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CITY COUNCIL SALARIES AND THE COMPETITIVENESS OF ELECTIONS: A SURVEY

**Report No. 05-03
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City Council Salaries and the Competitiveness of Elections: A Survey

Executive Summary

- The number of candidates running in Worcester elections has been declining since the 1980's. From 1957 to 1981, City Council elections averaged over 30 candidates per election. Since 1981, elections have averaged fewer than 22 candidates.
- In 1950, Worcester City Councilors were paid \$4,000 annually; if that salary had been adjusted for inflation, it would be over \$32,000 today. Worcester City Councilors are currently paid \$15,750.
- The mean city-councilor salary among the 47 cities surveyed is \$18,358. Worcester's salary of \$15,750 is the 22nd highest salary, and \$2,600 below the mean.
- The mean mayoral salary in the cities surveyed is \$30,267. Worcester's Mayor is paid \$18,000 per year, \$12,000 less than the mean.
- While there appears to be some consistency between higher salaries and more competitive elections, there are also exceptions including Worcester which reported one of the least competitive elections in the survey, while paying the 22nd highest salary (of 47 cities).
- The change in the composition of the Worcester City Council that was initiated by a new charter approved by the voters in 1985 appears to have decreased election competition. Elections from 1957 to 1985 averaged 3.24 councilors per seat. Since 1987, Worcester City Council elections have averaged 1.97 candidates per seat.
- Staggered elections appeared to be a more important factor in determining election competitiveness than salary level. Cities that stagger elections averaged 3.51 candidates per seat, while cities that did not averaged 2.24. (Staggered elections require a term of three or four years for each councilor.)

Introduction

The number of candidates running in Worcester elections has been declining since 1977. Worcester's elections were once replete with candidates and required primary elections (which are held when there are more than twice as many candidates as seats available). From 1957 to 1981 City Council elections averaged over 30 candidates per election, more than three times the number of seats on the City Council at the time. Since 1981, elections have averaged fewer than 22 candidates per year. School Committee elections have also shown a decline in competitiveness although not as significant. There are several possible explanations for the dearth of candidates: voters are satisfied with the current composition of the City Council; voters are satisfied with the City's current condition and policies; two-career families make it more difficult to find people with the time to run for office; the 1985 charter change with its establishment of district councilors may have decreased interest in running for office; citizens have lost their sense of connection to municipal government, or it may be too difficult for a newcomer to gain a seat. Some who are concerned about less competitive elections argue that the current salaries of \$15,750 for councilors and \$18,000 for the mayor are too low to attract a large number of viable candidates. These salaries were established in 1991 when the City Council and the Mayor took a 10% pay cut because of the City's fiscal problems. To explore the relationship between councilor salaries and election competitiveness, the Research Bureau conducted a 47-city survey to answer two questions:

- How do city-council salaries in Worcester compare with those in similarly sized cities?
- Do cities with higher salaries for city councilors have more competitive elections?

Worcester’s Election Competition in History

There has been a marked decline in the number of candidates running in Worcester municipal elections which began in 1977 and has continued until the present day. **Chart 1** shows the number of candidates running for City Council and School Committee since 1957.

