

## The At-Large Electoral System & Unequal Representation: An Analysis of Surrey Council

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Given the major disparities in terms of income, location, and ethnicity within the British Columbia municipality of Surrey, the current at-large electoral system fails to adequately represent or unite the city's diverse communities. An analysis of Surrey's six major communities, consisting of Cloverdale, Guildford, Fleetwood, Newton, Whalley, and South Surrey (see Figure 1), confirms that the unique concerns of each of these communities are not currently being represented at the level of local government. As the electoral system does not guarantee that the eight councillors or mayor of Surrey reside within each of the city's communities, the result has been a lack of representation from the lower-income and more culturally diverse communities. One way to counter this problem would be to re-introduce a ward system, abolished in 1957,<sup>1</sup> to ensure that each of the six Surrey communities would have at least one person to represent their interests on the city council.

After introducing the at-large and ward systems, I will consider how the ward system better fulfills the ideal of representative democracy by examining the relationship between the at-large system and the over-representation of socially and economically dominant groups. Next, this claim of unequal com-



Figure 1: Surrey Communities, Cartography by Eric Leinberger, UBC Department of Geography.

<sup>1</sup> Lorraine Ellenwood, *Years of Promise* (White Rock: White Rock Museum and Archives Society, 2004): 184.

munity representation will be further supported by examination of councillor residency in Surrey. This leads to a concluding examination of whether the ward system creates division and whether that division presents a barrier to reform by reducing incentives for change amongst those benefiting from the current circumstances.

### **An Introduction to At-Large and Ward Electoral Systems**

Surrey and Vancouver are currently the only large municipalities in Canada to use the at-large electoral system.<sup>2</sup> This system ensures that the entire municipality elects the candidates for council and mayor, thus all spots on council are awarded to those who gain the most votes cast by the city as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The alternative municipal electoral system, used in all other major Canadian municipalities, is the ward system, which divides the municipality into a number of geographic districts or wards based on population.<sup>4</sup> Voters then choose the person to represent their ward, similar to the single-member plurality electoral system used in Canadian provincial and federal elections. Vancouver, incorporated as a municipality in 1886, used a ward system until the at-large system was first adopted in 1936.<sup>5</sup> Incorporated as a municipality in 1879, Surrey had its first council in 1880 and used the at-large system until 1887 when the ward system was introduced.<sup>6</sup> Originally comprising five wards, Surrey expanded to seven in 1948. The ward system continued in Surrey until 1957 when the municipality reverted to an at-large system.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the at-large electoral system's history in British Columbia, serious concerns have been raised over the perceived relationship between it and unbalanced council composition. As there is no requirement that councillors must reside in specific areas throughout the city, this leaves open the possibility of having an unequal distribution of councillor residency. It is theoretically possible that the at-large system could produce a council with all members residing within the same area of a city. Although no longer using an at-large system, the reason behind Winnipeg's shift from a ward sys-

tem to a "quasi" at-large system in 1920 was said to be the fact that the city's elite "were cognizant of the campaign advantages accruing from political resources applied to large-scale constituencies."<sup>8</sup> Essentially, more dominant socioeconomic groups have been perceived as having a greater chance of being overrepresented under an at-large system. For Vancouver, these concerns about community representation resulted in the 1979 Eckhardt Electoral Commission and the 2004 Vancouver Electoral Reform Commission, or Berger Commission, both recommending the adoption of a ward system. As the Berger Commission reported "[i]t is generally accepted that the majority of City Councillors have been from the West Side," an area with higher incomes and less unemployment than Vancouver's East Side.<sup>9</sup> The major argument behind using an at-large system is that it better unites a city as each councillor is said to be representing the entire municipality rather than a specific ward. I will argue, however, this is outweighed by the negative repercussions incurred by disregarding the ideal of representative democracy.

### **The Case for the Ward System and Representative Democracy**

The ideal of equal representation, or that all members of society are equally represented in local government, can be more easily attained in a ward system. Whereas a ward system would divide the city into geographic areas based on population so that all areas of the municipality would be represented in the hopes of producing a more diverse council, the at-large electoral system may create unbalanced councils favouring more powerful groups. Again analyzing the case of Winnipeg, "the move from quasi-general elections in 1920 and the return to neighbourhood wards in 1971" increased the number of non-elite candidates running for council.<sup>10</sup> Overall, Chandler Davidson and George Korbel argue that "advantages... accrue to working-class people generally under the ward system" while Leon Weaver contends that there is an "[i]mprovement in the prospects of representation of minorities."<sup>11</sup>

2 Thomas R. Berger, *A City of Neighbourhoods: Report of the 2004 Vancouver Electoral Reform Commission* (City of Vancouver, 2004): 4.

