

Key Components of State and Local Electoral Systems

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This document should be used as a companion to, not replacement for, the discussion of mechanisms of vote/seat/information bias in Trounstein (2008). I wrote it because terms like “council-manager” or “district” or “at-large elections” often cannot fully describe the rules in place in a given locale.

Assembly size — number of seats in an assembly (like a city council), often good to think about as a ratio of residents per legislator (see, e.g., Allen and Stoll 2023).

District magnitude — number of seats per legislative district. Often, “district elections” will refer to a system of single-seat districts.

Ballot structure — how voters express choices on the ballot. This can be ordinal, categorical, or dividual (Gallagher and Mitchell 2017). U.S. ballots are either categorical (choose some number of candidates) or ordinal (rank them).

Allocation rule — specific rules used to convert ballot markings into seats. The common alternatives appear below. However, if you are trying to understand a “ranked-choice” system, please see the major types in Santucci (2021).

Plurality — for an election with M seats, the top M vote earners win them.

Majority — same as above, except some procedure is in place to try to get majority instead of plurality winners. This can be runoff or certain forms of “ranked-choice voting.”

Proportional — for an election with M seats, the M winners must have quotas. No city in the U.S. uses a proportional allocation rule. However, some consider the single transferable vote to be a form of proportional representation.

Semi-proportional — I do not like this category. However, it generally refers to a multi-seat system in which the number of votes a voter may cast is less than the number of seats to fill (commonly called “limited voting”) or in which the voter may cast as many votes as there are seats, yet distribute them among candidates however they want (“cumulative voting”). The purpose of such systems is to prevent the numerical plurality from winning every seat in a district (Grofman 1999).

Allocation tier — used to conceptually separate groups of seats in the same assembly that are elected in different ways, and when one level of seat allocation circumscribes another. Examples include Philadelphia (with ten seats in single-seat districts and

seven more elected at-large), Washington, DC (look it up), or New Hampshire (with something called “floterial districts”).

Nomination rule — specific rules used to determine which candidates get to appear on the ballot with a party’s label. The most common approach is a nominating primary. Less common is a party caucus. Other options are conceivable. If dealing with a system of so-called “nonpartisan” or “top-two” or “open” or “Cajun/jungle primaries,” check to see if there is a procedure by which parties control use of their labels. If not, the term “primary” is misleading. Also note that there are varying eligibility rules to vote in primaries (McGhee et al. 2014).

Nonpartisan election — this generally refers to a system in which there are no nominations *and* in which no party labels appear on the ballot.

At-large election — this generally refers to a system in which the entire city is the legislative district. Often part of a council-manager form of government, or left over from one that has been altered.

Numbered-post election — a multi-seat district, usually but not necessarily citywide, in which candidates declare which seat or “post” they are contesting. Often found with majority allocation rules. Often part of a commission form of government, or left over from one that has been altered. Often loosely called “at-large,” but verify.

References

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