



City of Portland Charter Commission Agenda

Location, Date, etc.

Due to the existence of an "emergency or urgent issue", the Charter Commission & its Committees will conduct meetings by remote methods/technology at the Zoom link provided below, in accordance with the requirements of 1 M.R.S. section 403 -B and the Charter Commission Remote Participation Policy.

Allow your computer to install the free Zoom app to get the best meeting experience. If you are not able to attend live, a recording will be available following the meeting in our Agenda Portal.

For public comment, you will need to use the "raise your hand" feature. To raise your hand via the telephone, please hit *9. You will be unmuted by the host when it is time for public comment.

1. Zoom Information

- a. This meeting will be held remotely pursuant to the Remote Meeting Policy adopted by the Charter Commission and as authorized under 1 M.R.S. 403-B because of the existence of an emergency or urgent issue that requires the committee to meet by remote methods. Allow your computer to install the free Zoom app to get the best meeting experience. If you are not able to attend live, a recording will be available following the meeting.
For public comment, you will need to use the "raise your hand" feature. To raise your hand via the telephone, please use *9. You will be unmuted by the host when it is time for public comment.

Please click the link below to join the webinar:

[https://portlandmaine-](https://portlandmaine-gov.zoom.us/j/85403124411?pwd=S0tBc01COXowM3FJY1pTS1pWNG9JQT09)

[gov.zoom.us/j/85403124411?pwd=S0tBc01COXowM3FJY1pTS1pWNG9JQT09](https://portlandmaine-gov.zoom.us/j/85403124411?pwd=S0tBc01COXowM3FJY1pTS1pWNG9JQT09)

Passcode: 915199

Or One tap mobile :

US: +13017158592,,85403124411#,,, *915199# or
+13126266799,,85403124411#,,, *915199#

Or Telephone:

Dial(for higher quality, dial a number based on your current location):

US: +1 301 715 8592 or +1 312 626 6799 or +1 929 205 6099 or +1 253 215
8782 or +1 346 248 7799 or +1 669 900 6833

Webinar ID: 854 0312 4411

Passcode: 915199

International numbers available: <https://portlandmaine-gov.zoom.us/j/85403124411?pwd=S0tBc01COXowM3FJY1pTS1pWNG9JQT09>

2. Call to Order
3. Review and Approval of Minutes
 - a. Approval of the draft February 15, 2022 meeting minutes.
4. Public Hearing
 - a. Overview of Council Districts Proposal Sponsored by Commissioner Chann
 - b. Public Comment Period on Council Districts Proposal
 - c. Committee Deliberations
5. New Business
6. Public Hearing for the At Large City Councilors to comment on the District Proposal (7:30)
7. Adjourn

Elections Feb. 15

Present: Chann, Buxton, Washburn

Minutes of last meeting approved unanimously.

Workshop on **proposed council districts**.

Elections Committee recommends separating mayor from city council.

Discussion and public comment followed.

Proposal will move to public hearing at next meeting in two weeks.

A public hearing followed on **Universal Resident Voting**, but no members of the public gave comments.

The URV proposal was unanimously referred to the full commission.

Meeting adjourned 7:02 p.m.

Council Districts Proposal

Sponsored by Commissioner Marpheen Chann (At-Large)

An issue that has been raised both during the Charter Commission election and deliberations has been that of increasing the size of the City Council to ensure more representation on the Council. The proposal is loosely based on Burlington's (VT) model and Maine's State Senate and State House districts (where State Senate districts overlay numerous House districts).

In looking at the existing Council, another issue that arises is what to do with at-large seats. Currently, at-large seats are held by councilors from diverse backgrounds: Councilor Pious Ali, Councilor April Fournier, and Councilor Roberto Rodriguez. Research articles detailing the tradeoffs of at-large and single-member districts are attached.

The original proposal taken up offered two avenues: Keep at-large seats or create larger districts that overlay ward/precincts that preserve the "unifying effect."

During a joint Governance and Elections Committee meeting, there was consensus that the number of total districts should be thirteen (13). Commissioners disagreed on whether or not to keep at-large seats. The Elections Committee at their February 15th, 2022, meeting agreed to forward the discussion on at-large seats to the full commission along with a proposal of a thirteen (13) member council.

PROPOSAL:

- Thirteen (13) Member Council
 - Ten (10) Districts or Wards
 - Three (3) At-Large
- Redistricting
 - Use voting precincts as template for wards
- Mayor Role
 - Governance proposals have mayor separate from the Council

Council Structure Analysis

	Population	Size of Council	District Seats	At-Large Seats	Is Mayor on Council?	Pop/District Seat	Accountability For how many members may a voter vote?***	Note
10 Largest Maine Cities								
Portland	66,215	9	5	3	yes	13,243	5 of 9	
Lewiston	36,409	8	7	0	yes	5,201	2 of 8	
Bangor	32,356	9	0	9	no mayor		9 of 9	
South Portland	25,364	7	5	2	no mayor	5,073	7 of 7	
Auburn	23,564	8	5	2	yes	4,713	4 of 8	
Biddeford	21,526	10	7	2	yes	3,075	4 of 10	
Sanford	21,387	7	0	6	yes		7 of 7	
Saco	20,554	8	7	0	yes	2,936	2 of 8	
Westbrook	19,266	7	5	2	no	3,853	3 of 7	
Augusta	18,795	9	4	4	yes	4,699	6 of 9	
average		8.2	4.5	3		4,279		
***figure includes 1 district member, all at-large members, and elected mayor if mayor sits on council exception is South Portland where district seats must be occupied by a district resident but all voters may vote for all council positions								
Cities similar in population to Portland in other states with 1-3 congressional districts								
Bismarck, ND	74,100	5	0	4	yes		5 of 5	
Missoula, MT	73,489	13	12	0	yes	12,248	3 of 13	all 6 districts elect 2 members
Rapid City, SD	75,258	11	10	0	yes	15,052	3 of 11	all 5 districts elect 2 members
Santa Fe, NM	84,683	9	8	0	yes	21,171	3 of 9	all 4 districts elect 2 members
Cheyenne, WY	64,618	9	9	0	no	21,539	3 of 9	all 3 districts elect 3 members
Idaho Falls, ID	64,618	7	0	6	yes		7 of 7	
Charleston, WVA	48,864	27	20	6	yes		7 of 27	
Grand Island, NE	51,267	11	10	0	yes	10,253	3 of 11	all 5 districts elect 2 members
Burlington, VT	44,743	13	8	4	yes	5,593	3 of 13	8 districts divided into 4 regions and each elects 1 at-large member
average	64,627	11.7	8.6	2.2		14,309		

The Portland Charter Commission will examine two important changes regarding the make-up of Portland's City Council:

1. Should the number of seats on the Council be expanded?
2. Should Portland keep its hybrid structure (at-large + district seats) or opt for a council with a different structure?

Political debate over the make-up of legislative bodies (national, state, and local) in the US goes back to colonial times with no conclusion as to what constitutes an optimal solution.¹ This is because any given council structure involves complex trade-offs between multiple and oftentimes conflicting aspects of what constitutes "good government". Municipal reform advocates have posited several widely-shared core values or goals for evaluating council reform efforts.² Specifically, such efforts might be designed to:

- increase the representativeness of council members
- increase the responsiveness of the council to community needs
- increase citizen engagement in council deliberations
- increase the accountability of the council to voters
- increase the council's ability to make decisions for the public good
- enhance the efficiency of council operations

Experience has shown that reforms which make improvements in one or more areas can have negative effects in others. As a simple example, increasing the number of district councilors by having smaller electoral districts may be expected to increase the representativeness and responsiveness of a council but reduce its operational efficiency, its ability to reach consensual decisions, and the ability of individual voters to hold the council responsible for its actions.

The attached chart shows the impact on each core value of three alternative proposals to change the make-up of Portland's current Council.³

What we know about Council size

The 2018 Municipal Form of Government Survey conducted by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) provides data on existing council sizes in the US. For cities with 50-100,000 in population (n=184), council size ranged from 3-40 members with the mean, median, and mode being 7.⁴ Small councils (4 members or less) and large ones (10 or more members) are unusual. Small councils do not provide the level of human resources and variety of views needed to run a city while large councils become unwieldy and make it difficult to

¹ "No political problem is less susceptible to a precise solution than that which relates to the number convenient for a representative legislature...", James Madison, The Federalist, #54.

² For example: Muzzio, D. and T. Tompkins (1989) On the Size of the City Council: Finding the Mean in Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 83-96 available at [jstor](#) and City Club of Portland (Oregon, 2020) [New Government for Today's Portland: Rethinking How We Vote](#).

³ Evaluation of impacts based on info in Muzzio and Tompkins, City Club of Portland, National League of Cities, [Cities 101: At-Large and District Elections](#), and [ACE Electoral Knowledge Network](#).

⁴ Numbers provided by Tad McGalliard, ICMA Director of Research, in email dated 9/20/21.

develop coherent policies. Five, seven, and nine member councils are most common with the odd number of members favored to avoid tie votes.

There are few empirical analyses of the effects of city council size because it is difficult to isolate size effects from the influence of other factors, leaving much of the available information speculative and anecdotal. One size cannot be called better than others; rather, different sized councils are conducive to different goals.⁵

What we know about Council composition and election methods

The 2018 ICMA survey found that exclusively at-large councils are most popular in cities of Portland's size (49% of respondents). A mix of at-large and district seats was found in 31% of cities that responded to the survey; only 20% of respondents had district only seats.⁶

Conclusive research on how well the different approaches support particular values is scarce. In general, at-large only councils tend to be less representative of a city's diversity than councils with some or all district seats. Although at-large systems remain popular, the Supreme Court has frequently found them discriminatory because they make it difficult for minority communities to elect members to the council. An outlier is Cambridge MA which elects a diversified at-large council all at one time using a proportional ranked-choice voting system.⁷

Exclusively district representation tends to produce more representative and responsive councils, but only if gerrymandering is under control. On the downside, district only seats can lead to councilors focusing on narrow district needs rather than what is best for the entire city.

Traditional single-member district systems are now being challenged by proponents of multi-member districts. For example, if a single member district system had a council with 8 district councilors, the multimember version might have 3 districts and 8 councilors, with 2 or 3 council members elected per district, depending on size. Proponents argue that multimember districts facilitate majority and minority representation from each district, increase voter choice, encourage voters to diversify their votes, allow more candidates to enter each race, and allow underrepresented groups to boost individual candidates.⁸ The larger the district and the number of councilors per district, the more likely elections will yield a diverse council.

Portland's experience with a hybrid system has not been systematically studied in terms of the values listed in our table. In terms of representativeness, however, it is interesting to note that in the 110 council elections since 1984, women have won 35% (20 of 63) of district races and 30% (14 of 47) of the at-large races. Minority candidates have won 3% (2 of 63) of district races and 19% (9 of 47) of the at-large races. Portland's experience runs counter to the conventional wisdom that minorities do better in district races and women do better in at-large races.

Conclusion

The structure and size of the City Council are two among many interacting factors that affect city politics, so any changes must be evaluated in the context of other changes that the Portland Charter Commission may recommend. No single model is best for all situations, so understanding the advantages and disadvantages of different options is a first step toward identifying a path forward for Portland.

⁵ Muzzio and Tompkins.

⁶ Numbers provided by IMCA on 9/20/21. (n=183).

⁷ FairVote, [Spotlight: Cambridge](#), accessed 10/20/21.

⁸ [ACE Electoral Knowledge Network](#). Accessed 8/20/2021. Look for headings on Single-member districts: Advantages and Disadvantages and Multimember districts: Advantages and Disadvantages.

ANTICIPATED EFFECTS ON CORE VALUES OF POSSIBLE CHANGES TO PORTLAND'S COUNCIL MAKE-UP

("plus" indicates increased support; "minus" indicates diminished support)

Core Value/Evaluation Criteria	- Possible Changes -		
	Increase Council Size to 11 (3 at large; 7 district members plus Mayor)	Replace Current Mix with 8 Single Member Districts (council size stays at 9 including mayor)	Replace Current Mix with 4 Districts electing 2 members at same time using proportional RCV (council size stays at 9 including mayor)
	(numbers in parentheses refer to notes under the chart)		
Representativeness (degree to which the geographic/economic/cultural/political diversity of Council reflects that of the city as a whole)	plus (1)	plus (1)	double plus (1) (2)
Responsiveness (degree to which Council responds to individual voter communications and concerns)	plus (3)	plus (3)	double plus (4)
Citizen Engagement (degree to which voters participate in, and feel confidence with, Council decisions)	plus (5)	plus (5)	double plus (4)
Accountability to Voters (% of all council members for whom each voter may vote)	small minus (6)	large minus (7)	minus (8)
Decision-Making Capability (ease with which Council can make <u>consensual</u> decisions for the public good)	minus (9)	double minus (10)	double minus (10)
Efficiency (degree to which Council conducts its business efficiently)	minus (11)	small minus (12)	small minus (12)

Footnotes

- (1) Gerrymandering in revising districts could limit or even eliminate positive impact.
- (2) Eliminating winner take all outcomes increases likelihood multiple constituencies will be represented; expected impact lessened if district councilors are not elected using proportional RCV.
- (3) Constituent services and responsiveness of councilors expected to improve with smaller districts.
- (4) Double number of district councilors to represent each citizen.
- (5) Smaller districts make it easier to run for office and more likely that each citizen knows their district representative.
- (6) Each citizen could vote for 5 of 11 (currently 5 of 9).
- (7) Each citizen could vote for 2 of 9.
- (8) Each citizen could vote for 3 of 9.
- (9) More districts means potential increase in NIMBYism; larger council size means more views to accommodate.
- (10) Elimination of at-large councilors means only mayor brings city-wide perspective.
- (11) Larger council size leads to increased diversity of views/interests and slower decision-making. Impact may be lessened depending on how much council work is done through committees.
- (12) To the extent council decisions have significantly different effects amongst the districts, the absence of at-large councilors may slow the council's decision-making process.



Cities 101 -- At-Large and District Elections

December 14, 2016

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.

Sources

Morgan, David and Robert England. *Managing Urban America, 5th Edition*. New York, NY: Seven Bridges Press, LLC, 1999.

Moulder, Evelina. "Municipal Form of Government: Trends in Structure, Responsibility, and Composition." In *The Municipal Year Book, 2008*. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association, 2008.

Renner, Tari and Victor S. DeSantis. "Municipal Form of Government: Issues and Trends." In *The Municipal Year Book, 1998*. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association, 1998.

Svara, James H. *Two Decades of Continuity and Change in American City Councils*. Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 2003.

The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity

Author(s): Jessica Trounstein and Melody E. Valdini

Source: *American Journal of Political Science*, Jul., 2008, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Jul., 2008), pp. 554-569

Published by: Midwest Political Science Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25193833>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Midwest Political Science Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Political Science*

JSTOR

The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity

Jessica Trounstone Princeton University
Melody E. Valdini Portland State University

Scholars continue to debate the degree to which electoral institutions matter for representation. The literature predicts that minorities benefit from districts while women benefit from at-large elections. The mechanisms by which institutions affect the ability of traditionally underrepresented groups to win seats have been understudied. Using an analysis of over 7,000 cities and interviews with city councilors, we find that compared to at-large systems, district systems can increase diversity only when underrepresented groups are highly concentrated and compose a substantial portion of the population. In addition, we find that the electoral system has a significant effect on representation only for African American male and white female councilors; the proportion of African American women and Latina councilors is not affected by the use of either district or at-large systems.

Extensive research has been devoted to understanding the continuing underrepresentation of women and people of color in legislatures. At the city level scholars have found mixed results for the effect of single-member district elections in increasing descriptive representation. Particularly in places where citywide elections were implemented to dilute the vote strength of racial groups, districts have been seen as a key factor in increasing racial and ethnic diversity. Alternatively for women, districts have been found to be detrimental to the election of female councilors. Scholars have proposed numerous, contradictory explanations for these findings. For minorities the focus has been on residential segregation and size of the group, while women are said to benefit from the multicandidate setting of at-large elections. For women of color these explanations are in direct conflict. This article contributes to this large literature by exploring the mechanisms by which institutions affect the representation of different groups, concurrently testing the segregation and group size hypotheses and taking into account the joint relationship between race and gender. Many of our findings confirm conventional wisdom, but advance our knowledge in this area by offering empirical estimates

of the effect of different demographic contexts in varied institutional environments.

As the Supreme Court anticipated in the landmark case *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986), we demonstrate that compared to citywide elections, districts increase representation when a group is geographically concentrated and moderately sized. Further, we find districts only benefit black men. That is, the positive effect of districts is conditional on the context. Districts can increase opportunities for representation, but in some cases districts are not helpful. Only rarely do districts have a substantial impact. Taking advantage of variation among city institutional structures, council composition, and demographics, we use quantitative and qualitative methods to study these relationships. We analyze data from surveys of city clerks and election results from more than 7,000 cities and connect this analysis to the experience of local legislators through interviews with city councilors.

