

At-large or Ward Elections?

The City of Guelph currently elects councillors in wards. Should future councils be elected by wards or at-large?

The *Municipal Act, 2001*, s. 217 (1) (4) provides that “other than the head of council, members shall be elected by general vote or wards or by any combination of general vote and wards.” The method of election of the mayor is therefore not under discussion. [NOTE: A “general vote” is sometimes called an at-large election.]

From the point of view of representation, the two systems offer alternative attributes, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Comparing General Vote and a Ward Systems of Representation
Attributes of a General Vote System

Advantages	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electors have greater choice and flexibility in elections (each voter has the opportunity to consider every candidate in the Council election). • Electors are able to select the candidates they think will do the best job, rather than having to make a choice among candidates who happen to run in their ward. • Residents will have a larger number of councillors to approach with their concerns. • The system promotes the concept of a municipal-wide focus, with councillors being elected by, and concerned for, the municipality as a whole, rather than placing a priority on more parochial interests. • The likelihood of acclamations is reduced. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candidates must campaign across the entire municipality; this may make the cost of a campaign prohibitive (especially for newcomers). • There would be no designated voices for particular communities or localities within the municipality. • General vote elections can lead to significant communities of interest and points of view being unrepresented (or under-represented). • Candidates who appeal to areas where voter turnout is highest tend to be elected disproportionately. • The format can lead to confusion of responsibilities and duplication of effort on the part of Councillors (everybody on a Council represents everybody in the municipality).

Attributes of a Ward System

Advantages	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors are more likely to be truly local representatives, easily accessible to residents and aware of local issues. • Distinctive communities of interest are more likely to be represented. • It is less likely that one particular point of view or sectional interest will dominate the Council. • Simplifies the election process for electors. • Easier for a new candidate to win election • Candidates do not need as much campaign funding to compete in a ward system as they need in an at-large system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors may be elected on minor or parochial issues and lack a perspective of what is to the benefit of the municipality as a whole. • Ward boundaries may divide communities of interest (which may be difficult to define anyway). • Voters may have a restricted choice of candidates in elections for individual wards. • There is a greater likelihood of acclamations. • There might be problems if a Councillor is not performing effectively or is clashing with some electors, as electors for that ward have no alternative councillor to approach. • Ward boundaries may be susceptible to change caused by demographic shifts. • Population changes can lead to unequal workloads for councillors until ward boundaries are reviewed. • May discourage new candidates if an incumbent is generally popular or if an incumbent who is popular with a dominant community of interest within the ward is running.

- Guelph operated under a general vote system for several decades (beginning in 1909 when the population was about 11,500). A ward system was implemented for the 1991 municipal election when the population was 88,500. In 2006, a ballot question “Are you in favour of retaining the current ward system as the method of electing City Councillors” was supported by 80% of electors.
- While permitted under the Municipal Act, 2001, s. 217 (1) (4), a general vote (at-large) system is not the practice in any municipality in Ontario with a population greater than 100,000. At-large elections are most often found in smaller, rural municipalities that do not have significant geographic differences within the municipality. The largest municipality in Ontario with an at-large system is Niagara Falls (population 85,000). Vancouver (population 610,000), which has a party

system, is the largest city in Canada with an at-large system. Both cities have had periodic discussions about switching to a ward system.

- Municipalities can choose to combine at-large and ward systems, but this is relatively rare. Among single-tier Ontario municipalities in the 100,000 to 200,000 population range, only the City of Thunder Bay uses a combination system; five members of its Council are elected at-large and seven in wards (note: 26 candidates sought the five at-large seats in 2018). This configuration has been used ever since the City was created through an amalgamation in 1970.
- In the early 1900s, several large Ontario cities had a combination of councillors chosen by wards and at-large. The at-large councillors were members of the board of control. These systems were all eliminated by the 1970s because of dissatisfaction with the idea of a hierarchy of councillors.
- The amalgamated City of Kingston experimented with a combination of ward and at-large councillors for one term before converting to all-ward councillors.
- The general concern about having a hybrid system is that it creates an awkward relationship between at-large and ward councillors. All councillors at the table are supposed to be equal, but when councillors are elected from different electoral bases, does this mean that some are more important than others?