At-Large Elections
and Minority-Group Representation:
A Re-Examination of
Historical and Contemporary
Evidence

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The effects of at-large or multimember-district elections on the opportunities of ethnic minority groups to participate effectively in the political process is a question of great practical importance. This paper attempts to clarify both the history and present effects of such elections and to situate this device within the context of developments that are reshaping local governments in the South and Southwest.

The use of at-large elections is widespread nationally. Sixty percent of cities in 1960 with a population above 10,000 elected their councilmen at large, while only 23 percent elected them solely from districts.¹ In cities of at least 5,000 population, most councilmen in 1971 were chosen at large and over twice as many cities elected some councilmen by this method rather than entirely by ward. Less than one percent of council members were Black, American Indian, Oriental, or Hispanic.²

Is there a causal relation between the small proportion of minority officials and the use of at-large elections? Scholars have long believed so:

... The municipal reform ideal of non-partisan, efficient, apolitical politics is certain to seem attractive to white, native, Protestant, middle-class citizens. By abolishing party labels, the lower-status groups are disoriented and become unwitting clients of the upper-status press. By doing away with 'peanut politics' (which apparently got its name from a political row over an Italian peanut vendor's stand), abolishing the small constituencies, and making the election of councilmen citywide, ethnic solidarity is weakened. 3

Citing Myrdal's 4 observation that "Negro apathy" in Detroit was partially the result of at-large elections, Lane concludes,

Municipal reforms of this nature: nonpartisanship, smaller city councils, the replacement of mayors by city-managers, may serve admirable technical purposes and in the long run be in the best interests of most groups in the community— but they weaken the political ties of the disorganized and depressed groups in the community. And, in doing this, they serve a strong, but usually repressed interest of the community's 'power elite,' whose focus is ostensibly upon the gains in efficiency and honesty brought about by the reforms, but who profit from the political apathy of the underdog. 5

Where accepted generalizations are concerned, however, one is entitled to ask for supporting evidence. One important source is the historical context in which at-large elections have developed. Associated with a self-described reform movement in the early twentieth century, this method was introduced widely in the name of "good government." 6 An inquiry into the situations in which it was typically implemented will shed light on the extent to which the reformers were motivated solely by such abstract civic concerns, as well as on the effects this reform was known to have had on citizen participation in that era.

A second source of evidence is the legal and political events of the 1970s. In this period several court decisions reflected a widespread belief among social scientists and jurists that at-large elections under

5 Lane, Political Life, 270.
6 We use the term "reform" in a neutral sense. It does not necessarily mean a transition from a bad system to a better one. Indeed, as this paper demonstrates, the at-large reform can be employed for racially discriminatory purposes. Reform is defined here as a change in governmental or electoral structure which is described by those who institute it as good.
certain conditions result in the unconstitutional dilution of minority-group votes. The landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *White v. Regester* (1973) and its progeny have defined the situations under which at-large elections operate in an impermissible manner.\(^7\) The court has held that the at-large construct is not unconstitutional *per se* but may be so if it operates to limit minority access to the electoral process or, in other words, dilutes or minimizes their vote.

The full judicial examination of an at-large electoral system involves a number of additional factors including historical discrimination; the existence of electoral devices which magnify the objectionable features of the at-large system (e.g., place voting, anti-single-shot laws, the majority requirement); the size of the electoral unit; the cost of campaigning; and the public policy behind at-large elections. More recently, the Supreme Court in *City of Mobile v. Bolden* (1980) has ruled that a demonstration of unconstitutional vote dilution must include proof of discriminatory intent in the adoption or maintenance of the at-large system.\(^8\)

Electoral changes in the wake of *White* have been extensive. In Texas, for example, almost one-half of the state legislature in 1970 was elected from multimember districts, and virtually all city councilmen and school district trustees were so chosen. By 1976 all legislators were chosen from single-member districts. In 1980 about one-third of the state’s urban inhabitants elected at least some of their council from wards and several of the larger school districts also had changed to single-member districts. These modifications came about largely through Federal court intervention. Even when jurisdictions “voluntarily” changed their election methods, litigation was usually either in progress or threatened. While no systematic assessment of the scope of reform has been made, other Southern states—particularly Louisiana—may have undergone even more extensive transformations.

It therefore is very likely that at-large elections presently render the election of minority candidates much more difficult than ward-based systems, which have been ordered as remedies in vote dilution cases. At the very least, minority plaintiffs and numerous federal judges hold this opinion, as the results of extensive litigation show.

However, a few academic studies have challenged this opinion. Inasmuch as they are based on statistical analysis of sizeable samples

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\(^7\) 412 U.S. 755.

\(^8\) *U.S. Law Week* 48:4436 (1980).
of American cities, it might appear that a confidently held hypothesis is collapsing under the assault of systematic evidence.

Such is not the case. We shall review the statistical research on this issue over the past decade in order to reconcile the disparate findings. Then, in the final section of the paper, we present original data on the effects of at-large elections in Texas, using a research design that enables us to overcome problems of measurement and covariance that in other studies obscure the independent effects of several factors on the success rate of minority candidates.

