



Research Report

Analysis of City Councils with At-large Seats

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To: Council member Flynn and staff

Summary: This memorandum provides information on the election systems for 36 large cities that have (or very recently had) at-large council districts. The attached spreadsheet provides information on the number of at-large seats, the method for electing at-large members, any recent changes to at-large seats, and available information on resident opinions of at-large seats. This memorandum provides background information on at-large seats and summarizes information in the spreadsheet.

At-large Council Districts vs. District Representation

City councils across the country elect their representatives at-large, by district, or through a combination of the two methods. At-large members are elected by the entire constituency of the city. District members are elected from a specific geographic section of the city called a district or a ward. In the 100 largest cities, about two-thirds of city councils consist of only district seats and one-third consist of a combination of at-large and district representation. Only a few cities elect all council members at-large. Arguments to support district representation include:

- Diverse communities have a better chance of being represented.
- Members may be more aware of unique problems of their constituents and more responsive.
- The cost to run in a district election may be less expensive.

Arguments to support at-large representation include:

- Members may be more impartial.
- Members may think about problems that impact the city as a whole.
- City-wide elections may allow more candidates to run.¹

Denver City Council At-large Seats

Per [charter](#), Denver City Council is composed of eleven district-specific members and two at-large members. The council composition has not changed since 1968. The [charter](#) specifies that City Council elections for all seats are held every four years on the first Tuesday in April. At-large candidates run on the same ballot, and the top two candidates that receive the most votes are elected. There is no run-off election held for at-large candidates. In 2021, as city council began the process to redistrict city council seats following the 2020 census, Council members Kevin Flynn and Candi CdeBaca [proposed](#) a ballot measure for a charter change to convert

¹Cities 101 – At-large and District Elections. National League of Cities. December 2016.

<https://www.cityofwfs.org/DocumentCenter/View/13991/Cities-101---District-v-At-Large-Elections---National-League-of-Cities-pdf>.

the two at-large seats to district representation. The ordinance passed through the Finance & Governance Committee but was narrowly voted down by the full council and did not make the ballot.

Trends in At-large Seats in Other City Councils

Using a list developed by Council member Flynn, staff researched 36 city councils. The 36 cities have a large population and had at-large city council members at the time the list was put together. Three of these cities – Boise, ID; Henderson, NV; and Virginia Beach, VA – converted their at-large seats to districts seats after 2020, leaving 33 city councils with at-large districts. Detailed information on how at-large candidates are elected, recent changes to elections, and available public opinion of at-large seats regarding the 36 city councils may be found in the spreadsheet labeled Attachment A. Below is a summary of observations. Cities use a variety of methods to elect at-large candidates. There have been recent attempts to make changes or discussion regarding at-large seats by city officials, residents, or state lawmakers; however, most cities ultimately did not make changes to city council composition and their at-large seats.

At-large election methods. The methods to elect at-large council members vary greatly. Three cities – Columbus, OH; Jacksonville, FL; and Memphis TN – have seats that are voted on at-large but are geographical super districts within the city. For example, Memphis splits the city in half and elects candidates at-large from each half. Election method trends are highlighted below.

- 21 out of 33 city councils have at-large candidates run on the same ballot and do not have separate races for separate seats.
- 11 out of 33 city councils have at-large candidates run on separate ballots. Three of these cities have caveats worth highlighting: Oakland, CA has only one at-large seat and by default is a separate ballot. Columbus, OH has a hybrid system that requires at-large candidates to run in geographical areas on separate ballots, but are voted on citywide. Jacksonville, FL also requires at-large candidates to run in geographical super districts on separate ballots, but are voted on citywide.
- Washington, D.C. has a separate ballot for the at-large city council Chairperson (President) race. The other at-large seats run on the same ballot.
- 25 of 33 city councils require at-large candidates to compete in two races in order to win – either a primary election and a general election, or a general election and a runoff election.
- Of the 25 cities that require at-large candidates to compete in two races, nine cities require at-large candidates to be elected by a true majority. These nine cities also have at-large candidates run on separate ballots.
- Seven cities have election systems like Denver's in which at-large candidates compete only in one race and the candidates receiving the most votes are elected.
- Six cities stagger the elections for at-large seats.

Resident attempts to change at-large districts. Residents in seven cities have recently attempted to or succeeded in converting at-large seats. Virginia Beach, VA residents succeeded in converting at-large seats through a court challenge alleging that at-large elections diluted minority voting strength. A 2014 resident ballot measure to convert at-large seats in Kansas City failed. Residents in Cincinnati, OH; Columbus, OH; and Scottsdale, AZ proposed ballot initiatives to convert at-large seats, but these attempts did not make the ballot. Advisory committees in Charlotte, NC and Raleigh, NC recommended converting at-large seats, but the recommendations were not acted upon by the respective city councils.

Proposals from city officials impacting at-large seats. Proposals to add at-large seats, add district seats, or convert at-large seats have been recently discussed by the mayor or city council in a few cities. In Aurora, CO, the mayor proposed several changes to city governance, including adding an at-large council seat. The proposal did not make the ballot. In Charlotte, NC; Hialeah, FL; Memphis, TN; and Raleigh, NC, council members or mayors discussed converting at-large seats to district seats – but proposals were never introduced or voted on by the councils. A ballot measure to create residential districts (that would be voted on at-large) in Columbus, OH, was supported by city council and passed.

State laws impacting at-large seats in local councils. State legislatures in Idaho, Nevada, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia attempted to require local city councils to convert at-large seats to district representation. A law passed in Idaho required Boise to convert their fully at-large council to district representation. A Nevada law required certain cities to run a ballot measure to allow citizens to decide whether to convert at-large districts. Henderson, NV did so, and residents voted to convert at-large seats to district representation. Laws in North Carolina and Tennessee were passed to require the cities of Greensboro and Nashville, respectively, to convert at-large seats to district representation. Both laws were ruled unconstitutional and did not take effect. A state law in Virginia prohibited district representatives from being elected at-large, which impacted the Virginia Beach city council. In general, these state laws targeted specific large cities and were viewed as an attempt to interfere in local governance.

Redistricting. Denver appears to be the only city to vote on a proposal to convert at-large seats to district representation during the 2020 redistricting process. Council members in Charlotte, NC and Memphis, TN discussed the idea of converting at-large seats, but no formal proposals were introduced in those cities.