

The Case for Electoral Reform in Skokie

by James Johnson, 12/5/2021

Abstract: The Village of Skokie’s unusual electoral system – partisan, not staggered, at-large elections – results in low turnout for both candidates and voters. In fact, no comparable municipality (Village, City, or Town) in the entire state of Illinois elects their representatives like Skokie. Thankfully, a new and improved electoral system – nonpartisan, staggered, hybrid elections – can be achieved through ballot initiatives supported by Skokie voters. A successful campaign in 2022 would reform our electoral system ahead of the next municipal elections in 2025 and pave the way for a more nonpartisan, representative, and dynamic democracy.



This is a public policy essay; an outline for an electoral reform campaign in the Village of Skokie, IL.

To begin, it will be helpful to distinguish between two key terms: our *form of government* and our *electoral system*. Our form of government is its basic organization and composition, while our electoral system is how residents elect their representatives.

Our form of government was modified with the support of Skokie voters in the late 1950’s, and in my opinion, remains very reliable and transparent. Our electoral system, on the other hand, was modified without the consent of Skokie voters (or even the Village Board) in the early 1960’s, and continues to hinder both candidates and voters. In this essay, founded in my support for our form of government, I will make the case that our electoral system should be updated, promptly and reasonably.

Skokie’s form of government is quite normal and can be categorized in two main ways. Since the Village’s incorporation in 1888 (as “Niles Center,” our original name), we have maintained a “Trustee-Village” form of government. This means that our legislative body of elected residents consists of 6 Trustees and 1 President (aka Mayor) – the “Village Board.” In 1957, we combined this with the “Council-Manager” variation, in which the legislative responsibilities of the Village Board are separate from the actual

administration of the government. The elected Village Board sets policies, and the appointed Village Manager implements them.

Skokie's electoral system is highly unusual and can be categorized in three main ways. Our elections are partisan, meaning political party candidates get preferential positioning and party-labels on the ballot. Our elections are not staggered, meaning they take place all at once every 4 years (quadrennial), instead of being split every 2 years (biennial). And our Trustees are all elected at-large, meaning none represent specific, geographical districts in the Village. Taken individually, these three factors are quite common for municipalities, but collectively, this combination of factors is unique in Cook County.¹ The impacts of such a system, as will be shown, are quite clear: our elections are rarely contested, voter turnout is well below-average, and our government gravitates towards single-party rule.

Thankfully, the Illinois Municipal Code grants us a surprising amount of liberty in modifying our electoral system. A better, more equitable system – nonpartisan, staggered, and hybrid elections – can be achieved through ballot initiatives supported by Skokie voters. This can be done at any general election, which means it can be accomplished in less than a year, during the national mid-terms on November 7, 2022. If this campaign is successful, Skokie can inaugurate a new and improved electoral system at the next municipal elections in 2025.

In the course of this policy essay, I will attempt to outline the history of our unique electoral system, analyze how it limits civic participation in our elections, and propose an action-plan for change. The goal is simple: a flourishing democracy, one that is more nonpartisan, representative, equitable, and friendly to both candidates and voters.

1. Awareness

Understanding Skokie's electoral system requires a close examination of Skokie's political past, specifically the period of **1957-1961**. In just this four-year span, Skokie residents voted to support a Council-Manager form of government (1957), voted against an Aldermanic-City form of government (1959), and lost staggered elections due to a "quirk in



Downtown Skokie, circa 1950

¹ Currently, the only other municipality in Cook County that does not have staggered election or have districts/wards is Melrose Park. Curiously, Melrose Park elects Trustees to 2-year terms, which means they still hold their elections biennially like municipalities that stagger their elections.

Illinois law” (1961). There were no changes to our form of government or electoral system before this period, and there have been no changes since.

❖ *1957: The Successful Campaign for a Council-Manager Form of Government*

Richard Whittingham, author of *Skokie: A Centennial History (1888-1988)*, describes what makes this campaign so integral to Skokie political history:

Skokie’s current governmental structure was inaugurated in 1957, when Village residents voted overwhelmingly [through a ballot initiative] to adopt the Council-Manager form of government. Approximately 30 other Chicago suburbs had already made similar decisions, but the change in Skokie’s administration was not without incident.

In the early and middle 1950’s, the government of the Village was organized much as it had been immediately following the incorporation of 1888. The Village Board and Board President [aka Mayor] controlled the political appointments in village government, and many were little more than patronage jobs. A series of scandals subsequently rocked the police department, the fire department, the building department, as well as other areas of local government...

