

Abandonment of Proportional Representation  
and the Impact of 9-X Voting in Cincinnati

W. Donald Heisel, University of Cincinnati\*

The objective of this paper is to examine the results of Cincinnati council elections since the abolition of Proportional Representation (PR) in 1957, and to determine the effects of the current 9-X system on election results in comparison with results under PR, particularly in regard to the criticisms of PR which led to its demise.

Background

Students of electoral systems are familiar with the history of Cincinnati government, so I will provide only a brief review of highlights. Other than two brief periods of reform, Cincinnati was controlled by Republican bosses during the entire first quarter of this century. The Cincinnati council consisted of 32 members, 26 elected from wards and six at-large. Following rejection of the Democratic reform administration of Henry Hunt in 1912, only five Democrats managed to get elected to council until the 1925 reform charter. Typically, the large council could be aptly described as ward heelers, in the pejorative sense of the term. Demographically, they were persons of low status on such measures as education and occupation. Politically, they were weak; power was in the hands of the bosses. Minority representation was ineffectual. (1)

It was no surprise, then, that when reformers framed a charter, they sought an electoral system which would assure an effective minority. The Hare system of PR was selected, and included in a reform charter that passed by a 2-1 majority. It is doubtful that the average voter cared about the electoral system; he voted for reform because of growing hostility to bossism.

A combination of elements produced the results the reformers sought. In the first (1925) election, PR produced a 6-3 council, with the reform-minded Charter Committee -- now a full-fledged political party -- in the majority. The presence of a minority opened up the processes of government. Minority representation on the council led to minority representation on council committees, and thus to open discussion of issues, which in turn attracted press and public. The vigilance of the press became a major strength of the new government.

The Republican organization ultimately became a strong advocate of the council-manager form of government and of the small council, but its affection for those elements of the reform charter did not extend to PR. They hated it, and led four abortive efforts to amend the charter before the public ultimately agreed on the fifth try. All but one of the repealers would have substituted the 9-X plan; the one exception in 1954 would have installed a 6-X plan as a concession to the strong public sentiment for a minority voice in council.

These repealer efforts were as follows: (2)

1936 (9-X)	PR survived by 831 votes
1939 (9-X)	PR survived by 742 votes
1947 (9-X)	PR survived by 7602 votes
1954 (6-X)	PR survived by 695 votes
1957 (9-X)	PR lost by 11,589 votes, 65,593 to 54,004

What caused the reversal in 1957? One can only speculate what went on in the minds of the voters. The arguments advanced over a period of years in opposition to PR included the following: (3)

1. Irritation over the complexity of PR -- the long time it took to count the ballots, the complexity of the process, a feeling that the vote transfer process was something like a lottery, a feeling they did not know where their individual votes might end.

2. A person could effectively vote for only one candidate under PR.
3. Encouragement of bloc voting, as a candidate need only appeal to one-tenth of the electorate.
4. PR does not assure a working majority for any one party in council.
5. A professed difficulty of getting good candidates to run, because, due to the need to run "against" one's own ticketmates, considerable money was needed.

Three of these reasons were particularly prominent in the 1957 campaign. The lottery aspect was emphasized by the fact that the Republicans, in the 1955 election, received only four seats on council even though, in terms of first-choice votes, they outpolled the opposition with 54% of the first-choice votes. A simplistic interpretation leads to the conclusion that the party with the most first-choice votes should win. The media and the voters ignored the fact that of Republican Mayor Rich's surplus, only 50% went to other Republican candidates, and that overall, while 82% of Charterite transfers went to fellow Charterites, only 65% of Republican transfers stayed within Republican ranks.

Another issue was the problem of bloc voting -- or at least the fear of it. This was the race issue. In 1955, Theodore M. Berry, a prominent and controversial black, was elected as a Charterite with a small surplus of first-choice votes, leading the ticket to a 5-4 win. There was some talk that he should be Mayor on the basis of leading the ticket -- talk which ignored the many times that the ticket leader was not elected Mayor during the 30 years of PR. When Berry was denied the Mayor's chair, there was ample controversy to build up this issue. So, in 1957, there was racism as an issue: "do you want a black for Mayor?"

The third major complain about PR to surface in 1957 was the lack of a working majority in the 1953 council. The Charterites had a 5-4 majority in that council until one of its members, Albert Jordan, defected from the party and was independent. After his defection, the Mayor, Edward Waldvogel, died in office. The council's inability to name a new Mayor was viewed as a lack of a working majority, notwithstanding the Mayor's principal role is ceremonial.

