

Types of Electoral Systems

There are three main types of electoral systems used to elect municipal/city elected officials within North America: ward system, at-large system and a mixed system which is a combination of both a ward and at-large system. Of the 37 municipalities surveyed by Legislative & Legal Services, 21 are governed by a ward-based system, 14 are governed by an at-large system, and 2 are governed by a mixed or partial ward-based system. Enclosure 3 provides the details of the 37 municipalities surveyed.

1. Ward-Based System

A ward-based system dissects a municipality into smaller electoral divisions (wards or districts). Electors residing in each ward are only permitted to vote for a candidate who is running in that ward (unless otherwise stated in a bylaw). Often, the Mayor or Chief Elected Official is elected at-large.

As reported by the surveyed municipalities and in research findings, the following table summarizes the **perceived** advantages and disadvantages of a ward-based system:

	Ward Based System
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each geographic area of the municipality is represented. • Elected Officials are “closer” to the electors. • Elected Officials are more accountable when responsible for one ward, and issues relevant to each ward will be resolved with greater focus. • May provide greater opportunities for diversity on Council. • Campaigning is less expensive. • Each elector has specific Elected Official to go to for assistance. • Helps to equalize the workload among Elected Officials
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the MGA requires Council to consider the interests of the municipality as a whole, there may be a perception that Elected Officials are taking a ward based perspective. • There may be greater conflict between Elected Officials. • Ward boundaries may need to be reviewed and redrawn frequently, including after each census or annexation. • Electors may be confused about wards and about candidates for whom they can vote. • There may be greater expectations from the electors to have their Elected Official involved in administrative matters. • Electors may have a smaller pool of candidates to choose from. • An Elected Official who moves out of the ward is disqualified.

Within a ward-based system, there can be single representation or dual representation. In a single representation ward system, only one candidate per

ward is elected to represent the ward. This is the current system of governance in Strathcona County. In a dual representation ward system, two candidates are elected per ward. Prior to the City of Edmonton changing their electoral system structure to its current single representation ward system in 2006, they had two elected officials representing each of their wards.

As reported by the surveyed municipalities and in research findings, the following table summarizes the **perceived** advantages and disadvantages of a ward-based single representation system and a ward-based dual representation system:

	Ward-Based Single Representation	Ward-Based Dual Representation
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a smaller geographic area and fewer residents for which each Elected Official is responsible. • Elected Officials are more accountable when responsible for one ward, and issues relevant to each ward will be resolved with greater focus. • Less confusion for voters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It provides the residents with an option to contact their preferred Elected Official for their ward. • Dual Elected Officials who share the workload are able to spend a greater amount of time focusing on forming stable relationships across neighbourhoods. • Dual representation may encourage each Elected Official to provide a similar level of service to residents.
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If their respective Elected Official for their ward is unavailable, residents may feel they cannot contact others with their inquiry. • Voters may feel as though they have limited choices when required to choose only one candidate to represent their ward. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a larger geographic area and more residents for which each Elected Official is responsible for. • Residents may become confused about Elected Officials' responsibility to the ward, and how they are working together for the ward's best interests. • May be viewed as a way to diminish the accountability of each Elected Official. • With two Elected Officials per ward, it may result in residents' requests or concerns being unintentionally neglected or undealt with.

2. At-Large System

With an at-large electoral system, Elected Officials are elected by popular vote to represent the entire municipality; all voters within the municipal boundaries vote on the same list of candidates. At-large systems are most commonly seen in smaller municipalities, where it may be difficult to create wards, but it is also seen in medium and smaller sized Alberta cities such as St. Albert, Lethbridge and Red Deer.

As reported by the surveyed municipalities and in research findings, the following table summarizes the **perceived** advantages and disadvantages of at-large systems:

	At-large Systems
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected Officials are not elected by residents of a particular ward and therefore it may be easier for them to consider the entire municipality when making decisions. • Elected Officials may be less likely to engage in conflict with each other in order to reach a conclusion which best suits the municipality. • Elections are easier to administer and easier for voters to understand. • Elected Officials can move anywhere within the municipality and not lose their seat. • An argument can be made that this type of system elects better qualified candidates since they must have the confidence of the entire municipality and the pool of candidates may be larger.
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaign expenses are much greater because they must cover the entire municipality, and this may deter candidates from running. • Members that are elected may be concentrated from a specific area of the municipality. • There is a perceived lack of neighbourhood responsibility and representation. • There is a potential for workload to be uneven amongst the Elected Officials if some are more flexible and readily available than others. • Diversity of Elected Officials may be reduced.

3. Mixed or Partial Ward System

Although this type of system is used more often in the United States than in Canada, there are a few Canadian municipalities utilizing this structure. The two municipalities that we researched were the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and the City of Thunder Bay, Ontario; both of which have different mixed structures.

Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Alberta: Similar to Strathcona County, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is a specialized municipality. Their Council consists of one Mayor and ten Councillors. They have a large urban centre (Fort McMurray) and a large rural territory with small populations throughout. The municipality is divided into four wards. In ward one, the large urban centre, there are a total of six Councillors elected at-large to represent the ward. Ward two, also having a larger population, elects two Councillors at-large. Wards three and four are the rural divisions of the municipality (large geographic area) and have only one Councillor to represent each ward.

Thunder Bay, Ontario: The city is divided into seven wards and their Council consists of a Mayor and 12 Councillors; five at-large Councillors who represent the entire city and seven Ward Councillors who each represent one of the seven wards.

Proponents of mixed electoral systems argue that it provides the best of both worlds; taking into consideration both the needs of the entire municipality as well as the individual neighborhood's needs.

Opponents of mixed systems argue that it creates two "classes" of Councillors, with those elected at-large having more prestige and clout than those elected in wards.