

Governance in Little Rock, Arkansas At-Large and District Elections and the Impact on Representation

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History of Institutional Design in Little Rock, Arkansas¹

Little Rock has experimented with its system of governance since the 1930s. Initially run by a mayor and an appointed city council, the city had three unsuccessful attempts to shift to a city manager system in 1934, 1938, and 1940. Each council alderman was required to live in the ward he or she represented but was elected city wide, or at-large. Following political controversy and misuse of funds, a grand jury was called in 1957 to study the government. That grand jury found that “tax payers [had] lost control of their city government.”² So the city voted to overhaul it, switching to a system that lasted until 1993. Under this new system, a city board made up of seven members, who were elected at-large, hired a city manager to run the show. Wards were eliminated, and the mayor—chosen by the city board members from amongst themselves—was reduced to a figurehead with no more power than any other board member. Under this system, the city board saw its first female and minority members. In 1957, Lucy Dixon (running as Mrs. Edgar Dixon) became the first woman to serve on the board. Charles Bussey was elected as the first black man in 1968. Despite these gains, a minimum of five of the seven members in any given year continued to be white and male.

This lack of board diversity helped spark the conversation on municipal representation in Little Rock starting in the 1970s, and beginning in earnest in the 1980s.³ Throughout the decade, petition drives regularly arose to install a strong and directly elected mayor with a return of the ward system, seen as a better chance for the minority citizenry to gain weight in city elections. A special election was held in 1987, but it was tied up by legal complications regarding the process leading up to the vote.⁴

The next attempts to change the city government came in rapid succession in the first half of the 1990s. There were three proposals for governmental reform, all of which were voted upon separately over a year and a half. The first proposal involved revamping the city manager system: keeping the city manager but adding an at-large elected mayor with new veto power and switching the city board to purely ward elections.⁵ This option, voted down by nearly 60 percent of the city's electorate in 1992, was opposed by two other reform camps—those in favor of a return to the mayor council system of 1957 and the Future-Little Rock group of civic leaders who wanted to see a more modest reform.

The new mayor council proposal would have replaced the city manager with a strong mayor. Aldermen would be assigned two to a ward and would be required to live in their wards although elected at-large like before (though now with the option to switch themselves to ward elections at a later point through a vote of the people).⁶ The positions of city attorney, city treasurer, and city clerk would all become elected positions. Opponents (including Future-Little Rock), criticized the fragmented accountability of the mayor position and claimed the ward system was useless for minority representation while the elections remained city-wide.⁷ There was also skepticism that a new board would ever shift to ward elections.⁸ The proposal was overwhelmingly voted down in March of 1993.⁹

Once the mayor council proposal was rejected, Future-Little Rock presented its own proposal to the city without strong opposition. The final proposal kept the city manager position but added a directly elected but still weak mayor with one vote on the board and no veto power. The original plan included six directors, four elected by ward and two at-large. But concern from the African-American community that at-large seats would dilute the minority vote led to a compromise. There would be 10 board members, seven elected by ward and three at-large.¹⁰ The directors would be compensated

(intended to aid lower-income candidates) and would be elected by plurality (intended to aid minority voters in having a fair chance at representation).¹¹ After the state government approved legislation to allow such a hybrid form of local government, the Future-Little Rock proposal passed easily later in 1993 and was phased into city government over the next few years. Little Rock was fully transitioned into its current governance system by 1997.¹²

The year 2007 brought the latest change to city government by moving the mayor to a full-time position with new power to veto board votes and hire and fire the city manager and city attorney, albeit only with board approval.¹³ This proposal, sent to the city's voters by the Board of Directors, passed with over 60 percent of the votes in an August special election. Though a voting rights lawsuit arguing that lessening board power would dilute minority representation was brought against the city in an effort to preempt the vote on electoral reform, the measure for a stronger mayor moved forward and passed.¹⁴

A second lawsuit was filed in 2007 calling for the elimination of all three at-large seats on the city board and the rezoning of Little Rock for 10 wards instead of seven. The plaintiffs claimed the minority voting power of the board had been diluted, citing underrepresentation of minority appointees to city boards and commissions as evidence (minorities made up only 15 percent of these appointments). Defenders of the system held that the at-large seats balanced provincial concerns of ward representatives with broader, city-wide concerns and that the underrepresentation problem was created by low minority voter turnout.¹⁵ The lawsuit stalled after the plaintiffs' attorney John W. Walker requested the case be withdrawn and refiled at a later date.¹⁶ Walker did bring the issue up again in 2011 (this time as a bill from his position as a member of the state House of Representatives). Arguing for the legislation in committee, Walker made the case that at-large campaigns were more expensive and

therefore less accessible to candidates from lower-income sections of the city. This was in addition to the arguments that were the focus of the lawsuit. Opponents of the bill, who succeeded in blocking it, said at-large board members often worked to promote projects to benefit parts of the city that were outside their home neighborhoods (Walker introduced similar legislation in the 2015 session of the General Assembly without success).¹⁷ Today, the 2007 system remains in place though debates about future reform persist.

