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Mapping the Revolution in California City Council Election Systems

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I. Introduction

The California Voting Rights Act of 2001 (CVRA) has revolutionized local elections in the state. The Act was designed to provide fairer representation for California's Latinos and other historically marginalized communities. In recent years, nearly half of all cities across the state have shifted their city council election systems from at-large to district-based contests, significantly changing the nature of elections and representation in those communities. Many of the state's other local jurisdictions, including school districts and special districts, have made similar transitions. Before the CVRA, only 29 cities in California (6.0%) used district-based elections; now 216 (44.7%) do.

In 2016, the Rose Institute of State and Local Government published a [report](#) that found the move to by-district elections had increased the number of Latinos elected to city councils in California, but concluded the change had been driven by significant gains in a few cities. Since then, many more California cities have transitioned to district-based election systems. As part of the Rose Institute's ongoing study of this "quiet revolution" in local government, this report offers updated information regarding the shift in California from at-large city council elections to by-district elections by region and by city population. The report is based on information available as of January 2025. While documenting the transition to district-based elections, this report does not assess the effects of these changes on representation or governance.

II. The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA)

Introduced in 2001 and signed by Governor Gray Davis in 2002, the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) builds on the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) by expanding the ability of Latinos and other groups to challenge at-large electoral systems and other voting systems that may dilute their voting strength. The CVRA was introduced by Democratic Senator Richard Polanco, with backing from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

Under the CVRA, jurisdictions (cities, counties, school districts, and special districts) can be sued if their voting systems are found to disenfranchise or impair "the ability of a protected class to elect candidates of its choice or its ability to influence the outcome of an election." The CVRA adopts the federal understanding of "protected class" as groups that have historically faced voting discrimination on the basis of race, color, or language minority status. The CVRA makes it easier for litigants to establish voter disenfranchisement because, unlike under the federal VRA, protected classes are not required to be "geographically compact or concentrated." Additionally, litigants need not establish why a protected class's preferred candidate lost. Therefore, CVRA litigation has been described as "purely a statistical exercise."

In at-large (AL) election systems, citizens throughout a city vote for all city councilmembers. These systems are the most frequent targets of CVRA lawsuits because they often made it harder for minority communities to elect representatives of their choice. Numerous California cities have received demand letters alleging their at-large systems violate the CVRA, and the threat of litigation has spurred many of them to switch electoral systems. Cities have most frequently switched to by-district elections, whereby voters select a councilmember to represent the area of the city (the district) where they reside. Other cities use a hybrid system; for example, Oakland uses a fusion, from-district (FD) election system where its eight councilmembers, including one at-large representative, are directly elected by the city's residents, with each of the seven districts represented by one councilmember.

Similarly, the City of Downey utilizes a mixed election system to elect its five-member City Council, consisting of four individual districts and one at-large district (though this is subject to change).

Noticing the statewide trend, many cities that have not received demand letters have preemptively switched to by-district (BD) elections, often in order to avoid costly litigation. Some cities have fought the alleged CVRA violation in court, only to lose their case and millions of dollars. To date, no city has won a CVRA lawsuit.

However, the CVRA contains a safe harbor provision that protects cities from lawsuits if they adopt district elections.

The California Government Code has also been amended to make switching election systems easier. For example, in the past, only cities with populations of less than 100,000 could switch to by-district elections through a council-approved ordinance without placing the question on the ballot for voter approval. In 2016, AB 2220 (Cooper) amended state law to allow all cities, regardless of population, to switch to by-district elections by ordinance alone.

III. Transition to By-District Elections

Our analysis shows that the number of cities adopting by-district systems has accelerated in recent years. In 2000, approximately 6% of California cities used by-district voting. By 2016, that number increased to 12%, and as of 2024, the percentage of cities using by-district elections nearly quadrupled to 44.7% (216 out of 483 cities).

Figure 1 depicts the sharp rise in the adoption of by-district election systems beginning with the 2016 election cycle.

- In 2016, the Rose Institute predicted that 74 cities would convert to by-district elections by 2018. The number of cities using by-district elections eclipsed that estimate and in 2018, 120 cities used by-district systems.
- From 2016 to 2018, 64 cities converted to by-district elections. In comparison, in the preceding decade, only four cities shifted from at-large to by-district elections (Modesto in 2008, Menifee in 2010, Tulare in 2012, and Escondido in 2014).

Figure 2 shows that larger cities have been more likely to adopt district-based city council election systems.

- 22.6% (59 out of 261) of small cities (population less than 35,000) use by-district systems.
- 59.6% (62 out of 104) of medium-sized cities (population 35,001 - 75,000) use by-district systems.
- 75.0% (72 out of 96) of large cities (population 75,001 - 200,000) use by-district systems. Three large cities use either a combination of by-district and at-large systems or a from-district system.
- 90.9% (20 out of 22) of very large cities (population 200,001+) use by-district systems. One very large city (Oakland) uses a combination of by-district and at-large systems.

FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF CALIFORNIA CITIES WITH BY-DISTRICT ELECTION SYSTEMS, 1998-2024

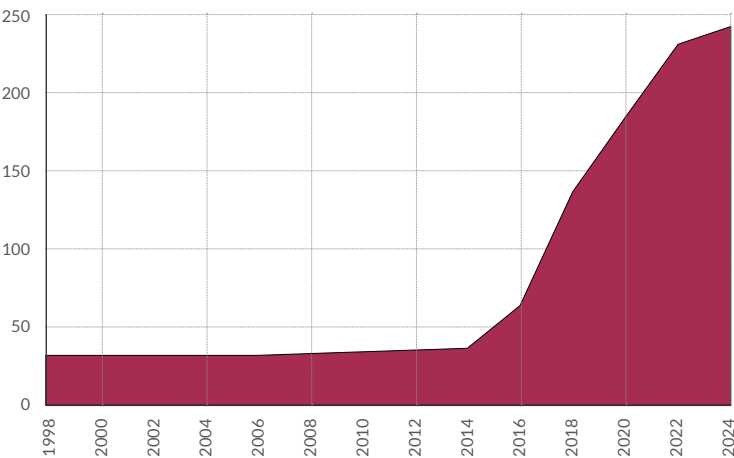


FIGURE 2. PROPORTION OF CALIFORNIA CITIES USING AT-LARGE, BY-DISTRICT, OR OTHER ELECTION SYSTEMS BY CITY SIZE, 2024

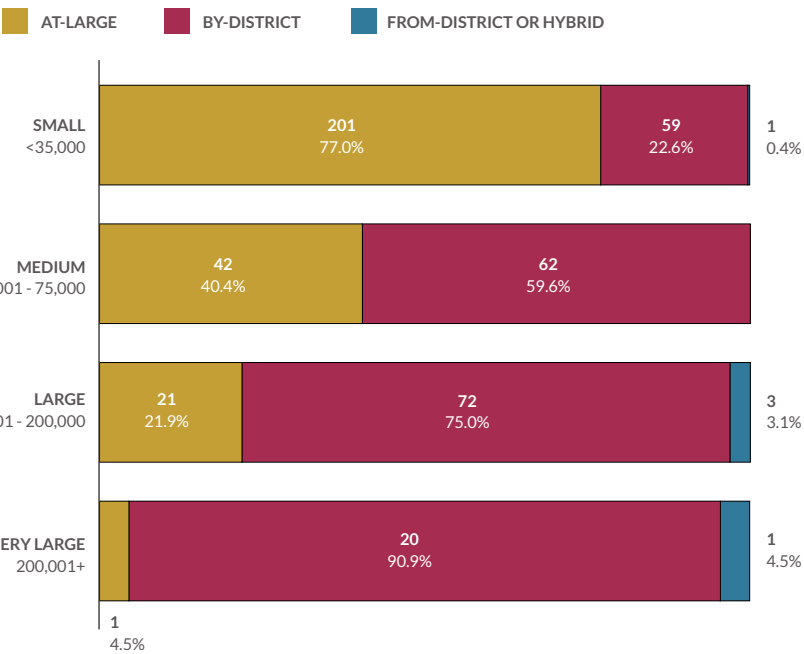


FIGURE 3. CITY COUNCIL ELECTION SYSTEMS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CITIES, 2000

In 2000, the majority of cities in Southern California elected their city councilmembers using at-large election systems. At the time, primarily large cities like Los Angeles, San Diego, and Long Beach used by-district electoral systems.

Notable exceptions include the cities of Alhambra, Santa Ana, and Newport Beach elected city council members, which used from-district elections. The City of Downey used a hybrid system with four council members elected by-district and one at-large councilmember.

