The Portland Charter Commission will examine two important changes regarding the make-up of Portland's City Council:

1. Should the number of seats on the Council be expanded?
2. Should Portland keep its hybrid structure (at-large + district seats) or opt for a council with a different structure?

Political debate over the make-up of legislative bodies (national, state, and local) in the US goes back to colonial times with no conclusion as to what constitutes an optimal solution.[1] This is because any given council structure involves complex trade-offs between multiple and oftentimes conflicting aspects of what constitutes "good government". Municipal reform advocates have posited several widely-shared core values or goals for evaluating council reform efforts.[2] Specifically, such efforts might be designed to:

- increase the representativeness of council members
- increase the responsiveness of the council to community needs
- increase citizen engagement in council deliberations
- increase the accountability of the council to voters
- increase the council's ability to make decisions for the public good
- enhance the efficiency of council operations

Experience has shown that reforms which make improvements in one or more areas can have negative effects in others. As a simple example, increasing the number of district councilors by having smaller electoral districts may be expected to increase the representativeness and responsiveness of a council but reduce its operational efficiency, its ability to reach consensual decisions, and the ability of individual voters to hold the council responsible for its actions.

The attached chart shows the impact on each core value of three alternative proposals to change the make-up of Portland's current Council.[3]

What we know about Council size

The 2018 Municipal Form of Government Survey conducted by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) provides data on existing council sizes in the US. For cities with 50-100,000 in population (n=184), council size ranged from 3-40 members with the mean, median, and mode being 7.[4] Small councils (4 members or less) and large ones (10 or more members) are unusual. Small councils do not provide the level of human resources and variety of views needed to run a city while large councils become unwieldy and make it difficult to

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[1] "No political problem is less susceptible to a precise solution than that which relates to the number convenient for a representative legislature…", James Madison, The Federalist, #54.

[2] For example: Muzzio, D. and T. Tompkins (1989) On the Size of the City Council: Finding the Mean in Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 83-96 available at jstor and City Club of Portland (Oregon,2020) New Government for Today's Portland: Rethinking How We Vote.

[3] Evaluation of impacts based on info in Muzzio and Tompkins, City Club of Portland, Naional League of Cities, Cities 101: At-Large and District Elections, and ACE Electoral Knowledge Network.

[4] Numbers provided by Tad McGalliard, ICMA Director of Research, in email dated 9/20/21.

develop coherent policies. Five, seven, and nine member councils are most common with the odd number of members favored to avoid tie votes.

There are few empirical analyses of the effects of city council size because it is difficult to isolate size effects from the influence of other factors, leaving much of the available information speculative and anecdotal. One size cannot be called better than others; rather, different sized councils are conducive to different goals.[5]

What we know about Council composition and election methods

The 2018 ICMA survey found that exclusively at-large councils are most popular in cities of Portland's size (49% of respondents). A mix of at-large and district seats was found in 31% of cities that responded to the survey; only 20% of respondents had district only seats.[6]

Conclusive research on how well the different approaches support particular values is scarce. In general, at-large only councils tend to be less representative of a city's diversity than councils with some or all district seats. Although at-large systems remain popular, the Supreme Court has frequently found them discriminatory because they make it difficult for minority communities to elect members to the council. An outlier is Cambridge MA which elects a diversified at-large council all at one time using a proportional ranked-choice voting system.[7]

Exclusively district representation tends to produce more representative and responsive councils, but only if gerrymandering is under control. On the downside, district only seats can lead to councilors focusing on narrow district needs rather than what is best for the entire city.

Traditional single-member district systems are now being challenged by proponents of multi-member districts. For example, if a single member district system had a council with 8 district councilors, the multimember version might have 3 districts and 8 councilors, with 2 or 3 council members elected per district, depending on size. Proponents argue that multimember districts facilitate majority and minority representation from each district, increase voter choice, encourage voters to diversify their votes, allow more candidates to enter each race, and allow underrepresented groups to boost individual candidates.[8] The larger the district and the number of councilors per district, the more likely elections will yield a diverse council.

Portland's experience with a hybrid system has not been systematically studied in terms of the values listed in our table. In terms of representativeness, however, it is interesting to note that in the 110 council elections since 1984, women have won 35% (20 of 63) of district races and 30% (14 of 47) of the at-large races. Minority candidates have won 3% (2 of 63) of district races and 19% (9 of 47) of the at-large races. Portland's experience runs counter to the conventional wisdom that minorities do better in district races and women do better in at-large races.

Conclusion

The structure and size of the City Council are two among many interacting factors that affect city politics, so any changes must be evaluated in the context of other changes that the Portland Charter Commission may recommend. No single model is best for all situations, so understanding the advantages and disadvantages of different options is a first step toward identifying a path forward for Portland.

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[5] Muzzio and Tompkins.
[6] Numbers provided by IMCA on 9/20/21. (n=183).
[7] FairVote, Spotlight: Cambridge, accessed 10/20/21.
[8] ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. Accessed 8/20/2021. Look for headings on Single-member districts: Advantages and Disadvantages and Multimember districts: Advantages and Disadvantages.

LWV LEAGUE of WOMEN VOTERS
OF THE PORTLAND AREA

November 2021

ANTICIPATED EFFECTS ON CORE VALUES OF POSSIBLE CHANGES TO PORTLAND'S COUNCIL MAKE-UP

("plus" indicates increased support; "minus" indicates diminished support)

- Possible Changes -

Core Value/Evaluation Criteria	Increase Council Size to 11 (3 at large; 7 district members plus Mayor)	Replace Current Mix with 8 Single Member Districts (council size stays at 9 including mayor)	Replace Current Mix with 4 Districts electing 2 members at same time using proportional RCV (council size stays at 9 including mayor)
		(numbers in parentheses refer to notes under the chart)	
Representativeness (degree to which the geographic/economic/cultural/political diversity of Council reflects that of the city as a whole)	plus (1)	plus (1)	double plus (1) (2)
Responsiveness (degree to which Council responds to individual voter communications and concerns)	plus (3)	plus (3)	double plus (4)
Citizen Engagement (degree to which voters participate in, and feel confidence with, Council decisions	plus (5)	plus (5)	double plus (4)
Accountability to Voters (% of all council members for whom each voter may vote)	small minus (6)	large minus (7)	minus (8)
Decision-Making Capability (ease with which Council can make concensual decisions for the public good)	minus (9)	double minus (10)	double minus (10)
Efficiency (degree to which Council conducts its business efficiently)	minus (11)	small minus (12)	small minus (12)

Footnotes

(1) Gerrymandering in revising districts could limit or even eliminate positive impact.

(2) Eliminating winner take all outcomes increases likelihood multiple constitutencies will be represented; expected impact lessened if district councilors are not elected using proportional RCV.

(3) Constitutent services and responsiveness of councilors expected to improve with smaller districts.

(4) Double number of district councilors to represent each citizen.

(5) Smaller districts make it easier to run for office and more likely that each citizen knows their district representative.

(6) Each citizen could vote for 5 of 11 (currently 5 of 9).

(7) Each citizen could vote for 2 of 9.

(8) Each citizen could vote for 3 of 9.

(9) More districts means potential increase in NIMBYism; larger council size means more views to accommodate.

(10) Elimination of at-large councilors means only mayor brings city-wide perspective.

(11) Larger council size leads to increased diversity of views/interests and slower decision-making. Impact may be lessened depending on how much council work is done through committees.

(12) To the extent council decisions have significantly different effects amongst the districts, the absence of at-large councilors may slow the council's decision-making process.