

APRIL 2025

Mapping the Revolution in California City Council Election Systems

Revised April 30, 2025

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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 36 cities in California (7.6%) used some form of district-based elections; now 229 (47.4%) do.

In 2016, the Rose Institute of State and Local Government published a [report](#) that found the move to district based 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 district elections by region and by city population. The report is based on information available as of January 2025 and revised as of April 30, 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 election systems, citizens throughout a city vote for all city councilmembers. These systems are targets of CVRA lawsuits because they can make 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. Many cities have adopted by-district elections, whereby voters select a councilmember to represent the area of the city (the district) where they reside. A few cities use a hybrid system. For example, in Oakland, seven councilmembers represent geographic districts while an eighth councilmember is elected at large. Similarly, the City of Downey uses a mixed election system to elect its five-member city council, consisting of four individual districts and one at-large district. A final, rarely used, system is called "from district" election. In this system, candidates must reside in and are elected to represent a district (giving the system a district component) but are elected by voters citywide (an at-large element).

Noticing the statewide trend, many cities that have not received demand letters have preemptively switched to district elections, often 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. 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 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 district elections by ordinance alone.

III. Transition to By-District Elections

Our analysis shows that the number of cities adopting district systems has greatly accelerated in recent years. In 2000, before adoption of the CVRA, only 7.6% of California cities used district-based election systems. By 2016, that number increased to 13.5%, and as of 2024, nearly half of all cities in the state—229 of 483 cities or 47.4%—have adopted some form of district-based city council elections, almost all of which are by-district.

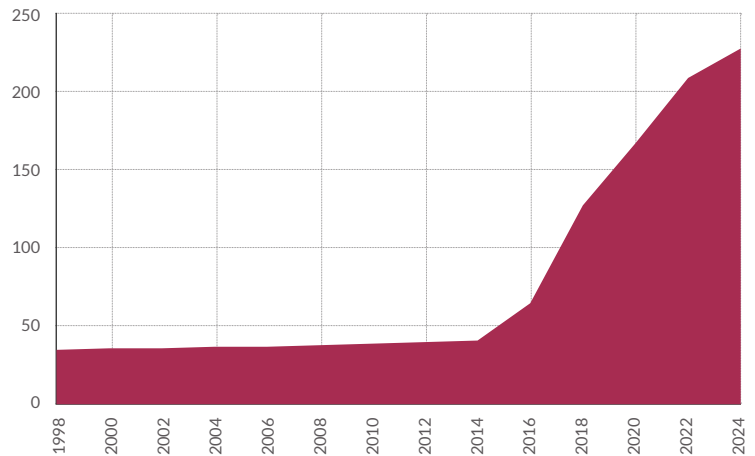
Figure 1 depicts the sharp increase in adoption of district-based election systems beginning with the 2016 election cycle.

- Between 2004 and 2014, only four cities transitioned from at-large to by-district election systems (Modesto in 2008, Menifee in 2010, Tulare in 2012, and Escondido in 2014).
- The change accelerated between 2016 and 2018, when 63 cities converted to by-district elections.
- Since 2018, 101 more cities have made the switch.

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

- 65 of 262 (24.8%) of small cities (population less than 35,000) use district-based systems. All these cities elect councilmembers by-district, except one that uses a from-district system.
- 64 of 101 (63.4%) of medium-sized cities (population between 35,001 - 75,000) use by-district election systems.
- 78 of 98 (79.6%) of large cities (population between 75,001 - 200,000) use district-based systems. Three of these large cities use from-district systems or a combination of by-district and at-large.
- 22 of 22 (100%) of very large cities (population more than 200,000) use district-based systems. One very large city (Oakland) uses a hybrid by-district and at-large system.

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



Note: Totals include By-District, From District, and Hybrid election systems.

