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Minority Representation in American City Councils: The Effect of Election Systems

Abstract

This research examines the impact of election systems on African-American and Hispanic representation for city councils and employs two hypotheses:

H1 Ward elections will produce more equitable minority representation than do at-large election systems, independent of the effect of the state's political culture, minority populations, overall population size, and region.

H2 Mixed cities, those with both ward and at-large elections, will represent minorities less equitably than in ward cities but more equitably than at-large cities, independent of the effect of the state's political culture, minority populations, overall population size, and

region.

R. Scott Ralston

Minority Representation in American City Councils: The Effect of Election Systems

American elections determine who is represented in American politics; the type of election system a city adopts has a major effect on election outcomes. The three main election systems are ward, at-large, and mixed. At-large elections were the preferred electoral structure for most city governments in the early 1970s. At-large elections elect city council members from the whole city and traditionally result in fewer minorities being elected. Pressure from the Voting Rights Act and judicial decisions have led to a decrease in cities with only at-large election systems. The reason for this change came about because purely at-large systems underrepresented minorities. Political scientists did research in this area and showed that only around half of the minority population concentration in U.S. cities was represented in at-large systems (Welch).

The opposites of at-large systems are ward or district elections. These are single-member districts in which one representative is elected from a certain part of the city. District elections have traditionally benefited minorities inwards where they make up higher percentages of the district than the city as a whole. Data from the 1970s support this. Dye and Robinson found that African Americans were represented 85% of their population proportion compared to only 42% in at-large system.

Recently more cities have adopted mixed systems, which have an element of both ward and at-large systems. ICMA (International City Management Association) survey results "showed an aggregate decline in the percentage of jurisdictions reporting the use of at-large elections, from 66.5% in 1981 ... to 60.9 in 1996 . . . while mixed systems increased from 26.8% in 1986 to 29.3% in 1991 . . . to 22.3% in 1996" and ward systems increased from 11.7% to 16.8% from 1991-1996 (Desantis and Renner 38). Findings show that Hispanics are best represented in mixed systems (McManus). Welch found that structure has a negligible impact for Hispanic representation.

Hypotheses

This research examines the impact of election systems on African-American and Hispanic representation for city councils and employs two hypotheses:

H1 Ward elections will produce more equitable minority representation than do at-large election systems, independent of the effect of the state's political culture, minority populations, overall population size, and region.

H2 Mixed cities, those with both ward and at-large elections, will represent minorities less equitably than in ward cities but more equitably than at-large cities, independent of the effect of the state's political culture, minority populations, overall population size, and region.

The dependent variables this study seeks to explain are African-American and Hispanic representation on city councils. The primary independent variable is the type of election system.

This research controls for the impact of the following possible contaminating variables that might be correlated with the independent and dependent variables in this analysis: minority population proportion, population size, region, and political culture.

Data and Methods

This study is based on the Form of Government Survey conducted by the International City Management Association in 1996. The survey was sent in August 1996 to 7,331 municipal jurisdictions. Survey responses included council size, ethnic make-up of the council, election system, and population size. 4,555 responses were collected or roughly 60% of the surveys that were sent (Desantis and Renner).

Using the ICMA survey, this study looks at the ethnic representation of city councils in cities with 50,000 or more people based on the 1990 Census.

Cities of 50,000 or more have been used extensively in previous research and also allow for a more thorough testing of our hypotheses since they tend to have a larger minority population than smaller cities. The city also had to have at least a 10% minority population of a certain ethnic background. The chances of a minority getting elected to a city council increase dramatically if there is a minority population of at least 10%. This is because most city councils have anywhere from five to twelve members; a minority population below ten percent makes it extremely hard to win because of the small size of most city councils.

The ethnic groups analyzed are African American and Hispanic. African Americans and Hispanics are America's largest minority populations and tend to be concentrated in urban centers. Using these criteria the number of cases analyzed total 174. Eighty-nine African American and eighty-five Hispanic cases are examined.

