

March 2011
Tulsa League of Women Voters
Unit Meeting Discussion Topic

At-Large Representatives

Overview

In February 1989 voters in the City of Tulsa voted to change the form of city government from a City Commission to a Strong Mayor/City Council. In April 1990 city voters elected 9 council members, one from each of nine districts.

In 2005 a group called Tulsans for a Better Government circulated petitions calling for changes to the current form of government. Though that petition drive did not succeed, many members of that group, now called Save Our Tulsa (SOT), circulated new petitions at the end of 2010 again proposing changes. Those petitions are currently being verified to determine if SOT successfully collected the required number of valid signatures. If the petitions are determined to be valid, the proposed changes would appear as questions on the November election ballot.

One of the changes proposed by Save Our Tulsa is to add three at-large representatives to the City Council increasing the size of the council from 9 to 12 members. The three at-large representatives would be voted on by the entire city. Three Super Districts would be established with one councilor (who would be required to be a resident of their Super District) being elected from each super district.

This means that each voter in Tulsa would have four votes: one for the representative from their home district and three votes for the at-large representatives (one from each Super District).

The SOT ballot proposal would also require that the mayor would sit on the council as its chair, but would vote only to break a tie vote. This aspect of the Save Our Tulsa proposal will not be studied this month.

Background

In their study “The Context Matters: the Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity” Jessica Trounstine (Princeton University) and Melody E. Valdini (Portland State University) used an analysis of over 7,000 cities and interviews with city councilors and made the following conclusions:

- Minorities benefit from districts
- Women benefit from at-large elections
- District systems can increase diversity only when underrepresented groups are highly concentrated and compose a substantial portion of the population
- The electoral system has a significant effect on representation only for African American male and white female councilors; the proportion of African American women and Latina councilors is not affected by the use of either district or at-large systems

There is a history of Justice Department scrutiny of at-large election systems. Though they are not unconstitutional nor a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there is a judicial bias against them. “No matter what good arguments justify at-large systems, where there is a significant minority population in identifiable pockets, they (at large systems) are viewed as an instrument which either dilutes, or have the high potential to dilute, the voting strength of minority groups.” (“At-Large Electoral Systems and Their Voting Rights”, Sidney Hemsley, March 2003)

Though it is difficult to separate the at-large representative proposal from the other proposals (non-partisan elections, returning council seats to two year terms and merging elections with state and federal elections) the fact is that these proposals will be unique questions on the ballot and will be voted on separately, not as a package, so need to be evaluated individually.

Arguments in Favor of adding three at-large representatives to the Tulsa City Council are:

- Candidates are more likely to have the interests of the entire city at heart and be global thinkers. They can focus on needs of the entire city rather than one geographic area.
- Having more people involved in the decision-making may improve the overall perspective.
- Candidates promote their own platform instead of campaigning against someone
- Encourages more positive campaigns and a focus on issues

- Candidates may take moderate stances in the political center to appeal to the broadest range of voters and thus may come on board the council already having incorporated consensus views.
- At-large council members are usually more homogenous than district representatives and there may, therefore, be less conflict among them
- Each voter gets to vote for several council members; each voter is therefore more likely to have voted for at least one winning candidate and therefore to feel “represented” on the council
- A group which might be a minority in a particular district may still be able to elect a candidate

Arguments in opposition to adding three at-large councilors to the Tulsa City Council include:

- The election of At-large representatives may disenfranchise the minority population by diluting the minority population’s vote. This may lead to potential legal challenges based on court interpretations of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voters’ Rights Act.
- There would be a less direct link between a voter and at-large council members.
- Emotional issues or personal agendas (e.g., funding for a particular project) may take undue precedence over important local concerns.
- Council members may be more inclined to view election to citywide office as a stepping-stone to higher office.
- Campaigns could be more expensive to run, since each at-large candidate must appeal to all city voters. Campaigns may rely more on media advertising and less on neighborhood and “grassroots” work
- Lower income and minority candidates may find it more difficult to run and be elected to office.
- At-large representatives could not truly represent the entire city.
- A two-class system could develop within the council.

Arguments that could be made to support either position:

- Adding more councilors to the Tulsa City Council would dilute the power of the mayor and strengthen the council (depends on how you currently feel about the strength of the mayor and the council)

Potential impacts of adding three more council members to the Tulsa City Council (these have more to do with the size of the council than the at-large question):

- Encourages larger and stronger cliques and blocs among the membership of the City Council
- The larger number of council members makes the council more unwieldy and may make it more difficult to arrive at decisions.
- A larger city council may be less efficient.
- The more councilors there are, the more difficult it will be for voters to keep track of who is who and who deserves to be reelected and who does not.
- Longer ballots are challenging for voters in terms of becoming adequately informed about all of the candidates that they find on the ballot creating the potential for reduced scrutiny of candidates running for city office.

Unit Discussion Questions:

1. How would the addition of three at-large city councilors affect the power of the vote of the minority populations of the city of Tulsa?
2. How would the cost of running a city-wide campaign for office impact the pool of candidates interested in running for the at-large councilor positions?
3. Would the addition of these three at-large councilors increase or decrease voter turnout?
4. Are there any additional arguments, pro or con, that you think should be added to the above analysis?
5. Does your unit favor or oppose the addition of three at-large representatives to the Tulsa City Council?