

Solving the Crisis of Democratic Representation in California

When it comes to representative democracy, numbers matter. There are worlds of difference between one elected official per every three thousand, ten thousand, or hundreds of thousands of citizens. Yet all of these ratios exist in state and even local governments throughout the USA. Such great disparities in representation mean that citizens residing in very large districts are less well- represented in government than citizens who live in small districts. By this standard, nowhere in the United States is representative democracy weaker than in the state of California.

California Assembly districts contain an average of 500,000 people, by far the largest in the United States of any state government. California Senate districts comprise almost a million inhabitants each. Even at the local level, where government is supposed to be closest to the people, popular representation is often abysmal or practically non-existent. Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose and San Francisco have city council member to population ratios of 1 to 266,000, 159,000, 100,00 and 80,000 respectively. County government is likewise removed from the reach of the people, with County Supervisors in some instances supposedly “representing” hundreds of thousands of residents. In the case of Los Angeles County, there’s one County Supervisor for every 2 million people.

The data below speaks for itself:

California Cities

City	Population	Councilors	Ratio of Councilors to Population
Los Angeles	3,985,516	15	1: 265,701
San Diego	1,429,653	9	1: 158,850
San Jose	1,003,120	10	1: 100,312
San Francisco	884,108	11	1: 80,373
Fresno	539,862	7	1: 77,123
Sacramento	531,285	8	1: 66,410
Long Beach	452,917	9	1: 50,532
Oakland	444,956	7	1: 63,656
Bakersfield	391,438	7	1: 55,919
Anaheim	349,366	5	1: 69,873
Riverside	336,478	7	1: 52,354

California Counties

County	Population	Number of Supervisors	Ratio of Supervisors to Population	Number of Residents not represented in cities	Type of County
Los Angeles County	9,934,710	5	1: 1,986,942	1,040,000	Charter
San Diego County	3,351,737	5	1: 670,347	515,403	Charter
Orange County	3,174,849	5	1: 634,969	128, 421	Charter
Riverside County	2,544,817	5	1:508,963	385,388	General Law
San Bernardino County	2,220,081	5	1: 444,016	311,659	Charter
Santa Clara County	1,914,397	5	1: 382,879	110,000	Charter
Alameda County	1,685,048	5	1: 337,001		Charter
Sacramento County	1,591,994	5	1: 318,398	564,657	Charter
Contra Costa County	1,162,547	5	1: 232,509	174,257	General Law
Fresno County	1,020,554	5	1: 204,110	171,000	Charter
Kern County	919,534	5	1: 183,906	266,821	General Law
San Francisco County (and city)	884,108	11	1: 80,373	0	Charter
Ventura County	839,598	5	1: 167,919	95,000	General Law
San Joaquin County	791,119	5	1: 158, 223		General Law
San Mateo County	760,249	5	1:152,049		Charter
Stanislaus County	558,262	5	1: 111,652	122,107	General Law
Sonoma County	481,415	5	1: 96,283		General Law
Tulare County	471,415	5	1: 94,283		General Law
Santa Barbara County	448,656	5	1: 89,731		General Law
Monterey County	434,394	5	1: 86,878		General Law
Placer County	416,326	5	1: 83,265		General Law
Merced County	288,267	5	1: 57,653		General Law
San Luis Obispo County	282,382	5	1: 56,476		General Law
Santa Cruz County	271,329	5	1: 54,265		General Law
Marin County	256,318	5	1: 51,263		General Law
Yolo County	221, 646	5	1: 44,329		General Law
El Dorado County	199,134	5	1: 39,826		General Law
Butte County	185,727	5	1: 37,145		General Law

Shasta County	181,193	5	1: 36,238		General Law
Imperial County	180,291	5	1: 36,058		General Law
Madera County	158,662	5	1: 31,732		General Law
Kings county	157,614	5	1: 31,522		General Law

**Counties with ratios less than 1: 30,000 Supervisors to residents: Napa, Nevada, Sutter, Mendocino, Yuba, Tehama, San Benito, Lake, Tuolumne, Calaveras, Siskiyou, Amador, Lassen, Glenn, Del Norte, Calusa, Plumas, Inyo, Mariposa, Mono, Trinity, Modoc, Sierra, and Alpine.*

As undemocratic as many of the above elected-official-to-citizens ratios are, there is some good news. California has democratic citizens' initiative processes that permit the people, themselves, to change local charters and amend the state constitution. The people of California have it in their power to make the necessary fundamental changes to their political system, to reduce electoral districts across the board and update the state's political system for the Information Age through decentralized, small district, democracy.

Small District Democracy at the State Level

When the nation was founded, the ideal US House district size was 30,000 people, a number found in the Constitution. Thirty thousand might be considered the uppermost marker on a scale for healthy political representation in the United States.

Thirty thousand is still a good benchmark for electoral districts because today political campaigns in districts of that size, or smaller, are affordable. In small districts, incumbent office holders have no special advantage over challengers because vast sums of money from special interests are not necessary for a candidate to be competitive. Districts comprising under 30,000 people can be won with yard signs, flyers, and shoe leather. Successful candidates from small, community-sized, districts win based on hard work and their personal reputations, not mass marketing. And when brought into the Information Age by connecting these small districts on the Web, elected representatives can legislate from home, among their own constituents, the people they are supposed to represent.

Overall, small electoral districts 1) make elections fair 2) empower ordinary people to serve in office 3) undermine the corrupting influence of special interests 4) ensure that all communities are represented 5) keep representatives in touch with their constituents, and 6) vastly improve citizen oversight of public policy. Small district democracy is the key to restoring trust and efficacy in government.