While the existing literature on underrepresentation is vast, our article makes several contributions to the understanding of the relationship between electoral institutions and representation. First, we offer a methodological contribution. While no model is perfect, our analyses

Jessica Trounstone is assistant professor of politics and public affairs, Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School, 303 Robertson Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544 (jessica@trounstone.com). Melody E. Valdini is assistant professor of political science, Portland State University, Division of Political Science, Hatfield School of Government, P.O. Box 751, Portland, OR 97207 (mev@pdx.edu).

The authors would like to thank Zoltan Hajnal for the generous use of his data. They would also like to thank Chris Achen, Chuck Cameron, David Lewis, Doug Massey, Nolan McCarty, and Melody Rose for extremely helpful comments on drafts of the article, and Gretchen Kafoury for her very helpful advice on securing interviews with city council members. Benjamin Tagoe provided excellent research assistance.

American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 52, No. 3, July 2008, Pp. 554–569

©2008, Midwest Political Science Association

ISSN 0092-5853

improve on previous research by taking into account the large number of cities with no female or minority councilors, allowing us to make more precise predictions. We use tobit models to predict, first, the likelihood that a city will elect any women or people of color and then, to estimate the proportion of female and minority councilors. Second, while existing research on electoral systems and underrepresentation has tested the effects of either segregation or group size, we are the first to include both variables in our analysis. Further, much of the work on the effect of districts studies councils at or before 1990 and/or is limited to a small sample of cities; we use recent data on a large number of cities to analyze patterns across time and place. Finally, most previous research as well as the *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986) decision assumes that the effect of electoral systems on the election of people of color is constant across gender. For example, the justices refer to the effect of districts on the representation of “minority groups” or “black citizens,” but there is no discussion of the possibility that electoral institutions work differently for men as opposed to women of color. The fourth contribution of our article is to question this assumption, and, although we have limited data, we present evidence that the effect of electoral institutions is significantly different for men versus women of color.

Even after decades of progress there remain substantial disparities in the representation of black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, and women city council members compared to their population proportions.¹ The average city in our data set has a population that is 8% African American, 7.6% Latino, and 52% female while the average city council has a membership that is 4.8% African American, 2.3% Latino, and 20.5% female. Yet, there is wide variation among municipalities and across time. A clear question emerges: why do some cities do better than others at electing women and people of color?

Single-Member Districts: An Institutional Solution?

One of the most persistent findings by scholars of urban politics is that single-member district elections increase descriptive representation of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups on city councils.² This effect has been found to be particularly strong for African Americans

(see, for example, Arrington and Watts 1991; Bullock and MacManus 1990; Davidson and Grofman 1994; Polinard, Wrinkle, and Longoria 1991; Welch 1990).³ Districts have also been found to be beneficial to Latinos (e.g., Davidson and Korbel 1981; Heilig and Mundt 1983; Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier 2004; Taebel 1978).⁴ These statistical findings have been supported by extensive case study and historical research as well (Bridges 1997; Rice 1977). In sum, the literature concludes that “the effect of . . . districts is unequivocally . . . greater equity” (Mundt and Heilig 1982, 1035).

The literature on the representation of women finds precisely the opposite effect for single-member districts. While there are some exceptions, the vast majority of the research has concluded that districts are either meaningless (Alozie and Manganero 1993; Bullock and MacManus 1991) or disadvantageous for women candidates (see, for example, Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1987; Hogan 2001; King 2002; Matland 1995; Matland and Brown 1992; Norris 1985; Rule 1994; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Welch and Studlar 1990).

Because race and gender are not mutually exclusive categories, a handful of scholars have also sought to understand how electoral institutions affect women of color given that they face a potential double disadvantage (Githens and Prestage 1977) and conflicting institutional effects. Existing research finds that black women are most likely to be elected in state multimember districts (analogous to at-large elections in cities) while black men are disadvantaged by this structure (Darcy, Hadley, and Kirksey 1993; Rule 1992). Similarly, Herrick and Welch (1992) and Karnig and Welch (1979) find that black men, but not black women, are advantaged by districts. Further, Karnig and Welch (1979) find no effect of districts for Mexican American men or women. This suggests that the effect of districts should be conditional on the characteristics of the group as well as the candidate in question.

In addition to academic work, the process of vote dilution and the effect of institutional structures on representation have been the subject of intense legal analysis. The United States Supreme Court held in *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986) that in challenging at-large or multimember districts minority plaintiffs must demonstrate (among other things) that the group in question is sufficiently large and compact enough to constitute a majority of a single-member district. While these criteria are consistently used in legal and scholarly work, there have been

¹We use the terms *black/African American* and *Hispanic/Latino* interchangeably. Due to data limitations we are not able to study the effect of electoral institutions for Asian Americans.

²Descriptive representation and substantive representation are not interchangeable. See Guinier (1992) and Tate (2003) for in-depth discussions.

³Others find that districts are not superior (e.g., Bullock and MacManus 1993) or that the effect of districts has substantially weakened over time (Welch 1990).

⁴Others find that at-large systems offer better representation for Latinos (e.g., Mladenka 1989).

no studies that have determined whether or not districts serve to increase representation when these conditions are met at the local level. We begin to do so here.

Cities in the United States tend to elect their city councils using two electoral system types: single-member districts or at-large elections. When councilors are elected by district, the city is divided into geographic areas of roughly equal population size that elect a single member to the city council in a plurality or majoritarian contest. An at-large system is one in which members of the city council are selected by the entire city electorate. In most cities this means that voters are offered a slate of candidates and are allowed the same number of votes as there are seats available. Cities often have majoritarian requirements such that if a candidate does not receive 50% of the vote she is forced into a run-off election. Some cities designate seats or residency requirements for at-large positions turning the election into a series of single-member contests, while other cities vote for only one at-large member in any given election. A small but growing number of cities use mixed systems, electing some council members by district and others at-large. Scholars have found that these mixed systems as well as modified at-large systems that employ different vote count procedures lead to descriptive representation at levels closer to single-member districts (Brockington et al. 1998; Karnig and Welch 1982; Welch 1990). The number of cities using pure at-large systems has declined over the past 20 years, but at-large elections remain a common feature in city politics. The majority of cities in our study elect their members at-large.

In order for district elections to increase the proportion of councilors relative to the population size of an underrepresented group, previous literature has posited that three factors might come into play: concentration, size, and polarization of the vote. First, the group must be geographically concentrated to take advantage of districts (Sass 2000; Vedlitz and Johnson 1982). If group members are spread throughout the city so that they do not compose a simple majority of any one district, presumably districts would not increase representation of the group compared to an at-large system.

The size of the group (of voting age citizens) should also impact the efficacy of districts (Brace et al. 1988; Bullock and MacManus 1990; Grofman and Handley 1989; Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier 2004). At minimum, if the group represents less than one-half of the population needed to elect a single council seat, districts are unlikely to ensure greater representation than at-large systems. Alternatively, if a group composes a majority of the city population in a majoritarian, at-large system, the group may be able to win all of the council seats. Districts might even decrease the group's representation on the city council.

We predict that geographically concentrated, midsized groups will benefit most from district elections.

Finally, these expectations rely on an assumption of polarized voting. The group must vote in a substantial bloc for candidates who are members of the group, and other groups must be substantially unwilling to vote for members of the group (Brace et al 1988; Davidson and Korbel 1981; Engstrom and McDonald 1982). If either one of these does not hold, it is unclear whether the electoral system will have any direct effect on group representation.

Polarized voting affects different racial and ethnic minorities to different degrees. For instance, the more heterogeneous the group is, the less likely they may be to vote as a bloc, which is particularly important for Latino communities (Pachon 1999). For this reason we expect the effect of districts to be less pronounced for Latinos relative to African Americans. However, we still expect districts to have some impact. Research has found that Latinos share a significant number of characteristics that encourage ethnically based voting, including discrimination, immigrant experiences, Latin American heritage, and Spanish language (see Barreto 2004 for a literature review). Further, due to the lack of partisan identification in most city-level contests, candidate characteristics like race, ethnicity, or gender may take on additional importance for voters looking for informational cues (Bobo 1988; Kaufmann 2004; Popkin 1991; Tate 2003; Valdini 2006).

Nearly all of the research on racially polarized voting has concentrated on state- and federal-level elections (see Hutchings and Valentino 2005 for a review). At the local level, Hajnal and Trounstine (2005) found that blacks and Latinos tended to vote most cohesively for the same candidate. Across 10 of the United States' largest cities, 74% of blacks and 72% of Latinos voted for the group's majority preferred candidate. This was compared to 67% of whites voting for the group's first choice. Additionally they find a significant racial/ethnic divide in votes for the winning candidate, with a 39 percentage point gap between whites and African Americans, and a 20 percentage point gap between whites and Latinos. These figures bolster our prediction that districts will be most helpful for African Americans.

The logic of concentration and group size also works to explain potential differential effects of districts for people of color and women. Women are rarely (if ever) highly concentrated in a community. The same can be said for group size and the representation of women. Because women are nearly always between 48% and 52% of a community's population, we cannot expect that they will be aided by districts. Furthermore, there is little evidence of gender-polarized voting. A number of studies have found

that voters evaluate female candidates drawing on gendered stereotypes (e.g., Dolan 2004; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; McDermott 1997; Valdinì 2006) and that these stereotypes can affect perceptions about candidates (Koch 2000) and vote choice (Brown 1994; Brown, Heighberger, and Shocket 1993; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

However, stereotyping only equates to polarized voting when there are gendered differences in the judgments of voters. Some research has determined that women are more likely to prefer female candidates and men to prefer male candidates (Sanbonmatsu 2002). But, other scholars argue that there is little evidence of gender group consciousness (Conover 1988; Gurin 1985) and that women are equally if not more unlikely to vote for female candidates as men (Darcy and Schramm 1977; Karnig and Walter 1976). In the aggregate, the gender gap (while persistent) tends to be small with regard to support for parties and candidates (see Norrander 2003 for a review).

So although it is likely that women are treated differently from men in elections, it is unclear how these differences should interact with institutional variation. According to the criteria specified in *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986), women are unlikely to benefit from districts. Scholars have suggested, among other reasons, that women might do better in multimember elections (such as at-large systems) because the competition is not zero-sum, meaning that voters need not choose women at the expense of men (Karnig and Welch 1979; Matland and Brown 1992; Matland and Studlar 1996). On the other hand, scholars have not proposed that the zero-sum calculation applies to racial and ethnic minorities.⁵ This implies that the electoral structure is predicted to affect racial and ethnic minorities in a different way and for different reasons than women. So how should our expectation change when we are talking about women of color; do the predictions for multimember elections only apply to white women?

There is some evidence that racial bloc group voting does not apply to women of color, particularly when men of color are also running. McClain, Carter, and Brady (2005) find that black women have a harder time gaining the support of race-based organizations compared to black men, and Philpot and Walton (2007) find that black women are the strongest supporters of black female candidates. Given that our concentration and size hypotheses depend on polarized voting, we might not expect districts to help black women. On the other hand, some scholars have found that black women and Latinas are *better* repre-

sented than white women (Darcy and Hadley 1988; Garcia Bedolla, Tate, and Wong 2005; Montoya, Hardy-Fanta, and Garcia 2000). Garcia Bedolla, Tate, and Wong (2005) explain this finding as potentially resulting from block group voting. This would also be supported by Philpot and Walton's (2007) finding that black men tend to be stronger supporters of black female candidates than white women or white men. Further, a number of studies have found that race trumps gender in determining voting behavior and attitudes (Gay and Tate 1998; Lien 1998) and that the gender gap is essentially the same across racial and ethnic groups (Welch and Sigelman 1992). In sum, while we expect white women to benefit from at-large elections, and black men to benefit from districts, there are no clear hypotheses that emerge for black women and Latinas with regard to the effect of institutional structure.

Testing the Effects of the Electoral System on Representation

To understand more about why single-member districts help certain underrepresented groups and not others, we begin by testing the relationship between electoral structure and diversity in cities. Our data come from surveys by the International City/County Manager's Association (ICMA) conducted in 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001. The ICMA survey is mailed to city clerks in approximately 7,500 cities including all municipalities with more than 2,500 residents. The average survey response rate for the years we analyze is 63%.⁶ The survey provides demographic information about council members and institutional variables for the cities. To control for city-level demographics we use 1990 census data for all 1986 observations, 2000 census data for all 2001 observations, and linearly interpolate values for 1992 and 1996. In total we have 7,174 unique cities in the data set.

⁶Determining the effect of response rates to the ICMA is difficult because no other source contains institutional data for the same time period; but we can use data from the 1987 Census of Governments (COG) as a comparison for our main independent variable. The proportions of councilors elected in each type of system are similar in the two data sets. In the 1986 ICMA data 72.3% of cities elected councilors at-large, 11.6% used districts, and 16.2% used a mixed system. The COG reports 74.2% of cities elected councilors at-large, 13.5% used districts, and 12.3% used a mixed system. It does appear that western and southern cities are underrepresented in the ICMA compared to the census. The control variables included in our analyses should mitigate the effect of this underrepresentation; nonetheless we add the caveat that our findings are most directly applicable to the types of cities included in the ICMA sample. Weighting by region does not change our conclusions. Summary statistics for all variables are available from the authors.

⁵Clearly more research should be done to determine the extent to which zero-sum calculations apply to different groups. It is possible that even in at-large settings such a calculation could be invoked, particularly when cities use designated post systems or staggered elections.

In addition to the statistical analysis, we present responses from interviews of current city councilors from a sample of cities with mixed electoral systems.⁷ These interviews served a number of purposes in our investigation. First, they helped us to identify the contextual factors that interact with institutions and affect the election of women and minority councilors. Secondly, they provide useful examples of our empirical findings. Finally, they offer face validity of our findings from people working in city politics. As we had hoped, all of the interviewees in our sample were familiar with both types of electoral systems and made a decision to run in one type rather than the other. Of the 174 councilors serving in 2006, 98 (or 56%) were female and/or persons of color. We randomly selected one-third of these members for an interview. Eleven councilors chose to participate in a phone interview in which we asked respondents open-ended questions regarding the effect of electoral institutions for electing white women, women of color, and men of color.⁸

In the quantitative analysis our dependent variables are the proportion of city councils that are black, Latino, and female. Unfortunately, the ICMA survey data do not specify the race of women councilors or the gender (or ethnic background) of those in the included racial categories. While it would be ideal to augment our discussion of women of color with ICMA data, we cannot. However, using data from a different source for 1986 we are able to perform a separate analysis of the effect of districts for black women versus black men and Latinas versus Latinos. In all of the analyses our primary independent variable is the percentage of councilors elected by district in each city. The majority of cities in our data set have a city council that is either elected wholly by districts or at-large, but some have mixed systems in which a portion of the council is elected by district and a portion elected at-large. To capture this variation we use a continuous version of the variable.

We add to these regressions a number of other institutional variables that have been linked to minority council representation either directly or indirectly through turnout and mobilization effects. These controls include nonpartisan versus partisan elections, mayor council ver-

sus council manager systems,⁹ the size of the city council,¹⁰ the presence of term limits, and a dummy variable noting whether city elections are held concurrently with national elections.¹¹ Because some city institutions are subject to closer scrutiny as a result of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) and our primary independent variable (elections by district) may in fact be the result of challenges brought under the VRA, we include a dummy variable indicating jurisdictions required to secure preclearance as per Section 5. We include citywide socioeconomic variables to account for the possibility that female or minority presence on the council is linked to wealthier or more educated communities.¹²

We control for potential region effects and the racial and ethnic makeup of the city population. Latinos have lower citizenship rates and younger populations than whites and African Americans, perhaps limiting their ability to affect election outcomes (Jones-Correa 1998). To control for this we include a measure of the total proportion of the city population that are noncitizens and the proportion that is 18 and older. To account for liberal leaning communities that might be more likely to elect women and minorities, we include a measure of the countywide vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in 1988 and a dummy variable for central cities. To control for the likely relationship between time and our independent and dependent variables, we include year fixed effects (with 2001 as the base category). Finally, in all models we include the population proportions of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians in each city.¹³ As was true with our dependent measure of racial and ethnic representation, we

⁹Using a more nuanced version of this variable allowing for mayor council systems with a city manager makes no difference to the results.

¹⁰Scholars have argued that in smaller councils the value of each seat is greater and therefore less likely to be represented by minorities or women (see Welch and Karnig 1979).

¹¹Ideally we would have also included controls for the city's vote-count procedure, but these data are not collected by ICMA, and the large size of the data set precluded us from collecting it.

¹²Unfortunately, group-specific versions of these demographic variables are not available from the 1990 census so we were unable to test the alternative argument that group resources determine representation (see, for example, Cole 1974; Karnig 1979).