What are the effects of electoral institutions on the essential democratic processes of representing minorities, of running for office, of getting elected, of paying for campaigns? These questions have become very important in the United States for several reasons. According to the Pew Research Center, US income inequality is at the highest level since 1928 and the black-white income gap has persisted since the 1960s (Desilver 2014). In addition, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the United States ranks 80th in the world in terms of the share of seats occupied by female legislators at merely 18.3 percent (IPU 2014). Last but not least, running for office in the United States has become prohibitively expensive for many, in part due to the relative lack of restrictions on campaign spending relative to other advanced capitalist democracies.¹⁸

Institutions are important, insofar as alternative institutional arrangements might either reinforce or break down preexisting societal cleavages along racial, gender, or income lines. If one of the great virtues of democracies is giving competing constituencies a seat at the decision-making table, institutions that prevent this from happening might also hinder the ability of otherwise procedurally sound elections to deliver representation and deliberation.

In this report, we explore the distinction between at-large and ward elections at the city level. We focus on races for the Little Rock Board of

Directors since 1957. In this city, characterized by substantial inequality along racial and gender lines, we demonstrate that the introduction of some ward races in the 1990s has had important beneficial effects on competitiveness, campaign spending differentials, and the likelihood of electing minority and female candidates. This evidence suggests that completely abolishing at-large elections would bring further benefits to the city's ability to give formerly under-represented constituencies policymaking influence.

The report begins with a discussion of existing literature that focuses on the institutional distinction between at-large and ward elections and representation. It then reviews the causal logic at play between institutions and several outcomes, such as representation, campaign cost, and competitiveness. We then provide some background on how the process of institutional design and reform unfolded in the city of Little Rock. We finish by presenting results from our quantitative and qualitative analysis on the relationship between governance structures and representation across time.

Representation in Urban Politics: Previous Literature

Political scientists in the field of urban politics have been exploring the distinction between at-large and district or ward elections for several decades, starting with case studies in the late 1960s (Sloan 1969). The relative merits of the two alternative institutional arrangements was discussed in depth by James Svara in a period when the shift from at-large to ward elections first became a national trend across the US. He argued that at-large and non-partisan elections should lead to higher voter participation; less citizen alienation; less upper class, minority party and racial bias; and a more heterogeneous city council (Svara 1977, 175). In their analysis of the switch from at-large to ward elections in Texas, Davidson and Korbel provide systematic evidence that this kind of reform increases minority representation for

Hispanics and African-Americans (Davidson and Korbel 1981). Similar conclusions were reached by several other investigations of the question done in the 1980s. For instance, Karnig and Welch studied election to city school boards and argued that blacks were elected at 90 percent of their population share in district elections and merely at 50 percent in at-large ones (Karnig and Welch 1980). This effect seemed to apply both when comparing representation across purely at-large and ward cities and within cities that use the two alternatives for portion of their city council seats.

Analysis continued in the 1990s and the then-conventional wisdom that ward elections work better for representing minorities was questioned in a comprehensive study of every US city with a population of 50,000 or more (Welch 1990). The author argues that the substantive impact of ward elections on representation of blacks is much smaller than previously estimated. Furthermore, she found there was no significant relationship between this institutional arrangement and the representation of Hispanics (Ibid, 1072) – a finding that must be at least partially explained by the lower residential segregation of this group, relative to African-Americans (Lopez 1981).

More recent research has solidified the notion that ward elections lead to better representations for minorities (Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier 2004). Scholars have also begun to explore the impact that institutional arrangements can have, not only on descriptive representation, but also on policy outcomes, demonstrating that school board members elected under ward elections are also more likely to hire administrators and teachers in a way that is more favorable to minorities (Meier et al. 2005). The authors not only show the effect empirically, but also provide a thorough theoretical discussion, linking the distance between the median voter citywide and the typical minority voter within a ward to the better responsiveness of representatives elected in a ward race (Ibid, 761).

It is unclear whether electoral institutions have the same impact on the representation of racial minorities and women. According to recent studies, ward elections tend to promote the election of African American male and white female councilors but have no effect on the election of women of other races (Trounstine and Valdini 2008). Furthermore, a key determinant of whether or not the ward election will yield better representation has to do with the geographic concentration and population share of the minority group in question (Ibid, 556).

