

## Study Urges More Say for Local Panels

L.A.'s neighborhood council system, approved in 1999, wins praise, but USC research also suggests diversity and voting reforms.

By Jessica Garrison, Times Staff Writer

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Five years after Los Angeles voters created a system of neighborhood councils, a new USC study says that although the panels are making progress, the city must do more to create fair elections and to involve the councils in decisions.

The study, which will be released today, also found that the council's governing boards are richer, whiter and older than the city at large.

"The lack of diversity in the system is its Achilles' heel," said Juliet Musso, an associate professor of public policy at USC who wrote the study.

But overall, Musso said, she was impressed with the accomplishments of the system — especially given its "shoestring" budget. The city spends \$2 per resident on neighborhood councils, compared with the \$13 to \$20 budgeted by cities such as Seattle, Portland and Minneapolis.

"I really thought the whole thing was going to collapse," she said of her initial reaction to the council effort. "It's really amazing to me that the neighborhood council system is as citywide as it is, and that most are up and running."

Authorized in 1999 by the new city charter, neighborhood councils began forming in 2001. There are now more than 80, representing more than 3 million Los Angeles residents.

The councils have thrown themselves into L.A. civic life by initiating a host of neighborhood improvement projects and also making their voices heard on citywide issues. Last month, city officials scaled back a water rate increase after neighborhood councils generated an outcry.

To keep the system on the right track, the study recommended that the Congress of Neighborhoods, which meets twice a year, be turned into a more deliberative body that could set agendas for the city. It also suggested that officials find a way to connect the panels more systematically to City Council policymaking.

The study also called for reforms to improve election procedures.

To encourage participation, the city set few restrictions on who could vote: All those who live, work, own property or somehow have a stake in the area are invited to cast ballots,

regardless of whether they are U.S. citizens or legal residents.

The loose rules have led to numerous complaints, including allegations that dogs and toddlers have voted. About half of the panels that have held elections have had the results contested.

"Democratic legitimacy requires policy reforms to ensure that council elections are fair and inclusive," the study said.

Council members said they were already planning to make some of those reforms.

"With a little tweaking, I still think these councils will be representative of a larger community," said Councilwoman Janice Hahn, an early advocate of the system.

Councilman Eric Garcetti suggested that the city invest more resources in organizing residents, perhaps even sending organizers out "block by block."

"There are too many people who don't participate in politics in this city," he said.