Mayoral Election Methods

This Manual is intended to assist Charter Review Comissions, city officials, and other community leaders in determining what electoral systems will best meet the needs and goals of their community. Given that no system can accomplish every goal, this manual will help you analyze the consequences of adopting one system over another and will aid you in comparing the features of various electoral systems.

Should you desire more information about any of the voting systems discussed within this manual, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Introduction

The range of options that exists for electing a mayor is broader than many people realize. Voting systems can have a striking impact on the type of candidates who run for office, how representative of the population the mayor is, and the quality of executive government within a city. In many cases, however, the method of election is not considered seriously when city charters come up for review. Charter review commissions are frequently unaware of alternative options, and as a result, may condemn their city to an executive not as good as it could be. This booklet is intended to aid in the evaluation of mayoral election methods so that the process by which a mayor is chosen can become one of conscious decision rather than inertia. A companion booklet, **City Council Election Methods**, deals with the selection of a city legislative body.

This booklet is divided into two sections. In the first, ten criteria useful in evaluating an election method's performance are identified and discussed. In the second, the workings of four possible election methods are assessed according to these criteria. A summary mayoral election method evaluation grid can be found on page 5.

Criteria for Evaluating Mayoral Election Methods

It is important to recognize from the outset that no election method is perfect. Enhancing electoral performance in one area will sometimes weaken it in another. Choosing an election method requires setting priorities for various criteria and making trade-offs. Depending on your criteria, some election methods are far superior to others.

This first section lists ten criteria for evaluating mayoral elections. Most people will agree that all of these criteria are real concerns, although their relative importance will vary from city to city.

1. Voter choice
2. Ensuring majority rule
3. Addressing the "spoiler" problem
4. Minimizing wasted votes
5. Accountability
6. Issue focused campaigns
7. Manageable campaign costs
8. Ease of voter use
9. Voter participation
10. Ease of administration

Other factors, such as the nomination process, the type of election (partisan or non-partisan), the length of the term and term limits, and the level of power which the mayor possesses, also have a significant impact on the way in which a city executive functions. However, since these are not directly related to election methods, they fall outside the realms of this booklet.

1. VOTER CHOICE

Different election methods will encourage different numbers of candidates to run, and will thus impact the level of choice which voters have in choosing a mayor. Sufficient voter choice is clearly an important factor. However, since ideas vary as to what constitutes a real choice, there is no universal optimum number of candidates. A single unopposed candidate obviously does not offer choice. Similarly, as individuals are accustomed to having a wide range of options as consumers, having only two options at the polls may seem inadequate. As the number of candidates increases, however, so does the effort that voters must invest to vote in an informed way. With a large number of candidates, this effort can be considerable and overly burdensome to some voters. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that having a large number of *candidates* does not equate to having a large number of *choices* if most of these candidates have no chance of winning.

2. ENSURING MAJORITY RULE

A fundamental principle of representative government is that the majority group should have the right to rule. This is especially important in the case of an executive. Since only one person can be elected mayor, it is vital that he or she have the support of as much of the electorate as possible. Surprisingly, the election methods used in most parts of the United States do not guarantee this. Plurality elections, under which it is possible to win with less than 50% of the vote, allow candidates to win an election even though the majority of the electorate would have preferred someone else.

3. ADDRESSING THE "SPOILER" PROBLEM

The "spoiler" problem refers to situations in which the presence of a minor additional candidate leads to the splitting of the majority vote, and reverses or "spoils" the outcome of the election. Voters who support potential spoiler candidates in plurality races may become frustrated because if they choose to vote for their favorite candidate, rather than a more mainstream choice, they might actually help elect someone else whom they strongly disapprove. Election methods with spoiler problems are further open to intentional manipulation. In such elections, it can be advantageous to recruit candidates with whom you disagree in order to capture some of the opposition vote.

4. MINIMIZING WASTED VOTES

In single-office elections, any vote that does not go towards a winning candidate is considered "wasted". Election methods resulting in large numbers of wasted votes can weaken citizens'

sense of connection with their government and depress turnout. When only one candidate is to be elected, wasted votes clearly cannot be eliminated, but systems that allow voters to express their opinions in a more nuanced manner (for example, through run-offs or the ranking of several candidates) can maximize the number of citizens who feel as though they have some say in the process.

5. ACCOUNTABILITY

Citizens should feel as though their executive has a real interest in listening to their concerns, and that anyone who fails to do so can be held accountable at the next election. Choice of election method is probably of less significance in ensuring accountability for single-office elections than it is for multi-member bodies. Gerrymandering, for example, is unlikely to be a factor in mayoral elections. It remains important, though, that the electorate should have genuine choices and a viable alternative to the incumbent. In addition, certain election methods make it easy for representatives to differentiate between supporters and opponents, and can encourage them to pander to the former while ignoring the latter. Other election methods that require a broader base of support, reward candidates who purport to serve all inhabitants of the city.

6. ISSUE FOCUSED CAMPAIGNS

When campaigning is reduced to character assassination, citizens are poorly served. Some election methods reward negative campaign strategies, while others encourage a more positive discussion of policy issues. Campaigns where policy is pushed to the forefront not only allow the public to chose a city's current direction from a position of knowledge, but also increase understanding of underlying issues. As a result, citizens are able to make more informed judgments about policy choices arising in the future.

7. MANAGEABLE CAMPAIGN COSTS

Campaign costs should be manageable rather than minimal. Any system where candidates have little incentive to spend the money necessary to make the public aware of their positions on important issues is undesirable. Uncontested races, for instance, would ensure that costs were as low as possible, but would be unsatisfactory for

this reason. Electoral methods that mandate excessively high-cost campaigns, however, exclude otherwise qualified candidates who lack access to funds.

8. EASE OF VOTER USE

Voter effort is increased by electoral systems requiring voters to evaluate large numbers of candidates, understand complex balloting and voting procedures, or vote on two separate occasions. Some election methods are also less intuitive than others, and may require more voter education, particularly when used for the first time. If large numbers of voters do not fully understand how an election system operates, there is a chance that they will not use it to best advantage. Large numbers of spoiled or incorrectly marked ballots can be taken as a sign that a voting system is not working. The complexity of a voting system, however, does not necessarily indicate that the system will be difficult to use. Moreover, ease of use should not be confused with voter satisfaction. In many instances, citizens using more involved voting methods have come to prefer them, in spite of the extra effort.

9. VOTER PARTICIPATION

Voter participation in the U.S., particularly in municipal elections, is low in comparison to other democratic nations. Insofar as this reflects voter apathy and disengagement with the political process, it is a worrying reflection of our democracy's health. In addition, extremely low turnout figures can undermine the perceived legitimacy of elected representatives. While most agree on the value of voter participation, the ways in which to increase voter participation, are open to debate. A variety of factors can act as an incentive for citizens to turn out and vote. Some – such as how important the official being elected is – are independent of the electoral process. Others are highly personalized: some voters are motivated by the desire to block candidates they oppose, while others will only participate if there is a candidate who they genuinely admire. Mobilization efforts of local political groups can also be significant in boosting voter turnout.

Election methods also influence participation because they have an impact on how "meaningful" and "effective" a citizen's vote is likely to be. An "effective" vote is one cast for a winning candidate, while a meaningful vote is one perceived to have real influence on the outcome of the election. Effectiveness and meaningfulness are in turn influenced by some of the factors discussed above, such as the level of wasted votes, and the extent to which majority rule is assured. In addition, election procedures that are difficult or time-consuming will tend to depress turnout.

10. EASE OF ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

All else being equal, election methods that are simpler and less costly to administer are better. But it would be a mistake to look at elections purely from the perspective of election administrators, who will naturally tend to elevate this factor to one of prime importance. Policy makers should be able to view the entire electoral process holistically, and not dismiss election methods simply because they require more preparation or effort on the part of election officials.

