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**Failed State:
Political Corruption and the Collapse
of Democracy in Bell, California**

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Abstract

This article seeks to explain recent patterns of corruption in the city of Bell, California. After reviewing the literature on municipal corruption and reform and political participation in immigrant communities, the article examines the Bell case study. It argues that the city's primary democratic institutions, voter participation, watchdog media, and community organization engagement collapsed prior to the scandal. In addition, elements of the council-manager form of government contributed to community disengagement from city politics. In this "failed state," local officials exploited governmental power for personal gain. Implications for political reform and local state-building in high immigration cities are discussed.

Keywords: political corruption, voter participation, high immigration cities, council-manager system

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Introduction

In July 2010 reports of systemic political corruption began to emerge from the tiny Los Angeles suburb of Bell, California. Located in an industrial corridor south and east of downtown Los Angeles, the Gateway Cities region already had a well-deserved reputation for municipal corruption. In recent years, the cities of Maywood, Vernon, Bell Gardens, and South Gate have been plagued by rash of corruption scandals (Saltzstein 2004, Fulton 1997). The initial allegations in Bell focused on unusually high salaries for city officials. City Manager Robert Rizzo was found to be earning \$1.5 million annually in combined pay and benefits, and was set to become California's highest-paid future retiree at \$600,000 per year. Assistant City Manager Angela Spaccia and Police Chief Randy Adams and four of Bell's five city council members also were found to be earning extraordinary salaries. Additional allegations included illegal taxes and fees assessed to fund city employee pensions and charges that Bell's police department had targeted illegal immigrant drivers to generate exorbitant impound fees.

In March 2011 voters recalled all of the indicted council members and elected a new city council. But for nearly nine months, Bell struggled to function without a city council as an interim city administrator, interim assistant city administrator, and interim city attorney—each appointed by the besieged City Council—ran day-to-day operations. Facing a \$4 million budget deficit, the city is considering

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disbanding its 84-year-old Police Department, among other measures, in order to stay afloat (Goffard 2011).

The recent scandal in Bell raises a number of important questions about the state of democracy in California's high immigration cities. How did systemic corruption emerge in a political system designed to prevent corruption and produce good government? It is argued that in the years leading up to the scandal, the city's democratic institutions faltered. Voter participation in city elections declined dramatically, and changes in the media environment left the southeast Los Angeles region without a regular watchdog of municipal affairs. Moreover, local political activity among community organizations was either moribund or nonexistent.

In addition, elements of the council-manager form of government, in particular off-cycle elections, and nonpartisan, part-time representatives, contributed to a climate of community disengagement that left local officials isolated from accountability. Collectively, the lack of functioning democratic institutions in Bell resulted in the municipal equivalent of a "failed state" —an environment that city officials exploited for corrupt purposes. Implications for the practice and reform of municipal government in high immigration cities are explored.

Political Corruption: Institutional Considerations

The topic of municipal corruption harkens back to an older literature examining allegedly corrupt machine-era governments and Progressive attempts to reform them. As the story goes, in the late 19th century, recent European immigrants used their organizational skills and growing numbers to create urban political "machines." Using a variety of tactics, immigrants filled a power void in American municipal politics to create self-perpetuating regimes. According to Judd and Swanstrom (2002), "the major types of graft in American cities involved handing out lucrative franchises, setting highly profitable utility rates, authority over the city's police power . . . , and the control of public works" (61). Neighborhoods that turned out to support the machine received the best services, while opponents were severely punished. By the early 20th century, middle-class Protestants calling themselves Progressives began to label machine tactics as inherently corrupt and mobilized to change the rules of the game.

Above all, the Progressive Movement sought to rein in machine corruption and institute businesslike efficiency to city government. At-large districts, nonpartisan elections, the initiative, referendum, and recall, residency and voter registration requirements, off-cycle elections, civil service bureaucracies, and the council-manager form of government were among key reforms intended to release the machine grip on major American cities (Judd and Swanstrom 2002). Like many states during the early 20th century, particularly in the West, California's state and local politi-

cal institutions were heavily influenced by Progressive reforms (Debow and Syer 2009).

Scholars have debated the legacy of Progressive reform in the United States. Many argue that, collectively, Progressive reforms were intended to depress immigrant turnout in municipal elections and shift political power toward native-born WASPs (Hajnal and Lewis 2003, Bridges 1997, Erie 1988). Nonpartisan elections are thought to deprive immigrants and other low-information voters of partisan cues while depressing turnout. Citywide elections are thought to disenfranchise minorities and immigrants by limiting opportunities for representation. Off-cycle elections are thought to negatively impact immigrants and minorities by placing additional burdens on voter time and information gathering. Finally, civil service systems and the council-manager form of government are said to favor educated whites who can pass rigorous entrance exams (Caren 2007, Hajnal and Lewis 2002, Elazar 1972, Bridges and Kronick 1999).

Trounstine's *Political Monopolies in American Cities* (2008) adds to our understanding of machine and reform structures. Her study of machine Chicago and reformed San Jose questions the conventional machine vs. reform dichotomy, essentially finding both systems alternative strategies for achieving the same goal: "building political monopolies" (217). Trounstine shows that political monopolies—coordinated systems of bias that control resources necessary to maintain power—can emerge in both structures of government. Whether machine or reform, Trounstine writes, "monopolies shape who is elected and appointed to office and when power is likely to be shared. They influence which residents are likely to participate in elections and whether or not participation affects political outcomes" (5). For Trounstine, both machine and reform monopolies employ similar strategies and institutions that serve to maintain a regime's hold on power. "When politicians cease to worry about reelection," she writes, "they become free to pursue government policy that does not reflect constituent preferences. They acquire the ability to enrich themselves and their supporters" (3).

In the case of Bell, it is argued that monopoly control over city government was enabled by a confluence of factors that began to take shape in the 1990s, principally declining voter participation, lack of media scrutiny, and community organization disengagement. Unlike Trounstine's political monopolies, which over time served relatively narrow political coalitions within a city, corruption in Bell appears to have flourished in a city altogether lacking in active and organized constituencies, and facing little or no outside scrutiny. Without functioning democratic institutions, corrupt Bell officials essentially became the city's most important constituency.

Progressive Institutions and Voter Participation

Evidence from scholars examining the impact of Progressive reforms on voter participation in local elections is mixed. Some have found that the initiative, referendum, and recall have increased voter turnout and engagement by giving voters a direct decision-making authority over city policies. Wood's (2002) analysis of municipal turnout found no significant differences between voter participation in reformed and nonreformed cities. Overall, however, the scholarly consensus seems to be that Progressive reforms had their intended effect: reducing voter participation among immigrants and minorities (Caren 2007, Hajnal and Lewis 2002, 2003, Alford and Lee 1968).

Scholars have also examined the impact of additional institutional factors on political participation. Kelleher and Lowry (2004, 2008) studied political participation in consolidated or fragmented metropolitan areas. They found that political participation was substantially similar—even slightly higher—in larger cities, raising questions about “presumed social, economic, and political advantages of smaller towns” (721). In contrast, Oliver found that rates of voter participation tend to decline relative to an increase in a city's population. However, for Oliver, the potential for robust democracy in homogenous suburbs is often unrealized: “suburbanization, by segregating the population is suppressing citizen involvement in community affairs, is depriving many localities and metropolitan areas other civic capacity and thus their ability to solve many contemporary social problems” (7).

