



## League of Women Voters of Portland

PO Box 3491, Portland, Oregon 97208-3491

503-228-1675 • info@lwvpdx.org • www.lwvpdx.org

**Board of Directors**    October 12, 2021

Debbie Kaye  
*President*

To:    Portland Charter Commission, City Council Elections Subcommittee

Marion McNamara  
*1<sup>st</sup> VP*

From: League of Women Voters of Portland

Chris Cobey  
*2<sup>nd</sup> VP*

Debbie Kaye, President

Nancy Donovan  
*3<sup>rd</sup> VP*

Audrey Zunkel-deCoursey, Board member

Re:    Suggestions for charter revisions concerning city elections

Adrienne Aiona  
*Treasurer*

Members of the Elections Subcommittee:

Anne Davidson  
*Secretary*

Thank you for volunteering to do the important work of examining our charter and proposing amendments to improve our form of government and elections.

Debbie Aiona

Carolyn Buppert

Judy Froemke

Linda Mantel

Amber Nobe

Margaret Noel

Audrey Zunkel-

deCoursey

The League of Women Voters is a 101-year old grassroots nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. As such, the Portland League has been closely following the work of the Charter Review Commission and appreciates the opportunity to engage Portlanders in this important civic process.

**Off Board Leaders**

Jen Jacobs  
*Budget*

In late 2019, the League of Women Voters of Portland released an in-depth study report about Portland's government, which we invite you to [read in full online here](#) (paper copies available by request). We also recommend a study about Election Methods done by the League of Women Voters of Oregon, our statewide organization ([full report online here](#), [executive summary here](#)).

Ann Dudley  
*Nominating*

Based on our research and collective discernment, we developed a 2020 position statement that summarizes the reforms we advocate for:

Mary McWilliams  
*Membership*

Philip Thor  
*Endowment Fund*

*The League of Women Voters of Portland believes that a thriving, livable city requires a city government that meets these criteria: accountability, responsiveness, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and nonpartisanship.*

*Our members believe that to more fully meet these criteria, Portland needs to improve its government structure. The highest priorities for change are to improve citizen representation by increasing the number of commissioners, to institute a city manager, and to establish the City Council as a legislative or policy-setting body.*

We are addressing the latter two of these suggestions - about instituting a city manager and establishing the City Council as a legislative body - in a separate letter directly to the Form of Government subcommittee.

The League of Women Voters of Portland:

*To promote political responsibility through informed and active participation in government.*

## ***COUNCIL SIZE***

We urge the Charter Commissioners to explore: **Increasing the number of city councilors to 10-12, plus the mayor.**

Here's why this is important:

- Increasing the number of commissioners might result in better representation. When Portland adopted the five-member commission system in 1913, there was one commissioner for approximately every 42,000 residents. With the city's population at 645,000 and growing, we now have only one commissioner for every 130,000 residents. As populations grow, cities tend to expand the size of their councils to provide a more sensible ratio of elected officials to total population.
- We are simultaneously advocating for changes to the form of government, specifically to suggest less administrative roles for City Commissioners. While the dual legislative and executive roles the council currently holds might be unwieldy with a larger council, more councilors would actually be better able to handle a more purely legislative function because they would bring more perspectives to bear. Details of our suggestions about this topic are in a letter to the Form of Government subcommittee.

How this change will benefit marginalized Portlanders:

- A larger council would work well with other election reforms including proportional representation methods. Combined, a larger council plus proportional representation would give marginalized Portlanders more voice on council. New election methods have the potential to increase voter engagement and bring more voices to City Hall.
- Running for a winner-take-all City Council seat and representing the entire city is an expensive and time-consuming undertaking for prospective commissioners. It frequently requires a healthy network of volunteers and a robust donor base. This fact and other compounding factors have led to a city council that has consisted overwhelmingly of white male homeowners from certain affluent neighborhoods of the city. Women, people of color, renters, and those living in less wealthy parts of town have been historically underrepresented in City Hall.
- We note that the recent campaign financing reforms already undertaken are an important step toward making elections more inclusive and equitable.

How this change aligns with the Commission's "North Stars:"

- A larger City Council could allow more **participation** from diverse members of the community, allowing more voters to have a say in who is elected to city council.
- A larger City Council could be more **accessible**, because there would be more Commissioners to hear Portlanders' concerns.
- A larger City Council could better **reflect** the communities it represents, by giving space to have a more diverse Council than five people can represent.

Examples of other similar cities with larger councils:

- Seattle (737,015 residents, per 2020 census) has a 9-member Council elected by district, plus the mayor.
- Salt Lake City (199,723) has a 7-member Council elected by district, plus the mayor.
- Pittsburgh (302,971) has a 9-member Council elected by district, plus the mayor.
- Albuquerque (564,559) has a 9-member Council elected by district, plus the mayor.
- Oakland (440,646) has an 8-member Council (7 elected by district, 1 at large), plus the mayor and a city administrator.
- Denver (715,522) has a 13-member Council (11 elected by district, 2 at large), plus the mayor.
- Minneapolis (429,954) has a 13-member Council elected by ward, plus the mayor.

The ten municipalities closest in population to Portland all have larger city councils, with a minimum of six, and a maximum of 40, members.

