Rohnert Park Election Districts *Transition from At-Large to District-Based Elections*

SUMMARY

In October 2019, the City of Rohnert Park was threatened with a lawsuit challenging its existing system of at-large representation on the City Council and seeking a change to district-based representation. The premise for the legal action was that at-large representation inadequately represented a minority population in distinguishable sections of the City. The City Council decided not to defend against the lawsuit, but rather undertook to convert City Council elections from at-large to district-based representation within the very short timeframe allowed by statute to limit the City's financial exposure.

The California Elections Code § 10010 (Code) requires that the City create districts in compliance with certain standards and follow specific procedures, including the requirement for citizen participation in the development of the new district maps and designation of the district vote sequencing during transition (i.e., which districts will hold elections during a given year). The district maps specify which parcels and neighborhoods are included within each district, and the election sequencing specified which district seats were up for election in 2020 versus 2022, given that terms of Council members are staggered.

The City hired National Demographics Corporation (NDC), a demographic consulting firm, to provide guidance through the process. NDC gathered data needed to appropriately divide the city into five districts, and helped draw maps of several proposed districts. The City Council also solicited citizen input on the drawing of district boundaries. During this process several maps were created by NDC as well as by residents.

The City Council dedicated time at its regular meetings between November 2019 and February 2020 to discuss the maps that had been submitted and to hear citizen comments. The Council then debated the options and settled on a proposed map of districts and an election sequence. The City Council, on February 25, 2020, adopted Ordinance 944, authorizing:

"The election of members of the city council by five districts; establish the district boundaries; and election order of each district."

In 2020, the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) received two citizen complaints about the redistricting process. After reviewing the complaints, we determined there was sufficient cause to investigate. The Grand Jury investigation considered three specific aspects of the conversion from at-large to district-based representation:

- The process followed by the City Council in defining the five newly created districts
- The process followed by the City Council in determining the election sequencing of the district-based council seats
- Whether there was any credible evidence that the Council violated open meeting laws during the process

The Grand Jury concluded that the rules governing the creation of district-based representation were followed, as were the rules governing election sequencing. Further, the Grand Jury found no credible evidence that open meeting laws were violated.

GLOSSARY

The Ralph M. Brown Act, California Government Code § • Brown Act 54950 et seq., is a law that guarantees the public's right to attend and participate in meetings of local legislative bodies. See Ralph M. Brown Act above. Open Meeting Law ٠ California Voting Rights Act of 2001 • CVRA National Demographics Corporation • NDC Southwest Voter Registration Education Project • SVREP • Safe Harbor A provision in the California Voting Rights Act that provides a period in which litigation is proscribed and settlement costs Provision are limited during conversion from at-large to district-based elections.

BACKGROUND

Council Representation

On October 15, 2019 the City of Rohnert Park received a letter from attorney Kevin Shenkman representing the "*Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP), and its members.*" SVREP is based in San Antonio, Texas, and is dedicated to increasing Latino voter participation. It has been party to more than 70 California Voting Rights Act (CRVA) actions.

In his letter, Mr. Shenkman claimed "*The City of Rohnert Park's at-large system dilutes the ability of Latinos (a "protected class") to elect candidates of their choice or otherwise influence the outcome of the City's elections.*" He also claimed that the at-large elections in Rohnert Park unfairly impacted the representation of Hispanic/Latino voters. As an example, he compared the demographics of the City to the ethnic makeup of those serving on the City Council. He closed by urging the City to make a voluntary change to a district-based election system. Failure to do so would result in litigation. The letter stipulated a November 26, 2019 deadline to advise the potential litigant of the City's decision.

The City Council's Options

The City Council had two options:

- Fight the lawsuit in an effort to retain the at-large election system and potentially incur large legal bills with an unknown outcome
- Transition to a district-based election system quickly to limit the City's legal liabilities

Some members of the City Council expressed misgivings about changing election format in a city the size of Rohnert Park, but ultimately the City Council opted to eliminate the threat of the lawsuit. The City Council announced its intention on November 12, 2019 to transition to district-based representation beginning with the 2020 election cycle.