3 Kenneth Grant Crawford, *Canadian Municipal Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954): 82.

4 Crawford 1954: 82.

5 Berger 2004: 12.

6 Ellenwood 2004: 184.

7 Ellenwood 2004: 184.

8 James Lightbody, "Electoral Reform in Local Government: The Case of Winnipeg," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 2 (1978): 315, 319.

9 Berger 2004: 40.

10 Lightbody 1978: 315, 330.

11 Chandler Davidson and George Korbel, "At-Large Elections and Minority-Group Representation: A Re-Examination of Historical and Contemporary Evidence," *The Journal of Politics* 43 (1981): 992; Leon Weaver, "Semi-Proportional and Proportional Representation in the United States," in *Choosing an Electoral System: Issues and Alternatives*, edited by

There are two reasons behind this increase in the representation of social and economic minorities on councils when using a ward electoral system. First, it lessens the effect of higher voter turnout in areas of greater socioeconomic status. As noted by the Berger Commission, Vancouver councillors “have been largely chosen by (and to large extent from among) West Side residents.”<sup>12</sup> The “more affluent and well educated,” the Berger Commission found “have a greater chance of informing themselves on civic issues and participating in political affairs.”<sup>13</sup> Geographically concentrated cultural minorities and/or lower income groups would have a higher chance of being elected in a ward system as it as “permits such groups to obtain representation of their special interests to an extent not possible if their votes are merged with the votes of the general community.”<sup>14</sup>

Second, the ward system places fewer burdens on potential candidates due to the fact that campaigning is contained within the ward. As councillors are intended to “represent the whole city” in an at-large system, it therefore requires candidates to run a city-wide campaign.<sup>15</sup> This places a financial burden on those running for council, especially independent candidates, thus explaining the lack of independents and great influence of political parties and slates in both Surrey and Vancouver.<sup>16</sup> Given the geographical size of Surrey and the number of residents, running a campaign across the municipality disadvantages those with limited political and financial resources, the reason why according to the Berger Commission the at-large system “crowds out minority voices, and may also tend to crowd out ethnic minorities from the political process as well.”<sup>17</sup> The ward system would not only encourage a more diverse selection of candidates to run a campaign, but it would also make it more likely that they would actually be elected to council, as their campaign would be less dependent on having significant financial resources in order to win votes.

The increase of minority representation in a ward system, stemming from these two reasons, comes closer to the ideal of representative democracy. Due to the varying socioeconomic and cultural differenc-

es across a municipality, the ward system’s “[r]epresentation of all geographic areas”<sup>18</sup> would work to ensure all communities, and thus more minorities, would have a voice on council. Although Crawford and others may claim that an at-large system increases efficiency or that “the standard of performance appears higher,”<sup>19</sup> as Lightbody argues, this would only be an acceptable “formulation” when “a socially homogenous and property-owning electorate believes the task of local government to be simply the efficient management of widely-agreed-upon-service chores.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than viewing them as neutral entities, electoral systems have a “role in the promotion or protection of specific class or group interest.”<sup>21</sup> Although Crawford claims one electoral system cannot be said to be more democratic than the other, he also states that it “depends on the interpretation of what constitutes democracy.”<sup>22</sup> The more balanced representation found under the ward system fulfills a definition of democracy founded on the belief that the government should reflect the diversity of the constituents being served. Yet, although there is firm theoretical support, as well as evidence from Vancouver and Winnipeg, to claim that the at-large system is negatively affecting council diversity, is there any clear evidence that this is the case in Surrey? Whereas Vancouver has attended to these concerns by conducting electoral commissions, the at-large system has not received the same level of scrutiny in Surrey. I seek to address this gap in knowledge by conducting my own research into the question of whether the at-large system has affected Surrey council composition in order to confirm or disconfirm these theoretical arguments.