**Chart 1 Election Competition--Number of Candidates Running
1957 to 2005**

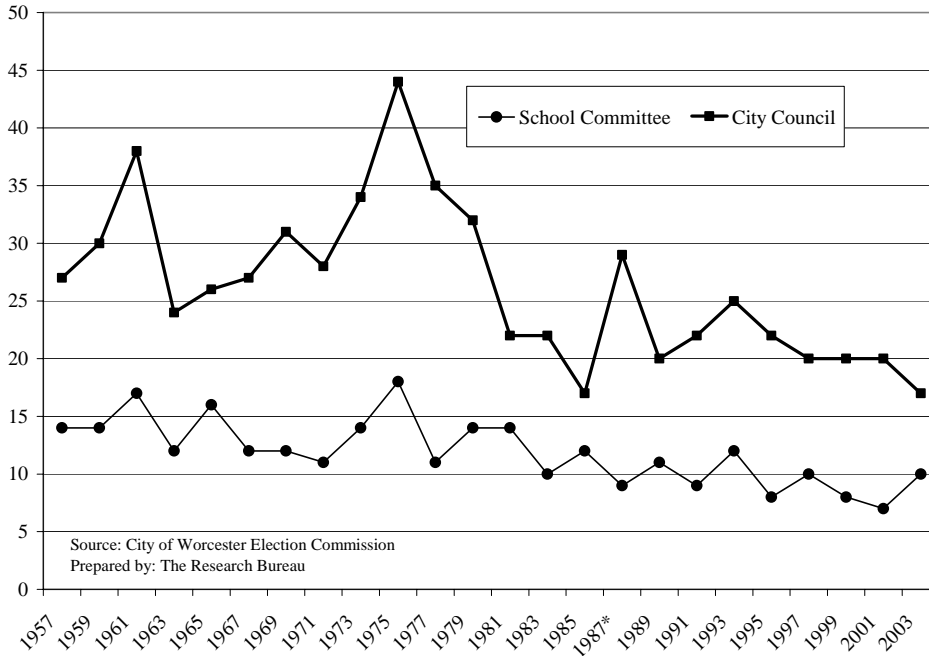
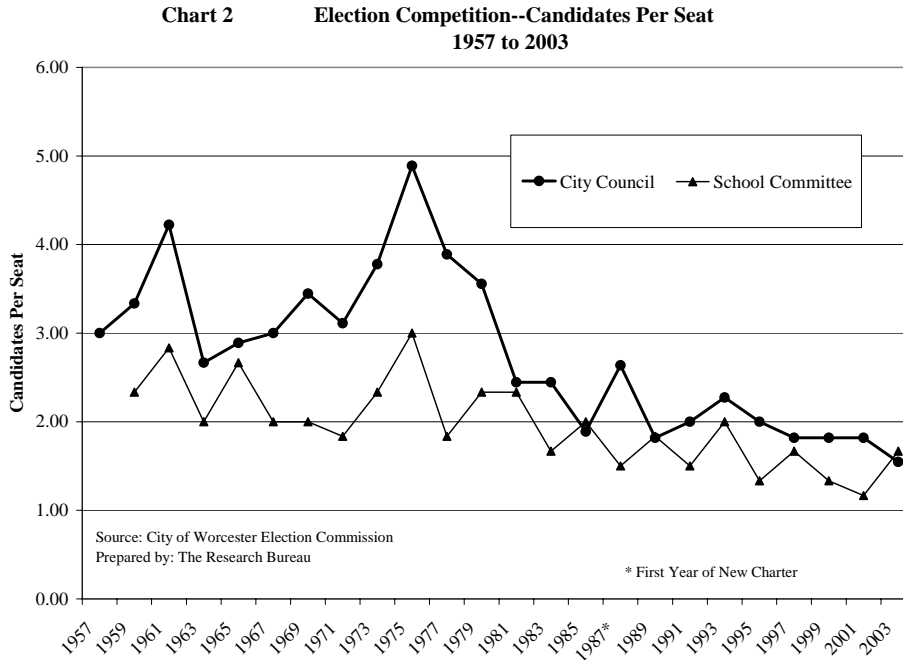


Chart 2 shows the number of candidates **per seat** for both types of elections during the same time. City Council elections averaged 3.19 councilors per seat from 1957 to 1967, 3.69 from 1969 to 1977, 2.81 from 1979 to 1987, 1.98 from 1989 to 1997, and 1.77 since then. Data from before and after the Charter change in 1987 (which increased the size of the council from 9 to 11, created 5 district councilors, and provided for the popular election of the Mayor) show that elections were more competitive before the change. Elections from 1957 to 1985 averaged 3.24 councilors per seat. Since 1987, Worcester City Council elections have averaged 1.97 candidates per seat. School Committee elections have also shown a downward trend, although it has not been as dramatic. Before 1981, City Council elections were always more competitive than School Committee elections, but the numbers have been closer in recent years, including 1985, 1989, and 2003, when there were more candidates per seat running for School Committee than City Council. (The method of electing the School Committee did not change with the new charter. The composition remains six members elected at-large plus the mayor, who serves as chairman of the School Committee.)