The Election System Transition

The Council hired NDC to analyze the population of the city and to develop districts that would be in compliance with the California Elections Code § 10010 (Code). During the City Council meeting, November 12, 2019, NDC made a presentation that suggested a calendar of public hearings, draft map presentations, and the required public discussion of the proposed ordinance.

The date of this presentation was critical due to the Code requirement that Council respond to the attorney's demand of redistricting per the Code, or face expensive legal action.

Public information hearings were held on November 12, November 26 and December 10, 2019 and January 14, January 28, February 11, and February 25, 2020 The purpose of the initial two meetings was to discuss the CRVA and the process of defining districts and election sequencing. The purpose of the subsequent meetings was to discuss proposed maps and election sequencing, to introduce the proposed ordinance, and to adopt the final map and sequencing plan. Public comment was solicited at each meeting, and citizens made presentations.

In 2020 the Grand Jury received two citizen complaints about the redistricting. The complaints centered on the process used in transitioning to the district-based system, and on the resulting districts and election sequencing. The complainants alleged potential violations of the CVRA and Code, as well as potential violations of legal requirements for open public meetings ("Brown Act").

Based on these complaints, the Grand Jury decided to investigate. The focus of the investigation was on the compliance with statutes governing the process, and the claim of evidence that open meeting laws had not been followed during the transition.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed City of Rohnert Park personnel, elected officials and one of the complainants.

The Grand Jury also reviewed relevant laws, including the CVRA, the Code, and the Brown Act.

Finally, the Grand Jury reviewed:

- Documents related to the transition to district elections
- Recorded City Council meetings, public announcements and published minutes of those meetings
- The Press Democrat's coverage of the issue
- Documents provided by witnesses

DISCUSSION

At-Large vs. District-Based Elections

Since its formation, the City of Rohnert Park has used an at-large system to elect Council members. In this system, each voter has the ability to vote for every Council member and every Council member represents all residents of the City. In October 2019, a lawsuit was threatened against the City of Rohnert Park, claiming that the existing at-large system under represented a demographic group concentrated in a portion of the City in violation of the CVRA. The potential litigant demanded that Rohnert Park change to a district-based system, in which the City is divided into districts and voters living in a specific district can vote only to elect the person who will represent that district.

The use of at-large election systems is being reduced by California cities as it has been attacked as potentially leading to inadequate representation of "groups of interest". The at-large election process is therefore subject to expensive litigation and is not readily defensible in court given the CVRA. To date, no city has successfully defended against the claim of unsatisfactory representation of a protected class with an at-large election system. Litigation fees may be

considerable, and these fees and other court settlements may be awarded to a plaintiff if they are successful in their lawsuit.

Rohnert Park had an established history of electing at-large Council members, and some City Council members voiced a preference for continuing to do so, given the size of the City. But the high cost of litigation and the low likelihood of success pushed them to a decision of the districtbased election alternative.

The Transition Process

Once the decision was made, the City Council needed to act quickly. A "Safe Harbor" provision exists under current law (AB 350 amendment to Elections Code § 10010), which allows 45 days from receipt of the plaintiff's notification of CVRA violation to publicly declare the intention to transition. Following such a declaration, the statute allows a 90-day period to pass an ordinance adopting district-based elections before litigation can commence. If the municipality meets both Safe Harbor periods, the expenses reimbursable to the litigant are capped at roughly \$30,000. The Rohnert Park City Council worked aggressively to meet these deadlines, but was unable to adopt the new ordinance within the 90-day period. The potential litigant, SVREP, agreed to an extension. The final map and election sequencing ordinance was passed by the City Council two weeks after the Safe Harbor deadline.

There is established law and procedures for transitioning to district-based elections. They are designed to assure that districts are developed under common guidelines and are appropriately representative of communities of interest, as well as existing commonly distinguished neighborhoods. The Code also helps to assure that the process is open to citizen input and evaluation during the transition.

The Code requires a minimum of two public hearings at which the public is invited to provide input into the development of districts. In addition, there must be a minimum of two public hearings for the public to review the draft maps and the sequencing of elections. These four meetings must be completed prior to a vote by the City Council to approve the selected map and sequence. Along with the Code provisions, the City Council must abide by the Brown Act, which specifies conditions for open meetings of local governing bodies. The Brown Act directs the legislative body to provide for open meetings with suitable notification and access of the public. It does, however, provide for exceptions to open meetings when there is the possibility of litigation.

The first indication of action by the City Council appeared on the agenda for the October 22, 2019 council meeting. The agenda for this meeting listed a closed session with legal counsel to discuss "Exposure to Litigation." The Brown Act does not require public participation in this type of meeting.

At its next meeting, on November 12, 2019, the City Council publically acknowledged the receipt of Attorney Shenkman's letter, and after an additional closed session, staff reports, public comment and open discussion, the Council adopted Resolution 2019-140. This resolution declared the City's intent to transition to district-based elections pursuant to the Code. This Resolution provided an initial answer to the potential litigant, and started the City's 90-day time period to adopt a district-based election ordinance before the potential litigant could take action against the City.

After Resolution 2019-140 was adopted, five public meetings were held to discuss the transition process, to evaluate proposed district maps (see Figure 1), and to adopt a map and related election sequencing for the newly created districts (see Figure 2).

The Council published rules for the development of legally-compliant district maps and boundaries to help citizens participate in the process of defining the districts. They also hired NDC to suggest potential district maps, evaluate citizen-proposed district maps, and evaluate proposed districts for compliance with anti-gerrymandering rules. The demographic evaluations included district population, total population, and voter ethnicity, age, education, income and home ownership in order to assure that proposed districts met state and federal legal requirements (see Appendix A). As noted above, the Code requires the City to hold at least two public hearings to solicit input on potential districts from citizens. The meetings must be held over a period not exceeding 30 days. Beyond that, the City is required to hold at least two public hearings over a period of no more than 45 days, at which the public is invited to provide input regarding the content of the draft map or maps and the proposed sequence of elections.

As a part of its regular Council meetings on November 12 and November 26, 2019, the City Council included discussion of the proposed transition to district-based elections. Time was set aside for public comment; two and four citizens, respectively, voiced their opinions on the process. These meetings met the Code requirement of two public hearings for input into the development process within 30 days.

As a part of its regular Council meetings on December 10, 2019 and January 14, 2020, the City Council included discussion of the proposed maps and potential election sequencing. Time was allotted at these meetings for public comment and presentation of maps from the public; three citizens spoke about the maps at the December 10 meeting and five citizens spoke at the January 14 meeting. These meetings met the Code requirement of two public hearings for input into the development of maps and sequencing within 45 days.

When the Council adopted a proposed timeline of meetings in November, it anticipated that it would be prepared to adopt an ordinance at its January 28 meeting to establish district elections. A map of the proposed boundaries was identified by the Council members as the preferred district map (Map 110, Figure 1). There was time for public comment and some objections were noted by the three citizens who spoke. The City Council decided not to vote on the map at that meeting, and it was added to the agenda for the next regular Council meeting scheduled for February 11, 2020.

At the February 11 meeting the agenda indicated "*Sixth Public Hearing on Draft Maps and Potential Election Sequencing.*" A City Council discussion took place in open session and time was allocated for public comment. At this meeting, a new citizen-submitted map was introduced, and the demographics were verified for legal compliance by NDC (Map 112, Figure 1). The Council members indicated that this was now the preferred map, replacing Map 110. This meeting included the first of two required discussions and public comment of the proposed ordinance which would adopt Map 112. Two citizens spoke at the meeting regarding the map and the process. Subsequent to the public discussion, the Council adopted Map 112, and proposed the sequence of voting for the districts.

