



MALDEF

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund

Dear Charter Revision Committee Members:

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MALDEF has a long history as a leader in the areas of voting rights and redistricting, particularly in Texas. Beginning with the first statewide Texas redistricting after MALDEF's founding in 1968, MALDEF has worked throughout the state to inform Latinos about the redistricting process, and assist them in creating and advocating for fair plans. This assistance often includes educating redistricting officials about their legal obligations under the Voting Rights Act and representing Latino voters in administrative and legal proceedings that follow the adoption of redistricting plans in Texas. Our work has increased Latino-majority electoral districts in cities, school districts and counties as well as in statewide redistricting plans.

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Austin is the largest city in the state of Texas that still elects its City Council through at-large elections. Austin's continued use of this anachronistic system denies fair representation to Latinos. MALDEF supports the inclusion of an amendment to the Austin City Charter that will change the election of Austin City Council members from an at-large system to an all single-member district system.

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Single-member districts will better serve Austin's diverse communities of interest and bring a wider range of social, economic, and political perspective to local government. Through single-member districts, every part of the city will have the opportunity to elect a representative familiar with its issues, concerns, and interests. No one neighborhood or area will be able to monopolize political power and no neighborhood will be ignored.

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The demographics of the state are changing rapidly, and Austin is no exception. Latinos now constitute 33.5% of the city's total population and 21.5% of its citizen voting-age population. The growth of the Latino population alone accounted for 48% of Austin's total growth between 2000 and 2010. Single-member districts will allow these changes to be reflected in the City Council. Through this amendment, Austin's minority communities will gain increased opportunity to elect their candidates of choice.

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Hybrid plans, which combine single-member and at-large offices, undermine the effectiveness and fairness a single-member district system. Hybrid plans allow for multiple elected officials from one group or one area to be overrepresented at the expense of the city as a whole. Just as at-large systems create barriers for equal political participation, hybrid proposals often dilute the voting strength of communities of interest and ethnic minorities.

The time has come for the Austin City Council to reflect its diverse communities and changing demographics. The time has come for Austin to join cities across the state in 21st century democracy by adopting an all single-member district election system.

Respectfully submitted,

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MALDEF