Ward Electoral Systems in Oregon Cities

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Background

Ever since the earliest municipal reform days, shortly after the 1900's, reformers have been trying to reduce the influence of corrupt politicians who, at one time, controlled most large cities. Most governments then were fragmented and decentralized, and it was simple for "party bosses" to dominate the political landscape, while staying often largely out of sight.

Several reforms blossomed. They were (1) the city manager plan, (2) the short ballot, (the confusing long ballot led voters to rely on the advice of the bosses on contests for trivial posts, like city recorder), (3) at-large elections, (4) civil service reform to prevent politically motivated appointments, and (5) a small council to clarify responsibilities and separate council policy from the manager's professional management of the city. To a lesser degree, the plan also included the recall, should councilors need to be removed from office; and the referendum, whereby citizens could directly propose legislation.

These reforms were aimed at providing middle and upper class citizens with the electoral tools to purify municipal life. Most of these reforms are now routine and are now the "conventional wisdom" of municipal life. In recent years, however, the political pendulum has swung from the rejection of corruption and political advantage to a more complex search for political leadership (a strong mayor) and representation of all groups on the council. This change has affected most parts of the "reform model."

Originally, at-large elections were to eliminate the influence of geographically based politicians. To do this, the at large part of the reform model featured the election of business or other professional people who could gain support from city wide interests and who were not guilty of a "partial" ward view.

At-large elections assumed that "better" kinds of candidates wouldn't emerge from wards, where small or petty issues flourish. For cities to grow and develop, civic affairs needed to be to be run like a business. To assure this happened, the voting public needed to identify and select honest, effective councilors, usually businessmen. This superior type of candidate was usually found only in citywide elections.

This belief was probably true years ago, when cities were first emerging from their dark days Today, however, there's not much evidence that "better kinds" of candidates can only be found through at large elections.

Similar candidates now emerge in similar cities, regardless of the existence of wards. Rehfuss showed this 30 years ago. He found that high status suburbs of Chicago with wards attracted the same type of candidate (similar in social status) that similar suburbs without wards did. Doctors, dentists, and accountants were as attracted to ward seats as their counterparts in non ward cities were attracted to at large posts. So were blue collar workers, truck drivers, and carpenters. The same result occurred in lower economic status suburbs – those with wards drew the same type of candidates as their sister cities with at large elections.(1)

However, this is only part of the question. Some might argue that you may get as many doctors and lawyers from ward as from at large elections, but the ward based doctor or comparable high social status occupations from a ward comes with a narrow view of events shaped by ward experiences and elections revolving around ward issues. "You can take the boy out of the ward" it's argued, by placing him at a council meeting with at large councilors, but "you can't take the ward out of the boy," and he or she will always see ward issues in any citywide issue.

This could be, although one doubts it. Many well governed cities have wards which seem to coexist happily with many other parts of the reform model such as the city manager plan, strong civil service systems, the short ballot, small councils, etc. Indeed, there are a number of advantages that wards have over at large elections, although these advantages presuppose a large city. Ward elections are generally less expensive; ward elections can ensure more minority representation (although certain elections, such a proportional representation or cumulative voting, have the same effect); ward election brings government closer to the voter and increases accountability; ward elections ensure that all areas of the city are represented; ward elections or mixed systems bring flexibility, such as the ability to promise areas to be annexed their own representatives (assuming population limits are reached); and ward elections decrease the chance that several or most members of the council will be from one area.(2)

The Study

This study was to gain information about the operation of ward cities in Oregon and to see if, indeed, ward cities are different from at large cities. I began with the assumption that ward cities are as well run as at large cities, and there is no longer any reason to choose either system over the other, except for particular situations in each city.

The Cities. Twenty two Oregon cities electing all or some of their councilors from wards were selected. The cities were usually selected by reviewing their web pages, although a few were selected by calls to the City Recorder.

I believe that these 22 cities constitute the major share of Oregon cities with wards. They contain 103 wards with 146 councilors. Nine cities had two councilor from each ward, while 13 cities had one councillor per ward. Questionnaires were sent to the 142 councilors with addresses reported to the League of Oregon Cities (LOC). Forty seven, about 33%, were returned. At least one councilor from each city, but Hillsboro, responded, including six of nine in Corvallis (see Table one).

City size varied from 141,000 down to 4,000, with the sample average of about 35,600. There were some small cities, such as Tillamook, Lincoln City, Milton-Freewater and Cottage Grove, all with under 10,000; but, generally, larger rather than smaller cities tended to contain wards.

