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Hayden, et al. v. Pataki
Press Conference
January 15, 2003, New York City

REMARKS BY LILLIAN M. RIVERA
“LATINOS NEED TO PAY ATTENTION TO THESE ISSUES”

Saludos. My name is Lillian Milagros Rivera. I come from a nation where voting, and political participation in general, is highly respected. I come from a place where over 85% of voters come out to vote on Election Day. I come from an island where prisoners are allowed to vote.

I come from Puerto Rico.

Now as I look back at over 45 years of community activism in the Lower East Side, I see that some of the complex, entrenched problems that we have had as a poor, marginalized community in a larger, thriving city are still preventing us from reaching a fair and just society. The media has rediscovered the homeless, but they have been with us for years. The ability of women who are single parents to get the supports necessary for them to continue in their jobs, no matter how little they pay, is still a major problem.

And equally important, the ability of the Lower East Side, and other communities like it in the State, to influence public policy is challenged by policies that have really locked up our voting power. Latinos in New York, like Blacks, are arrested, prosecuted, convicted and jailed in numbers that are far greater than their percentage of the population. For example, although Latinos are 15% of the New York State population, they make up almost 27% of the prison population and 32% of the those on parole. A lot of this is due to the Rockefeller Drug Laws, which have devastated families throughout Latino and Black neighborhoods. I believe that drug use in White communities in the State is far greater than in Latino communities, but that law enforcement has targeted Latinos and Blacks for arrests and imprisonment.

All Puerto Ricans and Latinos need to pay attention to these issues. We can no longer sit by and watch the effects of a discriminatory criminal justice system because it is robbing the Lower East Side, Washington Heights, East Harlem, South Bronx, Sunset Park, and all Latino communities in New York of our voice, our votes, and our political power.

Latinos and Latinas, like everyone else in the City want a voting system that is fair and rational. It makes no sense to further punish our jailed brothers and sisters by

taking away their fundamental right to vote. As Latinos we have had to overcome literacy tests in New York in order to vote. We have had to overcome English-only forms and ballots. We have had to overcome discrimination in the way district lines have divided our voting strength.

I now stand along side Mr. Joseph Hayden and all others behind bars and on parole to say that Latinos and Latinas must now overcome this wall to make the promise of a fair a New York a reality. Free the Vote and Unlock Democracy.