

Irvine City Council 11 Sept 2023, Agenda Item 5.1, City Council Election Districts

When I moved to Irvine in 1979, the population was about 60,000 and the "village concept" was still mostly on paper. My "community" was and is the 14 houses on a cul-de-sac. Between the scattered housing tracts were row crops and orchards, eucalyptus windrows, two-lane roads with no street lighting, 4-way stop signs, and Marine Corps jets and helicopters that sometimes made noise. Most workers commuted to jobs outside Irvine, and grocery shopping was only nearby Tustin. Irvine is very different now.

The five city council members were elected at-large. I've voted in every Irvine election since then. The city's population has grown to over 300,000. After the fight over the fate of the closing Marine Corps base and the sale of the property to developers, dark money influence over local elections seemed to get worse and worse, along with partisan politics. City Council members seemed remote and indifferent to large parts of Irvine's citizenry and swayed by political donors. The City Council still has five members elected at-large.



IS IRVINE LARGE ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY INCREASING THE SIZE OF THE CITY COUNCIL?

As of 2018, there are 19,495 incorporated cities, towns, and villages in the United States. 14,768 of these have populations below 5,000. Only ten have populations above 1 million, and none are above 10 million. Irvine is among the 310 cities that are considered at least medium-sized cities with populations of 100,000 or more.

Irvine is the 63rd-most populous US city.

Irvine ranks 13th among California cities by population. Irvine is similar in size to such cities as Anaheim, Stockton, Riverside, Santa Ana, and Chula Vista. There are 58 counties in California. Irvine ranks 23rd among counties. Irvine has a larger population than such California counties as Merced, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, or Marin. The combined populations of the 14 smallest county populations are less than Irvine's population.

Within Orange County, Irvine is 2nd largest by population (after Anaheim, although Santa Ana is nearly equal to Irvine). Thus, of the 34 cities in OC, 31 are smaller than Irvine. Irvine's population is 9.7% of the total OC population. Irvine's current population is equal to the cumulative total population of the 11 smallest OC cities.

When Irvine adopts six districts, each district would have a population about equal to Placentia. (Placentia has a City Council of five persons. To equalize this degree of representation in Irvine, it would require each of six Irvine districts to have five members for a total City council size approaching 24-30 persons.) Or, each district would have one each of Rancho Santa Margarita, Fountain Valley, Cypress, Brea, Aliso Viejo, and Placentia.

Irvine is large enough to warrant expansion of the City Council. But enlarging the Council from five to seven

actually does little to improve democratic representation. Six districts result in about 52,000 people in each district. Enlarging the council to 14 would bring this down to about 22,000 per member. Very large cities, such as New York and Chicago, have city councils numbering more than 50. Los Angeles has not enlarged its city council since 1924. Consequently, LA has just 15 districts with a council member representing about 260,000 people. (San Francisco has about 79,000 residents per district, and Long Beach has 52,000 per district.) "More council members would mean a larger, more diverse bench of leaders and less of a hit to the balance of representation each time a member leaves." (LA Times, 11/13/22). Perhaps it would be just a tad more difficult for "dark money" to influence a majority of 6 or 8 district elections. Enlarging the City Council to 7 or 9 would be an improvement over the current five, ignoring 52 years of population growth in Irvine. **YES, Irvine should enlarge the City Council, no matter what, to 7 or 9.**

DISTRICTING

My own hopes for "districting" in Irvine include increasing responsiveness of council members to the voters of Irvine, reducing the influence of "dark money" in city elections, and improving voter turnout.

"Community" is broadly defined as a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. Using districting to define Irvine "communities" is like slicing a loaf of bread. Each district is substantially similar. On the other hand, if the goal is the hegemony of a particular "interest group", gerrymandering becomes a malignant tool. It would be a step backward in Irvine's celebration of cultural diversity by delineating specific cultural zones.