**At-Large Elections and Progressivism**

Change took many paths during the Progressive Era. Holli distinguishes between two dominant tendencies. The "social reformers" located corruption among businessmen, whom they criticized for benefitting unfairly and often illegally from favors in franchises, taxes, and public services. Social reformers "... accepted a traditional, democratic faith in the ability of the masses to participate in the process of ruling themselves." To be sure, some were themselves businessmen. But, like most successful reform mayors or governors of the day, they encouraged popular participation in municipal politics. Their advocacy of cheaper utility rates, more equitable taxation, a wider distribution of urban services, and better working conditions benefitted ordinary people.\(^9\)

The "structural reformers," on the other hand, believed the enfranchisement of recent immigrants was a major factor in corrupt city government. Businessmen and experts were suited best to govern. "The inferior moral fiber of foreign-born and lower-class electorates and their representatives, and the dereliction of upper classes," writes Holli, "was one of the most pervasive themes in the early Conferences for Good City Government" sponsored by the National Municipal League.\(^11\)

Radical demographic changes activated structural reform. Between 1815 and 1914 approximately 35 million newcomers entered the United States, most of them settling in the Northeast, especially

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\(^11\) Holli, "Urban Reform," 137.
in cities. By 1910 first and second generation immigrants comprised at least two-thirds of the population of most of the major Northeastern cities, and more than three-fourths in New York, Boston, and Chicago.\textsuperscript{12}

Structural reform, however, was hardly limited to the Northeast. Two important vehicles for this brand of municipal reformism, the commission and city manager plans, both originated in the South. The first city in the nation to install a commission was Galveston, Texas, in 1901, and it spread rapidly to other Texas and Southern cities. By 1913 most of the larger cities in the South and many smaller ones had adopted it. The city manager model was inaugurated in Staunton, Virginia, in 1908.\textsuperscript{13} The initiative for both plans came from business groups who argued that a municipality was essentially a business corporation and should be run according to business principles.\textsuperscript{14} The at-large election and the nonpartisan ballot were associated with both the commission and city-manager forms of government.\textsuperscript{15} A study of 50 cities that had adopted the manager system by 1938 showed that 40 had at-large elections. Some had had such elections before adoption of the manager form. Of the 17 which changed their method of election at the time of adoption of manager government, however, 16 changed from ward-based elections. The tendency also was to decrease council size upon adoption of the city manager form.\textsuperscript{16}

The association between commission and city-manager govern-

\textsuperscript{12} Buenker, Urban Liberalism, 1-2. Presumably structural reformers did not favor at-large elections in cities where immigrants constituted an effective electoral majority. Assuming low turnout among recent immigrants, however, reformers may have been tempted to abolish ward elections where the ethnic population slightly exceeded 50 percent.


mments and at-large elections is still obvious today. In cities that by 1930 had a population of 30,000 or more, Gordon found that in 1960 councilmen were elected at-large in 100 percent of the commission cities, in 76 percent of the manager cities, but only in 22 percent of the “unreformed” cities. At-large elections also remain concentrated in the South (and in the West, though possibly for a different reason). Karnig has shown that 75 percent of Southern cities elect councilmen at large, compared with 47 percent elsewhere. Among Texas’ 185 home-rule cities in 1968 all but 6 elected councils at large.

While a major purpose of structural reform was to take city government out of the hands of neighborhood and ethnic leaders, thus centralizing it under the control of businessmen, the ostensible reasons were the lofty goals of abolishing corrupt machines and bringing efficiency and businesslike principles to local government. While proponents spoke in the name of “the people,” their statements sometimes revealed a peculiar concept of popular representation. As a Des Moines capitalist told a labor audience during the debate over commission government, the businessmen’s slate represented labor “better than you do yourself.”

In the South, Progressivism coincided with the peak of racial reaction. The introduction of the party primary system, a key item on the reform agenda, was facilitated by its exclusion of Blacks from the nominating process. “Racism was conceived of by some as the very foundation of Southern progressivism. Edgar Gardner Murphy, one of the most articulate and cultured of Southern pro-

18 Raymond E. Wolfinger and John Osgood Field, “Political Ethos and the Structure of City Government,” American Political Science Review 60 (June 1966), 326.
19 Albert K. Karnig, “Black Representation on City Councils,” Urban Affairs Quarterly 12 (December 1976), 235. This finding is based on a sample of cities with 25,000 population and larger.
21 The founder and guiding genius of the city manager movement, multimillionaire businessman Richard S. Childs, was influenced by the ideas of Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose theory of “scientific management” was intended to provide capitalists with a tool for crushing labor control of the workplace. For a description of the social context of Taylor’s theory, see Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 85-123.
ggressives, thought of "... 'the conscious unity of race' as 'the broader ground of the new democracy'. ..." Southern progressive leaders made the race issue their chief stock-in-trade and were among the principal advocates of disfranchisement. "The Vardamans and Hoke Smiths might have represented 'a genuine movement for a more democratic government in the south,' as Ray Stannard Baker contended, but their democracy was for whites only and did great harm to the cause of the Negro and to good relations between Blacks and whites."  

