

Preliminary Report

Political Participation within the Latino Community of Somerville



Yanelly Molina

Urban Borderlands: Somerville, MA

Professor Pacini Hernandez

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Introduction

Although Latinos have been living in Somerville since the early 1980s and currently comprise nearly ten percent of the city's population, no Latino has held an elected position. Moreover, in 2003, a debate forum was organized by the Latino community where the candidates running for Mayor could present their perspectives on various issues in front of the Latino community. However, none of the candidates attended this event. From these two incidents, one can infer that the Latino community in Somerville is not very active politically. This paper attempts to shed some light on the root cause of the limited political presence and power of Latinos in Somerville.

Originally this oral history report intended to research the political 'life' of Latinos living in Somerville. I proposed to look specifically at how they defined politics, what experiences have molded this definition and how they have been involved politically, both in the United States and in their home countries. Other primary topics intended to be covered in this research project included barriers that prevented them from becoming politically active and differences between female and male political participation. As I interviewed Latino leaders and social service providers, I began to realize that the Latino community was not very active neither through electoral politics nor political activism. As a result, the focus of this paper was changed because thus far only attempts have been made to engage the Latino community in the political sphere. Therefore, this oral history report documents some of the barriers that inhibit Latinos from participating politically. In addition, through interviews with members of the Somerville Latino Coalition, a community based group attempting to better organize the Latino community, the researcher was able to gather some information regarding attempts to do so.

Methodology

Originally the researcher proposed to select narrators according to the following guidelines: two Latinos who are or have worked in the municipal government specifically in elected positions; three Latino community leaders/ social service providers; and three Latino community residents. For this paper, a minimum of seven interviews were required and a narrator selection process such as the one outlined above would enable the researcher to gather information from narrators with differing backgrounds and hence make the report more objective.

The researcher began this report by interviewing a Latino legislative aid at the Massachusetts State House in order to find out which Latinos from Somerville were politically involved. I reasoned that politically active Latinos would contact this legislative aid in order to voice their concerns. In addition, the researcher also started to investigate the number and names of Latinos who held elected and appointed positions in City Hall, in order to set up interviews with them. Moreover, during this time, interviews were set up with Latino social service providers in order to understand the political landscape in Somerville at the community level and ask them for assistance in finding residents to interview.

During the interview with the Latino legislative aid, I became aware of the fact that not many Latinos in the Middlesex county within Somerville have been involved at the state and local level. It is important to note that during the time of the interview, this individual had only held this position for three and a half months and therefore the findings in this interview are limited. I also tried to set up an interview with the person who held this position beforehand, but was unable to do the interview because this individual had prior engagements. An interview with this individual would have been more insightful and weighty since they held this position for an

extended period of time. Although this individual had held this position for a short time, only one person from Somerville had contacted them.

Finding out how many Latinos have held or currently hold elected and appointed by City Hall took longer than anticipated. Finding out how many Latinos held appointed positions was included in this investigation because such individuals may be likely to run for elected positions due to their knowledge about how City Hall works and because of networks and contacts established within the local government.¹ Since no Latinos have held elected positions, I was able to find this out right away. Only Marty Martinez, of Mexican descent, from Nebraska has run for an elected position twice, in 2003 and currently in 2005. In terms of appointed positions, I spent a little more than four weeks calling City Hall. The researcher called every other day but kept being told to call back or that I would receive a call the following day, but never did. In addition, a lot of time was spent leaving messages. Eventually, I found out that there were about nine Latinos working in City Hall, out of about nine-hundred employees, excluding the school department. No breakdown was available for appointed versus other types of employment, such as custodial workers. It is important to note here that this number was obtained in a telephone conversation with the Personnel Department and a document verifying this data was not available.

