

Lessons from Westminster for Newport

In June, residents in Newport Beach and Westminster, two cities in Orange County, will vote on mirror-image changes to their city charters.

In Newport Beach, voters will consider whether the mayor should be directly elected, for a four-year term, renewable for another four years, with considerable control over city policy. In Westminster, which has long had a system of direct election of the mayor, residents will consider something like the Newport Beach system, in which the five members of the city council would select each year, from among themselves, one person to serve as ceremonial mayor for the next year.

Many residents of Westminster are tired of their strong-mayor system, in which contentious city council meetings often last past midnight. The city council is so busy bickering, as Voice of OC has reported, that the city may well have to declare bankruptcy.

Among the points on the Westminster ballot, in favor of changing to the Newport system, are that it would “STOP potential corruption and abuse of power by politicians who hold the title of mayor for too long,” and “ALIGN Westminster with 26 other cities in Orange County who appoint their mayor annually” and “increase the likelihood that the mayor will have local government experience as a Westminster councilmember before serving as mayor.”

These are all good arguments, reasons why Westminster should change its charter, to provide for a one-year mayor selected by the city council. They are also reasons why Newport Beach should NOT change its charter – should retain its current system in which the city council selects a one-year ceremonial mayor.

It is striking that nobody, not even the current mayor of Westminster, submitted an argument against the proposed change to the Westminster charter to be printed on the ballot. It seems that, in Westminster at least, there is a consensus that a powerful, directly elected mayor is not a good idea.

Of course, larger cities, such as Anaheim, Irvine, and Santa Ana, generally have directly elected mayors. But according to the 2020 census, Newport Beach and Westminster are of similar size: 85,239 people in Newport Beach and 90,911 people in Westminster.

Some might argue that the ethnic composition of Westminster is different than Newport Beach, so that Newport Beach (even if it changes its charter) would not face the problems that Westminster has faced. This is a dubious if not racist argument. People are people. Good government systems draw out the best in people; bad government systems draw out the worst. If Newport Beach changes to the Westminster system, the odds that it will start to see the problems from which Westminster has suffered in recent years.

The current system in Newport Beach has worked well and should not be changed. Surely Newport Beach should learn from Westminster and not rush to change its charter in a way that has not worked there. Please join me in voting NO on Measure B in Newport Beach.

Walter Stahr
Newport Beach