

Should Richmond Switch to District Elections?

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Are district elections more democratic than at-large elections? They are neither more democratic nor less democratic. Both forms of election have certain advantages and disadvantages depending on the context, and we need to look at these carefully.

But more importantly, the shifts between these forms often have nothing to do with abstract conceptions of democracy. Historically, campaigns to shift from one system to another are really part of a bigger political and social struggle in the community. Indeed, in 2004 both progressive candidates, Gayle McLaughlin and Andres Soto, supported the idea of district elections as a way to break the Darryl Reese / Chevron control of the city.

In contrast, in many other cities, the shift from district to at-large elections was part of a campaign to weaken urban political machines which depended on the votes of the urban poor (even while not delivering for them).

Furthermore, in Richmond in 1991 the reverse shift (from at-large to district) was part of an unsuccessful campaign led by whites in Pt. Richmond to reduce the power of the politically active Black community.



From Brett Murphey article, Richmond Confidential

<http://richmondconfidential.org/2014/11/07/has-at-large-voting-outlived-its-usefulness-in-richmond/>

It is also important to note that in almost every case in the twentieth century, the move to at-large elections was also accompanied by making elections non-partisan. Most experts agree that it was the shift to non-partisan elections which most reduced the power of the urban poor. By depriving people of party identification as the way to identify the general orientation of candidates, it made name recognition, access to the media, and wealth much more important in elections. One reason we have been

successful in breaking the money domination of Richmond politics is because slate campaigning (ours and Chevron's) provided voters a guide to where the candidates stood.

Racism and Elections

In recent years most of the legal and political interest in district elections revolves around issues of race. In many areas of the country the results of at-large elections in urban areas with significant concentrations of African-Americans and Latinos produced overwhelmingly white large majorities on representative bodies like City Councils. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, many court decisions, and the California Voting Rights Act of 2001 all made it easier to challenge the at-large voting system where it was clear that it was being used to "dilute" the votes of minorities. The California Voting Rights Act of 2001 allowed for suits to challenge at-large systems if it could be shown that the at-large voting was racially polarized and resulted in underrepresentation of minorities.

(Elections Code Section 14025-14032)

In the last 30 years numerous academics have studied the impact of district elections on representation of Blacks and Latinos. The general conclusions on the results of district elections:

- Where African Americans are concentrated (segregated), districts result in a significant increase in African American representatives to approximately their proportion in the population.
- The effect on Latino representation is mixed, in some cases producing a slight decline and in other cases a slight increase. Latino's remain greatly underrepresented in both district and at-large systems.
- The effect on women's representation is either statistically insignificant or in some findings reduces women's representation.

See Jessica Trounstine and Melody E. Valdini; **The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity**, American Journal of Political Science; [Volume 52, Issue 3](#), pages 554–569, July 2008.

Roger L Kemp , Local Government Election Practices: A Handbook for Public Officials and Citizens; (1999)

The Liberal Fix

Two factors typically contributed to the dominance of whites and denial of Black and Latino representation in at-large elections:

- White and upper class registration and voter turnout was significantly greater than in the African American and Latino communities, giving whites and upper class voters more influence than their numbers in the population.
- Whites with far stronger economic power were able to use their money to dominate elections through control of institutions, campaign contributions,

patronage, and even financial support to organizations within the African American and Latino communities.

Liberals were unwilling to seriously challenge the power of money in politics. They also feared the kinds of movements in the African American community that could galvanize large turnouts, so they focused on tinkering with the election structure and the idea of district elections.

In fact, district elections could not really address the problem of racism in politics.

The white power structure could often find people of color to front for it, so even with their election from districts, there would be no real challenge to the social structure.

And even where Black and Latino communities elected genuine representatives, it more often shifted the racism from the elections to the more hidden operations of government. See Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority* (1994)

The effect of districts on Richmond

The main issue of ethnic balance on representative bodies does not really apply to the Richmond City Council.

The population of Richmond is roughly (some people self-identify to more than one)

- 40 % Latino
- 25% African-American
- 20% White
- 15% Asian
- 5% others

The ethnic picture of the Richmond Council of 7 members is

- 2 Latinos*
- 3 African Americans*
- 2 whites
- 1 Asian

(*Jovanka Beckles is a Black Latina)

Given this breakdown there could be no reasonable cause for a suit under the California Voting Rights Act to change Council elections. On the other hand, the make-up of the WCCUSD school board (no African-Americans and one Latina) might very well be a good candidate for a suit.

Geographic representation on the City Council is also improving.

Mayor Butt and one councilmember live in Pt. Richmond (and Bates is widely seen as representing the South Side and Hilltop).

Jael Myrick lives in the Santa Fe neighborhood

Jovanka Beckles lives in Richmond Hts.

Vinay Pimple lives in North and East

Eduardo Martinez and Gayle McLaughlin live in the Annex

There are some who believe that the urban core of the city is under-represented. Daniel Butt, for example, has written about “the area between the Parkway, 580, and 23rd St. Those neighborhoods would likely be 2-3 seats if we had districts.” But the actual data show that on a Council with a Mayor and 6 district seats, that area would only be entitled to slightly over one representative. Jael Myrick lives in that area.

District elections for the Council would not likely significantly alter its current racial breakdown. Latinos are underrepresented largely because of low voter rates. But since there are few overwhelmingly Latino areas, they would probably be underrepresented in district elections also.

