

“Was it Worth the Effort?”

Did Changing Election Methods Make a Difference? Demography, Race, and Ethnicity in the Political Arena

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Applied Demography poster session

Abstract

A decade after helping two California community college districts change election methods from at-large to single-member district election of trustees in 1991, we wondered if it had made a difference. The election method change resulted from a desire to satisfy Section 2 requirements of the federal Voting Rights Act (giving protected minority groups who are geographically concentrated and politically cohesive the opportunity to elect representatives of their choice). We studied the extent to which each college district's board of trustees included members of protected groups (chiefly Hispanics/Latinos) during the decade before the election method change (the 1980s) and the decade after the change (the 1990s). We also studied whether the number of minority candidates for office was greater during the 1990s than during the previous decade.

Extended Abstract

In 1989-1991, we assisted two California community college districts with the process of changing from at large to single-member district election of trustees. The reforms resulted from a desire to satisfy Section 2 requirements of the federal Voting Rights Act (giving protected groups who are geographically concentrated and politically cohesive the opportunity to elect representatives of their choice). In one community college district, there were both sizeable (and somewhat geographically concentrated) Latino and Asian populations, and in the other there was a sizeable (and somewhat geographically concentrated) Latino population.

We examined the results of the electoral reforms a decade after they occurred. The research questions were,

- 1) Did more minority group members *run* for seats on the college boards of trustees after the changes in election methods?
- 2) Did minority group members *serve* on the college boards of trustees to a greater extent after the changes in election methods? Note that “*serve*” includes both election and appointment to office.

We obtained information on who ran for office from the Registrar of Voters office. Hispanics/Latinos were identified using the established Spanish Surnames list. We reviewed the number of votes received by each candidate.

We analyzed the racial/ethnic mix of each college district's sitting boards of trustees during the decade before (1980s) and the decade after (1990s) the electoral changes. Racial identities were obtained by interviewing long-term college district employees. Hispanics/Latinos were identified using the established Spanish Surnames list.

We distinguished among the following categories of board members:

- Elected without previous Board service
- Elected with previous Board service followed by non-service
- Re-elected incumbent
- Appointed (by remaining trustees when there was a resignation or vacancy)
- Appointed incumbent who was then elected

We calculated the number of days served by minority and non-minority group board members during the decade before and after the changes.

(Conclusions are yet to be verified) We concluded that application of the Voting Rights Act increased/had no effect on the number of protected group members on both boards. We found that the number minority group member candidates increased in one district, but not in the other. This suggests that the decade of single-member district elections resulted in increased/no change in the ability of protected groups (particularly Latinos) to elect representatives of their choice.

This poster will be visually interesting

It will include large GIS maps (population distribution by race/ethnicity within each college district) and color photos of trustees as well as the usual tables and charts. There may be some quotes from trustees and trustee candidates. There may also be maps showing how trustee areas were established against the backdrop of 1990 Census race/ethnicity data and how they were revised in the post-Census 2000 round of redistricting (all done using GIS software).