Proposed District Map 110

Selected District Map 112

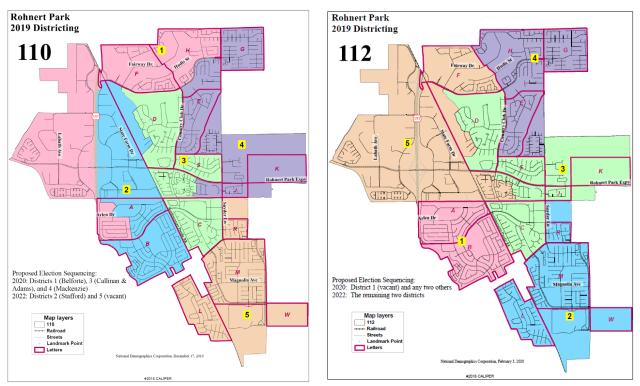


Figure 1: National Demographics Corporation

At the February 25 regular Council meeting, the Council had the second required discussion and public comment of the proposed ordinance. Seventeen citizens spoke at the meeting, largely noting the impact of the proposed sequence of district elections. Subsequent to public discussion, the Council adopted Ordinance 944 by a 3-2 vote in favor of adoption. This ordinance authorized district-based elections using the boundaries defined within Map 112, and adopted a sequence whereby districts 1, 3 and 4 would elect members to the Council in 2020, and districts 2 and 5 would elect members to the Council in 2022. All City Council members serve four-year terms.

The February 11 and 25 meetings fulfill the Code requirement of two public hearings on the decision to accept Map 112. The schedule and content of meetings, demonstrate that the Council was working with public input and following State laws. The additional meetings resulted in the Council exceeding their 90-day window to adopt an ordinance, however, SVREP agreed to an extension for the Council to complete the process.

In addition to the required public meetings, the City Council reported closed executive session meetings with the City Attorney to discuss the potential litigation. These closed meetings related to litigation are permitted under the Brown Act.

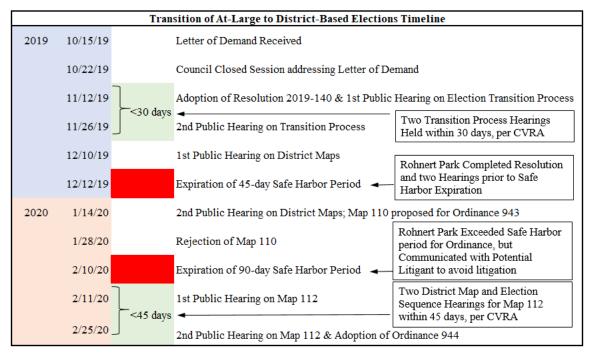


Figure 2

The Final Outcome

In adopting Ordinance 944, the Council voted for a sequencing of district elections that resulted in one incumbent Council member becoming ineligible to run for office. This member's 4-year term expired in 2020, but the member lived in a district that was not up for election until 2022 under the new sequencing. Two other City Council members would remain as at-large representatives until the expiration of their terms in 2022, and the remaining two Council members' terms expired in 2020, making them eligible to run for re-election in the newly created districts where they resided.

The districts and the election sequence adopted in Ordinance 944 were in place for the November 2020 election, which unseated both of the Council incumbents running for re-election and seated three new Council members. These three new Council members joined the two atlarge incumbents whose terms expire in 2022.

Ralph M. Brown Act Compliance

The Grand Jury did not find credible evidence supporting allegations of Brown Act violations. However, the Grand Jury did find that the bi-annual ethics training required by California Assembly Bill No. 1234, which includes Brown Act training, was not monitored or tracked by the City of Rohnert Park. Because this information is not monitored or tracked, City personnel are unable to determine whether City Council members have attended the training during their tenure in office and are thereby fully aware of Brown Act requirements. Assembly Bill 1234 does not require a municipality to monitor or track the attendance of required training by local officials, but it does require a municipality to provide the training. It also specifically requires local officials to receive training in open government laws. These rules are complex and many times elected local officials have had no prior experience holding public office.

The Grand Jury also notes that Rohnert Park anticipates that the 2020 decennial Census may have an effect on recognized demographics of Rohnert Park. The Code requires that district

boundaries be amended to account for any changed demographics documented in the Census data so that representation continues to meet the legal requirements for districts. Those district boundary decisions may be put into place prior to the 2022 elections, with further impact to incumbents or challengers running for office at that time.

CONCLUSION

The Grand Jury's investigation into the City of Rohnert Park's transition from an at-large to district-based election system confirmed that the City Council met the requirements of the law. The City Council complied with the rules for public notification, public involvement, district demographics and district boundaries. Notably, the City Council held more public meetings than the minimum required, had Spanish translations of pertinent information on the City's website, had robust public comment and ultimately adopted a citizen-submitted district map. Additionally, the Grand Jury found no evidence of violation of the Brown Act.