Finally, the voter participation literature also examines individual-level factors that motivate participation in elections. Over the years, research has focused on a number of salient *causes* of low voter turnout including incumbency, competition, age, race, socio-economic status, and education (Jacobson 1983, Cox and Munger 1989). Scholars have also studied the *consequences* of low voter turnout, including distrust of government (Bobo and Gilliam 1990), lack of political efficacy (Finkel 1985), and the undermining of democratic legitimacy (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995, Guinier 1994). On the positive side, Bennett and Resnick (1990) found that higher turnout tends to create a self-reinforcing dynamic that serves to engage residents in local politics.

Voter Turnout in American Local Elections

Although researchers have learned much about voter behavior nationally, less is known about voter turnout in local elections. Morlan (1984) found that half as many voters tend to participate in local elections compared to national elections. Caren's (2007) study of electoral turnout in 38 large American cities linked higher turnout to election timing, political party activity, closeness of a race, and nonre-

formed political structures. Overall, Caren found that between 1978 and 2003 average voter turnout was 27 percent.

In their study of turnout in California municipal elections, Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch (2002) emphasized the importance of election timing. The authors found that, on average, presidential elections produced 36 percent higher turnout than off-cycle, “local only” elections typically held in the spring. As with previous studies, turnout in local elections was linked in part to higher socio-economic status and race. “Even after controlling for socio-economic status,” the authors wrote, “the Asian American and Latino share of the population are both tied to lower turnout among [voting age] adult residents” (Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002, 45). However, they noted that, controlling for socio-economic factors and citizenship, Hispanics are not associated with lower rates of turnout in California municipal elections. Finally, Hajnal and Trounstein (2005) found that lower turnout rates at the local level leads to political underrepresentation, particularly for Asian Americans and Latinos.

Political Participation: Media and Community Organizations

Another strain of literature that speaks to voter participation and democratic accountability can be found in the field of political communication. Paek, Yoon, and Shah (2005) found higher rates of political activity among individuals who regularly read newspapers. McLeod, Sheufele, and Moy (1999) found higher levels of meeting attendance and community participation in cities with high media exposure. Filla and Johnson’s study of 83 suburban Los Angeles found that voters “who have access to a daily newspaper are more likely to vote than respondents living in communities without newspapers” (686). For Filla and Johnson (2010) “democratic governance is premised upon voter access to information about the problems and opportunities their political community faces, the actions of elected officials, and the policy options available to them” (679).

Authors in the field of civic engagement have discovered relationships between voter participation and membership in community organizations. Putnam (2000) found that strong social networks result in higher levels of informational awareness and participation in community life. Waldinger (2001) emphasized the importance of certain kinds of social capital and networks allow immigrant communities to form and function in the United States. For Waldinger, “the process of migration creates the seeds out of which a new ethnic social structure grows” (16). However, he noted, “the drive to acquire the skills and other resources needed to . . . move up the economic ladder” usually takes precedence over political assimilation. Importantly, Waldinger noted that urban economic restructuring has made economic upward mobility that much more difficult for recent immigrants to the U.S.

Southeast Los Angeles County: Corridor of Corruption

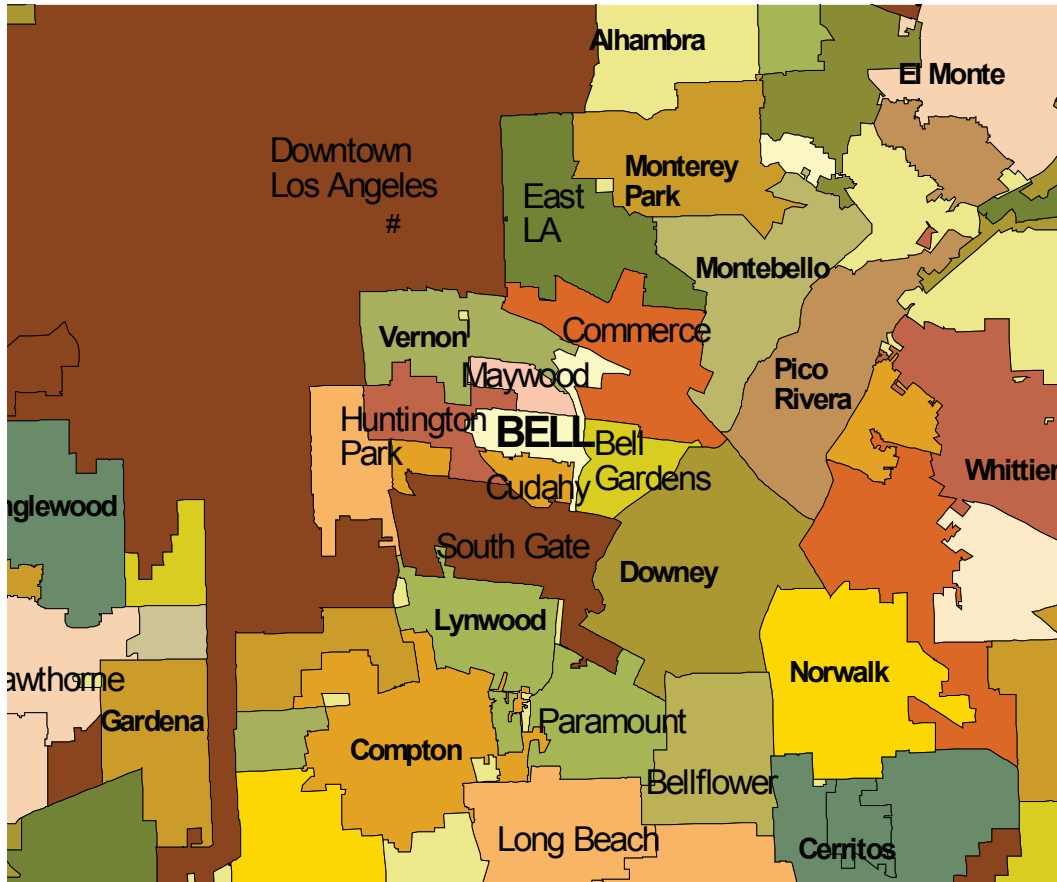
Along the industrial corridor south of downtown Los Angeles between the 110 Freeway and 710 Long Beach Freeway allegations of municipal corruption go back decades. Quinones (2007) examined the political implications of economic, demographic, and political shifts in the city of South Gate during the 1990s and 2000s. Quinones's tells the story of Albert Robles who, using "Mexican-style Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) tactics," emerged as something of a Boss-like figure in the city in 2001. Charged with threatening rival politicians in 2002, the South Gate City Council created for Robles the job of deputy city manager, leaving the city on the hook for his more than \$100,000 per year salary and substantial legal fees. Additional practices such as firing city department heads and, after doing away with civil service exams, replacing them with highly paid loyalists, left the city on the edge of bankruptcy. Serving as city treasurer, Robles was recalled by voters and convicted in 2005 of 30 federal counts of bribery, money laundering, and public corruption (Quinones 2007).

Quinones cited a number of factors to explain corruption in South Gate. For Quinones, "economic and demographic change, like a hurricane, had razed the traditions and institutions that maintain community life. These had not had time to grow back" (Quinones, 91). Quinones also cited expectations among recent immigrants that they would return to their home country and Mexican cultural biases that "all politics are corrupt" as reason for low rates of community participation. In addition, because of the systemic lack of media coverage, negative political mailers and attack phone calls made up most of the information available to many voters. However, for Quinones, the scandal served to spark greater community awareness and engagement in city politics (Quinones 2007). See Figure 1.