The analysis will have two different dependent variables. One is the percentage of the city council that is African American or Hispanic. The other is a ratio measure. The percentage of African Americans or Hispanics on the city council is divided by the percentage of African Americans or Hispanics in the city population. When African Americans and Hispanics are represented in the exact proportion found in the population, the measure equals 1.00. The first measure controls more for minority population proportion in the city.

The independent variable, which we will concentrate on, is the form of election system. The three different categories—at-large, ward, and mixed—meet the definitions in the introduction.

The control variables are measured in the following ways: political culture, using Daniel Elazar's classifications of individualistic, moralistic and traditionalistic states; minority population percentage (minority population level); 1990 population in thousands

(population size); and whether the city is in the South or outside of the South (region). The control variables are chosen because they have the greatest chance of contaminating our results if they are not controlled for.

For this analysis multiple regressions is the statistical procedure used. Because regression controls for all of the possible causes included in the research, this allows researchers to determine which independent variables had the greatest impact on the dependent variable and the relative strength of the impact the independent variables have on the dependent variable.

Table 1
Regression Analysis Results with African-American Representation as a Percentage of City Council Seats as the Dependent Variable in Cities >10% and <50% African American

Variable	Beta	t	Significance
At-Large v. Ward	-0.007	-0.08	0.937
At-Large v. Mixed	-0.08	-0.958	0.341
%Pop Afr. Amer.	0.822	10.058	0.001
Population Size	0.031	0.433	0.666
South v. Non-South	0.234	0.735	0.465
Moral v. Individual	0.019	0.204	0.839
Moral v. Traditional	0.115	0.344	0.732

Multiple R= .804
 Multiple R Square = .647
 Standard Error = .106
 N=89

Table 1 indicates that, while the model is significant, the independent variables are not significant with the exception of the percentage of the city's population that is African American. This suggests that the model is getting almost all of its explanatory power from this variable. This is why the next regression analysis uses the ratio measure. It is surprising that the Ward and Mixed election systems are not positively correlated with minority representation over At-large systems. This is inconsistent with the hypothesis.

Table 2
Regression Analysis Results with African-American Representation as a Ratio (% Council / % African-American population) as the Dependent Variable in Cities >10% and <50% African American

Variable	Beta	t	Significance
At-Large v. Ward	-0.007	-0.08	0.937
At-Large v. Mixed	-0.08	-0.958	0.341
%Pop Afr. Amer.	0.822	10.058	0.001
Population Size	0.031	0.433	0.666
South v. Non-South	0.234	0.735	0.465
Moral v. Individual	0.019	0.204	0.839
Moral v. Traditional	0.115	0.344	0.732

Multiple R = .362
Multiple R = .132
Standard Error= .508
N = 89

Table 2 shows that, inconsistent with this study's expectations, the difference between at-large and ward systems was not significant for African-American representation. The beta value of -.108 indicates that a shift toward ward systems tends, on average, to reduce African-American representation, but the probability of chance occurrence is very high (.448).

The independent effect of at-large versus mixed electoral systems, however, is statistically significant at the .10 level. The beta value of -.237 means that there is an average decrease of .237 standard deviations of the dependent variable for every one standard deviation change in this election system variable, controlling for all of the other causes included in the analysis. The t value of -1.79 and significance of .077 indicates that the probability that these results could have occurred by chance is less than .10. These findings are also inconsistent with expectations.

Region is the only other variable that appears to have a significant impact on the dependent variable. Inconsistent with expectations, African-American representation increases when one moves from the non-South to the South. With a t value of 1.817 and significance of .073 the probability that these results could have occurred by chance is less than .10.

Political culture is harder to explain. Individualistic culture benefits African-American representation better than moralistic culture but it is statistically insignificant (.933). Traditionalistic culture is positive for African-American representation. The tradition of racism in the South and the historical denial of the vote to African Americans make these results surprising. The beta value of .687 is relatively high but the probability of chance is also high at .196. The findings do suggest that the South is not nearly as closed to African-American representation as it has been in the past.

