



July 17, 2023

Members of the City Council  
Portland City Hall  
1221 SW 4th Ave,  
Portland, OR 97204

**Re: Sightline’s concerns about proposed revisions to charter amendments**

Dear Mayor Wheeler and Commissioners Gonzalez, Mapps, Rubio, and Ryan:

To make a long story short, we urge you not to alter Portland’s voter-adopted and nation-leading electoral reform by downgrading the design to a smaller council or to the single-winner variant of ranked choice voting.

To make a short story longer, Sightline Institute is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan think tank with staff, board members, and supporters in Portland. For more than a decade, our team of policy analysts has been studying democracy and elections systems. We seek models that have elsewhere proven to improve voter participation and representation, that dampen extremism and polarization, and that encourage consensus-building and collaboration—and promote those systems in state and local jurisdictions in Alaska, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. We were deeply involved, for example, in Alaska’s adoption and implementation of top-four primaries and ranked choice voting (RCV), and we designed Seattle’s innovative Democracy Voucher public campaign funding system.

For more than five years, we have been analyzing options for Portland’s city council, on our own and in collaboration with organizations such as the City Club of Portland and the League of Women Voters. Since long before the Charter Commission ever convened, we have been recommending that Portland enhance representation in its leadership with a multi-winner, proportional form of ranked choice voting. This electoral design, used in a handful of smaller US cities and a larger number of cities abroad, encourages consensus seeking and collaboration among elected officials and positive, solutions-oriented campaigning among candidates. We advised the Charter Commission extensively on this question.

Proportional representation is unfamiliar in the United States but is ubiquitous internationally. Indeed, among the world's advanced democracies, the United States is an outlier in its failure to adopt proportional representation. It is the dominant form of democracy used by almost all of our peer nations, other than the United Kingdom and its former colonies.

The November charter amendment vote that adopted proportional ranked choice voting, a form of proportional representation suited to the American political context and especially to nonpartisan local elections, launched Portland to the forefront of democracy in America. At a recent Harvard University conference we attended, scholars from across the country hailed Portland's new electoral method as the most exciting development in recent US election history.

We have been excitedly telling the story of Portland's adoption to audiences far and wide. Because of our in-depth research, we were alarmed to learn last week of the proposed changes to the design. Switching from proportional, multi-winner to single-winner RCV would be a profound change, not a modest technical adjustment. It would impede Portland's leadership toward becoming a more representative democracy. Just so, changing from three winners to two in each district would impoverish the representation for constituencies historically excluded from council: women, people of color, renters, young people, residents of East Portland, and working-class Portlanders.

Electoral systems need to fit together. The charter commission's design coheres; the proposed revisions to it do not. If the charter commission had opted for single-winner RCV in the first place, we would have recommended a different electoral scheme entirely: a number of at-large members and another set of single-winner races in small districts. (But this design would have done nothing for racial and ethnic representation.) If the charter commission had preferred a smaller council, we would have recommended fewer, larger districts and still using multi-winner RCV.

In short, both the multi-winner RCV method of voting and the number of seats per district (three) are integral features of Portland's new system. Changing either of them as proposed would undermine the reform's purposes: to enhance representation, encourage compromise and consensus-seeking, and make Portland work again.

We therefore urge you to reject these proposals.

Sightline has never studied the question of which powers a mayor should hold, so we offer no comment on the proposal to grant the mayor a veto.

Thank you for your attention. We would be honored to answer questions.

Respectfully yours,

Alan Durning  
Executive Director

Jay Lee  
Senior Research Associate (Portland)