

Cities 101 -- At-Large and District Elections



Background

The form of municipal elections varies from city to city, with three common variations: some cities elect their local representatives by at-large elections, some by district, and some using a mixed system.

The election system of a given city is determined by the nature of the council members' constituency and by the presence or absence of party labels on the ballot. With regard to the first feature, there are two types of constituencies for city council members: at-large and district.

At-Large

All at-large members are elected to serve the same constituency, which is the population of the city as a whole. At-large election proponents favor having council members elected by the entire city because:

- ▶ Council members in an at-large system can be more impartial, rise above the limited perspective of a single district and concern themselves with the problems of the whole community;
- ▶ Vote trading between councilmembers may be minimized; and
- ▶ The number of candidates available for election tends to be larger.

However, at-large elections can weaken the representation of particular groups, such as people of color, especially if the group does not have a citywide base of operations or is an ethnic or racial group concentrated in a specific ward.

At-large election systems are prevalent at the municipal level and a considerable majority make use of at-large voting in some way. At-large elections tend to be more practical in small cities and more homogeneous areas.

District

These elections select a single council member from a corresponding geographical section of the city, called a district or ward. District election proponents favor having council members elected to represent individual wards because:

- ▶ District elections give all legitimate groups, especially those with a geographic base, a better chance of being represented on the city council, especially communities of color. Several court decisions have forced jurisdictions to switch from at-large elections to district elections, and in most cases the reason was to allow more representation by specific ethnic and racial groups acknowledging that the prior system was a denial of equal access to the city's political process. (See: *McNeil v. City of Springfield, IL*, 1987; and *Williams v. City of Dallas*, 1990; and *Montes v. City of Yakima*, 2014);
- ▶ District councilmembers are more attuned to the unique problems of their constituents, such as crime levels, small lot development, trash pick-up, potholes, and recreation programs; and
- ▶

District elections may improve citizen participation because councilmembers who represent a specific district may be more responsive to their constituency.

However, councils elected by district elections may experience more infighting and be less likely to prioritize the good of the city over the good of their district. Larger municipalities tend to use district elections (Chicago and Philadelphia are examples).

Mixed-System

More than twenty percent of municipalities combine these two methods by electing some council members at-large and some from districts. Mixed systems which provide more district seats than at-large seats are more likely to stand Constitutional scrutiny.

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