

A Santa Cruz Like Me

Advancing Representative Government 2025

September 30, 2025



Prepared by:

VENTURES



Serving the Community | Working for the Future
COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	01
Summary of Findings	02
Methodology	03
Findings (Data)	04
Variance Analysis: 2021 → 2025	08
Conclusion	09
Pathways to Participation	10
Progress Since 2021	11
Recommendations	12
Glossary of Key Terms	13

A Santa Cruz Like Me: Advancing Representative Government 2025 builds on the county’s first demographic survey of boards and commissions conducted in 2021 through a partnership between the Santa Cruz County Executive Office and Ventures. That initial report established a foundation for tracking progress toward a representative government, documenting who serves on commissions and identifying lower participation among Latine residents, renters, South County residents, and young adults.

The 2025 survey, completed by 126 commissioners (about half of all active members), updates that baseline and measures changes over time. The results show both progress and persistent gaps. Representation from South County has grown, and participation among people with disabilities is closer to county benchmarks. At the same time, Latine residents, renters, and young adults continue to have a smaller presence on commissions, while older adults and homeowners hold a larger share of seats. Commissioners overall are also more likely to have advanced degrees and identify as homeownership compared with the broader community.

These findings point to the need for intentional action. The recommendations outline specific strategies to expand access, strengthen outreach to under-participating communities, and ensure commission structures reflect the full diversity and leadership capacity of Santa Cruz County.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS IN 2025

PROGRESS SINCE 2021

- South County (Watsonville): representation improved from 16% in 2021 to 27% in 2025, narrowing the gap with its 31% share of county population.
- In contrast, representation among commissioners with disabilities declined from 16.8% to 3.9%, widening the gap relative to the county’s 11% benchmark.

PERSISTENT GAPS

- Latine residents hold 16% of seats, compared to 36% of the county population, with minimal change since 2021.
- Renters make up only 13% of commissioners, a decline from 22% in 2021. This drop further widens the representation gap, underscoring the need for renter voices in local decision-making.
- Young Adults (ages 18–24) make up less than 1% of commissioners, compared to 14% of the population.

OVER-PARTICIPATING GROUPS

- Older adults (65+) comprise 38% of commissioners, nearly double their 20% share of the population.
- Homeowners account for 87% of commissioners, compared to 58% of county residents.

METHODOLOGY

- **Survey Administration:** The Santa Cruz County Executive Office distributed a survey to all commissioners and advisory board members. The survey was voluntary, confidential, and available in English and Spanish.
- **Respondents:** A total of 126 surveys were received representing about 51 percent of active commissioners.
- **Survey Content:** Core questions repeated from 2021 covered race/ethnicity, age, gender, housing, education, income, and disability status. New questions asked about recruitment pathways and first-time service.
- **Data Sources:** County population benchmarks were drawn from DataShare Santa Cruz County and the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS 2022 and 2024 estimates), ensuring alignment between survey data and the most recent demographic indicators available.
- **Variance Analysis:** Variance was calculated as the percentage point difference between commissioners and the county population. Positive variance indicates over-representation; negative variance indicates under-representation. Gaps of ± 5 points were considered notable and ± 10 points significant.
- **Limitations:** As a voluntary, self-reported survey, results may differ from Census definitions. Some demographic categories include small numbers of commissioners, which limits statistical precision.
- **Margin of Error:** This analysis is based on 126 survey responses from county commissioners, representing 51% of all commissioners ($n=247$). The overall margin of error for the commissioner survey is $\pm 6.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level. Variances represent the difference between commissioner demographics and county population benchmarks.

GEOGRAPHY

FINDINGS

Zip Code	2021			2025			Variance Shift 2021-2025
	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	
95003 (Aptos)	9.15%	8.00%	-1.15%	9.00%	15.08%	6.08%	7.23%
95010 (Capitola)	3.36%	4.80%	1.44%	3.40%	2.38%	-1.02%	-2.46%
95018 (Felton)	2.99%	5.60%	2.61%	3.00%	1.59%	-1.41%	-4.02%
95060 (Santa Cruz)	17.81%	22.40%	4.59%	18.10%	13.49%	-4.61%	-9.20%
95062 (Live Oak)	13.46%	13.60%	0.14%	13.10%	15.87%	2.77%	2.63%
95065 (Soquel)	2.95%	7.20%	4.25%	3.20%	4.76%	1.56%	-2.69%
95066 (Scotts Valley)	5.51%	8.80%	3.29%	5.80%	3.17%	-2.63%	-5.92%
95076 (Watsonville)	31.10%	16%	-15.10%	30.90%	26.98%	-3.92%	11.18%

ZIP CODE 95019 (FREEDOM/PAJARO AREA) HAD NO COMMISSIONERS REPRESENTED IN THE 2021 SURVEY. IN 2025, THERE IS ONE COMMISSIONER RESPONDENT. GIVEN THE VERY SMALL SAMPLE, VARIANCE VALUES ARE NOT SHOWN. THIS AREA REPRESENTS APPROXIMATELY 2.6% OF THE COUNTY POPULATION.

