

## At Large vs District Representation – Kathryn Saenz Duke

*Should Alameda's City Council shift from the current at-large system to district representation or perhaps to a hybrid of both systems?*

California cities can elect their City Council Members in one of three ways:

- At large: Our current system in which City Council Members are elected by and represent the whole City
- District: Council members are elected by and specifically represent a different part of the City
- Hybrid: Some council members representing specific districts and some representing our whole City

So, here are some questions and comments when considering whether our City should be interested in switching from at large to district representation

- Accountability and Focus: who would you like your City Council to be accountable to – you and your neighbors or the entire City
- Geographic Representation: would you prefer that the City Council be representative geographically of our City or would you prefer to vote for candidates from any part of the City even if they happen to be geographically clustered together
- Hybrid: selecting both district and at large City Council Members
- Minority Representation: racial and ethnic minorities usually stand a better chance of being represented on City Councils and commissions that have district elections
- Voter Turnout: mixed evidence about whether district elections affect voter turnout
- Demographics: In the country as a whole at large systems are common in wealthier and more affluent and racially homogenous communities. While district systems are common in larger urban areas with socioeconomic and racial diversity. Also, district systems are more common in cities with strong Mayor systems while at large voting is more common in cities with council-manager type systems. This is across the country,

Now we turn specifically to California and Alameda to ask should we consider moving to district elections. As of two years ago, 59 of California's 482 cities, so roughly one in eight cities elected representatives from districts rather than at large. In the following year, a dozen more cities were considering such a change, most were doing so under the threat of lawsuit relating to the California Voting Rights Act of 2001. This law speaks to the issue of minority representation and vote dilution within at large voting districts. District elections are the most common used remedy for an alleged violation of the California Voting Rights Act. The league held a forum a couple months ago talking about district elections and some of its ramifications.

So, let's look at some of our City's demographics using the current Census estimates for Alameda's population which is 78,000 plus. The racial breakdown is White 48.1% Asian 31.5% Black or African America 7.5% Remainder (Pacific Islander, American Indian and people of two or more races) 12.9%. In terms of ethnicity, Hispanics or Latinos 11.5%. Of that 11.5%, 6.4% are Mexican and the remainder 5.1% are Puerto Rican, Cuban or either Hispanic or Latino.

So, in summary, the pros of district elections are that running for City Council could become more accessible thereby broadening the candidate pool. Council members elected by districts could possibly be more responsive to neighborhood concerns. Shifting to district elections could help protect the City from a California Voting Rights Act lawsuit alleging racially or ethnically polarized voting.

The cons of switching to district elections are that shifting to district elections does not fully mitigate the influence of money in council races. Also district representation could make it harder for council to reach consensus on Citywide issues. An ineffective Council Member could leave a voting district without the same level of representation as people in other voting districts. And finally district elections do not guarantee a council whole racial and ethnic make-up represent our City as a whole.