Victor Valle's (2009) history of the city of Industry tells the story of a municipality conceived in corruption. Seeking to circumvent a state law requiring incorporating communities to have 500 resident voters, Valle describes how city founders conspired to count 169 patients and 31 employees of a local mental hospital as resident voters, allowing the city's 1957 incorporation to proceed. Armed with the requisite planning, financial, and police power, Valle labels Industry a "microstate" where capital interests "completely swallow the functions of citizenship" (74). During the 1980s Industry, which straddles the 60 Freeway east of downtown Los Angeles, witnessed a number of high-profile convictions for municipal corruption.

More recently, allegations of corruption have again emerged in the industrial city of Vernon. Incorporated in 1905, Vernon has since operated as a quasi-fiefdom run by a handful of family members. In 2010, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the city had been paying unusually high annual salaries—in some cases more than \$1 million—to city employees and outside consultants. The city was also found to

Figure 1. Los Angeles Gateway Cities, Including City of Bell



have paid part-time city council members—three of whom have been in office since 1981—an annual salary of nearly \$70,000, far above state averages. Prior to 2006, the city had not had a contested election in 25 years.

In recent years, numerous Vernon officials have been fined or charged with corruption. Former Mayor Leonis Malburg, a grandson of Vernon’s founder who served on the city council for five decades, was ordered to pay more than \$500,000 in fines to the city after being convicted of voter fraud and conspiracy.¹ Former City Administrator Bruce Malkenhorst, who recently retired with a state pension of \$500,000 per year, is currently awaiting trial on public corruption charges (Christensen and Allen 2010).

Corruption in Vernon has flourished amid a number of unusual circumstances. As of 2008, the 5.2 square mile city had 1,800 businesses employing a daytime population of more than 60,000, but only 91 permanent residents, and 70 registered voters (Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters). In a 2000 special election, vot-

ers passed a measure extending council-members terms from four to five years, preventing the possibility of an opposition slate by ensuring that no more than one official would come up for re-election each year. All of Vernon's residents, many of whom are city employees, live in 23 city-owned and administered housing units, most of which are heavily subsidized by the city. In return, the city's "indentured" (Valle 2009) voters are expected to vote for the city's preferred candidates and ballot measures in municipal elections. Critics point out that because of Vernon's housing monopoly, city officials effectively select the voters, casting further doubt on Vernon's legitimacy as a democratic entity (Becerra, Allen, and Christensen 2010, Valle 2009).

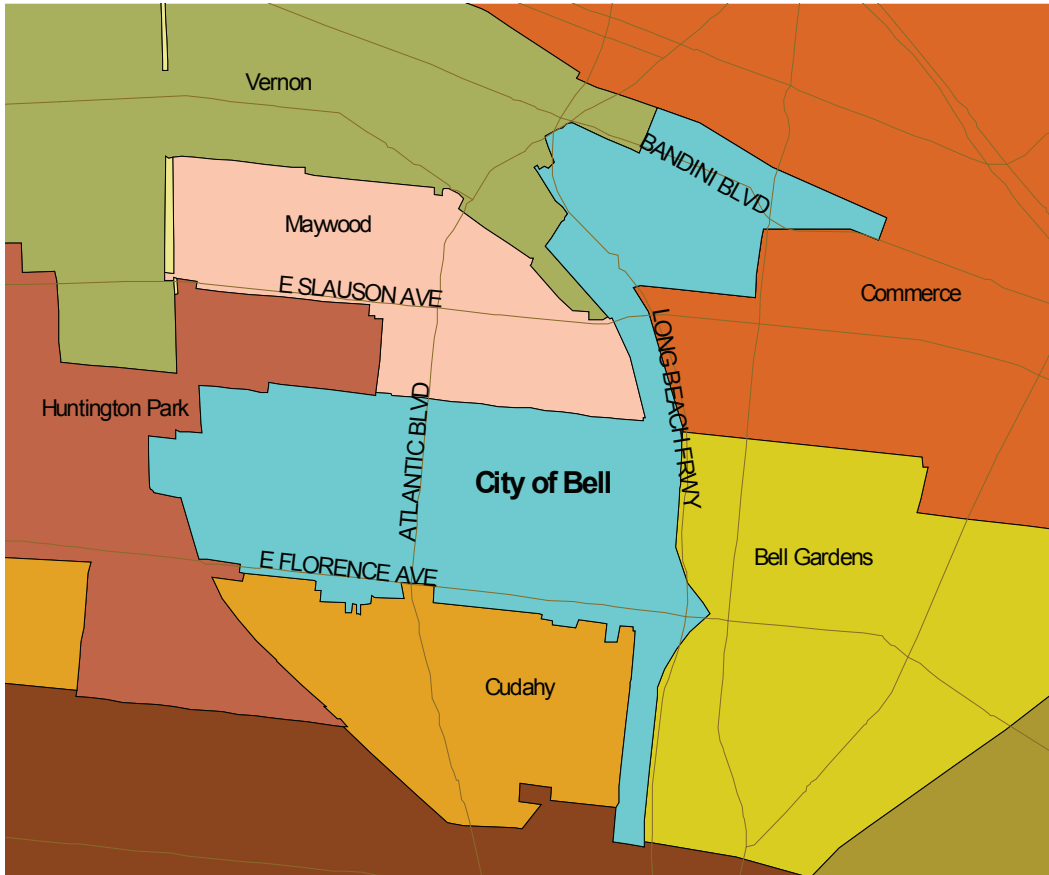
In early 2011, California State Assembly Speaker John Perez joined a chorus of Vernon critics to sponsor a bill to forcibly disincorporate the city. In response, Vernon has hired former State Attorney General John Van De Kamp and longtime government reformer Robert Stern to examine the city's questionable practices and recommend ethics reforms. The League of California cities and the powerful Vernon Property Association are vigorously opposing the legislation, instead proposing to restore the city's democracy by allowing property owners to vote in municipal elections, among other reforms.

City of Bell: A Demographic and Political History

The 2.6 square mile city of Bell is a swan-shaped municipality located several miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles. As seen in Figure 2, the 710 freeway and the Los Angeles River form the city's eastern boundary with the exception of an industrial area in the northeastern portion of the city that is bisected by the freeway. Most of the city's residential neighborhoods lie between Randolph Street to the north and Florence Avenue to the south. Gage Avenue and Florence Avenue, both major east-west commercial thoroughfares, are lined by small mom-and-pop ethnic stores and markets, while national retail chain stores such as Starbucks and CVS anchor north-south Atlantic Avenue.

The city's 2000 population² was 36,664, 91 percent of whom identified as Hispanic. Sixty-seven percent of Hispanics in Bell reported Mexican descent. According to Census 2000, 53 percent of Bell residents identified themselves as foreign-born, 40 percent were noncitizens, and 88 percent speak a language other than English at home. As seen in Table 1, the white population in Bell declined dramatically from 76 percent in 1970, to 13 percent in 1980. By the 2000 Census, Whites made up only a few hundred residents. Those identifying with "two or more races" on the 2000 Census—the first Census to list this designation—make up the next largest group, followed by small numbers of blacks, American Indians, and Asians/Pacific Islanders.