Dividing California's population of 36,664,000 into districts of 30,000 inhabitants or less would produce a very large lower house that would realize the necessary Information Age paradigm shift in the practice of representative government.

Assembly District Population	Number of Seats
30,000	1,222
20,000	1,833
10,000	3,666
5,000	7,332
3,000	12,221

Such small district sizes are normal in many states. Blue Vermont and Reddish New Hampshire, for examples, have districts legislator-to-citizens ratios of 1: 4,150 and 1: 3,400 respectively. But of course, these are small states. Even with such a low ratio, New Hampshire's legislature has 400 members, nowhere near the numbers proposed above.

To some, such large numbers of Assembly members may sound a little crazy, but it's not. The ancient Athenians, who created democracy, formed one of history's most influential civilizations and governed through their assembly of 6,000 citizens. There is nothing inherently counterproductive about putting power in the hands of large numbers of representatives, especially given the telecommunication tools that we possess in our time.

In fact, small-district democratic representation has no downside compared to the current system of large Assembly districts with populations averaging almost a half million people. In a system of electoral districts of under 30,000, elections will be much fairer, representation will be more diverse, special interests will have less power, members will be more accessible and connected to the people, and the potential for government oversight exponentially improved.

This last advantage should not be underestimated. A multitude of citizen-representatives from a vast range of professional specializations can apply their diverse backgrounds to truly represent the public rather than political and special interests. The large number of representatives, which at first blush appears to be a weakness, is actually a great strength. Government programs, regulations, as well as ongoing examinations of social, environmental and public safety needs, will be subject to far more scrutiny and rigor than at present. Assembly committees, where the work of government mostly takes place, can be massively expanded for unprecedented, specialized, oversight by representatives who will serve as accomplished but otherwise ordinary citizens, rather than always-politically-minded professional politicians dependent on support from special interests for their reelections.

Skeptics might argue that State Assembly leadership would have a harder time managing large numbers of Representatives, which might be true, but legislative leadership at present has become too autocratic. Less control by leadership could be considered a design feature in a system of small-district democracy, not a weakness. Rather than inevitable chaos, one scholar has summed up the consensus regarding large assemblies, concluding that “larger bodies are more formalized in their structures, with concentrations of power centered in leadership and centralized committees.” Large assemblies have far less group think without sacrificing much, if any, efficiency.ⁱ

In terms of practical considerations for an expanded California Assembly, lower House leadership, including the Speaker, Majority and Minority Leaders and Whips, might reasonably be based in Sacramento, like now. Assembly leadership would need to interact with the other branches of government, and require both leadership staffing and committee staffing, which would be available remotely to Members living and legislating among their own constituents around the state.

Assembly personal staff would be eliminated. Members from small districts would be their own staffs and interact with their own constituents far more, and less superficially, than they do now. Eliminating Assembly personal staffing will also go a long way toward paying for the body’s significant expansion.

Regarding the State Senate, it could remain small and in-person, so that it might have the quality of personal intimacy, which is helpful in coalition building and might be lacking in a decentralized lower house. However, Senators need not be elected by huge masses of people with all the negative consequences of the current system. State Senate members could be elected out of the Assembly by the Assembly Members from each Senate District or rotated to the Senate out of the Assembly by lottery. Or California could adopt a unicameral system, with committee members meeting in person from time to time, which can happen regardless of how the State Senate is reformed. But the days of electing legislators from big populous districts should end.

Small-District Democracy at the Local Level

Small-district local reform will require charter changes in cities and counties, and the adoption of charter governments where none currently exist in certain large counties.

Unlike the State Assembly, which needs expansion more than reform, many city and county councils and boards require the addition of new elected bodies of citizens. Fortunately, these models exist in abundance, in Europe, where many of the world’s most successful cities are government by popular assemblies.

The Economist has been ranking the world's "most livable" cities. For 2022, the top three are Vienna, Copenhagen and Zurich, each of which is governed by a popular assembly of citizen representatives.

Cities with popular assemblies divide governing authority between legislative and executive branches, which are each elected. Most use a weak mayor system with a collaborative city council. Sometimes the executive branches are elected directly by the people but in other cases the mayors and city councils are elected by the popular assemblies and are therefore accountable to them.

The world offers many interesting and innovative approaches to local government that rest far more solidly on the consent of the people than existing local government structures in California. It's past time to take a hard look at these attractive alternatives and make the necessary changes.

California Can Again Lead the Way

Between Silicon Valley and Hollywood, no place on earth has been more innovative or influential over the past hundred years than California.

But now California is stagnating as the state faces great challenges: grotesque inequalities of wealth, fiscal mismanagement, alarming environmental issues, public safety concerns, and an educational system unbecoming the state's leadership role in science and culture.

A comparison between two blue/progressive states, California and Massachusetts is interesting, because Massachusetts is largely governed through small electoral districts. For most people, the most essential local services are schools and police. According to US News and World Report's rankings, out of the fifty states, [Massachusetts ranks #2 in pre-k to grade 12 education](#) and [#7 in public safety](#). California ranks #40 and #36 respectively. The lesson should be obvious. While many factors are always in play, greater public participation and empowerment through more democratic representation produces better public services in addition to being more inherently equitable.

California's political operating system is failing because our democracy has been eroding over time as electoral districts have become larger and larger. The result has been increasingly interest-dominated government and poor public policy, with the public bearing the cost. The problem is that our people scarcely govern themselves anymore.

Democracy's decline is not unique to California. As populations grow, the loss of political representation will be faced by every democratic society in the world until each makes the



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necessary paradigm shift to update its political system for the Information Age. It's time for Californians to lead the way once again.

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ⁱ Swap, Walter C, *Group Decision Making* (S Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984) p. 54-55. Larger legislative assemblies also tend to be more fiscally responsible.