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

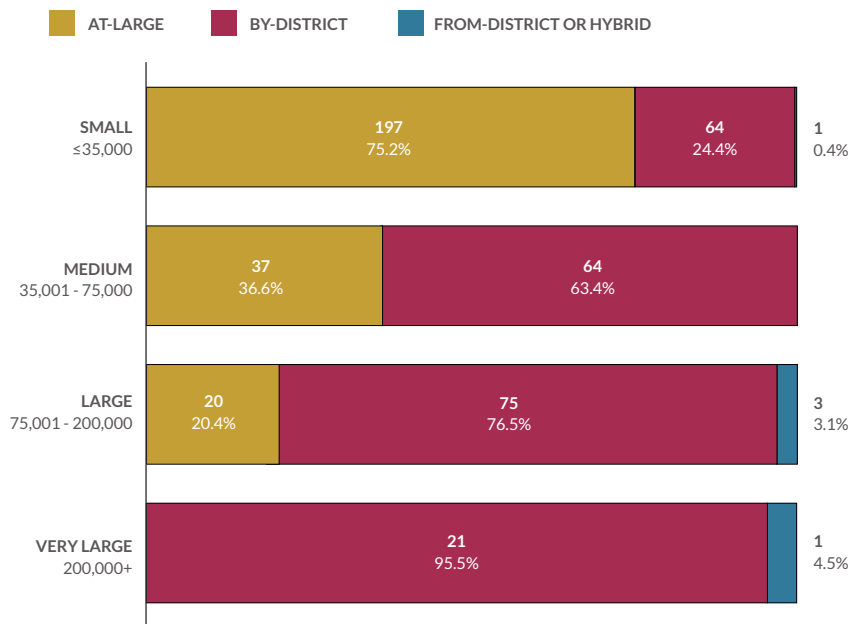


FIGURE 3. CITY COUNCIL ELECTION SYSTEMS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CITIES, 2000

In 2000, the majority of cities in Southern California elected their city councilmembers using at-large election systems. By-district election systems were mainly limited to the region's largest cities, such as Los Angeles, San Diego, and Long Beach.

Some cities, including Alhambra, Santa Ana, and Newport Beach, adopted from-district election systems. The City of Downey used a hybrid system with four council members elected by-district and one at-large councilmember.