AGE

Age Group	2021			2025			Variance Shift 2021-2025
	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	
18 to 24	13.86%	0%	-13.86%	13.50%	0.80%	-12.70%	1.16%
25 to 44	24.44%	18%	-6.44%	24.40%	12.80%	-11.60%	-5.16%
45 to 54	11.78%	26%	14.22%	11.80%	23.20%	11.40%	-2.82%
55 to 64	12.24%	21%	8.76%	12.20%	25.60%	13.40%	4.64%
65 +	17.69%	35%	17.31%	20.34%	37.60%	17.26%	-0.05%

HOUSING

Housing Status	2021			2025			Variance Shift 2025–2021
	County Pop (%)	Comm. Survey Responses (%)	Variance	County Population	Comm. Survey Responses	Variance	
Homeownership	51%	77%	25.90%	58.10%	84.13%	26.03%	0.13%
Renter	49%	22%	-27.49%	41.90%	12.70%	-29.20%	-1.71%
Other	n/a	1%	n/a	n/a	2.90%	n/a	n/a

Housing status is self-reported and benchmarked to 2024 ACS county estimates. The “Other” category includes non-traditional housing not fully captured in ACS data.

DISABILITY

Disability	2021			2025			Variance Shift 2021–2025
	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	
Yes	34%	16.80%	-17.20%	11%	3.97%	-7.03%	10.17%
No	n/a	77%	n/a	n/a	95.24%	n/a	n/a

County data follow ACS definitions for the civilian, noninstitutionalized population. The 2025 figure (11%) reflects updated ACS methods, replacing the broader 2021 local estimate (34%).

GENDER

Gender	2021			2025			Variance Shift 2021–2025
	County Pop. (%)	Survey Responses (%)	Variance	County Pop. (%)	Survey Responses (%)	Variance	
Female	50.51%	61%	10.49%	50.14%	50.79%	0.65%	-9.84%
Male	49.49%	38%	-11.49%	49.86%	48.83%	-1.03%	10.46%
Nonbinary	n/a	1%	n/a	n/a	0.79%	n/a	n/a

EDUCATION

Education Level	2021			2025			Variance Shift 2021-2025
	County Pop. (%)	Survey Responses (%)	Variance	County Pop. (%)	Survey Responses (%)	Variance	
Graduate/Professional Degree (Master's, Doctorate, Professional)	16.89%	44.80%	27.91%	18.40%	46.03%	27.63%	-0.28%
Bachelor's Degree	23.30%	32.80%	9.50%	24.80%	29.37%	4.57%	-4.93%
Associate's Degree	8.47%	4.00%	-4.47%	7.90%	3.17%	-4.73%	-0.26%
Some College, No Degree	22.25%	7.20%	-15.05%	20.50%	15.08%	-5.42%	9.63%
High School Diploma/GED	15.50%	1.60%	-13.90%	15.90%	3.97%	-11.93%	1.97%
Less than High School	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.40%	0.79%	-4.61%	n/a
Trade/Technical/Vocational	n/a	1.60%	n/a	n/a	0.79%	n/a	n/a

Education levels follow ACS and DataShare SCC categories. Commissioner responses were aligned for comparability across degrees and high school/GED definitions.

