

## At-large, Ward, or Mixed Elections for City Councils

### At-Large System

All council members are elected by the entire voting population of the city.

#### *Advantages of At-Large*

- Council members beholden to all residents equally
- Equalizes individual voting power – one person, one vote
- Reduced divisiveness and factions
- Broader base of candidates from which voters can choose
- No battles over how to draw wards/districts

#### *Disadvantages of At-Large*

- Potential lack of representation of minority groups – dilution of minority voters
- Citizens in large cities can feel disconnected from council
- Majority of council members could live in same area. This can be addressed by creating residency requirements that spread out council members, while still maintaining at-large elections.

#### *Who uses At-Large System?*

- Small and medium cities (59% of cities <25,000, 58% of cities between 25,000-199,999)
- Only used by 13% of large cities (>200,000)

### Ward System

One (or more, in large cities) council member is elected from each ward in the city.

#### *Advantages of Wards*

- Council members are more responsive to specific constituencies
- Maximizes potential for electing underrepresented groups to council
- Encourages personal campaigning
- Easier for new candidates to win election
- Lower cost of campaigning

#### *Disadvantages of Wards*

- Incentive to ignore city-wide concerns in favor of ward-specific issues. Potential for log-rolling (vote swapping).
- Ward representatives are more susceptible to interest groups' influence
- Potential for segregation based on ideology, socioeconomic status, race, etc.
- Potential issues surrounding redistricting (redrawing ward boundaries after the census), gerrymandering, etc.
- If minorities are not living in easily contained wards (but are spread throughout), the ward system may not achieve representation for minority groups. (Cracking and packing)

#### *Who uses Ward System?*

- Large cities (49% of cities >200,000)
- Used by about a quarter of small and medium cities

## **Mixed System**

Some council members are elected at-large, and some are elected by their ward. It is generally preferred that the ward members make up a majority of the council.

### ***Advantages of Mixed At-Large and Ward System***

- Combines city-wide focus of at large members with neighborhood and local concern represented by the ward -elected members

### ***Disadvantages of Mixed At-Large and Ward System***

- Can create tension between at large and district members, where at large members see themselves as superior to district council members and as rivals to mayor. To prevent this, at large and district council members should have equal status with respect to offices, services, and length of terms.
- Potential for deadlock or lines drawn between at-large and ward council members
- Redistricting and gerrymandering issues remain.

### ***Who uses Mixed System?***

- Large cities (38% of cities >200,000)
- Only used by about 17% of small and medium cities.

## **Other systems:**

### ***Single Transfer Voting***

- Voters rank candidates according to preference, all candidates meeting or exceeding a set threshold of first-preference votes are winners

### ***Cumulative Voting***

- Each voter has a certain number of votes to distribute among candidates. Voters can be strategic by voting or withholding votes.

## **Summary**

If city is small to medium and fairly homogenous, at-large elections may achieve fair representation. If city is larger or has significant minority groups that may not be represented by at-large elections, the ward system may work well. A mixed system may achieve some of the advantages of each system, but is not without disadvantages. If it appears that at-large, ward, or mixed systems still present problems, other systems could be explored. However, they require a lot of change and re-education for voters so that they understand how the system works.

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## ***Batavia's Current System***

Batavia City currently uses a mixed system, with 3 at-large council members and one council member elected from each of 6 wards. Batavia City currently has 15,465 residents, and the merger will add about 6,809 more, for a total of 22,274 (qualifies as a 'small city'). Key questions for Task Force:

- When was the mixed system established?
- If there was a change at some point, what instigated the change?
- How is it working? Are people generally happy with it?
- Has redistricting (drawing ward boundaries) been a difficult process?

## ***Model City Charter References***

[http://norpsc.info/uploads/National\\_Civic\\_League\\_Model\\_City\\_Charter.pdf](http://norpsc.info/uploads/National_Civic_League_Model_City_Charter.pdf)  
(2003 Version of Model City Charter)

### ***At-large and Ward***

The Council – Page IV (Introduction)

Section 2.02 Commentaries – Page 7 - 10