Figure 2. City of Bell and Surrounding Cities



In 2000, 39 percent of the city’s housing was classified as single-family, detached dwellings, and 31 percent was owner-occupied. Four percent of Bell residents in 2000 had a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 35 percent had a high school degree. Of adults 25 years and over, 39 percent reported less than a ninth-grade education. Most Bell residents were employed either in manufacturing, transportation, sales and office, or service-related professions. The 2000 per capita income in Bell was \$9,905, making it one of the poorest communities in southern California (Census 2000).

During most of the 19th century, the area that would become the city of Bell was part of a former Spanish land-grant known as Rancho San Antonio. Following Anglo conquest, the area remained an important part of a large ranching and agricultural industry in southern California. By the 1920s, population growth brought a new economy: real estate speculation. Like much of southern California, Southeast Los Angeles became a preferred destination for white immigrants from the South

Table 1. City of Bell Ethnic Change, 1970-2010

Ethnic Group	1970 (%)	1980 (%)	1990 (%)	2000 (%)	2010 (%)
White	16,669 (76 %)	3,345 (13 %)	3,663 (11 %)	234 (.01 %)	NA
Hispanic	4,476* (21 %)	16,028 (63 %)	29,483 (86 %)	33,328 (91 %)	NA
Black	28 (.01 %)	91 (.03 %)	274 (.08 %)	468 (.01 %)	NA
Asian/PI	394 (.02 %)	410 (.02 %)	470 (1.4 %)	413 (.01 %)	NA
Native American	263 (.01 %)	335 (.01 %)	287 (.08 %)	470 (.01 %)	NA
Two or More Races**	NA	NA	NA	1,751 (4.8 %)	NA
Total	21,830	25,449	34,221	36,664	NA

Source: 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010 U.S. Census.

* The 1970 Census used the term “Spanish” to denote individuals from Latin America.

**This category applies only to 2000 and 2010.

and Midwest hoping to join the region’s expanding industrial economy and suburban good life (Havener 1936, Nicolaidis 2002). During the 1950s and 1960s, the nearby communities of Bell Gardens, Cudahy, and Commerce incorporated cheaply as Lakewood Plan cities, helping to complete the existing political patchwork of southeast Los Angeles.

In his incisive analysis of Southeast Los Angeles County, William Fulton (1997) traced the region’s economic and political transformation from blue-collar Anglo to blue-collar Latino by the 1990s. Fulton describes the bifurcation of the region’s 1950s economy into industrial cities such as Vernon, Industry, and Commerce to the north, and working-and-middle-class residential communities of Huntington Park, South Gate, Bell, Bell Gardens, Maywood, and Cudahy, to the south. By virtue of its strategic location between important rail yards and the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, the region emerged as an important hub of industrial production in the pre-and-post-World War II period. General Motors, Bethlehem Steel, Firestone, Sampson Tire and Rubber, and a number of other large manufacturing companies formed the backbone of the region’s employment. As early as 1935 Los Angeles was the largest industrial area west of Chicago, in part due to the region’s

well-known hostility to unionization.³ By 1940, there were 900 factories within a two-mile radius of South Gate (Nicolaidis 2002).

During the 1970s, the strong industrial base that had supported the region's economy began to rapidly de-industrialize, earning the region the moniker "Los Angeles's Rust Belt."⁴ In its place, emerged a postindustrial economy that Fulton describes as primarily "extractive." In the new predatory economic order, wealth became concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of apartment owners, gambling operators, and recycling companies "designed to suck from a community whatever economic vitality might remain" (Fulton, 77).

As a result of deindustrialization, many longtime white Bell residents fled to retirement communities in Arizona and other parts of southern California (Fuetsch and Griego 1991). Simultaneously, the area attracted an influx of upwardly mobile Chicanos and new Latin American and Middle Eastern immigrants to fill jobs in the expanding service and transportation sectors. By 1990, the populations of Maywood, Huntington Park, Commerce, Cudahy, Bell Gardens, Bell, Pico Rivera, and South Gate were each at least 83 percent Latino. In the 1990 Census, 79 percent of Bell residents reported having moved to the city since 1980—only 7 percent reported having lived in the city since 1960 (1990 U.S. Census).

Politically, Fulton described southeast Los Angeles as a laboratory for studying "how smoothly suburban political power can be transferred from one race to another" (Fulton 1997, 70). The pattern that emerged in most cities during the 1980s and 1990s saw city governments remaining in the hands of whites by virtue of their regular participation in municipal elections. By the mid-1990s, the political mobilization of relatively modest numbers of Latinos began to overturn the region's Anglo regimes in favor of a new generation of mostly Hispanic leadership. In a number of instances, the transition was anything but smooth. Fulton chronicled ethnic political succession in the city of Bell Gardens, where Latino activism led to the 1991 recall of four longtime white council members, only to see the national media descend on the town to cover high-profile scandals and infighting that ensued (Fulton 1997).

Nicolaidis' *My Blue Heaven* (2002) examined the cultural history of the "Hub Cities" region between 1920 and 1965, in particular the blue-collar community of South Gate. Nicolaidis described the emergence of South Gate as a quintessential "working class suburbia" where residents sought to create enclaves of economic security from the vagaries of industrial life. During the golden years of the 1950s and '60s, the region's industrial expansion bolstered family incomes and housing values such that aggregate wealth in cities such as Huntington Park, South Gate, Lynnwood, and Bell rivaled, and in some cases exceeded, more high status cities such as Santa Monica, Pasadena, Redondo Beach, and Torrance.

The midwestern and southern immigrants who settled Los Angeles's working class suburbias brought conservative political and social traditions, particularly

with respect to religion and race. During the 1940s and '50s, the encroachment by black communities to the city's west became an ever present threat. Nicolaides describes political support for the use of racial covenants to help create a nearly all-white South Gate in the 1930s, with Alameda Street, a north-south thoroughfare locally known as the "cotton corridor," serving as the unofficial social barrier separating overwhelmingly white cities from growing black populations in Watts and South Central (Davis 1990). Nicolaides describes how conflicts over housing and school integration⁵ were perceived as battles for "working-class survival." By the late 1960s, the combination of civil rights, the 1965 Watts riot, and de-industrialization triggered massive white flight from the region (Nicolaides 2002).

The city of Bell closely followed this general economic and social pattern. Compared to some of its more industrial neighbors, Bell boasted relatively large retail and small business sectors as well as quintessential single-family neighborhoods (Nicolaides 2002). The city's 1960s annexation of 313 acres that included the former Cheli Air Force Base allowed it to expand manufacturing and warehousing in the northeastern section of the city (Romo 1987). Currently, Bell's northeastern portion includes a railroad yard, a large homeless shelter, a number of large warehouses and manufacturing operations, and a number of parcels owned by the Los Angeles Unified School District (Interview, Carlos Chacon). De-industrialization and the 1993 closure of California Bell Club, a large poker parlor that had contributed roughly \$2 million in annual revenue, dealt a severe blow to the city's fortunes. In addition, the local newspaper, the *Industrial Post*, which had covered local politics since 1924 also folded. And by the mid-1990s, membership in community organizations such as Chamber of Commerce, Qantas Club, Rotary Club, and the Masonic and Moose lodges had significantly declined or was nonexistent (Goffard 2010).