Through online research, I found out that there is an office for Democratic Party in West Somerville. I called this office to find out if any Latinos were active in the Democratic Party and was told that this information could not be disclosed. However, the individual with whom I spoke with took my phone number and said they would find out if there were any Latinos, and if there were, they would tell this person about this oral history project and give them my phone number. I was never contacted by a Latino in the Democratic Party, relying on the fact that the

¹ Luis Rivera*

individual I spoke with kept their word, this could mean that there are no Latinos active in this organization or that those that are may not be interested in being included in this report. There could be many reasons behind either of these two assumptions, such as barriers that inhibit Latinos from participating or fear of being interviewed. The researcher was also able to find out that there are two Latinos in the Progressive Somerville Democrats, a political organization trying to push for economic and social justice, in addition to the representation of the newly arriving population in Somerville.² Both of these individuals are second generation Latinos who have grown up outside of Somerville.

At the beginning of this project I also began to research and set up interviews with community leader and social service providers, since they usually have developed networks with residents and have contact with political leaders. Through these first interviews, I began to find out a lot about the political landscape in Somerville but it turned out to be very complicated and at times stained with interpersonal disputes. Thus, much time was spent on trying to sort through these issues. In addition, setting up interviews was an enormous task in itself due to the fact that these individuals are, of course, very busy. Near the end of the semester I was forced to change the focus of this oral history report. Since most of the narrators interviewed were social service providers, this report does not reflect the Latino community as a whole.

By the end of the semester, eleven narrators were interviewed, seven of which have been or currently are social service providers. Of the eleven narrators, seven narrators have been or are currently involved in the Latino Coalition. The remaining narrators include Alex Pirie, who has worked with the Latino community for many years but is not of Latin American descent; Marty Martinez, of Mexican descent who is running for Alderman at Large in the 2005 race and the current Mayor, Joseph Curtatone. In addition, a Latino legislative at the State House was

² Marty Martinez

interviewed. Due to the nature of this report, fake names were given to most of the interviewees in order to preserve their identities. The made up names have a star next to them. All fake names are masculine since very few females were interviewed. If fake female names were given to these individuals, their identities could be easily deduced.

Limitations and Biases

Although the researcher intended to put together an objective report, biases are almost always present although we may not realize them. Urban Borderlands was my first anthropology course at Tufts University. Due to my limited experience in anthropology and the time frame in which this project was completed, a more thorough and extensive analysis into the subject researched is needed before any general conclusions about the political life of Latinos living in Somerville is made. In addition, because all of the interviews were conducted in English and some of the interviewees were less comfortable speaking English, the content of my interviews may be skewed because words that have a meaning in English may be different than that in Spanish. Lastly, as mentioned in the methodology section, due to the fact that mainly social service providers were interviewed, my findings are limited in scope.

Defining Political Participation

Many of the people interviewed, including all of the social service providers, defined political participation as building social networks, “knowing how the system works” and becoming engaged in this system. For example, many narrators pointed not only to the fact that political participation may include calling up representatives, but that people are aware of who to call, how to access their representatives and that they can actually do so. As one narrator explains:

“Politics means to participate in different aspects of the life in the community, such as a parents’ organization looking to have a say in the curriculum designed by the school system. It could be a group concerned with housing that wants to influence the budget for affordable housing. It could be a group that doesn’t feel comfortable with their representatives in a particular district and they want to influence or make that person accountable. One type of politics, is traditional, like to vote, but the other is to be involved in the process to have knowledge. They [Latino community] could be represented by an Anglo-Saxon, but the Latinos in the community know that this specific person is responsible, and they make him accountable. It could even be a traffic light.”³

In the same vein, another narrator notes, taking into account the issue of undocumented Latinos:

“Just knowing the system. No one is going to get involved if they do not know what the purpose of that meeting is. [It is important to know] what you are going to gain and what the goal is. We need to educate the community. Probably we cannot get all the undocumented Latinos or all the documented legal residents because they will think ‘what am I going to be doing here if I am not a US citizen.’ And for those that are US citizens we need to ask them information [such as] ‘Do you know how to vote? Do you know who is running for President, Vice President? Do you know how to go and vote?... Like let’s say if I know how to address an issue with my sons principal. If I know the right way how to do it than a regular parent. But if you don’t know the path, like first talking to the teacher and writing and then writing a paper to the principal. You have to learn that. Not everyone knows how to do it.”⁴

An example that demonstrates the importance of building social networks in order to engage the Latino community was when the Latino Coalition organized a forum where Latino residents could voice their concerns to elected officials in the year 2000. According to the individuals interviewed, their event was a success because it was attended by more than 100

³ Luis Rivera*

⁴ Alberto Mendoza*

community members.⁵ They used personal connections to attract people to the event. One Coalition member who worked in the school system told parents about the conference, another used his contacts in the Community Action Agency of Somerville and another narrator used his connections through his businesses and through announcements at his Church.