City Council Salaries and the Competitiveness of Elections: A Survey



Salaries

In the summer of 2005, the Research Bureau conducted a survey of 47 cities with council-manager form of government and populations between 100,000 and 250,000.¹ The survey provides salary data from cities nationwide. (We have adjusted salary levels to reflect differences in the Consumer Price Index [CPI] for each region.²) We also recorded the number of candidates running per council seat in the last regular municipal election in each city to ascertain the level of competition. Worcester has one of the largest councils of the cities surveyed, which may make higher councilor salaries less affordable, while at the same time potentially decreasing the committee workload per councilor. Worcester has 11 councilors, while the mean council size of the cities surveyed was under eight (7.7). In 1950, Worcester City Councilors were paid \$4,000 annually; if that salary had been adjusted for inflation, it would be over \$32,000 today. Worcester City Councilors are currently paid \$15,750. In other words, Worcester City Councilor salaries have thus lost nearly 50% of their value since 1950, although the City is now providing salaries and benefits for 11 rather than 9 councilors. Prior to the Charter change in 1985, council salaries were \$7,500 and the Mayor’s salary was \$12,500, and School Committee members were not paid.

The mean city-councilor salary among the 47 cities surveyed is \$18,358. Worcester’s salary of \$15,750 is the 22nd highest salary, and \$2,600 below the mean. Cambridge, Massachusetts reported the highest salary, \$61,843, while except for Lubbock, Texas (\$330), the lowest is in Bakersfield, California (\$5,408). **Tables 1 and 2** show the ten highest and lowest city councilor salaries of the cities surveyed. The tables also include mayoral salaries and the number of candidates per seat in the last regular municipal election.

¹ Chelsea, which has a population of 35,000, has a council-manager form of government and was also included in the survey.

² Since the CPI in Southern, Western, and Midwestern cities is lower than that in the Northeast, the effective salaries (how much a given salary level will buy) differ from region to region. The salary data in this report have been adjusted according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Regional Urban CPI data for 2004. All of the salary numbers in this report have been adjusted to be comparable with the Northeast Region Urban CPI.

Worcester Regional Research Bureau

Table 1			
10 Highest Councilor Salaries			
City	Councilor*	Mayor*	Candidates Per Seat
Cambridge, MA	\$61,844	\$92,353	3.11
Tallahassee, FL	\$36,174	\$69,280	2.00
North Las Vegas, NV	\$35,880	\$41,080	2.00
Dayton, OH	\$33,000	\$39,600	2.00
Ft. Lauderdale, FL	\$33,000	\$38,500	3.00
Tacoma, WA	\$31,789	\$70,367	4.25
Alexandria, VA	\$30,250	\$33,550	2.29
Newport News, VA	\$27,500	\$29,700	3.25
Hollywood, FL	\$26,400	\$33,000	2.29
Hayward, CA	\$26,000	\$41,600	3.25
10 Highest Average	\$34,184	\$48,903	2.74
Worcester (22nd Highest)	\$15,750	\$18,000	1.64
*Adjusted for regional differences in cost of living according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Regional CPI.			