¹³Ideally these proportions would be in reference to the population of citizens over the age of 18. However, the census did not provide data for citizens over the age of 18 by race/ethnicity for our entire time period. We tested alternative formulations of population measures assuming in 2000 a constant citizenship rate across age groups and in 1990 a constant citizenship rate across racial and ethnic groups. The alternative specification made little difference to the results and is available from the authors.

⁷The cities are the 10 largest mixed system cities: Houston, Philadelphia, Charlotte, Jacksonville, Indianapolis, Boston, Washington DC, Denver, Nashville, and New Orleans.

⁸We interviewed six white women, two African American men, one African American woman, one Latino, and one Latina. Prior to each interview we requested permission to record and quote each councilor. We received consent from all but one council member who is not quoted by name in this manuscript. Transcripts are available from the authors upon request.

cannot account for racial and ethnic group heterogeneity in these models.¹⁴

Like most research on this topic, we restrict our results to cities with substantial minority populations. Rather than select an arbitrary minimum for the size of groups, we allow the threshold to vary by city depending on the size of the city council. An observation is included if the group in question composes at least one-half of the percentage that a single council seat represents.¹⁵ Our analysis assumes that black residents will be the strongest supporters of black candidates and Latino residents for Latino candidates. The larger the city council the easier it should be for any group to win representation. Using a varying threshold takes this into consideration.

The mean number of council seats is six, so on average a city is included if the underrepresented group is at least 8% of the city's total population. We apply this selection criterion regardless of the electoral system employed. When we test the hypothesis that the size of the group matters for the effectiveness of the electoral system, we relax this selection criterion and restrict the analysis to cities that have nonzero populations of the group in question. This allows us to directly test the assumption that a group will benefit most from districts when its population is larger than one-half of the percentage of a single council seat but less than a majority of the total population.

Due to the extremely large number of cities that have no female or minority councilors, we use a random-effects tobit model to estimate the effects of districts on council representation [$y_i^* = x_i'\beta + \varepsilon_i^*$, where $y_i = y_i^*$ if $y_i^* > 0$ & $y_i = 0$ if $y_i^* \leq 0$].¹⁶ The model, a maximum-likelihood estimation censored at zero, combines the logic of probit and multiple regression to estimate both the probability of a council having any female or minority members, and given this, predicts the expected proportion of female councilors and councilors of color.

Do districts increase the proportion of African American, Latino, and women councilors? The results displayed in Table 1 confirm that district elections continue to aid minority members in getting elected and are a nominal

detriment to women. A variety of simulations help to clarify the relationships between district elections and representation. We predict the marginal effect of the electoral system on the proportion of women and minority council members when moving from a system in which a majority of the council is elected at-large to a system in which a majority of the council is elected by district, holding all other variables constant at their mean values. First, we predict the effect of districts on the probability of a city having any members of the underrepresented group on the council. Then, we predict the effect of districts on the expected proportion of female and minority council members, weighted by the probability that this value is positive.¹⁷

For African Americans, having a majority of council members elected by district increases the probability of electing any African Americans to the city council by more than 10 percentage points, from 73% in at-large cities to 84% in district cities.¹⁸ The expected proportion of African American councilors increases by about five percentage points under districts, from 13% to 18%. Because the average city in our data set has six council members, in order for a group to gain an additional seat districts need to provide about a 16-point advantage. In our model, districts clearly fall short of this threshold for African Americans.

The key factor in increasing African American representation is the proportion of the city that is black. For Latinos, districts have a weaker effect on representation. For both at-large and district systems the probability of having any Latino councilors at all is low; 27% in at-large systems and 33% in district systems. When this is taken into consideration the relationship between district systems and the expected proportion of the Latino councilors is limited to about $1\frac{1}{2}$ percentage points, going from 4.1% in at-large systems to about 5.5% in district systems. The Latino population in a city plays a key role in the election of Latino council members. Nearly equal in effect is the percentage of the city that has the rights of citizenship.

Echoing the results of our regression analyses, nearly every interviewee in our sample agreed that district systems were better than at-large systems for electing people of color. For example, Councilman Jamie Isabel, an African American member on the Nashville City Council, explained, "It's happened again and again where African Americans can't get enough votes to win at-large." Susan Burgess, a white woman serving in an at-large seat in the Charlotte City Council, echoed his

¹⁴Scholars find that assuming ethnic or racial group homogeneity severely biases estimates of representation (DeSipio 1996; Sass 2000; Tam 1995), but we have no fix for this problem.

¹⁵We repeated the analyses using a 5% threshold of the group in question instead of allowing the threshold to vary based on council size (available upon request from the authors). The results are extremely similar and our conclusions hold in all cases.

¹⁶The likelihood function for each unit is computed using the Gauss-Hermite quadrature. The estimates were stable in multiple tests. Alternate specifications using a tobit model with Huber/White clustered standard errors are nearly identical. We further tested weighted models to correct for heteroskedasticity and got similarly strong results.

¹⁷Effects on uncensored observations are also available from the authors.

¹⁸Predictions calculated using Stata/SE 9.2 mfx command.

sentiments, stating that districts are “absolutely” better than at-large seats for electing people of color. Councilwoman Rosemary Rodriguez, a Latina serving on the Denver City Council, believes so strongly in the positive consequences of district elections for increasing the representation of people of color that she worked for electoral reform for other local offices in her city. She explains: “I actually persuaded the legislature to adopt single-member districts for Denver for a majority of the school board seats so that we could try to achieve Hispanic representation. And ever since that bill was passed,

we have had a Hispanic member elected to the school board.”

The Effect of Institutions for Women

For women, the results in Table 1 suggest that the probability of a council having at least one female councilor is high: about 83% in at-large systems and about 80% in district systems, with the expected proportion of female

TABLE 1 Tobit Regression on the Percentage of Minority and Female Council Members

	% Black		% Latino		% Women	
	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err
% District	0.06**	0.01	0.05**	0.02	−0.02**	0.01
Demographics						
% Latino	0.18**	0.07	1.68**	0.08	−0.00	0.03
% Black	0.85**	0.03	0.17*	0.09	0.12**	0.02
% Asian	−0.41**	0.21	0.53**	0.16	0.08	0.07
% Women	0.43**	0.16	−0.53*	0.32	−0.16	0.10
Total Pop (mil)	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.05*	0.03
% Poor	0.29**	0.10	−0.00	0.18	−0.07*	0.04
Med. Income (ths)	−0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	−0.00	0.00
% Coll. Grad	0.23**	0.07	0.26**	0.13	0.21**	0.03
% Noncitizens	−0.05	0.15	−1.26**	0.14	0.00	0.07
% Pop Over 18	0.02	0.11	−0.02	0.15	0.18**	0.05
Democratic Vote	−0.14**	0.05	0.15*	0.09	−0.01	0.02
Institutions						
Term Limits	−0.00	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.02**	0.01
Nonpartisan	0.00	0.01	−0.01	0.03	−0.00	0.01
Mayor Council	−0.00	0.01	0.02	0.02	−0.00	0.00
Council Size	0.00	0.00	0.01**	0.00	0.00**	0.00
Concurrent	−0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01*	0.01
VRA	0.00	0.01	0.04	0.03		
Geography						
Central City	0.07**	0.01	0.08**	0.02	0.02**	0.01
West	0.08**	0.03	0.05*	0.03	0.10**	0.01
Northeast	0.02	0.02	−0.03	0.04	0.02**	0.01
Midwest	−0.00	0.01	0.00	0.04	0.04**	0.01
1986	−0.07**	0.01	−0.03	0.03	−0.07**	0.01
1992	−0.02**	0.01	−0.01	0.02	−0.02**	0.01
1996	−0.01	0.01	−0.00	0.03	0.07**	0.01
Constant	−0.37**	0.15	−0.46*	0.26	0.03	0.06
N	3042		2749		11537	
Wald χ^2	1670.83**		1258.24**		1668.51**	

*p < .10, **p < .05.

Source: International City/County Manager's Association (ICMA) surveys of 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001.

councilors going from 20% in at-large cities to 18% in cities with district elections. None of the other variables perform particularly well predicting women's representation. The model suggests that increasing the proportion of women in a city negatively impacts the chance of having women on the council. Women are also aided by larger city councils. To test whether or not this finding reflects the benefit of increased district magnitude that other scholars identify, we interact this variable with a dummy variable indicating whether the majority of the councilors are elected at-large or by district. Our findings reflect the conventional wisdom (e.g., Alozie and Mangano 1993); women do better with larger city councils, but in at-large cities this effect is much more pronounced. Once the interaction is included, the independent effect of at-large elections actually disappears. This offers indirect support for the argument that women benefit from a nonzero-sum setting.

The opinions of our interviewees reflect these muddled findings of the effects of at-large versus district elections for women. Councilperson Carol Boigon felt strongly that at-large seats are better for electing women candidates. She explained that in her council, "the two at-large seats run at the same time—no differentiation occurs—one race, two top vote getters get seated. So there were seven men and me. So you win by a plurality, which really strengthens the hand of women." Council members Jamie Isabel, Glorious Johnson, Susan Burgess, and Anna Verna, on the other hand, all felt that districts are the better choice for increasing the number of women in office. However, when asked *why* they felt that district elections are better for electing women, every respondent gave a different answer.

Councilwoman Johnson explained districts were better because of the ability of women to be active and known within their districts, stating that the women currently serving in district seats on her council "have . . . clout when it comes to that district because they have been known since they were children." Councilwoman Burgess suggested that districts are better for women because they are less competitive. She explained, "Once you win a district election, many times the district representatives don't even have competition in their subsequent elections. At-large is always competitive. Very tough races, to be truthful and we have only one woman and three men." Three other council members all argued, however, that it was a toss-up and/or that the election of women depended on factors specific to each electoral contest, not the electoral system. Councilwoman Sanders of Indianapolis stated, "I don't know that there's really much difference [between at-large versus district elections], at least not in my experience."

Clearly, the variety of responses and opinions given on this subject is quite different from the nearly uniform responses given on the effects of district elections for the election of people of color. The wide range of responses regarding the effect of institutions on the representation of women is not too surprising given our statistical results. We found that women are negatively affected by districts, but the results were small, with the predicted proportion of women increasing only about 2% in at-large cities. In sum, after controlling for a variety of factors, it appears that districts have a limited but distinctly positive effect on increasing representation for underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and a small negative effect for women that appears to be driven by the multimember nature of at-large elections.

The Intersection of Race and Gender

Given that racial and ethnic minority groups seem to benefit from districted systems while women seem to do better in at-large systems, how do black women and Latinas fare in these cities? Our main data set does not provide the racial and ethnic background by gender of city councilors; however, the United States Census of Governments collected these statistics in one year that matches our data—1986. In this year about 16% of white and black councilors and about 18% of Hispanic councilors were women. For the following analyses we use as dependent variables the proportion of the city council that is black women, black men, Latinas, Latinos, and white (non-Hispanic) women. We include all of the controls described above. As above we only include cities with substantial minority and female populations.¹⁹

The results in Table 2 suggest differential effects of districts for black women and Latinas. Where district elections have no significant effect on increasing the proportion of councilors who are black women, black men get a significant boost from this institutional structure. In fact all of the predicted increase in representation found in Table 1 is attributable to black men. The predicted probability of a council having any black women is about 13%, and the expected proportion of black women is about 1.6% regardless of the electoral system. The probability of a council having any black men is much higher, about 53%

¹⁹We chose not to select cities on the combined basis of race and gender (e.g., only including cities with a substantial population of black women) because previous scholarship has indicated that race is a more important predictor of vote choice than gender. Thus we assume that the presence of black men and Latinos are important for the election of black women and Latinas.

TABLE 2 Tobit Regression on the Percentage of Council Members of Color by Gender

	% Black Women		% Black Men		% Latinas		% Latinos		% White Women	
	Coefficient	St Er	Coefficient	St Er	Coefficient	St Er	Coefficient	St Er	Coefficient	St Er
% District	−0.00	0.03	0.08**	0.02	0.04	0.09	−0.01	0.05	−0.02	0.01
Demographics										
% Latino	0.29	0.28	0.08	0.15	0.97**	0.27	1.63**	0.15	−0.15**	0.05
% Black	0.54**	0.1	0.58**	0.05	0.67**	0.33	0.27	0.19	−0.08**	0.04
% Asian	1.36**	0.63	−0.03	0.36	0.43	0.6	0.21	0.36	−0.09	0.13
% Women	−0.19	0.57	0.49	0.31	−0.02	1.22	0.58	0.78	−0.36*	0.19
Total Pop (mil)	−0.06	0.11	0.01	0.05	0.07	0.13	−0.04	0.08	0.06	0.05
% Poor	0.01	0.36	0.42**	0.19	0.67	0.6	0.25	0.36	−0.03	0.07
Med. Income (ths)	−0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00*	0.00
% Coll. Grad	0.42*	0.23	0.01	0.13	0.06	0.54	0.13	0.32	0.19**	0.05
% Noncitizens	−0.61	0.64	−0.07	0.34	−0.7	0.46	−1.21**	0.26	0.00	0.14
% Pop Over 18	−0.09	0.45	−0.07	0.24	0.25	0.79	0.17	0.47	0.32**	0.09
Democratic Vote	−0.03	0.15	−0.20**	0.08	−0.35	0.35	0.15	0.18	0.03	0.03
Institutions										
Term Limits	0.12**	0.06	−0.04	0.04	−0.04	0.11	0.08	0.06	0.04**	0.02
Nonpartisan	0.01	0.04	0.00	0.02	0.04	0.12	−0.04	0.06	0.00	0.01
Mayor Council	−0.03	0.03	−0.03**	0.02	−0.13	0.09	0.03	0.04	−0.02*	0.01
Council Size	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.03*	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01**	0.00
Concurrent	0.03	0.05	0.00	0.03	0.06	0.08	0.04	0.05	0.01	0.01
VRA	−0.03	0.04	−0.01	0.02	−0.03	0.10	0.04	0.06		
Geography										
Central City	0.12**	0.04	0.08**	0.02	0.01	0.09	0.10*	0.05	0.04**	0.01
West	−0.14	0.11	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.10	0.09	0.06	0.12**	0.01
Northeast	0.06	0.06	0.00	0.03	−0.12	0.19	−0.15	0.11	0.01	0.01
Midwest	0.00	0.05	−0.02	0.02	−0.15	0.20	−0.02	0.10	0.04**	0.01
Constant	−0.35	0.55	−0.38	0.3	−1.44	1.03	−1.45**	0.63	−0.13	0.12
N	893		893		698		698		3563	
Wald χ^2	62.12**		303.92**		30.31		321.97**		430.62**	

*p < .10, **p < .05.
Source: United States Census of Governments 1986.

in at-large councils and nearly 70% for district councils. The expected proportion goes from 8% in at-large cities to 14% in districted cities.

For Hispanics the story is different. The electoral structure has no significant effect on the proportion of the council that is Latino or Latina. However, Latinos are much more likely to be represented on councils. The probability of having any Latinos on the council is about 21% and the expected proportion about 3.5%, while the probability of having Latinas on the council is about 4% and the expected proportion less than 1%. Finally, in these results it appears that the positive effect of at-large elections is all going toward white women, although the coefficient does not quite reach statistical significance. The probability of a council having any white women increases from 64%

under districts to 67% in at-large cities, with the expected proportion increasing from 12% to 13%.

In sum, black men and white women are the only groups in our analysis that are substantively and significantly affected by electoral institutions, and the biggest benefit of the system appears to be increasing the probability of having any black men or white women, rather than the proportion.

Concentration of Population Matters

The reason that the electoral system may have a relatively small overall effect for racial and ethnic minorities may

lie in population size and residential concentration of the groups. We now look to see whether districts have a larger effect if these factors are taken into consideration. As opposed to women, African American and Latino voters can be heavily concentrated. The theory that concentration drives the relationship between district elections and representation of racial and ethnic minorities has a substantial number of subscribers (Brace et al. 1988; Davidson and Korbel 1981; Engstrom and McDonald 1982; Mladenka 1989; Vedlitz and Johnson 1982). Yet there have been few attempts to actually test this claim directly (Sass 2000 is an exception). We use 1990 and 2000 census data on concentration in 331 metropolitan areas to do so here.²⁰

Demographers rely on a variety of different measures of racial and ethnic concentration and segregation calculated using demographic data collected at the census-tract level (Massey and Denton 1988). One measure is the isolation index, which ranges from 0 to 1 and represents the probability that group members will meet members of their own group in their census tract. A score of .6 for African Americans means that the average African American lives in a census tract that is 60% black. This measure has the benefit of being sensitive to a group's size in addition to the distribution of the group throughout a community. It would be impossible to have a high isolation score unless a group composes a substantial portion of the total community. Both factors are likely important for a group to transform membership into voting strength.

