the stage for a second small property backlash, focused on protecting the Valley's middle-class suburban character. In particular, both coalition partners coveted local government (particularly zoning) power to protect single-family areas and to attract revenue-generating, high-end retail and white-collar firms that cater to the middle class (Hogen-Esch, 2001, Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, 2002). This vision also sought to exclude or contain undesirable businesses

and poor residents (Hogen-Esch, 2001). In short, Valley VOTE sought the authority to attract and maintain desirable commercial and residential investment, as well as the power to exclude perceived land-use threats.

Thus, Valley VOTE's coalition of business and homeowner associations represented a significant expansion not only of the potential support for Valley secession, but also of a potentially powerful coalition of interests capable of challenging growth elites. However, for reasons we explain in the following section, Valley VOTE's reliance on classic government efficiency and "fair share" rhetoric, as well as many of its leaders' associations with previous exclusionary efforts, such as Prop. 13 and antibusing, alienated many Latinos and liberals in the east Valley.

POLITICS FROM THE MIDDLE: FACING ENEMIES ON ALL SIDES

On November 5, 2002, residents in the City of Los Angeles were given the opportunity to vote on two secession proposals, Measure F for San Fernando Valley and Measure H for Hollywood. In the Valley, as in most county secession measures, residents passed the measure with a slim 50.7 percent majority. In many ways, the vote represented a tremendous victory of a political movement that from the start faced a powerful anti-secession coalition of government officials, public employee unions, regional business interests, and ethnic lobby groups. During the campaign itself, Mayor Hahn led the main anti-secession group, the Campaign for One Los Angeles, which far outspent secessionists. However, secession's inability to ignite a strong grassroots style campaign failed for reasons that go beyond money. We argue that secessionists stumbled because they used a campaign playbook more appropriate for the demographics of the 1970s than the reality of the Valley's diversity in 2002.

From the beginning, Valley VOTE's grand strategy was to win a supermajority of Valley voters while gaining a significant minority of sympathy support in the rest of the city. Because the Valley contains nearly half of the city's voters, such a supermajority had a realistic shot of offsetting lost votes outside the area and winning citywide (Finnegan, 2002).¹⁰

Still, as outlined in the previous section, Valley secessionists faced a problem common to virtually all middle-class social movements, namely the prospect of facing enemies on both sides of the political spectrum. Many of secession's leaders had orchestrated winning middle-class campaigns over growth, busing, and taxation during the 1970s and 1980s. When they won property tax limits and ended forced-busing, they became idols of the nation's conservatives. When they won height- and office-construction restrictions along Ventura Boulevard, they became heroes to liberal environmentalists and growth-control advocates. In each case, they had beaten "big government" and in the process won praise from ideologues on both sides of the political spectrum who admired their populist calls for democratic participation and local control (Lo, 1990, Davis, 1990, Fulton, 1994).

During the secession campaign, however, secessionists came under attack from the city's business and political establishment as well as unions and ethnic groups. Both accused secessionists of being aspiring "power elites" wanting to control land use and taxation for their own ends, and would-be perpetrators of "white flight" seeking to divorce themselves from the responsibilities of caring for the city's poor.

Early in the campaign secessionists had made awkward attempts to reach out to northeast Valley Latino organizations, such as the Mexican American Political Association. However, many Valley Latino and black leaders who viewed Valley VOTE with suspicion pointed to the fact that several individuals directly or indirectly involved with the secession effort were prime movers in the divisive 1970s Bustop campaign to halt integration of Valley public schools. They were also suspicious of Valley VOTE's support of Finally Restoring Excellence in Education (FREE), a Valley-based effort to break away from the LA Unified School District (LAUSD) and create two separate school districts in the Valley. Latino leaders in particular had argued that FREE's proposed north and south districts gerrymander the region along race-ethnic and class lines.

In addition, east Valley leaders could also cite their support for more recent and racially divisive state initiatives, such as 227, 187, and 209 (Baldassare, 2000, p. 91). According to Irene Tovar, the executive direc-

tor of the Valley-based Latin American Civic Association, “Many of us question the purpose of secession. . . . We are at the beginning of the first time that minorities have had a chance to get elected officials coming out of their neighborhoods. Will we be turned back?” (Testimony before the Commission on Local Governance for the 21st Century, March 5, 1999). Trapped by their own history and lacking any tradition of coalition building with minority residents in the northeast Valley, secessionists needed to craft arguments that would appeal directly to individual minority voters.

In this regard, Valley VOTE proved incapable of weaning itself from classic, middle-class arguments of the past. After all, this was the same message that had brought the movement to an historic secession vote. However, Valley VOTE failed to realize that these middle-class populist arguments would not serve them as well in attempting to build a broad Valley secession coalition. In particular, its antigovernment and fair share of services rhetoric failed to resonate in most heavily minority and liberal east Valley communities.

Unlike many middle-class Anglos, studies show that California Latinos by and large have positive attitudes toward government. Polls find that they are less likely to say that the federal government is run by a few big interests and more likely to say it is run for the benefit of all the people. Baldassare (2000) found that two in three Latinos think that state government regulation of business is necessary to protect the public interest, and only one in three feels that government regulation of business usually does more harm than good. Moreover, Latinos have more liberal attitudes when it comes to taxes and spending, leaning toward having the government spend more money on social programs, even if it means higher taxes (Baldassare, 2000 p. 122-123).

Secessionists’ anti-big government arguments also had more than a hint of unreality. The very suburb that secessionists were attempting to liberate from big government was itself a product of government largess. The water brought from the Owen’s Valley, which made the San Fernando Valley arable and generates some of the electricity that makes it habitable, was a product of city planning at its grandest scale. The freeways that provided quick access to the Valley were mostly paid for by the federal government, as were the subsidized mortgages that made

homeownership available to many. In this light, secession's denunciation of government, regulation, and taxation seemed hypocritical. Furthermore, secessionists' attacks on government were viewed by Latinos and other minorities as code words for potentially slashing housing, welfare, and other government programs that disproportionately benefit low-income Latinos. Finally, railings against the Valley's urban ills, crime, graffiti, and gangs struck many as thinly veiled, anti-immigrant rhetoric along the lines of highly racialized proposition campaigns during the 1990s. In the end, traditional notions of suburban exclusion that had proved successful in prior campaigns became political suicide amid the Valley's new demographic reality.

SELLING THE VALLEY TO ITSELF: A MULTICULTURAL SUBURBIA?

Developing a winning strategy for Valley secession, given both the dual majority requirement and the array of well-organized and funded opposition efforts, may not have been possible. Yet, we argue that Valley secessionists ignored a strategy that would have given the campaign the best chance for victory, namely, selling the Valley as a "multicultural suburbia." The irony of secession's failure is that instead of forming the basis for collective action, the suburban ethos formed the basis of conflict within the Valley. Trapped by traditional notions of suburban insulation and homogeneity, secession supporters failed to see the promise of the strategy of selling the new Valley city as protector of multicultural suburban space.

Historically, suburbs have promised political separation from the industrial city with its political machines and immigrant constituents. Those who moved from the city also claimed democratic advantages of smaller governments that were closer to the people. By the middle of the 20th century, suburban developers had invented the images that came to embody the American Dream, with the single-family home at its core. These communities were sold to the growing middle class not only as a way to escape the problems of the industrial city but also as a ladder to instant social status by living in a racially segregated social environ-

ment (Judd & Swanstrom, 1998, p. 301; Danielson, 1978; Jackson, 1984; Woods, 1958; Fawcett, 1903).

By the 1980s and 1990s, the Valley had undergone a transformation from a virtually all-white, “America’s Suburb” to what Kotkin and Ozuma (2002) have dubbed the “Mestizo Valley.” Despite some secessionists’ characterization that the Valley was becoming an “urban slum,” real estate trends revealed that Latinos had become the most numerous among the Valley’s recent homeowners. According to the San Fernando Valley Board of Realtors, the heavily Latino northeast Valley has one of the highest rates of home ownership in the region (Kotkin & Ozuma, 2002; Rodriguez, 1996). Drawn by relatively modest housing prices, Latino’s had been helping to preserve the Valley’s above-average levels of single-family homeownership, even amidst business and white flight during the 1990s (Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley, 2000, p. 50-54). Secessionist failed to realize that rather than a threat, Valley Latinos had come to represent the key to preserving the Valley as suburban space.

During his campaign for the new Valley city council, candidate Jerry England commented:

It’s just not politically correct to talk about in California, but [illegal immigration] is a large problem. We really haven’t done a good job of closing the borders. There’s a lot of illegals. I admire the Latino candidates, and they feel the same way. They want to protect their community, and I want to protect mine (Buckley, 2002, p. 1A)

The quote nicely illustrates secession’s dual failures: 1) secessionists’ view of the region’s decline in racialized terms, and 2) the failure of secession leaders to realize that Valley Latinos also want to protect their communities from the threat of urbanization.

