At Large But Not In Charge
How Formal Institutions Affect Minority Representation on U.S. City Councils

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Introduction

The United States is home to more than 20,000 sub-county governing bodies. Because every city, town, village, and municipality is unique, they each have a distinct set of institutions that determine how policy-making representatives are selected.

In some cities (like Salt Lake City), city councilors are elected by districts (sometimes called wards), meaning the city's electorate is divided into geographic regions that each elect their own council member. Others (like Orem, UT) elect their council member at large, meaning that each council member is elected by the entire city's electorate. Occasionally, cities (like Provo, UT) will elect some of their council members by district and some at large.

In recent decades, municipal reform movements have lobbied to remove at large elections from local governing bodies and replace them with elections by district. They argue at large elections dilute minority voices by only electing representatives that align with the municipality's median voter—often white and upper middle-class residents. Minority groups typically reside in geographic clusters within municipalities. So, even if a certain group makes up a minority of the municipality-wide population, subdivided districts provide a greater chance of at least one district containing enough minority-group votes to reach the threshold required to elect a representative.

Political scientists have concluded that in most cases, district elections more reliably elect non-white city councilors than at large elections (Robinson et al. 1985; Trounstine & Valdini 2008; Marschall et al. 2010). However, these studies are limited by small samples of municipalities, usually the largest ones (pop. > 25,000) or those from a single state. In this project we examine a much larger nationwide sample.

Data

We use an assortment of data collected by research assistants that coded information on city institutions based on city websites, state publications, and interviews with city officials. We also used a comprehensive list of elected municipal officials from 2017 merged with a nationwide voter file to identify the race of each official. The data yield a sample size of **N = 14,443** unique municipalities across 49 states. _As far as we are aware, no prior investigation into municipal electoral institutions has employed a sample size larger than 2,000._

