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

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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 (Trounstine 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 (Trounstine 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; Trounstine 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.	Trounstine and Valdini (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) Trounstine 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 (Trounstine 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 (Trounstine 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.

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

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