Specifically, we would suggest expanding the City Council to 10-12 members plus the mayor.

- The most typical pattern among other cities of similar size range is about two representatives per 100,000 residents, resulting in a 12-member Council for Portland.
- The City Club of Portland concluded after their study that the number of commissioners should be increased to at least 8, plus the mayor, for a total of at least 9 City Council members.

Expanding the City Council would have additional benefits:

- Multi-member districts would be possible, if the Commission develops a plan to create districts.
- Proportional representation would be possible in citywide races or in district races with multi-member districts.

## ***COUNCIL CONSTITUENCY***

This larger Council could be elected in proportional citywide races, in multi-winner proportional districts, or in single-winner districts. You also have the option of creating a combination of City Council seats held by single-winner districts and some winner-take-all citywide seats, as other cities our size have done. Each of these options has benefits and challenges.

*Benefits of district races:*

- Offices chosen by district elections could increase voter access to their Commissioners. Underrepresented constituencies might feel they are better represented and have better access to leaders under this approach. Former City Commissioner Fritz has said that she liked representing the entire city, but she acknowledged that election by district might reduce the cost of campaigning and make the process more accessible.
- Having some or all of the commissioners elected by district (or required to reside in a defined district and be elected at-large) would follow models already used to elect the Portland school boards, Metro Councilors, and Multnomah County Commissioners.

*Benefits of citywide races:*

- Citywide offices are simpler to maintain than setting up new districts, which would require work and expenses to set initial boundaries, as well as redistricting work every decade.
- Being elected citywide might make it easier for councilors to have a city-wide or long-term perspective, compared to districts which may encourage councilors to focus only on the short-term needs of their particular corner of the city.

**We urge the commission to explore either proportional representation methods (citywide or in multi-winner districts) or districts.** Proportional representation election systems are one innovative election method that has been discussed. This method would be an option to consider with an expanded City Council, whether the commissioners are elected by district or citywide.

***ELECTION METHODS***

**We urge the commission to consider election methods like ranked choice voting that can lead to a proportionally representative council.**

The League of Women Voters of Portland recognizes that election methods affect how voters participate in our democracy, who can run for office, and who can get elected. Therefore, the League supports innovative election methods that enhance democracy. We support election methods that encourage voter participation, are easy to use, are trustworthy, promote competitive elections, and prevent political manipulation. Many of those methods are detailed in our state League's study of Election Methods. The League of Women Voters supports election systems that elect policy-making bodies—legislatures, councils, commissions, and boards—that proportionally reflect the people they represent. Our state League supports enabling legislation to allow local jurisdictions to explore alternative election methods, noting that funding for startup and voter education should be available if they adopt a new election method.

For example, we support ranked-choice voting to increase voter choice and lead to more positive campaigning. It can be used in single-member districts as well as in multi-member districts to achieve proportional representation.

Proportional methods would align well with the Commission's "North Stars:"

- Proportional voting systems create more **reflective** representation. Under the current winner-take-all at-large system, the biggest block of voters can elect all the council members while voters in the minority are left with no commissioners they prefer. Proportional methods give every group of voters fair representation.
- Proportional systems can improve **accessibility**. The threshold to win one seat is lower in proportional elections than in the city's current winner-take-all at-large elections. Each city commissioner now has to win around 100,000 votes; in a nine-member proportional council, the threshold to win would be more like 20,000.
- Proportional systems allow more voters to **participate and be heard**. In Portland, only around half of voters are able to elect someone they support in City Hall. According to data analyzed by the Sightline Institute, in US cities that use proportional voting, between [70-90% of voters see someone they voted for](#) representing them in the halls of power.

Combining proportional methods with our other recommendations:

- Offices held citywide would be well-suited to proportional voting. A City Council expanded to 10-12 members would mean five or six councilors could be elected into office at each election. The mayor would be elected in a separate winner-take-all race.
- Proportional voting would also be possible with commissioners elected by districts. For example, for a 13-member Council, Portland could have four districts with three commissioners each, plus the mayor elected citywide. (It requires at least three seats per district for proportional representation.)

## **CONCLUSION**

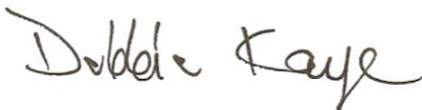
Election reforms are important to our organization on many levels. The League of Women Voters of the United States [supports voting methods](#) that maximize effective votes and minimize wasted votes, and that elect councils that proportionally reflect the people they represent. The League of Women Voters of Oregon [supports](#) reforms that promote voter participation and engagement and competitive elections, and discourage gerrymandering and negative campaigning, among other pro-democracy goals. As part of both the national and state Leagues, the League of Women Voters of Portland supports their goals for election reforms. We [endorse](#) accountability, responsiveness, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and nonpartisanship.

[Our 2019 report](#) concluded with these words:

When the next Charter Review Commission considers how the City Charter might be amended, their recommendations and the voters' decisions will be based on the criteria they prioritize for judging the potential improvements or trade-offs for each proposal. The League of Women Voters of Portland City Government Study Committee hopes this report will help guide the public, as we choose among the options that will shape Portland's future government.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to public service.

Sincerely,



Debbie Kaye,  
LWVPDX President



Audrey Zunkel-deCoursey,  
LWVPDX Board Member