While much of the existing literature has focused on descriptive and in some rare cases substantive representation, scholars have recently shifted to exploring the impact that the two institutional arrangements might have on campaign finance. According to Brian Adams, at-large elections are associated with much higher costs of running for office than ward ones (Adams 2010). This line of is not fully developed and we take a step in this direction with this paper. The research presented here is a first step toward a full analysis of issues of representation in a hybrid system that simultaneously combines ward and at-large elements. As such, the paper contributes to the existing literature on representation in urban politics in a variety of ways.

Theory and Hypotheses

On the whole, existing studies – especially the earliest ones – do not sufficiently theorize about the precise causal mechanisms that link the institutional arrangement to representation. We seek to address this by developing a more focused theoretical argument that considers not only descriptive representation but also other outcomes that are equally important when it comes to the electoral process. In particular, we are interested in representation along gender and racial lines. In addition, we develop causal arguments that relate the ward versus at-large distinction to election competitiveness and campaign cost. We do so in a context where major change occurs across time

arriving where both at-large and ward elections are happening simultaneously.

Why would ward elections be expected to yield higher representation for minority members? Here we follow Meier and his co-authors and argue that ward elections will give an advantage to candidates that are closer to the median voter within a particular electoral constituency (Meier et al. 2005). We argue that this discrepancy between the ward and the city median voter will be especially amplified by existing income inequalities that follow racial distinctions. Consequently, candidates running in at-large races will tailor their electoral appeals to a median voter that is much wealthier – and sometimes with better access to education and healthcare – than the typical minority voter. Such a candidate will have a higher likelihood to get elected. Yet, he or she is likely to leave minority voters dissatisfied and disillusioned because of policymaking that will not be sufficiently targeted at addressing the gaps in income, education, or health. Successful candidates in at-large elections are more likely to belong to the ethnicity or race that is associated with greater opportunities for income, education, and health. In the context of Little Rock where African Americans tend to be the smaller voter group that is also underprivileged in terms of income, ward elections will be associated, on average, with a lower likelihood of electing a white candidate.

Hypothesis 1: Ward elections will be associated with a lower likelihood of electing a white candidate.

As suggested above, the existing literature does not explore at length the effects of institutional structure on electing female board members. In fact, as argued by Trounstine and Valdini (2008), ward elections have no effect on the success rate of women. This seems counter-intuitive when the comparative literature on representation is taken into consideration. Existing research focusing on electoral systems, for instance, draws a clear

connection between more proportional institutions and equitable representation of both minorities and women (Lijphart 1999; Matland and Studlar 1996; Rule 1987).¹⁹

Moreover, as examined below, at-large elections might well reward better-financed candidates. A line of research indicates women candidates' perception of gender-based challenges to their raising money, particularly at lower levels of politics (Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, and Walsh 2009). Specifically, women see male candidates as advantaged in terms of the networks on which they can draw for fundraising, particularly because women are less likely to give money to campaigns (and generally give smaller amounts) (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). For this array of reasons, women in politics are more drawn to make use of public financing, when available, than are their male peers (Lawless and Fox 2010).

Hypothesis 2: Ward elections will be associated with a lower likelihood of electing a male candidate.

We are also interested in exploring whether the distinction between ward and at-large elections has any impact on the cost for running for office. As noted above, some research does indicate that the latter are more expensive (Adams 2010). This argument makes sense, at least in part because at-large candidates have to appeal to a larger audience than ward ones. However, we also argue that ward elections will experience a lower campaign spending differential between winners and runners-up. In part because such races occur in geographically narrower areas with more homogeneous populations, there will be less of a likelihood that one candidate will have a significantly higher spending capabilities. Other candidate attributes, like connections to local community members and platform differences, will be more likely to drive electoral outcomes than campaign spending, which is playing a bigger and bigger role in at-large elections in larger cities, both in terms of geography and population.

