

Rationalizations and Repercussions Evaluating a Hybrid At-Large and Ward Electoral System

BY JOHN T. SPENCE AND
MICHAEL MARGOLIS

Covington, Kentucky, a community of about forty-three thousand residents in the Cincinnati metro area, recently changed from an at-large system of representation to a ward-based system. Unlike most cities with ward systems, however, Covington commissioners are still elected at large.

When a governmental body adopts a ward system to replace an at-large system, the decision is often supposed to enhance participatory democracy. The ward system supports smaller constituencies from which elected officials are drawn, gives more weight to the individual citizen's vote, and ideally increases the likelihood that constituents and elected officials will have personal relationships.

Some cities have tried to find a balance between the two systems with a mix of at-large and ward-based seats on their councils or commissions, so the benefits of each are introduced: enhanced minority representation, increased access to the political system, and policies that address local issues as well as those that affect the entire community.

What advantages accrue from adopting a hybrid system with district representation and at-large voting? This essay examines the decision (by a three-to-two vote) of the Covington Board of Commissioners in 2005 to adopt such a system. By examining the 2006 primary and general elections, we hope to present an early assessment of the impact of this decision and determine whether the benefits of adoption, as asserted by the elected officials, comport with the actual consequences.

Whenever an electoral system is modified, the principal question usually concerns whom the change benefits. In the case of Covington, a longstanding

uncontroversial electoral system was modified. What were the intentions, and what were the consequences? Our analysis proposes some initial answers to these questions.

The Ward and At-Large Systems

Although the ward system has deep roots in the history of American municipal politics, in the early twentieth century it was largely replaced by at-large voting as a result of Progressive reforms. The ward system's decentralized nature led to what Joseph Zimmerman has termed "invisible city councils controlled by corrupt machines" (p. 9). The at-large electoral process allowed citizens to vote for all candidates on the ballot and was supposed to encourage elected officials to focus their concerns on the larger community rather than a small district. Over time, however, the at-large voting system increasingly came to be seen as supportive of a political status quo that discouraged representation of minority and ethnic interests. Many cities have recently reintroduced wards—often as part of a combined system that includes at-large and ward representation—as a means of correcting this perceived flaw.

Much of the research associated with the impact of the ward system indicates that it produces local elected officials who are more reflective of a community's racial and ethnic diversity than at-large elections. Other research argues there are no systemic differences between the two, that council policy differences between the two systems are not dramatic, or that a mixed system is better than wards for representation of African Americans on city councils. Covington has a nonwhite population of about 11 percent. Under the new ward system, each commissioner represents approximately 10,840 residents.

Nevertheless, political structures do matter. In addition to minority representation, they affect electoral variables such as campaign cost, candidate recruitment, citizen access, and distribution of public resources. Data from the 1996 Municipal Form of Government Survey, reported by T. Renner and V. DeSantis, indicate that 60.9 percent of all responding jurisdictions used at-large systems but that the proportion of these cities decreased with rising populations. Darrell Williams found that larger cities, with more diverse populations, more often employed a mixed electoral system of wards and at-large council seats, and data indicated that the number of cities using this mix was increasing. This may be a consequence of a shifting of political power to a more diverse set of actors defined by ethnic and racial populations, neighborhoods, and interest groups. Table 1 summarizes a comparison of the alleged advantages of both systems.

Although the ward system permits greater geographic representation, evidence suggests it can be susceptible to several problems. The gerrymandering of district boundaries, even if subtle, is common when politicians, or their appointees, draw the boundary lines. If a large number of candidates run in a ward election, there is the issue of plurality: Does the winner represent the majority? Finally, the citizen-access problem in the ward system affects those voters who backed a losing candidate. With a

typical ward election, voters have only one representative, and those who supported the losing candidate may question whether or not they still have a voice at City Hall.

An at-large system may encourage elected officials to adopt a larger vision, but it also produces problems. According to Joseph Zimmerman, it dilutes the vote of geographically dispersed minority groups and thereby reduces their political influence. The at-large system is also associated with access issues; the ability of an average voter to influence an election diminishes as the number of voters per representative increases. Moreover, at-large elections are usually more expensive for candidates to run and make it more difficult for voters to gather sufficient information in order to make informed voting decisions about the many candidates for whom they can vote.