## Data and Methods

Surrey is divided into six major communities or town centres, ranging from Whalley and Guildford in the northern end of the municipality to South Surrey at its opposite end, while Cloverdale, Fleetwood, and Newton occupy its middle.<sup>23</sup> The question of whether these six communities are being equally represented on Surrey’s council can be answered through an examination of the residence patterns of council members. First, using a list of Surrey coun-

Arend Lijphart and Bernard Grofman (Toronto: Praeger Publishers, 1984): 193

12 Berger 2004: 5-6

13 Berger 2004: 43

14 Crawford 1954: 84

15 Weaver 1984: 192

16 Berger 2004: 44, 46

17 Berger 2004: 46

18 Weaver 1984: 192

19 Crawford 1954: 86

20 Lightbody 1978: 310

21 Lightbody 1978: 310

22 Crawford. 1954: 86

23 City of Surrey, “Secondary Land Use Plans,” City of Surrey, 2011, <http://www.surrey.ca/plans-strategies/1322.aspx>

Table 1: Surrey Council Representation 1960-1994

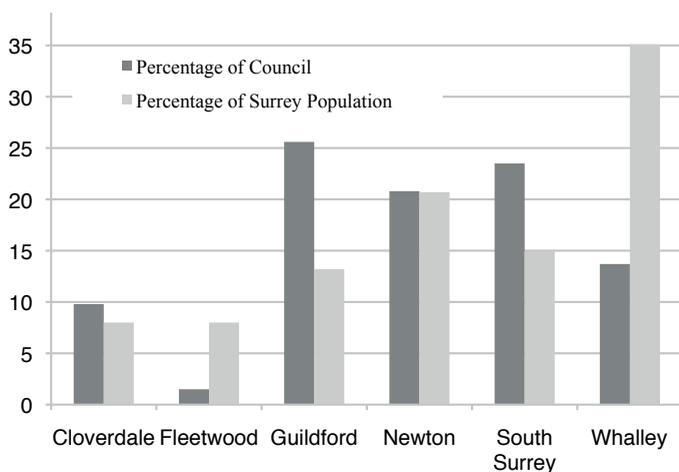
		Number of Councillors*	Percentage of Council	Percentage of Surrey Population %**
Community	Cloverdale	33	9.8	8.0
	Fleetwood	5	1.5	8.0
	Guilford	86	25.6	13.2
	Newton	70	20.8	20.7
	South Surrey	79	23.5	15.0
	Whalley	46	13.7	35.1
	No Info	5	1.5	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*Data from years 1960 to 1994

\*\* Average taken from 1965 to 1995

councillors, provided from the office of the City Clerk, I looked up each councillor’s address in the B.C. City Directories (Vancouver South or Lower Fraser Valley) for that particular year he/she served on council. This was done from the year 1960, or two years after the re-introduction of the at-large system, to 1994, when the directories ceased publication. Second, addresses were then inputted into Google Maps and cross-referenced with a City of Surrey map to label each councillor as a resident of one of the six Surrey communities. In total, the residences of 336 Surrey members of council, both mayors and councillors, were collected to determine patterns of councillor residency. Despite some gaps

Figure 2: Surrey Council Representation 1960-1994



in the data owing to seventeen cases in which a councillor either resided outside of Surrey or had a residence that could not be determined, some conclusions can be drawn based on the remaining 319 councillors (see Table 1).

The last column reflects each community’s share of the Surrey population, or the percentage of Sur-

rey residents residing in that community, an average taken from 1965 to 1995.<sup>24</sup> Although this is an average and lacks some nuance in terms of population changes, it serves the purpose of giving a point of reference when comparing how many councillors served from each community. Ideal community representation would mean that each community’s percentage of the Surrey population would match its share of Surrey councillors in these thirty-four years. However, the data reveal a long-standing

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Dong, Planning Analyst, City of Surrey, Personal communication, “Re: Population Inquiry,” November 25, 2011.

Table 2: Surrey Council Representation 2000, 2010, 2011

		Number of Councillors*	Percentage of Council	Percentage of Surrey Population**
Community	Cloverdale	3	11.1	11.0
	Fleetwood	3	11.1	12.6
	Guilford	4	14.8	13.4
	Newton	2	7.4	25.8
	South Surrey	15	55.6	16.1
	Whalley	0	0	21.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