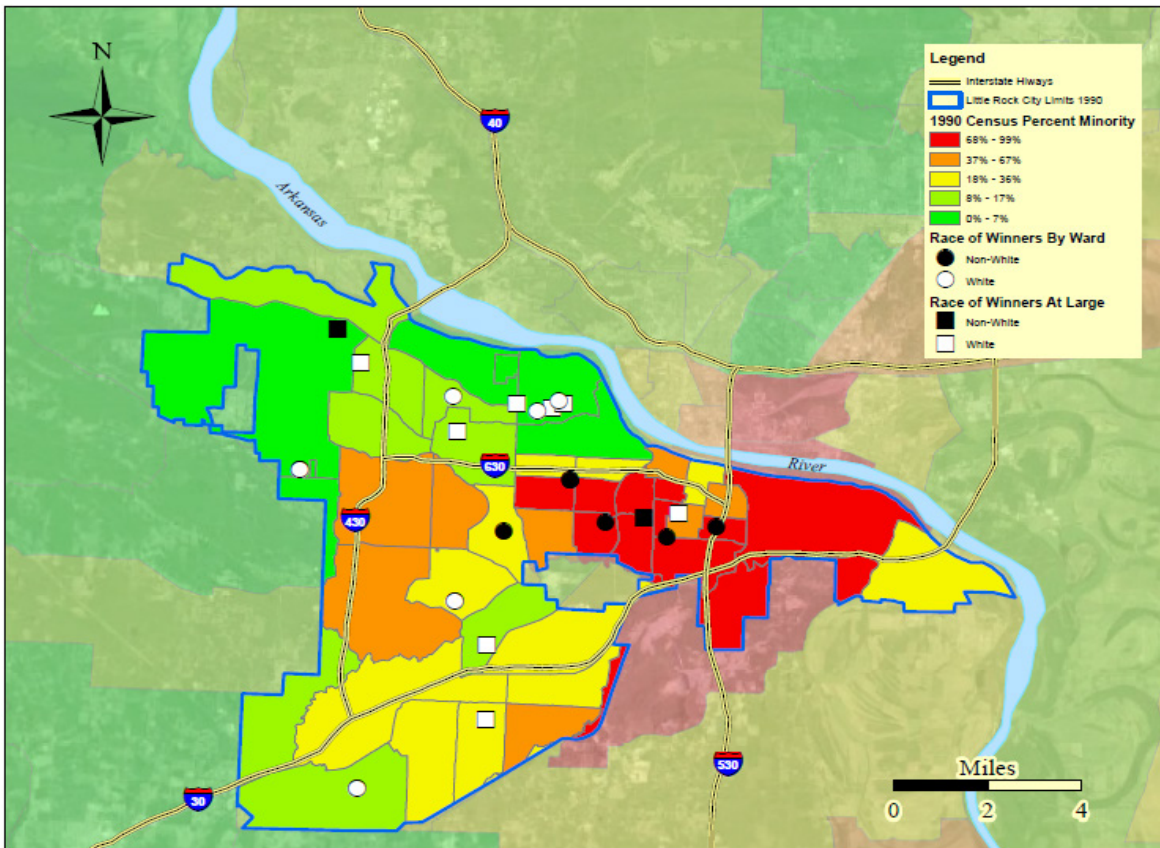


Figure 1: Little Rock Election Winners by Race for Ward and At-Large Offices (1990-1999)

Hypothesis 3a: Ward elections will be associated with lower campaign spending.

Hypothesis 3b: Ward elections will be associated with lower campaign spending differentials between winners and runners-up.

The final hypothesis we introduce is related to the previous one. If no candidate is able to substantially outspend another one in ward elections, we can also expect those races to be more competitive. In other words, a vigorous pre-election period where multiple views are capable of being expressed will also result in a narrower margin of victory.

Hypothesis 4: Ward elections will have narrower margins of victory.

Overall, we suggest that ward elections will have substantial effects not only on descriptive representation of women and minorities, but also on the competitiveness and cost of elections. We now turn to testing these various hypotheses in Little Rock, an urban context with the distinctive rules of the game described above.

The city of Little Rock provides a critical case for the theoretical arguments advanced in the previous sections. It provides meaningful variation on the independent variable, as it has, over time, shifted from a pure at-large system of election of City Board members, to a hybrid one that features ward races as well. In addition, the city's population is characterized by the presence of a non-majority share of white residents (48 percent). Black residents make up 42 percent and about six percent are Hispanic (Census 2013). Furthermore, whites tend to live in the northwest parts of the city whereas blacks occupy the