In Texas, for example, racism clearly was intertwined with Progressive reform. The poll tax as a prerequisite for voting and the so-called Terrell Election Law, both enacted before 1910, were advertised as progressive measures—the poll tax because it ostensibly made ballot fraud less likely, the election law because it paved the way for "fair" party primaries. But the poll tax was intended clearly to disfranchise Blacks and the white poor, and it was opposed by spokesmen of both groups and by labor unionists. The Terrell Law made poll tax payment a requirement for voting in party primaries and conventions, gave county executive committees discretion to exclude Blacks from primaries, and instituted the place voting system in Texas for the first time.  

Ethnic minorities and laboring people were well aware of the structural reformers' intentions. Hays cites numerous instances of opposition to progressive charter changes by the lower-middle and working classes. Rice concludes that early commission governments in Texas were consistently endorsed by businessmen and only slightly less consistently opposed by the working class, especially organized labor, a pattern manifested in cities elsewhere. 

28 Bradley Robert Rice, Progressive Cities (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 110. However, Rice notes that "a full understanding of the commission movement must go beyond a pure class interpretation."
lower classes correctly perceived that the at-large election of a small board would make it difficult for people of limited means to be elected."29 Undoubtedly for the same reason a bank president in Sherman, Texas, one of the early commission cities, reported that "... those who pay taxes are generally satisfied with the commission system."30

Galveston, the birthplace of the commission movement, provides an instructive example of the forces leading to an at-large council. In its early years, the commission model popularly was referred to as the Galveston plan. It was characterized by a five-man governing body elected at large, each member of which was a city department head.

In the standard account of the Galveston commission's creation, a hurricane devastated the island city in September, 1900, and during the crisis that followed, the need for a "modern," honest, efficient government adequate to the task of recovery suddenly was recognized and acted on, leading to the adoption of a commission. Rice has demonstrated recently that, in reality, the famous hurricane simply provided a rationale for a charter change already favored by leading businessmen who had been locked in a struggle with laboring people—including Blacks—for council control during the 1890s.31

The change to at-large elections actually occurred in 1895. Prior to 1891 the city had operated under a mayor-council charter with 12 aldermen elected from wards. New charter amendments initiated by businessmen and effective in 1891 and 1893 added 4 at-large seats. The Chamber of Commerce in 1895 proposed a completely at-large council of 12 members. The amendment passed, and the businessmen's group behind it organized the Good Government Club which offered a slate of "typical middle-class businessmen and a physician," in sharp contrast to the incumbent council of longshoremen, bartenders, small businessmen, and a drayman, which included a Black. Opponents of the Good Government Club formed a slate dubbed the People's Ticket, appealing to the city's laboring classes. Spokesmen for the People's Ticket pointed out that the Good Government Club had no Blacks on its slate, in contrast to their own, which included the black incumbent.

29 Ibid., 29.
31 Rice, Progressive Cities, 3-4.
Ten of the twelve members of the Good Government Club won, including two who had also been endorsed by the People's Ticket. Five winners citywide lost their own wards. Conversely, the black incumbent carried his ward but was defeated citywide as black leaders had predicted, leaving an all-white council in a town that was 22 percent black.32 Even under the at-large system the Good Government Club subsequently had trouble controlling the council. By the summer before the 1900 storm, the business elite was casting around for a different plan that would ensure its control.33 When the storm provided the catalyst for change, the elite salvaged the at-large device as the only useful remnant of the discarded system. It became essential to the commission model.

In the first third of the twentieth century the impact of at-large elections on the socio-economic makeup of councils nationwide in many instances was similar to its effect in Galveston.34 Elsewhere, racial gerrymandering was sometimes the remedy of choice, when at-large elections were impossible to implement because of the strong popular support for wards.35

In the South disfranchising measures such as the poll tax, literacy test, and grandfather clause—delicately spoken of by apostles of reform as means of "purifying" the ballot—as well as intimidation through economic sanction and violence accomplished the same end. The mechanisms of the white primary, gerrymander, place system, and run-off requirement also were implemented.

Consequently, in cities that already had dealt with the threat of Blacks in electoral politics, the advent of at-large elections probably did not signal as dramatic a change in the racial makeup of councils as it did in their social class composition. Galveston's 1895 change is especially useful, therefore, as a before-and-after study of its impact on racial representation.

By 1905, when the Galveston plan had begun to catch on throughout the South, the ranks of Black voters had been reduced

32 Ibid., 4-5.
33 Ibid., 6. The city's shaky financial situation at this point—including a large debt and a failure to meet city payrolls two months in a row—fuelled popular discontent on which the business elite based its case for a new charter.
35 Prior to 1885, Blacks sat on the Boston city council thanks partly to white support. But when Black concentration increased in the West End's Ninth Ward, enabling Blacks to win on their own, the ward was split and their political advantage destroyed. See Henry Lee Moon, Balance of Power (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1949), 87.
sharply. Even so, the at-large mechanism became a formidable barrier to effective political participation after the decline of Progressivism, with the massive influx of Blacks and Hispanics into the cities of the North and West. The at-large system was in place in the South and Southwest when the Blacks and Mexican Americans of those regions began their political resurgence in the 1940s; and where it was not yet in effect, city fathers often inaugurated it to deal with the new threat.

