

Communication from Public

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<https://losangeles.cagreens.org/issues/gplac-concerns-limited-scope-los-angeles-electoral-reform>

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April 12, 2023

Dear members of the Ad Hoc Committee on City Governance Reform

The Green Party of Los Angeles County (GPLAC) wants to express its grave concerns with the limited insufficient scope of work being considered thus far by the Ad Hoc Committee on City Governance Reform.

The root problem with the scope is what appears to be the assumption that switching from a redistricting process where the city council chooses district lines to one where an independent commission does, will be a sufficient response to the myriad of problems that plagued the 2021 Los Angeles redistricting process.

It will not.

Even with an independent commission drawing district lines, and even with a modestly larger city council to draw lines for— redistricting for single-seat districts will always remain problematic and controversial — because it will always be a discretionary choice about which group of voters gets grouped with which others, in order to elect a single winner. And that's because a different choice in single-seat district lines can lead to a different result in terms of who receives representation, who does not and who holds power — no matter who draws the lines.

This structural limitation and deficiency inherent to single-seat, winner-take-all elections was reflected in the question from Councilman Harris-Dawson at your last hearing. The Councilman posited an artificial intelligence program that could take all of the variables that are to go into the redistricting process, and would magically product a map that met all of the requirements. Despite this, Councilman Harris-Dawson predicted that even in such a theoretical case, many groups

and individuals would still inevitably be arguing for different maps, all for reasons of their own advantage.

It may be true that assigning redistricting decisions to an independent commission, guided by a set of legally mandated variables, may make the unavoidably subjective ultimate decision on how to split the baby seem more ‘fair’. But what is fair about denying people representation because of how lines are drawn?

The truth is, *everyone* deserves representation. But winner-take-all district elections can never deliver that. And because they can’t, the stakes, tensions and conflicts around redistricting — especially in a diverse city such as Los Angeles, will inevitably remain high - regardless of who draws the lines.

An example of this played out with San Francisco’s recent redistricting process. San Francisco faces similarly complex diversity and representation challenges as Los Angeles. But unlike in LA where the redistricting commission is advisory and the city council ultimately decides upon district lines, in San Francisco the redistricting task force decides upon district lines itself — without submitting it to politicians to approve the very legislative district lines in which they will run.

Despite this, San Francisco experienced a [brutal redistricting battle](#) in 2021-2022 between competing racial groups and political factions trying to gain advantage via the redistricting process to increase their chances of winning winner-take-all seats — and its redistricting task force found itself bedeviled by a racial dogfight between Chinese, Black and Latino communities, trying to decide who was more deserving of representation.

Proportional Ranked Choice Voting Elections

For these reasons, the GPLAC strongly encourages the Committee to expand its investigations to explore the use of multi-seat city council districts elected by ranked-choice voting - commonly called proportional ranked-choice voting, or PRCV.

Under PRCV, there are multiple winners — and fuller representation from within each district election — as more diverse elements of the community win representation at the same time. Relevant to Los Angeles' redistricting process, that also lowers the stakes of drawing district lines, because elections and issues of representation are no longer winner-take-all.

There is an example that your Ad Hoc Committee on City Governance Reform should be studying of a major US city recently adopting PRCV. There is nothing in the Council motion that established your Ad Hoc Committee that would prevent you from doing so, especially since any redistricting process should be designed to be able to address drawing district lines whether the districts are single-seat or multi-seat.

What is that example, in November 2022, voters in Portland (OR) voted to 2022 to amend its city charter and to more than double the size of its city council and elect it from multi-seat districts by PRCV.

This recommendation came out of a multi-racial public charter review commission process, led by communities of color, that rejected single-seat district representation like in LA in favor of multi-seat districts elected by PRCV, because of the inability of single-seat districts to represent Portland's own racial minority constituencies.

A Larger City Council

The GPLAC also believes you should be considering a broader range of possible increases to the size of City Council size than are detailed in the report by the Chief Legislative Analyst — and how a much larger council elected from multi-seat districts elected by PRCV might work together.

Again there is nothing in the Council motion to explore tying council size to population that would preclude looking at a much larger city council, nor how it could work with PRCV. Los Angeles has the worst per-capita city council representation at approximately 264,885 people per city council member.

The report by the Chief Legislative Analyst notes that the average for the top ten U.S. cities by population 128,762, excluding Los Angeles, is 128,762. Then the report projects the number of seats if the ratio for Los Angeles would be 150,000-to-one, 200,000-to-one and 250,000-to-one member.

Why assume only considering these nationally high per-capita ratios is ok? There was no limit on potential city council size in the city council motion authorizing this study?

Why not try and find out what might work best for Los Angeles, instead of being limited by what is being done elsewhere, and still doing worse?

When Los Angeles voters approved its current 15 member, single-seat district city council model in 1924, the per-capita ratio was 38,000. Why not work up from that?

If we are talking about comparable cities, Chicago has 50 members on its City Council and New York 51. Why isn't a city council of such sizes even considered in the written report at this early date as at least a potential option? Especially since when combined with multi-seat districts elected by PRCV, you get a lower-per capita ratio *and* fuller representation.

For example, if Los Angeles had a city council the size of New York's, that would yield a per-capita ratio of approximately 77,907-to-one — still double what Los Angelenos voted for in 1924, but a lot closer than 150,000-to-one or more ratios studied in the Chief Legislative Analyst's report.

If a 51-member city council were elected by PRCV, there could be 17 three-member districts where more voters would have voted for a winning candidates within each district, and residents, neighborhood councils and a range of community groups and organizations could

now have three council members representing their district that they could go to for local issues instead of one.

There are other potential advantage for Los Angeles if PRCV were adopted, that are at least worth studying as part of the Ad Hoc Committee on City Governance Reform work. For example, by eliminating LA's out-dated two-round 'contingent' spring primary/ November general election run-off in favor of a single November ranked-choice vote, all city council elections would be decided in November when turnout is higher and the electorate more diverse.

Conclusion

Owing to the unique circumstances around the City's 2022 redistricting process — including its ugly underbelly revealed by the hateful and racist comments revealed by three Los Angeles City Council members, there is a historic opportunity for truly transformational electoral reform for Los Angeles — an opportunity that should not be missed for not trying hard enough.

The GPLAC is concerned that the limited reforms currently under review by the Ad Hoc Committee on City Governance Reform are not trying hard enough.

For this and all the other reasons stated herein, the GPLAC implores you to expand your study in the way recommend above.

Sincerely,

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