Amid the sweeping economic and demographic changes, Robert Rizzo was hired in 1993 as Bell's city manager, reportedly for the modest annual sum of \$78,000. During the 1990s, Rizzo earned a reputation both for competence and thrift, initiating layoffs and contracting services to private firms in order to save money (Goffard 2010). In the 1994 general municipal election, two Hispanics, City Clerk George Mirabal⁶ and Alfonso Rios were elected to the city council. By 1997, Mirabal was again the only Latino on the city council. In March 2003 a critical power shift took place as two members who had served on the city council since the 1980s, George Bass and Rolf Janssen, retired. In an uncontested election, Victor Bello, Oscar Hernandez, and George Mirabal were appointed by Rizzo, forming the first Hispanic majority on the city council in Bell's history.

In 2005, an important structural reform was made to Bell city government. Amid little public discussion, the city council called a special election for November 29, 2005 to transform Bell, which had operated as a general law city since 1927,

into a home rule city.⁷ Measure A,⁸ as it was called, passed with 84 percent approval but only 336 yes votes, and a turnout rate of 4 percent of registered voters and .02 percent of voting age adults (see Table 1). In addition, the election resulted in an unusually high number of absentee ballots (61 percent), leading to speculation that city officials had orchestrated the result from behind the scenes. It is thought that Bell officials sought to use its home rule status to circumvent recently passed state laws limiting compensation for councilmember service on city boards and commissions. Within a year, city officials' salaries again began to dramatically climb.

A Scandal Erupts

In the summer of 2010, two *Los Angeles Times* reporters began examining allegations of corruption in the nearby city of Maywood. Their initial investigation then led the *Times* to track down reports of salary irregularities in Bell, including nearly \$800,000 in annual salary for City Manager Robert Rizzo and unusually high salaries for Police Chief Randy Adams (\$457,000), and Assistant City Manager Angela Spaccia (\$376,000). The *Times* also revealed that Rizzo was the highest paid future retiree in California's pension system, set to earn \$600,000 annually for life. In addition, four of Bell's five city council members were earning nearly \$100,000 per year, mostly to sit on obscure city boards and commissions that seldom or never met. The compensation was far above the typical \$8,000 annual salary for part-time city council members in California⁹ (Knoll 2010).

Within days, Rizzo, Spaccia, and Adams resigned. Over the ensuing weeks and months, the embattled city council appointed an interim city manager, an interim city attorney, and a new assistant city manager. However, with its besieged city council, Bell became stuck in political limbo, unable to conduct regular business between October 2010 and April 2011 (Becerra, Gottlieb, and Winton, 2010).¹⁰

Over the ensuing weeks, more allegations emerged. The *Times* reported that, in addition to his nearly \$800,000 per year salary, City Manager Rizzo had negotiated a lucrative benefits agreement, making his total yearly compensation package greater than \$1.5 million. Rizzo reportedly also arranged for nearly \$900,000 in loans to various city employees over the last several years. And an agreement between Rizzo and new Bell Police Chief Randy Adams surfaced declaring Adams to be officially disabled, a designation that would allow him to avoid paying taxes on half of his anticipated \$400,000 annual retirement pension (Pringle 2010).¹¹

By August 2010, allegations in Bell had ignited a media firestorm and the city emerged as a national poster child for government waste and corruption. Four separate investigations unfolded. The U.S. Department of Justice began investigating civil rights allegations that Bell officials had orchestrated a scheme to boost city revenues by aggressively towing the cars of unlicensed immigrants, and charging

triple the going rate to retrieve their automobiles. In recent years the city had been impounding between 2,000 and 2,500 cars per year, a scheme that netted roughly \$800,000 in annual revenues. The Justice Department also began investigating complaints of illegal code enforcement and parking violations in order to generate exorbitant fees for the city (Winton, Esquivel, and Vives 2010).

California State Controller John Chiang produced three reports alleging that the city had illegally collected more than \$5.6 million in local taxes. According to one of the controller's reports, Bell had illegally increased assessments¹² on sewer fees and raised its business license taxes by more than 50 percent during the previous decade. Bell's property tax rate of 1.55 percent was found to be significantly higher than the countywide average of 1.16 percent. Chiang also discovered that monies were being collected specifically as a "retirement tax" to fund city employee pensions (State Controller 2010). And Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley opened a separate investigation into allegations of misappropriation of public funds, falsification of documents, and voter fraud by six former city council members and the city manager and assistant city manager.

In late summer, a community group known as Bell Association to Stop the Abuse BASTA (Spanish for "Enough") formed to raise funds and collect signatures to trigger a recall of the city council. At the March 8 Special Election, four members of the tainted council were formally recalled and replaced by new council members. Lorenzo Velez, the only member of the city council not charged with a crime or targeted for recall, lost his reelection bid.

Political Participation in Bell

The recent corruption scandal in Bell raises a number of important issues with respect to political participation, government structure, and democratic legitimacy. In an attempt to explain the emergence of institutional corruption in Bell, this section examines voter participation, presence of active media, and interest group engagement in city politics.

Following Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch (2002), this section measures voter turnout using percent *registered voters* and percent *voting age adults* to analyze political participation in national, state, and local elections in Bell since 1980. Voter turnout in Bell was then compared to voter turnout rates in Los Angeles County and statewide among both registered voters and voting age adults since 1980. The figures for percent registered voters were obtained from the Los Angeles County Registrar and the Bell City Clerk. Voting age population data from the previous census was used instead of the number of eligible voters (see Caren 2007) in order to highlight obstacles to participation for noncitizens in Bell.

Voter Turnout General and Primary Elections, 1980–2010

Data from general and primary elections in Bell since 1980 reveal voter participation rates that are significantly—though not dramatically—lower than voter participation figures from Los Angeles County and state of California voters. As seen in Table 2, the overall average rate of participation in state primary and general elections among Bell registered voters between 1980 and 2010 was 41 percent, compared to 52 percent in Los Angeles County and 55 percent statewide. Between 1980 and 1990, average participation in primary and general elections in Bell was 49 percent, compared to 58 percent in Los Angeles County and 59 percent statewide. Between 1997 and 2010, the major period of ethnic political succession in Bell, average voter turnout among registered voters was 37 percent—a 4 percent decline. Turnout among registered voters over the same period in Los Angeles County remained the same, 49 percent, while turnout of registered voters statewide declined 5 percent to 54 percent.

Comparison of voter turnout in the city of Bell from 1980–2010 among *voting age adults* reveals an overall 13 percent average turnout, compared to 31 percent in Los Angeles County and 37 percent statewide. Between 1980 and 1990, average turnout among voting age adults in Bell was 18 percent, compared to 36 percent in Los Angeles County and 43 percent statewide. From 1997–2010, again, the major period of ethnic political succession, average voter turnout in Bell dropped six percentage points to 12 percent. In Los Angeles County, average turnout among voting age residents between 1997 and 2010 was 28 percent, a drop of 8 percentage points, and 34 percent statewide, a 9 percent decline.

On average, turnout among voting age Bell residents between 1980 and 2010 in state and national elections was roughly half that of Los Angeles County, and one-third participation rates statewide. Though significant, relatively lower voter participation in Bell between 1980 and 2010 can be substantially explained by the city's large population of noncitizens, low income, highly transient population, among many other factors (Jacobson 1983, Cox and Munger 1989). And recent declines in participation rates in Bell, Los Angeles County, and statewide are all consistent with a general trend toward a decline in voter participation nationally. Though comparatively low, adjusting for demographic factors, participation rates in Bell since 1980 do not suggest a “democratic collapse,” at least with respect to voter turnout in state and national elections.