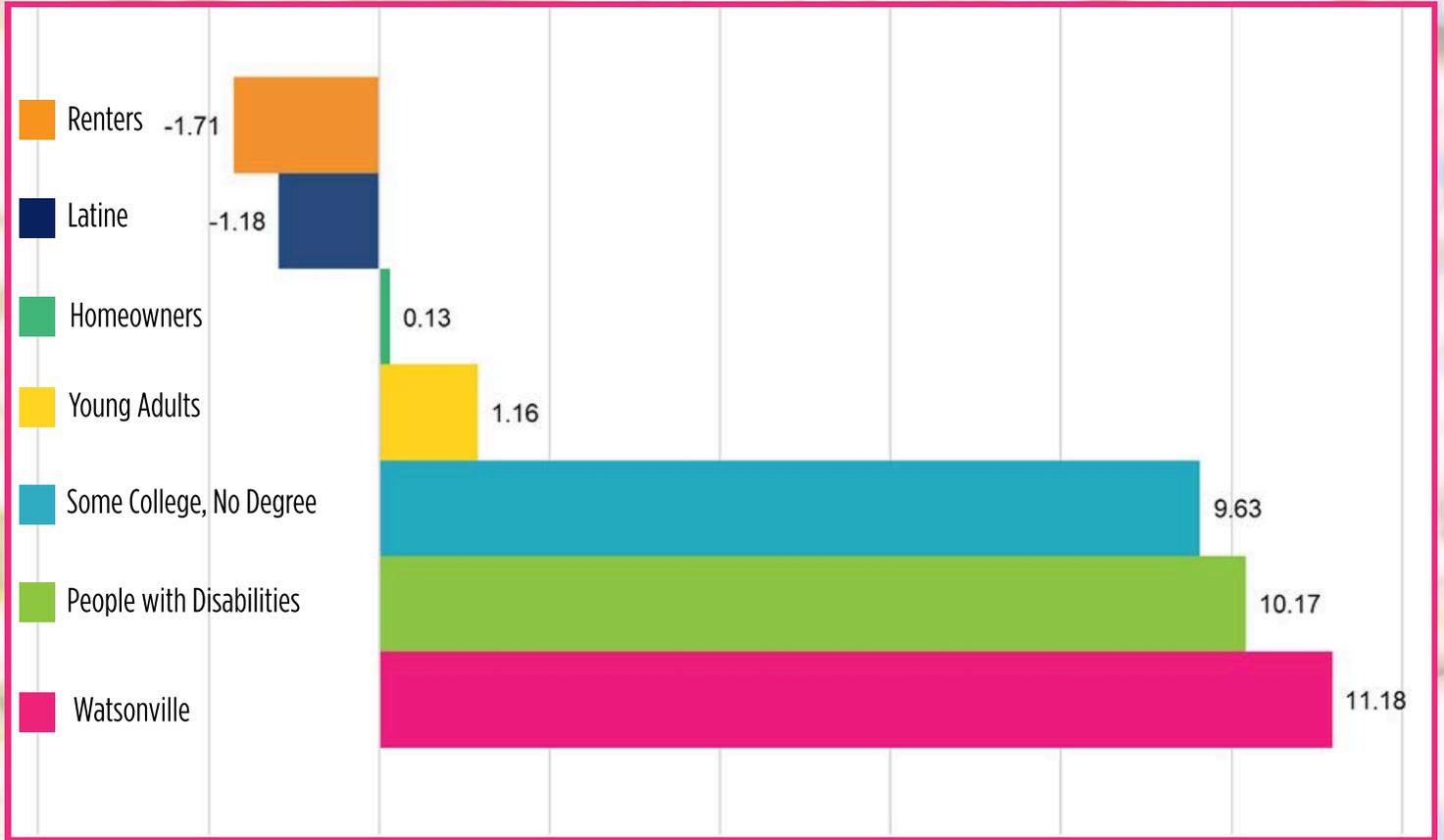
RACE AND ETHNICITY

Ethnicity	2021			2025			Variance Shift 2021-2025
	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	% of County Population	% of Survey Respondents	Variance	
White (non-Hispanic)	55.11%	72%	16.89%	57.40%	64.29%	6.89%	-10.00%
Hispanic/Latine	35.32%	16%	-19.32%	36.37%	15.87%	-20.50%	-1.18%
Two Or More Races	4.90%	2.40%	-2.50%	15.07%	4.80%	-10.27%	-7.77%
Asian	7.26%	1.60%	-5.66%	4.90%	1.60%	-3.30%	2.36%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.15%	0%	-0.15%	0.15%	4.00%	3.85%	4.00%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.57%	2.40%	1.83%	1.36%	0.80%	-0.56%	-2.39%
Black/African American	1.17%	2.41%	1.24%	1.18%	0.80%	-0.38%	-1.62%

VARIANCE ANALYSIS: 2021 → 2025

Group	Survey Respondents (%) 2021	Survey Respondents (%) 2025	County Population Benchmark	County Variance (2025)	Variance Shift 2021-2025	Key Insight
Watsonville	16%	26.98%	30.90%	-3.92%	11.18%	Strong gains since 2021; nearly matches County level
Disabilities	16.80%	3.91%	11%	-7.03%	10.17	Steep decline; now under-participating
Some College, No Degree	7.20%	15.08%	20.50%	-5.42%	9.63%	Participation more than doubled since 2021; now closer to County demographics
Young Adults (18-24)	0.00%	0.80%	13.50%	-12.70%	1.16	Does not reflect County demographics
Homeownership	77%	84.13%	58.10%	26.03%	0.13%	Continue large hold of seats; little change since 2021.
Latine/ Hispanic	16%	15.87%	36.37%	-20.50%	-1.18	Significantly under-represented; little change since 2021
Renters	22%	13%	41.90%	-29.2	-1.71	Largest gap; remains significantly underrepresented.