Secessionists never fully realized that Valley Latinos are settling in the Valley for many of the same reasons that brought earlier waves of migrants from the East and Midwest: affordable single-family homes with yards for children and better public schools. Thus, ironically, although the battle over secession was largely fought to protect the region’s suburban character, secessionists’ simultaneously failed to grasp the universal appeal of the suburban ideal. In other words, given the Valley’s

new demographic realities, the best strategy for winning the necessary supermajority was also the most obvious: suburbia. Because the Valley has always represented the city's middle-class suburban heartland, secession's mantra of "local control" to preserve accessible single-family homeownership, good schools, and safe neighborhoods would have been precisely the message that Latinos and the other minorities wanted to hear. Moreover, a campaign emphasizing diversity and homeownership would have resonated better with the significant population of more south Valley Jews who have historically rejected the region's politics of exclusion (Sonenshein, 1993).

Instead of portraying the Valley as a community besieged by urban ills, secessionists should have emphasized a positive vision of protecting the multicultural suburban dream. By emphasizing a shared ethos of small-scale home and business ownership and promoting the positive benefits of government, including promises to protect and enhance programs to help renters become homeowners, and government support for minority small business enterprise, secessionists may have unified Valley residents under a common ethos of preserving the Valley as a multicultural suburbia.

SECESSION AND THE FUTURE OF GROWTH POLITICS IN LOS ANGELES AND BEYOND

Despite the resounding defeat of measure F, it is our contention that the case of San Fernando Valley secession has much to reveal about the past and future of growth politics in Southern California. In attempting to understand why secession failed in the San Fernando Valley, we analyzed seven county-level secessions attempted between 1976 and 1988. The results showed that traditional service, tax, and land-use claims can succeed in getting the measure on the ballot, and even in garnering a majority within seceding areas. However, the results also show that these arguments face difficulties at the final stage where a dual majority is required. Secessions, we argue, differ from incorporations in that they require two essentially separate campaigns: one emphasizing grievances within the seceding area to get the measure on the ballot and a second

campaign aimed at a wider audience that downplays these grievances, while unifying the region under a common theme.

We then trace the historical evolution of secession movements in the Valley and show that Valley VOTE represented a new and potentially powerful urban coalition between two traditional growth adversaries, business and homeowner organizations. However, we find that the group's use of classic middle-class, fair-share and antigovernment arguments served to both alienate residents outside the city—who feared loss of tax base—as well as *significant portions of minority and Jewish voters within San Fernando Valley itself who are far more predisposed to have positive views of government*. In merely repackaging arguments from the past, secessionists were never able to shake the perception—particularly in the east Valley—that cityhood was a way for affluent whites to win political power amidst the region's demographic shifts.

We also found that although facing an uphill and perhaps unwinnable battle, secession could have improved their chances of victory—and ensured a stronger voice in future reforms—had its leaders articulated a more culturally inclusive vision of a new city. A campaign based on protecting the region as a “multicultural suburbia” may have resonated among a large population of minorities predisposed to a message embracing family, suburban homeownership, upward mobility, and neighborhood stability.

Finally, we contend that Valley secession represents a classic conflict between two fundamentally opposed intentions for urban space in Southern California—one emphasizing “growth with equity”¹¹ and the other seeking to protect the region's historically dominant spatial vision, the suburban ideal. Although more research is needed to more fully understand the role Latinos and other minorities will play in urban and suburban politics, we believe the case represents the pivotal role that they can play in determining the future spatial development of California.