Covington's Political System

Covington's political organization is subject to Kentucky state statutes. Even though these statutes grant the city some local restructuring powers, including determining whether candidates are elected at-large or by wards, they also contain restrictions. Covington cannot draw more wards than the number of existing commissioners unless it also changes governmental institutions from a council-manager to a mayor-council system.

Historically and geographically, Covington is divided into three principal areas from north to south. The city was founded in 1814 and grew south and west along the Licking and Ohio River floodplains, respectively. In the early twentieth century, Latonia, a small city developed at the junction of two railroads about three miles south of the Ohio River, agreed to be incorporated. In the 1970s, Covington incorporated a large area further south that has since been developed primarily as suburban tract housing and is known as South Covington. For much of its history, officials who resided in the north dominated city government. More recently, Latonia has had a fair

Table 1. Comparative Advantages of Ward and At-Large Systems

At-Large	Wards
Citizens can vote for all candidates	Campaign costs are lower
Officials serve needs of entire city	Increased minority representation
Larger talent pool and higher-quality candidates	Greater equity in public service delivery
Less pork-barrel politics	Familiarity between voters and candidates
No gerrymandering	Previously excluded areas receive benefits

share of elected officials and arguably has dominated city politics since the 1990s. Only one candidate from South Covington has ever been elected to the board of commissioners, and none since 1991.

Like many American cities, Covington has had an evolution of municipal governmental styles: (1) an elite council and appointed mayor (1815), (2) a managerial mayor with a council elected at-large (1845), (3) a system with a bicameral legislature and seventeen members (ten council members elected to represent five wards and seven aldermen elected at-large) and a weak mayor (1892), (4) a commission form with four council members elected at-large and a weak mayor (1914), and (5) a council-manager system (1932) that maintains four council members at large for two-year terms and a mayor elected at-large for a four-year term (Spence). Thus Covington's experimentation with various electoral systems has included wards and at-large arrangements. The electoral system adopted in 2005 combines elements of wards with at-large, but it is not the traditional mixed system.

The Covington Ward System

In contrast to earlier governmental transformations, the 2005 change to a hybrid system responded to neither a national nor a regional trend. Serving his first term as an elected commissioner, Jerry Stricker found it difficult to establish a collegial relationship with the city's other elected officials after "running against" them in the at-large field race. One of his colleagues suggested that a ward system would reduce this conflict, and with collegiality as his avowed goal Stricker sought to design a ward system for Covington. He said to reporter Cindy Schroeder, "I studied it for a long time before we went public with it," explaining that it took him "about eight tries" before he succeeded in drawing four wards "that were contiguous, didn't divide voting precincts, and were roughly equal in population." The proposal was introduced at a public hearing held on June 30, 2005.

At this first of three public hearings, the list of reasons given by Covington commissioners for considering the ward system grew. In part, this resulted from the attendance of officials from Hopkinsville, Kentucky, who the forum organizers (the Legacy Group) had invited to speak about their experiences with the ward system. There were, however, more differences than similarities between Hopkinsville's ward system and Covington's proposal. (Hopkinsville has partisan primaries by ward with citizens within each ward casting votes only for their own party's candidates, but it then holds a nonpartisan general election in which the votes are cast at-large.) In response to citizen questions, Covington commissioners made additional arguments for the proposal: change is good, campaign debate would focus more on issues, the commission would not be dominated by any one neighborhood, and the ward system would reduce the number of candidates running against one another.

Two of the more salient arguments for the ward system made by commissioners were the assertion that elections would be more about issues than a "popularity campaign" and that "the ward system could eliminate primaries." Although the import of issues would surface in later arguments, there was no further discussion of the potential benefit of eliminating primaries. With at-large elections, commission candidates faced a primary if more than eight individuals registered to run; a primary reduced this number to the top eight vote-getters, who then competed in the general election. In Covington's ward system, it takes at least three candidates from a single ward to trigger a primary. Even though only candidates from these wards would have a primary contest, all registered voters participate in narrowing the field to the top two vote-getters in the contested wards. The top two then face each other in the general election. In this scenario, an incumbent would have a primary contest only if challenged by two or more candidates from his or her ward.