In January 1956, the [North Central Home Owners Association] chairman Ray Jackson held a public meeting in his home. He invited all interested persons, but especially sought the attendance of the presidents of the various homeowner associations active in the village. During the meeting a 10-member committee was formed to study a change to the Council-Manager form of government for Skokie. The committee split into two groups, one to work for a referendum installing a Village Manager in the 1957 elections, the other working to promote a new political party [the Skokie Caucus Party] to slate a set of candidates during the same election.²

The 1957 election was one of the wildest in Skokie history, with the incumbent “Village Party” facing *two* full slates of opponents: the new “Skokie Caucus Party” and the short-lived “Citizens for Skokie Party.” Compared to recent Skokie elections, voter participation was extraordinarily high, with 15,947 Skokie residents (over 50% of registered voters at the time) turning out to vote. Strangely, even though the incumbent Village Party was opposed to the ballot initiative for a Council-Manager form of government, they won the close election (with roughly 39% of the vote) and the ballot initiative still passed (with roughly 57% of the vote).

² Whittingham, Richard. *Skokie: A Centennial History*. Chapter 6. Village of Skokie, 1988. Available online at: <http://skokiecentennialbook.com/chapters/6/>.

❖ 1958-59: *The Failed Campaign for an Aldermanic-City Form of Government*

What came next is incredibly important, but is curiously absent from *Skokie: A Centennial History*. In 1958, there was *another* ballot initiative campaign, inspired by the success of the 1957 initiative to adopt a Council-Manager form of government. This campaign, led by a local committee called the “Skokie Civic Federation” and sponsored by numerous political groups (including the new Skokie Caucus Party), advocated that Skokie transition from a “Village” to a “City.” The 6 at-large Trustees on the Village Board would have been replaced with 16 Alderman, representing 8 wards, on a City Council. A similar attempt to adopt an Aldermanic-City form of government had been voted down by a 4-1 margin in 1951, but the 1958 campaign came close to succeeding on the second attempt.

The Skokie Civic Federation believed that Skokie, which had more than tripled in population during the 1950’s, was no longer adequately served by the Trustee system that had been in place since 1888. As argued by their chairman, Harry Levick, “It narrows down to a choice between representative government and nonrepresentative government. Skokie is today [in 1958] a village of 52,000. We are now asking six men who have other jobs to run a village... They just don’t have time to do it.”³ The group’s attorney, Gilbert Gordon, contended that “people want the feeling of being close to their representatives and they can’t get it through six trustees elected at large.”⁴



Skokie Mayor Ambrose Reiter, 1957-61

The city referendum campaign is worth remembering for numerous reasons, including the Village’s misguided response. In the fall of 1958, the Village attempted to block the city referendum question entirely. The Village Board rejected the Skokie Civic Federation’s petition, which included 2,748 resident signatures, by claiming that the petition didn’t meet the signatures requirement. The number of signatures needed to be 1/8 of the total number of votes cast in the previous local election (which in this case, was less than 2,000 signatures), but the Village claimed that the Federation’s petition didn’t include 1/8 of the voters who had *actually* participated in the previous election...

³ Davis, J. “SKOKIE MOVES TOWARD NEW GOVERNMENT: COUNCIL-MAYOR FORM GETS BACKING.” Chicago Daily Tribune, 17 July 1958. Archives available online through the Skokie Public Library.

⁴ “SKOKIE VOTES TUESDAY ON CITY STATUS: SIXTEEN ALDERMEN VS. SIX TRUSTEES VILLAGE, CITY? SKOKIE WILL VOTE TUESDAY.” Chicago Daily Tribune, 18 January 1959.

The Skokie Civic Federation responded by suing the Village of Skokie. “We can’t accept this ruling,” said Levick. “There are no legal grounds for it. The ruling amounts to disenfranchising all voters in Skokie who did not happen to vote in the last municipal election.”⁵ A Circuit Court judge ruled in favor of the residents, but the Village’s Corporation Counsel, William Hennessey, led a Village appeal to the State Supreme Court. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the Supreme Court’s rebuke of the Village was “strongly worded,” and argued that the Village’s refusal of the residents’ petition was “not in the spirit of the law.”⁶

A special election for the Aldermanic-City question was finally held in January, 1959 and was heralded as “Skokie’s hottest election of all time.”⁷ 54.5% of registered voters participated, but the city referendum campaign failed. 54% of voters opted to keep Skokie a Village, with at-large Trustees as opposed to ward Aldermen, and 46% voted to make Skokie a City.

With the April 1959 municipal elections just months away, the Skokie Civic Federation vowed to continue their city-campaign but opted to “wait and see” if reform-minded candidates could be elected to the Village Board. Coincidentally, the three Trustee candidates from the Skokie Caucus Party – one of the political groups that had supported the city referendum campaign – easily won the 1959 election.