Note: We use the terms city, town, village, and municipality interchangeably. While there are minute differences between the terms, each refers to a form of subcounty governing body.
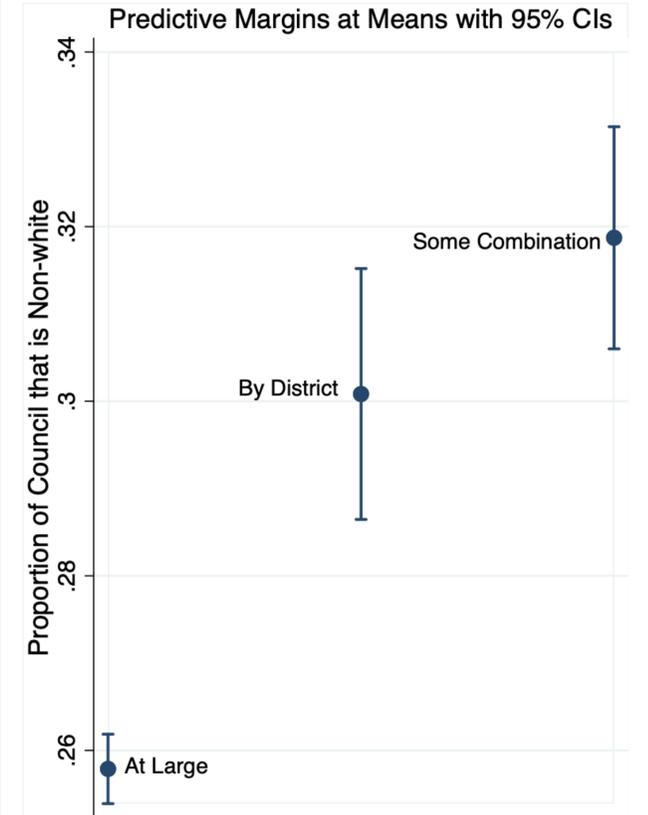
Results
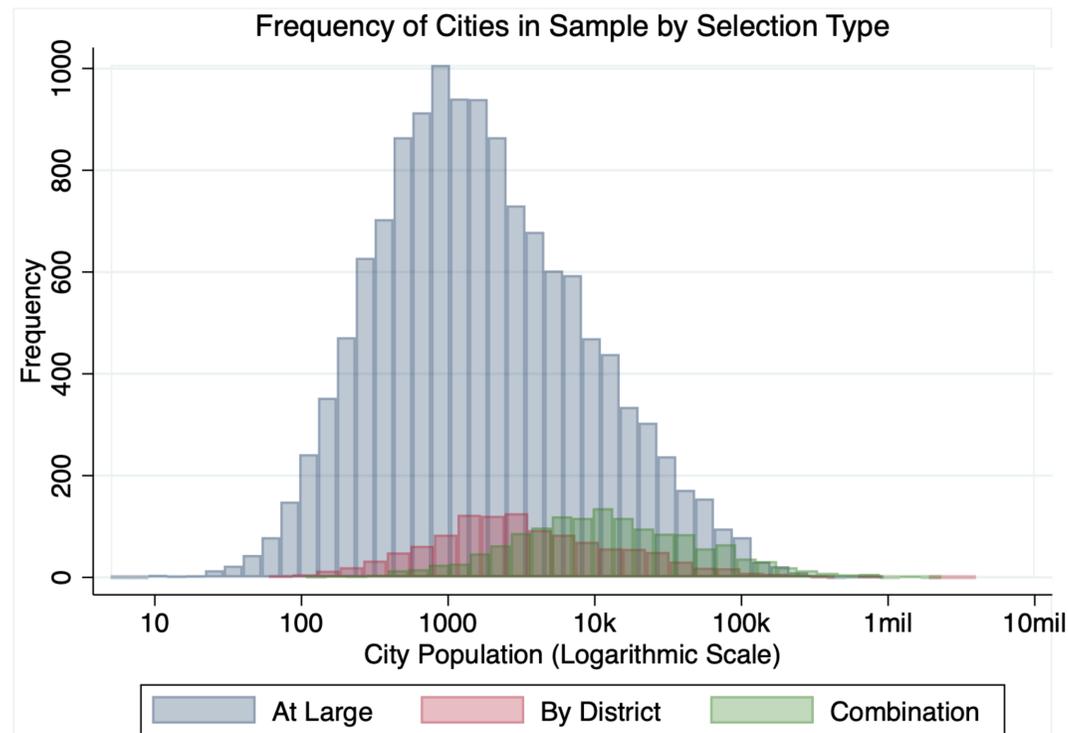
Our sample represents a wide variety cities in terms of size and electoral institutions.
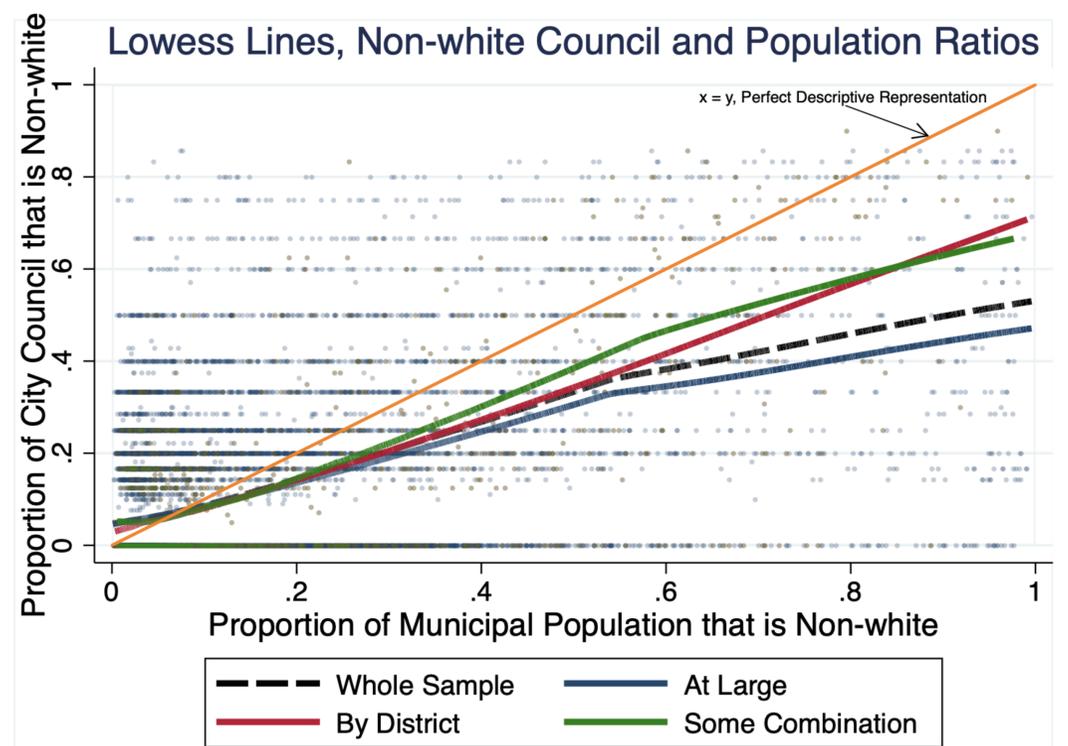
Each dotted plot represents one observation. Darker dots suggest higher frequencies of municipalities with shared statistics.
These results hold in a regression that controls for other variables, including the level of racial segregation in the city.

Regression model contains control variables for the size of city council, nonpartisan elections, off-cycle elections, and racial segregation.

Conclusions

Municipalities that elect their council members by district _favor minority representation_ more than those that elect their council members at large.

- On average, by district elections are predicted to have their councils be _6 percentage points more non-white_ than at large councils
- In municipalities with smaller proportions of non-white residents, at large and by district elections elect minority representatives at about the same rate.
- However, as the proportion of non-white residents within a municipality's population increases, _by district and combination elections are predicted to elect higher proportions of non-white representatives than at large elections_.

Although scholars have reached similar conclusions prior, our findings are unique due to the magnitude of our sample (N = 14,443).