Research in the post-Progressive era demonstrates that at-large systems diminish minority representation. Banfield and Wilson conclude that Boston's at-large councilmen were generally less responsive to voters' wishes than were ward-based ones. Wilson attributes the speed with which Blacks won office in Chicago to high-density Black areas and the fact that councilmen were elected from a large number of small wards. He observes that large districts, as in New York, were not as effective because racial gerrymandering was easier in them. This conclusion corroborates Myrdal's observation a generation earlier that, "Negroes in Chicago were more favored than Negroes in any other city," with regard to officeholding. Speaking of the North as a whole, circa 1939, Myrdal pointed out that with the exception of a few minor offices, "No Negrò has attained a city-wide elective position."

Salter found that ward-based elections of Philadelphia committeemen in the 1930s enabled ethnic minorities, including Blacks, to choose their own representatives. Dahls study of New Haven sup-

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36 One might be tempted to conclude that inasmuch as Southern Blacks were disfranchised widely at the turn of the century, the introduction of at-large elections subsequently did not have racial intent. In fact, the disfranchisers simultaneously threw up numerous barriers to effective Black political participation, and continued to erect new ones as time went by. Thus, in Texas the poll tax was followed by the Terrell Election Law. And in 1923 the Texas Legislature specifically provided that Blacks could not vote in the Democratic primary. In other words, the Democratic Party and the state legislature continued into the third decade of the Twentieth Century to erect racially motivated election laws although earlier discriminatory measures were in effect. Black disfranchisement and vote dilution at the local level have not received the attention they have at the state level. Nonetheless, some municipal dilutionary structures now in effect undoubtedly had a racial intent at the time of their inauguration.

37 Banfield and Wilson, *City Politics*, 95.


ports this view.\(^{41}\) Williams and Adrian stress the advantages that accrue to working-class people generally under the ward system.\(^{42}\)

Black electoral failure in Florida between 1944 and 1954 has been linked to at-large elections.\(^{43}\) Ladd points out that many southern cities switched to at-large elections when confronted with a growing Black vote.\(^{44}\) Significantly, the first Black elected to public office in competition with white candidates in the South since the turn of the century—an alderman in Winston-Salem in 1947—was elected from a ward. He was assisted by a partisan ballot and the backing of CIO-PAC leaders.\(^{45}\) Instead of changing to at-large elections, as many cities did under similar circumstances, the city’s Democratic leadership gerrymandered the ward boundaries to limit Blacks to a majority status in only one of the city’s eight districts.\(^{46}\) Events in Waco, Texas, were perhaps more typical. After a Black almost won election to council from a ward in 1950, the newly elected council enacted a resolution abolishing districts.\(^{47}\) This action conforms to a general pattern in the South, noted by Hamilton, in which multi-member legislative districts have been tailored to minimize Republican and Black membership.\(^{48}\) Studies by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in Southern states lend added weight to this point.\(^{49}\)

**Recent Empirical Evidence**

In spite of the overwhelming evidence for the dilutionary impact of at-large elections, the accepted view has lacked broad-based statistical corroboration until recently. This situation has now


\(^{45}\) Moon, *Balance of Power*, 188.

\(^{46}\) Ladd, *Negro Political Leadership*, 102-103.


changed. Table 1 presents a summary of the findings of research on the subject in which samples of 16 or more electoral systems were used. In some cases, we have extracted the necessary data from information published in other formats.

In every study but one, the independent variable is the election method. The classification is usually three-fold: (1) all members elected at large; (2) some members chosen at large; and (3) all members chosen from districts. The dependent variable consists of a measure of minority representation, typically a comparison between the proportion of minority members on a governing body and the proportion of the same minority population residing in the jurisdiction. In some cases this comparison is a ratio—the minority proportion on council divided by the minority proportion in the community. In others, it is the difference between the proportion on council and the proportion in the community. In the case of ratios, a score of 1.0 indicates exact proportional minority representation, and a smaller score indicates under-representation. Where differences are used, a score of zero indicates proportional representation and a negative score indicates under-representation.

The 13 studies allow 16 comparisons of the effects of electoral systems on minority representation. (Two studies examine Black and Hispanic representation separately. Another, besides comparing effects among cities, compares minority representation in at-large seats and ward seats within mixed systems.) In 12 comparisons the conventional hypothesis is confirmed. The findings in the remaining 4 are dubious, for reasons explained below.

Welch and Karnig find a slight over-representation of Blacks in at-large systems, under-representation in ward-based ones, and a

50 The one exception is the study by Engstrom and McDonald. Instead of measuring proportional representation as the difference or ratio between the minority population and minority seats on council, as in the other studies, the authors treat proportionality as a relation across elections, rather than as a variable itself. See Richard L. Engstrom and Michael D. McDonald, "The Election of Blacks to City Councils: Clarifying the Impact of Electoral Arrangements on the Seats/Population Relationship," *American Political Science Review* 75 (June 1981), 346-347. In using this measure, the absence of a threshold for minority population in the sampled cities is not the problem that it is in the MacManus study described below. Susan MacManus, "City Council Election Procedures and Minority Representation: Are They Related?," *Social Science Quarterly* 59 (June 1978), 153-161.