Responses. Smaller city councilors tended to respond more frequently than their counterparts in larger cities. There were only five respondents from Salem, Eugene, Hillsboro and Medford, the only sample cities over 60,000 population.* There was an average of only 1.25 councilor responses from each of these cities, while councilors in cities under 60,000 averaged 2.3 responses per city. Looking at it another way, 5 of 30 (17%) questionnaires were returned by respondents from the four largest cities, while 42 of 112 (38%) respondent were from the 18 smaller cities. The four smallest cities had a 46% return rate (10 out of 22).

*If one includes Albany, Springfield and Corvallis, the next three largest cities with a population from of 40,000 to 55,000, as large cities; responses are about equal between large and small cities. This is because Albany, with four of six questionnaires returned, and Corvallis, with six of nine questionnaires returned, were the two cities with the highest return rates.

Table 1: Questionnaires Sent and Received

City	Population (2002)	Questionnaires Sent	Questionnaires Received
Albany	42,280	6	4
Astoria	9,790	4	2
Central Point	14,120	5*	1
Corvallis	52,450	9	6
Cottage Grove	8,730	6	3
Eugene	142,380	8	2
Grants Pass	23,870	8	2
Hermiston	14,120	8	2
Hillsboro	78,840	6	0
Klamath Falls	19,680	4*	1
Lebanon	13,110	6	1
Lincoln City	7,420	5*	2
McMinnville	28,200	6	2
Medford	66,090	8	2
Milton-Freewater	6,450	6	2
Newberg	18,750	6	2
Pendleton	16,600	8	2
Roseburg	20,170	8	4
Salem	141,150	8	1
Springfield	53,910	5*	1
Tillamook	4,340	6	3
Woodburn	20,860	6	2
	Average: 38,575	Total: 142	Total: 47 (33%)

* In these cities, questionnaires were sent only to councilors on LOC records, which were occasionally incomplete. Thus, there are fewer questionnaires (142) than councilors (146).

Table 2: Electoral Systems by City

City	Wards	Seats/ Ward	Electoral System			Councilors At-Large	Total Councilors
			Wards	At-Large	Both		
Albany	3	2	✓				6
Astoria	4	1	✓				4
Central Point	4	1		✓		2	6
Corvallis	9	1	✓				9
Cottage Grove	4	1		✓*		2	6
Eugene	8	1	✓				8
Grants Pass	4	2		✓			8
Hermiston	4	1		✓		4	8
Hillsboro	3	2					6
Klamath Falls	5	1	✓				5
Lebanon	3	2	✓				6
Lincoln City	3	2	✓				6
McMinnville	3	2	✓				6
Medford	4	2	✓				8
Milton-	3	1			✓	3	6
Newberg	6	1		✓			6
Pendleton	3	2			✓	2	8
Roseburg	4	2	✓				8
Salem	8	1	✓				8
Springfield	6	1		✓			6
Tillamook	6	1	✓**				6
Woodburn	6	1	✓				6
TOTALS:			13	6	2	5 (cities)	

* Respondents disagree, the city may have gone to AL in 1998.
** One respondent reported at large elections. City recorder verified ward elections.

Ward Electoral Systems. Ward systems can be complex. Table 2, type of ward elections, (above) shows all arrangements by city. Table 3, type of ward elections, summarizes the electoral system data.

Table 3:
Type of Ward Elections in Cities

All Councilors Elected From Wards			Both At-large and Ward Elections	
Elect At-Large	1 Seat/Ward	2 Seats/Ward	All At-large	Ward Elections
3	7	7	3	2

The 17 cities who elect only ward councilors form one group. In this group, three elect ward councilors by a city wide vote and 14 elect councilors by a ward vote, including 10 of the largest 12 cities. Seven of these 14 cities have one councilor from each ward while seven elect two councilors from each ward.

It isn't obvious from the responses why some cities have two, rather than one, councilors from each ward. It could maximize citizen access, since there are two councilors for each area, but it may simply provide a chance for "two bites of the apple," since citizens could play one councilor against other. The choice of two councilors per ward may be simply random, since it occurs equally in small, large and medium sized cities.

The second group is five cities which have two or more at large councilors, in addition to three or four ward councilors. Of these five cities with a "mixed system," three elect all councilors, including ward councilors, at large. Two elect ward councilors from ward voters only. These five cities have a total of 13 councilors at large, and are small, averaging 12,000 in population.

It's not clear what purpose having both at large and ward councilors serves. However, nationally, there is a slight tendency toward adopting these "mixed systems." Renner and DiSantis found, in a 1991 International City Association survey, that these combined systems increased slightly from 1986. Mixed systems, in the 10,000 to 50,000 population range, now include 30% of all cities, compared to at large systems, which fell to about

57%, and ward systems, which remained stable at 12%. The Pacific Coast, including Oregon, had comparatively higher percentages of at large cities. Renner and DiSantis imply that the increase in mixed systems may have been a reaction to Voting Rights challenges to at large systems. (3)

Councilor Views

Does the Ward System Work Well and are Citizens Satisfied? Councilors were asked if the city ward system was working well (W) and if citizens were satisfied with the ward system (S). To W questions they could answer Very successful (1), Moderately successful (2), Not sure (3), Fairly unsuccessful (4), or Very unsuccessful (5). For S questions , they could respond Very satisfied (1), Moderately satisfied (2), Not sure (3), Fairly dissatisfied (4), or Very dissatisfied (5). Most responded very successful or moderately successful to W questions (only four of forty seven gave ratings lower than moderately successful) . Likewise, respondents rated S questions very satisfied or moderately satisfied (only one person rated citizen satisfaction lower than moderate) .Tables 4 and 5 give the breakdowns for councilors in all cities.

Table 4:
Ward System Works as Intended

Very Satisfied	Moderately or less Satisfied
23	24

Table 5:
Citizen Satisfaction with Ward System

Very Satisfied	Moderately or less Satisfied
27	20

Councilors believe citizens are satisfied with the ward system to a slightly greater degree than the councilors themselves think the ward system works. This view becomes more pronounced when city size is considered. Tables 6 and 7 divide responses between large cities (population > 40,000, N = seven) and small cities (population < 30,000, N = 15)

Table 6:
Ward System works as intended

Ratings	1	2 or lower
Large City respondents	12	4
Small City respondents	11	20
Total	23	24

Table 7:
Citizen Satisfaction with ward system

Ratings	1	2 or lower
Large city respondents	13	3
Small city respondents	14	17
Total	27	20

Respondents in large cities are more likely to be positive about whether the ward system is working as it should, and whether or not citizens are satisfied with the ward system in their cities. One respondent from a large city, Salem, stated "We believe the ward system, in combination with our neighborhood associations, allows for more responsiveness to the concerns of a smaller area and population. Salem is too large and diverse to be knowledgeable about every local concern." In comparison to Salem, population 139,000, the vast majority of the low rankings occur in smaller cities.

This outcome shouldn't be surprising. The ward system recognizes smaller, more homogenous districts within a larger area. Thus, large complex cities like Salem or Eugene presumably have wards because a councilor can't know the whole city. Conversely, in smaller cities (Tillamook or Cottage Grove, for example), councilors can know the whole city well and the city is relatively homogenous. Wards are less important there.

Several respondents from smaller cities also mentioned difficulty in finding good candidates from each ward. "Sometimes we have trouble finding good candidates who are willing to run from specific open wards while too many qualified candidates live in other areas of town but can't file." One response from a councilor in a small city where ward councilors were elected at large said "Everyone represents everyone, just makes it harder to get people to run." Finally, "In smaller towns it can be difficult to find individuals willing and qualified to fill positions. Our council and budget committee are selected by ward.....planning commission is at large"(this latter small city has a ward for every 600 or 700 persons).

In the seven largest cities, ward population ranged from 5,700 to 17,600, while in cities under 10,000 population, the population range was from 600 or 700 to 2,300. These are such large differences that it's not clear that a ward means the same in each city.

Reasons for Wards. Respondents were asked to give the reasons for their city's use of wards. The options were to control campaign costs; keep government closer to the voter; representation of minorities (race, age, gender, etc,); representation of neighborhoods; representation of all views; and representation of all city areas. They could select as many of these choices as they wished. Their first choice was rated six points, a second choice five, a third choice four, down to 0 if the option was not chosen.

Most respondents chose three or four options. Some made as many as six choices, while others made no choices for this question. The highest ranked option by respondents was "representation of all areas in the city," followed closely by " government closer to the voter." Representation of minorities received almost no support, and was the lowest rated choice, with no councilor ranking it higher than fourth. One large city respondent noted "We try to include neighborhood associations in adjusting ward boundaries, but minorities–just luck of the draw....." Either Oregon cities are highly homogeneous or councilors don't perceive groups, such as college students, as minorities.