For the purposes of this essay, it bears mentioning that Levick eventually conceded that a more “representative” government could be achieved without a city referendum at all, “by apportioning the village and electing trustees from districts rather than at large”⁸...

❖ 1961: *The Loss of Staggered Elections*

Skokie’s electoral system has fundamentally changed only once, in 1961 when the Village lost its staggered elections. Sadly, this change was for the worse, and occurred without the consent of either the Village Board or Skokie voters. Again, Richard Whittingham offers a helpful summary:

⁵ “SUE TO FORCE CITY STATUS VOTE IN SKOKIE: CIVIC GROUP'S PETITIONS RULED INVALID.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 September 1958.

⁶ “SKOKIE TO VOTE JAN. 20 ON CITY GOVERNMENT: BOARD SETS DATE AFTER APPEAL FAILS.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 December 1958.

⁷ “SKOKIE RETAINS VILLAGE RULE: TURNS DOWN CITY PLAN, 7,773 TO 6,526.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 January 1959.

⁸ “SKOKIE GROUP DELAYS FIGHT FOR CITY PLAN: CIVIC FEDERATION WAITS FOR ELECTION.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1 February 1959.

By the elections of April 1961, the official population of Skokie, for the first time, was more than 50,000. According to the Illinois law [at the time], all villages with populations exceeding 50,000 had to elect their Board of Trustees at-large in elections held every four years. Prior to that time, the terms of Skokie's village trustees had been staggered, so that only three seats were voted upon during each two-year election. The [three Skokie Caucus Party Trustees], who had won four-year terms by the results of the 1959 election, were compelled to face re-election in 1961. Despite the quirk in Illinois law, which previously had applied merely to the village of Oak Park, the only village then with a population exceeding 50,000, the Caucus Party approached the election with great confidence [but lost to the "Civic Achievement Party," a slate of candidates selected by the combined Republican and Democratic parties].⁹

Even though the Village Board was aware that Skokie had crossed the 50,000 population threshold, they still passed an ordinance in 1960 calling for the election of 3 Trustees (instead of 6) in 1961. A friendly lawsuit was filed against the Village to test the State election law on staggered elections. The Village's new Corporation Counsel, Bernard Harrison, wrote a four page defense¹⁰ of the Village's ordinance and defended staggered elections, arguing that election law shows "the intent of the legislature that municipalities stagger their legislative terms of office."¹¹ At the very least, he believed that Skokie should be able to keep its staggered elections until 1963, in order to prevent the 4-year terms of the 3 Trustees elected in 1959 from being unfairly cut short.

In 1961, a Circuit Court judge ruled against the Village, and Skokie was forced to relinquish staggered elections. Ironically, the 1959 law (in the revised "Cities and Villages Act" of the 1870 Illinois Constitution) that mandated the change was abandoned when the State Election Code was revised for the 1970 Illinois Constitution. This is when the Illinois Constitution became more accommodating of "home rule" communities like Skokie. The "quirk in Illinois law" that transformed our electoral system has not existed for over 50 years. There are now 12 different Village municipalities in Illinois with populations over 50,000 and they *all* stagger their elections except Skokie.¹² Even Oak Park, which before Skokie was the only Village to cross the 50,000 population threshold, decided to stagger their elections in 1989.

⁹ Whittingham, Richard. *Skokie: A Centennial History*. Chapter 6. Village of Skokie, 1988. Available online at: <http://skokiecentennialbook.com/chapters/6/>.

¹⁰ I requested this document from the Village via FOIA (Freedom of Information Act), but was informed that it could not be found in the Village's records by either the Corporation Counsel or Village Clerk.

¹¹ "SKOKIE LAW ON ELECTIONS TO BE TESTED: POPULATION RISE BEGINS HASSLE." Chicago Daily Tribune, 11 August 1960.

¹² The Villages of Schaumburg, Arlington Heights, Bolingbrook, Palatine, Orland Park, Oak Lawn, Mount Prospect, Tinley Park, Oak Park, Hoffman Estates and Downers Grove – all with current populations over 50,000 – stagger their elections.

Largest Municipalities in Illinois (2021)

