

Presentation for 2022 Elections Task Force

In 1995, I was appointed by the Board of Supervisors to the first Elections Task Force which was created by Proposition L passed in 1994 by the San Francisco electorate. Proposition L mandated that the Mayor, the Board of Supervisors, and the Registrar of Voters would each appoint 3 members of the Task Force, and this body would “draft one or more plans to provide a different method of electing the Board of Supervisors. The Task Force would consider: the cost of running for supervisor; representation of the diversity of the city’s neighborhoods and communities; the number of Supervisors San Francisco should have; the pay for Supervisors; and all other relevant matters.” In addition to the nine members of the Task Force, we had the benefit of consultation provided by Steven Hill from the Center for Voting and Democracy, now known as FairVote. I was elected by the body to chair the Task Force.

Under the citywide system in place at that time, also known as “at-large,” eleven members were elected to the Board of Supervisors from throughout the city. As explained in the Voters Handbook under “The Way It Is Now”: “there is no requirement that candidates for the Board of Supervisors receive a majority of the votes cast, and there are no run-off elections for the Board. If, for example, six Board seats are up for election, the six candidates who receive the most votes are elected.”

From the beginning of our work, it was understood that a return to a district system of electing supervisors was under consideration. After two unsuccessful ballot measures in 1972 and 1973, San Francisco had originally passed district elections in November 1976 and elected its first board of district supervisors in June 1977. It remained in place until a special election in August 1980 repealed district elections by a margin of fewer than 2,000 votes, returning the city to citywide elections.

Our Task Force also assessed 3 other alternative plans for electing supervisors besides the single-member district system: 1) preference voting, known today as instant run-off voting or ranked choice, in an at-large system; 2) cumulative voting at-large; and 3) preference voting in five 3-member districts. Except for the last with a 3-member district plan, all the other plans called for an 11-member board.

After meeting for 11 months in 1995 and holding 18 public hearings throughout the city, receiving a substantial amount of public input, our Task Force concluded that the citywide system of electing supervisors was drastically flawed and that the voters should have placed before them a ballot proposal to return to district elections. Such a ballot proposal would need to include exactly what the districts would look like, with distinct boundaries defined in the ballot language. We contracted with the Public Research Institute at San Francisco State University to draft maps based on **strict criteria**, and we revised the map several times based on community input received in public meetings. We stipulated that the members of the Board of Supervisors would have no say in the drawing of lines in order to eliminate any possibility or appearance of a conflict of interest.

Strict Criteria: Chief among the criteria for the drawing of district lines was that we adhere, to the fullest extent possible, to the original spirit and intent of the former district elections guidelines: 1) to build district boundaries that maintain the integrity of traditional and recognized neighborhoods; and to design districts that group together ethnic constituencies, marginalized minorities (e.g., LGBTQ community) and communities of interest (e.g., renters, homeowners, artists). We also listened in our community meetings, especially in the ones we held in the neighborhoods, to the feedback received from San Franciscans regarding which neighborhoods they felt were more naturally aligned with their neighborhood in terms of such factors as neighborhood character, political affinity and/or economic status, among others. The public testimony was invaluable to our work, and Professor Rich deLeon of the Public Research Institute has often said that it greatly informed his work in drafting the district lines. For example: what had been district 5 in the 1977 districts had aligned the Castro/Eureka Valley neighborhood with the Haight-Ashbury, but in our hearings, we heard that the folks of the Haight-Ashbury felt that their neighborhood was a more logical fit in the demographics of the 1990's with the Inner Sunset and Western Addition neighborhoods.

Our first time before the Board of Supervisors with a report back on the work of the Task Force and the conclusions we had drawn was in December 1995. Our proposals included 4 plans that would: -- 1) Divide the city into 11 districts of about 65,000 people each, with one supervisor elected from each district. -- 2) Divide the city into five districts of about 144,000 people each with three supervisors elected from each district, increasing the overall number of supervisors from 11 to 15. -- 3) Establish a cumulative voting system that would ask voters to cast multiple votes for one candidate or split their votes as they wished. -- 4) Establish a "preference voting system" that would maintain the present at-large system but allow voters to rank their votes in order of preference. In addition, the task force recommended moving board elections from even- to odd-numbered years; the thinking at that time was that we needed to prevent local elections from competing with high-profile state and national elections.

At that December 1995 meeting, the Board of Supervisors surprised our Task Force and district elections supporters by failing to pass our proposal to put all four plans up as ballot measures, as moved by then-Supervisor Terrance Hallinan. The vote was tied 5-5 with one supervisor absent. One supervisor, a longtime district elections supporter who had voted NO, expressed her fear that if putting all plans on the ballot meant they all failed, district elections would be lost perhaps forever, and she felt that the Board should move forward with a SINGLE plan.

Supervisor Hallinan promised that there would be more debate and public discussion, and our Task Force returned to a new round of community meetings to assess which of the plans had the widest appeal and to consider more fine-tuning of district lines. Then in July 1996, by a vote of 7 to 4, the Board of Supervisors approved our District Election Plan for the city, and it was placed on the November 1996 ballot as Proposition G. An alternate plan for Preference Voting within a citywide system of electing supervisors was also placed on the ballot as Proposition H.

Proposition G to return to District Elections passed by 57% to 43%. In November 2000, San Francisco seated the first 11 supervisors elected from within the districts our Task Force had approved, sent through the Board of Supervisors, and seen implemented by the voters of San Francisco.

Proposition H, titled "Preference Voting," lost in 1996 by 56.4% to 43.5%. It was revised and was placed on the ballot in 2002 titled "Instant Run-Off Voting." It passed that year and was first used two years later in Board of Supervisors district races.

One final note: in the end, our Task Force did not include a raise in supervisors' salaries to either of our proposals that went before the voters in November 1996. A separate charter amendment was submitted by a unanimous vote of the Board of Supervisors to raise the supervisors' annual salary from \$23,924 to \$50,000 and to also add them to the city's retirement system. It failed by 63.3% to 36.6%. The supervisors' salaries were ultimately increased in subsequent elections.

The district boundaries remained in place until the need arose to revise the lines in accordance with the 2000 census, and have been redrawn after each succeeding census.

Subtracted text:

The other appointing officers were the Mayor and the Registrar of Voters. Our task force was charged with examining San Francisco's system in place at that time of electing supervisors citywide and assessing the feasibility of alternative systems for the election of supervisors. Other members of that Elections Task Force included Christopher Bowman, Susan Horsfall, Henry Louie, Eric Mar, Ruth Picon, Betty Traynor.

Some in the public saw this as a vote against reinstating district elections. However, Supervisor Sue Bierman, a longtime district elections supporter from its origins who voted NO, was quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle as saying, "You need real unanimity to bring out a great force of people power to get a unified plan." The Chronicle stated that Bierman

Articles:

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