51 Various other studies find that other variables besides the at-large structure also influence minority representation. We describe a study as confirming the conventional hypothesis if the authors conclude that at-large elections independently depress minority representation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Population Size</th>
<th>Percent Minority</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Was Conventional Hypothesis Confirmed?</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Sloan (1969)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>500,000 +</td>
<td>15 +</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>2. Cole (1974)</td>
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<td>25,000 +</td>
<td>15 +</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>3. Jones (1976)</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>50,000 +</td>
<td>5 +</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Robinson-Dye (1978)</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>50,000 +</td>
<td>15 +</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Taebel (1978)</td>
<td></td>
<td>166</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0 +</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. MacManus (1978)</td>
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<td>U.S.</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0 +</td>
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<td>0 +</td>
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<td>8. Welch-Karnig (1978)</td>
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<td>11. Latimer (1979)</td>
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<td>7.3 +</td>
<td>Ala., La., S.C.</td>
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<td>McDonald (1981)</td>
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<td>0 +</td>
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<td>13. Vedlitz- Johnson (forthcoming)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50,000 +</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
f Delbert Taebel, "Minority Representation on City Councils," *Social Science Quarterly*, 59 (June 1978), 143-152.
g Susan MacManus, "City Council Election Procedures and Minority Representation: Are They Related?," *Social Science Quarterly*, 59 (June 1978), 153-161.
h Susan Welch and Albert K. Karnig, "Representation of Blacks on Big City School Boards," *Social Science Quarterly*, 59 (June 1978), 162-172.
j Albert K. Karnig, "Black Resources and City Council Representation," *Journal of Politics* 41 (February 1979), 134-149.

Comparison #1 is between types of cities. Comparison #2 is an analysis of cities with mixed systems, comparing within each city the representation of minorities elected to at-large seats and that of minorities elected to ward seats.

p Blacks, unless otherwise noted.

q Minority threshold varies according to council size.
sharper under-representation in mixed systems.\textsuperscript{52} This is the only study in Table 1 focussing on school boards rather than city councils; and the authors acknowledge that their unpublished data on councils in the same cities as the school boards in fact do confirm the conventional hypothesis. The score for ward-based systems is based on a sample of only two school districts.\textsuperscript{53}

Cole finds no appreciable differences in Black representation between at-large cities and other types. But two problems render the findings doubtful. The Black officeholders are not simply council members, as in the other studies of municipalities, but rather "the maximum number of Black elected officials at any one time in 1972,"\textsuperscript{54} which would include everyone from mayor on down. As whites vote more readily for Blacks in lower positions, this method may exaggerate the proportion of Blacks on council. A more crucial difficulty stems from Cole's classifying the cities as ward cities when council is actually elected by a mixed plan.\textsuperscript{55} (This classification procedure is also used by Latimer in her study which confirms the conventional hypothesis.)\textsuperscript{56} If mixed systems are more unrepresentative than ward systems, this fact would exaggerate the unrepresentativeness of Cole's "ward" systems in comparison with at-large ones.

Suspecting that the 16 New Jersey cities which Cole analyzed were atypical, Karnig replicated his study using a national sample of 139. He limited his research to councilmen and correctly classified cities by election method, thus improving on Cole's procedure. Karnig's findings confirm the conventional view.\textsuperscript{57}

MacManus's analysis leaves much to be desired in terms of method and interpretation.\textsuperscript{58} She does not report an average representation

\textsuperscript{52} Susan Welch and Albert K. Karnig, "Representation of Blacks on Big City School Boards," \textit{Social Science Quarterly} 59 (June 1978), 164-165.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, 166. In a subsequent paper the authors note that their "... limited sample of district cities makes confident generalization impossible." Albert K. Karnig and Susan Welch, "Electoral Structure and Black Representation in City Councils: An Updated Examination," (revision of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 20-22, 1978), 2.


\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, 20.

\textsuperscript{56} Margaret K. Latimer, "Black Political Representation in Southern Cities," \textit{Urban Affairs Quarterly} 15 (September 1979), 65-86.

\textsuperscript{57} Karnig, "Black Representation on City Councils," 223-242.

\textsuperscript{58} MacManus, "City Council Election Procedures," 153-161.
score for at-large systems as a group. Instead she separates at-large systems into various kinds, depending not only on the type of residency and place requirements but on governmental type as well, such as strong versus weak mayoral systems. She then calculates representation scores for each subtype. Because she finds a wide range of scores for both Blacks and Mexican Americans among the subtypes of at-large systems, she concludes that her data "... reveal the lack of marked variation in equity of minority representation by council election plan..." MacManus's data are unavailable for reanalysis, and it therefore is impossible to calculate the mean score for all at-large systems combined. However, the only subcategory of at-large cities with a mean score indicating less Black underrepresentation than the average in ward cities contains only 13 cases out of a total of 136 at-large cities, implying that the mean score for all 136 cities indicates less equitable Black representation than in ward cities. Essentially the same is true for her analysis of Mexican Americans.