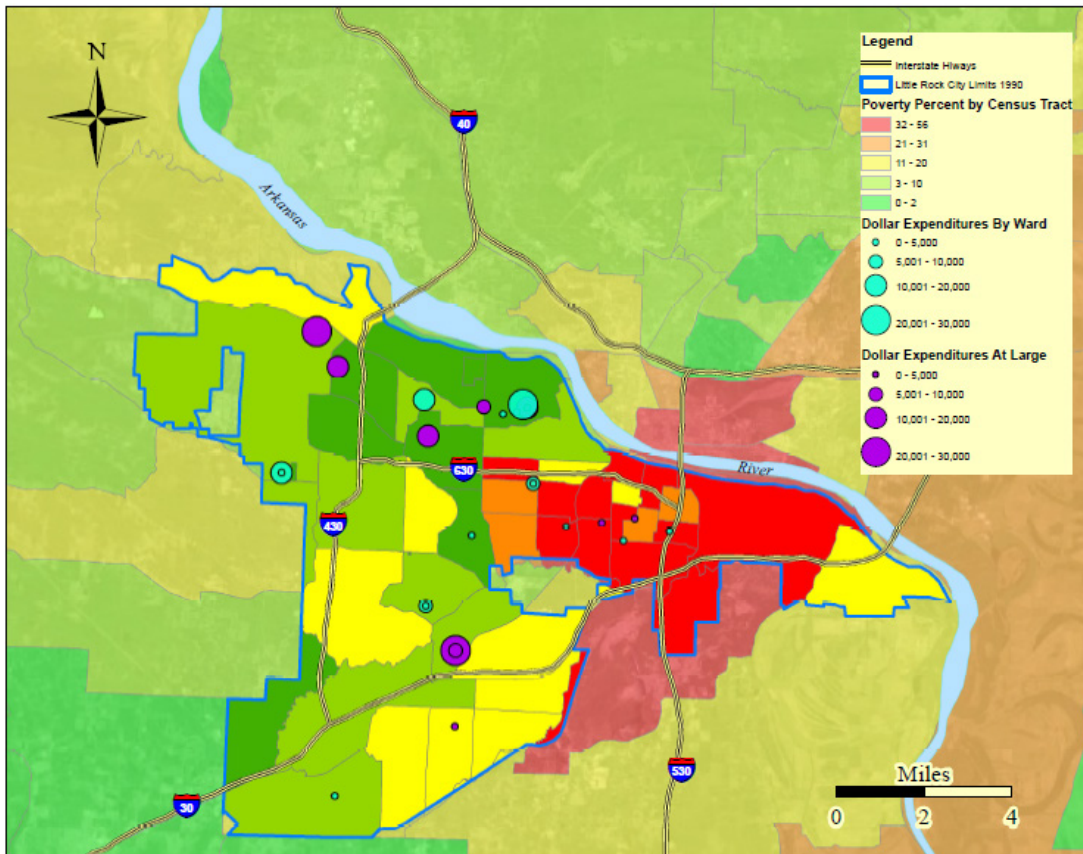


Figure 2: Little Rock Median Income and Campaign Expenditures for Ward and At-Large Candidates (1990-1999)

southeast areas. Last but not least, it is clear that Little Rock tends to vote along ethnic lines, both in at-large and ward elections.

Figure 2 looks at median income and campaign expenditures. It shows that the areas that were identified as predominantly black on Figure 1 tend to be poor. In addition, candidates that have won both at-large and ward elections tend to spend way less if they come from the poor areas of the city.

The maps show Little Rock is a city that is characterized by geographic concentration along racial lines. This separation also goes along with variation in poverty levels, voting patterns, and campaign expenditures. What is not entirely clear by looking at the maps, however, is whether the institutional distinction between ward and at-large elections contributes to descriptive representation, campaign cost, and competitiveness independently. The remainder of the paper tackles this question by engaging in more systematic analysis of this institutional effect.

Statistical Tests

Earlier we described the process leading to the adoption of the current system of elections in Little Rock. The introduction of ward elections was supported by minority groups and grew out of decades of under-representation and, sometimes, allegations of mismanagement. This is hardly surprising, considering the overlap between race, income, and voting patterns evident in the city. In this section, we explore whether the 1993 reforms brought changes in electing minority members and women that are consistent with the theoretical expectations outlined earlier. Furthermore, we explore whether they changed the nature of elections' competitiveness and campaign finances.

Table 1: Variables for the Statistical Tests

Variable Name	Variable Role	Source
Race of elected candidate	DV, Hypothesis 1	Self-coded
Gender of elected candidate	DV, Hypothesis 2	Self-coded
Campaign spending levels	DV, Hypothesis 3a	Contribution and Expenditure Reports, Pulaski County Clerk Archives (online and microfilm)
Campaign spending differential	DV, Hypothesis 3b	Same as above
Margin of victory	DV, Hypothesis 4	Little Rock City Hall
Ward election	Independent variable	Self-coded
Election year	Control	Self-coded
Presidential election year	Control	Self-coded
Median household income	Control	National Historical Geographical Information System (NHGIS) ²⁰
High school education pct.	Control	NHGIS for 1960 – 1990 American Factfinder for 2000-2010 ²¹
Median age	Control	NHGIS for 1960 – 1990 American Factfinder for 2000-2010
Percentage white	Control	NHGIS for 1960 – 1990 American Factfinder for 2000-2010
Percentage female	Control	NHGIS for 1960 – 1990 American Factfinder for 2000-2010

To test our hypotheses, we run several statistical models that differ in terms of their dependent variables but feature consistent independent and control variables, with elections for a particular seat on the Little Rock Board during a given year as the unit of analysis. In total, we have collected data on 128 races that occurred between 1957 and 2012.