I will not speculate on the relative importance of these three points of opposition to PR, and the wide swing of votes since the unsuccessful repeal effort of only three years ago. PR lost by over 11,000 votes, never to be revived. In the same year as the successful repeal effort, Mr. Berry lost his bid for reelection -- the only Charterite defeated as council became 5-4 Republican.

In place of PR came 9-X. Each voter could place as many as nine "x" marks in front of the names of preferred candidates. The fiction of a non-partisan election was maintained -- meaning only that party affiliations were not printed on the ballots.

#### Changes in the City

Before considering data on the measurable differences and similarities of councils elected under the two methods, it is necessary to point out the environmental differences under which the two systems operated.

PR was in effect for 16 elections, 1925 through 1955. The early portions of this period were dominated by reaction against bossism and a fear of one-party domination. In fact, the pro-PR Charterites ran against Boss Cox long after he was dead and buried. Admittedly, the effectiveness of this type of campaign dwindled as fewer and fewer voters recalled the bad old days.

In the twenties, the only organized political party in the city was the Republican organization. The Democratic party was conspicuous by its absence; it was not a force to be reckoned with. Even now, the Republicans control all 11 elective offices in the county of which Cincinnati is a part.

Therefore, in the early days of PR, the Charter Committee consisted of independent Republicans, independents, and what few Democrats could be located. Via Charter, Democrats could express their opposition to the Republican machine. Then came FDR and the changes he wrought in the Democratic party nationally. FDR attracted labor, blacks and intellectuals. By the third council election under 9-X, Cincinnati had for the first time voted Democratic in the presidential election -- JFK in 1960.

The growth of the Democratic party within Cincinnati was slow and gradual. Democrats were not recognized as such in city elections until 1957, when the leadership decided to run a ticket for council. Its imprint even today is weak; but, by joining forces with the Charterites in a coalition, they have been able to gain power which would have been denied them had they chosen to operate independently. In summary, the Democratic organization has increased from virtually nil under PR to a 50/50 partnership with Charter under 9-X -- a partnership which survives today, however tenuously.

The other change in the city which is highly relevant is the increase in the black population and in black political activism. In the twenties, blacks were Republican if anything; the party of Lincoln elected the first two blacks to city council under PR. Republican domination of blacks was strong. In the 1936 repeal effort, for example, the two major black wards supported repeal by 4-1 and 3-1 margins, at the urging of their white ward leaders. However, at the national level, by the mid-sixties, about 85% of blacks had become Democrats. (4) There is no reason to believe that blacks

in Cincinnati varied materially from national averages.

Furthermore, PR helped blacks get into council. Fifteen blacks were elected out of 144 possible seats in council. This helped to raise black consciousness about politics. While data are not available concerning political participation by race, the distribution of votes by wards indicates a fuller rate of participation than during the early days of PR.

This increase in participation came at a time the city was getting blacker; so it was a matter of greater involvement of a larger proportion of the population. Exact data on race is available only for census years. These data indicate substantial growth in the <sup>adult</sup> black population: 7.9% in 1920; 10.4% in 1930; 11.5% in 1940; 14.9% in 1950; 19.8% in 1960; 24.4 % in 1970; and 29.9 % in 1980. Thus, by interpolation, we can conclude that the range of black population varied from 9 % to 17 % under PR, and from 17 % to 29 % under 9-X.

In summary, the three important changes in the city between the two period were (1) the reduced effectiveness of running against bossism as fewer voters considered this an issue; (2) the resurgence of the Democratic party to a point it is helpful to the Charter movement; and (3) the increased political power of blacks, caused by increased numbers as well as by increased political awareness.

Comparisons of Councilmembers

While keeping in mind these important changes in the city, let us now look at the similarities and differences in the types of persons elected under the two systems.

Education: PR had brought a significant change in the educational level of councilmembers. As previously stated, the pre-PR councils were filled with less educated, low status members. In the 16 PR elections, with 144\* seats filled, over 61% had more than a baccalaureate education (mostly law school), and 85% were at least college graduates -- thirty from prestigious Eastern schools. Under 9-X, the percentages increased; only two of the 117 seats filled under 9-X in 13 elections were filled with persons who had not graduated from college; 31 of these were from prestigious colleges. Almost 85% had graduate education, again mostly in law. Obviously, in the average 30-year time difference, the average education of the entire population rose. But 9-X at least cannot be accused of lowering the educational level of councilmembers.