In order to analyze the effect of concentration, we split our data into four samples based on the isolation index for each group and run the same tobit models presented above for each quartile.²¹ We hypothesize that the benefits of district elections should be most likely if a group can reasonably generate a voting majority in some neighborhoods. In other words we predict increasingly significant effects as the isolation index increases. The following analyses are restricted to cities with nonzero populations of African Americans and Latinos. We present only the variables of interest, but the models include all of the controls listed in Table 1. The full models are available from the authors.

²⁰The census did not produce concentration data at the municipality level until 2000, and then only for large cities. To show the effects of concentration across time for as many cases as we can, we rely on the MSA-level statistics, but because of the potential mismatch between MSA- and city-level concentration, we rerun the analysis using 2000 data at the city level for 596 cases.

²¹We elected not to present an interaction model because the effect is nonlinear. We had enough data to estimate the effect in a split sample allowing the coefficients to vary.

The results in Table 3 are clear. Only when a group is concentrated will districts promote increased descriptive representation on the council. For African Americans, the effect of districts goes from being negative at very low levels of concentration to significantly positive at high levels. Districts have the largest effect for cities in the third quartile, where moving from an at-large system to a district system increases the estimated probability of electing an African American council member by about 10 percentage points, from 14% to 24%. This is a powerful effect compared to the first quartile, where districts decreased both the probability of having any African American councilors (from 7% to 3%) and the expected proportion from .9% to .3%. When the isolation index is very high for African Americans the effect of districts becomes insignificant. This could indicate the decreased importance of the electoral system when a group makes up a majority of the electorate. The size of the black population is most dominant in the first and fourth models, suggesting that African American council representation in cities at the two ends of the isolation spectrum is best predicted by the size of the minority group itself.

We repeated this analysis with the 1986 census data using the proportion of black men and the proportion of black women as dependent variables. As expected the results hold systematically for the election of black men, but not black women. For black men districts have a negative effect in the first quartile and an increasingly powerful effect in the second through fourth quartiles. For black women the electoral institution has no effect in the first through third quartiles, but districts are extremely powerful and positive in the fourth quartile. When blacks compose a majority of a city's population, districts—not at-large elections—help black women.

As shown in the bottom half of Table 3, for Latinos, the effect of the interaction between districts and concentration is even more striking. The effect of districts is small and highly insignificant in the first and second quartiles. The effect in the third quartile is substantial but not quite statistically significant. Unless Latinos are extremely concentrated, districts make little difference for representation. In the fourth quartile, the impact is large. Districts increase the probability of electing Latinos to the council to 98% from 75% under at-large systems.²² The predicted proportion of Latinos on the council increases by more than 25 percentage points from 19% in at-large cities to 48% in district systems.²³

²²We could not run these models on Latinos and Latinas separately because of a lack of data.

²³Using city-level isolation measures from 2000 for large cities, the results are extremely similar though not exactly the same. For blacks

TABLE 3 **Tobit Regression on Proportion of African American Council Members, Controlling for Concentration**

	0 ≤ isolation < .25		.25 ≤ isolation < .50		.50 ≤ isolation < .75		.75 ≤ isolation ≤ 1	
	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err
% District	−0.13**	0.05	0.04**	0.02	0.08**	0.02	0.06	0.04
% Black	3.15**	0.48	1.29**	0.08	1.22**	0.06	1.31**	0.10
VRA	0.14**	0.06	−0.03**	0.02	0.06**	0.03	−0.90	73.3
Constant	−0.92	0.60	−0.05	0.22	0.13	0.26	1.44	0.68
N	1373		2247		2735		908	
Wald χ ²	94.15**		680.00**		902.92**		383.65**	

Tobit Regression on Proportion of Latino Council Members, Controlling for Concentration

	0 ≤ isolation < .25		.25 ≤ isolation < .50		.50 ≤ isolation < .75		.75 ≤ isolation ≤ 1	
	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err
% District	0.03	0.11	−0.00	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.32**	0.16
% Latino	4.63**	0.94	1.53**	0.17	1.53**	0.15	2.14**	0.40
% Noncitizens	−4.98**	1.67	−1.22**	0.35	−0.97**	0.23	−0.64	0.67
Constant	−2.80	1.73	−0.35	0.48	−0.53	0.46	1.61	1.19
N	4542		1966		968		133	
Wald χ ²	163.28**		241.99**		427.35**		198.88**	

*p < .10, **p < .05.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1990 & 2000; International City/County Manager’s Association (ICMA) surveys of 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001.

There are at least two reasons that the effect of districts occurs only at the highest levels of isolation for Latinos. First, Latinos have lower levels of turnout compared to their population proportions than African Americans or whites. This may indicate that Latinos need to be a larger share of the population before they can affect electoral outcomes as a group. Secondly, these results may indicate a lower level of polarized voting and bloc group voting until Latinos are highly concentrated and a large portion of the population. It is plausible that ethnic group identity would be associated with a higher degree of segregation and a larger minority group presence. In general though, these data provide strong support for our hypothesis that the benefit of single-member district elections for minority groups operates through patterns of concentration. Furthermore, the negative results for African Americans in the first quartile of isolation suggest that underrepresented groups may fare better in at-large elections when they are highly dispersed throughout the community.

the effect of districts is negative in the first quartile, small and insignificant in the second quartile, and increasingly positive in the third and fourth quartiles. For Latinos the effect is negative in the first quartile, nearly zero in the second and fourth quartiles, and very powerful in the third quartile.

This is precisely the conclusion drawn by one of our interviewees, Councilman Felix Arroyo, the first Latino elected to the Boston City Council. Councilman Arroyo stated that he chose to run for an at-large seat rather than the district seats also available because “it is very difficult to win if you are a person of color by district except for two districts which are actually communities of colors.” Further, he explained that because of the demographics of the city, the at-large seat was better for electing Latinos in Boston, “because most of the Latino community is spread across the city, as well as the immigrant community and the progressive groups.” For Arroyo, the lack of concentration of his primary constituency means that districts do not offer him the best opportunity for election.

Councilor Carol Boigon, a white woman serving on the Denver City Council, also emphasized the power of district elections when groups are concentrated. She explains:

... in a district seat ... some of the ethnic concentrations have an opportunity to be represented ... That’s the advantage I see. We have two seats that could reliably elect a black council person, the 8th and 11th. And those of us who feel

that it's important to have diverse voices at the table and who are not black, you would say "Why would you run from one of those seats then?" I wouldn't.

Councilwoman Boigon's point is clear: African American council members benefit electorally in areas of the city that have large concentrations of black voters.

Size of the Group Interacts with Districts

We hypothesized that the effect of districts should interact with group size, being most effective when groups are moderately sized. Our use of the isolation variable in the previous section tested this indirectly, but because the index combines concentration with group size, in this section we test this hypothesis directly by splitting our sample by the size of the underrepresented group.²⁴ We divided our data into three subsamples for African Americans and Latinos. The first sample includes cities that have minority populations greater than zero, but less than the one-half of the percentage that a council seat represents. The second sample includes cities with minority groups equal to or larger than one-half of the percentage the council seat represents, but less than a majority of the population. The third sample includes cities where the group in question composes a majority of the population.

The results confirm our expectations. Districts matter most for groups that are a moderate proportion of the population. For very small and very large groups the electoral system has no significant effect on representation in the models. Rather than present these as regression results, we have included a graph of the benefit of districts compared to at-large systems for African Americans and Latinos depending on the size of the black or Latino population.

The results in Figure 1 suggest that districts have a much stronger effect for African Americans than Latinos, as would be expected given the differences in concentration and bloc voting between the groups. For both groups the only statistically significant differences between electoral systems occur when the group is moderately sized.

²⁴ A single model including the interactions between districts, group size, and dummy variables for subsamples also generated significant results. There is no significant difference between at-large and district systems when a group is very small; increasing the group population increases the proportion of minority group members and districts enhance this result. We present the split sample analysis because the results are easier to interpret.

In no case does the electoral system bring a group to representational parity, but in cities where there are very large populations of African Americans and Latinos, there is virtually 100% probability of at least a single council member being African American or Latino. This suggests that African Americans and Latinos are breaking into the political system when they command a substantial voting bloc.

In our interviews a number of councilors emphasized group size in combination with concentration in their discussion of the superiority of district for electing people of color. Councilman Jamie Isabel, an African American member on the Nashville City Council, explained that districts are better because at-large systems "dilute the votes." Similarly, Councilor Susan Burgess, a white woman on the Charlotte City Council, stated that

... the reason is because we have drawn our districts to make sure we have minority representation. Three [out of seven] of our districts are majority-minority. And there's always a minority elected there. We have had difficulty electing minorities at-large, even when they are extremely qualified. . . . We've had awesome African American candidates who have tried to go from districts to at-large and lost citywide.

Councilperson Joanne Sanders, a white woman serving in the Indianapolis council (which is consolidated with the county), nearly repeated the sentiments of Councilwoman Burgess, stating that

because of the demographics of the county, I think that the district level was better for people of color. . . . we still have heavily black areas, in our communities, where it's easily a seventy-thirty Democrat district. So for people of color that's much easier than trying to run county-wide where some of the outlying areas are predominantly white. Although, the black people who have run on the at-large ticket have been successful but again you can tell by the numbers unfortunately they don't always glean the most amount of votes.

Councilor Sanders's response hints at the presence of racially polarized voting in Indianapolis. Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments. When asked why black candidates had been unsuccessful in winning at-large seats, Councilman Isabel ascribed the outcome to polarization:

FIGURE 1 **Estimated Benefit of Districts Compared to At-Large Elections by Group Population Size, 1986–2001**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1990 & 2000; International City/County Manager's Association (ICMA) surveys of 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001.

I think whites have a reluctance to vote for African Americans. We're in the south, I think up north or back where you are out west, there may be some differences. But I think here in the south whites really haven't come to the reality that African Americans can represent them well.

Similarly, Councilor Burgess suggested that "subtle racism" kept African Americans from winning citywide elections. A number of our interviewees also insinuated that some groups formed more cohesive voting blocs than others. Councilor Rodriguez from Denver highlighted the benefits of districts for Latino candidates because of the strategy of "single-shot[ting]" where voters pool votes in a multicandidate, at-large race for a single candidate. She told us that the African American community used this approach successfully to elect representatives whereas

Latinos tended to divide their votes among a slate of candidates and so "every time a Hispanic candidate would run, they would be defeated." According to these council members, racially polarized voting continues to be a significant factor in city council elections, and different groups are affected in different ways by these types of vote patterns.

Conclusions

One final possibility in explaining the benefit of districts for female and minority council membership is the attraction of running in a district versus citywide election. Districts might aid racial and ethnic minorities because more traditionally underrepresented candidates choose to run in district races. If the organizing, fundraising,

and campaign costs are substantially different between districts and citywide races, this may well be a factor. Furthermore, it remains to be explained why some cities elect more women than others: it does not appear to make a substantial difference whether women run in district or at-large electoral systems. Nonetheless, we believe that we have taken a step forward in explaining the effect of electoral systems on underrepresented groups.

By taking advantage of the institutional variation across cities in the United States, we have gained a more nuanced understanding of the representation of women and racial and ethnic minorities. Single-member district systems can increase diversity only when underrepresented groups are highly concentrated and compose moderate portions of the population. These factors are most important in an arena where polarized voting predominates and where groups leverage their population size to achieve descriptive representation. In addition, the effect of the electoral system is not constant across all people of color, nor is it constant across both genders; race and gender interact to produce different results. Our findings demonstrate the need for caution when making declarations of the benefit or detriment of institutional settings; while the electoral rules certainly have an effect, the context in which they are employed is also crucial to gain a complete understanding.

References

- Alozie, Nicholas, and Lynne Manganaro. 1993. "Women's Council Representation: Measurement Implications for Public Policy." *Political Research Quarterly* 46(2): 383–98.
- Arrington, Theodore, and Thomas Gill Watts. 1991. "The Election of Blacks to School Boards in North Carolina." *The Western Political Science Quarterly* 44(4): 1099–1105.
- Barreto, Matt A. 2004. "The Role of Latino Candidates in Mobilizing Latino Voters: Revisiting Latino Vote Choice." Prepared for Latino Politics: The State of the Discipline. College Station: Texas A&M University.
- Bobo, Lawrence. 1988. "Group Conflict, Prejudice, and the Paradox of Contemporary Racial Attitudes." In *Eliminating Racism: Profiles in Controversy*, ed. Phyllis A. Katz and Dalmas A. Taylor. New York: Plenum Press, 85–116.
- Brace, Kimball, Bernard Grofman, Lisa Handley, and Richard Niemi. 1988. "Minority Voting Equality: The 65 Percent Rule in Theory and Practice." *Law and Policy* 10(1): 43–62.
- Bridges, Amy. 1997. *Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brockington, David, Todd Donovan, Shaun Bowler, and Robert Brischetto. 1998. "Minority Representation under Cumulative and Limited Voting." *The Journal of Politics* 60(4): 1108–25.
- Brown, Clyde. 1994. "Judgments about the Capabilities of City Councilors and Support for Female Representation on City Council." *Social Science Journal* 31(4): 355–73.
- Brown, Clyde, Neil Heighberger, and Peter Shocket. 1993. "Gender-Based Differences in Perceptions of Male and Female City Council Candidates." *Women & Politics* 13(1): 1–17.
- Bullock, Charles, and Susan MacManus. 1990. "Structural Features of Municipalities and the Incidence of Hispanic Councilmembers." *Social Science Quarterly* 71(4): 665–81.
- Bullock, Charles S., III, and Susan A. MacManus. 1991. "Municipal Electoral Structure and the Election of Councilwomen." *Journal of Politics* 53(1): 75–89.
- Bullock, Charles S., III, and Susan A. MacManus. 1993. "Testing Assumptions of the Totality-of-the-Circumstances Test: An Analysis of the Impact of Structures on Black Descriptive Representation." *American Politics Quarterly* 21(3): 290–306.
- Cole, Leonard. 1974. "Electing Blacks to Municipal Office: Structural and Social Determinants." *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 10(1): 17–39.
- Conover, Pamela. 1988. "The Role of Social Groups in Political Thinking." *British Journal of Political Science* 18(1): 51–96.
- Darcy, Robert, and Charles Hadley. 1988. "Black Women in Politics—The Puzzle of Success." *Social Science Quarterly* 69(3): 629–45.
- Darcy, Robert, Charles D. Hadley, and Jason F. Kirksey. 1993. "Election Systems and the Representation of Black Women in American State Legislatures." *Women and Politics* 13: 73–89.
- Darcy, Robert, and Sarah Schramm. 1977. "When Women Run Against Men." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41(1): 1–12.
- Darcy, Robert, Susan Welch, and Janet Clark. 1985. "Women Candidates in Single-Member and Multimember Districts: American State Legislative Races." *Social Science Quarterly* 66(4): 945–53.
- Davidson, Chandler, and Bernard Grofman, eds. 1994. *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965–1990*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Davidson, Chandler, and George Korbel. 1981. "At-Large Elections and Minority-Group Representation: A Re-examination of Historical and Contemporary Evidence." *The Journal of Politics* 43(4): 982–1005.
- DeSipio, Louis. 1996. *Counting on the Latino Vote: Latinos as a New Electorate*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Dolan, K. 2004. "The Impact of Candidate Sex on Evaluations of Candidates for the US House of Representatives." *Social Science Quarterly* 85(1): 206–17.
- Engstrom, Richard, and Michael McDonald. 1982. "The Underrepresentation of Blacks on City Councils: Comparing the Structural and Socioeconomic Explanations for South/Nonsouth Differences." *Journal of Politics* 44(4): 1088–99.
- Garcia Bedolla, Lisa, Katherine Tate, and Janelle Wong. 2005. "Indelible Effects: The Impact of Women of Color in the U.S. Congress." In *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, 2nd ed., ed. Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 152–75.
- Gay, Claudine, and Katherine Tate. 1998. "Double Bound: The Impact of Gender and Race on the Politics of Black Women." *Political Psychology* 19(1): 169–84.
- Githens, Marianne, and Jewell Prestage, eds. 1977. *A Portrait of Marginality: The Political Behavior of American Women*. New York: McKay.
- Grofman, Bernard, and Lisa Handley. 1989. "Black Representation: Making Sense of Electoral Geography at Different

