The 100th anniversary of the Los Angeles City Charter holds lessons for today’s LA.

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One hundred years ago this Monday, May 6, the voters of Los Angeles approved a new city charter. Few would have imagined then that this charter, even with a thorough revision and restructuring in 1999, would remain the fundamental governing document of a global city of nearly four million.

While the Los Angeles of 1925 can seem like ancient history, the issues and ideas that animated the 1925 charter resonate today as a much more diverse city contemplates major charter changes. Then as now, reformers struggled with how to avoid municipal corruption, and how to make a more responsive and representative government without the strong partisan organizations that characterized the big cities of the East and Midwest.

Los Angeles city charter reform is in the air once again, spurred by a controversial round of council redistricting and the release of the taped conversations marked by racist slurs ostensibly driven by conflict over redistricting. Proposals are floating around for charter reforms in redistricting, council expansion, and ethics reform. There is talk in the city council of creating a charter reform commission to handle some of the tougher issues such as council expansion.

The council has moved redistricting reform forward. There has some recent movement on ethics reform. But council expansion seems to be off the table. A look at how the 1925 charter was created and a focus on the history of council expansion will offer some insights into how we can move forward on reform today.

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Since the city’s first home rule charter in 1888, charter proposals and revisions had come and gone, but none had the staying power of the charter that took effect on July 1, 1925. The new charter included a number of innovative reforms: empowering citizen commissions governing appointed general managers of city departments, enhancing the role of the mayor in the budget, and even establishing a never-used authority to create boroughs.²

One reform in the 1925 charter that has been highly impactful for modern Los Angeles almost didn’t happen: a city council of 15 members elected by district. What is now orthodoxy – that the council must have exactly 15 members elected by district – was anything but orthodox a century ago. In fact, the 15 member council divided by district was the outsider position against the status quo.

Traditional reformers, who dominated southwestern and western cities, believed that city councils should have a small number of members, and should be elected at large. In their view, a larger council attuned to districts would fracture the city government and create the dreaded “machine” politics that reformers associated with New York City and Chicago.

True to this doctrine, the L.A. council featured 9 members elected at large. Reformers remembered an earlier pre-reform “ward” system in Los Angeles that in their view had fostered corruption.³

In 1923 voters elected a board of freeholders to design a new city charter. A key leader in that charter movement was Dr. John Randolph Haynes, a major force in Los Angeles and California reform, a democratic socialist with establishment credentials as a successful business leader. Haynes was one of the top vote getters in the freeholder election and was chosen to be vice president. According to historian Tom Sitton: “Haynes was only one of two

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candidates endorsed by organized labor, testimony to his long relationship with labor leaders in countless reform campaigns."

The minutes of the freeholder meetings held throughout 1923 featured a labor movement restive in business-dominated Los Angeles and residents from “outlying” areas in the Harbor and San Fernando Valley who pushed hard for a larger council with district elections to ensure that their voices would be heard at city hall.

Seventy-five years later, residents of the Harbor and the San Fernando Valley spearheaded the secession movements that motivated city leaders to pursue the only successful comprehensive charter reform since 1924.

Crucially, the 1923 elected freeholders, as an elected body, had the power to place their recommendations directly on the ballot. As an olive branch to community activists, they proposed to increase the at-large council from 9 to 11 members.

But that was not nearly enough for dissidents from the labor movement and the outlying areas. Clarence Dykstra, a traditional reformer, reflected the status quo stance. Writing in 1925, when the story was still fresh, he disdainfully suggested that the ward system arose because of “some hazy opinion that the city is too large for a council chosen on a general ticket….and a vague discontent with the present personnel of the council resulting in some desire for a change of system.”

Nonetheless, the freeholders added a ballot measure for 15 members elected by district. This and other compromises improved the chances of voter approval for the charter.

The charter passed by a large majority as did the council expansion. The turnout was 59% of registered voters, an enviable showing by today’s standards. The charter received more yes votes (126,058) than the council expansion (88,275).

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5 L.A. City Archives. 1923. Board of Freeholders, meeting minutes. Los Angeles City Archives, Courtesy of Michael Holland, City Archivist.

6 Dykstra, 1925.

7 Ingram, 2008.
According to Dykstra: “The council voted that the charter be sent to the legislature for approval, minus the ward section (emphasis in original) and by its own vote declared the election-at-large section a part of the adopted charter.” In so doing, the council contradicted the advice of the city attorney, who had stated that the district measure should prevail.

Supporters of the district election measure filed a lawsuit against the city to require council expansion and district elections. The district court of appeal (then the lower court in the state system) affirmed the council’s position.