Occupation: Consistent with their educational achievements, councilmembers elected under both systems achieved prestigious occupational levels. Under PR, the following occupational breakdown was calculated: lawyers, 47%; other professionals, 12%; managers, 31%; salespersons, 6%; others, 4%. Under 9-X, lawyers accounted for 62%; other professionals, 7%; managers, 16%; salespersons, 12%, and others, 3%. To the extent that elitist occupations indicate quality of councilmembers, there is no appreciable deterioration of council quality.

---

\*In this analysis, each seat is considered a unit; therefore a person reelected is counted as many times as he was elected. Thus, under PR N=144, and under 9-X N=117, to reflect the 16 and 13 elections, respectively. I justify this approach because at each election, the voters have the opportunity to choose nine members. If they choose to reelect an incumbent, he should be counted again for purposes of illustrating the demographic makeup of council.

Age: A substantial difference appears in the age distributions under the two voting systems; PR councilmembers tended to be older, in comparison with those elected under 9-X.

Table 1

Age Distribution of Councilmembers  
(omitting those whose ages are unknown)

Age Range	Age when elected		Age when first elected	
	PR	9-X	PR	9-X
Under 30 years	0%	7%	0%	12%
30-39 years	9%	33%	23%	47%
40-49 years	36%	25%	40%	24%
50-59 years	16%	14%	15%	18%

The average number of candidates remained about the same under the two systems, thus ruling out any belief that it is easier for a younger person to be elected due to less competition. The introduction of 9-X approximately coincided with the lowering of the voting age to 18, thus making it possible that younger voters were attracted by younger candidates. However, we have no assurance that this is the cause. There does not appear to be any characteristic of either voting system that would tend to explain the rather substantial differences indicated above.

Sex: A higher proportion of women -- 7.7%, compared with 2.1% -- have been elected under 9-X. However, this figure is exaggerated by the fact that one woman has served six terms under 9-X. Furthermore, as women have been winning public offices throughout the country in greater numbers than ever before, I consider this difference to be without significance in a comparison of electoral methods.



Race: Almost exactly the same proportions of person elected were black under the two systems -- 10.3% under PR, 10.4% under 9-X. However, conditions are vastly different. During PR, blacks constituted a much smaller proportion of the eligible voting population than under 9-X. Under PR, as previously noted, the proportion of blacks in the adult population ranged from 9 % to 17 %, whereas under 9-X, the proportion ranged from 17 % to 29 %. Further, black political activism has increased. These two facts suggest that had PR continued, more blacks would have been elected than actually were under 9-X.

Here the inherent difference between the two voting systems is relevant. Under PR, blacks may, if they choose, concentrate their high choices on black candidates. Their votes stay with these choices as long as they remain in contention. Under 9-X, however, black ballots simultaneously count for other, presumably white, candidates, thus increasing the number of votes needed for election. The only way that blacks can avoid helping to elect whites would be through bullet voting, and thus giving up part of their franchise.

an adult  
 With  $\frac{1}{4}$  black population of 29 %, Cincinnati should elect a minimum of two blacks to council. This has happened only once under 9-X; but it happened twice under PR with a much smaller proportion of blacks in the population. In four 9-X elections no black was successful; whereas at least one black succeeded in every PR election from 1941 on. It is no surprise, then, that blacks are critical of 9-X.

Further, under PR, blacks could choose their own candidates and elect them without white support. This is impossible under 9-X; any black who expects to be elected must strive for white support.

-3-

Residence of councilmembers: I cannot think of any scientific way to compare the two electoral systems on the basis of the locations of their residences. Councils have frequently been criticized because so many members lived in the same neighborhoods. This criticism arose both under PR and 9-X.

In one sense, it is valid. As can be seen from the maps appended to this paper, there are concentrations of residences in specific parts of the city. Hyde Park and Mt. Lookout, two upper-class neighborhoods, have produced more than their share of councilmembers; this is not surprising considering the types of occupations already reported.

The evolution of the city makes other comparisons meaningless. For example, the PR map shows few councilmembers from the western edge of the city. This is the one growth area; while PR was in use, the western suburbs had only about one-fourth of their current population. Likewise, under PR there were a number of members from the West End area downtown. This area was an important black neighborhood years ago, but now the West End blacks live in Avondale, which was formerly the home of the Jewish elite.

