

City council election methods – strengths and weaknesses

Sources are listed at bottom of this page.

Criteria	Ward-only	At-large	Combination of wards and at-large
Constituent connection	Increased chance for contact with the ward's council member, giving residents a greater sense of being represented and a single, local place to go for constituent service.	People can go to any council member for constituent service. However, this method tends to have among the weakest connections between council members and their constituents.	People have a wider choice for constituent service: their ward council member or an at-large council member. However, constituent connection, while better than at-large, is not as good as ward-only.
Extent to which voters have choice	Geographically concentrated areas are more likely to be able to elect council member of their choice. However, gerrymandering can make single candidate elections commonplace as it creates safe-seat wards for incumbents.	With the ability to vote for all the council members, voters are likely to find candidates they want to support. In addition, at-large is not subject to gerrymandering. However, citywide incumbency and name recognition can make defeat unlikely. One party can dominate elections. Also, the process encourages recruitment of candidates to fill out a campaign slate, even if they are weaker candidates.	Voters can choose both ward and at-large candidates. However, wards still may be gerrymandered, citywide incumbency and name recognition can make defeat unlikely, and one party can dominate elections.
Balancing neighborhoods and the city	Allows focus on needs of the ward, which gives neighborhoods the feeling they have an advocate in city government. However, it can fuel inter-neighborhood battles over access to resources. Additionally, because council members may see the city a district at a time, they may miss the overall value to the city of new projects.	Each council member's relatively diverse base of support encourages council members to have a big-picture outlook as they focus on the needs of the city. However, there is a tendency for council members to miss issues or projects that may be small but important.	Encourages a balance between the needs of the wards and the needs of the city. However, the dominant party may ignore neighborhoods in which their candidates cannot win.
Mayor's role	The mayor is more prominent since the mayor is the only elected official to bring a citywide voice to the table. Consequently, as time passes, there is a tendency to start	The mayor is not as prominent since council members also have a citywide voice. Mayors can think of the council as a cabinet. There is less of a tendency to give	The mayor is more prominent than in at-large, but not as prominent as in ward-only.

This table is based on several sources:

- A manual on City Council Election Methods by FairVote, the Center for Voting and Democracy. FairVote says it is a "non-profit, non-partisan organization with a history of working with scholars, civic leaders, policymakers, and journalists from across the spectrum."
- A presentation Jan. 25, 2016, by consultant Raphe Sonenshein to the city's Charter Review Committee.
- A telephone call Jan. 29, 2016, between John Nalbandian, a municipal government expert from the University of Kansas, and members of the SALC Governance Focus Area.
- Department of Justice lawsuit against Euclid, Ohio, the Euclid News-Herald, the Arkansas Policy Program, and additional Internet sources.

PREPARED BY THE SOUTHERN ARIZONA LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Criteria	Ward-only	At-large	Combination of wards and at-large
Council members' role	<p>thinking of giving the mayor a veto. Council members know the ward: "I am there for you." However, there is more territoriality among council members. There also is a tendency toward vote trading and placing ward needs above citywide needs.</p>	<p>Council members tend to feel they are part of the leadership team on citywide projects. However, it can create tension between the council members and the mayor because being elected at-large allows the council members to better position themselves against the mayor.</p>	<p>Depends on whether the council member holds a ward seat or a citywide seat.</p>
Minority inclusion	<p>Minority candidates can win when they are geographically concentrated. However, creating "majority-minority" districts also can have the effect of creating safe seats in non-minority areas. Wards can suffer from geographic disenfranchisement as well as ethnic or racial disenfranchisement. (Little Rock, Ark., has changed its structure several times over the years, but currently has a combination form. Academics from Hendrix College in Arkansas found ward elections in Little Rock promoted the election of minorities and women, as well as less expensive and more competitive contests.)</p>	<p>Minority candidates are less likely to win seats. And it is not uncommon for most of the council members to come from just a few, wealthier neighborhoods, with other areas having little or no representation.</p>	<p>Presumably, minimizes the weaknesses of both ward-only and at-large. However, minority inclusion generally depends on "majority-minority" wards. (Can still face racial justice issues: In 2006 the Department of Justice filed suit against the Euclid, Ohio, city council, alleging that the city's combination of four at-large and four ward council seats "diluted" the votes of African-American voters. The DOJ prevailed in court. Subsequently, Euclid adopted eight wards and a council president, who is elected at-large, as is the mayor.)</p>
Voter turnout	<p>Generally low turnout. With some wards having little or no competition, citywide turnout is reduced.</p>	<p>Generally has modest voter turnout.</p>	<p>Generally has modest voter turnout.</p>
Representativeness	<p>Residents are more likely than in other systems to believe city government takes their concerns seriously. However, large blocks of voters can win a disproportionate share or sweep all of the seats. Low turnout gives an advantage to highly engaged voters and well-connected politicians. Council members can be more susceptible to interest group influence.</p>	<p>100% sweeps by the dominant party are more likely. Can preclude representation of distinct ethnic and geographic areas.</p>	<p>May minimize, but not eliminate, the weaknesses of ward-only and at-large.</p>
Opportunity to be elected and serve	<p>"Orphaned" candidates, who live in districts where their party never can win, essentially are precluded from serving.</p>	<p>Because it can be difficult for a minority candidate to win, entire segments of society essentially are precluded from serving on the council.</p>	<p>A candidate has the chance to run either in a ward or at-large. However, candidates from minority groups often don't win.</p>
Issue-focused campaigns	<p>Personality-focused campaigns and personal attacks are more likely.</p>	<p>Thematic and slate campaigns can allow a greater focus on policy than on personal</p>	<p>Mostly same as at-large.</p>

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Campaign costs	Campaign costs generally are modest.	Overall cost of campaigns is high because of the larger number of voters and the larger field of candidates.	Depends on whether the candidate is seeking a ward or citywide seat.
A key challenge	Need to determine how to ensure citywide issues are addressed.	Need to figure out how to give neighborhoods fair representation.	Need to ensure citywide council members are not seen – and do not see themselves – as stronger and more powerful than ward council members.
Balancing stability and responsiveness of the city council	Gerrymandered seats may promote an unhealthy stability by allowing incumbents to be continually reelected. However, small shifts in public support can result in dramatic shifts in council makeup. In addition, depending on the composition of the wards, staggered elections can allow one party an advantage in the mayoral election.	Somewhat greater risk of complete removal of incumbents, with loss of institutional memory. Consequently, staggered terms sometimes are used.	Same as at-large.
Which special interests benefit?	Organized labor tends to do better at getting candidates elected.	The business community tends to do better at getting candidates elected. Tends to favor growth interests by facilitating citywide growth while muting neighborhood opposition.	Allows for offsetting gains among special interests. Special interests that do best in ward-only can win some seats, but so can special interests that do best in at-large.
Ease of administration	A simple election method for the city to administer – and for the voter to use.	Simplest method to administer with a single ballot for the entire city. An occasional problem: Voters cast votes for too many candidates.	Requires running two elections at once, but both are simple.

Note: Because there are 15 criteria and no clear-cut best method, it may be useful to first choose which criteria are most important, and then to make a decision based on the strengths and weaknesses of these criteria.