Voter Turnout Bell Municipal Elections, 1980–2010

Data from Bell municipal elections from 1980–2010 suggest a different conclusion. Between 1980 and 2010, average turnout among *registered voters* was 29

Table 2. % Turnout Registered Voters (RV) and Voting Age (VA) Population, Bell, LA County, and California, 1980-2010

Election	Bell RV	Bell VA	LA County RV	LA County VA	CA RV	CA VA
11/10 GG	47%	20%	54%	35%	60%	42%
6/10 GP	16%	6%	23%	15%	33%	23%
11/08 PG	75%	29%	82%	49%	79%	56%
6/08	9%	3%	20%	12%	28%	18%
2/08 PP	16%	8%	55%	32%	58%	37%
11/06 GG	41%	14%	52%	30%	56%	36%
6/06 GP	19%	6%	27%	15%	34%	21%
11/04 PG	61%	20%	79%	45%	76%	51%
3/04 PP	23%	7%	38%	20%	44%	31%
11/02 GG	38%	13%	45%	26%	51%	31%
3/02 GP	17%	6%	26%	16%	35%	21%
11/00 PG	56%	19%	68%	40%	71%	45%
3/00 PP	40%	8%	48%	27%	54%	32%
11/98 GG	42%	13%	53%	32%	58%	39%
6/98 GP	34%	11%	38%	23%	42%	28%
11/96 PG	56%	16%	65%	39%	66%	47%
3/96 PP	25%	6%	37%	21%	42%	28%
11/94 GG	47%	11%	59%	43%	61%	40%
6/94 GP	24%	5%	32%	18%	35%	23%
11/92 PG	55%	13%	76%	44%	75%	52%
6/92 PP	33%	7%	48%	20%	47%	29%
11/90 GG	38%	8%	55%	35%	59%	36%
6/90 GP	27%	6%	38%	24%	41%	24%
11/88 PG	58%	21%	73%	50%	73%	59%
6/88 PP	40%	12%	46%	29%	48%	35%
11/86 GG	49%	17%	60%	39%	59%	44%
6/86 GP	31%	10%	39%	24%	40%	29%
11/84 PG	62%	24%	74%	50%	75%	57%
6/84 PP	46%	15%	49%	29%	49%	32%
11/82 GG	62%	21%	70%	42%	70%	47%
6/82 GP	49%	16%	53%	30%	53%	34%
11/80 PG	69%	25%	77%	46%	77%	51%
6/80 PP	58%	20%	64%	35%	63%	39%
Ave. Turnout	41%	13%	52%	31%	55%	37%

Source: Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters; California Secretary of State; 1980, 1990, 2000 U.S. Census.

PP=Presidential Primary; GP=Gubernatorial Primary; PG=Presidential General; GG= Gubernatorial General

percent. Among *voting age adults*, the average was 9 percent. Between 1980 and 1990, no municipal election in Bell received less than 20 percent turnout among *registered voters*, and all elections were contested. During that timeframe, the average turnout in city elections among *registered voters* was 40 percent, including a particularly spirited 1982 election that attracted 88 percent turnout.

Between 1980 and 2010, average turnout in Bell elections among *voting age adults* was 9 percent. Between 1980 and 1990 no election received more than 28 percent turnout and average turnout was 12 percent. The large gap between the average turnout among *registered voters* (40 percent) and *voting age adults* (12 percent) is almost certainly due to the demographic transformation taking place in Bell during the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, it appears that a relatively small portion of relatively active residents (older and white) made up a disproportionately large share of the city electorate.

Between 1997 and 2010, however, there was a marked decline in participation in Bell municipal elections. As seen in Table 3, no municipal election between 1997 and 2010 received more than 24 percent turnout among *registered voters*. Average turnout over that timeframe was 16 percent. Among *voting age adults* over the same time period, no municipal election in the city received more than 10 percent participation, while average turnout was 4 percent. In particular, the November 29, 2005 Special Election stands with only 4 percent of registered voters and .02 percent of voting age adults casting ballots on a measure to adopt a home rule charter. Over that time, three of the city's seven municipal elections were uncontested, resulting in appointments to vacant seats on the council. It is likely that the lack of competitive elections was both a cause as well as an effect of a climate of political apathy in the city.

Declined Coverage by Local Media

Compounding the decrease in voter participation in recent years, a decline in local media coverage appears to have contributed to corruption scandals in a number of southeast Los Angeles communities. Quinones (2007) found that the absence of aggressive local media coverage played an important role in the emergence of systemic corruption in the city of South Gate during the 1990s and 2000s. Quinones, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, chronicled the decline of the *South Gate Press* from its fairly robust coverage of local community and political events to little or no local coverage by the 1990s. Quinones described how media restructuring during the 1990s also led to major budget cuts at the *Los Angeles Times*. By the mid-1990s, the *Times*, which used to tailor its coverage of local events in community sections, began to produce a far more scaled-down and uniform local newsgathering effort.

Table 3. % Turnout Municipal Elections, City of Bell, 1980-2010

Election Date	Reg. Voters	Voting-age Adults
March 8, 2011**	34%	12%
March 3, 2009	24%	6%
March 6, 2007	6%	2%
November 29, 2005	4%	.02%
March 8, 2005*	--	--
November 4, 2003	10%	4%
March 4, 2003*	--	--
March 6, 2001*	--	--
August 26, 1997	13%	4%
March 4, 1997	36%	10%
April 12, 1994	51%	11%
April 14, 1992*	--	--
April 10, 1990	20%	4%
April 12, 1988	39%	12%
April 8, 1986	26%	9%
April 10, 1984	34%	11%
April 13, 1982	88%	28%
April 8, 1980	30%	10%
Ave. Turnout	29%	9%

Source: City Clerk, City of Bell; LA County Registrar

*Uncontested Election; **Recall Election

According to Quinones, by 2000, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Long Beach Press Telegram* “devoted only one reporter each to all the suburbs of southeast Los Angeles.” Even *La Opinion*, the nation’s largest Spanish daily, “rarely sent a reporter to the area” (Quinones 2007). This state of affairs contrasts with previous decades when newspapers such as the *Industrial Post*, which closed in 1993, and the *Daily Signal*, which closed in 1985, provided regular and fairly robust coverage of local community events and politics (Interview Rolf Janssen, April 8, 2011). As in South Gate, it is likely that the almost complete absence of local political coverage in Bell and other southeast Los Angeles cities emboldened officials inclined toward corruption.

In 1993, the *Bell Gardens Review*, *South Gate Press*, *Huntington Park Bulletin*, and the *Industrial Post* merged with the *Los Angeles Wave*, a historically black community newspaper. However, according to a longtime reporter for the pa-

per, “community newspapers” such as the *Wave* tend to focus more on issues such as schools, crime, and local human interest stories rather than political watchdog journalism. In addition, lack of resources prevents community newspapers from performing a watchdog role over city government on a consistent basis (Interview, Arnold Adler, April 14, 2011). Although the collapse of local media coverage is not unique to southeast Los Angeles, in combination with the decline of other local government institutions, the impacts may be disproportionately negative in high immigration cities.

Decline of Community Organizations

Between 1930 and 1960 a number of traditional civic organizations emerged in Bell. An early history of the city lists the Chamber of Commerce, Bell Woman’s Club, numerous Parent Teachers Associations, Bell Masonic Lodge, American Legion, Bell Veterans of Foreign Wars, Bell Rotary Club, Bell Toastmasters Club, and Kiwanis Club as organizations with active memberships in the city (Havener 1936). Civic life in Bell also revolved around the community’s large number of churches—particularly Protestant—which, though not directly involved with city politics, nonetheless provided an important forum for community political discussion. With the onset of white flight, membership in Bell’s service organizations and religious institutions and declined significantly. Simultaneously, as more women began to enter the workforce in the 1970s and ’80s, participation in local civic affairs in Bell declined further (Interview, Rolf Janssen).