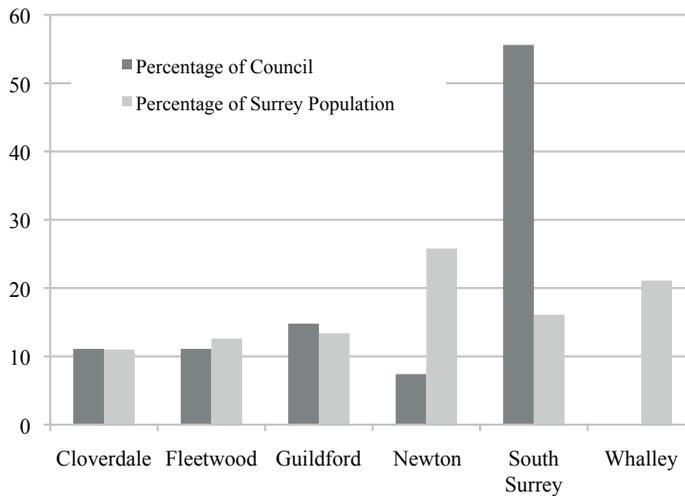
\*Data from years 2000, 2010, 2011

\*\* Average taken from 2000 to 2011

pattern of disproportionate representation of select communities on council. Looking at the same data graphed in Figure 2, it is clear that the percentage of council represented by each community does not always reflect their share of the municipality’s population. While Cloverdale and Newton roughly made up the same share of Surrey council as their population would suggest, an analysis of data from the other four communities confirms disproportionate representation. Guildford and South Surrey are overrepresented on Surrey council at the expense of Fleetwood and Whalley. In particular, the gap between Whalley’s share of council and share of population is over twenty percent.

This, however, does not provide a current picture of community representation. Table 2 examines councillor residences from the councils of 2000, 2010, and 2011, which presents an even more un-

Figure 3: Surrey Council Representation 2000, 2010, 2011



balanced Surrey council. A list of addresses of the 2000 council was found in the Surrey Archives, while the postal codes of the 2010 and 2011 councillors were found on their electoral nomination forms on the City of Surrey website. Similarly, I inputted these addresses and postal codes into Google Maps, and then used a City of Surrey map to make claims about community residency for each of the 27 councillors (see Table 2). Examining these more recent years, it is evident that they confirm arguments that the at-large system can produce unequal city councils. Although this is only three years of data, considering the consistency of councillor residency patterns across the period, two general points can be made. First, in more recent years, each community's population share has risen with the exception of Guildford and Whalley.

Second, South Surrey is increasingly dominating council; in these three sample years, fifteen of the twenty-seven councillors were, or still are, residing in South Surrey. This is occurring at the expense of all other communities, in particular Whalley, where there not one councillor during these years was a resident of this community.

### Implications of Unequal Surrey Representation

By having an at-large electoral system that produces unequal community representation, socioeconomic differences between communities are not being reflected on council. Variations among the population are not equally distributed throughout Surrey, instead they tend to be drawn along community lines. Although the municipality may have

an average employment income of \$32,733 in 2006, in reality the numbers range from \$47,981 in South Surrey to \$28,219 in Whalley.<sup>25</sup> Significant variations also exist in the prevalence of low-income families, defined by the 2006 Census as the portion of the population spending twenty percent or more of its income on basic needs.<sup>26</sup> Only 6.7% of families in South Surrey qualified as low-income, significantly less than Surrey's northern communities, where 19.3% of Whalley families and 22.3% of Guildford families held low-income status.<sup>27</sup> Under the at-large electoral system, the municipality's most prosperous community, South Surrey, holds the greatest number of resident councillors, and as a result arguably the greatest community voice. Meanwhile, Whalley, the community with the least amount of socioeconomic wealth, has been consistently underrepresented.

In the case of Surrey, these differences express themselves also in terms of visible minority background. For example, the election of Tom Gill to council in 2005 made him the first Indo-Canadian candidate to be elected to council in a municipality where 45.8% of the 2006 population was a visible minority, and of which, 59.6% were of South Asian descent.<sup>28</sup> Even more telling, most of Gill's votes came from the more ethnically diverse communities, such as Newton and Fleetwood, while he received lower numbers of votes in the less diverse community of South Surrey.<sup>29</sup> In essence, it is as if the at-large system is "converted into a tool of absolute control by the majority....[t]he larger the district magnitude, the worse off the minority parties or groups are likely to be."<sup>30</sup> Instead, "at-large elections... work to the clear advantage of individuals and groups who are dominant in social and economic spheres."<sup>31</sup>

### A Divided Surrey?

While this paper has argued that representation is a crucial part of democracy, critics of the ward electoral system argue that representatives from each ward tend "to represent the parochial interests

25 Jean Lamontagne, Corporate Report No. R247 (City of Surrey, 2008): 4-5

26 Lamontagne 2008: 4-5

27 Lamontagne 2008: 7-8

28 Ted Colley, "Gill pledges to represent all," Surrey Now, November 23, 2005, New section, 6; B.C. Stats. Profile of Diversity in BC Communities: Surrey (Province of British Columbia, 2006): 1.