In addition to the key independent variable that reflects whether a particular election was a ward or an at-large one, we add standard socio-economic controls, such as income, education, age, and race. Existing scholarship has discussed at length the relative explanatory power of those four factors (Lublin 1997). In particular, we want to account for the possibility that richer voters who also have higher educational attainment will also be more likely to belong to the majority and subsequently support a majority candidate. This dynamic will be reinforced in a context of substantial income disparities along racial lines, such as Little Rock. In addition, we want to control for any generational shifts in attitudes towards minority and female candidates and therefore include median age. We also control for the share of the population that is white or female. Since two of our dependent variables have to do with race and gender, we want to capture any effect on the propensity to elect members

Table 3: Effect of Ward Elections on Election of Male Candidates

Variable	(1) male	(2) male
Ward Election	-1.291*** [0.451]	-1.409*** [0.489]
Female %	21.62** [9.757]	23.46** [11.00]
Household Income		-8.59e-06 [1.74e-05]
HS Educ %		3.629* [1.983]
Median Age		0.0174 [0.0529]
Constant	-10.18* [5.207]	-14.40** [5.958]
	115	115

To test Hypothesis 1, we take a look at whether ward elections are associated with a higher incidence of electing white candidates. Descriptively, about 87.6 percent of at-large elections have resulted in the election of a white candidate, compared to about 59 percent of the ward ones. This bivariate relationship is also highly statistically significant. The multivariate analysis is less decisive, as demonstrated by Table 2. Ward elections tend to be statistically significant and lead to a lower likelihood of electing a white candidate in the second (more fully specified) model, but not the first. We also discover a highly statistically significant and positive relationship between the percentage of the population that has completed a high school degree and the propensity to elect white board members. The statistical analysis also enables us to make substantive predictions about the probability of electing a white candidate if a ward election is introduced. In an electorate that has an typical (or median) racial composition, household income, high school completion rates and age, the introduction of ward elections reduces the likelihood of electing a white candidate from 95 percent to 73.6 percent.

with certain characteristics merely as a function of a higher share of the population, as suggested elsewhere in the literature (Piliavin 1987; Sigelman and Sigelman 1982; Sigelman and Welch 1984).

For the models that look at competitiveness and campaign spending as outcomes of interest, we also include controls for whether the election occurred during a general or presidential election year. This will account for any spillover effects that could result from federal-level races that increase chances of donating to a political campaign or turning up to vote. In addition, we maintain the standard set of controls discussed earlier. We want to account for the possibility that richer, more educated, and older voters might make larger campaign contributions to majority candidates, thereby increasing the spending and vote margin differentials between winners and runners-up.

Table 2: Effect of Ward Elections on Election of White Candidates

LABELS	(1) White	(2) White
Ward Election	-0.507 [0.671]	-2.058* [1.080]
Black %	-6.636*** [1.229]	-5.564*** [1.617]
Household Income		2.06e-06 [4.60e-05]
HS Educ %		8.878*** [3.350]
Median Age		0.0547 [0.0869]
Constant	3.509*** [0.589]	-4.852 [3.340]
	115	115

Table 4: Effect of Ward Elections on Campaign Expenditures

VARIABLES	(1) Winner Exp.	(2) Winner Exp.	(3) Runner-Up Exp.	(4) Runner-Up Exp.
Ward Election	-80,802*** [15,422]	-59,516*** [16,747]	-56,020*** [17,894]	-58,932** [21,992]
Election Year	1,629** [772.0]	975.5 [1,550]	-267.7 [708.9]	-512.6 [1,693]
Pres. Election Year	-57,886*** [15,240]	-49,306*** [17,028]	-42,995** [18,131]	-48,051** [21,605]
Household Income		0.802 [0.520]		-0.0201 [0.541]
HS Educ %		-71,893 [86,009]		-12,133 [84,554]
Median Age		449.6 [1,531]		675.6 [1,598]
White %		35,714 [49,235]		3,984 [49,075]
Female %		371,805 [246,974]		276,271 [265,909]
Constant	-3.161e+06** [1.544e+06]	-2.083e+06 [3.068e+06]	598,462 [1.423e+06]	927,922 [3.323e+06]
Observations	41	41	29	29
R-squared	0.453	0.590	0.285	0.330

Standard errors in brackets
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05,
 *p<0.1

The distinction between at-large and ward elections seems to influence the gender of the elected candidate. We find that 80.9 percent of at-large races have historically elected males, compared to merely 46.2 percent of the ward ones. This difference is highly statistically significant. When running logistical multivariate regressions, we reach the same conclusions. Even when controlling for socio-economic and demographic factors, ward elections are much less likely to elect a male winner than at-large ones. Based on our regression analysis, we can estimate that, for the average electorate, the introduction of ward elections reduces the likelihood of electing a male candidate from 81.1 percent to 51.9 percent. This confirms Hypothesis 2.