For a variety of reasons, newcomers to Bell during the 1980s and 1990s either did not create new organizations, or created social and religious organizations that were generally not involved in civic affairs (Interview Rolf Janssen, April 8, 2011). Although the Bell Chamber of Commerce remained one of the few local organizations that participated in local politics, it was reported that the organization had become an extension of City Manager Rizzo’s authority. As a result, in 2010 residents and merchants started an alternative, the Bell Business Association (BBA), in part to free local business from his influence. In the aftermath of the corruption scandal, the organization hosted several candidate forums for aspiring city council candidates. The organization sees itself as the heir apparent to the tainted Bell Chamber of Commerce in terms of future business leadership in the city.

In the wake of the scandal, a new community organization, Bell Association to Stop the Abuse (BASTA) was formed. BASTA, led by local Bell residents and funded largely by the Bell police union, emerged as the primary political force behind the recall campaign. The organization sees itself as a vehicle for restoring good government and accountability in Bell through increased community political

participation. In the aftermath of the crisis, it appears likely that BBA and BASTA will remain viable political forces in city government.

Explaining the Collapse of Democracy in Bell

Why did Bell's democracy collapse? It has been argued that, by the early 2000s, the combination of declining voter participation, inadequate media coverage, and interest group disengagement allowed Bell to devolve into the municipal equivalent of a failed state. As seen in Figures 4 and 5, voting patterns in Bell between 1980 and 2010 reveal a significant gap between turnout in most statewide and presidential elections (41 percent of *registered voters*; 13 percent of *voting age adults*), and turnout in Bell municipal elections (29 percent *registered voters*; 9 percent of *voting age adults*). The disconnect becomes even more apparent when comparing voting patterns from 1997 to 2010, the years leading up to the scandal. During that time frame, average turnout in state and national elections was 37 percent among *registered voters* and 12 percent of *voting age adults*. In the November 2008 presidential election, 75 percent of Bell's registered voters turned out. In contrast, between 1997 and 2010, average participation in Bell municipal elections was 17 percent among *registered voters* and 5 percent among *voting age adults*.

Even in the highly charged aftermath of Bell's political corruption scandal, only 34 percent of registered voters turned out for the March 8, 2011 recall election. Moreover, the scandal did not appear to significantly increase voter registration in the city. As of June 2010, a month before the scandal broke, registration in Bell stood at 9,929 voters. At the March 2011 election, registration had increased by 498 voters, a 10 percent increase. These figures suggest that the corruption scandal will not be sufficient to jumpstart community participation in the city, particularly as residents become further removed from the crisis with the passage of time.

It was argued that the city's dysfunctional media environment and lack of interest group engagement also contributed to the collapse. Cutbacks to traditional newspaper journalism—a nationwide phenomenon—has led to an alarming lack of substantive media coverage of city politics, especially in the Los Angeles media market. As a consequence, Bell residents had little or no access to unbiased political information about city politics, a factor likely contributing to voter disengagement.

Similarly, long-standing interest groups in Bell—what Quinones (2007) terms the “institutions of white suburbia”—either ceased to function or became co-opted by the Bell officials in the years leading up to the scandal. Lacking traditional democratic checks on political power, Bell became, in Trounstone's (2008) terminology, a “political monopoly.” However, unlike most political monopolies that serve particular constituencies within the city, the collapse of Bell's democracy allowed

corrupt officials to effectively become their own constituency, allowing them to use their political power for personal gain.

Elements of the council-manager system of government appear to have contributed to the climate of nonparticipation in city politics. In the early 20th century, Progressive reformers dismantled allegedly corrupt machine institutions and created nonpartisan professionally administered city government. Still today, the vast majority of California city governments employ Progressive-style council-manager government. Although scholars have examined the effect of reform structures on political participation (Caren 2007, Hajnal and Lewis 2002, 2003, Alford and Lee 1968), little attention has been paid to Progressive governance and corruption. In conceptualizing reform regimes as substantially similar to machine systems—as “political monopolies”—only Trounstine (2008) offers insight as to how and why a political system designed to prevent corruption could itself become so corrupt. In Bell, reform structures intended to distance policymakers from political influence instead created an environment that insulated from traditional institutions of political accountability. At the very least, recent patterns of corruption in Bell and other southeast Los Angeles cities undermine the council-manager government’s purported benefits in preventing corruption. As Trounstine (2008) implies, under the right circumstances, corruption can flourish in any political structure.

Additional factors contributed to the collapse of democracy in Bell. Global economic restructuring helps explain the area’s rapid transformation from blue-collar white in the 1960s to postindustrial Latino by the 1980s, creating conditions that allowed “extractive” Fulton (1997) industries and politicians to prey upon recent arrivals. Community complacency was also a contributing factor. According to former Bell City Councilman Rolf Janssen, during the late 1990s a rising economy, lower crime rates, and improvements in the city’s physical infrastructure led to a collective apathy about city politics: “Things were going well in the late ’90s and early 2000s. People just stopped asking questions” (Interview, April 8, 2011). A veteran reporter with the *Los Angeles Wave* commented that the council’s ethnic homogeneity contributed to the complacency: “there was a certain level of trust in having an all-Latino City Council. Now people feel a sense of betrayal” (Arnold Adler Interview, April 14, 2011).

Finally, Bell’s large numbers of undocumented residents and recent arrivals clearly played a role in fostering community disengagement. Lewis, Ramakrishnan, and Patel (2004) note that “immigrants occupy a somewhat uncertain role in local civic affairs . . . they are often recent arrivals; a high proportion either cannot or do not vote; and they are often not well connected to associations and interest groups that are important in local affairs” (iii). Above all, cases of political corruption in Bell and elsewhere underscore the pressing need for political reform to reinvigorate local democracy in communities with large numbers of recent immigrants.

Reform Alternatives in Bell and Beyond

Recent scandals in Bell and other cities highlight the need for political reforms that strengthen the fabric of local democracy to better incorporate longtime residents and newcomers into the political process. This section highlights reform alternatives available to cities confronting municipal corruption:

1. Increase Voter Participation. In order to increase voter participation and democratic accountability, cities facing corruption should consider aligning its municipal elections with higher turnout state primary and general elections in March and June. Based on average turnout among Bell voters in state elections from 1995–2010, an increase of about 10 percent turnout among registered voters (from 16 percent to 25 percent) can be expected. Although the anticipated benefit appears relatively small, a 9-point increase would amount to a 56 percent upswing—probably the single most effective way to increase local voter turnout (Hajnal and Lewis 2003).

The downsides of adding municipal elections to the state ballot include the potential for voter confusion, fatigue, and higher rates of incumbency (Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch, 2002). However, what cities may lose in voter fatigue, confusion, and incumbency could be made up in greater political participation and civic legitimacy. In addition, because of space limitations, cities in California are not always guaranteed a place on primary and general election ballots. Finally, to the extent that the scandal in Bell increases interest by prospective candidates in running for city office, interest and participation in local affairs is likely to increase. As Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch note, “uncontested elections are bad news for voter participation in city elections” (2000, 42).

