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MARKET ANALYSIS

Will the City of Portland's Charter Reform be Democratic?

Gerard Milder

Portland State University

Gerard Milder is an Associate Professor in the School of Business at Portland State University.

What would you think if you ran for City Council, won 50% of the vote, your two opponents won 40% and 10%, respectively, and yet all three of you were awarded a city council seat...? You would have the same council seat as both opponents, even though you received five times as many votes than one of them. That sounds completely unfair, yet that is what the City of Portland's Charter Review Commission is proposing.

In November 2022, City of Portland voters will vote to change the city's form of government, with the key proposal moving from the current discredited commission form of government to a city manager form of government. This welcome change promises greater coordination between the various city bureaus and better bureau management, as most city commissioners have little city management experience.

While this change is long overdue, the Charter Review Commission has also proposed elections to City Council that include ranked choice voting and multi-member districts which are unrealistic and undemocratic. The Commission should drop this proposal in favor of a simpler City Council election method – 12 city councilors elected from 12 equal population districts using our existing primary process.

The Charter Review Commission adopted as a goal to increase the number of minority voices on City Council. In their early deliberations, for example, they recognized that turnout is greater at general elections in November, particularly among racial and ethnic minorities. They also recognized that Portland doesn't have that many geographic concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities that would promote election of minority candidates to the City Council. The irony of this goal is that the current City Council is 40% Black and 20% Latino in a city that's overwhelming white and non-Hispanic.

The Commission's negative view of low-turnout primary elections in May led them to adopt ranked choice voting, where voters list their preferences 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc. among the City Council candidates, with ballots for lowest ranked candidates transferring to one's second or third choice. Depending upon the other elements of the reform, this method would create "instant primaries" in November, when minority turnout is highest.

The problem with ranked choice voting is that most voters have limited information when they vote. They might have good knowledge of some of the candidates on the ballot, but no voter is aware of the merits or positions of all the candidates in a five- or 10-person race. By contrast, the current primary election system helps voters focus on serious candidates after eliminating fringe candidates in the primary. Hence, the advocates of ranked choice

voting are promoting an election system with less voter information and deliberation.

Compounding this error, the Commission proposes “multi-member districts”, in which several people from a single district would be elected. In the current proposed format, three people would be elected from each of four districts for a total of 12 City Councilors. The Commission was persuaded by arguments that most European parliaments use multi-member districts along with proportional representation, so that smaller parties are represented in proportion to their total vote.

The problem with multi-member districts that the Commission proposes is that candidates with very small number of votes would receive the same council seat as more popular candidates with two, three or even five times the number of votes. Unlike proportional representation parliaments, where votes determine the number of elected party representatives, city elections are non-partisan and there’s no mechanism to add weight to more popular representatives.

This proposed system will elect more fringe candidates. And while many on the Commission believe this will enhance minority and progressive voices on the Council, multi-member districts could just as easily bring obstructionist, right-wing representatives on the Council.

Some of the interest in multi-member districts by the Commission is self-serving as several are past or future City Council candidates. For example, the commission is chaired by activist Candace Avalos, who lost a 2020 City Council election to Carmen Rubio by 68% to 9%. Under the proposed revision, Ms. Avalos would have earned a Council seat equivalent to that of Commissioner Rubio, as well as the third-place fringe candidate with even fewer votes.

The Commission’s multi-member district proposal also ensures that Council races will be held in gigantic districts with populations of 161,000, much larger than the cities of Hillsboro, Beaverton, and Gresham. Large districts will increase the cost of campaigning and reduces the opportunity of neighborhood representation and grass roots democracy.

The shame of Commission’s proposal is that a desperately needed reform of our commission form of government is being held hostage to a weird and undemocratic scheme for electing a city council.