To test Hypothesis 3a, we look at total expenditure levels in ward and at-large elections first. Then we see whether there is a bigger discrepancy in campaign money spent by winners and runners-up across the two types of races. This part of the analysis comes with a caveat. Data on campaign expenditures is simply not kept by the City of Little Rock prior to 1992. This limits the total number of races for which we have accurate data for winners to merely 41. The numbers are even lower for runners-up. This is a rather low number of observations for statistical analysis. However, the differences are often so substantial that we have some confidence in presenting our results and conclusions, even given this substantial limitation.

Differences in spending are substantial for both winners and runners-up in ward and at-large elections. Average total campaign expenditures for winners in at-large elections since 1992 has been about \$50,227, compared to merely \$8,767 in ward ones. For runners-up, the two numbers are \$26,061 and \$3,993, respectively. It is clear that running for an at-large position is much more expensive than running for a ward one. The differences are statistically significant in both instances. It is also evident that winners in both types of races tend to spend more on their campaigns too, relative to runners-up.

We then examine whether ward elections have an impact on the expenditure differential between winners and runners-up. This addresses our expectations in Hypothesis 3b: namely, that a more balanced election should feature candidates that have access to similar financial resources, so that they can spread their policy proposals to constituents equally well. It turns out that the campaign spending differential for at-large elections in favor of the winner stands at \$30,127 and at \$8,961 for ward elections, showing a higher premium on wealth in the former. This difference is statistically significant even when we control for presidential election and socio-economic and demographic characteristics. The low number of

observations (28), however, is something to keep in mind and we do not present the full results here. It is also important to point out that there is a substantial spending disparity between winners and runners-up (\$50,227 vs. \$30,127) in at-large elections. Such a disparity does not exist in ward elections where winners and runners-up have historically spent comparable amounts on their campaigns (\$8,767 vs. \$8,961).

Table 5: Effect of Ward Elections on Competitiveness

VARIABLES	(1) Victory Margin	(2) Victory Margin
Ward Election	-0.151*** [0.0572]	-0.123* [0.0632]
Election Year	0.00390*** [0.00133]	0.00257 [0.00307]
Pres. Election Year	-0.0776* [0.0437]	-0.119** [0.0496]
Household Income		-3.96e-07 [1.92e-06]
HS Educ %		0.225 [0.191]
Median Age		-0.00153 [0.00461]
White %		0.0670 [0.133]
Female %		0.0163 [0.557]
Constant	-7.452*** [2.622]	-4.950 [6.073]
Observations	94	82
R-squared	0.102	0.144
Standard errors in brackets		
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1		

The strong suggestion from these results is that the shift to a ward election system in this (and other) cities would advance a system of representation that is more fully reflective of those who have traditionally been on the outside looking in and create more vibrant, competitive elections.

We use several alternative measures of election competitiveness. First, we simply look whether the percentage of votes that winners attract is higher in at-large elections or in ward races. We assume that higher shares of the vote will reveal lower competitiveness. Second, we look at vote differentials between the winner and the runner-up. Third, we calculate this differential as a percentage of total turnout. This is done to account for the fact that at-large elections have more voters. Therefore, the same amount of vote differential between the winner and runner-up will also mean higher degree of competitiveness in ward elections.

Winners in at-large elections since 1957 have attracted 54.4 percent of the votes, as opposed to 51.7 percent of the votes in ward elections. This makes ward elections marginally more competitive but this difference is not statistically significant.

When looking at vote differentials between the winner and runner-up, we find that ward elections are associated with a margin of victory of about 1,322 votes, whereas at-large elections are associated with an average margin of victory of 9,902 votes. This difference is statistically significant at the 99 percent level.