Municipality	Population	Form	Staggered	Wards/Districts
Chicago	2,746,388	City	No	Yes
Aurora	180,542	City	Yes	Yes
Joliet	150,362	City	Yes	Yes
Naperville	149,540	City	Yes	No
Rockford	148,655	City	No	Yes
Elgin	114,797	City	Yes	No
Springfield	114,797	City	No	Yes
Peoria	113,150	City	Yes	Yes
Waukegan	89,321	City	Yes	Yes
Champaign	88,302	City	Yes	Yes
Cicero	85,268	Town	Yes	No
Schaumburg	78,723	Village	Yes	No
Bloomington	78,680	City	Yes	Yes
Evanston	78,110	City	No	Yes
Arlington Heights	77,676	Village	Yes	No
Bolingbrook	73,922	Village	Yes	No
Decatur	70,522	City	Yes	No
Palatine	67,908	Village	Yes	Yes
Skokie	67,824	Village	No	No
Des Plaines	60,675	City	Yes	Yes
Orland Park	58,703	Village	Yes	No
Oak Lawn	58,362	Village	Yes	Yes
Berwyn	57,250	City	No	Yes
Mt. Prospect	56,852	Village	Yes	No
Tinley Park	55,971	Village	Yes	No
Oak Park	54,583	Village	Yes	No
Wheaton	53,970	City	Yes	Yes
Normal	52,736	Town	Yes	No
Hoffman Estates	52,530	Village	Yes	No
Downers Grove	50,247	Village	Yes	No
Glenview	48,705	Village	Yes	No
Elmhurst	45,786	City	Yes	Yes
Plainfield	44,762	Village	Yes	No
Lombard	44,476	Village	Yes	Yes
Buffalo Grove	43,212	Village	Yes	No
Moline	42,985	City	Yes	Yes
Belleville	42,404	City	Yes	Yes
Bartlett	41,105	Village	Yes	No
DeKalb	40,290	City	Yes	Yes
Crystal Lake	40,269	City	Yes	No

2. Analysis

What are the impacts of our current electoral system – partisan, not staggered, and at-large – in the Village of Skokie? Fewer candidates, below-average voter turnout, and a tendency towards single-party rule.

❖ *Partisan vs. Nonpartisan Elections*

Under the revised Illinois Election Code, all municipalities that have historically held partisan elections are allowed to continue doing so without conducting a referendum. Any municipality incorporated since 1992 is automatically nonpartisan, and has to conduct a referendum if they want to allow partisan elections.

Since our Village elections are historically partisan, candidates from established political parties (like the Skokie Caucus Party) get to file their nomination paperwork *before* any newcomers, and their names are automatically positioned at the top of the ballot. New party candidates and nonpartisan candidates (labelled “Independent” in partisan races) file their nomination paperwork next, and their names are automatically positioned at the bottom of the ballot.

Partisan-based ballot positioning provides a systemic advantage for established political parties, and a systemic disadvantage to new political parties and (especially) nonpartisan Independents. Writer Matthew Wills outlines the impacts of ballot positioning:

Did you know that ballot position can have an effect on voting? In many cases, the first-listed candidate is more likely to be voted for. The relationship between ballot position and electoral success, aka “name-order effects,” has been well-established in the political science literature, and seems to be a truism amongst politicians, who covet those first-row listings. In the dark ages of American politics, candidates were not beneath changing their names when listings were alphabetical...

TRUSTEE, VILLAGE OF SKOKIE

4 Year Term, Vote For 6

CANDIDATE NAME	PARTY
Edie Sue Sutker	Skokie Caucus Party
Keith A. Robinson	Skokie Caucus Party
Khem Khoeun	Skokie Caucus Party
Ralph Klein	Skokie Caucus Party
Alison Pure Slovin	Skokie Caucus Party
Billy Haido	Skokie Caucus Party
James Johnson	Independent

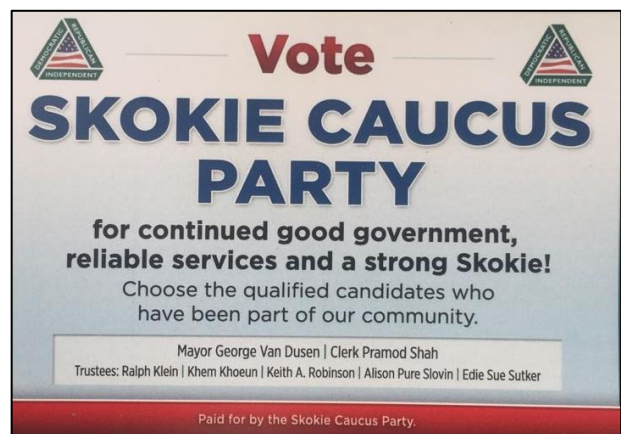
2021 ballot for Trustee Candidates

[In his research, political scientist] Delbert A. Taebel showed that not only did candidates listed first enjoy a favorable advantage, but that this advantage was greater in contests further down the ballot...

So how do election boards deal with this choice bias? In some states [like Illinois], ballot position is determined by drawing lots or by the order of the candidate's formal filing for office. In a minority of states, they rotate candidate names [on the ballot]...¹³

Switching to nonpartisan elections in Skokie would automatically level the playing field between partisan and nonpartisan candidates, allowing *all* candidates to file their nomination papers in the same period, and ensuring candidates are positioned on the ballot by simply the order they submit their paperwork. In the event that multiple candidates submit their paperwork at the earliest time allowed, a lottery would be held to order those candidates' names on the ballot. All in all, nonpartisan elections would mean that *any* candidate for Village office would have the chance to be positioned first on the ballot, eliminating the inequity of party-first ballot positioning.

