



## Analysis of City Councils with At-large Seats

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**To: Council member Flynn and staff**

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**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.<sup>1</sup>

### 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

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

<https://www.cityofws.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.