REFERENCES

- Addeo, Ed. (1961, December 24). Valley secession move has review. West Valley Herald Tribune p.1,1.
- Baker, Erwin. (1978, July 4). LA-San Fernando land “war” looms. Los Angeles Times. p. 1, 2.
- Baldassare, Mark. (2000). California in the new millennium: the changing social and political landscape. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boudreau, J. A., & Keil, Roger. (2001, September). Seceding from responsibility? Secession movements in Los Angeles. Urban Studies,38, 1701-1732.
- Buckley, Stephen. (2002, October 13). Leaving LA. St. Petersburg Times. p.1A.
- Burns, Nancy. (1994). The formation of American local governments. New York: Oxford University Press.
- County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed Canyon County (1976, August 17). Final Report. Los Angeles, CA. County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed Canyon County.
- County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed Canyon County. (1978, August 25) Final Report. Los Angeles, CA: County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed Canyon County.
- County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed Peninsula County (1978, March 24) Final Report, Los Angeles, CA: County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed Peninsula County.
- County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed South Bay County. (1978, March 24). Final Report. Los Angeles, CA: County Formation Review Commission for the Proposed South Bay County.
- Crouch, Winston W., & Dinerman, Beatrice. (1963). Southern California metropolis. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Danielson, Michael N. (1976). The politics of exclusion. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Davis, Mike. (1990). *City of quartz*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Detwiler, Peter. (1996, September 29). Suburban secession: history and context. Paper presented at the Envisioning California Conference, Senate Committee on Housing and Land Use.
- Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley. (2000). First annual survey of the San Fernando Valley. Van Nuys, CA: Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley.
- Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley. (2000). *San Fernando Valley Almanac*. Burbank, CA. Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley.
- Fawcett, Weldon. (1903, July). Suburban life in America. *Cosmopolitan*, p. 309.
- Finnegan, Michael. (2002, July 2). Voters oppose breaking up Los Angeles. *Los Angeles Times*, P.1.
- Fishman, Robert. (1987). *Bourgeois utopias: the rise and fall of suburbia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fogelson, Robert. (1967). *The fragmented metropolis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fulton, William. (1997). *The reluctant metropolis*. Point Arena, CA: Solano Press.
- Garreau, Joel. (1991). *Edge city: life on the new frontier*. New York: Doubleday.
- Gottdeiner, Mark. (1985). *The social production of urban space*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Hogen-Esch, Tom. (2001). Urban secession and the politics of growth: the case of los angeles. *Urban Affairs Review*, 36, 783-809.
- Hogen-Esch, Tom. (2002, May). *Recapturing suburbia: urban secession and the politics of growth in los angeles, boston, and seattle*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Southern California.
- Judd, Dennis R. & Todd Swanstrom, (1998). *City politics*, second edition. New York: Longman.

- Keil, Roger. (2000). Governance restructuring in Los Angeles and Toronto: Amalgamation or secession? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24, 758-780.
- Keropian, Haig. (1961, December 16). Associated Chambers Study on Secession Gets Support. Valley Green Sheet.
- Kotkin, Joel, & Erika Ozuma. (2002). The changing face of the San Fernando Valley. Van Nuys CA: Economic Alliance of the San Fernando Valley.
- Langius, Jamie. (1996, June 6). Recent secession movements from Los Angeles. Sacramento, CA. California State Assembly, Office of Policy Research.
- Littwin, Susan. (1978, May 22). Home rule: The natives are restless. *New West Magazine*, SC25-SC26.
- Lo, Clarence. (1990). Small property versus big government. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Logan, John R., & Molotch, Harvey L. (1987). *Urban fortunes: The political economy of place*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Los Padres County Formation Review Commission (1978, June 26) Final Report. Santa Barbara, CA: Los Padres County Formation Review Commission.
- Marks, Marlene Adler. (1977, March 28). Secession: Will the Valley leave LA flat? , SC-2, SC-3.
- Marten, Michael. (1978, July 4). Another city eyes the Valley. *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, p. A3.
- Mayers, Jackson. (1976). *The San Fernando Valley*. Walnut, CA: John D. McIntyre.
- Miller, Gary J. (1981). *Cities by contract: The politics of municipal incorporation*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Mojave County Formation Review Commission (1988, March 24). Final Report. San Bernardino, CA: Mojave County Formation Review Commission.

- Mojave County Advocate, April 1989, p.4
- Molotch, Harvey. (1976). The city as a growth machine. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, 309-322.
- Musso, Juliet. (1994). Drawing the line: the political economy of municipal incorporation. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley.
- Pincetl, S. (1999). *Transforming California: A political history of land use and development*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ponderosa County Formation Review Commission. (1982, March 16). Final Report Fresno CA: Ponderosa County Formation Review Commission.
- Purcell, Mark. (1997). Ruling Los Angeles: neighborhood movements, urban regimes, and the production of urban space in Southern California. *Urban Geography*, 18, 684-704.
- Purcell2. (1998). Power in Los Angeles: neighborhood movements, urban politics, and the production of urban space. Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Geography, University of California Los Angeles.
- Purcell3. (2000). The decline of the political consensus for urban growth: evidence from Los Angeles. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 22, 85-100.
- Purcell4. (2001). Metropolitan reorganization as a politics of urban growth: the case of San Fernando Valley Secession. *Political Geography*, 20, 613-633.
- Rankin, Jerry. (1978, November 8) County split is rejected by four-to-one margin. Santa Barbara News Press,
- Rodriguez, Gregory. (1996). *The emerging Latino middle class*. Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University, Institute for Public Policy.
- Rolfe, Lionel. (1976, July 23-29). Baxter Ward answers secessionists' charges. Los Angeles Free Press, p. 9.
- Simmons, Bob. (1976, April). Revolt of the Balkans: The move to secede from LA County. *California Journal*, p. 117-119.