More obviously, a switch to nonpartisan elections would eliminate party-labels on the ballot. The names of all candidates would be listed as equals, with no distinctions based on political party. This would reduce blind, straight-ticket voting, by which voters are encouraged to vote based on party-name as opposed to the merits of individual candidates. It would also prevent nonpartisan candidates from being lumped together under the shared category of "Independent." In a truly nonpartisan system, Skokie voters would be encouraged to prioritize people over parties in voting.



2021 Skokie Caucus Party flyer, handed to voters at polling locations

❖ Not Staggered vs. Staggered Elections

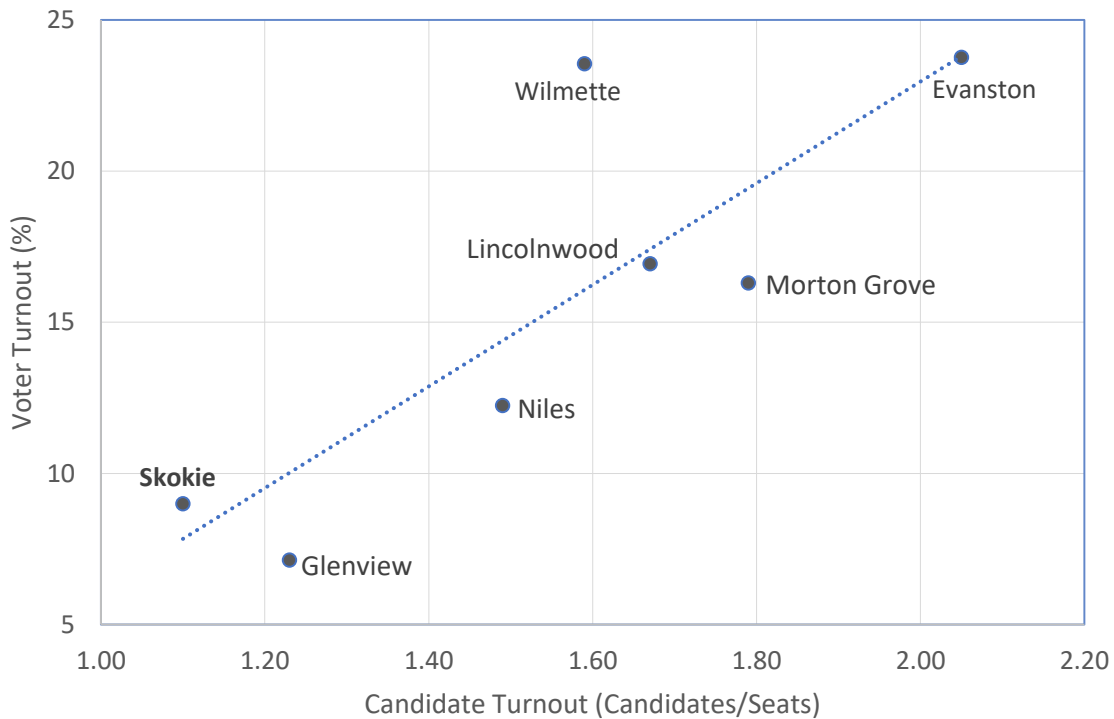
The single easiest way to make our Village electoral system "normal" is re-staggering our elections. Because of the involuntary loss of our staggered elections in 1961, we are now the only Village of our size in the entire State of Illinois that does not stagger its elections. With this single reform, our electoral system would become like all of our neighboring suburbs – Glenview, Golf, Lincolnwood, Morton Grove, Niles, Glenview, and Wilmette – with the exception of Evanston.

¹³ Wills, Matthew. "Ballot Position: It Matters." JSTOR Daily, 29 August 2016. Available online at: <https://daily.jstor.org/ballot-position/>.

Most Skokie voters don't realize how odd it is to have the phrase "Vote for 6" on their ballot for Trustee candidates. It is far more common to see "Vote for 3" (due to staggered elections) or "Vote for 1" (due to districts). Ironically, voting for more candidates at the same time results in fewer candidates to choose from overall. Power becomes more concentrated in block "slates" – groups of candidates running together, usually in the form of a political party – and candidates are systemically disadvantaged if they run as individual Independents.