One councilor wrote, "I would say that our ward system, while theoretically providing a base for representation of diversity on the basis of race, nationality and income class, has not really functioned to insure representation in those areas. I believe that my ward has the highest concentration of minorities and low-income persons but both councilors are Caucasian, self employed, middle class males. Our only Hispanic councilor resides in the ward with the next highest number of those citizens and is not what I would consider "low income."

Campaign costs ranked only fifth overall, but was the only category in Reasons for Wards answers which divided large and small city councilors. For large city councilors, campaign costs were more important. Sixteen large city councilors gave the campaign costs option 28 ½ points, while 31 small city respondents (not all respondents answered this question) only 23 points. Apparently in larger cities, campaign cost are hefty, and creating wards limits them to a smaller portion of the city. One large city councilor responded, "As I understand it, the system was put into place by a citizen vote after many years of control of the council by a special interest (i.e. , Chamber) who could afford citywide campaigns!"

Setting and Changing Ward Boundaries. Councilors were asked about how their ward boundaries were drawn (question 9) and changed (question 10). The options for the method of drawing boundaries were population, neighborhoods, topography, and social characteristics. For how ward boundaries were changed, respondents could choose

between a set schedule, frequently (less than 10 years), ward boundaries are stable, and boundaries are rarely changed.

Most respondents from large cities reported that their city based ward boundaries on population alone, realigning boundaries after each United States census. A fairly small number of these same respondents reported that neighborhoods were also used in setting boundaries. In answering question 10, most large city respondents referred to a set schedule, although some mentioned that boundaries changed frequently while others averred that their boundaries were stable.

Smaller city respondents also emphasized population, with many also noting natural topographical boundaries. A major difference between small city and large city respondents was that most small city councilors (21 of 28 who answered the question) reported either that " Ward boundaries are rarely, if ever changed," or "Ward boundaries are stable." Only four large city respondents indicated that boundaries were stable and none said that boundaries rarely changed. Clearly, small cities in Oregon have not experienced the population growth that larger cities have, and have apparently not needed to adjust ward boundaries.

One might get the impression from the responses that setting ward boundaries is a bloodless, routine duty. I doubt this. Boundary changes can be controversial. One councilor wrote "....I believe that the ward system was initiated by the business community to dilute the influence of Senior Estates, a retirement community of about 1,500 homes. Allegedly, it was able to pack (elect to) the City Council with ultra conservative, anti-growth, anti-government, anti tax councilors. For years, ward boundaries were drawn in a way that split Senior Estates among three wards, further weakening it's influence."

Selective ward boundary changes are probably more common than respondents admit. One councilor said, "I am on the council because the previous councilor was gerrymandered out of his seat." However, another respondent wrote "There is one additional criterion (not noted on survey question 10), which I question, namely that no councilor is to be removed out of his or her ward in the reapportionment process."

Elections. There were some interesting results from question 11, elections. Councilors could reply to six choices in three groups of two questions, each designed to be exclusive. Thus, three marks about elections were expected on each questionnaire returned. This happened in most cases, although many respondents didn't choose all possible options. Respondents could note (1) that elections were either competitive or low key; (2) that councilors were either generally ousted or reelected, and (3) that ward issues were either important or unimportant in elections.

Respondents indicated that once councilors were elected, they can generally get reelected. Of 47 possible responses, 40 reported that incumbents were generally reelected and only one suggested that incumbents were generally ousted. Fourteen of the possible 16 large city respondents indicated this and 26 of the possible 31 small city respondent also reported this result.

The other results divided respondents. In large cities, seven of 16 possible respondents reported that ward issues were important in elections. This is under half, but it still dwarfs the five councilors (out of 31 possible) from small cities, who reported that ward issues were important in elections. Apparently in small cities, ward issues rarely arise. What purpose, then, do wards serve in small cities? Perhaps, as one small city councilor noted "Rarely is there a ward issue–usually issues are citywide."

Election competition varied by size of city. Seven of 16 respondents from large cities (not necessarily the same ones who thought ward elections were important) reported elections as competitive, while eight of 16 thought them low key. This is about an equal division. However, only four of a possible 31 small city respondents regarded their elections as competitive, (!) while 21 small city respondents regarded them as low key. Apparently small city elections are rarely competitive. The results are summarized in Table eight.

Table 8: City Elections

	Competitive Elections	Incumbents Reelected	Ward Issues Important
Respondents from larger cities *	7 of 16	14 of 16	7 of 16
Respondents from Small Cities	4 of 31	26 of 31	5 of 31

* The numbers 16 and 31 represent the number of questionnaire returned (some respondents didn't answer a given election option), so 16 and 31 are maximum possible responses.