From these quotes it seems that many of the individuals interviewed are concerned with the lack of know-how among community members to immerse themselves into the ‘political life’ of the community. It is important to note here again that the majority of individuals interviewed were social service providers, and as a result, their opinions about what political participation means may be influenced by the kind of work that they do. These definitions are not meant to represent the views of the Latino community or all social service providers. In addition, the majority of these individuals have been involved in the Somerville Latino Coalition, which is trying to get itself on its feet as an advocacy organization for the Latino community. Perhaps they focus on this aspect of political participation because this is one of the major issues they are currently struggling with within the community.

⁵ Juan Gutierrez*

Barriers to Political Participation

As mentioned in previous sections of this report, all of the individuals interviewed stated that the Latino community is not very active when it comes to participating in politics.⁶ In total, six main barriers that prevent or repel Latinos in Somerville from engaging in politics were mentioned in the interviews.

Negative Political Experiences in Home Countries

One reason why some of the narrators believe that some Latinos in Somerville do not participate in politics is not because they are legally barred from doing so, but because they had negative experiences with it in their home countries. For example, Juan Gutierrez stated that many of the Latinos in Somerville who came from Central American and the Caribbean experienced a lot of political repression because of the civil wars that took place in many of these countries during the 1980s. He feels that for these Latinos:

“Politics is a dirty word. We don’t want to talk about it. A lot of us have had bad experiences with politics at home, either voting or the abuse of power or a lot of other stuff. When we talk to people about politics some people avoid talking about it. It’s almost like talking to someone who has been raped. It’s that kind of thing. It’s so bad. It’s so dirty, politics at home. It’s almost rape. It’s disgusting.”⁷

In his opinion, because of the abuse of power during this time, people were very limited in terms of voicing their opinions. This narrator also noted that most of the Salvadorans who migrated during this time and currently did so came from the rural regions of El Salvador, where political repression was the greatest.

⁶ http://www.ci.somerville.ma.us/newsDetail.cfm?instance_id=111

⁷ Juan Gutierrez*

Similarly, Jorge Aguilar* believes that because of the abuse of power and corruption in their home countries, people have grown to distrust in the government and in authority. For example, he remembers:

“My mom told me, ‘If you see that someone is going to mug you, give them your money and give them what they want. But if the police come up to you late at night, run because they are going to want something out of you and its going to be bad’.”

In his opinion, this turns out to be a huge problem because “a lot of clients, we tell them to call the police but they say no. They say no because they believe the police might find something wrong.”

This narrator also stated that because of this distrust, individuals who do approach City Hall, from the Latino community, might be seen as traitors or as if they are trying to obtain access to City Hall just for themselves. At the same time, this narrator believes that differing opinions in terms of obtaining Latino political power in City Hall gets in the way of reaching this goal. For example, some individuals and groups may believe that confrontations, such as protests directed at representatives is the best method while others contend that meetings and conversations with representatives would bring more long term changes. This difference creates tensions and divisions between such individuals and groups and consequently impedes action.

Desire to Migrate Back to Home Country

Another barrier that came up in the interviews was that when immigrants come to live in the United States, they think they will only be here for a short period of time. As a result, many times they do not take out the time to participate in the life of the community. For example one narrator noted

“So many people come over here. They want to come here and make money and go back home or make money to send back home. It’s that when your going to be somewhere and you know they are going to be there for five years...When I came here I knew I was going to be here to

stay because my situation in Venezuela was bad and I had nobody else. So many parents that you see and their kids doing bad in school and their parents say 'I don't care because we are going back to *****, or going back to...wherever we are from and he'll behave there'.”⁸

In this narrator's opinion, this way of thinking hurts the community when community members just come here to Somerville thinking that they will move to another community or back home because it does not make them invested in trying to change the community they live in.

Lack of Latino U.S. Citizens in Somerville

Many narrators pointed to the fact that the population of Latinos in Somerville who are U.S. citizens is very small. Therefore, the voting power of this community is very minimal. The narrators explained that most Latinos in Somerville either hold legal status, but not US citizenship or are undocumented. Of those who are US citizens, most have only attained this status recently.⁹ Consequently, these Latinos are still becoming familiar with the political system. There is also a younger generation of Latinos, the second generation, who may vote in the future, but for the most part, are too young to vote currently. As a result, a large segment of the Latino community of Somerville is unable to call up their representatives in order to voice their concerns or vote.

Some of the narrators interviewed said that because of the limited voting power in the Latino community, the two candidates for Mayor in 2003 did not attend an event organized by the Somerville Latino Coalition where they would debate their stance on various issues. For example, one narrator elaborates on this perspective:

“For example, there is Latino Coalition, me being part of it. Last year we had elections. We asked the Mayor, who has the position right now, to attend a night of listening to his opinions and of his opponent. He did not want to come...We sent him letters and went to talk to him. But, why didn't it happen. Some people said because he is very racist. But, it may be because

⁸ Jorge Aguilar*

⁹ Luis Rivera*

he does not need our vote to win. Latinos do not represent a powerful voting block. If they cry, if the shout, if they jump, he won't care because he doesn't need them."¹⁰

For this reason, many of the people interviewed find hope in the future second generation since they are U.S. citizens.¹¹ In addition, with time perhaps Latinos will become more acquainted with how the political system works in the United States.

Economic Barriers: "Making Ends Meet" and Rising Real Estate Prices

A further obstacle that came up during the interviews is that Latinos living in Somerville are too preoccupied with making ends meet that they do not have the time to take on active roles in politics. For example, Luis Rivera says that people are very occupied with their "sobrevivencia," their survival. He gave an example of a woman who wanted to help out with political organizing in Somerville, but could not because she had two jobs, six days a week and Sunday was the only day she could use to do errands for the family. In the interview, he commented that it was easier for him to do well because when he migrated during the 1970s there were many job opportunities and it was easier to get a social security number. This is in contrast to the 1980s when there was a large influx of Latino immigrants and a tighter immigration policy in the United States.

Another barrier related to economics is that rising real estate prices has caused many Latinos to move out of Somerville once they have been able to save up money to buy a house.¹² The problem with this tendency is that those who can save up money are not able to buy a house in Somerville because they are extremely expensive. As a result, they purchase houses outside of Somerville. The problem is that these individuals have probably lived in the United States for a longer period of time and therefore are more likely to be US Citizens. Once they leave the city

¹⁰ Luis Rivera*

¹¹ Juan Gutierrez*

¹² Alex Pirie

they cannot exercise their voting power locally in Somerville. For example, only one of the members of the Latino Coalition lives in Somerville. Most have moved out in order to buy houses at less expensive prices, but have lived in Somerville in the past.¹³ For example, one narrator notes:

“In the past five years, the price has gone up the most because we moved here about seven years ago and then the price of the house doubled. So then it was very difficult for many families to try to stay here. They have gone to Chelsea, they have gone to Malden, they have gone to Revere, they have gone to Linn, and others have gone to Lawrence and Lowell and I don’t know of how many other places. But these are the ones that I know of.”¹⁴

Access to City Hall:

Lack of English Proficiency and Translators & Elected and Appointed Latinos

In addition, another issue pertinent to barriers relating to political participation is lack of English proficiency and the lack of translation services in City Hall. For example, City Hall does not employ translators, the majority of meetings are not translated, and poll booths are not staffed with translators.¹⁵ According to the 2000 census, 3.9 out of 8.8 percent of the Latino population speaks English less than “very well.” This is approximately 45 percent of the Latino population living in Somerville. Latinos and other immigrant groups who do not speak English are therefore ill equipped to communicate with City Hall, whether it be to voice concerns or to access City services because there are no translators. The only time City Hall does have translators is when they are able to borrow translating machines from the Community Action Agency of Somerville and have volunteers from social service agencies come in to do the translations.¹⁶

¹³ Franco Rodríguez*

¹⁴ Daniel Medina*

¹⁵ Marty Martinez

¹⁶ Jorge Aguilar*

The importance of this language barrier can also be noted at the state level. According to the legislative aid at the Massachusetts State House, only one resident from Somerville has contacted them. Although this individual held this position for a short period of time, it is an interesting example because the resident was from Somerville, but not the Middlesex County section of Somerville, which is the section of Somerville that this legislative aid represents. In addition, the resident only spoke Spanish and so did this legislative aid.

According to the legislative aid interviewed, Latinos are very underrepresented at the State level and that to her knowledge only a select few of these may actually speak Spanish fluently. The resident who contacted her was a Salvadoran woman who was experiencing domestic abuse and had legal problems. Although the legislative aid did not know what to do, as this was not part of their job, she referred this woman to Boston Legal Services. The only problem was that the lady was too intimidated to call because she did not know English so the legislative aid called for her. Later on, this lady encountered more problems when she went to court because her lawyer did not speak Spanish and had to wait for an extended period of time for a translator. Due to these language barriers, the legislative aid felt that there were some issues when it came to trusting this lawyer. When asked how this resident found out that this resident got in contact with her she said that this lady had probably heard from someone somewhere that they spoke Spanish and was given the legislative aid's contact information.

In terms of access to City Hall, another barrier that came up during the interviews is the fact that no Latino or Latina has held an elected position in City Hall. Marty Martinez, of Mexican descent, from Nebraska has been the only Latino to run for Alderman. In 2003, he ran for Alderman in West Somerville but lost by a narrow margin. He is currently running for Alderman at Large in the 2005 race. As an Alderman at Large Marty hopes that a road will be opened up for Latinos and minorities to take these roles later on. If he wins this election he also

hopes to make sure City Hall reaches out to the Latino community, and that he is able to represent more progressive and liberal views and those of newly arriving residents.¹⁷

In addition, only three Latinos have held appointed positions. Two of these Latinos held the position of Youth Director for a short period of time. The other Latino, Vicente Sanabria, is the Director of the Somerville Cares About Prevention Program. First it is interesting to note that the background of these Latinos does not mirror that of the typical Latino living in Somerville. Both Marty Martinez and Vicente Sanabria are second generation college educated Latinos who have grown up outside of Somerville.¹⁸ Silvio Almanzar is a native of the Dominican Republic and had a medical degree before migrating to Lawrence, MA and subsequently working in Somerville, MA.¹⁹ By taking note of this, I do not intend to diminish the important contributions of these men to the community of Somerville, but to highlight that it seems that certain qualifications are needed in order to access City Hall.

In addition, another issue that came up frequently in the interviews was the firing of Silvio Almanzar, one of the Latino Youth Directors. Prior to Silvio Almanzar, Marty Martinez held this position from 2000 to 2002. In 2002, Mr. Martinez decided to resign from this position because he felt that City Hall was too insensitive and unwilling to meet the needs of the Latino and immigrant communities.²⁰ In the interview, he pointed to the lack of translation services and hiring practices that to him do not seem show any effort to diversify City Hall. In 2002, Silvio Almanzar became the new Youth Director. In the summer of 2004, Silvio Almanzar was fired by the Mayor Joseph Curtatone. According to the article entitled “Joe Fires and Hires at Youth

¹⁷ Marty Martinez

¹⁸ Marty Martinez

¹⁹ Parker, Brock. (2004). “Joe Fires and Hires at Youth Center.” Somerville Journal. [WWW Document] Retrieved: <http://www2.townonline.com/somerville/localRegional/view.bg?articleid=26986&format=text>

²⁰ Marty Martinez

Center, ” the Mayor chose not disclose the reason why.²¹ However, he did criticize the Youth Department for failing to combat gang recruitment, teen suicide, and drug use. According to Silvio Almanzar the problem was in the fact that the Youth Department budget was cut from \$200,000 in 1998 to \$61,000 in 2004, and its staff dropped from ten to zero.²² According to Jorge Aguilar, he noted a discrepancy in the fact that he sometimes had to take printing paper from the nonprofit he worked at to the Youth Department. There was also some resentment and rumors about a hike in the Youth Director salary and a renovation of the Youth Center when the new Youth Director was hired.

Some of the people interviewed contend that the reason why Silvio Almanzar was dismissed was because he was developing programs that specifically targeted Latinos which contrasted with the administrations desire to develop youth programs which targeted youth in general.²³ Others thought that City Hall was afraid that Silvio Almanzar was gaining too much power in the Latino community. Still others argued that Silvio Almanzar was fired because of racism. Some of the interviewees mentioned a rally to protest the firing of Silvio Almanzar where those participating in the event would directly call the Mayor Curtatone a racist. When asked further about this event, which did not take place, the interviewees either changed the topic or rephrased what they had already explained to me.²⁴ Other complaints about the current and past administrations has been their inability to reach out to the community. For example, some of the community leaders and social service providers have felt like they are in the dark about what

²¹ Parker, Brock. (2004). “Joe Fires and Hires at Youth Center.” Somerville Journal. [WWW Document] Retrieved: <http://www2.townonline.com/somerville/localRegional/view.bg?articleid=26986&format=text>

²² Parker, Brock. (2004). “Joe Fires and Hires at Youth Center.” Somerville Journal. [WWW Document] Retrieved: <http://www2.townonline.com/somerville/localRegional/view.bg?articleid=26986&format=text>

²³ Luis Rivera*

²⁴ Alejandro Arias*

is going on inside City Hall.²⁵ In addition, some of the individuals interviewed believe that City Hall becomes involved in the Latino community in a limited sense, such as organizing an event celebrating Salvadoran independence day. Some of the people interviewed refer to events like these as “token” events that are put together to make City Hall look good rather than truly empower the community.²⁶ It is also important to note that much debate exists about who needs to take the initiative: Does the City Hall need to make a greater effort to reach out to the Latino community or does the Latino community itself need to become organized first in order to push for concrete demands for their community? This is a hard question, which will be discussed in the following section.

During the interview another interesting point that came up is that a political representative for Latinos in City Hall does not necessarily have to be Latino.²⁷ Many of these individuals reason that ethnicity does not necessarily correlate with representation, although it does make it easier because this individual would be more equipped to understand the specific needs of certain ethnic groups.²⁸

When asked who represents the Latino community in City Hall the people interviewed said that no one represents them.²⁹ At the very least, most people pointed to Alderman at Large Denise Provost and Alderman Roche of Ward One in East Somerville, who have at times been allies to the community.³⁰ For example, Denise Provost was a strong advocate against a gang ordinance which some community members argued lead to racial profiling. She also voted against this ordinance when it needed to be re-approved after it came back from the State House in 2003. In 2000, Alderman Roche helped the Latino Coalition make sure that elected officials

²⁵ Daniel Medina*

²⁶ Alberto Mendoza*

²⁷ Juan Gutierrez*

²⁸ Daniel Medina*

²⁹ Alejandro Arias*

³⁰ Alberto Mendoza*

attended a forum where Latino residents could express their views. However, as a champion of the gang ordinance, he has lost the support of much of the Latino community.³¹

On another note, in terms of access to the State House I found it very interesting that this individual had very limited to no experience working with Latino communities (based on resume) , although this individuals position also included a component geared to the Latino community. During this interview, the interviewee stated that Latinos face the same obstacles as any other groups and individuals, mainly apathy or preoccupation with making ends meet.³² The name and title of this person are not included in this report in order to preserve this individual's identity.

Tensions Between "Old" Somerville and "New" Somerville

An additional obstacle to political participation that came up in these interviews was the tensions between "old" Somerville and "new" Somerville. Somerville has traditionally been an Italian and Irish community. Within the last twenty years Somerville has begun to become more diverse, with the influx of Haitian, Latino, and Brazilian immigrants. According to Marty Martinez, about forty percent of the population in Somerville are people of color and yet hardly any of the cities directors and non of the members of the Board of Alderman are minorities.³³ Another narrator stated that perhaps City Hall has not changed because this would translate into power changes. At the same time, this narrator notes that maybe some people do not come to terms with these changes or miss what Somerville used to be. Another narrator stated that the

³¹ Juan Gutierrez*

³² Rafael Perez*

³³ Marty Martinez

dismissal of Silvio Almanzar attests to the fact that City Hall is not willing to change. This narrator explained:

“I feel that the immigrants who came here before might feel threatened. They have the control. For me one of the difficulties that I see was in the case of Silvio Almanzar, who was the only Latino representative of the City government. He was terminated from his job...he was doing his job with the youth so I think they are not really open to the immigrant community...In this city to my knowledge they do not have a Latino in the police department...in the fire department they are all white...You know, there has been a control by the Italian and Irish community...So, the newcomers need to find a way to break barriers. People need to start to strategize how to break down barriers.”³⁴

In this quote, the narrator implies that the Latino community has not been very successful in organizing itself into a cohesive unit. This section touched on some of the obstacles to reaching this goal. These obstacles included negative political experiences in immigrant home countries, the desire to return back to their home country and therefore not invest in the community, lack of a large population of Latino U.S. Citizens, rising real estate prices and the struggle to make ends meet, and access to City Hall, including lack of English proficiency, translation services in City Hall and elected and appointed Latino representatives. However, despite the aforementioned obstacles there is a group of Latinos who have tried to organize the Latino community. The following section takes a quick glimpse of this group and more obstacles they have faced.

³⁴ Luis Rivera*

Somerville Latino Coalition: An Attempt

In an article written in 2002, found on the Somerville City Hall website, a paragraph summarizes the administrations perspective on the Latino community, during this time:

“According to the Mayor [Dorothy Kelly Gay], the Latino community has yet to organize into a cohesive group. By fostering increased communication, she is hoping they can gain a greater voice in local government and issues as other groups have. “It is in the best interest of the Latinos, or any group for that matter, to band together and speak with one voice to the largest degree possible. Not only will it afford them greater positive visibility, but it will also provide a mechanism by which City officials can learn more about what their needs are and how we can better serve them,” said Mayor Kelly Gay. “We’ll be more diligent about fostering an environment that’s open to communication with the City, but ultimately, we need them to identify their own leadership and voice.”³⁵

This excerpt raises an interesting question: Who needs to be the one to reach out? The Latino community or City Hall? Some people reason that one of the two has to take the initiative, while others contend that it’s a “two way street” and that both have a share in that responsibility.³⁶ Since 2000, the Somerville Latino Coalition has been trying to do just what the above quote deems necessary. According to the members interviewed, this organization aims to better organize the Latino community and advocate for representation in City Hall.

According to Juan Gutierrez and other interviewees, the Latino Coalition was formed as result of the failing pro bilingual education movement in Massachusetts, called the Massachusetts Educational Initiative for Latino Students (MEILS).³⁷ In 1998, a chapter was established in Somerville, which was lead by two social service providers.³⁸ By 2000, the members of the chapter began to realize that the movement was not getting anywhere, especially after Proposition 227 was passed in 1998. This proposition eliminated all bilingual education

³⁵ http://www.ci.somerville.ma.us/newsDetail.cfm?instance_id=111

³⁶ Juan Gutierrez*

³⁷ Juan Gutierrez*

³⁸ Franco Rodriguez*

programs in the state of Massachusetts. So, they decided to focus on the needs of the Latinos in Somerville, especially the need for access to City Hall.

Thus far the Latino Coalition has put together two major events. In 2000, they organized a forum in which Latino community members could raise their concerns to their representatives. As mentioned in a previous section, the event was advertised through community networks and Alderman Roche helped to bring the representatives from City Hall. Following this successful event, the Coalition focused on trying to gain recognition as a nonprofit and began working on the bylaws of becoming a nonprofit.³⁹ Later, in the fall of 2003, the Coalition organized another forum in which the candidates for Mayor would debate various issues. None of the candidates attended this event. During the time the interviews were conducted, the Coalition was struggling to get back on its feet and finalize which campaigns it wanted to focus on this year.⁴⁰ Some of the interviewees were not even sure if the Coalition still existed.