In four decades of Irvine residency, I have not observed any useful historic boundaries that emphatically say "here is a voting district" or "this is a distinctly different place". In the last 15 years, I have spent many hours walking and cycling the trails and bike paths of Irvine, north, south, east, and west. It's very difficult to define differences between "communities" this way. (There is substantial similarity in views, trail landscaping, back walls, stucco, and tile.) In my view, any district map will have some degree of arbitrariness, and there are an infinite variety of ways to fiddle with boundaries. Consequently, I submitted a variety of district proposals that simply equalized the populations of districts and ignored all other criteria such as planning area, ZIP codes, school districts, political party, race, rent/own, village, recent arrival, age, income, *et cetera*. I'd like most to live in a community of humans that values human diversity and avoids tribalism and divisiveness. None of my districting ideas attracted much attention. That's okay. I'll try to explain later on.

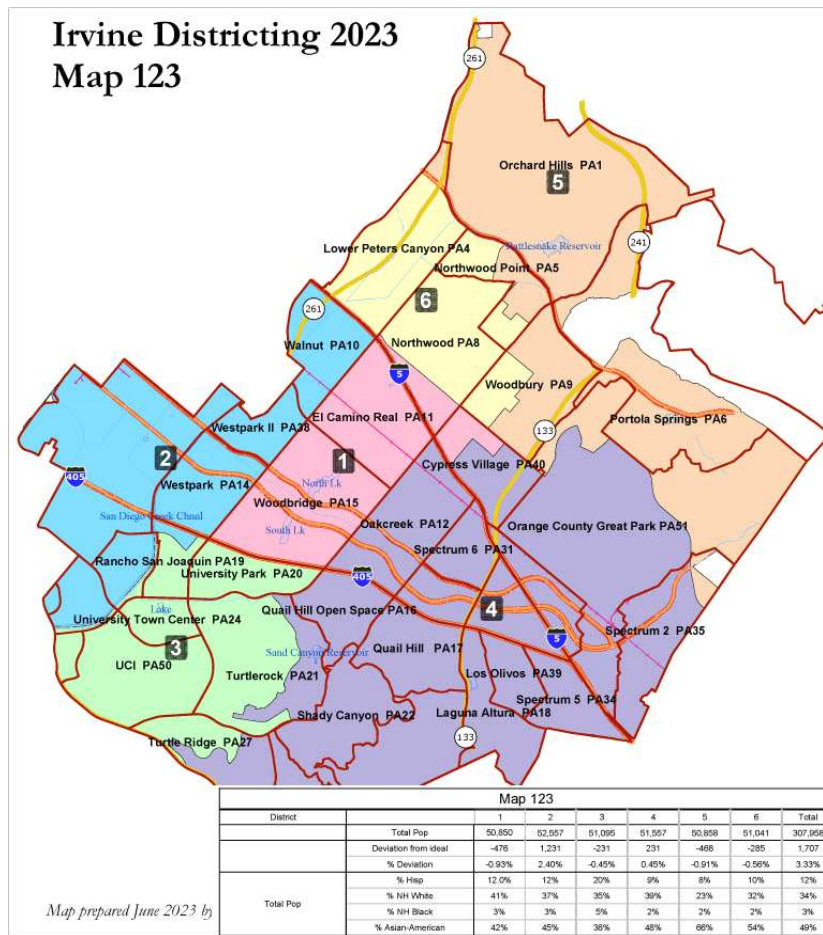
Personally, I have never voted on the basis of race or "looks like me"- I am reluctant to accept that other people do. (Racial supremacy and bigotry are wrong for us in any direction). I must admit that in voting for candidates based on "what they say about their conduct once elected", I have been fooled. I have voted one time or another for each of the current City Council members, but am unlikely to do so again. I probably won't have to think about that since it seems unlikely that any current council person will be a candidate living within a district encompassing the part of Irvine wherein my residence is located. I believe that in our republic, people have a duty to be informed and to vote. I'm hoping districting will improve the connection between voters and council candidates (council members responsive to the electorate and better turnout by voters) and reduce the influence of campaign funds from outside Irvine or from unidentified sources (dark money).

So, when a district proposal seems to have "guided" boundaries, some degree of "Gerrymandering", inclusion/exclusion/segregation, I think I don't want it. Some bias is at work. Reject it. When a council member says "I want at least two districts to have a majority based on a particular racial category", that seems like undemocratic bias and should be rejected. But "equally drawn" districts without gerrymandering or boundary fiddling based on race or politics would give us an equitable set of districts and the "right" solution for Irvine.