- Sonenshein, Raphael J. (1993). *Politics in black and white: race and power in Los Angeles*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Teaford, Jon C. (1997). *Post-suburbia: government and politics in the edge cities*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Testimony before the commission on local governance for the 21st century. (1999, March 5). Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Commission on Local Governance for the 21st Century.
- Waldinger, Roger, & Bozorgmehr, Medhi. (1996). *Ethnic Los Angeles*. New York, Russell Sage Foundation.
- Willon, Phil. (1998, August 16). Valley secession effort's roots go back to the '70s. *Los Angeles Times*. Valley Edition, A1.

NOTES

1. Residents also defeated Measure H which would have created a new City of Hollywood.
2. California's Cortese-Knox Act requires both a majority in the seceding area, as well as in the entire city.
3. Attempts to create Chumash, Los Cerritos, San Gabriel Valley and San Fernando Valley counties from Los Angeles County were also attempted. However, none of these efforts came to a vote. An area south of Lake Tahoe also attempted to secede from El Dorado County but the vote here was non-binding. These movements are not considered in this analysis save for the observation that bringing secession measures to the ballot requires a great deal of political effort.
4. The loophole permitted an existing city to annex another city's territory without the consent of the other city, unless at least 25% of registered voters or landowners had protested. In that case, the annexation would have required majorities in both the City of San Fernando and the annexed areas. Under the law at the time, an annexation would only have required a majority approval of the annexing city's Council and of the county's LAFCO Board (See Willon, 1998).

5. Besides increasing the city's tax base and geographical area, San Fernando's primary interest in annexation was in assuring that the nearby San Fernando Mission, which adorns the city's logo, would be captured within the city's limits.

6. Boland, as president of Finally Restoring Excellence in Education (FREE), has also been a central figure in efforts to breakup the Los Angeles Unified School District. Valley VOTE was also actively supported LAUSD breakup.

7. On December 9, 1999 Valley VOTE submitted roughly 205,000 signatures to LAFCO. On March 15, LAFCO announced that enough signatures had been validated to meet the 25% threshold (132,000). If the study finds that separation can be "revenue neutral" a vote could be held as soon as November 2002.

8. AB 62 requires a majority of voters in the seceding area, as well as the entire city to approve a breakup.

9. The Valley's "Anglo" community is extremely diverse, including large numbers of Persians, Armenians and Jews.

10. Los Angeles Times staff writer Michael Finnegan reported that pro-secession forces needed to win at least 40% of the vote outside of the Valley to prevail citywide assuming normal patters of voter turnout (Finnegan, 2002).

11. The "growth with equity" coalition represents a greater consensus than existed a decade ago that economic growth is connected to non-growth objectives like improved quality of life, reduced poverty, and affordable housing. This group includes progressive developers and planners, backed by minority groups, unions, foundations, churches, and advocates of the poor. They still favor traditional pro-growth policies that focus on the development of office, airport, and port infrastructure but advocate a modification of these programs to give increased weight to poverty reduction and greater equity. Expected population growth could be accommodated through the densification of land use and the promotion of mass transit. The encouragement of such redevelopment would be linked to requirements for low-income housing, and affirmative contracting.



Figure 2.
Valley Population by Race/Ethnicity

Source: 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 US Census, Los Angeles Department of City Planning, *City of Los Angeles Community Plan Profiles*, August 1, 1995.

| Race/ Ethnicity | 1970 Percent Pop. | 1980 Percent Pop. | 1990 Percent Pop. | 2000 Percent Pop. |
|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| White | 85.3 | 75.1 | 55.6 | 41.3 |
| Black | 1.7 | 3.1 | 4.2 | 4.4 |
| Latino | 11.6 | 18.2 | 32.4 | 42.4 |
| Asian | 1.0 | 4.3 | 7.7 | 9.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Figure ?.
Map of San Fernando Valley

Source: City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning

