Proportional Representation Oregon
P R O

July 9, 2021

Dear Charter Commission Members:

Thank you for your thoughtful and inclusive approach to consulting with the community and making recommendations for updating the Portland City Charter. We are an organization made up of representatives from local democracy-focused organizations. As such, we have a keen interest in the study areas you have identified. We know you are receiving lots of feedback on the first key area, form of government, so we would like to make some specific recommendations around the second area, city council elections.

In short: We recommend multi-winner districts with a proportional voting method.

The benefits of this system would be myriad:

Better Representation
Under the current system, Portland voters who are in the minority — whether by race, ethnicity, location, homeownership status, ideology, or anything else — are excluded or underrepresented. Single-winner districts would remedy only the geographical underrepresentation, but could still leave key groups of Portlanders without a voice. Multi-winner districts with proportional voting would give voters across the city better opportunity to be well-represented on the council. This is well-proven in cities such as Cambridge, which uses a multi-winner race and proportional ranked choice voting to achieve more accurate representation by race and gender, and countries such as New Zealand, which moved from single-winner districts to a proportional system and immediately increased representation for native Maori people and women.

Voter Power

Voters would have more choices on the ballot and more power to elect at least one contender they liked. The current system allows candidates to choose which at-large seat they run for, potentially resulting in voters seeing two candidates they like running in a zero-sum race against each other. The voter has to pick one, and it's possible neither will win. Indeed, up to half of voters might see no one they voted for in City Hall. On the flipside, a slim majority of voters can capture 100 percent of the councilors. In a multi-winner district, using a system like Proportional Ranked Choice Voting, the voter could rank more than one candidate, and the vast majority of voters would elect at least one candidate they approved of, and all groups of voters would have the power to elect a proportional number of councilors (but nor more).

No Gerrymandering

Single-winner districts are vulnerable to [gerrymandering](). Indeed, they might even require gerrymandering, if the line-drawers are trying to create at least one "minority-majority" district. Multi-winner districts empower voters, not line-drawers. When electing the top 3, or 4, or 6 candidates, you can't mathematically predict the winners by drawing a single neighborhood into or out of the district. And you don't need a minority-majority district to ensure minority representation: if one-third of voters in a district prefer the same candidates, they will be able to elect that candidate to 1 of the 3 seats in a 3-winner district. Same for a 6-winner district: if one-sixth of voters share a favorite candidate, they will elect 1 of the 6 councilors, no matter how the lines are drawn.

Policymaking, not Pork Barrelling

Single-winner districts can lead to pork barrelling, as each councilor sees their job to bring the most benefit to their corner of the city. Multi-winner districts and proportional representation mitigate that incentive structure, because no councilor is the sole representative of a neighborhood. If there is just one city-wide district, all councilors understand they are there on behalf of voters from across the city.

Candidate Pipeline

The current system gives great staying power to incumbents and pits them against new candidates. Multi-winner districts and proportional voting would upend this dynamic, allowing more experienced candidates to mentor like-minded newer candidates and campaign alongside them, knowing that both could win seats. This would open up the pipeline for emerging candidates to run and win.

Campaign Costs

The non-zero-sum dynamic described above would also create the possibility for similar candidates to share campaign costs as they court similar voters. Vancouver, BC uses multi-winner elections, and candidates run in slates. With this system, the candidates on the slate are able to spend less time fundraising, because they are sharing office space, phone-banking, and door-knocking resources. Although multi-winner districts will cover more geographical territory than single-winner districts, candidates won't have to win as many total votes as under the current system. To win an at-large seat in Portland, candidates need around 125,000 votes on average. In an 8-member council with multi-winner districts they'd only need to win around 25,000.

To answer your specific questions, we recommend:

- **Form of voting**: a form that will lead to proportional representation. We are open to any proportional method but specifically, we recommend Proportional Ranked Choice Voting. That is, each voter can rank as many or as few candidates as they want, and the votes are counted in rounds until enough candidates cross the winning vote threshold to fill the available seats.

- **Number**: between 6 and 12 city councilors (in addition to the mayor), though we would prefer on the higher end. This would bring Portland more in-line with other major cities such as Seattle (9), San Francisco (11), Vancouver, BC (10), and Los Angeles (15).

- **Constituency:** elect each councilor city-wide or from one of a few multi-winner districts — we recommend no more than three districts, and no fewer than three councilors per district. A bigger council would make it easier to use districts; for example, 12 councilors could be elected from 3 districts each electing 4 councilors or 9 councilors could be elected from 1 5-councilor district and one 4-councilor district. A smaller council would lead towards a single city-wide district. For example, 6 councilors could be elected in a single race.

- **Sequence**: to maximize voter participation, elect as many councilors as possible on the presidential-year general election ballot. Only hold primaries as necessary to narrow the field; skip the primary if the field is already a manageable size. Primaries are low-turnout races with older, whiter, wealthier voters than the larger voting population. When primaries determine the winner, they take power away from the larger group of voters in the general. Primaries also make the campaign season longer and more expensive.

Therefore, we recommend minimizing the importance of the primary by holding it only if needed to narrow the field. Similarly, voter participation in mid-term years is consistently lower than in presidential years.

- If you recommend a larger number of councilors (such as 12), we recommend that 8 be elected from two 4-winner districts in a presidential year, the remaining 4 from a 4-winner district in the mid-term year, and the primary be used to narrow the field to 10 candidates in each district. If 10 or fewer candidates in a district file, there is no primary.
- If you recommend a small number of councilors (such as 6), we recommend they all be elected city-wide in a presidential year, and the primary be used to narrow the field to 18 candidates. If 18 or fewer candidates file, there is no primary.

Sincerely,
Proportional Representation Oregon Steering Committee:
Kristin Eberhard
Barbara Klein
Norman Turrill
Dan Meek
Rob Harris
Sal Peralta
John Horvick