Thus far the Latino Coalition has faced a number of obstacles. One of these obstacles is the fact that only one member of the Coalition currently lives in Somerville. As a result, this lowers the weight that the coalition has when approaching City Hall.⁴¹ The remaining members have lived in Somerville in the past, but have moved out in order to buy houses. One of the interviewees asserted that this presents a big problem because these Latinos are not constituents of Somerville.⁴² In addition, other interviewees argue that because almost all of the members of the Latino Coalition are employed in a non-profit, political change may not occur because some of the programs of these non-profits are held in City owned buildings.⁴³

³⁹ Franco Rodriguez*

⁴⁰ Franco Rodriguez*

⁴¹ Alex Pirie

⁴² Alejandro Arias

⁴³ Luis Rivera

Another obstacle is that different members have had conflicting ideas as to what the direction of the Coalition should be, especially in the short term. Some contend that first stronger social networks need to be established through which political action can be based on.⁴⁴ Others focus on providing services, such as translations, while other campaigns, such as licenses for undocumented immigrants. And yet others insist that the Coalition cannot represent Latinos in Somerville because they were not voted for. Some have wanted to concentrate on becoming a recognized nonprofit while others feel the need to take action and not spend time and energy on the tedious bylaws and paperwork needed to be filled out in order to obtain this type of recognition.

Another obstacle that came up several times during the interviews, were interpersonal disputes and power struggles between members of the coalition. For example, some members have raised questions about the true motivation behind another member's participation in the Coalition. For example, one narrator explained

“The idea was to prevent something that is going on right now would take place [the gang ordinance] But we couldn't because we could not agree due to differences in interests and goals. There were others that unfortunately used this organization for their own personal benefits. This is why I am very careful which organization I join. But I have always been involved in helping people the most I can.”⁴⁵

Some members have become disappointed with the direction the Coalition and as a result have left this group. Lastly, the issue of stereotypes and the fact that is hard to work with different Latino subgroups came up in two of the interviews as barriers that may inhibit people from working together and create tensions between Latinos, such as which ethnic food should be included at a community event.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Daniel Medina*

⁴⁶ Jorge Aguilar*

Conclusion

Many of the people interviewed hope that with the second generation of Latinos, the Latino community will be more engaged and participate in the political process. These Latinos will be able to understand both the American and their Latino cultures. Since they are U.S. Citizens, are more exposed to English through the school system and have the opportunity to attend high school and college, they will have more resources that will facilitate their participation. As one narrator explains:

“I think that people would vote [if they could.] But we haven’t reached a point where we would make a difference as a block of voters. If you compare with Boston or Chelsea, Somerville, as block of voters has no achieved that. They don’t even have a candidate yet for school committee that is Latino. We did have one candidate, Marty Martinez, I think. And Marty Martinez is second generation. He was raised here and he is Latino... In the last years, the city has become more diverse, but in terms of political participation it is way behind. I think that probably in the next four or five years we will move forward because there can be a block of people that will become more stable, like become US Citizens, and also the effect of continuing to do political work, this will create new leaders. You know, this is the normal process, through activism and experience. Just look at how long it took Boston to have Felix Arroyo elected to City Hall. It took many years. He was first appointed to School Committee, and he was appointed because there was a need to integrate. I would say that Somerville will follow that process.”⁴⁷

As this narrator notes, perhaps only with time and the continued development of the Latino community, will this community become fully engaged in politics. This report barely scratches the surface of this topic and there are many unanswered questions. Among those to be explored is the perspective of Latino residents who are US Citizens or hold legal status on political participation in Somerville, a more detailed description of the Latino Coalition and its history, and political participation in the home countries of the Latinos who reside in Somerville.

⁴⁷ Luis Rivera*