The election process wasn't viewed positively by those few who added comments to their questionnaires. One frustrated large city respondent, who also noted that elections are competitive and incumbents not always reelected, responded "The real question on elections for incumbents is why would one want to run again for a completely thankless job that takes 30 to 40 hours a week? The cost in terms of one's personal life, personal

finances, and business, are just too great for the little good one hopes (for) or can achieve."

One small city councilor who reported low key elections, noted "The primary concern of ward elections with me is that some councilors believe they should have favored status; and the ones that cry the loudest over minor issues are the less educated, less financially status, (sic) less socially responsible."

Summary

This short study of ward cities should shed some light on the ward option for Oregon cities, and perhaps for small cities elsewhere.

1. Cities with under, say, 20,000 population should tread carefully when considering wards. Small city responses didn't strongly endorse wards. Also, there's no evidence that ward issues are generally important or that wards improve political participation, as far as ousting incumbents or having competitive races.

2. Cities should be sure, when creating at large positions in addition to wards, that this hybrid system does not create unexpected problems. While the data does not deal with this issue, at large positions in ward cities don't seem inherently logical. At large elections, with multiple ward councilor slots, might result in a substantial part of the council from one geographic area. They might also create two groups of councilors, at large and ward, with at large councilors having more status since they represent the whole city.

Of course, as Renner and DiSantis imply, mixed systems may protect the city against Voting Rights legal challenges. Also, electing some councilors at large could solve a problem noted by some small city responses, recruiting "qualified" candidates entirely from a ward system.

3. Cities considering ward systems should be sure that those systems will solve problems associated with that system or whether there really are "ward problems." Remember, only five of 31 possible small city respondents, two from the same city, said that ward issues are important in elections.

4. Perhaps the next step in fully understanding why cities choose the ward form of government is to examine a smaller sample of cities, very large and very small, and by case studies evaluate the ward system's impact, if any, on local elections. The impression left by this preliminary study is that wards are highly functional in large cities, but in small cities may be electoral vestiges long bypassed by time.

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(1) Rehfuss, John, "Are At At-Large Districts Best for Council Manager Cities?" National Civic Review 61 (May, 1972) New York, NY, pp.236-42.

(2) Nalbandian, John, "Comments," Model City Charter Committee, National Civic League, Atlanta, Georgia, (June 21, 2001); Devine, Dan "George of the Jungle," Tucson, AZ Weekly (February 5, 2001); DiSantis, Paul and Irene Vivi , "The Case For Veritas," Santa Monica Mirror Volume 3, Issue 4 (January 20, 2003); "Enforced Democracy," The Niagara Falls Review, (September 16, 1998); Green, Paul, "A tale of two wards, or diversity in one city," Illinois Issues 39 (May, 1991); McDonald Deangelo, "Districts Ahead for Hartselle," The Decatur Journal (September 1, 2002); "Systems for Electing City Government," and "Results of the Survey,"City of Vancouver questionnaire, untitled(June, 1996); "The War of the Wards'" Niagara Falls Review, (2002); Smyser, Dick'"Council Members by district, Council members at large? a 60 year debate," The Oak Ridger (Tenn) Online, (January 16, 2003); Heather McWilliams, "Charter Review Commission wants longer tenure and fewer wards'" Newport (Rhode Island) This Week., (April 12, 2001); The Gang of 9,. Issues Briefs-Citywide Election of City Councilors (pamphlet) (January 25, 2003); Michael l. Niman, "Doomsday in Buffalo Part 111: Dave Franczyk, Racism and a Divided Council,"Politics WNY@aol.com (January 24, 2003), pp. 1-10; Office of the City Clerk, "Ward Boundary Design Policy,"City Policy C469,.City of Edmonton, Canada, (September 8, 1994);_____. "Governance Issues and Ward Systems," Edmonton, Canada, (April 24, 2003); Amy Bridges, Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997: DiSantis, Victor "Municipal Management Systems: Administration and Planning", unpublished manuscript, Bridgewater State College, MA, (April 24, 2003.); "Electoral Systems Influence Policy',"Idea House , National Center for Policy Analysis, Washington, D.C. (April 28-2003). Note: All works cited in footnote two are from the Internet.

(3) Renner, Tari and Victor DeSantis, "Contemporary Patterns and Trends in Municipal Government Structures," 1993 Municipal Yearbook, International City Management Association, Washington, D.C., p. 67.