Of those plans that I drew weeks ago, **the one I like best is 123**. I'm not adamant about it, but I see some things

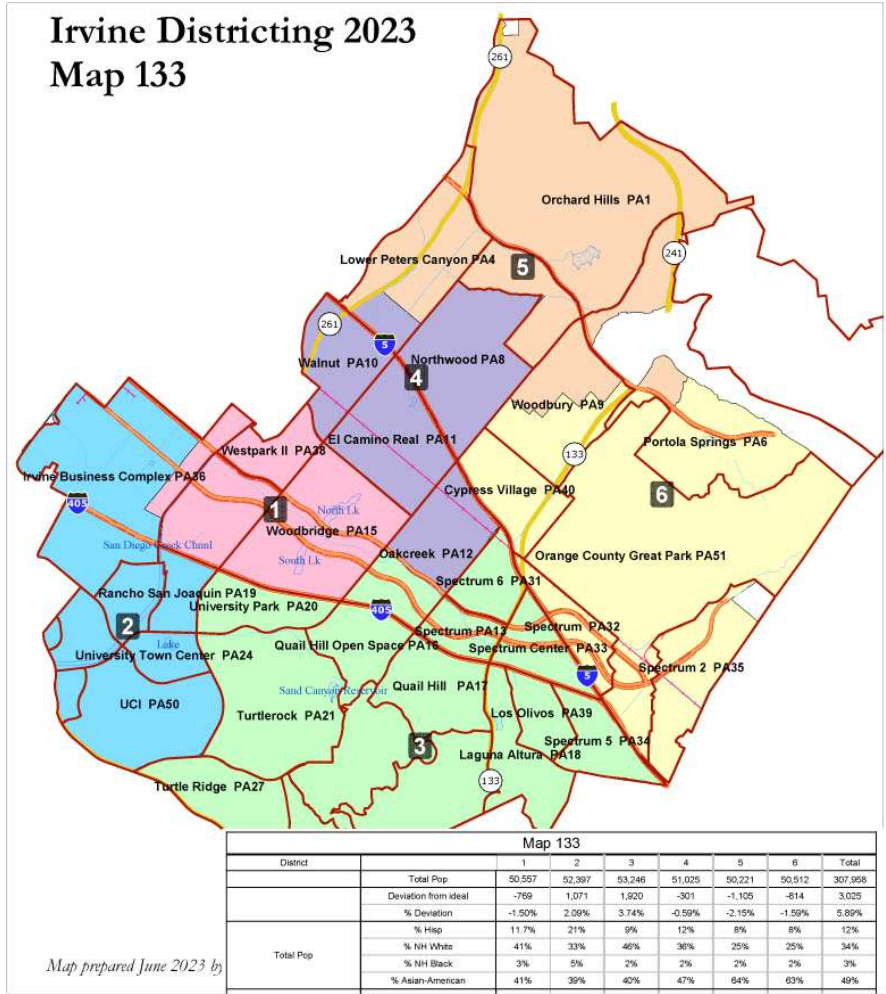
that appeal to me. With the exception of district 5, the northern tier, most districts are defined by streets with minimal sprawling. I like D5, the northern tier, for its dominance by recent construction, mostly in the last 10 years. Northwood D6 (my zone) is a contiguous block north of the I-5. UCI, D3, is nearly its own district, including the city's largest employer and a group of ephemeral voters, but also Turtle Rock. (Ephemeral: It's assumed that students pursue a 4-year course of study, may or may not live on campus or in Irvine that entire time, and depart Irvine and UCI after completing their studies, thus, voting perhaps once in an Irvine election.) D2, the "west" side, contains IBC and a predominance of "renters". Older neighborhoods, such as Woodbridge, are in the middle, D1. I personally wish for the east side Great Park to be split between districts (or not included in any district) to avoid any perception that the Great Park is "owned" by any one district. It belongs to all of Irvine and should not be ruled by any "subgovernment". (5 Points named nearby residential developments "Great Park Neighborhoods", but some folks have taken to saying they live within the Great Park and therefore deserve a greater say in its fate.)