ELECTION METHODS

In the following section, various possible mayoral election systems will be scored on a scale from -2 to +2 for how well they perform on each of these criteria. The assigned scores are necessarily subjective, and it should not be assumed, for example, that a score of +2 is exactly twice as good as one of +1.

1. Plurality election (PLU)
2. Majority election (separate runoff) (MSR)
3. Majority election (instant runoff) (MIR)
4. Combined mayor and council election (CMC)

1. Plurality election (PLU)

This election method is the most straightforward. All voters in a city cast a single vote, and whichever candidate receives the greatest number of votes is declared elected, even if this is less than 50% of the vote. Election by plurality is used in Baltimore.

1. **Voter choice** (-1) Anxiety about the spoiler problem can often limit the number of candidates running in plurality elections. In partisan elections, each party will usually only run a single candidate in the general election. Voter choice suffers as a result. Even when there are more candidates, fear of creating a spoiler scenario may deter voters from voting for the candidate they most prefer.
2. **Ensuring majority rule** (-2) When more than two candidates run for office, it becomes possible to win with less than 50% of the vote.
3. **Addressing the "spoiler" problem** (-2) If more than one candidate tries to appeal to the same constituency, the spoiler problem may result.
4. **Minimizing wasted votes** (-2) Plurality elections tend to produce the highest proportion of wasted votes since there is no guarantee that even fifty percent of voters supported the winner, and since there is no mechanism for expressing alternative preferences.
5. **Accountability** (0) Plurality elections are relatively easy to understand. Such a transparent electoral system gives an impression of accountability. In plurality elections, however, the incumbent is often accountable only to his or her core constituency. With no majority requirement, and no electoral advantage to be won from forming alliances with other candidates, mayors elected under this system may not have an interest in appealing to the public as a whole.
6. **Issue focused campaigns** (-2) Because of the spoiler problem, plurality elections will frequently have only one or two candidates running for office. In these circumstances, negative campaigning can be a sensible political strategy.
7. **Manageable campaign costs** (0) The relatively small number of votes needed to win, and the single election date, keeps campaign costs manageable.
8. **Ease of voter use** (+2) Plurality elections are easy to understand and use.
9. **Voter participation** (-1) The lack of voter choice can depress turnout.
10. **Ease of administration** (+2) Plurality elections are simple to administer.

MAYORAL ELECTION METHOD PERFORMANCE SCORES	1 PLU	2 MSR	3 MIR	4 CMC
Voter Choice	-1	+2	+2	-2
Ensuring Majority Rule	-2	+1	+2	-2
Addressing the "spoiler" problem	-2	+2	+2	0
Minimizing Wasted Votes	-2	+2	+2	-1
Accountability	0	+1	+2	-2
Issues Focused Campaigns	-2	-2	+2	0
Manageable Campaign Costs	0	-2	+1	0
Ease of Voter Use	+2	-2	0	-1
Voter Participation	-1	-2	+2	0
Ease of Administration	+2	-2	-1	+2

2. Majority election (separate runoff) (MSR)

Majority elections with separate runoffs differ from plurality elections in that if no candidate gains over 50% of the votes, a second election must be called in which the top two candidates face off again. Alternatively, the first round of the election can function as a primary to reduce the field to two candidates for the next round of voting. Certain cities also use a variant of MSR where a lower percentage of the vote (often 40%) triggers the runoff. This lower percentage system, however, has the same essential characteristics as a plurality election (except for being more difficult to administer) and should be scored accordingly. Many cities throughout the U.S. use majority runoff elections, including Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia.

1. **Voter choice** (+2) Since the runoff largely eliminates the danger of spoilers, more candidates can run in plurality elections, and voter choice is increased.
2. **Ensuring majority rule** (+1) The 50% requirement is supposed to ensure that the winner of the election will have the support of the majority of the voters. However, since voter participation tends to be extremely low in the second election, the actual number of votes which the "majority" candidate gains in the second round may be significantly less than the number gained by a "minority" candidate in the first round. As a result, the winner's legitimacy may be questioned.
3. **Addressing the "spoiler" problem** (+2) Runoffs are designed to eliminate the spoiler problem, allowing split majorities to coalesce on a single candidate in the second election.
4. **Minimizing wasted votes** (+2) The 50% requirement keeps the number of wasted votes as low as possible.
5. **Accountability** (+1) The runoff system allows large numbers of candidates to run for office without fear of the spoiler problem. This ensures that voters have options beyond the incumbent. The majority requirement also encourages candidates to reach out to more of the electorate.
6. **Issue focused campaigns** (-2) Separate runoffs often generate extreme negative campaigning.
7. **Manageable campaign costs** (-2) The need to raise money quickly for a second election means that campaign costs are particularly high under this system.
8. **Ease of voter use** (-2) Separate runoffs often double the effort required to vote.
9. **Voter participation** (-2) Because of the need to turn out for a second election, this system is even worse than the plurality method in terms of voter participation. Turnout is often vastly lower in the second round, and this can undermine the credibility of the winner as a genuine reflection of the electorate's choice.
10. **Ease of administration** (-2) Whenever a runoff election is required, the cost and effort of administering an election is essentially doubled.

3. Majority election (instant runoff) (MIR)

With instant runoff voting (sometimes known as IRV or ranked choice voting) the election and the runoff take place simultaneously. Rather than selecting a single favorite, voters rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate wins a least fifty percent of the vote when all first preferences are counted, a runoff election can be simulated using the lower rankings on each ballot. The candidates with the fewest votes are eliminated (under some versions of instant runoff voting they are eliminated sequentially, while under other versions all candidates barring the top two are eliminated in a batch). The ballots of the voters who voted for them are then redistributed in accordance with voters' lower-ranked preferences, until one candidate has garnered over 50% of the vote. Majority elections using instant runoff voting have recently been adopted in San Francisco, CA, Burlington, VT, and Ferndale, MI.

1. **Voter choice** (+2) Same as MSR.
2. **Ensuring majority rule** (+2) The 50% requirement ensures that the winning candidate will have the support of the majority of voters.
3. **Addressing the "spoiler" problem** (+2) Same as MSR.
4. **Minimizing wasted votes** (+2) Same as MSR.
5. **Accountability** (+2) Instant runoff voting allows large numbers of candidates to run without fear of spoiler problems. As a result, voters have other options besides re-electing the incumbent. The majority requirement also encourages candidates to reach out to a broad segment of the population. Candidates often need to pick up second or third rankings on voters' ballots in order to win election. This increases accountability since it means that candidates can never be sure exactly whose vote will be necessary to win election. Consequently, candidates will be more inclined to consider the preferences of a wide range of voters – including opponents' constituencies.
6. **Issue focused campaigns** (+2) Under instant runoff rules, campaigns based around personal attacks can easily backfire by alienating voters whose alternate preferences might be necessary to win. Thus, negative campaigning is largely avoided. In some instances, instant runoff voting has even encouraged candidates seeking the votes of similar constituencies to campaign *together*, emphasizing their shared policy goals in order to win alternate preference votes from each other's supporters.
7. **Manageable campaign costs** (+1) With only one round, MIR is cheaper than MSR. Like-minded candidates may also find it advantageous to share resources with each other, and this can further reduce costs.
8. **Ease of voter use** (0) Instant runoff voting is more burdensome than plurality voting due to the use of a ranked ballot.
9. **Voter participation** (+2) Because the spoiler problem is eliminated and there is only a single election, turnout is higher than in plurality or separate runoff elections.

10. **Ease of administration** (-1) MIR is simpler than MSR since there is only one election, but more complicated than PLU due to the need to tally rank-ordered ballots.

