



# NATIONAL LEAGUE of CITIES

## Municipal Elections

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 have both, called 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 (see [Partisan vs. Non-partisan Elections](#)). 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 is minimized.
- Better-qualified individuals are elected to the council because the candidate pool is larger.

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

Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of all municipalities use at-large elections in some way. At-large elections tend to be more popular in small cities and more affluent 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 minority groups. 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 (see: Springfield, IL, 1987 and Dallas, TX, 1990; see also amendments by the U.S. Congress to the Voting Rights Act, 1982).



- District councilmembers are more sensitive to the small but important problems of their constituents, like waste disposal.
- District elections may improve citizen participation because councilmen 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.

Only 14 percent of all municipalities use district elections. Cities with populations of 200,000 or more are more likely to use district elections.

### Mixed-System

Twenty-one percent of municipalities combine these two methods by electing some council members at large and some from districts. An individual councilmember will either occupy a district or an at-large seat on the council. Mixed systems are most likely to be found in parts of the South and Central jurisdictions.

### Breakdown of Types of City Council Elections by City Size (2001)\* (n = 649)

	Small (25,000-69,999)	Medium (70,000-199,999)	Large (200,000 And Up)
At-Large	48.9%	43.7%	16.4%
Mixed-System	25.0%	25.4%	38.2%
District	26.1%	31.0%	45.5%

\*Study based on a mailed questionnaire completed by a random sample of 664 council members in cities with populations of 25,000 and higher (Svara).

### Sources

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