Additional arguments arose as the ward proposal was debated in the public and the press. Commis-

Sanders's main concern was not reducing campaign costs for candidates. He was arguing that the costs to the public for holding primary elections would be reduced because "if only certain commissioners [face more than one challenger in their ward], then there is no need to make [the other incumbents] run for re-election" (p. 3B). Nevertheless, in Covington's at-large elections, voters from each ward can cast ballots in other wards' primary election contests, regardless of whether their own ward has a primary. Unless there are no ward primary contests at all (all wards having two or fewer candidates seeking nomination), the costs of holding an election would change very little.

A general argument for wards is that the individual voter will have a greater impact on electoral results. Sanders argued that the Covington ward system would enhance each voter's electoral impact: "If you don't like an incumbent's attitude, voting record, or qualifications, now is your chance, as a voter, to address your issues directly with the incumbent" (p. 3B). The likely meaning is that under the ward system voters would have a more direct impact on the electoral outcome than under the previous at-large system. In this respect, Sanders may be correct. One never-discussed by-product of the general election is that voters can vote against a candidate, since it effectively consists of four head-to-head races. This does not necessarily enhance representation, however, because incumbents could lose every vote in their home ward and still be reelected if they garner enough votes from the other wards.

Running for local office takes time, effort, and money. When competitive, this is true even for the lowliest of elected offices. According to Sanders, reported Vicki Prichard, "The main goal [of the ward system] . . . is to make running for office easier for anyone willing to take that step" (p. 6A). Since the process of becoming a candidate did not change (fil-

enhances political participation by lowering the cost to run can only be based on the idea that candidates would be elected by, and responsive to, a fairly small percentage of the community's population, thereby taking less time, effort, and money to run for office. But in an at-large electoral process such as Covington's, these arguments have little substance. In the event, however, twelve candidates did file to run in the 2006 primary—the most since 1977. The increase could have resulted from four candidates choosing to run for an open seat in Ward C. (Sanders ran for a county office.)

The argument that no one part of the city would dominate Covington politics in a ward system has been made repeatedly. Once again, under a traditional ward system the argument is valid because only the voters from the wards in which the candidates resided would elect them. In Covington's ward system, candidates must live in the ward from which they run, but they must compete in at-large elections. It appears that the ward boundaries would help to disperse power and reduce the probability of one geographic area dominating Covington politics, but we note that the current ward boundaries divide several neighborhoods in the city. Theoretically, any of these neighborhoods could have two of the four commissioners. If the third vote came from a mayor who resided in the same area, that neighborhood could dominate Covington politics. This scenario is currently applicable to Covington; the mayor and two commissioners all reside in Latonia.

The assertions by members of the Covington Board of Commissioners that ward elections would politically benefit the community appears to be based on some understanding of the current literature on local election systems, and also on conjecture, idealism, and confusion. That traditional ward elections are likely to increase minority representation and improve access to political leaders has been documented, but it seems dubious that Covington's ward

sioner Robert Sanders offered a summary of these arguments in favor of the ward system in a series of documents posted on the city's Website, interviews with the press, and a guest editorial published by the *Sunday Challenger* weekly newspaper:

- Less competition among commissioners, more collegiality
- Election for incumbents more difficult, reduced incumbent advantage (incumbents more accountable for their voting record; issues more important than name recognition; no "popularity campaign")
- Improved opportunity for head-to-head debate
- Less money spent on elections (does not always require incumbents to run for reelection in primaries)
- Greater impact of voter on electoral process
- Running for office easier for anyone
- Ensures no single area of city has a majority on commission

The argument that ward elections would create a more collegial environment on the commission assumed that candidates in at-large, or "field," races ran against one another and found it difficult to establish working relationships. Commissioner Sanders argued: "Field races meant that sitting commissioners spent the first year of their term trying to put animosity left over from the last election behind them and the second year of their term campaigning against one another. Separate elections mean no competition between sitting commissioners and . . . more time spent bettering Covington."