Table 2			
10 Lowest Councilor Salaries			
City	Councilor*	Mayor*	Candidates Per Seat
Lubbock, TX	\$330	\$990.00	4.00
Bakersfield, CA	\$5,408	\$24,960.00	1.75
Garden Grove, CA	\$6,066	\$7,488.00	2.33
Fort Collins, CO	\$7,426	\$11,169.60	2.50
San Buenaventura, CA	\$7,488	\$8,736.00	2.33
Santa Clara, CA	\$8,252	\$13,752.46	3.00
El Monte, CA	\$9,135	\$9,135.36	2.33
Lakewood, CO	\$9,491	\$24,960.00	2.17
Westminster, CO	\$9,984	\$12,480.00	2.25
Pomona, CA	\$9,984	\$19,968.00	1.50
10 Lowest Average	\$7,356	\$13,364	2.42
Worcester (26th Lowest)	\$15,750	\$18,000.00	1.64
*Adjusted for regional differences in cost of living according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Regional CPI data.			

The mean mayoral salary in the cities surveyed is \$30,267. Worcester’s Mayor is paid \$18,000 per year, \$12,000 less than the mean. The highest salary reported for a mayor is \$92,300 (Cambridge, where the Mayor is paid a full city councilor’s salary and a full School Committee member’s salary) while the lowest is \$990 (Lubbock). Most mayoral salaries were more than 60% higher than those of councilors. Worcester pays its mayor 14% more than its councilors.³

³ In general, higher mayoral salaries were not due to additional duties not typically found in other council-manager forms of government. Pomona, CA, pays its mayor twice that of council members according to a provision of the city charter. Other cities compensate the mayor for school committee duties while others designate the Mayor as a full time employee while councilors are considered part time.

City Council Salaries and the Competitiveness of Elections: A Survey

Health Benefits

The majority of the cities surveyed (29 including Worcester) offer city councilors the same health benefits as city employees; 18 cities do not.⁴ Worcester’s health benefits are more generous than those of other cities in Massachusetts and state and local government employee benefits in other states.⁵ Worcester city councilors are also eligible for retirement health benefits (after age 55) once they have served on the council for six years (other Worcester city employees are not eligible for retiree benefits until they have worked for the City for 10 years). So it is likely that the total compensation for Worcester’s city councilors is relatively higher than reported here, as the following data in **Tables 1 and 2** include only salary information.

Election Competitiveness

To determine election competitiveness, we compared cities by the number of candidates running per seat. Worcester had 18 candidates for 11 seats in the last election, or 1.68 candidates per seat, the fifth lowest ratio in the survey, and the lowest since 1957 (the earliest year of data used for this study).⁶ The highest number of candidates per seat was reported by Chesapeake, Virginia, which had 24 candidates for 5 seats, or 4.8 candidates per seat, which is 3.2 more candidates per seat than Worcester. Chesapeake pays its city councilors \$25,300 per year, almost \$10,000 more than Worcester.

Tables 3 and 4 show the 10 cities with the most and least competitive elections. Generally speaking, cities with higher councilor salaries had more competitive elections. The ten most competitive cities had an average salary of \$24,845 and 3.62 candidates per seat. The ten least competitive cities had an average salary of \$13,272 per year and had 1.60 candidates per seat. While there appears to be some consistency between higher salaries and more competitive elections, there are also exceptions. For instance, Lubbock, Texas, pays \$330 per year and had 4 candidates per seat, the fifth-highest of any city surveyed. Worcester, too, is an exception to the rule. Worcester’s city councilors are not among the lowest-paid city councilors, but Worcester’s elections are among the least competitive. The degree to which salary is the determining factor in the competitiveness of elections thus cannot be determined conclusively from this information.

Table 3			
10 Most Competitive Elections			
City	Councilor *	Mayor *	Candidates Per Seat
Chesapeake, VA	\$25,300	\$27,500	4.80
Tacoma, WA	\$31,789	\$70,367	4.25
Lubbock, TX	\$330	\$990	4.00
Thousand Oaks, CA	\$15,021	\$16,336	3.50
Cape Coral, FL	\$15,950	\$18,700	3.50
Portsmouth, VA	\$20,790	\$23,100	3.33
Hampton, VA	\$23,924	\$25,835	3.25
Hayward, CA	\$26,000	\$41,600	3.25
Newport News, VA	\$27,500	\$29,700	3.25
Cambridge, MA	\$61,844	\$92,353	3.11
Most Competitive Mean	\$24,845	\$34,648	3.62
*Adjusted for regional differences in cost of living according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Regional CPI data.			