Table 3
Regression Analysis Results with Hispanic Representation as a Percentage of Hispanics on the City Council

Variable	Beta	t	Significance
At-Large v. Ward	0.250	2.496	0.015
At-Large v. Mixed	0.134	1.437	0.155
%Pop Afr. Amer.	0.611	7.633	0.001
Population Size	-0.055	-0.594	0.554
South v. Non-South	0.104	0.627	0.504
Moral v. Individual	-0.0405	-0.468	0.641
Moral v. Traditional	0.244	1.574	0.120

Multiple R = .727
Multiple R = .529
Standard Error= .131
N = 85

Table 3 shows that, consistent with our hypotheses, ward election systems do benefit Hispanics better than at-large elections. At a value of 2.496 and significance of .015, the probability that this occurred by chance is less than .05. The percent of the population that is Hispanic is significant. This is consistent with the literature that finds that as the percentage of the population that is minority increases, representation does as well. This is significant beyond the .001 level. The general direction of at-large vs. mixed systems is consistent with the hypotheses though it is not statistically significant (.155).

Moralistic culture vs. traditional is somewhat surprising as it is clear that traditional political culture benefits Hispanic representation more so than moralistic culture. This may have to do with election systems that the culture adopts. A major traditionalistic state is Texas, while a major moralistic state is California. California overwhelmingly adopts at-large elections, while traditionalistic cultures have more mixed election systems. A large number of the Hispanic ICMA cases come from California and Texas and are not representative of the nation, therefore contaminating our results. For the above reasons the effect of political culture on Hispanic representation is inconclusive.

Table 4 Regression Analysis Results with Hispanic Representation as a Ratio (%Hispanics on Council / % Population Hispanic) as the Dependent Variable in Cities of >10% and <50% Hispanic

Variable	Beta	t	Significance
At-Large v. Ward	0.190	1.444	0.153
At-Large v. Mixed	0.212	1.791	0.078
%Pop Afr. Amer.	0.083	0.794	0.430
Population Size	0.014	0.117	0.907
South v. Non-South	0.234	1.153	0.253
Moral v. Individual	-0.060	-0.525	0.601
Moral v. Traditional	0.423	2.073	0.042

Multiple R = .432

Multiple R = .186
 Standard Error= .523
 N = 85

Table 4 shows that, consistent with the hypotheses, the mixed systems increase Hispanic representation over at-large systems. The beta value of .212 indicates that there is an average increase of .212 standard deviations of our dependent variable for every one standard deviation change. The t value of 2.433 and significance of .078 indicates that the probability that these results could have occurred by chance is less than .10. A shift from at-large election systems to ward systems is positive as expected.

The independent effect of moralistic political culture versus traditionalistic culture is statistically significant. The beta value of .423 is the highest among the variables. With a significance value of .042, it is significant at the .05 level.

This relationship is probably explained by the large number of Hispanic cases from Texas which is a traditionalistic culture. The other state with a large number of Hispanic cases is California. California is a moralistic culture. Hispanics have been more successful in Texas than in California in achieving equitable representation.

Looking at the simple mean measures of ratio and the percentage with no representation, we can see the effect of election systems on African-American representation. What stands out the most is that African Americans are not at a disadvantage in at-large systems. In fact, the opposite occurs a 16% advantage over ward systems and a 25% advantage over mixed systems. This is very encouraging as African Americans have succeeded in getting elected by the city as a whole.

Table 5
The Effect of Election Systems on African-American Representation

Election System Ratio	(Council %/City%)	No Representation
At Large (n=20)	1.07	15%
Ward (n=20)	0.91	15%
Mixed (n=45)	0.82	13%

Table 6
The Effect of Political Culture on African-American Representation

Political Culture	Ward	%NR	At-Large	%NR	Mixed	%NR
Individual (n=25)	1.02	0	1.22	0	.92	13
Traditional (n=43)	.70	20	1.06	11	.73	17
Moralist (n=17)	1.16	14	.91	40	.91	0

Tables 5 and 6 indicate that regardless of election systems, the individualistic political culture has the greatest equity of representation of the three types of political culture. This makes sense as alliances with different groups have long been a part of individualistic cultures harkening back to the machine days. Traditionalistic culture has negative effects

on African-American representation in ward and mixed systems, but does not in at-large systems.