The basis for the argument that ward elections would be more difficult for incumbents was never clearly articulated. It may be that Sanders (and others) believed this because they saw the ward system as a head-to-head race more conducive to issue-based campaigns than name recognition or a popularity contest. If these assertions were true, challengers would have a chance to face the incumbent in a public forum, question the incumbent's

record, and create an alternative image in the minds of voters who would later choose between the incumbent and the challengers. How effectively challengers would be able to convince the voters to choose them over the incumbent would depend on the opportunities the forum provided, the openness of the audience to alternative candidates, and the political skills of challengers. This scenario depends on a variety of factors likely to be beyond the control of the challengers: whether or not debates are scheduled, whether the debates allow candidates to square off against one another, and whether independent community organizations would create these opportunities for all contested wards.

In retrospect, the suggestion that ward elections would transform the commission campaign from a contest that prioritized name recognition to one in which debate about issues predominated seems idealistic. In traditional ward systems, the number of voters per candidate is fewer than in at-large systems, so the candidate's link to the voters is likely to be more personal. The same cannot be said of Covington's new ward system. Even though candidates must live in distinct wards, the system requires them to draw votes from the entire electorate. As a result, they have no particular voting constituency. Name recognition is therefore likely to remain the most important factor in being elected. Moreover, there is no evidence that the importance of name recognition would be significantly reduced given that Covington's wards average a population of approximately eleven thousand. It is unrealistic to assume that most voters in the ward would have a personal relationship with a candidate, and even if they did each candidate would still need to expend resources on building name recognition in order to attract votes from other wards.

Since wards contain only a proportion of the population, ward electoral systems can help to reduce campaign costs. Covington's new ward system, however, maintains at-large voting. How exactly this system would reduce costs was unexplained;

Sanders's main concern was not reducing campaign costs for candidates. He was arguing that the costs to the public for holding primary elections would be reduced because "if only certain commissioners [face more than one challenger in their ward], then there is no need to make [the other incumbents] run for re-election" (p. 3B). Nevertheless, in Covington's at-large elections, voters from each ward can cast ballots in other wards' primary election contests, regardless of whether their own ward has a primary. Unless there are no ward primary contests at all (all wards having two or fewer candidates seeking nomination), the costs of holding an election would change very little.

A general argument for wards is that the individual voter will have a greater impact on electoral results. Sanders argued that the Covington ward system would enhance each voter's electoral impact: "If you don't like an incumbent's attitude, voting record, or qualifications, now is your chance, as a voter, to address your issues directly with the incumbent" (p. 3B). The likely meaning is that under the ward system voters would have a more direct impact on the electoral outcome than under the previous at-large system. In this respect, Sanders may be correct. One never-discussed by-product of the general election is that voters can vote against a candidate, since it effectively consists of four head-to-head races. This does not necessarily enhance representation, however, because incumbents could lose every vote in their home ward and still be reelected if they garner enough votes from the other wards.

Running for local office takes time, effort, and money. When competitive, this is true even for the lowliest of elected offices. According to Sanders, reported Vicki Prichard, "The main goal [of the ward system] . . . is to make running for office easier for anyone willing to take that step" (p. 6A). Since the process of becoming a candidate did not change (filing requires fifty dollars and the signatures of two registered voters), the argument that the ward system

enhances political participation by lowering the cost to run can only be based on the idea that candidates would be elected by, and responsive to, a fairly small percentage of the community's population, thereby taking less time, effort, and money to run for office. But in an at-large electoral process such as Covington's, these arguments have little substance. In the event, however, twelve candidates did file to run in the 2006 primary—the most since 1977. The increase could have resulted from four candidates choosing to run for an open seat in Ward C. (Sanders ran for a county office.)

