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**UCLA CONTINUES LAUNCH OF NEW VOTING RIGHTS PROJECT WITH A LAWSUIT IN YAKIMA CITY**

*The lawsuit was filed today to challenge a city ballot initiative that is viewed as an attempt to weaken the electoral power of the area's growing Latino electorate.*

The UCLA Latino Politics and Policy Initiative’s new Voting Rights Project (UCLA VRP) filed two lawsuits today against the Yakima City Council in Washington for their push to switch to a “strong mayor” system, which is seen as an attempt to dilute the Latino vote.

The lawsuits are of the first of several actions that the new UCLA Voting Rights Project will undertake to protect the rights of Latino and minority voters across the nation. In partnership with the Columbia Legal Services and the ACLU of Washington, the two cases filed today challenge the city council’s decision to place a ballot measure asking Yakima City voters to consider a council system where the mayor is elected citywide and as the executive branch of the city, would oversee all operations such as hiring department heads and preparation of budget.

The push for a strong mayor system comes after a federal court ordered the Yakima City Council to switch to district-based elections rather than citywide elections, a move that led to three Latinos winning council seats in 2015. A strong mayor system would strip political power from the city council just as changes are taking place to make it more diverse and representative of the Yakima City population.

The UCLA Voting Rights Project is co-founded by Chad W. Dunn, who filed today’s lawsuit, and Matt Barreto, who served as an expert consultant in the federal *Montes v. Yakima* case that led to Yakima City’s election reform.

"The federal court very clearly mandated the City of Yakima to uphold the full and equal voting rights of the area's growing Latino community. Specifically, the court instructed the city to stop diluting the influence of Latino voters. Every attack on the voting rights of
any eligible voter must be challenged, whether it comes from local city halls, state legislatures or even the White House," Barreto said.

The complaints allege that the Yakima City Council’s decision to call a special election to move the city to a strong-mayor form of government violates the Washington state constitution and that the ballot title put forth by the Yakima City Council violates Washington state law.

About the UCLA Voting Rights Project

The UCLA Voting Rights Project is a new center at the University of California, Los Angeles that is focused on voting rights litigation, research, policy, and training. The UCLA Voting Rights Project addresses monumental and overlooked gaps in the field of voting rights—how to train young lawyers and researchers, support the development of new legal and methodological theories for voting rights cases, and how to advance policy work to ensure that there is a new generation of leaders who are pursuing efforts to guarantee all citizens have equal and fair access to our democracy. The project was founded by Chad W. Dunn, J.D. and Matt Barreto, Ph.D. The UCLA Voting Rights Project is located within the Luskin School of Public Affairs and works in coordination with the Latino Policy and Politics Initiative.

In order to learn more about the UCLA Voting Rights Project, please visit https://latino.ucla.edu/votingrights.

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