⁴ Currently, three Worcester City Councilors receive City health benefits; the others have declined them.

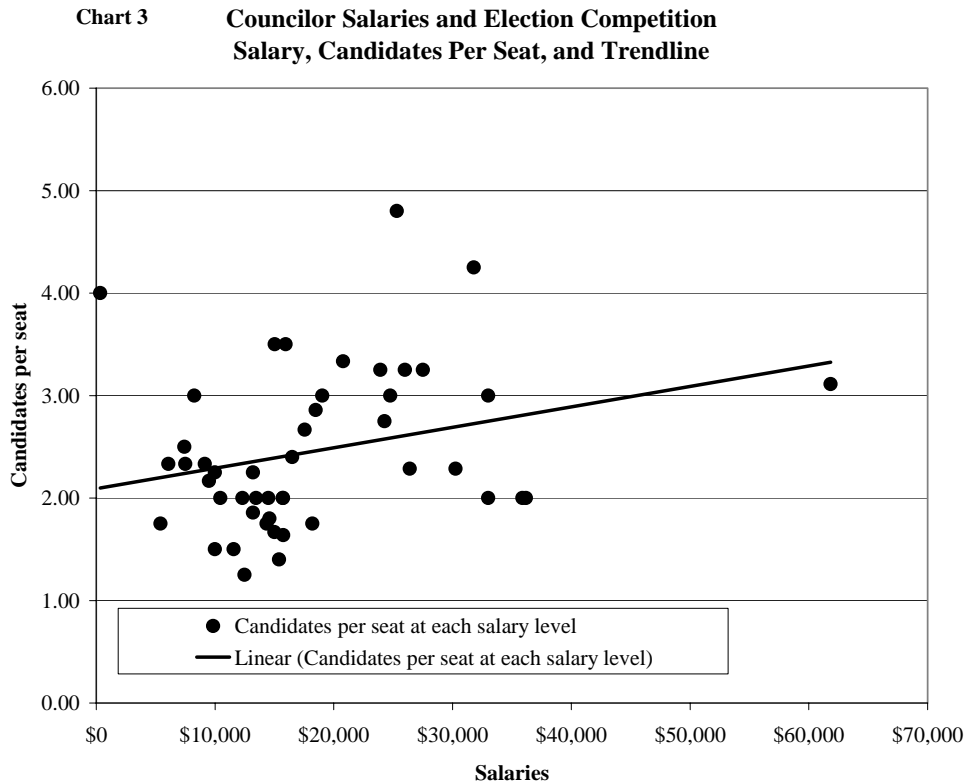
⁵ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *Condition Serious, Prognosis Uncertain: The Impact of Municipal Employee Health Benefits on Massachusetts Cities*. Report No. 05-01, February 28, 2005.

⁶ Worcester election data from 1957 to the present.

Table 4			
10 Least Competitive Elections			
City	Councilor *	Mayor *	Candidates Per Seat
Fayetteville, NC	\$14,578	\$25,952	1.80
Bakersfield, CA	\$5,408	\$24,960	1.75
Arvada, CO	\$14,352	\$18,720	1.75
Glendale, AZ	\$18,200	\$36,400	1.75
Lowell, MA	\$15,000	\$19,000	1.67
Worcester, MA	\$15,750	\$18,000	1.64
Pomona, CA	\$9,984	\$19,968	1.50
Naperville, IL	\$11,568	\$28,920	1.50
Columbus, GA	\$15,400	\$77,163	1.40
Eugene, OR	\$12,480	\$18,720	1.25
Least Competitive Mean	\$13,272	\$28,780	1.60

*Adjusted for regional differences in cost of living according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Regional CPI data.

Chart 3 shows all of the salaries and candidates-per-seat data along with a trend line showing that in general there are more candidates running per seat where salaries are higher.