The argument that no one part of the city would dominate Covington politics in a ward system has been made repeatedly. Once again, under a traditional ward system the argument is valid because only the voters from the wards in which the candidates resided would elect them. In Covington's ward system, candidates must live in the ward from which they run, but they must compete in at-large elections. It appears that the ward boundaries would help to disperse power and reduce the probability of one geographic area dominating Covington politics, but we note that the current ward boundaries divide several neighborhoods in the city. Theoretically, any of these neighborhoods could have two of the four commissioners. If the third vote came from a mayor who resided in the same area, that neighborhood could dominate Covington politics. This scenario is currently applicable to Covington; the mayor and two commissioners all reside in Latonia.

The assertions by members of the Covington Board of Commissioners that ward elections would politically benefit the community appears to be based on some understanding of the current literature on local election systems, and also on conjecture, idealism, and confusion. That traditional ward elections are likely to increase minority representation and improve access to political leaders has been documented, but it seems dubious that Covington's ward system, with its at-large elections, would have the same effect.

Testing the Impact and Consequences of Covington’s Ward System

Twelve candidates, among them three incumbent commissioners, filed for election in 2006. Three challengers and one incumbent filed for Ward A, four challengers filed for the open seat in Ward C, and one incumbent and one challenger filed for Wards B and D. The primary election held in May listed only the candidates from Wards A and C. Its outcome set up the November general election as a contest between two challengers in Ward C and between an incumbent and a challenger in the other three wards.

The number of primary votes cast for a city of forty-four thousand residents was relatively low. Each voter could cast two votes, one for each ward contest. Even if in the end every voter chose to cast only one vote, the maximum turnout was about 13 percent. The primary contests were for candidates in Wards A and C, but voters from all wards were eligible to cast ballots in each race. The eight candidates who advanced to the general election included the three incumbents and two women (Carran and Rains). In Ward A, both African American candidates lost (Frye and Mullins), and in Ward D a challenger (Schadler) who had failed in the previous two primaries automatically advanced to the general election simply because he was the only person from his ward to challenge the incumbent (Table 2).

To compare the primary election returns with a typical at-large election, it is necessary to make some

projections. This requires considering the likely results if all twelve candidates had stood for election in the primary. Given that incumbents generally fare well in primary elections, there would have been five seats open for challengers. Among these five was Schadler, the one challenger from Ward D, who we project would have lost the primary on the basis of his poor showing in past elections. We project the challenger (Carran) in Ward B as surviving the primary, considering her capability to raise funds. Given these assumptions, we project that an at-large field-race primary election would have had these results:

Allen	Frye
Bamberger (incumbent)	Megerle
Carran	Rains
Edmondson (incumbent)	Stricker (incumbent)

The projected primary election results suggest that the eight strongest candidates (on the basis of name recognition, financial capability, and order of finish in the ward primary) did not advance to the general election under the new ward system. Specifically we projected that Frye, an African American woman who had been the city’s economic development director for twelve years, would have finished no worse than eighth place.

According to the county clerk, turnout for the 2006 general election was approximately 30 percent, which is typical for Covington in nonpresidential election years. Results under the new ward system accurately reflect the finish that would have resulted from a typical at-large election; they do not reflect the finish in a traditional ward election. As Table 3 shows, one incumbent was reelected on the strength of the vote he received outside of his ward (Stricker), while another (Edmondson) lost his ward by a considerable number of votes (108) relative to the number by which he lost the election (18).

Evaluation of Arguments for Ward System

With these election results, it is possible to make a preliminary analysis and evaluation of the arguments

Table 2. Results of the 2006 Primary Election (Candidate and Votes Received)		
Ward A	Stricker	1,003 (incumbent)
	Allen	800
	Frye	669
	Mullins	281
Ward C	Megerle	1,037
	Rains	961
	Prescott	382
	Williams	232

Table 3. Ward v. At-Large Electoral Results in 2006 General

Election		
Ward and Candidate	Ward Vote	At-Large Vote
A Stricker*	686	3,176
Allen	784	3,079
B Carran	670	3,157
Edmondson*	562	3,139
C Megerle	921	3,462
Rains	707	2,602
D Bamberger*	1,195	3,648
Schadler	682	2,502

Note: * = incumbent.

put forward by the proponents of the Covington ward system. For this purpose, we have simplified the arguments as originally stated and presented them along with our findings.