2021 - 2025 VARIANCE SUMMARY (PP)



CONCLUSION:

The 2025 data reveals a mixed picture: significant progress toward demographic balance in some areas (gender, geography, disability status) alongside deepening disparities in others (housing tenure, education level, ethnicity). This pattern suggests that traditional outreach methods may effectively reach certain communities while systematically missing others.

The slight decline in renter participation is particularly concerning given rising housing costs and the need for renter perspectives on county decisions. Combined with persistent gaps among Latine residents, young adults, and those without college degrees, these findings point to barriers beyond simple awareness.

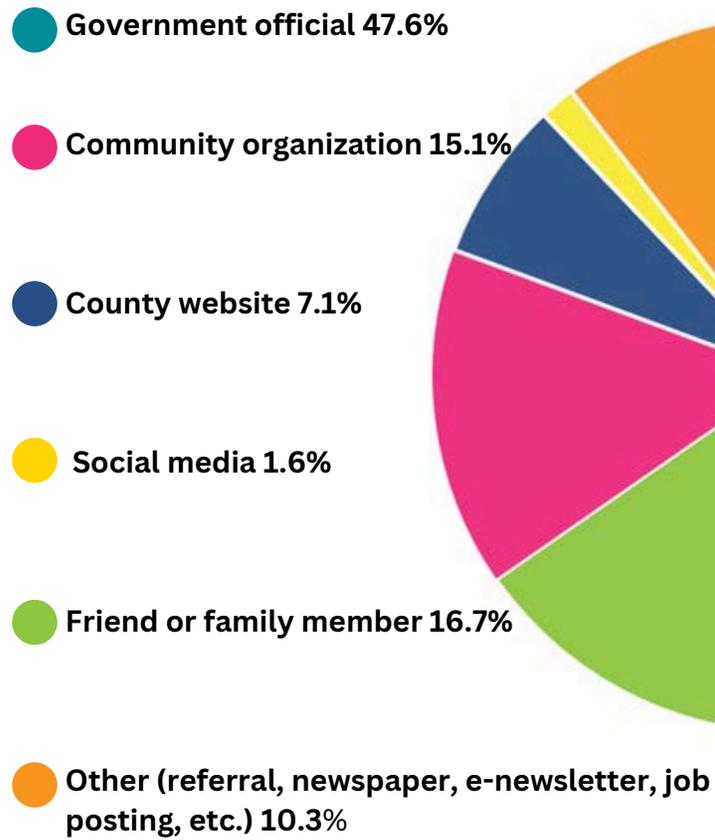
Addressing these gaps will require intentional strategies that go beyond general recruitment efforts. The following recommendations provide concrete steps for improving representation and ensuring commissioner bodies better reflect the full diversity of Santa Cruz County residents.



PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION

Nearly 47% of commissioners are serving for the first time, and 84% reported not serving on any other governmental body. This reflects strong success in bringing in new voices, while also indicating limited cross-pollination between boards.

RECRUITMENT SOURCE SUMMARY



RECRUITMENT PATHWAYS

The 2025 survey found that most commissioners were recruited through government officials, community organizations, or personal contacts. Meanwhile only 7% learned about opportunities through public-facing channels like the County website. This suggests limited reach beyond existing civic networks and highlights the need to explore more inclusive approaches.

PROGRESS SINCE 2021

FOLLOWING THE RELEASE OF THE *2021 A SANTA CRUZ LIKE ME* REPORT, THE COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ HAS TAKEN SEVERAL STEPS TO STRENGTHEN REPRESENTATION ON BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS:



Demographic Data Collection:

Optional demographic questions have been included in board and commission applications, creating a consistent baseline for tracking progress over time.



Stipend Program:

In January 2024, the County launched a \$75 per-meeting stipend. To date, 124 commissioners have opted in, reducing financial barriers and recognizing the commitment required to serve.



Youth Advisory Task Force:

Formed in October 2024, the Task Force brought together 24 young residents to explore models of youth engagement, identify local needs, and recommend strategies for strengthening youth participation. The group will present its findings to the Board of Supervisors in 2025.