The Grand Jury found, however, that the circumstances of the threatened litigation drove the City Council's valid objective to complete the process within the condensed Safe Harbor timeline. This, then, coupled with related closed session discussions, led some to question whether the Council was receptive to public input and whether open meeting rules had been violated. The rapid transition actions are not judged by the Grand Jury to be improper, but they are noted to be unique to this transition, and should be avoided if and when the City revises district boundaries in the future. If the Census demonstrates that redistricting is appropriate, the Grand Jury recommends that the Council take early initiation of the process, with time to propose and debate district boundaries and election sequences. This will help to assure the public that the redistricting activity is fully within the public view and according to rule.

FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury determined that:

- F1. The Rohnert Park City Council acted in compliance with California law in transitioning to district-based Council elections.
- F2. There is no credible evidence of violations of the Brown Act with regard to non-public communication of the City Council. The Brown Act permits closed-session meetings to discuss litigation.
- F3. The election sequence adopted by the City Council complies with California and federal election law.
- F4. The submission of Map 112 and the City Council's evaluation of it complied with the California Elections Code.
- F5. The City of Rohnert Park does not monitor or track the ethics training required by California Assembly Bill 1234 of all local agency officials in office on or after January 1, 2007.
- F6. The City Council provided legally sufficient opportunity for the public to submit proposed district maps and to comment on submitted maps.

F7. Subsequent to the first sequencing election in 2020, but prior to the second sequencing election in 2022, in which the transition from At-Large to District-Based elections as adopted in Ordinance 944 is fully adopted, the City of Rohnert Park will have the results of the 2020 decennial Census and will need to evaluate whether Map 112 still provides representation for demographic groups of interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. The City of Rohnert Park establish a procedure to monitor and track ethics training for publicly elected officials as required by California Assembly Bill No. 1234. This should occur by December 31, 2021. (F5)
- R2. The City of Rohnert Park notify elected officials of ethics training bi-annual deadlines by December 31, 2021. (F5)
- R3. The City Council members proactively plan in advance and allocate time in Council Meeting agendas to give the public opportunity for robust and ongoing discussion of any changes to the City's demographics that need to be addressed when the new Census data is released on September 30, 2021. This should occur by December 31, 2021. (F7)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the grand jury requires responses as follows:

- City of Rohnert Park City Manager (R1, R2)
- Rohnert Park City Council (R3)

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that their comments and responses must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Rohnert Park City Council Meeting Videos: November 2019 through February 2020
- Rohnert Park City Council, Resolution 2019-140, "Adoption of a Resolution Declaring the City of Rohnert Park's Intent To Initiate Procedures to Consider Transition from At-Large Elections to By-District Elections," November 12, 2019
- Rohnert Park City Council, Ordinance 944, "An Ordinance Of The City Council Of The City Of Rohnert Park Amending Title 2 "Administration And Personnel" Of The Rohnert Park Municipal Code To Add A Chapter 2.66, "District Elections" To Provide For The Election Of Members Of The City Council By Five Districts; Establish The District Boundaries; And Election Order Of Each District," February 25, 2020
- Assembly Bill No. 2123 Chapter 277, "An act to amend Section 10010 of the Elections Code, relating to elections," September 6, 2018.

- California Elections Code 10010 Chapter 10, "Local, Special, Vacancy, and Consolidated Elections," 10/17/2019
- Rohnert Park City Council, 10/26/2020 District Election Information
- Rohnert Park City Council, 10/26/2020 Draft Maps
- Rohnert Park City Council, 10/26/2020 Mapping Tools
- Assembly Bill No. 849 Chapter 557, "Fair and Inclusive Redistricting for Municipalities and Political Subdivisions (FAIR MAPS) Act" October 8, 2019
- Assembly Bill No 1234 Chapter 700, Section 4 Article 2.4 "Ethics Training"

APPENDIX A

Map Preparation Rules

Rohnert Park issued the following rules for citizens wishing to prepare district maps for consideration:

- Each council district shall contain a nearly equal population as required by law.
- Each council district shall be drawn in a manner that complies with the Federal Voting Rights Act. No council district shall be drawn with race as the predominate factor in violation of the principles established by the United States Supreme Court in Shaw v. Reno, 509 U.S. 630 (1993), and its progeny.
- Additionally, pursuant to Government Code § 21601(d), the Council must not adopt district boundaries for the purpose of favoring or discriminating against a political party.