Advocates of district plans see unfairness in these maps. They assume people are not represented on council unless one of their neighbors is a member. They overlook the fact that the public willingly votes for the Hyde Park and Mt. Lookout residents and considers that they represents their interests if not their neighborhoods.

In comparing PR with 9-X, I cannot see any meaningful difference in the dispersion of residences.

Summary: In terms of the types of persons elected to council, we can conclude that the only important change brought by 9-X is the increased difficulty of electing blacks.

One of the arguments used against PR was the cost of elections, and the subsequent difficulty of getting competent people to run. The data cited in this section indicates that the charge was false; Cincinnati did get the services of high-class citizens. Fortunately, the change to 9-X did not lessen the willingness of competent people to run for council. The general caliber of councils under the two systems remains high. If blacks had a fair chance under 9-X, we would be unable to detect any difference that could be traced to the electoral system.

#### Impacts on Council as a Governing Body

Opponents of PR argued, during repeal campaigns, that PR too often failed to produce a working majority of one party in council; further, that the PR system tended to encourage bloc voting, as a councilmember could get reelected by placating as little as 10% of the population and ignoring the remaining 90%. As pointed out earlier, the absence of a working majority in part of the term of the 1953 council was one of several important events which was fresh in the minds of voters in the 1957 successful repeal effort.

When council takes office on the December 1 following election, the first order of business is the election of a Mayor. This is a highly partisan vote; the Mayor's office is virtually a guarantee of reelection.

It is true that the election of a Mayor in 1954 was stymied by a 4-4-1 division in council. However, this was not the result of the election system, but rather of the defection of one member of the 5-4 Charter majority. That could happen under either system; it did happen in 1980 with the defection of Blackwell from Charter to Republican. But nobody

particularly cared in 1980, as the Mayor had already been elected, and Charter still had a 5-4 majority.

In other split councils under PR, some accomodation was made to assure the election of a Mayor. This was done by the independent aligning himself with one of the parties; or, as happened in 1939, a Charterite voted for the reelection of the Republican Mayor in order to reduce the power of the independent who had been elected.

What most people do not realize is that other than the election of the Mayor, there are few party issues decided by council. About 90% of the votes taken in council are unanimous. In the remaining 10%, it is rare to find straight party divisions. The outstanding example of the lack of party control over its council representatives occurred in 1964, when a member of the Republican majority voted with the four-member minority to choose a new city manager. If a party cannot control its representatives on such an important issue as selection of a city manager, it should be no surprise that straight party votes are rare on other issues.

Even in a 4-4-1 elected council, an independent does not exercise undue power. Straetz (5) made a study of the votes of Herbert Bigelow, the last person elected as an independent in 1939. He found there were 727 roll-call votes during that biennium, of which 90.9% were unanimous. Of the remaining 66 votes, 23 were either 8-1 or 7-1; but in only four of these 23 times was the independent the one-person minority. There were only four votes in which Bigelow was decisive -- four times when he was the fifth vote needed for passage, three times supporting Republicans and once supporting the Charter position. Had a Charter regular been elected, therefore, three votes might have been changed; had a Republican been elected, there would have been a change on only one vote.

Bloc voting within council has also been conspicuous by its absence. For example, the Reeds and Straez (6) studied the voting records of Jesse Locker and Theodore Berry when both blacks served in council together (1949 and 1951 terms). Locker was a Republican and Berry a Charterite. Out of 811 recorded votes, there was none in which Locker and Berry were a minority of two. Of the 105 times that council was divided, they were on opposite sides 23 times.

In summary, there does not appear to be any difference in the abilities of councils elected under the two systems to tackle the business of the city, other than the election of the Mayor. And this problem arose not because of PR as such, but because of the presence of an independent leading to a 4-4-1 split. Considering the tendency of Cincinnati voters to split their tickets, an independent could be elected under 9-X, although admittedly it would be more difficult to do so.

## Impacts of Differences between PR and 9-X

In this section, I examine some of the complaints against PR which presumably 9-X corrected, to see what effects, if any, they had on election results.

