

More California Cities Move Towards District-Based Elections

California has seen a shift toward district-based representation for city councils.

This has been a statewide trend over the past several decades, from the previously common at-large system. 2023 and 2024 have continued in this direction.

Cities up and down the state have already made the transition, mainly driven by the signing of the 2002 California Voting Rights Act (CVRA). This is because the CVRA prohibits the use of an at-large electoral system if it “impairs the ability of a protected class to elect candidates of its choice or its ability to influence the outcome of an election” (Elec. Code, § 14027.).

This law has led more than 185 cities in California to transition to a district-based voting system for their councils, whether by choice or through litigation, according to the League of California Cities in 2023.

Every year more cities join the list of localities that have moved away from an at-large system, with many new cities moving to districts for the first time.

Cities that have moved to districts for the upcoming cycle include Hayward, Azusa, Laguna Niguel, Pleasant Hill, Cypress, Santa Clarita, Los Altos, San Clemente, Soledad, La Palma, Rancho Santa Margarita, Thousand Oaks, Irvine, Fillmore, Rancho Cordova. This is an updated list of cities that have officially moved to districts in 2024 and represents cities from all across the state of California.

Many of these cities did not transition upon their own volition though, with many coming under the threat of legal action, if requests to change to districts were not met. Some of these cities did face legal action that forced them to change their election system, like the Orange County city of Cypress, which was sued twice over this issue.

This is why cities like Santa Clarita or Pleasant Hill chose to transition under their own conditions, rather than have an expensive legal process.

Some California voters seem to support a broader move to district-based elections for city councils.

The city of Irvine resisted calls to change their at-large system, but eventually allowed a ballot initiative to go forward in March that would change the way Irvine elected the council to a district-based system with a mayor. The initiative passed and Irvine now has to transition because of popular support.

However, many in power in California's cities are wary about sudden changes to electoral systems. Moving to districts from an at-large system can cause races between incumbents and lead to several years of local political turmoil, as politicians jostle for positions to continue representing their city.

This is why some cities like Cypress are willing to fight legal battles over this issue, and why Santa Monica has taken the contents of the CVRA all the way to the California Supreme Court in the past, with the case being unresolved.

California has again seen more cities move to district-based elections this year, as the number of cities adhering to at-large systems become smaller. It is likely that this trend will continue over the next several years, until the majority of California cities switch to city council districts.