In addition, several objectives needed to be considered for the proposed districts as follows:

- To the extent practicable, council districts shall be geographically contiguous. Areas within districts that meet only at the points of adjoining corners are not contiguous.
- To the extent practicable, the geographic integrity of any local neighborhood or local community of interest should be respected and included within a single district for purposes of its effective and fair representation in a manner that minimizes its division. A "community of interest" is a population that shares common social or economic interests that should be included within a single district for purposes of its effective and fair representation.
- Council district boundaries should be easily identifiable and understandable by residents. To the extent practicable, council districts shall be bounded by natural and artificial barriers, by streets, or by the boundaries of the city.
- To the extent practicable, and where it does not conflict with the preceding criteria, council districts shall be drawn to encourage geographical compactness in a manner that nearby areas of population are not bypassed in favor of more distant populations and where doing so does not conflict with higher-ranked criteria.
- Where doing so does not conflict with higher-ranked criteria, the City Council may consider other traditional principles in the development of districts. For example, to the extent practicable, each council district shall respect the previous choices of voters by avoiding the creation of head-to-head contests between councilmembers previously elected by the voters, insofar as this does not conflict with Federal or State Law.

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$ \begin{array}{ c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c$	0							50%
$\begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $	Language spoken at home	english						76%
$ \begin{array}{ c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c$		-						17%
$ \begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $		asian-lang						
$ \begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $		other lang	3%	2%	4%	3%	3%	3%
$ \begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $	Language Fluency	1 0	18%	4%	5%	5%	10%	8%
$\begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $		hs-grad	61%	63%	66%	63%	61%	62%
$ \begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $		bachelor	16%	22%	20%	20%	20%	20%
Pct of Pop. Age 16+ employed 63% 66% 64% 63% 64% 6 Household Income income 0-25k 23% 14% 16% 11% 20% 1 Household Income income 50-75k 26% 19% 20% 18% 20% 2 income 75-200k 27% 46% 40% 47% 34% 3 income 75-200k 27% 46% 40% 6% 5% 4 Housing Stats single family 52% 75% 69% 78% 64% 6 multi-family 48% 25% 31% 22% 3 6 population data from the 2010 Decemnial Census. 40% 57% 55% 61% 51% 5		graduatedegree	6%	11%	7%	9%	7%	8%
income 0-25k 23% 14% 16% 11% 20% 1 Household Income income 25-50k 23% 17% 20% 19% 22% 2 income 50-75k 26% 19% 20% 18% 20% 2 income 75-200k 27% 46% 40% 47% 34% 3 income 200k-plus 2% 4% 4% 6% 5% - Housing Stats single family 52% 75% 69% 78% 64% 6 multi-family 48% 25% 31% 22% 36% 3 owned 40% 57% 55% 61% 51% 5	Child in Household	child-under18	30%	26%	26%	27%	26%	27%
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Mousing Stats multi-family 48% 25% 31% 22% 36% 33 rented 60% 43% 45% 39% 49% 4 owned 40% 57% 55% 61% 51% 5 otal population data from the 2010 Decennial Census.								68%
Housing Stats rented 60% 43% 45% 39% 49% 4 owned 40% 57% 55% 61% 51% 5 otal population data from the 2010 Decennial Census.								32%
owned 40% 57% 55% 61% 51% 5 tal population data from the 2010 Decennial Census.	Housing Stats							
otal population data from the 2010 Decennial Census.								47%
			40%	J/%	22%	01%	D1%	53%
uname-based Voter Registration and Turnout data from the California Statewide Database.								
tino voter registration and turnout data are Spanish-surname counts adjusted using Census Population Department undercou								

Selected District Demographics - National Demographics Corporation

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.