Other arguments for district elections

Therefore the issue of district elections must be examined carefully on other grounds than racism.

Other arguments for district elections are:

- More personal. Smaller districts mean candidates can meet a greater proportion of constituents. Voters would better know the candidates and could make more informed decisions.
- The influence of city wide media and organization would be less
- Neighborhood issues will be more of a focus in the election and will be better represented on the Council.

There is some truth in these but there are also significant downsides.

- City-wide issues get less attention as more emphasis is on neighborhood issues. Candidates are not forced to relate to city-wide issues, and voters will less judge candidates based on city-wide issues.
- District politics pits neighborhood against neighborhood and undermines building pride in the whole city. Since issues are not worked out as part of city-wide coalition building --a relatively open process-- district elections tend to produce more backroom “deal-making” to address neighborhood needs.
- Without city-wide issues in the forefront in district elections, there is greater dependency on name recognition, favors, and patronage. These can all be heavily influenced by moneyed interests from anywhere in the city.

- The results of a district election system depend on how the districts are drawn. This process usually involves a huge, behind-the-scenes political struggle, and the results can be dramatic. In 2012 a majority of North Carolinians voted for Democrats in the state's congressional elections. Yet the districts were drawn so that Republicans won 9 of 13 seats. <http://portside.org/2014-11-29/election-math-how-fewer-voters-elect-more-reps>
- Districts are based on the 10 year census, so districts in areas like Richmond that are changing quickly would be well behind major demographic shifts. And every 10 years the redistricting struggle would be repeated.
- Even attempts to draw maps fairly involve many assumptions about what is important. For example, here are two possible district maps. Both are drawn with compact, roughly equal population districts. The first is drawn to try to reflect current demographic and income factors. The second is drawn by trying to break down the division of Richmond by 580 and place emphasis on current geographic characteristics (e.g., the area surrounding Chevron faces special problems).

How and who would decide? (Notes: Legally districts would be determined based on Census population. The maps here use approximations based on voting registration with 20% increase in numbers for African-American and Latino areas to compensate for lower registration rates.)



- Citywide organizations and the media can find ways to control district elections. For years the Chicago Democratic machine tightly controlled politics in the city based on district organization and elections. The result was that politics were centrally controlled, deals were struck with powerful corporations and institutions in the city, and districts did not get better services.
- Finally there are unintended consequences when you adjust just one part of the electoral system. For example, many supporters of Rank Choice Voting in Oakland believed that this system would give voters more and clearer choices. Voters would be less concerned about “wasting” their votes on a candidate who

had a clear position but was not a serious contender. As it turns out, candidates became so concerned about getting the second and third choice votes from supporters of other candidates, that they tended to mush over any differences with other candidates. In Richmond one of the unintended consequences of district elections may well be changing the role of the Neighborhood Councils. (See discussion below.)

Other approaches:

Addressing the real problems:

Rather than tinkering with the election structure as a solution, we should be looking to why certain groups dominate in politics and why there is low participation.

- Domination in politics comes from the fact that there is class domination in America. The 1% who control the society also control the politics through their wealth. It makes sense to start by attacking their ability to use their wealth in politics.
- People don't participate in politics because they do not see politics as helping them change or improve their lives. The extent to which candidates seek their votes and then forget about them until the next election makes people cynical and quite rational in deciding not to participate. Until participation is organized so it produces real results, participation will stay low.

Strengthening Neighborhood Councils to Balance Neighborhood and Common needs

Actually, Richmond has a pretty good system right now. The City Council is elected on city-wide issues. At the same time we have an active Neighborhood Council system that addresses neighborhood issues, in many cases with greater attention and depth than the City Council can do. What makes it work is that City Council members, especially those who take no corporate contributions, are dependent on grass roots support and take the views of the Neighborhood Councils very seriously. There are some things we can do to strengthen the Neighborhood Councils and their influence on planning and other neighborhood issues.

What will happen to Neighborhood Councils under district elections? They would certainly find that they would lose influence with the five Council members who represent other districts. They would be more dependent on the one Council member who represents their district. An independent Neighborhood Council depending primarily on one councilmember is an unstable situation. Depending on circumstances Neighborhood Councils may evolve into support organizations tightly wedded to or controlled by the local councilmember, organizations in opposition to the councilmember, or just atrophy.

Coalition politics

What enables Richmond to elect an ethnically and increasingly geographically diverse City Council is coalition politics. The extent to which we reduce the power of money in our city elections is also the extent by which winning city-wide elections means building coalitions of different interest and ethnicities. Building coalitions means running balanced slates of candidates -- slates that represent the different constituencies and ethnicities while at the same time focusing on the issues facing the city as a whole.

In conclusion:

A shift to district elections would:

- not likely result in significant changes in the ethnic composition of the City Council
- increase the influence of neighborhood issues in elections, but possibly reduce the importance of Neighborhood Councils
- reduce the influence of city-wide issues in elections. Our “One-Richmond” slogan and the content behind it would be buried. Chevron would appreciate that its role in elections will be less visible, and it could operate through different local groups in different districts. Chevron's policies and role are less likely to be an issue in most districts. Would a district-based council be more or less likely to stand up to Chevron?
- likely further tensions between Latino and African Americans in the central part of Richmond
- increase the influence of money in politics through patronage and campaign contributions
- embroil the city in backroom deals to determine how to draw the boundaries of districts
- be a major expense.