PR was considered complex, hard for the average voter to understand; presumably it is easier to make nine "x"-es than to write numbers from 1 to 9. If this were true, then it would follow that fewer people would vote. To test this, I derived estimates of the population of voting age at each election, interpolating from census data, and compared the adult population (roughly those eligible to vote) with the actual vote. Under PR, an average of 44.2% of adult Cincinnatians voted; under 9-X, the average dropped to 39.9%. As a minimum, we can conclude that PR was not so complex as to discourage voting.

Data are not available on the proportion of invalid ballots under 9-X. Under PR, the proportion ranged from a low of 3.5% (1925) to a high of 7.8% (1955), with an average of 5.4%. We cannot estimate whether or not this is high for Cincinnati voters because of the lack of data for comparison. It is interesting, if unfathomable, that the proportion increased steadily over time.

Length of time for counting the ballots was another criticism of PR, although this obviously did not impact election results. PR with hand-counting of ballots was time-consuming, usually taking from eight to ten days. Under 9-X, the Board of Elections uses Volomatic machines. Whether PR would be as fast if computerized is speculative.

The most important criticism has to do with PR's accuracy. Many people felt there was a touch of lottery in the distribution of surplus votes. If different ballots were chosen, they assert, the election results might be different.

But in terms of accuracy, both systems rate well. Under 9-X, the official count has never deviated from the unofficial first count by any significant number of votes. And under PR, a major test of its accuracy occurred in 1955, when the results were so close a recount was ordered. In that election, Gilligan led Jordan for the ninth seat by only 111 votes out of 135,000 on the unofficial count. The recount changed the total number of votes cast by only two. But it so happened that the big winner, Mayor Carl Rich, who had a total of 27,000 votes, lost a total of 19. This required that his votes be renumbered, so that when his surplus was distributed in the recount, different ballots were chosen. In spite of this fact, the Reeds and Straetz concluded, after a study of the recount, that a change of only nine votes was ascribable to the method of distributing surplus. Gilligan's election was confirmed, and so was PR's accuracy. (6)

Closely related to the question of accuracy is the question of whether PR produces as winners the persons the public wants. In the 1955 election, the Republican candidates, as a group, received 54.5% of the first-choice votes. But they got only four seats. A number of people felt this was wrong. Obviously, what happened was that many who voted for a Republican as first choice voted for a Charterite for second choice. In fact, by the thirteenth of fifteen counts that year, the Republicans had retained only 48% of the ballots. The Republicans held onto only 50% of Rich's surplus.

If one assumes that each voter has only one choice, then the Republicans deserved to win that election. But PR assumes voters have more than one preference. It is obvious, from analysis of additional choices, that PR resulted in expressing the will of the voters.

Under 9-X, it is impossible to make a comparison. Republicans have been running short tickets in recent years, attempting to concentrate their voting power on a few candidates. Under PR, however, both parties consistently ran full tickets. In the 1981 election, for example, Republicans totalled 227,000 votes or an average of 45559 for each of their five candidates. The Charter-Democrats totalled 390,000 votes, divided among nine for an average of 43,375. These figures show the difficulty of making comparisons.

My conclusion is that both systems accurately reflect voter choices, but that PR is the more representative because it permits minority groups to choose their own representatives.

---



## The Current Status

Neither the citizens nor the leaders of Cincinnati politics are currently concerned about the election system. The sole interest in change comes from blacks who feel threatened by the 9-X system and would prefer a district or ward system.

The issue was discussed in some detail in late 1980 when the council appointed a committee to review the city charter. By agreement, each of the three political parties -- Republicans, Democrats, and Charter -- selected three representatives for this committee. The author was named executive secretary for the committee.

When the committee discussed electoral systems, the Charterites urged return to PR, the Democrats asked for a district system, and the Republicans favored the status quo. As a result, each proposal was defeated by a 3-6 vote. When the committee's report reached the council, it was quietly shelved.

## Conclusions

In my opinion, any consideration of 9-X and PR must include other aspects of electing councilmembers. Specifically, the length of the term and thus the number to be elected at one election should be considered.

Councilmembers currently serve two-year terms. If we changed to four-year terms and elected only five every two years (the fifth being for a two-year term), it would be possible to return to PR and computerize the election process while retaining the current Votomatic system. This would reduce the argument about long counts and increase public acceptance of the accuracy of the count.