Another serious problem stems from the fact that MacManus's sample includes numerous cases that have virtually no minority population. Assuming no minorities were elected to office, each of these cities consequently has a score of zero indicating perfect proportional representation. If the percentage of such cities is not distributed equally among the various election systems, the mean scores could be distorted seriously. MacManus's study is the only one in Table 1 employing her mode of analysis in which cities without minority populations were included.

Robinson and Dye use an almost identically generated data base of 243 cities collected within a year of MacManus's research, but employ a 15 percent cut-off point for minority percentages in the cities analyzed. This study comes to conclusions very similar to those of Taebel, who used MacManus's data, but excluded cities with low or nonexistent minority percentages. Robinson and Dye, as well as Taebel, reach opposite conclusions from those of MacManus.

In summary, the studies by Cole, MacManus, and Welch and

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62 Delbert Taebel, "Minority Representation on City Councils," *Social Science Quarterly*, 59 (June 1978), 143-152.
Karnig, because of the above-mentioned problems, do not constitute convincing counter-evidence for the conventional hypothesis. The other ten studies have been done carefully enough to meet acceptable standards, although Latimer should have separated mixed from at-large systems. Each confirms the hypothesis that single-member districts afford minority groups a better chance for representation than at-large elections.

Even these studies, however, actually may understate the relation between minority under-representation and at-large elections. The reason is that several other factors are known to affect adversely minority chances, including gerrymandering, the nonpartisan ballot, place voting (or its functional equivalent, the anti-single-shot rule), small council size combined with small minority percentages, low minority geographical concentration, and the run-off requirement. The problem of isolating their effects is formidable when the research design specifies the collection of cross-sectional data. The procedure would entail, for example, constructing a measure of ward boundary fairness that could easily be applied to a sample of cities. The use of regression techniques to arrive at "percentage of variance explained" depends upon the dubious scalability of variables such as election systems, place rules, and partisanship.

CHANGE FROM AT-LARGE SYSTEMS IN TEXAS

To overcome these difficulties, we employed a before-and-after design. The sample consists of all known political entities in Texas changing from at-large elections to mixed or pure ward systems between 1970 and 1979, which have had sufficient time to elect a full complement of officeholders under the new system. Changes usually resulted from vote-dilution litigation initiated by minority plaintiffs or from Justice Department intervention under Section 5 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act as amended. In all, 41 cases are analyzed, consisting of 21 cities, 12 state legislative districts, and 8 educational districts.

Jurisdiction population size ranged from 4,719 to 1.74 million. The minority population in the 41 units (Blacks and Chicanos combined) ranged from 7.8 percent to 79.1 percent. All but four, however, contained a minority population of at least 20 percent. The mean minority percentage was 32.4.

The jurisdictions are widely dispersed geographically across the face of Texas, thereby representing various subcultures. Some are
located in deep East Texas, the traditional Black Belt area with relatively high Black concentrations. Others are located on the rim of East Texas, in a North-South corridor that contains the state's largest and most cosmopolitan urban areas. Still others are located in the southern or western part of the state, where Mexican Americans are concentrated heavily.

The structural change, as noted, involved abolishing pure at-large systems. In 33 cases a pure ward scheme was substituted. A mixed plan was adopted in the remaining 8, with the at-large seats averaging 30 percent of the total seats in the jurisdiction.

There were virtually no other changes in electoral procedure that accompanied the change from at-large elections, and therefore the confounding effects of other variables are minimized. The most important effect, we believe, stems from racial gerrymandering. Under the Voting Rights Act any change in an electoral scheme (including annexation) in covered jurisdictions must be precleared by the Justice Department. When such changes are judged dilatory, and a single-member-district remedy is required, the Justice Department reviews the newly drawn boundaries to prevent blatant racial gerrymandering. When a court orders the remedy, the court itself has the responsibility to ensure fairly drawn boundaries.

There are no rigid criteria of boundary fairness, which means that there is still some discretion allowed in drawing them. Even so, the extent of gerrymandering to dilute minority votes is now more narrowly delimited. It is therefore only a slight exaggeration to say

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63 In the case of the Harris County legislative district the change from a single multimember scheme had occurred in 1966, but the result was three multimember districts within the county. In 1972 the final step in the process occurred when the multimember districts were all divided into single-member districts. Thus the Harris County case, before the change whose effects we study, actually consisted of three multimember districts electing six, six, and seven representatives, respectively. We treat these as a single at-large district. In the case of El Paso county, the before-change arrangement consisted of an at-large scheme for electing four state representatives, combined with one single-member district. This subsequently became five single-member districts. These anomalies are of minor import to our overall results.

64 In 12 cases a change in the number of representatives occurred. The net effect was small—an average increase of two representatives in the 12 cases. Before the change the average size was 7.7. Place voting, which only operates under an at-large scheme, disappeared in every instance when the change was to a pure single-member-district scheme, and in most instances when the change was to a mixed one. As several cases had place voting before the change, our findings are best interpreted as demonstrating the dilatory effect of these two processes operating simultaneously.
that our design enables us to separate the effects of at-large elections from those of racial gerrymandering.\footnote{Even under supervision of the courts or the Justice Department, boundaries drawn by minority plaintiffs and those drawn by political officeholders result in different degrees of minority representation, suggesting that gerrymandering still goes on but in a much attenuated form. See below, p. 1003.}

It might be argued that our sample is biased because in most cases the change to ward-based elections resulted from a finding of minority vote dilution. Are not these cases the ones most likely to reveal a dramatic change in minority representation?

