

*Guest Commentary for the News-Gazette
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Many cities, school boards ending at-large representation

by Ben Grosser

On election day, Urbana voters will be asked whether to add two at-large representatives to the seven-member city council. These at-large members would be elected citywide, as opposed to the neighborhood elections of the seven ward seats.

More is better, right? Wouldn't more representatives give everybody more voice in local government? Perhaps Urbana is behind the times, and needs to sign on with this hip new form of choosing their elected officials?

Or perhaps not. If you look across the country, you'll find that over 250 cities across the United States have recently removed at-large seats from their city councils. Removing them has been so popular that it's the second most common change to local governments nationwide.

In fact, even school boards with at-large elections are getting harder to find. Right here in the city of Urbana, the voters overwhelmingly chose to eliminate at-large from the school board in favor of district elections in 1998.

Those pushing to resurrect at-large in Urbana feel they deserve more say in local government. They believe that higher voter turnout in their neighborhoods justifies this greater representation. The U.S. Constitution disagrees. Voter turnout varies everywhere, but the constitutional principle of "one person, one vote" means that representation must be based on population, not voter turnout. In other words, everyone gets equal representation, whether they choose to vote or not.

The use of at-large seats for local government gained renewed popularity around 1965, when congress passed the Voting Rights Act. This law enacted a number of changes designed to empower minorities to gain equal representation. A common method used to negate the minority vote in the wake of the Voting Rights Act was to use at-large elections.

At-large seats are effective in diluting the minority vote because they require candidates to run citywide as opposed to district-wide. Minority neighborhood districts are more likely to elect minority candidates. But at-large seats, with voters taken from anywhere in the city, typically elect majority candidates. This has been proven in study after study, making it one of the most verified findings in the field of political science.

As convincing as it is, one need not solely rely on the scientific literature for examples of how at-large affects minority representation—we have plenty of examples in central Illinois. In 1987, a voting rights lawsuit forced Springfield to abandon at-large in favor of districts, sparking election of the first African-American to that body since 1911. For

similar reasons, Danville also eliminated their at-large seats in favor of wards in 1987. Before then, every elected council member since the city was founded in 1867 was a white man. Since switching to wards, Danville has elected 5 African-Americans, 8 women, a Latino, and a person of Native-American descent.

While Springfield and Danville's councils were fully at-large, the structure being proposed in Urbana is referred to as a "mixed" system—one made up of both districts and at-large. Proponents of the at-large seats suggest this is an important distinction, one which makes all of the scientific evidence "irrelevant." But the leading scholars in political science disagree with them. Susan Welch, Professor of Political Science at Penn State University states it clearly: "While blacks are equitably represented in the district portions of mixed systems, they are abysmally underrepresented in the at-large portions."

Another reason at-large dilutes minority representation is the high cost of citywide campaigns. Minority candidates are less likely to receive the big-money backing typically supplied by majority supporters. But minorities aren't the only ones discouraged by the at-large system; the average majority citizen doesn't have the money to compete with special interest funded candidates either.

It is impossible for an at-large candidate to knock on every door in the city. This forces them to replace personal contact with media saturation. They engage in one-way communication, broadcasting their ideas out to the people, hoping voters find their sound bites most appealing. In contrast, a ward candidate engages in two-way communication. Every time they knock on a door in their ward they hear the concerns of their neighbors, and it is in their best interests to remember and respond to those concerns. Ward races encourage receptive council members, while at-large elections cause even the best candidates to have a more distant and less informed relationship with their constituents.

There has been extensive research into alternative electoral systems. Not only did those pushing for at-large never consider these alternatives, they didn't even ask why cities across the country have been abandoning their proposed system for years. Urbana needs effective city government—it has serious problems and it needs serious answers. But at-large is not the answer.

Ben Grosser is an Urbana resident, and is one of the leaders of "Vote No At-Large," a local organization opposed to the addition of at-large seats in Urbana. Further information is available on the organization's website, at <http://www.noatlarge.org>.