

Huntington Beach Becomes Latest OC City Hit With Voting Rights Lawsuit

Huntington Beach city leaders were [hit with a lawsuit](#) looking to push the city into district elections for city council members.

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Huntington Beach city leaders are facing a new legal threat looking to force the city to switch to district voting for its city council elections.

In a lawsuit filed last Friday, Surf City resident Victor Valladares alleges the city's current at-large election system disenfranchises minority voters and city council candidates.

The new lawsuit comes as the city is already wrapped up in a series of other legal battles, including a case with Attorney General Rob Bonta arguing the city has the right to implement voter ID in its local elections.

Malibu-based attorney Kevin Shenkman – who's helped compel cities to switch to district elections throughout the region – is representing Valladares.

The legal argument centers on the California Voting Rights Act, which can require cities to move away from general, at-large elections if it's proven that the city's minority voters are disenfranchised.

In at-large elections, voters get to vote for every city council member, and can vote for as many candidates as there are open seats in that election. For example, if three seats are up for grabs, voters can pick three different candidates.

In district elections, each resident gets just one vote for a single candidate that lives in their district of the city. Some cities, like Anaheim, also have at-large mayors – meaning everyone gets to vote for the seat.

In court filings, Shenkman argues district voting gives minority communities a better chance of electing a council member who represents their neighborhood.

Valladares – a [former vice chair](#) of the county’s Democratic Party and a resident of the predominantly Latino Oak View neighborhood – said the city doesn’t have equal representation.

“The current at-large election system has led to a lack of representation, which in turn has led to neglect and marginalization,” Valladares said in a statement announcing the suit. “I love Surf City and believe it can be a better place, open to all, by ending its discriminatory at-large election scheme.”

In a Monday statement to Voice of OC, Gates said the city council “already authorized me to take any and all legal action to fight this lawsuit intended to take voting rights away from our residents.”

“It’s in the City’s Charter and no threats, intimidation, or legal action will change that,” Gates wrote. “I will not allow a Shenkman lawsuit to take away our residents’ right and authority to vote for all Council Members.”

No California city has yet to successfully defend itself against a voting rights lawsuit.

Mission Viejo city leaders attempted to implement cumulative voting instead of moving to districts, but that effort ultimately failed and a judge found multiple council members illegally extended their terms of office while they fought the switch to districts.

In January, the city of Cypress settled with Shenkman and began looking to draw up voting districts.

Huntington Beach is the largest Orange County city that does not operate on district elections after the cities of Anaheim, Santa Ana and Irvine all made the choice to transition.