This is one of the main reasons that Skokie has the lowest candidate turnout amongst our neighboring suburbs (discounting the Village of Golf, which has a population of only around 500 residents). In our past 5 Village elections, we've averaged only 1.1 candidates for every 1 elected seat, meaning our elections have *barely* been contested in the last 20 years. As can be expected, with our elections so uncontested, voter turnout in this period has averaged only 9% of registered Skokie voters.¹⁴ Quite simply, more candidates means more voters.

Contested Elections and Voter Turnout, 2003-2021



¹⁴ This data is obtained from the Cook County Clerk's Office (<https://www.cookcountyclerk.gov/election-results>), though pre-2011 voter turnout percentages had to be estimated. More exact voter turnout averages for each municipality would be helpful, but the trend between contested elections and voter turnout is quite clear.

More obviously, without a staggered system, the Village of Skokie has elections less often than most municipalities. Votes are cast every 4 years (quadrennially) as opposed to every 2 years (biennially), which has the effect of curbing the momentum of new political candidates and organizations in the Village. Presumably, this also dilutes voter turnout in the local mid-terms for the government bodies that *do* stagger their elections, namely the Skokie Park District and School Districts 65, 68, 69, 72, 73, 73½, and 219.

❖ At-Large vs. District Elections

Since our incorporation in 1888, all Trustees on the Village Board have been “at-large,” representing the entire community as opposed to specific, neighborhood districts within Skokie. The at-large vs. district debate was at the center of the 1959 city referendum vote, when Skokie was almost divided into 8 wards (aka districts), and the debate continues to this day. But little known to most Skokie voters is that a third option is allowed by the Illinois Election Code, a “hybrid” system in which Trustees can be elected at-large *and* by district.

Since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, hundreds of municipalities across the country have switched from at-large to district-based elections, either voluntarily or by court order. There has been a growing recognition that at-large electoral systems can (sometimes intentionally) discriminate against minority groups, often preventing geographically concentrated minority groups from gaining political representation by diluting their votes in a larger jurisdiction. Nationwide, there has been a post-Civil Rights trend of municipalities transitioning from at-large to district/hybrid systems and few municipalities have attempted the reverse. Though Skokie’s incredible racial/ethnic diversity is geographically widespread across the community, not concentrated in a specific area, it is still noteworthy that we did not elect a person of color to the Village Board until 2008.

Besides protecting minority representation in some communities, there are many advantages of districts for both voters *and* candidates, as outlined by the organization “Nonprofit Vote:”

Neighborhood-based election districts make it easier for both voters and candidates. Voters are more likely to meet the candidates in person and have access after the election to a neighborhood-based representative. For candidates, the campaigns cost less, more time is spent closer to home, and there is more chance to meet people they seek to represent...

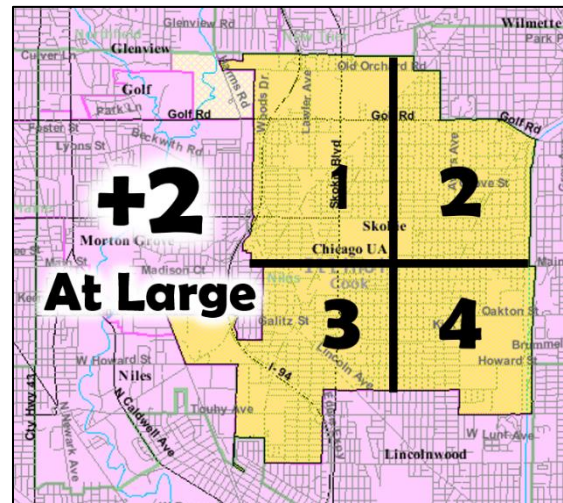
District systems do benefit from having some at-large seats to ensure a jurisdiction-wide perspective.¹⁵

¹⁵ “The Bias of At-Large Elections: How It Works.” Nonprofit Vote, 16 August 2017. Available online at: <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/the-bias-of-at-large-elections-how-it-works/>.

From a candidate’s perspective, at-large elections in Skokie are a huge obstacle, requiring more money and people-power to run for office. Trustee candidates have to campaign across the entire Village (with a population of 67,000+) instead of in smaller, less populous districts. Compare this to Evanston, where candidates for the City Council only have to campaign within specific wards (with populations of 8,000+) instead of across the entire City. It’s no coincidence that candidate turnout in Evanston is roughly double the candidate turnout in Skokie (see Chart 2).

From a voter’s perspective, at-large elections in Skokie have one significant benefit: voters have a say in the election of all 6 Trustees. On the other hand, this is only a benefit if elections are contested, which they rarely are due to the systemic inequities in our electoral system. In an all-district system, a Skokie resident would only get to vote for 1 Trustee, representing their individual district.