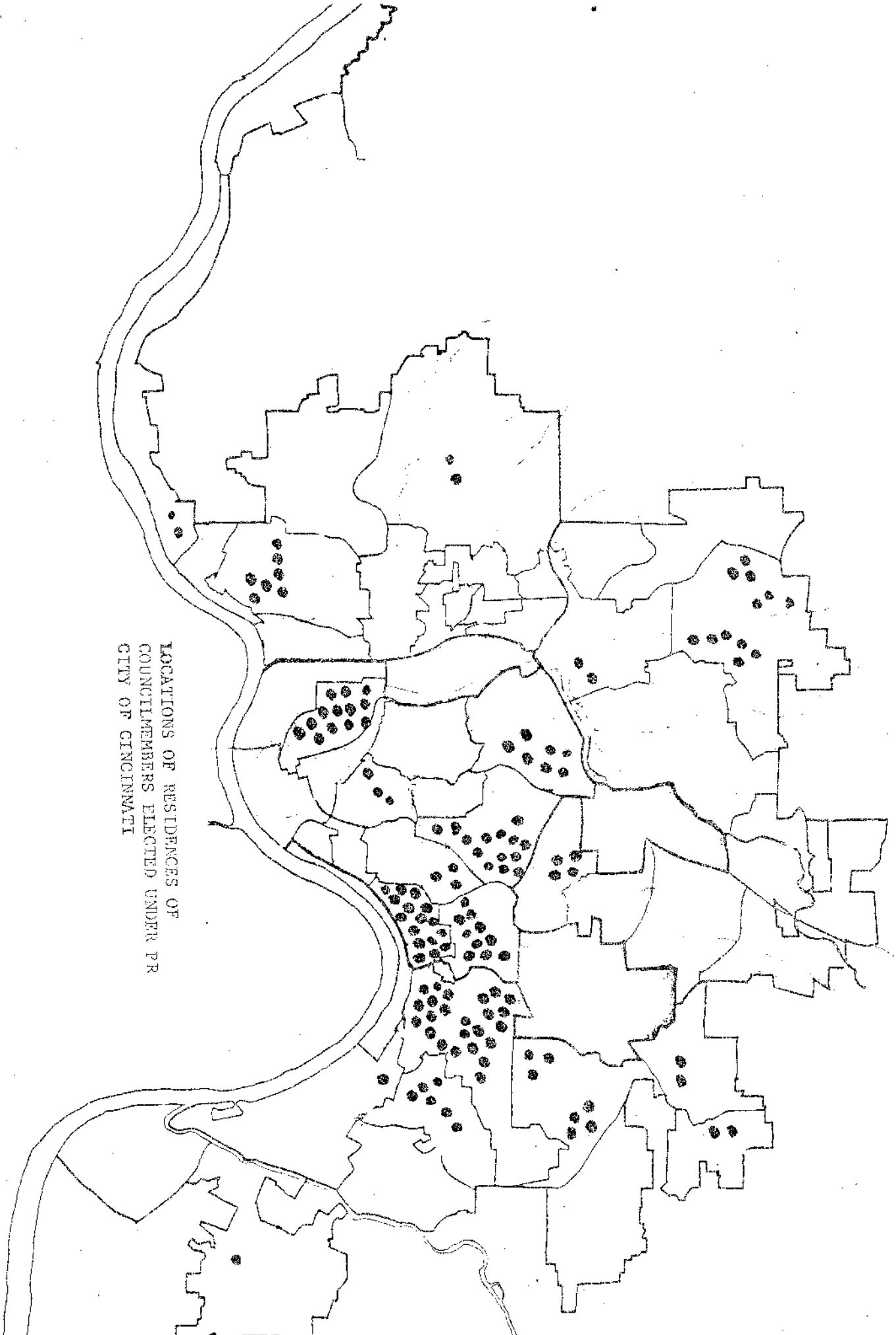
PR would assure the election of one and probably two blacks. It would also assure the election of two or three Republicans -- assurance which is not present, considering the party's minority status, under 9-X.

The four-year term is not just an idea thrown in to make PR feasible. It is a long-expressed desire of a number of councilmembers, and others, that would provide greater continuity in council and reduce the cost of campaigning; four members could sit out each election.