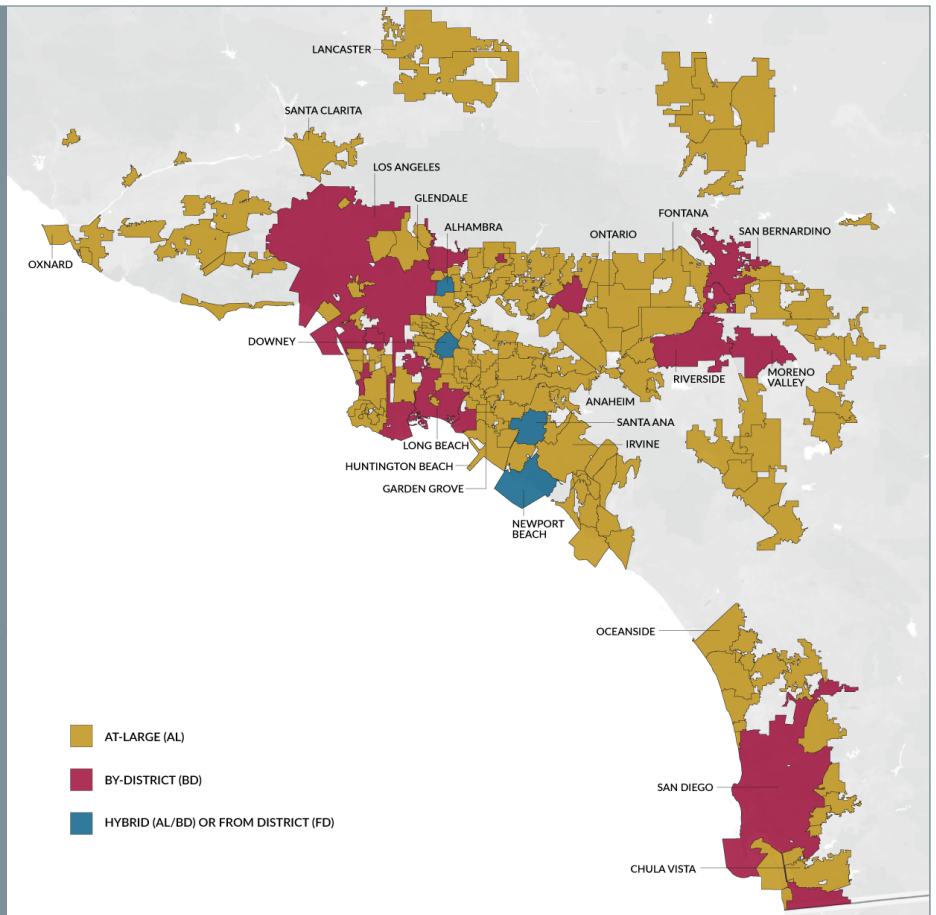
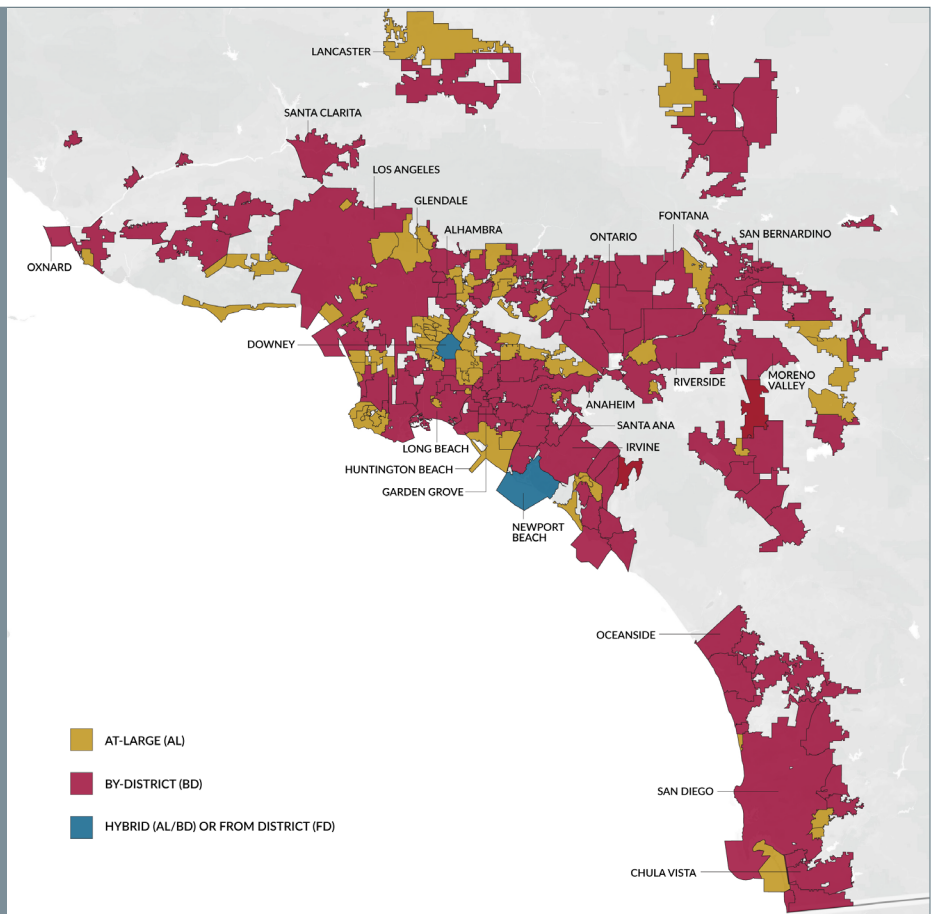


FIGURE 4. CITY COUNCIL ELECTION SYSTEMS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CITIES, 2024

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. 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 2026.



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