29 Colley 2005: 6.

30 Rein Taagepera, "The Effect of District Magnitude and Properties of Two-Seat Districts," in *Choosing an Electoral System: Issues and Alternatives*, edited by Arend Lijphart and Bernard Grofman (Toronto: Praeger Publishers, 1984): 101

31 Lightbody 1978: 311

of that district rather than the whole community.”<sup>32</sup> In comparison, they argue that “those elected at-large can afford to take a community rather than sectional view,” as “dividing the community into sections... is detrimental to the best community spirit.”<sup>33</sup> The idea that a ward system creates narrow-minded councillors and fosters division within a city is claimed by current Surrey councillors as the reason why Surrey should maintain the at-large system, pointing to the example of the separation of White Rock.<sup>34</sup> The current municipality of White Rock was “[b]orn as Surrey’s enfant terrible,” originally one of the seven wards of Surrey until 1957.<sup>35</sup> As ward seven, citizens of White Rock began to increasingly voice concerns over perceived neglect by the Surrey council and managed to hold a 1956 Surrey-wide referendum on the separation of White Rock from Surrey.<sup>36</sup> After the results yielded slightly higher numbers for annexation, a White Rock MLA quickly drafted a private-members bill in Victoria, which created the new municipality of White Rock.<sup>37</sup>

Arguments against the ward system in Surrey focus on the potential for another ward of Surrey to separate as why the current at-large system should be maintained. However, although Surrey may not be formally divided into wards, as noted earlier, there still exist varying socioeconomic and cultural differences across the city when comparing the municipality’s six communities. Summing up the problems in Surrey, a local editorial noted that Whalley is coping with crime and homelessness, Fleetwood and Cloverdale face the issue of growth, Guildford struggles with the challenge of densification, Newton has a large population of immigrants, while “South Surrey residents struggle with the question of whether to serve red or white wine with salmon.”<sup>38</sup> This tongue-in-cheek statement speaks both to the unique concerns of each community as well as the sense that South Surrey largely differs from the rest of the city. Yet, as proved by the analysis of community representation, it is South Surrey that is overrepresented while other communities have little or no formal representation

of their interests on council. As Berger argues, although the ward system produces tension between the neighbourhood and city-wide points of view, the neighbourhood perspective should still be represented on council.<sup>39</sup> In 2007, Councillor Tom Gill argued, “[b]eing one of only two councillors from North Surrey... means we get bombarded with more requests” as the “balance of councillors are in South Surrey.”<sup>40</sup> While proponents of the at-large system may argue that it promotes a city-wide vision, a complete Surrey perspective is absent when a council is missing the inclusion of certain neighbourhood perspectives, and therefore risks alienating these communities.

### The Future of Electoral Reform in Surrey

In comparison to Vancouver, which conducted two electoral commissions, Surrey has had relatively little political debate surrounding its electoral system. Although current Mayor Diane Watts and other Surrey councillors claim that the ward system would lead to municipal division, pointing to the example of White Rock, it can be said that the true reason for keeping the at-large system is the lack of incentive for electoral change. As argued by Boix, if “the current [electoral] rules serve the ruling parties well, the government has no incentives to modify the electoral regimes.”<sup>41</sup> The Surrey council has little reason to reintroduce the ward system when considering its electoral success. The Surrey First slate, headed by Watts, won all nine of the council spots in the 2011 election and the one non-Surrey First councillor was not re-elected.<sup>42</sup> Bob Bose, this lone minority voice on council and a councillor for twenty-eight years, has been a vocal critic of the at-large electoral system during his time on council.<sup>43</sup> But with his proposals of a referendum on the ward system continually dismissed by Surrey council and no longer occupying a seat on council, the issue of electoral reform has faded. Yet, when comparing homogeneity of their council to the heterogeneity of their municipality, Surrey citizens may be right to question the perceived normality and neutrality of electoral outcomes.

32 Weaver 1984: 193

33 Crawford 1954: 84-85

34 Amy Reid, “Should Surrey return to the ward system?” *Surrey Now*, November 3, 2011, News section, 1.

35 Ellenwood 2004: 11

36 Ellenwood 2004: 190-191

37 Ellenwood 2004: 190-191

38 Michael Booth, “Ward system suits Surrey perfectly,” *Surrey Now*, November 3, 2011, News section, 14.

39 Berger 2004: 5

40 Matthew Burrows, “Surrey Coun. Bob Bose wants Surrey ward system,” *The Georgia Straight*, April 26 2007, News and Views section.

41 Carles Boix, “Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies,” *The American Political Science Review* 93, no. 3 (1999): 609

42 Kelly Sinoski, “Surrey Mayor Diane Watts cruises to victory, taking 81 per cent of vote and sweeping Surrey council,” *The Vancouver Sun*, November 20, 2011, News section.

43 Burrows 2007

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