- Levels of Government." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 14(2): 265–79.
- Guinier, Lani. 1992. "Voting Rights and Democratic Theory—Where Do We Go From Here?" In *Controversies in Minority Voting: The Voting Rights Act in Perspective*, ed. B. Grofman and C. Davidson. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 283–91.
- Gurin, Patricia. 1985. "Women's Gender Consciousness." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49(2): 143–63.
- Hajnal, Zoltan, and Jessica Trounstein. 2005. "Where Turnout Matters: The Consequences of Uneven Turnout in City Politics." *Journal of Politics* 67(2): 515–35.
- Heilig, Peggy, and Robert Mundt. 1983. "Changes in Representational Equity: The Effect of Adopting Districts." *Social Science Quarterly* 64(2): 393–97.
- Herrick, Rebekah, and Susan Welch. 1992. "The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Black and White Women." *National Political Science Review* 3: 62–77.
- Huddy, Leonie, and Nayda Terkildsen. 1993. "The Consequences of Gender Stereotypes for Women Candidates at Different Levels and Types of Office." *Political Research Quarterly* 46(3): 503–25.
- Hutchings, Vincent, and Nicholas Valentino. 2005. "The Centrality of Race in American Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 7: 383–408.
- Jones-Correa, Michael. 1998. *Between Two Nations: The Political Predicament of Latinos in New York City*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Karnig, Albert. 1979. "Black Resources and City Council Representation." *Journal of Politics* 41(1): 134–49.
- Karnig, Albert, and Susan Welch. 1979. "Sex and the Ethnic Differences in Municipal Representation." *Social Science Quarterly* 60(3): 465–81.
- Karnig, Albert, and Susan Welch. 1982. "Electoral Structure and Black Representation on City Councils." *Social Science Quarterly* 63(1): 99–114.
- Karnig, Albert K., and Oliver Walter. 1976. "Election of Women to City Councils." *Social Science Quarterly* 56(4): 605–13.
- Kaufmann, Karen. 1994. *The Urban Vote: Group Conflict and Mayoral Voting Behavior in American Cities*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Koch, J. 2000. "Do Citizens Apply Gender Stereotypes to Infer Candidates' Ideological Orientations?" *Journal of Politics* 62(2): 414–29.
- Leal, David, Valerie Martinez-Ebers, and Kenneth J. Meier. 2004. "The Politics of Latino Education: The Biases of At-Large Elections." *Journal of Politics* 66(4): 1224–44.
- Lien, Pei-Te. 1998. "Does the Gender Gap in Political Attitudes and Behavior Vary across Racial Groups?" *Political Research Quarterly* 51(4): 869–94.
- Massey, Douglas S., and Nancy Denton. 1988. "The Dimensions of Residential Concentration." *Social Forces* 67(2): 281–315.
- Matland, Richard, and Donley Studlar. 1996. "The Contagion of Women Candidates in Single-Member District and Proportional Representation Electoral Systems: Canada and Norway." *Journal of Politics* 58(3): 707–33.
- Matland, Richard E. 1995. "How the Electoral System Structure Has Helped Women Close the Representation Gap." In *Closing the Gap, Women in Nordic Politics*, ed. Lauri Karvonen and Per Selle. London: Dartmouth, 281–312.
- Matland, Richard E., and Deborah Dwight Brown. 1992. "District Magnitude's Effect on Female Representation in U.S. State Legislatures." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17(4): 469–92.
- McClain, Paula, Niambi Carter, and Michael Brady. 2005. "Gender and Black Presidential Politics: From Chisholm to Moseley Braun." *Journal of Women Politics & Policy* 27(1–2): 51–68.
- McDermott, M. 1997. "Voting Cues in Low-Information Elections: Candidate Gender as a Social Information Variable in Contemporary United States Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 41(1): 270–83.
- Mladenka, Kenneth R. 1989. Barriers to Hispanic Employment Success in 1200 Cities. *Social Science Quarterly* 70(2): 391–407.
- Montoya, Lisa J., Carol Hardy-Fanta, and Sonia Garcia. 2000. "Latina Politics: Gender, Participation, and Leadership." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33(3): 555–61.
- Mundt, Robert, and Peggy Heilig. 1982. "District Representation: Demands and Effects in the Urban South." *Journal of Politics* 44(4): 1035–48.
- Norrander, Barbara. 2003. "The Intraparty Gender Gap: Differences between Male and Female Voters in 1980–2000 Presidential Primaries." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36(2): 181–86.
- Norris, Pippa. 1985. *Politics and Sexual Equality*. Boulder, CO: Reinner.
- Pachon, Harry. 1999. "California Latino Politics and the 1996 Elections: From Potential to Reality." In *Awash in the Mainstream*, ed. Rodolfo O. de la Garza and Louis DeSipio. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 167–90.
- Philpot, Tasha, and Hanes Walton, Jr. 2007. "One of Our Own: Black Female Candidates and the Voters Who Support Them." *American Journal of Political Science* 51(1): 49–62.
- Polinard, Jerry, Robert Wrinkle, and Tomas Longoria. 1991. "The Impact of District Elections on the Mexican American Community: The Electoral Perspective." *Social Science Quarterly* 72(3): 608–14.
- Popkin, Samuel. 1991. *The Reasoning Voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rice, Bradley Robert. 1977. *Progressive Cities*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Rule, Wilma. 1992. "Multimember Legislative Districts: Minority and Anglo Women's and Men's Recruitment Opportunity." In *United States Electoral Systems: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*, ed. Wilma Rule and Joseph F. Zimmerman. New York: Greenwood Press, 57–72.
- Rule, Wilma. 1994. "Parliaments of, by, and for the People: Except for Women?" In *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*, ed. Wilma Rule and Joseph F. Zimmerman. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 15–30.
- Sanbonmatsu, Kira. 2002. "Gender Stereotypes and Vote Choice." *American Journal of Political Science* 46(1): 20–34.
- Sass, Tim R. 2000. "The Determinants of Hispanic Representation in Municipal Government." *Southern Economic Journal* 66(3): 609–30.

- Schwindt-Bayer, Leslie A., and William Mishler. 2005. "An Integrated Model of Women's Representation." *Journal of Politics* 67(May): 407–28.
- Taebel, Delbert. 1978. "Minority Representation on City Councils: Impact of Structure on Blacks and Hispanics." *Social Science Quarterly* 59(1): 142–52.
- Tam, Wendy K. 1995. "Asians—A Monolithic Voting Bloc?" *Political Behavior* 17: 223–49.
- Tate, Katherine. 2003. *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in the U.S. Congress*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Thornburg v. Gingles, 478 US 30 (1986).
- Valdini, Melody Ellis. 2006. "Electoral Institutions and Information Shortcuts: The Effect of Decisive Intraparty Competition on the Behavior of Voters and Party Elites." PhD dissertation. University of California, San Diego.
- Vedlitz, Arnold, and Charles Johnson. 1982. "Community Racial Concentration, Electoral Structure, and Minority Representation." *Social Science Quarterly* 63(4): 729–36.
- Welch, Susan. 1990. The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Blacks and Hispanics. *Journal of Politics* 52: 1050–76.
- Welch, Susan, and Albert Karnig. 1979. "Correlates of Female Office Holding in City Politics." *Journal of Politics* 41(2): 478–91.
- Welch, Susan, and Lee Sigelman. 1992. "A Gender Gap among Hispanics? A Comparison with Blacks and Anglos." *The Western Political Quarterly* 45(1): 181–99.
- Welch, Susan, and Donley Studlar. 1990. "Multimember Districts and the Representation of Women: Evidence from Britain and the United States." *Journal of Politics* 52(2): 391–412.

NOTICE
This material may be
protected by copyright
law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

PERSONAL COPY
INSTR: Tabarrok
CREF #: 091447
COPY #:
COURSE: Hours 390

From: Electoral Laws and their Political Consequences

ed's Bernard Grotman
r Arend Lijphart
Agathon Press
NY © 1986

CHAPTER 13

The Effect of At-Large Versus District Elections on Racial Representation in U.S. Municipalities

Richard L. Engstrom and Michael D. McDonald

Whether the members of a city council should be selected through at-large, citywide elections or through geographically designated (usually single-member) districts within a city has been a major election law issue in the United States for many years. Election at large has been one of the central planks in the platform of the American municipal "reform" movement. The first model city charter issued by the National Municipal League in 1899 recommended that this electoral system be adopted in place of the single-member district or ward system used at that time; this recommendation has been retained in all subsequent editions of the model charter. At-large elections, these reformers argued, would attract a "better class" of council members and improve the quality of councilmanic decisions. Successful candidates within this system would have to appeal to more than a particular neighborhood or ethnic group, and therefore were more likely to be people of education and accomplishment (or expressed differently, wealth and social standing). These "better-qualified" councilmanic representatives were in turn expected to make decisions on the basis of what they perceived to be good for the entire city, not just one geographic or social segment of it. This combination of council members with better judgment and a citywide decisional referent,

203

Engstrom, R.L and M.D. McDonald. "The effect of at-large versus district elections on racial representation in the US municipalities," Electoral Laws and Their Political Consequences, Ed. B. Grotman and A. Lijphart. New York: Agathon Press, 1986. 203-25
ISBN: 0875860648 TEO14012505.pdf

these reformers maintained, would improve dramatically the quality of municipal government (see, e.g., Judd, 1979, pp. 87-100).

The municipal reformers were remarkably successful in that their recommended electoral system was widely adopted (often in combination with a nonpartisan ballot). A survey conducted in the early 1970s of cities with populations exceeding 10,000 discovered that in over three fourths of these cities (78.2%) at least some members of the city council were elected at large; in 63.3%, the *entire* council was elected at large (Svara, 1977, p. 168). A more recent survey of the largest central cities within each standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA) has disclosed that in 83.6% of the cities, some of the members of the council are elected at large, and in 47.0% *all* of the members are elected at large.¹ The municipal reform campaign was so successful, in fact, that for many commentators at-large elections, in combination with the nonpartisan ballot and city manager plan, became virtually synonymous with the idea of "good government" itself.

This association with good government has not been accepted by everyone, however. In recent years what might be called "a new wave of reformers" (Grofman, 1982a, p. 124) has been active, attempting to undo much of what the earlier reformers had accomplished. This second generation of reformers, unlike the first, is predominately black, and its activity has been concentrated largely within the American South.

The "new reformers" argue that cities should elect council members from districts within the city because this electoral system is much "fairer" than are at-large elections—a city council elected in this fashion is likely to be more "representative" of the municipal population. Specifically, black opponents of at-large elections complain that city-wide elections are discriminatory toward the racial minorities residing within America's cities. Given the racially polarized voting patterns often found in American cities, the black minority has enormous difficulty electing the candidates of its choice, especially black candidates. The white majority, it is argued, effectively controls access to all of the at-large seats on the council, an especially serious matter when the entire council is elected in that manner. White council members electorally accountable to a white majority, they complain, are not likely to be very responsive to the needs of the black minority. If the city is divided into districts, however, the black minority can often take advantage of being residentially concentrated and control the selection of one or more council members, who will be more directly accountable to, and presumably responsive toward, the black electorate.

This new wave of reform has been especially pronounced in the American South, a region in which the municipal reformers had been especially successful (see, e.g., Wolfinger and Field, 1966; Dye and MacManus, 1976). The 1972 survey just noted disclosed that over eight in ten (81.7%) of the cities with a population above 10,000 and located within the southern and border states elected at least some of the council members at large; almost three fourths (74.6%) elected all members of the council at large (Svara, 1977, p. 171). The more recent survey of central cities likewise found that 89.3% of the cities in the South (defined as the 11 states of the Confederacy) elected at least some council members at large, while 59.2% elected all of them at large. The South was the region of the country with the highest proportion of cities utilizing at-large councilmanic elections in the later survey.²

The South is also the region in which blacks have been the most severely underrepresented on city councils. The percentage of a city's council members who are black is usually less than the percentage of a city's population which is black. Numerous studies have documented the fact that this is especially true of cities in the South (see, e.g., Jones, 1976; Karnig, 1976; Taebel, 1978; Karnig and Welch, 1980, chap. 4; Engstrom and McDonald, 1982; and Heilig and Mundt, 1983). Much of this underrepresentation, the new reformers maintain, is attributable to the extensive use of at-large elections within the region. Indeed, at-large elections have been at the center of the *vote dilution* controversy in the South.

Since passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the barriers to black people registering to vote and actually casting ballots have been largely removed throughout the American South, and as a consequence black registration and electoral participation have increased significantly (see, e.g., Engstrom, forthcoming). Despite these gains, however, the issue of racially discriminatory electoral laws continues to be an important legal and political issue within that region. The nature of that issue has changed, however; as the black electorate has grown, the previous preoccupation with denial of the vote has shifted to a more contemporary concern, dilution of the vote. Blacks have become acutely aware of the fact that when voting patterns are polarized along racial lines, the actual impact of the votes they cast may well be dependent upon the way in which electoral competition is structured. Placing electoral decisions in the hands of a white citywide majority is commonly cited as one of the major techniques for reducing the potential impact of the black vote. Blacks in the South, there-

fore, have launched an aggressive campaign against the continued use of at-large elections, seeking through referendum and/or litigation the substitution of single-member districts.³

A survey conducted by Peggy Heilig and Robert Mundt in 1980-1981 of cities with populations exceeding 10,000 and in which at least 15% of the population was black in 1970 has documented the southern focus to this latest "reform" activity. Their survey disclosed that 93% of the cities in which attempts were made to switch from at-large to single-member districts during the 1970s were located in the South. Such efforts, which were almost invariably initiated by black groups, occurred in 55% of the southern cities which in 1970 used at-large elections to select council members (Heilig and Mundt, 1983, p. 394; see also Claunch and Hallman, 1978). Efforts to switch to districts were especially likely to have occurred, not surprisingly, in the southern cities in which blacks were the most severely underrepresented on the council (Mundt and Heilig, 1982, pp. 1042-1043). These more recent "reform" efforts have not been without success, as 33% of the southern cities employing at-large elections in 1970 were found to have switched to geographic districting by 1980.⁴

This new reform movement, as just noted, is premised upon two important propositions: (1) that the black minority will be better able to convert its voting strength into the selection of black representatives if elections are conducted within districts rather than at large, and (2) that councilmanic decisions (and municipal policies generally) will become more responsive to the needs and interests of the black community as the percentage of black council members increases. Considerable empirical research has addressed the first proposition, and efforts to verify the second have been reported recently. The following section reviews and evaluates the evidence for these propositions.

Election Systems and Descriptive Representation

Numerous studies have addressed the issue of whether blacks are more likely to be elected to city councils if districts rather than at-large elections are used. The central concept in virtually all of these studies has been what Hanna Pitkin has called "descriptive representation," the correspondence between the black percentage of a city's population and the percentage of seats on that city's council to which black people have been elected (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 60-91). The focus of inquiry has been to account for why blacks are more or less proportionately represented across city councils.

Despite the tremendous variation of sampling criteria employed in these studies (e.g., cities with different size populations and having various proportions of black residents) and the variety of analytic designs applied, there is an overwhelming consensus among the researchers that when blacks are a citywide minority, their presence on the city council is likely to be less proportionate when elections are held at large rather than through districts (see, e.g., the review of these studies by Grofman, 1982b). Black candidates, these studies suggest, are simply much less likely to be elected if forced to compete citywide. Indeed, few generalizations in political science appear to be as well verified as the proposition that at-large elections tend to be discriminatory toward black Americans.

There is not, however, unanimity among researchers on this issue. A dissenting view has been put forward which maintains that the electoral framework through which city council members are selected is actually little more than a relatively unimportant intervening variable—a structural dimension which happens to intervene between more explanatory socioeconomic factors and the level of black representation. The degree to which blacks are elected is far better accounted for, according to this view, by the socioeconomic characteristics of a city's population than by the city's electoral structure. We will focus on those studies which we believe offer the most persuasive evidence of the discriminatory impact of the at-large format, studies utilizing both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, and also on those studies which have formed the basis for the dissenting viewpoint.

