

Messy democracy

Chatsworth neighborhood council election shows need for greater participation

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Some folks in Chatsworth saw the list of candidates on Saturday's neighborhood council elections as a threat to the burgeoning democracy in the community. A local private school, Sierra Canyon School, stacked the ballot with a slate of six of its own employees and even more supporters.

While this is strictly legal - the council's bylaws don't ban slates - it seems wrong, like it will create an imbalance on the council of 21 stakeholders in the neighborhood. And no doubt the new members of the council, when they are certified, will change its dynamics, and maybe even push their school's interests, zoning changes and whatnot, before other things.

However, the worriers have got it all wrong. This election is not a sign of trouble, but one that democracy - hairy warts and all - needs greater public participation to grow strong and healthy in Chatsworth.

In an ideal world, a newborn democracy would work perfectly. Elections would be well-organized and fairly represent the diversity of the electorate. Candidates would be free from bias and be working solely for the common welfare. Everyone eligible would vote their conscience, and all would be well in the world.

But as we know from centuries of trial and error, it doesn't work that way. Democracy is chaotic, particularly in its infancy, and sometimes falls into the hands of special interests. Slates arise to push agendas. They in turn spark other slates and interests to keep them in check, and so on and so forth.

That is what will likely happen in Chatsworth. If enough stakeholders think the new makeup of the council stinks, they may be so moved to get involved. And the neighborhood council will be richer for it.

In fact, the growing neighborhood council movement in Los Angeles should be so lucky if every council found itself with stakeholders clamoring to join the advisory panels.

Sure, this brand of grass-roots, participatory democracy might be a tumultuous mess - but it's a beautiful one that works. As Winston Churchill so accurately described it: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried."