

IDEAS MATTER

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A Case Against At-Large Elections

To begin a discussion about election systems, it may be informative to set a baseline regarding what an election does for a representative democracy.

The American Experiment of self governance relies upon free and fair elections to determine the will of the governed in a process of selecting representatives to our government. Public opinion can ebb and flow, so we agree to select our representatives on a single day.

Any variance from this agreement weakens our democracy and works counter to the experiment.

Elections are not for those in elective office and they are not for political parties. Both the elected and the parties that help in this process are vitally important, but they exist as servants to the nation and to the citizenry. Elections are meant to tally the opinion of the electorate equally. In the end, the design and function of an election system is best described mathematically.

Tucson's Council Election System: We use an at-large system to elect our City Council. Three city districts, called wards, elect with the Mayor (1, 2 & 4), while three wards elect in the middle of the Mayor's term (3, 5 & 6). All of these elections are conducted on "off-years" when state and federal elections are not being conducted. This allows for the electorate to concentrate on city issues, but it can also lead to voter fatigue and lower voter turnout.

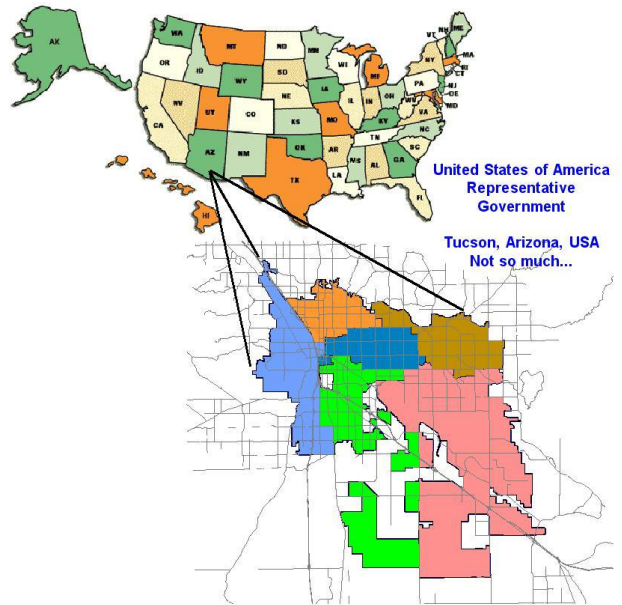
In our Council elections we hold a primary within the ward and then a general election to select the Council member is held citywide. This is a Jim Crow Era election scheme that was enacted in 1929 here in Tucson. It had the effect of removing Hispanic people from the Council for the next two decades. At-large elections were eliminated in over 200 municipalities in the "Deep South" after the 1965 Voting Rights Act due to this kind of recognized unfairness to racial and ethnic minorities. Tucson, along with a number of Democratic Party leaning cities were allowed to keep theirs with the idea that the systems were not discriminating based upon race or ethnicity. As a modern day example, the Georgia Republican Party has argued that gerrymandering of districts to favor a political party is justified under the Voting Right Act. It is my view that wrong is wrong and to the best of system design, election systems should not discriminate. At-large elections are designed to discriminate and I believe we here in Tucson can do better.

Example Ward 6: The argument, above, is a moral one. Here's a simple mathematical one.

- Ward 6 has roughly 60,000 voters, thus each vote represents 1/60,000. (this varies with turnout)
- A Ward 6 primary does not require a majority outcome. (as little as 25% +1 is needed in 2025)
- Tucson has roughly 300,000 voters, thus each vote represents 1/300,000. (disregarding turnout)
- Therefore, in Ward 6 a vote is 5-times weaker in choosing the actual representative for the ward.
- Tucson's at-large allows the majority to select representation for the minority.

If elections are to promote equal representation, or at least equivalent, then Tucson's at-large system falls short. We should avoid the characterization of those who have supported this system in the past and in our present. We need to convince those citizens toward a better way.

I'm Calling for a more democratic Democratic Party and City Government.



GOOD, FAST, CHEAP -- WE ONLY GET TWO

Tucson: An Electoral History

The table to the right shows a history of party positions in elections from 1950 to 2023 or 73 years of at-large electioneering.

Out of 132 Council elections, 30 Council seats were won by candidates who did not win their wards (23%). Comparing all these elections with the Dem to Rep ratio, we can note that with all of these ward losses, none of them changed the overall party leadership on the Council. Thus, our at-large system has never been proven to unduly upset party leadership.

What this means is that there has been no danger regarding party dominance. It follows that there is no danger to Democratic dominance on the Council from removing our at-large system. At least it has proven so for 73 years.

It follows that since there is no strategic issue and there exists a 15/15 tie in ward losses, we can dispense with concerns about overall dominance. The ethical nature of the at-large question remains. Should the majority be allowed to choose representation for the minority viewpoint? Should citizens of a ward be subjected to political representation from a candidate who the ward did not elect? Taxation without chosen representation is a time honored American grievance.

	Mayor	WARD						Dem:Rep
		1	2	3	4	5	6	
1950								
1951		Ward Loss						3 : 4
1952						Ward Loss	Ward Loss	0 : 7
1953		Unopposed						0 : 7
1954								3 : 4
1955					Ward Loss			6 : 1
1956					Ward Loss			6 : 1
1957			Ward Loss		Ward Loss			7 : 0
1958						Ward Loss		4 : 3
1959			Ward Loss		Ward Loss			4 : 3
1960						Ward Loss		4 : 3
1961								0 : 7
1962						Ward Loss		1 : 6
1963		Ward Loss	Ward Loss					2 : 5
1965								4 : 3
1967		Ward Loss	Ward Loss					5 : 2
1969						Ward Loss		2 : 5
1971			Ward Loss					2 : 5
1973								5 : 2
1975			Ward Loss					6 : 1
1977						Ward Loss		3:2:2
1979			Ward Loss					5 : 2
1981								6 : 1
1983			Ward Loss					6 : 1
1985				Unopposed		Ward Loss		5 : 2
1987					Ward Loss			6 : 1
1989								7 : 0
1991			Ward Loss					7 : 0
1993				Ward Loss				7 : 0
1995			Ward Loss					7 : 0
1997				Unopposed		Unopposed	Ward Loss	6 : 1
1999								5 : 2
2001				Ward Loss		Unopposed	Ward Loss	4 : 3
2003								4 : 3
2005						Unopposed		6 : 1
2007								6 : 1
2009							Ward Loss	6 : 1
2011								6 : 1
2013							Unopposed	7 : 0
2015								7 : 0
2017						Unopposed		7 : 0
2019								7 : 0
2021						Unopposed		7 : 0
2023					Unopposed			7 : 0
2025								

So, What can be done?

Changing our election system is serious business. Our elections should only be changed by the will of the people. This means that a plan must be designed democratically and brought to the electorate in the form of one or several ballot measures. Additionally, voting should take place in a general election with the Mayor on the ballot to maximize voter engagement. Additionally, any design should not put undue pressure on our current ward system. This is a tall order that will change history in our region. If we do it right, we can spread our good work throughout the nation.

If you've ever believed that the American people are better than their representatives, then perhaps it all comes down to the way we elect our representatives. Let's double down on democracy.