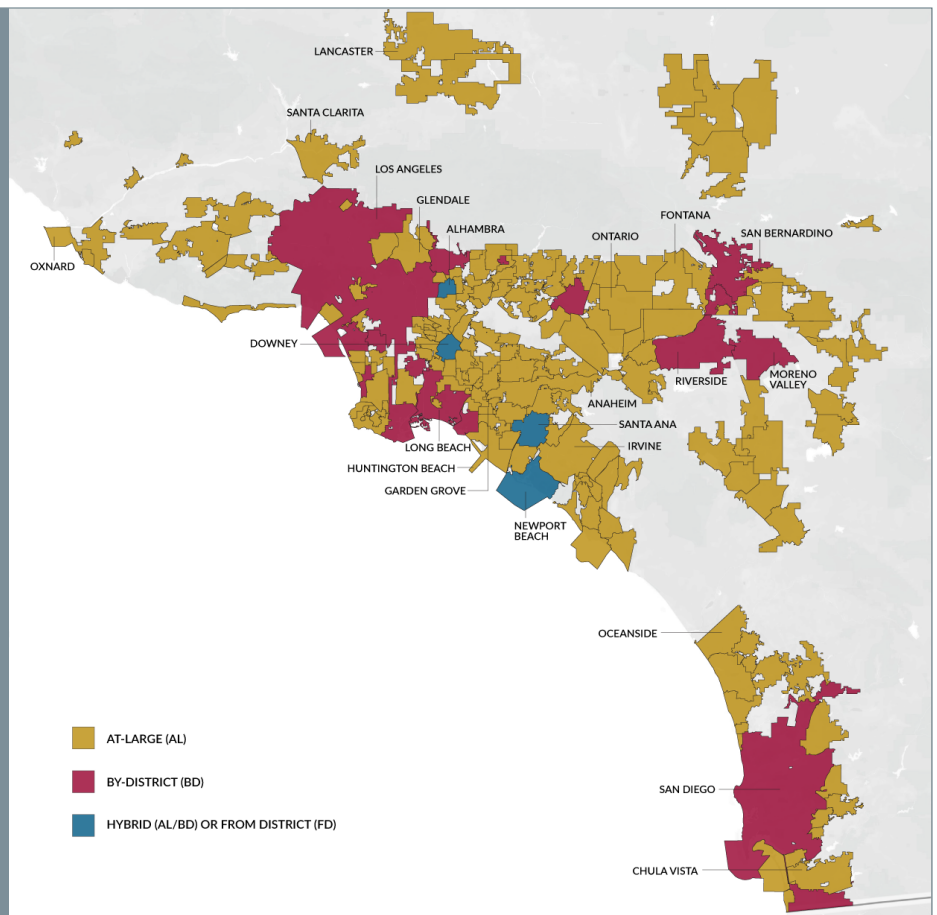
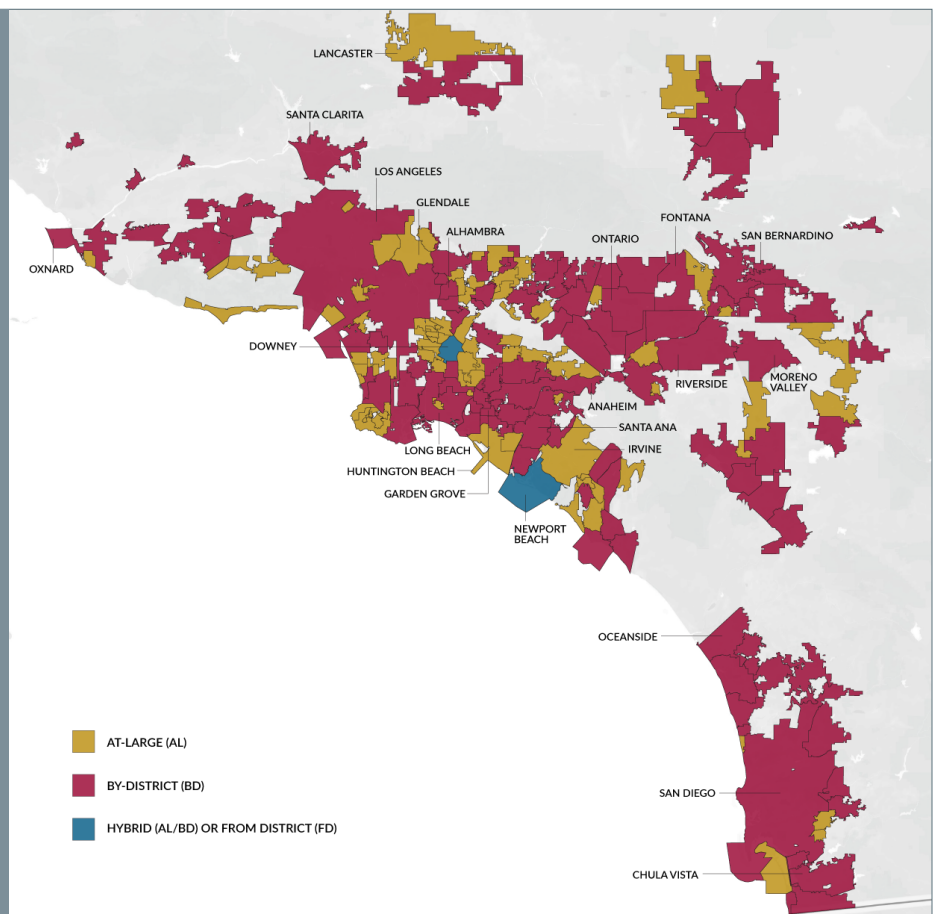


FIGURE 4. CITY COUNCIL ELECTION SYSTEMS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CITIES, 2024

Over the past two decades, a majority of southern California cities have converted from at-large electoral systems to by-district electoral systems. Among the twenty most populous cities in Southern California, only Lancaster continues to use at-large elections.

Since 2000, Santa Ana and Alhambra voters approved a switch to by-district elections for all city councilmembers in 2018 and 2020 respectively, meanwhile Newport Beach continues to use a from-district election system. As of November 2024, the City of Downey is actively transitioning its hybrid election system to a by-district system, citing compliance with the CVRA as the impetus for the transition, with a goal to complete the switch by 2028.



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