Described by Grofman as "the best of the cross-sectional studies" (Grofman, 1982b, p. 7), Engstrom and McDonald (1981) treat the electoral format as a specifying variable which affects the rate at which blacks are able to convert their voting strength into the election of black council members. The major independent variable, the variable expected to have the greatest effect on the black percentage of council members, is the percentage of the population which is black (in only a few cities is the race of registered voters recorded). The study attempts, by regressing the black council percentage onto the black population percentage, to assess how the relationship between these two variables will differ, depending on the electoral structure being employed. The results of this analysis, based on a 1976 survey of the largest central city within each SMSA ($N=239$), are displayed in Figure 13.1.⁵

In cities in which all of the members of the council are elected from districts, the relationship between the black population and the black membership on the council is virtually proportional. Although excep-

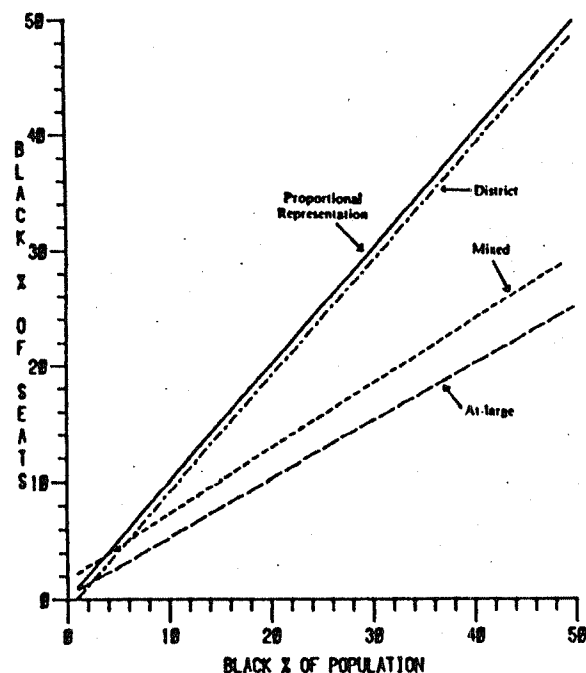


FIG. 13.1. Relationship between black percentage of population and black percentage of city council in different electoral formats. (From Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, p. 348.)

tions can always be cited, as a general matter blacks can be expected to be almost proportionally represented if districts are the exclusive medium through which council members are selected. If at-large elections are used, however, blacks can be expected to be underrepresented. The correspondence between the population percentages and council percentages drops dramatically if some councilmanic seats are filled through citywide contests (the mixed category), and even further if all of the council members are elected in that manner. The electoral format, according to this analysis, has a major impact on how black electoral strength translates into black elected officials.

It is further estimated in this study that this differential impact will be present even when the black percentage of the population in a city is quite small. In Figure 13.2, 90% confidence bands have been added to the regression lines for cities employing either districts or at-large elections exclusively (i.e., we can be 90% confident that the actual

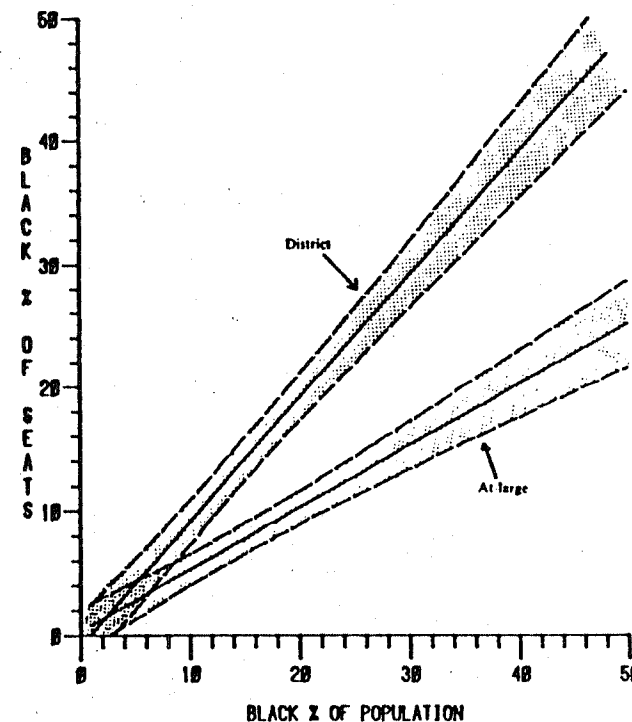


FIG. 13.2. Estimated seats/population relationships with 90% confidence bands in districted and at-large electoral formats. (From Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, p. 349.)

seats/population relationship lies within the band). Because these bands separate completely at a point below 10% black population, the authors argue that the 10% figure can be (conservatively) considered to be a threshold or critical point—whenever blacks constitute 10% or more of the population, at-large elections are likely to have an adverse impact on how proportionately they are represented. The differential impact of election structures was not affected in this study when statistical controls were applied for a variety of socioeconomic factors which other researchers have suggested might relate to the election of blacks (such as the educational, occupational, and income characteristics of the cities' populations).

Another cross-sectional study which complements the Engstrom-McDonald analysis very well is that by Albert Karnig and Susan Welch (1982). This study, based on a 1978 survey of all cities with

TABLE 13.1. Representational Indices for Mixed Cities by Electoral Format

	Representational Ratio	Representational Deficit	Percent of Cities Without Any Black Council Member
A. Districts + At-large (N=50)			
District seats	.952	-2.4	14.0
At-large seats	.499	-11.6	72.0
B. Districts + At-large with Residency Requirement (N=6)			
District seats	1.047	+1.4	12.0
At-large seats	.478	-12.0	50.0

Source. Karnig and Welch (1982, p. 105).

populations greater than 25,000 in 1970 and in which black people constituted at least 10% of the population (N=264), focuses special attention on the representational situation in cities employing mixed electoral arrangements. This approach was adopted because in those cities, differences in how proportionately blacks have been elected to the at-large seats and how proportionately they have been elected to the seats allocated to districts can be attributed directly to the different electoral contexts. Other variables which may be expected to have an impact on the election of black council members are "naturally controlled" in this approach.

When comparing two election forms within the same city, socioeconomic, demographic, political context, and other variables are controlled, since aggregate indicators of income, education, percent blacks, region, partisanship, form of government, and so on, are precisely the same for both the at-large and the district parts of the election in the same municipality (Karnig and Welch, 1982, pp. 103-104).

In this analysis, the dependent variables are two measures of the deviation from proportional racial representation in each city. One measure, the representational ratio, is simply the quotient obtained when the black population percentage is divided into the percentage of council members who are black. This ratio is, of course, zero when no blacks serve on the council and 1.0 if the two percentage figures are equal. If the percentage of black council members is higher than the population percentage, then the ratio will exceed 1.0. The other measure, the representational deficit, is the result obtained when the popu-

TABLE 13.2. Representational Indices for Single Format Cities by Electoral Format

	Representational Ratio	Representational Deficit	Percent of Cities Without Any Black Council Member
District Elections	.922	-1.3	10.0
At-large Elections	.616	-9.6	44.0
At-large Elections with Residency Requirements	.443	-14.0	45.0

Source. Karnig and Welch (1982, p. 107).

measure, a score of zero reflects perfect proportionality, and scores above or below zero register the relative degree of over- or underrepresentation respectively.⁶ Different electoral arrangements are then treated as independent variables affecting the scores for various cities on these measures.

Reported in Table 13.1 are the average scores within the districted and at-large components across cities in which both of these electoral mechanisms were used to select council members. In 50 of the cities, a combination of districts and "pure" at-large elections (i.e., candidates residing in any area of the city may compete for any at-large seat) were used. In 6 others, a residency requirement was attached to the at-large component (i.e., only candidates residing in specified areas of the city were permitted to compete for certain at-large seats). It is disclosed in Table 13.1 that blacks come very close to winning a proportional number of district-based seats in these cities, while winning a disproportionately low number of the at-large seats (including those in which council members are required to live in dispersed areas throughout the city). One reason why the representational indexes reflect such a greater deviation from proportional representation within the at-large components is apparent in the third column of the table; blacks are often excluded completely from election to the at-large seats, while winning at least one of the districted seats in almost every city.

Although the evidence from the cities with mixed electoral systems is quite impressive, Karnig and Welch find additional evidence for the differential impact thesis in their analysis of those cities using only one electoral format as well. Reported in Table 13.2 are the representational indexes for those cities in which only district elections are used to select council members, those in which only "pure" at-large elec-

residency requirements. Once again, blacks are close to being proportionally represented when districts are employed but are considerably "underrepresented," and often excluded completely, when elections are held at large. These differences between electoral systems remained when statistical controls for a number of demographic and other variables were applied.

Most of the evidence which has been marshaled in support of the argument that at-large elections have a racially discriminatory impact has been cross-sectional in nature (see also Kramer, 1971; Jones, 1976; Karnig, 1976; Taebel, 1978; Robinson and Dye, 1978; Latimer, 1979; and Engstrom and McDonald, 1982). As noted, however, the recent movement to force the abandonment of at-large elections in favor of districted arrangements has not been without success. Heilig and Mundt (1983; p. 394), for example, discovered that among the southern cities in their sample which were electing council members at large in 1970, one third had switched to either a mixed or districted system by 1980. This has created an opportunity to approach the differential impact question using longitudinal rather than cross-sectional data, that is, examining the level of black representation within a city both *before* and *after* the adoption of a different electoral arrangement.

Two studies have brought longitudinal data to bear on this question. The first to be reported was that by Chandler Davidson and George Korb (1981). They report scores for both the representational ratio and the representational deficit for blacks and Mexican-Americans (combined) for all 21 municipalities in Texas which switched from elections at large to either a mixed or districted arrangement between 1970 and 1979. The differences between the before and after scores in these cities were dramatic—the average ratio was .28 prior to the systemic alteration and .86 after, while the average deficit was -18.7 before the change and only -3.3 after. While this is impressive evidence of the impact of these structural revisions, the absence of any "control" group of cities in this analysis (cities in which electoral arrangements were not altered) does leave open the possibility that these increases in minority representation are a result of some other factor or factors. Without a control group,

[I]t is difficult to be sure that increased equity in minority representation is occurring *because* of change of election system—especially in a period where some minority groups (in particular, Blacks in the South) have been making extensive electoral gains based on increased voter registration and

TABLE 13.3. Representation Ratios for Southern Cities, 1970s and 1980

	Representation Ratio		
	1970s	1980	Difference
At-large (N=122)	.31	.37	+ .06
Mixed (N=10)	.44	.57	+ .13
Districts (N=13)	.45	.74	+ .29
Changed from At-large to Mixed (N=19)	.16	.70	+ .54
Changed from At-large to Districts (N=25)	.15	.87	+ .72

Source: Heilig and Mundt (1983, p. 396).

the easing of traditional barriers such as intimidation (Grofman 1982b, pp. 5-6).

This problem is at least partially overcome in the second analysis employing longitudinal data. Heilig and Mundt (1983) have examined the representation ratios over time for blacks in 209 southern cities (i.e., cities located in the former Confederacy) in which there are more than 10,000 residents, at least 15% of which are black. Heilig and Mundt employ a "natural" experimental design (see, e.g., Shively, 1980, pp. 92-93)—differences in representational ratios over time are compared across groups of cities, some of which have altered their electoral arrangements and some of which have not. In their analysis, those cities which used only at-large, mixed, or districted systems during the period 1970-1980 serve as "control" groups, while those in which a systemic change from an at-large to a mixed or districted arrangement occurred sometime during the 1970s serve as "treatment" groups. The average representation ratio for these groups in 1980 is compared to the average ratio throughout the 1970s for the control groups, and the average ratio in the 1970s prior to the systemic adjustments for the treatment groups.

The results of the Heilig and Mundt analysis, which are presented in Table 13.3, strongly support the differential impact thesis. Changes in the representational ratios were much greater in the treatment groups than in the control groups. The average ratio in 1980 for the 25 cities switching to districts exclusively was .72 higher than the average ratio for those cities prior to the adoption of districts. For the 19 cities adopting a mixed plan, the average ratio increased .54. Among the

control groups, the average ratio increased substantially within only one group, that in which districts had been employed over the entire period. This increase (.29), however, was still well below that for either of the groups of cities in which there had been a change. In the other two groups the ratio changed only minimally, + .06 for cities employing only at-large elections over the entire period and + .13 for those using a mixed arrangement.

Although this analysis does employ "control" groups against which before and after scores can be compared, it does not solve completely the inferential problem just noted. Alternative explanations for the increased minority representation in the treatment groups, beside that of the alteration in the electoral systems, are still possible because cities, although "matched" by region (i.e., all are located in the South), have not been placed into the treatment and control groups randomly (a situation which is characteristic of the "natural experiment"). This leaves open the possibility that another factor or factors may be responsible for both the change in the electoral system and the increase in the number of blacks elected to the councils. One such factor, for example, might be a high degree of political mobilization or organization within the black community. As Grofman has noted,

[C]ities which change from at-large to ward elections are *ipso facto* more likely to be characterized by a minority political organization of some strength which will be likely to generate greater minority representation under *any* electoral system . . . (Grofman, 1982b, p. 6).

The fact that the representation ratios for the treatment groups in this analysis during the period in which at-large elections were employed were substantially below those for the at-large control group during the 1970s (.15 and .16 vs. .31) and that the ratios for 1980 were substantially above those for the respective control groups in 1980 (.57 vs. .70 for those with mixed systems, and .74 vs. .87 for those with districts only) suggests that another factor or factors may also be at work. While alternative explanations for these "experimental" results therefore cannot be precluded, the Heilig and Mundt analysis does provide impressive empirical support for the differential impact thesis.

The longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses just described provide, we believe, a solid basis from which to generalize about the racial consequences of alternative electoral structures. As just noted, however, there has not been unanimity among researchers on this

electoral frameworks have only minimal, if any, impact on the election of blacks to municipal councils.

The most extensive analysis in which electoral structures have been reported to be relatively unimportant was conducted by MacManus (1978). Utilizing data gathered in 1975 on 243 central cities of SMSAs, MacManus discovered that differences in the local electoral structures across those cities had virtually no impact on how proportionately blacks were represented within them. Various demographic characteristics of these cities, however, such as population size and growth, median family income, median school years completed, and the proportion of workers employed in white-collar occupations, were related to the representation levels. This leads MacManus to suggest that these environmental factors were the more important determinants of the rate at which blacks were elected, while the councilmanic election system was "only an intervening variable" (MacManus, 1978, p. 159) which itself had very little effect on whether or not blacks were elected.

The analysis conducted by MacManus, however, does not provide an adequate basis for abandoning the differential impact notion. The basic problem with the study concerns the use of the representational deficit (the percentage of council members who are black *minus* the black percentage of the city's population) as the measure of descriptive representation without also requiring that the cities included in the study contain at least some minimal number or percentage of black residents (a threshold commonly set at 10% or 15%). In cities in which there are proportionately very few black residents, no more than a minimal level of underrepresentation can be recorded on this measure, even if the municipal council is composed exclusively of white members. One can hardly expect any electoral system to have a racially discriminatory impact in these virtually all-white cities.

Sixty of the cities in the MacManus analysis in which no black was serving on the council also had black population proportions of *less than 5%*. In over half of these cities, councilmanic elections were conducted *at large*.⁷ It should not be surprising, then, to discover that the electoral system variable has little impact on the scores recorded by the deficit measure—blacks can hardly be seriously disadvantaged by the use of at-large elections in places such as Fargo, North Dakota; Provo, Utah; Dubuque, Iowa; and Sioux Falls, South Dakota! Nor should it be surprising, given the absence of any minimal black population threshold, that MacManus ultimately concluded that blacks are most likely to be equitably represented in "small [central] cities. char-

lations . . . regardless of the plan of electing council members" (MacManus, 1978, p. 160). These are precisely the types of cities most likely to have minimal percentages of blacks in their populations and therefore cities in which blacks cannot be seriously underrepresented, by definition (given the deficit measure). There is a strong negative relationship between the percentage of blacks in the populations of cities and the representation scores recorded on the deficit measure, and when statistical controls are imposed for these black population percentages, the relationships between the environmental variables MacManus focused upon and black representation levels virtually disappear (see Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, pp. 350-351). The MacManus analysis, therefore, does not provide a very solid foundation upon which to challenge the differential impact thesis.

A second study which also questions the differential impact notion is a much more limited analysis by Cole (1974). Examining the 16 cities in New Jersey with a population of 25,000 or more, at least 15% of which were black, Cole discovered that it was not possible to distinguish, on the basis of their electoral systems, between those cities in which blacks were close to being proportionally represented (in 1972, based on the deficit measure) and those in which they were not. Cole (1974, pp. 23-28) concluded, therefore, that the differential impact thesis had been exaggerated and, like MacManus, suggested that the socioeconomic characteristics of a city's residents were much more important determinants of black electoral success. Blacks were more likely to be equitably represented, he reported, in those cities in which the municipal population had the highest levels of formal education, largest proportions of residents employed in relatively prestigious occupations, and the highest median annual incomes.

Although the analysis performed by Cole does not suffer from the methodological problems present in the analysis by MacManus, the data base is clearly too limited to provide a basis for generalization (see, e.g., Karnig, 1976, p. 224). Given that other, more extensive cross-sectional studies have controlled for these and similar environmental variables without equivalent results (e.g., Engstrom and McDonald, 1981; Karnig and Welch, 1982; Robinson and Dye, 1978; and Latimer, 1979), it hardly seems appropriate to abandon the differential impact thesis on the basis of Cole's limited analysis.

There is substantial evidence for the first proposition upon which the campaign against at-large elections is premised—that the black minority will be better able to convert its voting strength into the selection of black representatives if councilmanic elections are held

within districts rather than citywide. This appears to be especially true for cities within the South, the region in which this campaign is most intense. Southern cities tend to have the most racially segregated residential patterns, and therefore the blacks in these cities are likely to benefit the most from the adoption of geographic districting (see, e.g., Van Valey et al., 1977; Vedlitz and Johnson, 1982; and O'Loughlin and Taylor, 1982).