2. One-Year Budget. A second reform critical to restoring civic engagement is the single-year budget. In 2003, Bell City Administrator Rizzo instituted a two-year budget cycle, and in 2005, a five-year budget cycle. Many observers believe this was done to further limit outside scrutiny on the city’s revenue and spending practices. As a city’s most important policy document, regular discussion about budgetary matters is a critical step in promoting public participation.

3. Improved Transparency. Greater transparency is another key to establishing public trust in city politics. Cities seeking to deter corruption and encourage participation should devote significant resources to providing relevant and user-friendly information concerning expenditures, revenues, meetings, and other relevant events on their website. Cities may also consider hosting televised feeds of city meetings and posting them on their websites. Increasing “sunlight” can go a long way toward deterring public corruption and restoring faith in city government.

4. State and Professional Oversight. The California State Controller is examining ways to expand its auditing power to include greater oversight over municipal

finances, a good idea in theory, but one that would require substantial additional resources in order to be effective. State laws limiting compensation for service on city boards and commissions in home rule cities should also be considered. In addition, improved oversight from professional organizations such as ICMA and Municipal Finance Associates should be exercised to ensure that established accounting practices and standards are followed by city administrators and staff.

5. Media Coverage. Improving media coverage of local politics is a critical element in rebuilding democracy in Bell and similar cities. Because of recent media consolidation and cutbacks in local reporting among established media outlets, voters simply do not have the same breadth and depth of political coverage of local politics as in past decades. Improved communication over the Internet by city government, citizen journalists and bloggers, and ethnic media may hold promise for improved coverage of local affairs. The Bell case underscores the critical importance of local media presence, both in uncovering political corruption after the fact as well as in deterring future corruption.

6. Community Engagement. If corruption is to be prevented, all residents, including recent immigrants, need to participate in the local political process. New organizations that are indigenous to and appropriate for each community must be created and integrated into the local political system. Local Hometown Associations, typically created for the purposes of assisting family members and friends in the home country, are one example. Broadening the function of Hometown Associations, common throughout southern California, to foster participation in California local government could help fill the institutional gap that currently exists between policymakers and local residents.

7. Disincorporation. Residents of chronically corrupt municipalities may also consider disincorporation of their municipality in favor of county governance. Although this reform might seem drastic, it holds promise for preventing corruption by creating Madisonian-style competition among various factions in a larger political entity. Unlike the scandal-plagued city of Vernon, where state lawmakers are considering a unilateral disincorporation, state statutes permit community residents to petition for a citywide vote on disincorporation. Following a series of corruption scandals, residents of the city of Cabazon voted in 1972 for disincorporation (see Knox and Hutchinson, 2009).

8. Resist Term Limits. Term limits are frequently proposed in the wake of corruption scandals to prevent local politicians from becoming entrenched. This reform is ill-advised and may actually contribute to existing corruption. Council-manager systems already heavily favor professional staff over part-time elected officials in terms of knowledge and experience in city government. A system that encourages less experienced elected officials would likely only invite political abuse.

The Need for Municipal State-Building in California

Bell is not Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, or any number of other truly “failed states.” Its streets are relatively safe, and many of its quiet, tree-lined neighborhoods and commercial thoroughfares look much like suburbs elsewhere in southern California. However, the institutions of local democracy in Bell and other similar California cities are failing. Voter participation is extremely low, serious media coverage is sparse or nonexistent, and community organizations, if they exist, are often not focused on local affairs.

In addition, the council-manager system, with its emphasis on nonpartisan administration of city affairs and off-cycle elections appears particularly ill-suited to the governance of municipalities with large numbers of recent immigrants. In the late 19th and early 20th century, active political parties and competition among ethnic groups drew new immigrants into local politics. In contrast, most new immigrants to California’s Progressive reformed cities land in a political dead zone nearly devoid of political parties, media, or community organizations designed to help assimilate newcomers into the local body politic. And due to ethnic clustering, segregation, and political geography—Latinos make up more than 90 percent of the population in many of the small cities of southeast Los Angeles—there is little of the kind of conflict and cooperation among various ethnic groups characteristic of American urban politics at the turn of the 20th century.

And yet in the effort to build local political capacity, a small city’s size may also be its primary strength. One of the long-standing ironies of California local democracy is that although relatively few groups participate in local affairs, those that do receive a disproportionate share of the benefits. Compared to larger cities, small towns uniquely offer a scale and familiarity that lend easily to Democratic participation (Oliver 2000). In southeast Los Angeles and elsewhere, small-scale politics may yet offer avenues for building local political institutions that both deter corruption and focus on the core service needs of residents.

Among the many questions the case of Bell raises is whether local democracy can be considered legitimate when half or more of the voting age population in a city are not able to register their policy preferences at the ballot box. Although this article does not address federal immigration reform efforts, it is clear that the presence of large numbers of residents in American cities unable to select their local representatives is a factor that undermines public faith in and the stability of local democracy.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the Bell scandal as merely another spectacle of government corruption in southeast Los Angeles. Above all, abuses in Bell and other California cities should be viewed as symptoms of a larger failure of political systems to incorporate new immigrants. As the political consequences of the new

immigration unfold, it is likely that the conditions that led to exploitation in Bell either currently exist or will emerge in many cities across California and the United States in coming years. Failure to recognize the problem and change the underlying conditions that lead to municipal corruption risks a further erosion of civic engagement and democratic legitimacy in high immigration cities.

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Notes

¹ A Los Angeles Superior Court judge cited Malburg's age and medical history as a reason not to incarcerate him.

² Census 2010 data could not be collected in time for this article, but the city's ethnic makeup is expected to be substantially similar to Census 2000.

³ Nicolaides describes the not-so-coincidental opening of General Motors' South Gate plant in 1936, the year autoworkers in Flint Michigan organized the "great sitdown strike."

⁴ The best illustration of the region's economic shift is "The Citadel," a former tire plant located in the city of Commerce. During the 1990s, The Citadel was turned into an outlet shopping mall.

⁵ Nicolaides describes that, in the early 1960s, South Gate high school was 97 percent white, while Jordan high school, only a few miles away, was 99 percent black. Currently, South Gate High School is more than 95 percent Latino.

⁶ Mirabal was appointed by the Bell City Council as city clerk in 1992 in an uncontested election.

⁷ Cities in California fall into two types: general law and home rule charter cities. Although California cities have witnessed an erosion of their home rule authority in recent decades (Hogen-Esch 2011; Saxton, Hoene, and Erie 2002), home rule offer cities greater autonomy with respect to elections, governmental structure, and employee salaries.

⁸ The text of Measure A curiously read: "Shall the voters of the City of Bell approve a City Charter, which allows The People of Bell to manage the business of the City of Bell?"

⁹ One Bell council member, Lorenzo Velez, who had been earning \$8,000, was reportedly unaware of his colleagues' higher levels of compensation.

¹⁰ In an attempt to avoid paralysis, the idea of having the scandal-tinged city council members appoint their own replacements was actually considered.

¹¹ Adams had not claimed to be disabled when serving previously as police chief for the much larger city of Glendale, where he reportedly earned \$225,000 per year.

¹² Under Proposition 13, property in California is taxed statewide at 1 percent of assessed value. Any additional taxes or special assessments levied by local governments require two-thirds voter approval.

¹³ Although there is no political precedent for such intervention in California history, serious efforts are taking place in Sacramento to disincorporate the perennially corrupt city of Vernon.