Commission Restructuring:

Between 2023 and 2025, the Board of Supervisors approved a series of ordinances to sunset, consolidate, or update advisory commissions. These actions aimed to reduce redundancy, improve effectiveness, and align commissions more closely with county priorities.



Expanded Outreach:

Vacancies and the stipend program have been promoted through flyers, social media, and Board Supervisors' newsletters, with the goal of reaching younger and more diverse audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2021 report called for building systems to collect demographic data and establish a baseline for representation. The 2025 recommendations build on that foundation by moving from planning to action. They focus on reducing barriers, expanding outreach, and embedding equity into commission structures through concrete policy and program changes.

01

Broaden Recruitment Pathways

It is recommended that the County move beyond promotion toward engagement and education by partnering with community groups and schools to launch Cafecito y Comunidad, a bilingual space where residents can learn about local government and stay informed on community issues. Sessions can be hosted in trusted spaces such as libraries, churches, and markets, in English, Spanish, and Indigenous languages. Partnering with civic organizations can help sustain this model and build a more diverse pipeline of future commissioners.

02

Apply a Housing and Equity Lens

Partner with a local civic or housing organization to conduct listening sessions and community research with renters, tenant rights groups, and housing assistance providers. These efforts can assess current barriers to participation, identify effective ways to engage renters in public decision-making, and build community buy-in for future housing-related representation. Findings from this work can guide recruitment strategies, policy initiatives, or advisory structures that strengthen equity and inclusion for residents with lived experience of renting or housing insecurity.

03

Engage Young Leaders

It is recommended that the County build on the Youth Advisory Task Force by establishing a permanent structure for youth participation across commissions that reflects the racial, cultural, and geographic diversity of Santa Cruz County. To reduce barriers, the County should consider offering school credit, leadership training, and stipends to offset transportation or participation costs.

04

Institutionalize Data and Accountability

To track progress and maintain transparency, the County should collect demographic data at key points in the commissioner cycle, including during applications, renewals, and exit interviews. Collect this information from both appointed and non-appointed applicants to identify who is seeking to serve compared with who is selected, revealing where barriers may exist in outreach or recruitment. Review this data every three years to highlight trends, measure progress toward equity goals, and inform strategies to strengthen representation across commissions.



GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

County Commissions

Groups of community members who are appointed by local leaders to give advice and make recommendations on specific topics, such as housing, health, or the environment.

Commissioners

People who serve on a county commission. They share their ideas, review information, and help shape county decisions that affect the community.

Demographics

Traits of human populations such as age, race, gender and so on.

Disability

Self-identified by commissioners. County data come from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), which defines disability as difficulty with hearing, vision, thinking, moving, self-care, or living independently.

Latine

A gender-neutral term for the Latino/Latina population.

Recruitment Pathways

How commissioners learned about or were encouraged to apply (for example, through a government official, community group, family or friends, or the county website).

South County

Watsonville and the surrounding areas (ZIP codes 95019 and 95076), which make up about 31% of the county population.

**Under-Participation/
Over-Participation**

When a group's share of commissioners falls below (under) or above (over) its share of the county population. In this report, a gap (variance) of ± 5 points or more is said to be notable.

Variance

The difference in percentage points between commissioners and the county population. A positive number indicates over-representation; a negative number indicates under-representation
The difference in percentage points between commissioners and the county population. A positive number indicates over-representation, a negative number indicates under-representation.

Young Adults

Persons aged 18–24, consistent with U.S. Census categories.

APPRECIATION



Special thanks to Donna Bell Sanders for her contributions to this report.



About Ventures

For 35 years, Ventures has partnered with rural Latino working-class families across California's Central Coast to advance economic opportunity and leadership rooted in community. As a systems change organization, Ventures designs and implements transformational programs that strengthen families' economic and political power while addressing the structural barriers that limit equity and inclusion. Together, we are working toward a shared and prosperous future where zip code, race, gender, or immigration status do not determine income or wealth. www.sccvonline.org



About County of Santa Cruz, Executive Office

Situated on the northern half of Monterey Bay, Santa Cruz County is known for its natural beauty including pristine beaches, redwood forests, and rich farmland. Its economy is anchored by tourism, agriculture and technology, and is home to world-class arts and cultural institutions. The County of Santa Cruz serves its 270,000 residents through a county government dedicated to creating a healthy, safe and more affordable community that is culturally diverse, economically inclusive, and environmentally vibrant. For more, visit www.SCCVision.us



VENTURES

23 E. Beach Street, #205, Watsonville, CA 95076
WEBSITE: sccvonline.org PHONE: (831) 200-1719