The impact of this campaign on the racial composition of municipal councils in that region has already been impressive. The data reported by Heilig and Mundt (1983, p. 396) demonstrate that the dramatic increase over the past decade in the number of black people serving on city councils in the South can be attributed almost entirely to the adoption of district elections. The regional differences (South vs. non-South) in how proportionately blacks are represented were, by 1980, only slight in those cities employing districted or mixed electoral arrangements, yet still substantial in those employing only at-large elections. Heilig and Mundt have concluded, therefore, that the continued adoption of district elections "is the key to increasing black representation in the South" (Heilig and Mundt, 1983, p. 396). Indeed, it has been estimated that if the distribution of electoral systems across southern cities were the same as that across cities outside the South, not only would the relative underrepresentation of southern black people disappear, but blacks within that region will be likely to be more proportionately represented on city councils than black people outside the South (Engstrom and McDonald, 1982).

Black Representation and Responsiveness

While electing black people to city councils is a major goal of the new reform movement, that in itself is of course "only half the battle [and] perhaps the lesser half at that" (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 150). Black demands to employ district-based elections are premised on the expectation that the election of black council members will result in a difference in the way in which a municipal government responds to the needs and interests of its minority citizens. As expressed by Eisinger,

A central assumption in the practice of ethnic [or racial] politics is that a particular group will be in a more powerful position to have its demands met if it has a coethnic in a position of authority than if it must supplicate an officialdom controlled by other groups (Eisinger, 1982, p. 388; see also Bullock, 1975, p. 727; and Keech, 1968, pp. 57-58).

The presence of blacks on city councils, therefore, is expected to result in more than "symbolic representation"; it is expected to translate into "substantive representation" as well (see, e.g., Preston, 1978).

The second proposition upon which this more recent reform movement is based, however—that councilmanic decisions (and municipal policies generally) will become more responsive to the needs and interests of the black community as the percentage of council members who are black increases—has not been documented anywhere near as impressively as the initial proposition linking different electoral systems to black electoral success. While there is impressionistic evidence suggesting that black elected officials do make the expected difference (see esp. Cole, 1976, pp. 221–223), only a few efforts at systematic empirical verification of this second proposition have as yet been attempted. Although these initial attempts at verification have been limited (and must be considered far from conclusive), they do suggest that it would be wise, at least at this time, to heed Marguerite Barnett's warning against any naive acceptance of "the *careless equation* of black political presence with black political power" (Barnett, 1982, p. 28; emphasis added; see also Walton, 1972, pp. 196–202).

Measuring the influence of black elected officials in the policy-making process, especially across a large number of municipalities, is admittedly an investigative task "fraught with methodological and conceptual difficulties" (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 115). One of the initial, and most serious, conceptual problems researchers working in this area must confront is the specification of the types of impact that black council members can be expected to have on municipal policies and programs. Mack Jones has provided a useful approach to this problem by identifying three conceptually distinct areas in which the impact of black elected officials may be evaluated. According to Jones,

[T]he political power of black officeholders may be assessed in terms of: (1) their success in *reordering the priorities* of their boards and commissions and persuading them to seek novel solutions to outstanding problems, particularly those especially salient in black communities; (2) garnering for the black community a *more equitable distribution of existing benefits and services* provided by government; (3) *thwarting the passage of measures inimical* to the welfare of their constituents (1978, pp. 98–99, emphasis added).

The efforts to verify the increased responsiveness thesis have to date examined the first and second of Jones's dimensions; the third has yet to be the subject of systematic, comparative inquiry.

the reordering of public priorities. This was the focus of the first broadly based comparative study to attempt to link different levels of black councilmanic representation to changes in municipal policies. Albert Karnig and Susan Welch (1980) attempted to determine whether the changes in the amount of money spent for different categories of municipal functions (both per capita and as a proportion of the total budget) could be attributable to the level of black representation on municipal councils. They had hypothesized that as the black percentage on a council increased, there would be *greater increases* in spending on social welfare functions (health, housing, welfare, and education) and *smaller increases* in spending for protective services (fire and police), physical facilities (streets, sanitation, sewage, and hospitals), and amenities (parks and libraries). When they related the percentage of council members who were black (the average percentage for 1970 and 1972) in 139 cities (each greater than 50,000 in population) to the changes in the municipal expenditures in these categories between 1968 and 1969 and 1974 and 1975, however, they discovered that the level of black representation had minimal, if any, impact on any of the policy areas, including the social services category (Karnig and Welch, 1980, pp. 124–141).^a

Karnig's and Welch's results surely will not bring comfort to those who assume (or hope) that a linkage exists between the presence of blacks on municipal councils and the policies and programs of municipalities. But these results must be considered, at best, as only suggestive. It would be premature to dismiss the increased responsiveness thesis on the basis of this analysis alone. While the findings certainly are not supportive of that thesis, neither are they, by themselves, a sufficient basis for rejecting it.

Karnig and Welch have relied upon changes in the amount of money spent in various functional areas as an indicator of changes in "responsiveness." The relationship between these budgetary categories and the actual needs and/or demands of minority residents, however, is far from clear, and, as Karnig and Welch (1980, p. 117) acknowledge, may vary from municipality to municipality. Eisinger has argued that "assigning special racial interests to broad functional expenditure categories is an exercise fraught with ambiguity," one which requires the researcher to make "questionable assumptions" (Eisinger, 1982, p. 382)—such as assuming that blacks will place a relatively low priority on spending for protective services, despite the fact that they are disproportionately the victims of both crimes and fires. Even if such racial assignments could be made, the problem of assuming a

Schumaker and Getter have commented in this regard that "[T]here is no single, a priori distribution of policy which can be considered responsive" (Schumaker and Getter, 1977, p. 249; see also Getter and Schumaker, 1978). Ideally, a study assessing changes in responsiveness should have an independent measure or measures of minority needs and/or demands so that responsiveness could be inferred from a relationship between variables, rather than defined through the researcher's own selection of a dependent variable or variables.

Another problem with the use of aggregate expenditure levels as a medium for assessing the impact of black council members is that the level at which budgetary categories are funded is something over which council members may have minimal control, especially in the short run. As expressed by Thomas Dye and James Renick, "Much of a city's budget is composed of 'uncontrollables'—items over which neither black nor white . . . council members have much authority" (Dye and Renick, 1981, p. 475). To expect dramatic changes in the levels at which existing programs and services are funded is to impose, therefore, a very stringent test on the increased responsiveness thesis. A more important problem with the use of aggregate expenditure figures, however, is that the level at which programs and services are funded may not be a good indicator of who is actually benefiting from the expenditures. Money spent in functional areas assumed to be important to blacks may or may not be spent in a fashion directly benefiting the black community. This relates, of course, to the second dimension of possible impact identified by Jones—"garnering for the black community a more equitable distribution of existing benefits and services" (Jones, 1978, p. 98). This, in fact, may be the area in which black council members can be expected to have the greatest influence. As Karnig and Welch suggest:

It is quite possible, owing to financial straits as well as the difficulty of changing policy in other than an incremental fashion, that the emphasis of black officials may be on shifting program benefits from white to black neighborhoods. For example, the stress may be on more police protection in black neighborhoods, more spending on black schools, improved paving and repair of streets in black areas, and so forth (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 153).

This type of change in policy, as Karnig and Welch recognize, "may occur without changing the distribution of expenditures in the overall policy categories" (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 153).

Support for the expectation that black councilmanic representation

will result in blacks being treated more equitably has been found in a study of municipal employment patterns. Unlike broad categories of expenditures, "the distribution of public-sector jobs is clearly divisible by race" (Eisinger, 1982, p. 382) and can be used, therefore, to measure differences in how equitably blacks are treated, both across communities and over time within specific municipalities. Dye and Renick have suggested that this is one area in which black council members are most likely to have an impact.

If there are any policy consequences at all which stem from increased minority representation, certainly increased minority employment in government ought to be one of those consequences. Even if minority council members cannot solve all of the problems confronting the nation's cities, they can still act to obtain more and better city jobs for their minority constituents. (1981, p. 476)

When Dye and Renick compared the race of full-time municipal employees across various occupational categories for 42 cities in 1977 (all with populations of 25,000 or more, at least 10% of which were black) with the percentage of councilmanic seats filled by blacks in 1976, they discovered a very pronounced relationship. The greater the percentage of black council members in a city, the higher the percentage of blacks employed in administrative, professional, and protective (police, fire, corrections, etc.) positions, regardless of the relative size and the educational and income characteristics of the black population within a city. For each of these employment categories, the level of black representation was the variable most strongly related to the level of black employment, prompting Dye and Renick to conclude that "black representation on city councils is a *crucial link* in improving black employment opportunities" (1981, p. 485, emphasis added).

Eisinger (1982) has analyzed data very similar to that relied on by Dye and Renick, however, and reached a conclusion inconsistent with theirs. Examining employment data for 43 cities with populations exceeding 50,000 and which were also at least 10% black (only 14 of which were included in the Dye and Renick study), Eisinger discovered that the degree to which blacks were represented on a city council in 1977 had virtually no impact on the percentage of blacks in administrative or professional positions in 1978. (The presence of a black mayor, however, was related to black employment in these categories.) Eisinger's indicator of black representation, however, was the ratio measure frequently utilized in studies of "descriptive representation"; that is, the percentage of council members who were black

divided by the percentage of the population which was black, and the results of the analysis therefore cannot be considered a test of the increased responsiveness thesis. The causal variable specified by that thesis is *not* how proportionately black people are represented but the proportion of the council which is black. When the issue is the policy impact of black representatives, the latter is clearly the more appropriate variable. In this regard, we are in agreement with Karnig and Welch, who state:

An equitable proportion on the city council is probably less important to meeting policy objectives than is the absolute representation that blacks possess on the council. That is, we would expect blacks to have greater influence where they hold 60% of the council seats, even if that is only 80% of the equitable rate, than where they hold one quarter of the seats and this reflects an equity ratio 1.5 times their share of the population (Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 116; see also Meier and England, 1982, p. 13).

Much more research obviously needs to be completed before the increased responsiveness thesis, the second proposition upon which the new reform movement is based, can be considered empirically sound. The degree of congruence between a greater variety of measures of "policy" and indicators of the needs and/or demands of black residents needs to be investigated. In addition, some important analytic issues concerning the assumed linkage between black representation and policy outputs need to be resolved. One such issue is the degree to which increased responsiveness may be a function of the race of the representative, or the race of the represented. Earlier research has reported that municipal policies are more responsive to the interests and needs of blacks in those cities in which council members are elected by district, rather than at large (see, e.g., Liebert, 1974, pp. 781-782; Karnig, 1975, pp. 99-100; Lyons, 1978, pp. 126-129; and Schumaker and Getter, 1977, pp. 265, 273-275; 1983, p. 25). The race of councilmanic representatives was not included in these analyses. Because districted systems presumably create situations in which black voters have more electoral influence, these studies suggest that the important variable may be the ability of blacks to hold representatives electorally accountable, regardless of the race of those representatives. In other words, responsiveness may result from a fear of electoral retribution by black voters, a fear that is presumably shared by black and white officeholders alike (and is felt more immediately by a greater percentage of council members in districted cities). The efforts

system variable or the black representation variable, but never both. Each needs to be included in future research designs so that the relative impact of each can be better clarified. Another related issue concerns a more complete elaboration of the manner in which the presence of blacks on a city council affects responsiveness. Is the percentage of blacks on a council best understood as an intervening variable in a causal sequence (as suggested by Dye and Renick, 1981, p. 485) and therefore viewed as having a direct affect on the adoption of policies that are congruent with the needs or demands of blacks, or is it best understood as a specifying variable which establishes conditions under which the relationship between black needs or demands and policies will vary? In statistical terms, should it be viewed as having an additive or a multiplicative impact? These, and undoubtedly other issues, will have to be addressed in future research efforts before we have an adequate empirical basis upon which to accept the increased responsiveness thesis.

Conclusions

At-large councilmanic elections have been a central plank in the platform of municipal reformers for many years. These elections, it was assumed, would result in the selection of "responsible" council members from the middle and upper classes, who would make decisions on the basis of a citywide, "public-regarding" viewpoint (see Banfield and Wilson, 1963, pp. 87-96, and Lineberry and Fowler, 1967). Many American municipalities have adopted and are today using this "reformed" electoral structure as the means for selecting council members. This electoral system has drawn an adverse reaction from America's black minority, however, which has argued that at-large elections are often racially discriminatory. District-based electoral systems, they maintain, would provide black people with a much more equitable opportunity to elect fellow blacks to city councils, a situation which in turn is expected to result in municipal governments being more responsive to minority needs and interests. This has stimulated another "reform movement," focused largely on municipalities within the southern portion of the United States, which seeks to substitute single-member districts for the at-large arrangement.

The empirical evidence for the two propositions upon which this new black reform movement is based has been reviewed in the preceding pages. The first proposition, that blacks will be represented

elections are employed, has been impressively documented. Indeed, this proposition is among the best verified empirical generalizations in political science. The second proposition, however, that governmental responsiveness will increase as the level of black representation increases, does not rest upon nearly as solid an empirical foundation as the first. Systematic efforts to verify this second proposition have begun only recently and have reached inconsistent conclusions. It would seem prudent, therefore, to exercise considerable caution before generalizing about the policy consequences associated with different levels of black councilmanic representation. It is not possible, as yet, to state with any confidence whether these inconsistent findings are related to the type of policy dimensions analyzed (priorities or equitability of distributions), the measurement of black strength on the council (black proportionality or black percentage), and/or the failure to account for other factors that might make a difference (such as variation in black needs or demands or the likelihood of greater electoral accountability generally in districted as opposed to at-large systems).

Even if the impact that black elected officials have on municipal policies and programs should prove to be of less magnitude than many black reformers would like, this should not suggest that the current electoral reform movement is therefore unimportant. District-based election systems do generally facilitate the election of blacks to city councils, and the presence of blacks on councils may serve other important functions beside that of altering policies. The presence of blacks on a council may very well result in increased constituency service for black citizens (see, e.g., Jewell, 1982, pp. 145-146). And feelings of political competence and affect among blacks may increase as a result of blacks being in decision-making positions. As expressed by Michael Preston:

[S]ymbolic representation is not only desirable but necessary for black Americans. Because of past historical conditions, blacks need role models in government; they need representatives that they believe will represent their interests; they need to know that good leadership (or bad) is not dominated by one race or group. Most important, blacks must become more self-reliant. Self-reliance is a basic ingredient of political influence. To be self-reliant is to believe in oneself, and to seek out others who can be influenced to act in one's behalf (Preston, 1978, p. 198; see also Karnig and Welch, 1980, p. 109).

Regardless of the type of impact that black council members may (or

may not) ultimately have, the better electoral prospects for black candidates in districted as opposed to at-large systems will continue to compel the racial minority to view districted systems as the more fair alternative, in the sense that "the fairness of the electoral method depends on whether substantial numbers of voters who wish to elect one of their own members . . . can, in fact, do so" (Lijphart, 1982, p. 144). On this dimension, the black reformers are unquestionably correct.

Notes

1. This data was collected through a telephone survey of city clerks' offices during the spring of 1982. The authors wish to thank Albert Ringelstein for assisting with this survey.
2. The South was second to the West in the proportion of cities utilizing at-large elections in the earlier study of cities with populations exceeding 10,000. For the regional percentages in the earlier survey, as well as the definition of the West employed in both, see Svara (1977, p. 171).
3. The litigation has been premised on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the United States Constitution and on section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. For an excellent discussion of the history of this litigation, and commentary on the standards applied, see O'Rourke (1982).
4. Efforts to switch to at-large elections in those southern states covered by section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which requires federal "preclearance" of any changes in laws affecting elections, are generally prevented by the Department of Justice, or the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, on the grounds that they may have a racially discriminatory effect (see Motomura, 1983, pp. 210-214).
5. Four central cities in which blacks constituted a majority of the population were excluded from this analysis.
6. The correlation between these two measures is exceptionally high when they are applied to cities having populations which are at least 10% black but is reduced dramatically if a lower black population threshold is applied (see Engstrom and McDonald, 1981, p. 346).
7. These figures are based on the data collected in 1976 by Robinson, not the data collected by MacManus. For analyses of the data collected by Robinson, see Robinson and Dye (1978) and Engstrom and McDonald (1981, 1982).
8. Karnig and Welch (1980, p. 120) attempted to minimize the impact that the differences in the functional responsibilities of cities might have on these results by examining changes over time within each city's budget and by eliminating from the analysis of each category of expenditures any cities that did not have expenditures in that category in either of the two observed fiscal years. On the importance of taking these differences into account, see Liebert (1974).

The Trade-Offs between At-Large and Single-Member Districts

Scott Hofer

Hobby School of Public Affairs
Department of Political Science
University of Houston
sjhofer@uh.edu

Cong Huang

Hobby School of Public Affairs
University of Houston
chuang23@central.uh.edu

Richard Murray

Hobby School of Public Affairs
Department of Political Science
University of Houston
rmurray@central.uh.edu

October 2018

The Trade-Offs between At-Large and Single-Member Districts

Scott Hofer, *University of Houston*

Cong Huang, *University of Houston*

Richard Murray, *University of Houston*

This report provides a review of the existing literature about the trade-offs between at-large and single-member districts at the local offices in the United States. Overall, at-large districts were the most common form of representation in most local offices until the 1960s and the passage of Voting Rights Act in 1965. Since the 1960s single-member districts have been the method of choice for most local elections because they enable smaller, geographically situated communities to send their own representatives to larger legislative assemblies. The history behind these two electoral systems corresponds with their respective pros and cons. In general, at-large elections are found to improve diversity in gender representation on city councils with more female councilors being elected. On the other hand, single-member districts benefit the representation of some racial minority groups, including African Americans and Latinos. But the positive potential depends on context: (1) the concentration, (2) the size, and (3) the polarization of the vote. Specifically, the advantages of single-member districts are minimal in a largely homogenous community or in a community where underrepresented groups are not concentrated geographically. African Americans are found to be overrepresented on school boards with at-large elections when African Americans occupy a smaller part of the population.

Keywords: at-large districts, single-member districts, gender representation, racial representation.

Background

The literature on structures of elections focuses on local levels in the United States because there is little variation in representation structures in higher offices (Davidson 1979; Meier and Stewart 1991; Rocha 2007; Zax 1990). The United States does have single member (hereafter: SM) districts in the 43 states that have two or more members in the House of Representatives, while U.S. senators are elected at-large (hereafter AL) in all 50 states, as are almost all executive officers at the state level. That being the case, the best opportunity to study the effects on of electoral systems are in the thousands of local offices in the U.S., specifically school districts, county commissions and city councils. Overall, at-large districts were the most common form of representation in most local offices until the 1960s and the passage of Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1965 (Davidson 1992).

The history behind SM and AL districts systems correspond with their respective pros and cons. While context is key, the following section is a broad overview of the existing literature about the trade-offs in both systems. Then we move to the discussion of more nuanced findings pertaining to gender and racial representation in these two systems.

At-large elections have been employed when ruling majorities attempt to emphasize the corporate identity of particular jurisdictions and to suppress partisan or ethnic factionalism. The basic idea being that those elected to AL districts will be more likely to work toward the best result for the whole community rather than pander to the specific demands in parts of the community. Work in political science broadly illustrates that substantive representation is most common in AL systems for the wealthiest and most connected in the community (Enns and Wlezien 2011; Gilens and Page 2014; Meier et al. 2005). Additionally, AL systems have the benefit of increasing the diversity in gender representation with more women being elected in these systems (Trounstin and Valdini 2008). However, people of color are less likely to be elected in AL systems because the votes of racial minorities are diluted in elections that cover a broader area (Trounstin and Valdini 2008). The importance of AL systems for diverse cities has been the focus of lawsuits and VRA compliance. In more homogenous communities, the difference between AL and SM districts are less pronounced in terms of racial representation, while the overall trends of representation patterns along gender and economic lines remain.

Since the 1960s SM districts have been the method of choice for most local elections because they enable smaller, geographically situated communities to send their own representatives to larger legislative assemblies. SM systems provide the benefits of localized democracy. In cases of city councils and school boards, elected members in SM systems might only represent a small neighborhood which allows legislators to be intimately aware of the issues of the local community. This allows the elected member to focus on the needs of their localized constituency rather than the interests of all. In diverse places, especially where diversity is in highly segregated communities, the SM systems promote diversity with increasing minority representation (Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier 2004; Meier et al. 2005; Trounstin and Valdini 2008; Zax 1990).

Yet, this diversity in racial representation is likely to be contrasted with the loss of gender representation and the tendency for fewer women to be elected in these systems. As noted, SM systems have become more popular in the United States after passage of the VRA as a mechanism to increase representation of racial minorities (Davidson 1992). In some cases, SM systems were implemented due to lawsuits such as *Thornburg v. Gingles* in 1986 alleging the AL systems in place unduly discriminated against cohesive groups of people of color to participate equally in the process by electing disproportionately white officials (Kosterlitz 1986).

Finally, a small, but growing number of communities have incorporated a mixed approach that combines AL and SM systems. The Houston City Council is an example of these mixed bodies. While there is variation in the impacts of mixed system (they should be thought of as a continuum between AL and SM) the conclusion in the literature is that mixed systems typically provide benefits similar to SM districts. These mixed systems and modified AL systems provide descriptive representation similar to SM districts (Brockington et al. 1998; Karnig and Welch 1982; Welch 1990). Given the proportion of SM to AL districts (11 to 5) on the Houston City Council,¹ it is especially likely to produce representation outcome similar to purely SM district systems.

¹ <https://www.houstontx.gov/council/>.

The Voting Rights Act and Electoral Structures

In the United States, AL elections were popular for local elections; especially as a mechanism to ensure that a bloc-voting white majority could deny black citizens the opportunity to choose representatives of their choice in local governments. In 1965, mass politics changed the landscape of racial diversity and racial representation through the VRA. Language allowing judicial review of minority vote dilution efforts in places with a history of disenfranchising minority voters initially helped push communities away from AL systems. However, court rulings undermined this language in the late 1970s. By 1980, the courts had established that racial minorities must prove that a challenged election structure was designed or maintained intentionally to dilute their voting power. However, the passage of the VRA of 1982 changed this standard was from racial intent to vote dilution in practice, making minority lawsuits more likely to succeed. The 1986 *Thornburg v. Gingle* ruling created a quicker and easier process for providing a remedy for vote dilution, resulting in widespread changes from AL elections to SM elections, through both litigation and legislation (Davidson 1992; Kosterlitz 1986). Although the courts would later reverse course on some aspects of the VRA, the legacy of the rulings in the 1980s has become the status quo.

Electoral Systems and Gender Representation

One major focus in the relevant literature is on the role of gender representation in AL versus SM structures. **Table 1** summarizes the trade-offs between these two systems regarding gender representation in particular. While SM districts are typically seen as a remedy to a lack of diversity, AL districts are the most likely to produce female elected members (Trounstine and Valdini 2008). Unlike racial diversity, gender diversity among the population is stable across geography. The existing scholarship on gender representation overwhelmingly suggests that SM districts either lead to fewer women being elected on city councils (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1985; Hogan 2001; Matland 1995; Matland and Brown 1992; Rule 1994; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Welch and Studlar 1990) or no effect (Alozie and Manganero 1993; Bullock and MacManus 1991). This result may make more sense in terms of the non-exclusive relationship between race and gender (Githens and Prestage 1977). For instance, nuanced analysis of intersectionality found that black women tend to be advantaged by AL elections in cities while black men are disadvantaged by this structure (Darcy, Hadley, and Kirksey 1993; Rule 1992). However, there is no influence of SM versus AL districts for Mexican American women or men (Karnig and Welch 1979). A more recent study (2008) by Trounstine and Valdini that focused on more than 7,000 United States cities also found that the impact of either AL or SM district on gender representation is much more significant regarding white female and black male representation than was the case for Latinas or black women.

Table 1. The Trade-Offs between At-Large and Single-Member Districts – Gender Representation

Electoral Systems	Effects	Literature
Single-member districts	(1) Have positive effect on the representation of African American men in city councils.	Karnig and Welch (1979)
	(2) Have negative effect on the representation of African American women in city councils.	Herrick and Welch (1992)
	(3) Have no effect on the representation of Mexican American women or men in city councils.	Karnig and Welch (1979)
At-large districts	(1) Promote diversity in gender representation on city councils.	Trounstone and Valdin (2008)
	(2) Benefit African American female candidates.	Darcy, Hadley, and Kirksey (1993)
	(3) African American male candidates are disadvantaged by this structure.	Rule (1992)

Note: Regarding mixed systems, they are considered to provide descriptive representation similar to single-member districts (see e.g., Brockington et al.). Same for **Table 2**.

Electoral Systems and Racial Representation

The historical transformation at the local level from AL to SM has had the expected impact. Majority-minority districts became very popular in the 1990s and the representation of underrepresented groups began to improve (Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran 1996). **Table 2** lists the trade-offs on racial representation specifically. Numerous studies put forward that SM districts have positive effect on the representation of some racial groups in city councils, including African Americans and Latinos (Arrington and Watts 1991; Bullock and MacManus 1990; Davidson and Grofman 1994; Polinard, Wrinkle, and Longoria 1991; Welch 1990). If equity in representation is the goal, in a diverse community, then SM districts are overwhelmingly cited as a better mechanism.

Table 2. The Trade-Offs between At-Large and Single-Member Districts – Racial Representation

Electoral Systems	Effects	Literature
Single-member districts	(1) Improve diversity in racial representation on city councils. (2) Have positive effect on the representation of African Americans and Latinos in city councils. (3) These effects are conditional on the context. The benefits are minimal in a largely homogenous community or in a community where underrepresented racial groups are not geographically concentrated.	Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran (1996) Davidson and Grofman (1994) Trounstone and Valdini (2008)
At-large districts	(1) Lead to over-representation of minority voters where racial minority groups are geographically concentrated or where democratic voters make up a larger proportion of the population. (2) Lead to over-representation of African Americans on school boards where African Americans make up a smaller proportion of the population.	Arrington and Watts (1991) Meier and Rutherford (2014)

Despite the positive potential, the improved representation of historically underrepresented groups depends on context (Trounstone and Valdini 2008). The concentration (Sass 2000), size (Bullock and MacManus 1990; Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier 2004), and polarization (Brace et al. 1988) of the vote are the key variables to consider. For instance, in a largely homogenous community or in a community where underrepresented groups are not concentrated geographically, the benefits of SM districts are minimal (Trounstone and Valdini 2008). Conversely, AL districts lead to over-representation of minority voters under some circumstances where Democratic voters make up a larger proportion of the population and racial minority groups are concentrated in the area (Arrington and Watts 1991). Similarly, African Americans are found to be overrepresented on school boards with AL elections when African Americans occupy a smaller part of the population (Meier and Rutherford 2014).

Houston Specific Outlook

Given the trends found in scholarship on SM versus AL districts, we can make some educated predictions about the impact of these districts specifically for the City of Houston. Houston is a geographically large city with an incredibly diverse racial makeup; however, this racial diversity is also highly segregated by neighborhood (Houston Chronicle 2015²). These two patterns make Houston an ideal location for a mix of AL and SM districts. The result of the concentrated pockets of different ethnic and racial groups in these districts will allow greater descriptive representation of the diverse communities within the city in the SM districts while the AL members must appeal to the broader diverse electorate of the entire city.

References

- Alozie, N., and Manganaro, L. 1993. "Women's Council Representation: Measurement Implications for Public Policy." *Political Research Quarterly* 46(2): 383-398.
- Arrington, T., and Watts, T. G. 1991. "The Election of Blacks to School Boards in North Carolina." *The Western Political Science Quarterly* 44(4): 1099-1105.
- Brace, K., Grofman, B., Handley, L., and Niemi, R. 1988. "Minority Voting Equality: The 65 Percent Rule in Theory and Practice." *Law and Policy* 10(1): 43-62.
- Brockington, D., Donovan, T., Bowler, S., and Brischetto, R. 1998. "Minority Representation under Cumulative and Limited Voting." *Journal of Politics* 60(4): 1108-1125.
- Bullock, C., and MacManus, S. 1990. "Structural Features of Municipalities and the Incidence of Hispanic Councilmembers." *Social Science Quarterly* 71(4): 665-681.
- Bullock, C. S. III, and MacManus, S. A. 1991. "Municipal Electoral Structure and the Election of Councilwomen." *Journal of Politics* 53(1): 75-89.
- Cameron, C., Epstein, D., and O'Halloran, S. 1996. "Do Majority-Minority Districts Maximize Substantive Black Representation in Congress?" *American Political Science Review* 90(4): 794-812.
- Darcy, R., Hadley, C. D., and Kirksey, J. F. 1993. "Election Systems and the Representation of Black Women in American State Legislatures." *Women and Politics* 13: 73-89.
- Darcy, R., Welch, S., and Clark, J. 1985. "Women Candidates in Single-Member and Multimember Districts: American State Legislative Races." *Social Science Quarterly* 66(4): 945-953.

² <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Houston-is-both-one-of-the-most-diverse-and-most-6236793.php>.

- Davidson, C. 1979. "At-Large Elections and Minority Representation." *Social Science Quarterly* 60(2): 336-338.
- Davidson, C. 1992. "The Voting Rights Act: A Brief History." In B. Grofman and C. Davidson, eds., *Controversies in Minority Voting: The Voting Rights Act in Perspective*, 7-34. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Davidson, C., and Grofman, B. (eds.) 1994. *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Enns, P. K., and Wlezien, C. (eds.) 2011. *Who Gets Represented?* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gilens, M., and Page, B. I. 2014. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(3): 564-581.
- Githens, M., and Prestage, J. (eds.) 1977. *A Portrait of Marginality: The Political Behavior of American Women*. New York, NY: McKay.
- Herrick, R., and Welch, S. 1992. "The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Black and White Women." *National Political Science Review* 3: 62-77.
- Hogan, R. E. 2001. "The Influence of State and District Conditions on the Representation of Women in US State Legislatures." *American Politics Research* 29(1): 4-24.
- Karnig, A., and Welch, S. 1979. "Sex and the Ethnic Differences in Municipal Representation." *Social Science Quarterly* 60(3): 465-481.
- Karnig, A., and Welch, S. 1982. "Electoral Structure and Black Representation on City Councils." *Social Science Quarterly* 63(1): 99-114.
- Kosterlitz, M. J. 1986. "Thornburg v. Gingles: The Supreme Court's New Test for Analyzing Minority Vote Dilution." *Catholic University Law Review* 36(2): 531-563.
- Leal, D., Martinez-Ebers, V., and Meier, K. 2004. "The Politics of Latino Education: The Biases of At-Large Elections." *Journal of Politics* 66(4): 1224-1244.
- Matland, R. E. 1995. "How the Electoral System Structure Has Helped Women Close the Representation Gap." In L. Karvonen and P. Selle, eds., *Closing the Gap, Women in Nordic Politics*, 281-312. London, UK: Dartmouth.
- Matland, R. E., and Brown, D. D. 1992. "District Magnitude's Effect on Female Representation in U.S. State Legislatures." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 17(4): 469-492.
- Meier, K. J., and Stewart, J. Jr. 1991. "Cooperation and Conflict in Multiracial School Districts." *Journal of Politics* 53(4): 1123-1133.

- Meier, K. J., Juenke, E. G., Wrinkle, R. D., and Polinard, J. L. 2005. "Structural Choices and Representational Biases: The Post-Election Color of Representation." *American Journal of Political Science* 49(4): 758-768.
- Meier, K. J., and Rutherford, A. 2014. "Partisanship, Structure, and Representation: The Puzzle of African American Education Politics." *American Political Science Review* 108(2): 265-280.
- Polinard, J., Wrinkle, R., and Longoria, T. 1991. "The Impact of District Elections on the Mexican American Community: The Electoral Perspective." *Social Science Quarterly* 72(3): 608-614.
- Rocha, R. R. 2007. "Black-Brown Coalitions in Local School Board Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 60(2): 315-327.
- Rule, W. 1992. "Multimember Legislative Districts: Minority and Anglo Women's and Men's Recruitment Opportunity." In W. Rule and J. F. Zimmerman, eds., *United States Electoral Systems: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*, 57-72. New York, NY: Greenwood Press.
- Rule, W. 1994. "Parliaments of, by, and for the People: Except for Women?" In W. Rule and J. F. Zimmerman, eds., *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*, 15-30. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Sass, T. R. 2000. "The Determinants of Hispanic Representation in Municipal Government." *Southern Economic Journal* 66(3): 609-630.
- Schwindt-Bayer, L. A., and Mishler, W. 2005. "An Integrated Model of Women's Representation." *Journal of Politics* 67(2): 407-428.
- Thornburg v. Gingles, 478 US 30. 1986.
- Trounstein, J., and Valdini, M. E. 2008. "The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(3): 554-569.
- Welch, S. 1990. "The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Blacks and Hispanics." *Journal of Politics* 52(4): 1050-1076.
- Welch, S., and Studlar, D. 1990. "Multimember Districts and the Representation of Women: Evidence from Britain and the United States." *Journal of Politics* 52(2): 391-412.
- Zax, J. S. 1990. "Election Methods and Black and Hispanic City Council Membership." *Social Science Quarterly* 71(2): 339-355.