The final and most relevant measure of competitiveness accounts for the large discrepancy in the number of voters in ward and at-large elections by dividing the vote differential between the winner and runner up by the total turnout for that particular race. The results are presented in Table 5. In the first model, we include controls for the year of the election, as well as an indicator of whether or not there was a presidential election during that year as well. In the second model, we add standard socio-economic controls for household income, education, age, and the percentage of the population that is white and the percentage of the population that is female. In both instances, ward elections are associated with lower margins of victory as share of total turnout between the incumbent and runner up, providing support for Hypothesis 4. In substantive terms, the margin of victory, relative to turnout, declines from 27.7 percent in at-large elections to 15.7 percent in ward elections.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that—at least for the half-century examined in this study—ward elections have had a positive effect in promoting the election of traditional outsiders (persons of color and women) in the city of Little Rock. Moreover, the ward system has been shown to promote smaller dollar campaigns and decidedly more competitive contests. In some respects, this simply reiterates previous research (although the simultaneity of ward and at-large elections in a single hybrid case strengthens that prior research). But, in other respects, this research covers new turf regarding representation in American urban areas. The strong suggestion from these results is that the shift to a ward election system in this (and other) cities would advance a system of representation that is more fully reflective of those who have traditionally been on the outside looking in and create more vibrant, competitive elections.

Most would argue that these findings suggest the normative good in ward systems of elections, particularly in locales (like Little Rock) where history has evidenced division and subordination along race, gender, and class lines. According to Jane Mansbridge, it is important to allow descriptive representation in contexts of historical political subordination and low legitimacy where mistrust and an inability to fully articulate interests characterize voters (Mansbridge 1999). We therefore think that, in contexts of past racial segregation, between-gender inequality and income disparities, ward elections show many strengths over at-large systems of governance. Layered on top of these benefits of a ward system are two additional benefits: the relative accessibility for those who might be pushed out of politics because of high-stakes fundraising and the enhanced electoral competitiveness of the races.

As clear as the results in this analysis are in terms of normative good, those who have resisted creation of a fully ward system of governance in Little Rock have argued that the ward system promotes a provincialism that undermines efforts to create holistic responses to city-wide challenges. This project does not take that key next step of examining the nature and outcome of decision-making within ward and at-large systems. For a truly thorough analysis of the comparative health of ward and at-large systems, that step is a complicated but necessary one. However, these results show that institutional structures matter enormously in terms of who is elected to public office in America's cities, where so many crucial decisions that impact citizens' lives are made.

NOTES

¹ The authors appreciate comments on an earlier version of this project presented at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association.

² "Law Offers LR Variety on Form of Government." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. 22 December 1999: A17.

³ In one of the first public expressions of frustration about the at-large system, the relatively new Little Rock-based advocacy group ACORN issued a press release in 1974.

⁴ *Ibid*; "LR Looks at Latest in Series of Paths for Management." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. 16 July 2007: A4.

⁵ "Plan to Reshape LR Government Shows Compromise." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. 8 July 1993: B4; "Senate Lets LR Pick New Way to Run City." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 9 April 1993: A1, B3.

⁶ "Familiar Faces in LR Drive Against Government Issue." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 10 February 1993: B2.

⁷ "Activists Court Black Votes in Mayor-Council Ballot Issue." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 21 February 1993: A20.

⁸ "LR Gets 2nd Chance to Alter Government." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 3 March 1993: A1, A12.

⁹ The proposal failed in all but a handful of the city's precincts, losing by a margin of 7709 to 4928.

¹⁰ "Future-LR Rescinds Governing Plan, Cites Black Concern." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 14 February 1993: B2; "Future-LR Wants City Manager and 10 Directors." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 23 February 1993: B2.

¹¹ "Plan to Reshape LR Government Shows Compromise."

¹² "Senate Lets LR Pick New Way to Run City."

¹³ "LR Voters Start Deciding Power Mayor Wields." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 30 July 2007: B7.

¹⁴ "Suit fighting LR power vote gets court date." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 11 August 2007: B13.

¹⁵ "Suit alleges bias in how LR board is elected." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 24 October 2007: A1.

¹⁶ "Suit over wards' makeup in LR thrown out, for now." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 4 February 2009: B13.

¹⁷ "Tossing at-large seats is bill goal." *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 10 March 2011: B9.

¹⁸ "Why American Elections Cost so Much." *The Economist*, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/02/economist-explains-4>.

¹⁹ A separate strand of literature draws a link between gender and minority quotas and inclusion of previously under-represented voters (Caul 2001; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Zetterberg 2009) and some focus specifically on the effect such rules have on minority women (Hughes 2011).

²⁰ All NHGIS data was obtained from <https://www.nhgis.org>. The data was extracted by selecting a geographic level, census years and topics that correspond to the variables used in the analysis (income, education, age, race, gender) for the particular time period when an election took place.

²¹ All FactFinder data was obtained from <http://factfinder2.census.gov>. The data was extracted by selecting “Topics” and “Geographies” and narrowing the search by census tract that corresponds to the ward or city area for the time period analyzed for the variables analyzed (income, education, age, race, gender).

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