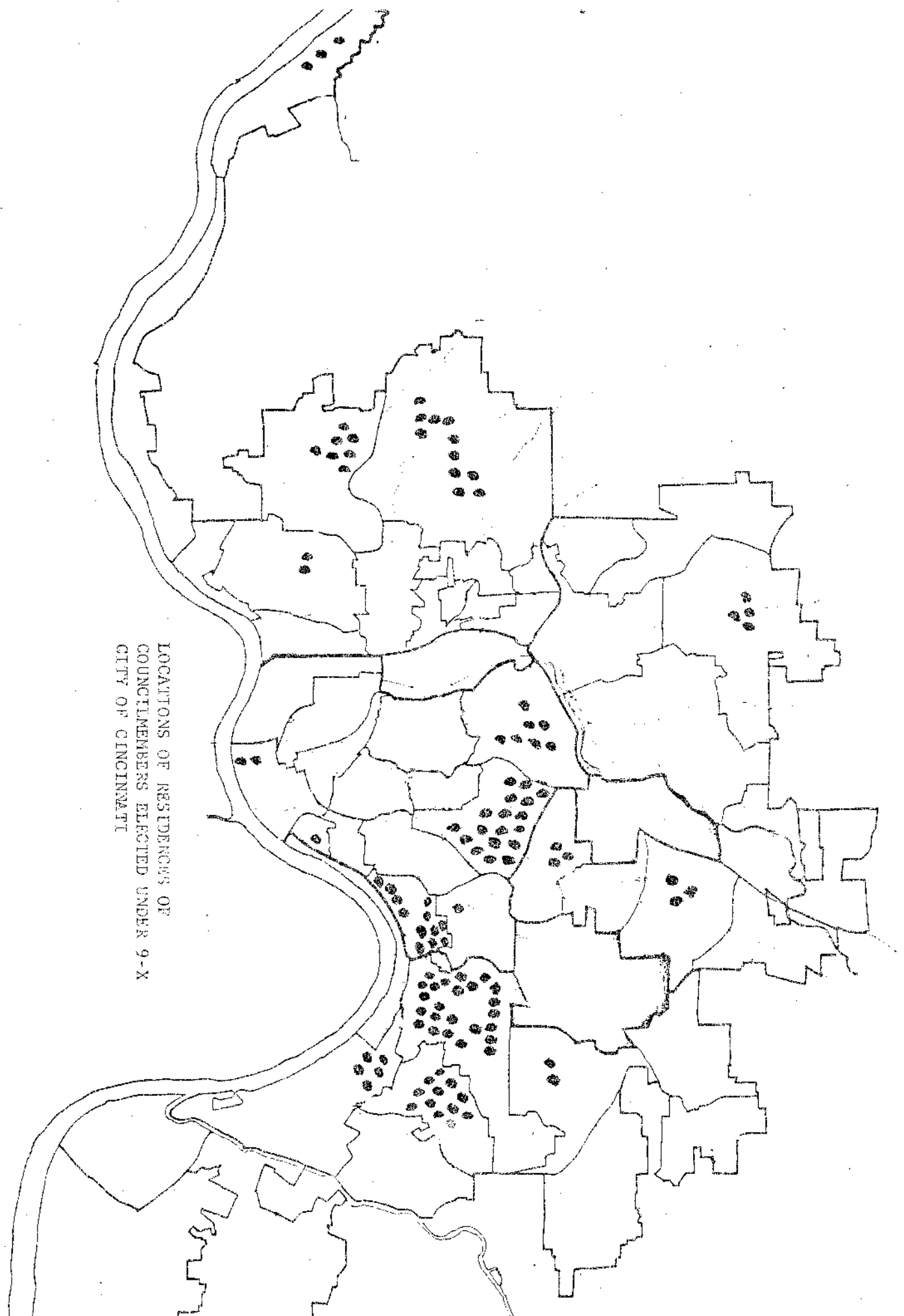
It is strange that the support for PR comes from the group which is currently prospering under 9-X, the Charter group, while PR's opponents, Republicans and blacks, stand the most to gain from its return, in my opinion.

Will they support the return of PR? Not in my lifetime. PR has long been an emotional issue with many people, and even self-interest apparently cannot cope with the strong feelings it generates.

Fortunately, 9-X has continued to give Cincinnati some good Councils. Hence the indifference to the electoral system as a political issue.



LOCATIONS OF RESIDENCES OF  
COUNCILMEMBERS ELECTED UNDER PR  
CITY OF CINCINNATI



LOCATIONS OF RESIDENCES OF  
COUNCILMEMBERS ELECTED UNDER 9-X  
CITY OF CINCINNATI