This is consistent with earlier findings. Moralistic culture has the problem of having a high percentage of no representation, but when it is achieved it is close to individualistic culture in terms of representation.

Table 7
The Effect of Election Systems on Hispanic Representation

Election System	Ratio %	No Representation
At Large (n=57)	0.44	51%
Ward (n=9)	0.94	0%
Mixed (n=17)	0.71	24%

Table 7 suggests that at-large systems do a horrible job of representing Hispanic populations. 51% of at-large councils with no Hispanic representation is a staggering figure that needs to be addressed in the future. None of the systems over-represents Hispanic populations, which means Hispanics have a long way to go before they achieve full incorporation into the political system.

Mixed systems do significantly better than at-large systems, but with 24% having no representation this does not present very much encouragement. Ward systems did very well although the number of cases is relatively low. It does suggest that maybe a shift to ward systems would greatly benefit Hispanics.

Table 8
The Effect of Political Culture on Hispanic Representation

Political Culture	Ward	%NR	At-Large	%NR	Mixed	%NR
Individual (n=25)	0.70	0	0.0	100	.66	0
Traditional (n=43)	1.19	0	0.88	13	.63	50
Moralist (n=17)	0.61	0	0.39	55	0.87	0

Table 8 demonstrates that traditionalistic political culture is the only one that does a decent job of representing Hispanic if they are represented. At-large elections in traditionalistic cultures have a significantly greater impact than they do in individualistic and moralistic cultures. What is encouraging is that changes in moralistic cultures toward mixed systems would greatly increase Hispanic representation. There were only five cases of moralist and mixed systems. This number needs to increase dramatically. But the effect of California and Texas make the results inconclusive for all of the political cultures.

Conclusion

Neither of the regression models for African-American representation found any significant independent effects. Running another regression with the ratio measure has shown that there are multiple interactive effects, suggesting a more complex explanation for African-

American representation. Other models have had a hard time explaining variance as Dye and Robinson with 11 variables received an R squared of less than .40.

The findings do put into dispute two long held assumptions: that at-large system hurt African-American representation and that the political culture of the South hurts African-American representation (Karnig). In fact, with traditionalistic systems and at-large systems combined we get a ratio of 1.06 — in fact, overrepresentation. This suggests that African Americans in the South have become a significant part of the ruling hierarchy. A further explanation that needs to be explored is that at-large systems may actually force African-American cohesion around one African American candidate. Whereas, in ward elections "the black vote may be split" if more than one African American runs in the district resulting in no African-American representation (Karnig).

Overall, at-large systems benefited African-American representation over ward and mixed systems. This is consistent with recent trends as Welch in 1990 found that blacks do much better in at-large cities than they did a decade ago. Region was significant as African Americans were better represented in non-Southern cities. This is consistent with most findings.

Findings on Hispanic representation are less clear as not many studies have been done. This study disagrees with recent findings by Welch that "District elections do not generally facilitate election of Hispanics" (Welch 1072). Unfortunately, the number of cases is only nine but they have a ratio of .94. More importantly all have some representation. These findings are consistent in that Hispanics do better in mixed systems than pure at-large systems. No election system gives equitable representation to Hispanics. This suggests that they have a long way to go to achieve full incorporation into the political process.

The goal of equitable representation for minorities is hard to achieve, but these findings suggest that at-large elections do not have as much negative effect as previously thought for African-American representation. African Americans have made great economic strides in the past thirty years and this is reflected in the political arena at the city level, with economic advancement the same will occur for Hispanics. Hispanics are at a great disadvantage in at-large systems and would greatly benefit from a move toward ward and mixed systems. Political culture clearly has an effect. Individualistic cultures advantage African Americans over moralistic and traditionalistic, while traditional cultures advantage Hispanics over moralistic and individualistic. But these findings are disproportionately affected by the states of Texas and California.

Future research should concentrate on the variables in at-large systems that hurt Hispanic representation disproportionately over African Americans. In the same election systems and city, it would be valuable to explore if African Americans and Hispanics compete against each other and to see if African Americans simply are more electorally successful because of more economic resources.

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