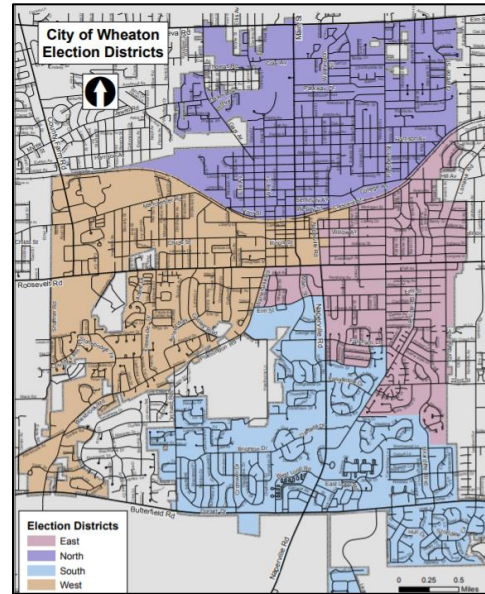
In a *hybrid* system, Skokie voters would elect 2 at-large Trustees and 4 district Trustees. Ideally, when combined with a staggered system, the Village would alternate biennially between at-large and district elections. We’d elect the Mayor, Clerk and 2 at-large Trustees in the regular municipal elections, but also get to elect district Trustees in the local mid-terms. In the event we were required to stagger the 6 Trustees evenly, there would be 1 at-large and 2 district Trustees elected every 2 years. Either way, a hybrid system would allow for a much more dynamic electoral system, far more inviting to candidates and voters.



Hypothetical “hybrid” electoral system for Skokie Trustees

Whereas adopting staggered elections is a common-sense decision, returning us to a “normal” electoral system compared to our neighboring suburbs, adopting hybrid elections would keep Skokie a unique, electoral outlier (though in a much, much better way). There are certainly other Villages in Illinois that both stagger their elections *and* implement districts (examples: Oak Lawn, Lombard), but none that employ a hybrid model, to my knowledge. If we adopted a hybrid model with both at-large *and* district Trustees, our electoral siblings would not be other Villages, but Cities. Many cities in Illinois employ a hybrid model (examples: Aurora, Joliet, Champaign, Moline). In some sense, a campaign for a hybrid system would be a soft reboot of the city referendum campaign of 1958-59, but would allow us to keep our “Village” designation.

In my research, I've been awed by the incredible diversity of electoral systems that can be found in Illinois, but I have only found one municipality that's comparable to Skokie *and* has an electoral system like I have been describing: the City of Wheaton. Another suburb of Chicago, Wheaton has a population of 53,970 (compared to 67,824 in Skokie), covers an area of 11.49 mi² (compared to 10.06 mi² in Skokie) and has *nonpartisan, staggered, hybrid elections*. They do not have an elected Clerk, but the Mayor and 2 at-large Councilmembers alternate biennial elections with 4 district Councilmembers. Curiously, instead of numbering their districts, they name them by direction: North, South, West, and East. The average candidate turnout is around 1.8 candidates/seat, and the average voter turnout is around 20%, both significantly better than Skokie.



City of Wheaton election districts for councilmembers, hybrid system

❖ Transitioning to a New Electoral System

If Skokie voters opt to change our Village electoral system, what will the transition be like? The shift to an updated electoral system will require an abnormal, transition election in 2025, but will set the stage for improved, biennial elections commencing in 2027.

When staggered elections were lost in 1961, the 3 Trustees elected in 1959 had their 4-year terms cut short to 2-years each, and were rightfully opposed to the decision. Thankfully, nothing this drastic would be necessary to *re-stagger* our elections. Instead of cutting any representatives' terms short, some Trustees would be elected to 2-year terms in 2025. The change in term-length would be temporary, and all representatives would return to 4-year terms commencing in 2027.

To achieve staggered *and* hybrid elections, the 4 District Trustees could be elected to 2-year terms in 2025, with the remaining at-large representatives elected to normal, 4-year terms. After 2025, this would mean our elections would be staggered evenly between district and at-large representatives. In the models below, the final, staggered options are outlined in red:

Models for Electoral System Transitions, 2025-

<u>2025</u>	<u>2027</u>	<u>2029</u>
Mayor		Mayor
Clerk		Clerk
Trustee		Trustee
Trustee		Trustee
Trustee		Trustee
Trustee		Trustee
Trustee		Trustee
Trustee		Trustee

No Change. All officials elected at-large to 4-year terms.

<u>2025</u>	<u>2027</u>	<u>2029</u>
Mayor		
Clerk		
Trustee – 4 Year	Trustee	
Trustee – 4 Year		
Trustee – 4 Year		
Trustee – 2 Year		
Trustee – 2 Year		
Trustee – 2 Year		
		Mayor
		Clerk
		Trustee
		Trustee
		Trustee

W/ Staggered Elections. Transition: 3 Trustees elected to 2-year terms in 2025.