The case found its way to the state Supreme Court in fairly short order. In the last week of 1924, the Court ruled unanimously against the city. In the case *Horn v. Allen*, the justices announced that “we will approach the matter from the standpoint of the voter.”

If the form of the ballot presented to the voters was such as to permit a free expression on their part of a preference for the at-large plan of councilmanic representation on the one hand or for the district plan on the other, and the intention of the voters be readily ascertained and determined, we feel impelled to give full effect to the very large majority vote in favor of the district plan of representation.

If the 88,275 electors who were in favor of the district plan had voted against the charter, as they might have done if they had thought that their votes would have been considered also in favor of the at-large plan, the charter would have been defeated, a result the board of freeholders may have contemplated might occur if the district plan were not submitted separately.

The Court’s last comment was a shrewd assessment of the Freeholders’ actual political strategy. They hoped to assure supporters of district elections that if they voted for both measures, there would be a good chance to have both a new charter and district elections. Otherwise some district election fans might have opposed the charter.

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8 Dykstra, 1925.


11 Ingram 2008.
In the face of the Supreme Court decision, the council had no choice but to quickly draw district lines for the new 15 member council in advance of the upcoming 1925 city elections.

Needless to say, the work would have to be done without laptops and geographic mapping systems. The Times noted: “Maybe before the job is completed it will be necessary to send to the universities for astronomical savants so that the stars can be consulted. In the meantime extra adding machines, calculating apparatus, divining rods, comptometers, geographies, encyclopedias and other equipment. are being gathered together...”

As the process moved along, councilmembers “found to their delight” that life under the new system was not as dreadful as they had feared, as most members found they could run for district seats in their areas of residence.

The impact of district elections turned out to be profound. The district system created an opportunity for minority communities, virtually shut out of city offices after 1900, to get a foothold at city hall. In 1949, Edward Roybal won the 9th district seat that spanned the eastside and parts of South LA and became the first Latino elected to the council in the 20th century. In 1953, Roz Weiner (later Wyman) became the first Jewish member since 1900 when she was elected in the mid and west side 5th district.

In 1963, three African American councilmembers, Billy Mills, Gilbert Lindsay, and Tom Bradley won seats in the 8th, 9th, and 10th districts, becoming the first African Americans ever to be elected to city office in Los Angeles. The Tenth became the springboard for Bradley’s historic biracial coalition and his string of five mayoral victories.

In addition to racial and ethnic incorporation, district elections laid the groundwork for representation by geographic region, a critical aspect of the dispersed Los Angeles political system.

Imagine if instead, these communities had been forced to spend discouraging decades trying to break through the firewall of at-large elections.

As with all change, there were also challenges. With districts, the zero sum game of redistricting politics found communities competing for scarce political resources. Latinos were forced to file and win lawsuits in the 1980s to win a fairer share of council seats. The

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horrifying recordings of racist conversations that roiled the city in 2022 centered on conflict over redistricting.

Proposals to expand the council did not succeed. In the 1999 round of charter reform, there was far less public support for expanding the size of the council, and charter reformers had to worry that proposals for increasing council size would actually jeopardize the charter. The two charter reform commissions, one elected and one appointed, decided to offer council expansion measures outside the charter ballot measure, thereby saving the charter itself.

Today, as in 1924, council expansion seems to be enjoying significant popularity, according to a number of surveys. In that sense, the mood is more like 1924 than 1999. But can council expansion (and hopefully ethics reform) get onto the ballot for voter consideration?

The city council has the formal authority to place charter amendments on the ballot without a mayoral requirement to sign or veto. The 1925 charter benefitted from having one but by no means the only vehicle (an elected board of freeholders) for avoiding a council monopoly of what reforms voters can consider. In 1999, a remarkable alliance between an appointed commission limited by council review and an elected commission with a direct path to the ballot created a space of independence for a credible, unified and widely supported charter reform movement that neither commission could have won on its own.

An alternative for today would be to explore the legalities and practicalities of a ballot measure for the voters to create an appointed charter commission whose recommendations would go directly to the ballot. There is a recent precedent; the redistricting reform that will likely be on the 2024 ballot prevents the council from blocking an appointed commission's district lines. If the council is reluctant to take up such reforms as council expansion, a charter reform commission that can more easily take recommendations to the people would be a way forward.

While defense of the status quo is always strong, a city's leaders and voters sometimes should consider taking a well reasoned chance on the future. And in 2024 as a century ago, the wider civic community, not just the city council, should be part of deciding what reforms reach the ultimate deciders of all charter changes – the voters.

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14 Support for council expansion was found in surveys and focus groups by the LA Governance Reform Project, Our LA, and Fair Rep LA.
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