The answer is affirmative. But this is exactly the point that needs to be made, because it is sometimes overlooked in discussions of the effects of at-large elections. Surely no one wishes to argue that at-large systems dilute the votes of ethnic minorities under all circumstances. On the contrary, it is those instances where racially polarized voting exists that one would expect at-large elections most seriously to under-represent minorities. Consequently our data demonstrate the effects of at-large elections in such jurisdictions. That they are not isolated cases, however, is indicated by the size and number of Texas and other Southern jurisdictions in which vote dilution has been proven, according to legal criteria, and by the finding of Murray and Vedlitz of a sharp increase in racially polarized elections in major Southern cities since the early 1960s.\footnote{Richard Murray and Arnold Vedlitz, "Racial Voting Patterns in the South," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences (September 1978), 29-39.}

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Jurisdiction</th>
<th>Mean Representation Scores$^a$</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legislative District</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-23.6</td>
<td>+0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.38)</td>
<td>(0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Council</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-18.7</td>
<td>-3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.28)</td>
<td>(0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jr. College Board</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-21.5</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>-21.2</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ Superior scores are differences; scores in parentheses are quotients.
The findings appear in Table 2. Minority representation is measured (a) as the difference between the percentage of elected officials (legislators, councilmen, or educational board members) who are Black and/or Mexican American in a political unit and their percentage in the unit’s population; and (b) as the quotient of the minority percentage of officials divided by their percentage in the population. Before the changes, only 10 percent of the 259 officials were Blacks or Mexican Americans. After the changes occurred, 29 percent of the 283 were. This increase resulted in near parity of representation overall.

At-large elections benefited both groups. Black officials increased from 6 to 17 percent and Mexican Americans from 5 to 12 percent. Although Taebel doubts that wards remedy discrimination against Mexican American voters, who are less geographically concentrated than Blacks, our findings indicate that their concentration in many cases is sufficient to warrant a ward-based remedy.67

The figures in Table 2 are means, and scores vary a great deal around them. Our sample is too small systematically to explore the reasons for this variation. A few common-sense observations are appropriate, however.

Generally speaking, there are four reasons why wards did not increase minority representation. In two kinds of circumstances proportional representation was possible before the at-large system was dismantled: (1) when “minorities” constituted a sizeable majority of the electorate; or (2) when their candidates received the endorsement of a powerful Anglo slating group. Once wards were implemented, two factors rendered them ineffective: (3) gerrymandered boundaries; or (4) a small minority ratio.

A Large Minority Population. In Hidalgo County, the Mexican American population was 79 percent. In spite of their lower turnout rate they were able to elect Hispanics to both of the county’s legislative seats under the at-large system. In jurisdictions where the socio-economic characteristics of minorities and whites are similar, an even smaller percentage will suffice to allow equitable representation.

Slating. Some cities anticipated judicial challenges to their at-large system by slating conservative minority candidates who were able to win at large with the imprimatur of white political dominants. Among cities in which the change to wards did not

67 Taebel, “Minority Representation,” 151.
result in increased minority representation, both the Dallas
municipality and Houston Independent School District had already
elected minorities to office by means of a conservative slating group.
(But in two other cities, Waco and San Antonio, the advent of
single-member districts doubled the number of minorities previously
elected when a conservative slate-making system was operative.)

Gerrymandering. As explained earlier, our design enabled us
partially to control for the influence of racial gerrymanders, given
the narrower limits within which political cartographers were
forced to operate in the 1970s. Yet, some room for maneuvering re-
mained. We were able to identify 14 cases in which districts were
drawn either by minority groups or the Department of Justice, and 5
in which they were drawn by defendants or individuals hostile to
minority group interests. In the remaining 22 cases, the identity of
the cartographers was unknown. Table 3 demonstrates the results
of authorship. Where the change to wards was accompanied by a
decrease in minority representation on city council (Dallas and El
Paso) plans were drawn by “hostile” groups.68 In a third case,
Houston Independent School District, no change in minority
representation occurred. In the case of H.I.S.D. the slating of
Black candidates by a conservative white group under the at-large
system was also a contributing factor. In a fourth case, Houston
city council, the adoption of the council’s plan over one advocated
by a minority coalition probably shaved 10 points off the elected
minority proportion, in part because of gerrymandered districts,
and in part because of a mixed plan instead of a pure ward one.