<u>2025</u>	<u>2027</u>	<u>2029</u>
Mayor		
Clerk		
Trustee – At-Large	Trustee – District 1	
Trustee – At-Large		
Trustee – District 1		
Trustee – District 2		
Trustee – District 3	Trustee – District 3	Trustee – At Large
Trustee – District 4	Trustee – District 4	Trustee – At Large

W/ Staggered and Hybrid Elections. Transition: 4 District Trustees elected to 2-year terms in 2025.

3. Action

Reforms to our electoral system are so significant that they can *not* be adopted by a simple ordinance of the Village Board. Instead, electoral changes require voter approval through referendum questions placed on the ballot of a regularly scheduled election. Questions can be placed on the ballot in two different ways: a Village Board resolution or a voter petition. Given the Skokie Caucus Party's current 6-1 majority on the Village Board, and their inaction with a 7-0 majority from 1965-2021, a Village Board-backed resolution for electoral reform is highly unlikely. On the other hand, a voter petition is very doable.

❖ The Questions

The exact wording of these electoral reform questions is incredibly important, and will necessitate the insights of attorneys that specialize in election law. This campaign will require a legal team, both to prepare petition paperwork and (if necessary) provide legal defense. Just as the Village attempted to block the voter city-referendum initiative of 1958-59, there may be a similar attempt to challenge *this* initiative in 2022.

Though I am not an attorney, I can report that the Illinois Election Code offers helpful suggestions for phrasing specific questions related to electoral reform. For example:

- *Shall candidates for president and trustees of (name of village) be elected in nonpartisan primary and general elections? (65 ILCS 5/3.1-25-60)*
- *Shall the city (or village) of _____ adopt a system of staggered terms for alderpersons? (65 ILCS 5/5-2-3.1)*
- *Shall the city of _____ elect part of the councilmen at large and part of the Trustees from districts? (65 ILCS 5/5-2-18.2)*

Though up to 3 questions can be placed on a single ballot, it may be possible to combine multiple initiatives within a single question. Ideally, in my opinion, the more common-sense measures (nonpartisan and staggered elections) would be combined in a single question, and the more novel measure (hybrid elections) would be a separate question.

❖ The Petition

After the petition forms are prepared by a legal team, signatures of registered Skokie voters will need to be gathered. The number of required signatures is 8% of the total number of Skokie residents who voted

for Governor in the last gubernatorial election, which in my estimate would be 1,882 signatures.¹⁶ Since a challenge to the signatures should be anticipated, it is necessary to gather many more signatures than necessary. In my opinion, this campaign should strive for 3,000+ signatures.

❖ The Timeline

Ballot initiatives can be voted-on at any regularly scheduled election, and there are *two* regular elections in 2022: the June primary and the November general. Petitions must be submitted to the Skokie Clerk's Office at least three months prior to a regular election, meaning this campaign has two choices:

- **Primary:** Petitions submitted March 28; Election held June 28
- **General:** Petitions submitted August 8; Election held November 8

From a campaigner's point of view, the August 8 deadline is much more desirable. The summer weather will be much more conducive to campaigning and signature-gathering, and there will be over 4 additional months to prepare. From a voter's point of view, the August 8 deadline is also preferable, since voter turnout will be higher in the general election than in the primary. As many Skokie voters as possible should have the opportunity to weigh-in on these decisions.

❖ The Campaign

This is where this public policy essay ends, and the real work begins. Just like a campaign for a candidate running for office, a campaign for a ballot initiative requires a lot of work – signatures, fundraising, outreach, publicity, etc. The upside is that the work is incredibly meaningful. To my knowledge, nothing like this has been attempted by Skokie residents since the late 1950's, so there is incredible potential for creative outreach and voter education. There are so many ways for Skokie residents to contribute their gifts and talents.

A campaign for electoral reform is also an opportunity to encourage *thousands* of Skokie residents to be more active in our local democracy. Our Village's political culture has been fairly stagnant for the past 40+ years, but by opening up our electoral system, Skokie will have more candidates, more voters, and more civic engagement. The work ahead may be great, but this campaign has the potential to revitalize our Village democracy for decades to come.

¹⁶ According to the Cook County Clerk's Office, 53.19% of Niles Township voters participated in the 2018 gubernatorial election, and there are 44,221 registered voters in Skokie. Given that Skokie has a lower voter turnout than other municipalities within Niles Township (example: Lincolnwood, Morton Grove), a *conservative* estimate is that 23,522 Skokie residents voted for Governor in 2018. The signature requirement is 8% of that number, or roughly 1,882 signatures.