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Democracy Dies in Darkness

MONKEY CAGE

California's city councils are getting more diverse. This law made that happen.

ELECTING PEOPLE BY DISTRICT INSTEAD OF CITYWIDE IMPROVES MINORITY REPRESENTATION

Analysis by Loren Collingwood and Sean Long

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As President Biden pushes forward with protecting voting rights, Democratic Senate leaders want to change filibuster rules to enact stronger federal voting rights laws. The two bills being considered — the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act — are aimed at protecting racial minorities' voting rights and countering Republican-controlled states' recent restrictions on election procedures.

But with Sens. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) and Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) saying they will not change filibuster rules, neither appears likely to pass. Given that impasse, some states and local jurisdictions are working to protect voting rights on their own. We looked into whether California's Voting Rights Act of 2001 succeeded at its goal of diversifying local city councils. Here's what we found.

The California Voting Rights Act

Some states such as California and Washington have enacted state voting rights laws. New York is considering a similar law. Perhaps the most important of these state laws is the CVRA.

Lawmakers designed the CVRA to ensure that minority voters' interests were represented on city councils and other local elected bodies. It takes aim particularly at cities that elect council members at-large, meaning each candidate runs citywide instead of in separate, single-member districts. A great deal of political science literature shows that at-large voting dilutes minority votes, making it less likely that they will be represented on the council. If a plaintiff can prove that different racial groups' voters prefer different candidates — for instance, if Latinos prefer one candidate while Whites/Anglos prefer another — then the CVRA requires that city to elect city council members by district instead.

When the law first passed, Latinos and other minorities were underrepresented on California's city councils and elected bodies. However, our research finds that the CVRA has largely succeeded in expanding minority representation at the local city council level.

How we did our research

First, we collected data on which cities had switched from at-large to single member districts since the CVRA's passage in 2001 until 2018.

Relying on several demographic, political and public opinion measures, we then matched each city that had switched against its most comparable city that had not shifted to district elections. That gave us 30 cities that had fully shifted from at-large to single-member districts and 30 similar cities that had not switched.

We then examined their city council's racial demographics over at least four elections, including the first election after the one of the paired cities had shifted to district elections *and* the previous three elections before that transition. We went several election cycles back to be able to see whether any changes were the result of long-term trends rather than prompted by the CVRA. For example, midsize Madera in central California shifted to district elections in 2014, while the city we paired it with, Apple Valley, did not. To ensure that any difference between the two came from the CVRA, we looked back to see whether Madera's city council had already been diversifying in the years before its shift. The answer: No. Our analysis found that each city in the pair had about the same ratio of White to non-White council members each year until one of them changed to district elections — and things changed.

To collect demographic information on city council members, we contacted city clerk offices to get lists of members and individually researched each person to find or infer race or ethnicity. Finally, we compared the difference in city council ethno-racial representation between the two cities in the pair, before and after one of them switched to district elections.

The shift to district elections increased city council diversity

We found that city councils that switched from at-large to single-member district elections were on average 10 to 12 percent more diverse after the shift.

For instance, before it switched in 2018, Anaheim's city council members were all non-Hispanic White, despite making up only 22.5 percent of the city population; afterward, 67 percent of council members were non-Hispanic White. During the same time, Anaheim's matched city, Ontario, changed its city council membership from 100 percent non-Hispanic White to 80 percent non-Hispanic White. Similarly, after shifting from at-large to district elections, Madera's city council members changed from 100 percent non-Hispanic White to 33 percent non-Hispanic White; Madera's matched city, Apple Valley, kept its 80 percent non-Hispanic White city council both before and after that year.

A third of the cities we analyzed had all-non-Hispanic White city councils before the shift. That suggests that the CVRA managed to diversify councils that minority communities had been unable to join. That effect is likely to spread; since our study, an additional 80 California cities have shifted to district elections.

What states can do to expand minority representation and enhance democracy

While national media attention focuses on threats to voting rights in Republican-controlled states and on the impasse in Congress, even in Democratic-leaning states, minority voters' interests can be overlooked or shut out. California's voting rights law offers a model for those who wish to expand minority representation locally.

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