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MALDEF Applauds Gov. Davis for Signing California State Voting Rights Act of 2001

Bill makes it easier for California minorities to challenge 'at-large' elections, such as the system proposed for the prospective new Hollywood city

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(LOS ANGELES, CA) MALDEF, a Latino civil rights organization, is applauding Governor Gray Davis for signing into law the California State Voting Rights Act of 2001, which will provide California minorities with additional tools to challenge "at-large" elections, a system where all the citizens of a jurisdiction vote for all of the elected officials. MALDEF has challenged at-large elections because in many instances, they can suppress the ability of Latinos to elect the candidates of their choice – candidates that meaningfully represent them and their interests.

"We are very pleased that Governor Davis is acknowledging and addressing the civil rights problems that at-large elections create in many California cities," said Staff Attorney Steve Reyes, MALDEF's political access expert for California. "This Act provides the tools necessary for Latinos and other protected minority communities to combat the problems of disenfranchisement and unequal access to the political process caused by at-large elections."

On July 3, MALDEF submitted a letter to Gov. Davis, which included the following:

"Although California has already become a majority-minority state, Latino political representation at the local level has not kept pace with the staggering growth of the Latino community over the past decade," wrote Reyes. "This stark disparity underscores the continued need for measures, legislative or otherwise, to help the governing bodies of local government better reflect the communities they serve. This Act provides an opportunity to create a political leadership that is both diverse and responsive to the needs and concerns of the Latino community."

MALDEF has litigated a number of at-large cases nationwide. In California's central coast, for example, MALDEF has battled against the city of Santa Maria in a case that has taken several years and that is still not resolved. More recently, MALDEF expressed concern over an at-large system for the proposed new city of Hollywood, should voters allow it to secede from Los Angeles.

Said Reyes: "This Act immediately puts cities and other jurisdictions that employ at-large elections on notice – they should carefully examine their

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electoral practices to determine whether they have a discriminatory effect on Latinos or other protected minorities.”

A national nonprofit organization, MALDEF promotes and protects the rights of Latinos through advocacy, community education and outreach, leadership development, higher education scholarships and when necessary, through the legal system.

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