



Local Opinion: The real problem with Tucson's election system

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Tucson city elections are unfair in two ways: One —they focus on irrelevant political party affiliations and, thus, obscure important local issues and make them harder to solve. Two —they subvert democracy by allowing residents in one part of the city to choose City Council members for residents in another part of the city.

This unfairness is not just the use of ward primary and citywide general elections but, more fundamentally, the city's use of partisan elections. Tucson is the only charter city in Arizona and only city among its Western peer group where candidates are selected in partisan party primaries and general elections.

While partisan elections are typical in state and national elections, which often involve more philosophical issues on broad public policy, in municipal elections a candidate's party affiliation is not relevant.

What matters more on the local level is efficient management, not philosophy of government or ideology.

More important are the candidate's personality, character, capabilities, and especially the candidate's positions on issues and objectives of local importance like fixing roads, improving our park system and zoning. Nonpartisan elections (which every other Arizona city has) tend to support more centrist candidates because they are freed from having to align themselves with party dogma and instead focus on mainstream constituent concerns. Independents and nontraditional candidates also have a better chance of getting on the ballot and winning in nonpartisan elections. Tucson has a most unusual way of conducting its elections. In primary

elections, council members run only in their wards. But in the general election, they run citywide.

This frequently denies voters the opportunity to choose their own representatives. Voters in a ward can select one candidate, only to have voters elsewhere in the city override them and elect somebody else.

Tucson voters have consistently rejected efforts to change the current system. Since there are almost two registered Democratic voters for every registered Republican voter in the city, it is not surprising that previous attempts have failed. And if the new initiative to require ward-only elections is only viewed through a partisan lens as a Republican effort, it will also likely fail this time. While ward-only elections would be an improvement, we believe fixing the partisan nature of our elections would have significantly more impact.

We believe nonpartisan open city elections will benefit everyone in Tucson, regardless of party affiliation. Nonpartisan municipal elections are more likely to inspire competition, focus on community needs and encourage a larger pool of candidates to run for office. Annexation into the city could be more appealing to foothills residents, who understandably doubt they would be fairly represented by the current system.

If we can work collaboratively together instead of being divided by political parties into ideological camps, we have a much better shot at reducing duplicative governmental waste and inefficiencies, fixing our roads and infrastructure, creating a community culture that fosters economic growth and employment opportunities, and making Tucson a place where our children want to live and work. That is what most of us want from municipal government.

Every other charter city in Arizona and our peer Western cities have figured out that a nonpartisan election system that treats every voter and candidate the same is good government.

We can do it here too, but it will require acknowledgment that the current system is unfair and needs to be changed.