Collegiality

Electoral competition among the commissioners was eliminated, but the question remains open as to the issue of enhanced collegiality. The ability of elected officials to get along depends on myriad factors, notably philosophical outlook, political affiliation, and the nature of the issues facing the community. We suggest that collegiality results more likely from the character of the elected officials than from the features of the electoral system. Indeed, the voting public may actually benefit from having elected officials who debate the value of one policy option over another. Rational debate has the potential to test the validity of the arguments in favor of one position over another and to enhance the public's general understanding of the political issues.

Incumbency Advantage and Name Recognition

The argument that incumbents would face more competition under the ward system and thereby have their advantages reduced is difficult to understand, let alone to prove. Some incumbents faced stronger challengers; others did not. In ward elections, it may be that incumbents are more likely to run on their record, but there is no evidence that

incumbent advantages (such as name recognition) are lessened or that having a record reduces incumbent advantages. In fact, having political experience is usually an advantage.

The argument was that elections would be more about issues and less a popularity contest. Luke Saladin's review of campaign literature from previous campaigns and discussions with neighborhood activists, however, suggests that the primary issue in this campaign was the ward system itself. Meanwhile, name recognition continued to be highly associated with electoral success.

Opportunity for Head-to-Head Debate

Our findings indicate that some voters were aware they had the opportunity to vote against candidates, but only in the general election. Whether the ward system enhanced head-to-head debate is difficult to determine. Certainly the nature of the ward system allowed the media to present the election in this manner, and several community forums were also organized to accentuate candidate competition. Given the nature of the ward system, at least in the general election, the opportunity does exist and was made to present candidates in head-to-head debate.

Fewer Primaries and Less Money Spent on Campaigns

The cost of campaigns for candidates without a primary was reduced. The cost for successful candidates in the general election remained approximately equal to what it was in previous elections, and those who spend the most money usually win. An anomaly to this campaign may have been the assumption on the part of some incumbents that the election would not require the same effort as an at-large election. Neither of the incumbents without primaries spent as much money as they had in previous elections, and one (Edmondson) lost a close race.

Ward elections did eliminate primary elections for two incumbents and their two challengers. In a typical at-large election, all of the incumbents would have been required to stand for election in the 2006

primary. There is no way, however, to predict whether or not incumbents will have primaries in the future. As with any election, incumbents will draw competition according to a variety of factors, especially perception of their vulnerability.

Greater Impact for Individual Voter

The new ward system does not mathematically enhance the impact of the individual voter on the electoral outcome because the electoral process remains an at-large system. However, the ward system does change the strategy that a voter, or group of voters, can use to influence the outcome. Specifically, the new system facilitates the ability of citizens to vote against a particular candidate in the general election. In a typical at-large field race, voters' principal means of adding weight to their choice is by "bullet voting," that is, voting for only one of the candidates. In Covington's "vote for four" at-large commission elections, where citizens could choose up to four candidates, the top four vote-getters were elected regardless of where they resided. Voting for a single candidate would accentuate the impact of a vote. In place of this positive vote choice, citizens in the ward system can vote against one or more of the incumbents by casting their ballots for the incumbents' specific head-to-head opponents in each particular ward.

Ease of Running

Filing to run for office is no easier because the formal requirements remain the same. The chances of a "weaker" candidacy (low name recognition and few financial assets) may be enhanced, however, in the event that a ward has fewer than three candidates running in the primary. As the case of Ward D illustrated, a challenger was able on his third attempt to make it to the general election because of these circumstances. But the ward primary can also have the opposite effect: capable candidates in a ward with several strong candidates may not make it past the primary, thus reducing the quality of the candidates available to the voters in the general election. This was true in Ward A, in which one capable and expe-

rienced candidate, who likely would have been nominated in an at-large field primary, could not advance to the general election because two "stronger" candidates also ran in her ward.

Geographical Dominance

Theoretically, the idea that the new system would prevent a single area of the city from dominating the commission appears to be a valid argument, but ward boundaries cut across neighborhood boundaries, offering the opportunity for multiple candidates. Because the mayor is also a member of the board of commissioners, it is possible for one neighborhood to dominate the commission. Such is the case currently, with the voting majority (the mayor and two commissioners) all residing in the Latonia neighborhood.