4. Combined mayor and council election (CMC)

In the three systems discussed so far, the mayor and city council members are elected separately. It is also possible, however, to combine these elections. When the public votes for city councilors, the candidate receiving the highest number of votes can be declared mayor. There are various ways to elect a city council (discussed in the companion book, **City Council Election Methods**), and which election method is chosen obviously also affects how well the election system meets your criteria. However, all combined mayor and council election systems also share certain characteristics, which are discussed here.

1. **Voter choice** (-2) The number of candidates prepared to run, and how likely they are to win election, will depend on the voting system used for city council. However, voters will not know who they are voting for as mayor, and who they are voting for as a city councilor. Thus, they will be unable to differentiate between candidates who they would support as city councilors but feel would make poor executives (and vice versa).
2. **Ensuring majority rule** (-2) Even if the election system is one which ensures that the winning candidate has the support of the majority of the voters, there is no guarantee that he or she would be the candidate whom voters most want *as mayor*.
3. **Addressing the "spoiler" problem** (0) The score in this category depends on the election system adopted for city council.
4. **Minimizing wasted votes** (-1) The score in this category depends partly on the election system adopted for city council. However, CMC will also tend to increase wasted votes. Under many systems, voters who feel strongly about the election of a certain candidate for mayor will be tempted to "bullet vote" – that is, not to use all of the votes they have a right to cast in order to strategically help favored candidates. These withheld votes are effectively wasted.
5. **Accountability** (-2) It is extremely difficult to hold the mayor accountable when he or she is not voted for directly.
6. **Issue focused campaigns** (0) The score in this category depends on the election system adopted for city council.
7. **Manageable campaign costs** (0) The score in this category depends on the election system adopted for city council.
8. **Ease of voter use** (-1) Although voting may be slightly easier in practical terms, given that mayoral and council elections are combined, voters will have to make difficult tactical assessments if they want to elect a specific council member as mayor rather than councilor.

9. **Voter participation** (0) The score in this category depends on the election system adopted for city council.
10. **Ease of administration** (+2) This is the easiest election system to administer since a second election is not even required.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

A useful exercise might be to assign weighted values (from 0 to 10) to the criteria based on how important you feel each is in your city. For example, you might decide that "accountability" is of no concern and give it a weight of zero, decide that "ease of administration" is of some importance and give it a weight of three, that "majority rule" is critical and give it a weight of ten, and so on. Next, multiply the assigned weight for each criterion by the performance scores in the different areas (from -2 to +2) for the election methods listed in the table at the center of this booklet. Once each weighted criterion has been multiplied by the performance score for a particular method, these products can be added together for a total score. Some election methods will likely end up with negative totals and others with positive ones, with the highest positive score being the best election method, according to the values of the person or group carrying out the exercise.

SOME ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Q. Doesn't the nomination process also have a major impact on the election process?

A. Yes. Nominations may be done, for example, by gathering petitions, by party caucus, or by primary election. However, the pros and cons of various nomination options are beyond the scope of this booklet.

Q. What about partisan vs. nonpartisan elections – is one system inherently better than the other?

A. No. Studies have found that whether or not a locality's elections are partisan has only a marginal impact on representation. In the United States, which system is used is largely a matter of local custom. Most cities using partisan elections are in the eastern United States, while nonpartisan elections are more typical in the western states. Even cities using nominally nonpartisan elections frequently have candidates receive partisan endorsements.

Q. Is instant runoff voting the same as proportional representation?

A. No. Proportional representation is a name given to election systems that try to mirror the make-up of the voting population as a whole in the make-up of the legislative body. The principle behind proportional representation is that although the majority should have the right to rule, everyone should have the right to representation. This principle, however, cannot apply to the election of a single individual such as a mayor. The process of tallying an instant runoff election is similar in certain ways to that used in some proportional systems. However, the aim behind the election methods is different.

Q. How does the City-Manager system of government compare with the Mayor-Council system of government: does which one a city uses effect which election system would be best for that city?

A. The more important a mayor is in municipal government, the more crucial it is that he or she is elected in a way which voters consider to be legitimate. However, how an election system functions will not be affected by the importance of the offices to which candidates are being elected.

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