PAT BROWN INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Unleashing the Power of Participation

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Fifty years ago Monday, Tom Bradley was elected LA mayor and changed the trajectory of racial politics

On May 29, 1973, Los Angeles city councilmember Tom Bradley made history when he won election as the first African-American mayor of what was then the nation's third largest city.

Looking back fifty years, the ranks of African Americans who had been elected to major leadership positions were extremely thin. No Black governor held office, and only one Black Senator, Republican Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, elected in 1967, sat in that body.

Until 1967, when Carl Stokes in Cleveland and Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana won mayoral elections, there were few Black mayors and none in major cities. In 1970, Newark, New Jersey voters chose Kenneth Gibson, on a foundation of Black support and slice of white voters. Black candidates struggled to win support outside the Black community, and despite a host of candidates with strong leadership credentials, they seemed likely to be limited to offices with large Black constituencies.

The interracial coalitions that propelled the civil rights movement by drawing the Black struggle into alliance with liberal whites, Jews, and Latinos, seemed to be in tatters. New York City, once a liberal beacon, began to move away from multiracial coalitions.

So it was astounding that in faraway Los Angeles, a city whose politics were different from and distant from the more traditional politics of eastern and midwestern cities, a breakthrough occurred. Not only was LA a city with a relatively small Black population (then around 18%, today closer to 9%), it also a political system that was difficult for progressives to influence. The conventional wisdom of the time suggested that in such a setting the election of a Black mayor would be extraordinarily difficult.

When city councilmember Bradley challenged conservative Mayor Sam Yorty in 1969, that dispiriting view seemed to be confirmed. Bradley, a highly respected former Los Angeles police lieutenant who had risen to the highest rank any African American had attained in the Department, lost to a racist campaign waged by Mayor Sam Yorty. Yorty labelled Bradley as a tool of black militants and white radicals and scared white voters into backing his re-election. Both white and Black voters voted in massive numbers, with 76% of registered voters turning out. Bradley lost 53 to 47 percent.

And that might have been the end of the story-- another case of a qualified Black candidate unable to break through to a position of power representing a broader constituency.

When Bradley challenged Yorty again in 1973, the city began to learn more about him as a person but also about how deeply and durably he had invested in building relationships across racial lines in a divided city. Bradley had been a leader of a growing progressive surge both within the Democratic party but also within the city, allying with and supporting civil rights and civil liberties groups. He had been an early supporter of city councilmember Ed Roybal, an icon in the Latino community, many of whose political backers also supported and worked for Bradley. Bradley had emerged as the city's leading voice of police reform in the face of a hostile LAPD.

In addition to his deep base in the African American community, Bradley had developed strong relationships with Jewish liberals and AAPI activists, going back to his election to the city council in 1963 in the multiracial Tenth District. My research on the Bradley coalition indicated how deeply trust and shared beliefs among the activists in these and other communities became a bulwark of Bradley's strength and allowed him to forge something that had been declared impossible in the post-civil rights era, a true interracial coalition. Bradley became the bridge among these communities as their shared relationship with his political rise made history.

When the election returns came in on May 29, Bradley had beaten the odds, elected with 54% of the vote in a city that only four years before had swooned in the face of Yorty's demagoguery. The turnout was still very high, at 64%, but Bradley's campaign was able to go on the offensive against Yorty (which in those days was a particularly difficult proposition for a Black candidate) and Yorty's charges carried less weight against a better-known African American candidate.

Bradley swamped Yorty among Black voters, as he had in 1969, but secured his victory with massive support among Jewish voters and a majority of Latinos. (Bradley was very popular in the AAPI community, but voting returns from 1973 do not provide data on their vote in 1973). For the first time, an African American mayoral candidate had won election in a major city with an overwhelmingly white majority population. Researchers at USC[1] found that Bradley had gained 46% of the white vote, a vast increase over the single-digit Stokes and Hatcher levels of white support.

Bradley, of course, went on to be an immensely popular mayor, a worldwide figure especially in the Far East where he was often treated as a visiting head of state, and served five terms, becoming the most durable mayor in LA history. That same year 1973 was itself a turning point, with the election of Black mayors in Detroit and Atlanta, and then Chicago (1983) and

[1] Halley, Robert M., Alan C. Acock, and Thomas Greene. 1976. Ethnicity and Social Class: Voting in the Los Angeles Municipal Elections. *Western Political Quarterly*, 29: 507-20.

New York City (1989) followed. Closer to home, Doris Davis won election in 1973 as mayor of Compton, becoming the first Black woman elected mayor of a metropolitan city.

Bradley's election and enduring incumbency carved out a divergent path in Los Angeles from New York City politics, as liberalism in NYC gave way to a less liberal city politics and Los Angeles turned from a relatively conservative system into a more generally liberal one.

Echoes of the Bradley story resonated with the rise of Barack Obama, also fighting headwinds that seemed impossible to overcome in winning the nation's and indeed the world's most important elected office. But they also resonate today with the election of Karen Bass, who came of age in an around the Bradley era, and whose personal characteristics and coalition strength have elements of the Bradley model. Like Bradley, Bass had political assets that were underestimated because they were forged outside the media glare in part through her work as leader and organizer of the Community Coalition. As with Bradley, those trusting relationships helped her forge a surprisingly large victory margin in a range of diverse communities.

The 50-year anniversary of Bradley's election is a remembrance that what has sometimes seemed out of reach can be attained by people and communities whose determination is matched by relationships and coalitions often underestimated.

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