In plan 123, Irvine has a north (Orchard Hills/Portola Springs/Woodbury), south (UCI), east (Los Alisos/Spectrum/Cypress Village), west (IBC/Westpark/Walnut), and a middle (Northwood/El Camino Real/Woodbridge).

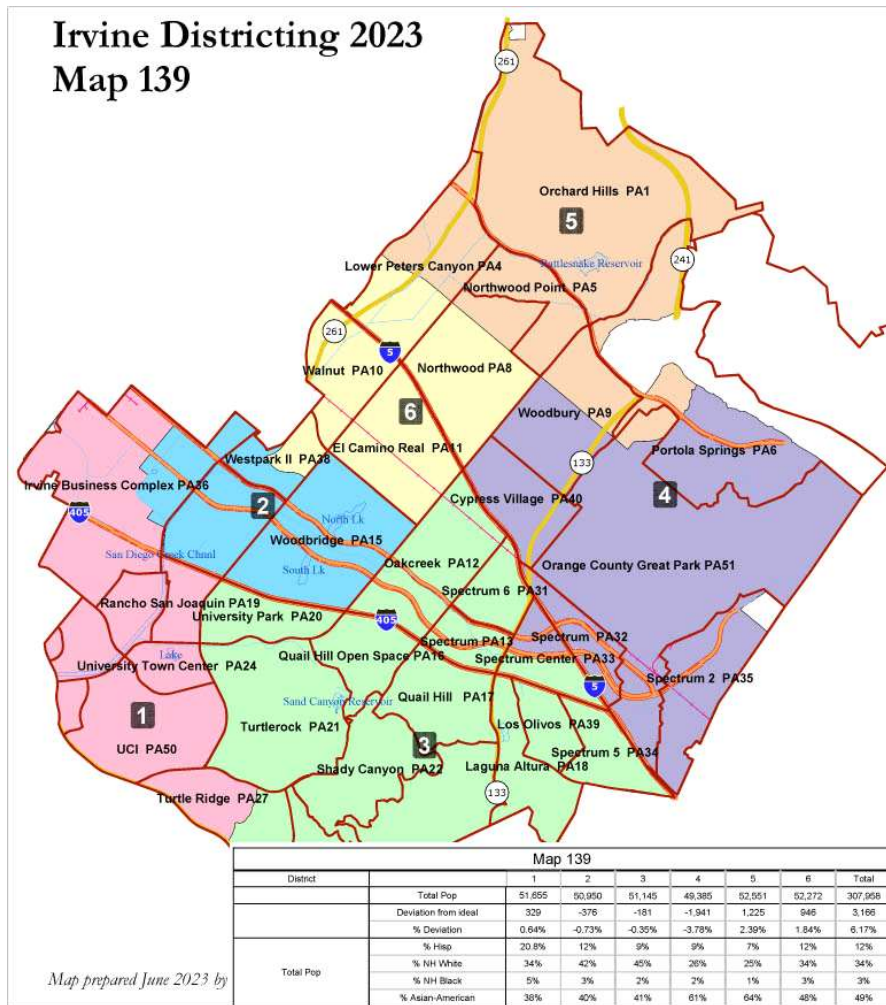


Although, I still like "123", my mind is open to other plans. To chose among the approximately 50 plans, I tried to identify similar plans that had some appeal to me, four along the northwest side and two along the southeast side. I reject most plans with irregular or sprawling districts and reject plans 135, 136 and 138 of the focus group. Plans that I could support and which are somewhat similar are: 108, 122, 123, 133, 139, 140, 144, 146, 151. I also see that several plans among those I favor are very similar to each other. They are: 108/133, 139/140, 144/146.

If our choice must be **ONE** plan for the March 2024 ballot, I would adopt **133/108**.



My second choice would be: 139/140.



By enlarging the City Council and ceasing at-large voting for all council members but the Mayor, **I'm hoping Irvine will reduce dark money influence, improve voter-council connectivity, and voter turnout in City elections.** If a larger council and districting don't help, we'll need to focus on regulating political action committees, campaign funding, and council ethics.

J. Fancher, Northwood, Irvine
11 Sep 2023