

DISTRICT ELECTIONS

Impartial Analysis

Measure I, if approved by the voters, would amend the Santa Rosa City Charter to reflect the City of Santa Rosa's recent transition from the election of Council members by city-wide vote to the election of Council members by district.

Existing Charter Provision

City of Santa Rosa is governed by a seven member City Council. Each Council member serves a four-year term. Elections are held every other year. The Council members' terms are staggered, with three Council seats filled in one election and four in the next.

Section 4 of the City Charter provides that Council members will be elected "at-large," that is, by city-wide vote. In each election year, a single election is held, all registered voters in the City may vote, and the three or four candidates that receive the highest votes city-wide earn seats on the City Council.

Legal Challenge

In 2017, the City received a legal challenge to that at-large voting system. The California Voting Rights Act prohibits use of an at-large voting system if a community experiences racially polarized voting. Racially polarized voting exists when voters in a protected class (defined in the Act as "voters who are members of a race, color, or language minority group") have different electoral preferences than the rest of the electorate. In such situations, the rest of the electorate dilutes the votes of the protected class, impairing the ability of the protected class to elect candidates of its choice or to influence the outcome of the election. The California Voting Rights Act preempts all local laws, including city charters.

After review, the City Council found substantial evidence of racially polarized voting within the City, polarization which impaired the ability of the City's Latino voters to elect candidates of their choice and to influence the outcome of elections. The Council therefore initiated transition to district-based elections.

On April 17, 2018, Council adopted Ordinance No. 2018-007, which divided the City into seven Council districts and set district boundaries. Each district elects one Council member, who must be a resident and registered voter in the district. Together, the individual Council members from the seven districts constitute the City Council. District elections were held in Districts 2, 4, and 6 in 2018 and Districts 1, 3, 5, and 7 in 2020.

City Charter Section 4, however, still provides for at-large Council elections, creating an inconsistency between the Charter and the City's practice. Only the voters of the City can revise the Charter's language.

Measure I

If passed, Measure I would revise Section 4 of the Charter to confirm the election of Council members by district, authorize the Council to establish and update the Council districts in accordance with law, and confirm the sequencing of district elections.

If Measure I fails, there will remain an inconsistency between the City Charter and the City's current practice of district-based elections. In that event, the Council may consider whether to begin a transition back to at-large elections or to seek judicial guidance in light of the requirements of the California Voting Rights Act.

Measure I was recommended by the Charter Review Committee and placed on the ballot by unanimous vote of the Santa Rosa City Council.