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Opinion: Why Santa Clarans should support ranked-choice voting

By Mary Hanna-Weir, Hosam Haggag and Keith Stattenfield

Santa Clara faces an important choice in June — whether to transition to a new election system that has the potential to make our local representation more closely reflect the will of the people. Democracy works best when the voices of the people can be heard by their elected officials and where voters feel their votes actually matter. The proposed changes to our local elections, using ranked choice voting and creating two districts with three city council members each, will do just that.

We were honored to be members of the Santa Clara Charter Review Committee. Santa Clara is a richly diverse community, and our committee reflected that. And by that, we mean all types of diversity: race, national origin, politics, professions, religions, etc. Our goal is that this diversity be reflected on the dais at city council — both in the officials who are elected and in the ability of coalitions of like-minded people, whether allied through identity or other interests, to elect the candidates of their choosing.

The committee debated whether and how to divide the city into districts as well as different methods of voting that may be an improvement over our current plurality system. If you want to see our robust discussions, you can watch the meetings for yourself on the city's Facebook and YouTube pages. The committee unanimously supported this plan.

A two-district plan with ranked choice voting makes the most sense for Santa Clara.

Our neighborhoods bustle with the energy of living among a kaleidoscope of people: retirees and young children, people recently arrived from all over the world and long-time Santa Clarans, tech entrepreneurs and police officers. Our city's diversity should work for us and not against us.

When voters have the power to rank their candidates in order of preference, election results are more fair and representative. Voters always get to vote their favorite first. This allows voters to vote for their true preference based on their hopes and values, rather than fear splitting the vote among candidates from the same communities. Candidates can run to be the first or second choice of voters, and if a candidate can't win, the second and third choices of voters can help another candidate get elected rather than voters feeling their vote is wasted. Beyond empowering racial and ethnic minorities, ranked-choice voting makes it more likely for ideological minorities to elect the candidates they prefer too.

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We also recommended the two-district, three-member plan because districts have benefits of their own. Santa Clara still feels like a small town in many ways, and carving the city into six single-member districts would slice and dice this community into unrecognizable bits. But our at-large, by-seat, system has rarely elected council members from across the geography of our city. Santa Clara is also growing rapidly and has an extremely complex city government with the stadium authority and public utilities to run as well. Having two districts, each roughly half the city, should help council members be able to invest the time and attention to understand the local, neighborhood based interests of the district they represent.

Change is hard. Santa Clara is unique. We are “the Center of What’s Possible,” and that is why we proposed such an innovative plan. At the end of the day, what matters is that the people of Santa Clara feel that their votes matter and their voices are heard. And this plan will do just that.

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