

The Facts Against At-Large Electoral Systems  
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On November 2<sup>nd</sup> Urbana voters will face this question on the ballot: “*Shall the City of Urbana restrict the number of aldermen to a total of nine, with one alderman representing each of seven wards, plus an additional two aldermen to be elected at-large?*” Currently, the Urbana City Council consists of 7 alderpersons, each one representing a discrete area of the city, called a “ward.” The proposal on the ballot is asking whether two more representatives should be added to the council. The “at-large” part means that those two representatives would be elected by a majority vote of all voters within the city boundaries (like the mayor or city-clerk).

More is better, right? Wouldn't two 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 “the second most commonly considered change [in municipal government structures nationwide] was to eliminate at-large seats on the council and replace them with ward or district elections.” In fact, the change being proposed in Urbana is so uncommon that the standard sources used to track trends in local government don't even bother to report it. As a result, political and social scientists who study the effects of at-large elections now tend to focus their attention on school boards, as there just aren't enough city council examples left to support research.

But 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 as an improvement for the council point to the fact that more voters turnout in some areas of the city than others. Although this is a common occurrence all over the United States, they feel that voters who live in wards with higher turnout deserve a greater voice in government. But imagine if we applied their reversal of constitutional philosophy to the state legislature. The 100<sup>th</sup> Representative District, which surrounds Springfield, had 48,000 voters turnout in the last election—almost twice the number of people who voted in our 103<sup>rd</sup> District! Does this mean Champaign-Urbana voters deserve less representation than Springfield does in the Illinois House of Representatives?

Not according to the U.S. Constitution (see Article I, Section II, and the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment). The constitutional principle of “one person, one vote” is that representation in government must be based on population, not on voter turnout. In other words, everyone has the same rights to equal representation, whether they choose to vote or not.

At-large has long been supported by those who think they deserve more representation than others. Used in local governments for at least the last 100 years, it gained renewed popularity around 1965, when congress passed one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation, the Voting Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act enacted a number of changes that were meant to empower minorities to vote and gain equal representation. A common method used to negate the minority vote in the wake of the Voting Rights Act (as well as before it), was to use at-large seats for local government.

At-large seats are effective in diluting the minority vote because they require candidates to run city-wide 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 time and again 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 empirical evidence in the scientific literature for examples of how at-large affects minority representation. Right here in central Illinois we have plenty of examples:

In 1987, a group of African-Americans filed a minority vote dilution lawsuit against the city of Springfield, seeking the city's compliance with the Voting Rights Act. As a result, the city eliminated its at-large system in favor of a ward system—like we have here in Urbana. *The first African-American was then elected to that body since 1911.*

Also in 1987, a similar lawsuit was brought against the city of Danville. At that time in the city's history, every elected council member since the city was founded in 1867 *were all white men*. The city settled the lawsuit by eliminating at-large and adopting a ward system—again, like we have in Urbana. And since they removed at-large? The city has elected 5 African-Americans, 8 women, a Latino, and a person of Native-American descent. Danville, with an over 20% African-American population, has since had two African-Americans on the council at all times.

In 1998, the citizens of Urbana voted to eliminate at-large seats from the school board in favor of district elections. Subsequently, the first African-American was elected to that body in *20 years*.

While Springfield and Danville's electoral systems were fully at-large, the system being proposed in Urbana is referred to as a "mixed" system—one made up of both districts and at-large. Proponents of the proposed change suggest this is an important distinction, one which makes all of the scientific evidence "irrelevant." But the leading scholars in political science have studied mixed systems as well. Susan Welch, a leading researcher on the effects of at-large elections on minority representation, and Dean and 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.”

Given the overwhelming national and local evidence, we can easily predict some of the effects of adding at-large to Urbana’s city council. Currently, the council is 1/7<sup>th</sup> African-American, just as 1/7<sup>th</sup> of Urbana’s population is African-American. Since at-large seats *almost never* elect minority candidates, we can be assured that at-large would dilute minority representation in Urbana’s city government, with African-American representation immediately shifting to 1/9<sup>th</sup> of the council. This disparity would grow over time, as African-Americans are on track to make up 1/5<sup>th</sup> of Urbana’s population within the next 10 years.

One of the fundamental reasons at-large dilutes minority representation is the high cost of running a city-wide campaign. 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 funds to compete with special interest funded candidates either.

While a candidate for a ward seat can knock on every door in their ward, it would be impossible for an at-large candidate to knock on every door in the city. This forces at-large candidates to replace personal contact with media saturation. As such, they engage in one-way communication, broadcasting their ideas out to the people, hoping voters find their sound bites more appealing than the other candidates’ sound bites. In contrast, a ward candidate continuously engages in two-way communication with the voters. Every time they knock on a door they hear the concerns of their neighbors, and it is in their best interests as a candidate to remember and respond to those concerns. The concept of local government is that local decisions are made by normal people that understand the concerns of people like them. In comparison, at-large elections produce council representatives that are out of touch with those they represent, and obligated to special interests.

There has been extensive research into alternative electoral systems. Various versions of a system called proportional representation (such as that used in Peoria, IL) are often cited in research on election reform. Unfortunately, those pushing for at-large elections never researched the problems inherent in this system that cities across the country have been abandoning 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 grassroots organization opposed to the addition of at-large seats in Urbana. Further information, including a detailed review of the scientific literature on this topic, is available on the organization’s website, at <http://www.noatlarge.org> .*