District Councilors and Staggered Elections

Of the cities surveyed, 22 have all at-large councilors, and none has all district councilors. 60% of all councilors in the survey are at-large councilors. The 22 cities with all at-large seats averaged 2.5 candidates per seat, while cities with mixed councils averaged 2.4. Staggered elections appear to have a bigger effect on competitiveness. Worcester is one of seven cities that elects the entire city council and the mayor at the same time. Most cities among those surveyed (40) stagger elections so that only a few seats are available at each election. This appears to increase the competitiveness of each election. Cities that stagger elections averaged 3.51 candidates per seat, while cities that did not averaged 2.24. Cities with staggered elections have longer terms of office for city councilors (3 or 4 years). Worcester's councilors and school committee members serve two year terms.

Conclusions

Although Worcester City Council salaries have declined considerably in real terms since 1950, the largest decline in the number of candidates per seat for City Council (to levels usually substantially below those in the 1957-1973 period), following a peak in 1975 (at a time of considerable controversy over property tax assessments, and then over construction of the Centrum, which may have attracted more candidates) began in the early to mid-1980's. Though there are several possible explanations for the decline, as we noted at the outset – including the increasing number of two-career families, making it harder for people to find the time for public service, as well as the decline in real salaries – it is noteworthy that the longest continued period of relatively low numbers of candidates per City Council seats has occurred since the 1985 Charter revisions that reduced the number of at-large seats while adding five district seats. There are several ways in which the Charter revisions might have reduced the number of candidates per seat:

- The sheer increase in number of seats means that even if the same number of candidates ran for City Council as in the past, that number is now divided among a larger number of seats, generating a lower ratio of candidates to seats.
- It may be harder for challengers to have a reasonable hope of unseating an incumbent district councilor than an at-large incumbent, since at-large candidates are in principle running for **any one** of the at-large seats, while a candidate for a district councilor's seat **must** defeat the incumbent in that particular seat. With fewer at-large seats available, the opportunities for challengers to win one of those seats are reduced from what they were before 1985.
- Just as incumbents in Congress typically have a large advantage over challengers, simply because their opportunities to serve their constituents and win publicity as a result are greater, incumbent district representatives may win a reputation as “defenders” of the interests of their respective districts, or helpers to individual constituents, that increases their advantage over challengers. (By contrast, at-large councilors cannot easily claim credit for policies that benefit a particular bloc of City voters.)

Additionally, as we have noted, while Worcester's average salary for city councilors is slightly below the median for the 47 cities surveyed, it is likely that including health benefits would raise Worcester's standing in the rankings of city council compensation.

Worcester Regional Research Bureau

Worcester's mayoral salary is considerably lower (as a proportion of council salary) than the mean of the other cities surveyed. It is not clear what accounts for the disparity, as cities with high mayoral salaries have similar duties to those found in Worcester's charter.

In conclusion, therefore, while there are several contributing factors to the decline in the competitiveness of City Council elections in Worcester, it is doubtful that the decline in net value of Council salaries is the main cause of this development. (One sign it is not the main cause is that the competitiveness of elections to School Committee, for which salaries have remained proportionate to City Council salaries since the Charter change in 1985, but which have not added district seats, has declined far less. Furthermore, before the charter change, the school committee was not compensated, and still produced more competitive elections than it has in recent years.) Rather, the decline seems to correlate most closely with the reduction in the number of at-large council seats under the 1985 Charter revision. Assuming that that change is not reversed, the likeliest means of increasing the competitiveness of Council elections, based on our observation of other Council-Manager cities, would appear to be to stagger the elections for at-large seats. On the other hand, precisely because the Council-Manager form assigns executive responsibility to the Manager, the decline in the number of candidates per seat is not necessarily a matter for great concern, as it would be under other forms of municipal government. Quite likely, if issues like those that roiled Worcester's political waters in the mid-'70's were to arise again, we would again observe an increase in the number of candidates running for Council.