Small Minority Population. In some cities, the small number of
seats on a governmental body results in a large average district
population. Thus, even if geographically concentrated, the
minorities may have difficulty mustering 51 percent of the district’s
vote, especially when their turnout is low. This is true in the city of
Gainesville, and in two legislative districts where no change in
minority percentages resulted from wards. Gainesville has a
minority population of 8 percent. With 6 councilmen elected from

68 The city of Dallas has redrawn its 8 districts since our analysis was completed,
and a Mexican American was elected, thus placing Dallas in the “no change in minori-
ty representation” category. It was only under this condition of reapportionment that
the city was able to obtain preclearance under the Voting Rights Act. In El Paso
minority groups strongly objected to the reapportionment there. The move to districts
and the plan itself were products of a retired Anglo military resident. The board that
drew the districts was overwhelmingly Anglo.
Table 3
Is Change in Minority Representation Affected by Who Draws District Boundaries?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authorship of Boundaries</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Score Change$^a$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority Groups or Justice Department</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>+34.3 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorship Unknown</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>+13.3 (0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups Hostile to Minorities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+3.8 (0.18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ Superior scores are differences; scores in parentheses are quotients.

districts, the mean district size was 17 percent. Assuming high voter polarization, a minority candidate will have difficulty winning under those circumstances.

Galveston and McLennan County legislative districts both have fairly large minority percentages but only two legislative seats apiece, which means that the minority electorate has to constitute more than 25 percent of the total in a highly polarized situation. However, the Waco (McLennan County) city council and school board have a larger number of seats available than in the McLennan County legislative district. Thus, single-member districts in council and school board elections resulted in an increase in elected minority officials.

As 8 of the 41 cases involved changes to mixed rather than pure ward systems, it is possible to compare post-change representation in the 2 types of remedies. Surprisingly, minority representation is slightly greater in mixed systems than in wards. When cities and legislative districts with small minority populations are eliminated, however, the pure ward systems are the most representative. Moreover, in several of the mixed systems, notably the Houston and Dallas city councils, and the Waco school board, the elimination of at-large seats would undoubtedly increase the proportion of minority office holders.

Summary and Conclusions

An examination of the history of reform during the Progressive Era demonstrates that many reformers, recruited from the business
classes, introduced at-large elections to wrest control of municipalities from the laboring classes and ethnic minorities. Research on the use of at-large elections since the 1920s indicates that they continued to be introduced or maintained as barriers to minority office holding, especially when disfranchising measures began to come under challenge.

Persuasive as the evidence is for intent, the statistical evidence for effect is also strong. Research reveals that the accepted view on the subject is firmly grounded in empirical fact, which is especially significant because it concerns cities in the 1960s and 1970s. There has been a popular conceit, predicated more on hope than fact, that voter polarization has declined. Our before-and-after study demonstrates dramatically, however, that recent changes from at-large to single-member-district elections increase minority representation in different kinds of political subdivisions.

In conclusion, a word of caution is necessary regarding future attempts to measure the impact of structure on minority representation. The mere presence of minority officials does not insure minority groups representation. Racial or ethnic head counting is a somewhat limited and misleading measure of representation, partly because dominant white groups tend to co-opt "safe" minority candidates by including them on a ticket or slate which guarantees their election citywide. The minority candidates selected seldom are supported actively by the ethnic community they ostensibly represent. This pattern has been observed in a current study of Texas cities by one of the present authors. For example, in Houston, an incumbent Black councilman who had won at large with the imprimatur of the city's informal business establishment ran a poor third against two other Black candidates in a primary race for the congressional seat vacated by Barbara Jordan, which represents the heart of Houston's Black ghetto.69 In Waco, the Black elected

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69 After an attempt by a Black legislator to pass a law requiring single-member districts in Houston, the city's downtown business establishment gave its support to a wealthy Black council candidate in 1971, who consequently won the only council seat held by a Black in the twentieth century until the implementation in 1979 of a mixed plan under Justice Department supervision resulted in the election of two more Blacks and a Mexican American. (Chandler Davidson and Douglas Longshore, "Houston Elects a Mayor," New South 27 [Spring, 1972], 47-61.) Dallas's business-dominated slating group, the Citizens Charter Commission, succeeded in enlarging the council and slating two minority candidates who won in 1969, although the city's at-large elections were subsequently found unconstitutionally to dilute minority votes.
at large to the city council was unable to carry the Black area of town. If co-optation through slating groups in citywide elections is more probable than in single-member-district systems, where voters in minority wards usually are better able to provide a counterbalance to the blandishments of the white political dominants, then a relative increase in the "representation scores" of at-large systems \textit{vis à vis} ward systems could understate the differences in actual representation offered by the two types of electoral structures.

Consequently, while the discussion in this paper has centered on the constitutional aspect of at-large elections, i.e., their potential for diluting the votes of minority persons, the issue of representation expands beyond vote dilution in its most technical sense. In the final analysis, the ability of officeholders actually to deliver benefits to their constituents is an essential criterion for substantive representation. Unfortunately, the precise and objective measurement even of those public goods which are obviously divisible remains problematic. A high priority should be assigned to research on this topic.

Such research should be longitudinal, covering the delivery of minority benefits before and after electoral structures have changed. The collection of data afterward should be delayed since the initial efforts of minorities under the new dispensation may be limited by their lack of political experience and by the initial rigidity of white officeholders in dealing with minority representatives operating from an independent power base. Identification of those public goods (both substantive and procedural) whose achievement will provide the best index of the satisfaction of minority needs within a given community is necessary. Only under these conditions can the question of fair and adequate minority representation be addressed empirically.