Impact of a Hybrid Ward System: Conclusions, Repercussions, and Future Research

Our conclusions are preliminary, based as they are on a single primary and general election. Nonetheless, the Covington ward system appears to reduce the quality of candidates available to voters in the general election by allowing only two candidates from each ward to advance regardless of whether or not a third candidate from the ward outpolls second-place candidates in other ward primaries. Ward representation is not enhanced because candidates may get fewer votes than their opponent from electors in their home ward but still win office by receiving more votes from electors who live elsewhere in the city. Minority representation may be reduced because there is no longer the opportunity to batch or bullet-vote. In addition, the ward system reduces electoral competitiveness for open seats; only candidates who live in a ward can run for an open seat. The ward system does appear to enhance the opportunity for head-to-head debate, however, and it may be responsible for attracting more candidates to the field (at least in wards with open seats). The system also allows voters for the first time under the council-manager plan to vote "against" candidates.

Obviously, more research is needed to fully understand the impact of this hybrid ward system on voters and candidates. Questions related to campaign costs, the availability of so-called strong candidates, voter confusion, opportunity for "ticket candidates," and the impact on neighborhoods that have traditionally supplied the community with leadership need to be explored. At this point, it is too early to conclude whether the ward system does or does not enhance democracy in Covington. It seems clear that the new system reduces the overall quality of the candidates available to voters in the general election, and that it enhances the ability of incumbents to be renominated because it tends to splinter votes for challengers. Incumbents from wards that have traditionally provided community leadership may face regular competition from strong challengers, while incumbents from wards that historically have not provided leadership may regularly escape competitive elections. Adopting this hybrid ward system may discourage talented and bright individuals from entering electoral politics if they happen to live in the same ward as a popular incumbent.

After experiencing the first elections under the ward system, the Covington Board of Commissioners has developed doubts about it. A majority of the commission now favors discontinuance of the system, and Saladin reported the two incumbent commissioners believe that the new system has "made things worse" (p. 2). In a bid to make up for what some critics saw as improper and inadequate debate before the adoption of the ward system, the commission named a citizen committee, composed primarily of neighborhood representatives, to review the electoral process. One of the committee's first actions was to declare that any electoral system adopted by the city should enhance democratic participation. Whether this means the committee will recommend eliminating the ward system remains to

be seen. In the meantime, there are some who are pleased that they can finally, more directly, vote against incumbents.

References

- Prichard, V. "Covington Wards: Why the Rush?" *Sunday Challenger*, Aug. 7, 2005, p. 6A.
- "Public Hearing." Notes taken at Covington Governance Forum, Covington, Ky., June 30, 2005.
- Renner, T., and DeSantis, V. "Municipal Form of Government: Issues and Trends." *Municipal Year Book*, 1998, 65, 30-41.
- Saladin, L. "Covington's Ward System May Be Dumped." *Kentucky Post*, Nov. 18, 2006, p. 2.
- Sanders, R. "Guest Editorial." *Sunday Challenger*, Sept. 4, 2005, p. 3B.
- Sanders, R. "Responses to Questions from Covington Business Council." Official City of Covington document posted on city Web site, July 28, 2005.
- Schroeder, C. "Panel to Study City's Ward System." *Enquirer*, Feb. 8, 2007, p. C4 (K [Kentucky edition of *Cincinnati Enquirer*]).
- Schroeder, C. "Covington Ward-System Race Weighed." *Enquirer*, July 29, 2005, p. B3 (K).
- Williams, D. "At-Large vs. District Election Systems." In R. L. Kemp (ed.), *Local Government Election Practices: A Handbook for Public Officials and Citizens*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1999.
- Zimmerman, J. F. "Alternative Local Election Systems." In R. L. Kemp (ed.), *Local Government Election Practices: A Handbook for Public Officials and Citizens*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1999.

John T. Spence is visiting professor in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at Xavier University in Cincinnati. Michael Margolis is professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati.
