

Mayoral Views on Cities' Legislators: How Representative are City Councils?

**A POLICY BRIEF FROM THE
2018 MENINO SURVEY OF MAYORS**

This year, thousands of census takers across the country will go out into their communities to collect demographic information on the American public. This information is invaluable—it allows communities to track poverty, diversity, and the efficacy of local services. These data are also foundational to our democracy; they are enshrined in our constitution, and form the basis of our representative government. Indeed, to ensure that our legislative districts continue to represent equal populations, states and local governments redraw districts every ten years on the basis of new decennial census data.

How we draw districts profoundly shapes representation. District lines determine legislators' constituents. They can be drawn to increase or decrease the representation of different groups, including racial and ethnic minorities or homeowners and renters. When politicians have an active role in the districting process, they are often able to "choose their voters," including groups that have supported them in the past and excluding potential opposition.

Much of the research and press attention on districting focuses on congressional and state legislative districts, and how strategic politicians and political parties draw districts to their advantage. Partisan and racial gerrymandering abound in these redistricting processes; in some places politicians and political parties draw districts that pack Democratic voters and voters of color, making it easier for conservative candidates to win surrounding districts. Gerrymandering contributes to less competitive races and distorts political representation. In contrast, independent redistricting commissions—in which politically independent appointees are responsible for drawing legislative districts—create districts that are more compact and keep more political subdivisions intact (Edwards et al. 2017).

At the local level, we know much less about both the redistricting process and the representational consequences of different redistricting plans. We do not even know systematically who is responsible for city-level redistricting. Do city councilors, mayors, city managers, independent commissions, or some other group control the redistricting process? Most of the research on city council districts compares at-large to district-level representation. In at-large districts, councilors are elected by the entire city, while district-level representatives are accountable to particular city neighborhoods. These systems come with important representational tradeoffs. At-large elections may spur better representation of the city as a whole's interests. As a Boston Globe article put it, "Freed from some of the

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constituent-service demands of district councilors, at-large councilors have the leeway to think big.”¹ They may, however, be vulnerable to capture by powerful financial interests. Moreover, they may exclude minority voices from council representation. In contrast, scholars have found that district-level contests enhance the representation of minority groups, particularly when those groups are spatially segregated (Welch 1983; Bledsoe 1993; Meier et al. 2005, Trounstein and Valdinì 2008; Mullin 2009).

We know nothing systematic, however, about how those cities who hold district elections create their city council districts. Consequentially, we know very little about whether these choices in how to draw districts shape the representation of particular interests.

SURVEY OF MAYORS

To better understand how well city councils represent their constituents, we asked a nationally representative sample of mayors of cities over 75,000 a series of questions about their city councils.² We interviewed mayors in person and over the phone, discussing a range of critical political and policy questions—including a module on city councils. Among other things, mayors rated the quality of their city council’s representation for different racial, ethnic, economic, and social groupings. They also told us who was responsible for drawing their city councils districts.

CITY COUNCIL REPRESENTATION

Mayors believe that the quality of city council representation varies widely depending upon the group. They see relatively little overrepresentation of particular interests; just over one-quarter of mayors highlighted senior citizens and Democrats as being over-represented by their city councils, the largest of any group we asked about. In contrast, they perceive a number of interests as under-represented. Over half of mayors see renters, low-income residents, immigrants, Asian Americans and Hispanics as underrepresented by their city councils.

Mayors of cities with at-large council elections see important differences in the representativeness of their city councils relative to their counterparts in cities with district elections.³ Consistent with research showing better minority representation in district elections, mayors of at-large cities are six percentage points more likely to see Black people as underrepresented by their city councils. Interestingly, mayors’ perceptions of Hispanic representation point in the opposite direction; compared to mayors of at-large cities, mayors of cities with district elections are twelve percentage points more likely to see Hispanics as underrepresented by their city councils. Mayors of cities with district elections are ten percentage points more likely to see immigrants as underrepresented by their city councils, relative to their counterparts governing cities with at-large elections. This suggests that, in mayors’ eyes, district elections are more effective at empowering Black people than immigrants and Hispanic people.

These differences between racial groups may be due to higher levels of Black segregation in American cities.⁴ District elections enhance minority representation when minority groups are large and racially segregated

1 <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/2019/09/18/winnowing-large-field-sept/EMOes5ycHYC1OVheWGKwHO/story.html>

2 For more details on the full survey, see surveyofmayors.com.

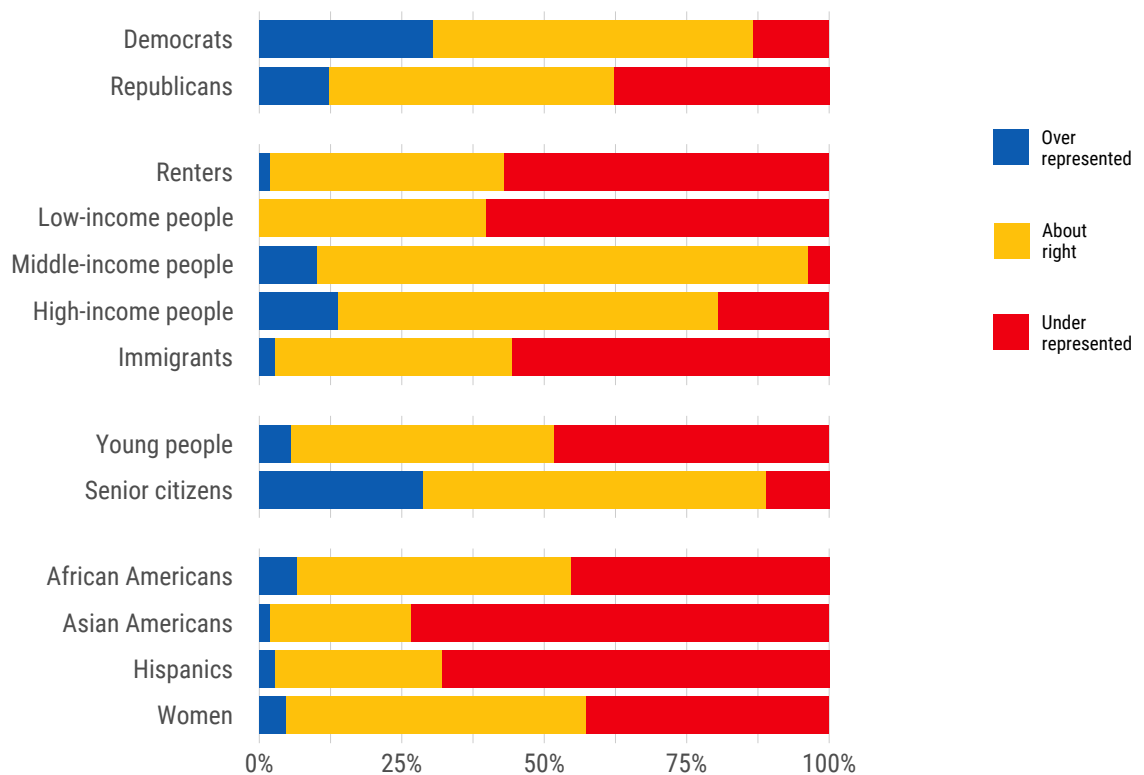
3 For the following analyses, we define at-large cities to be cities where *all* city councilors are elected at large. Hybrid cities—in which some councilors are elected at-large and others by district—are coded as district cities, as are those cities in which all councilors represent particular neighborhood districts.

4 <https://www.governing.com/gov-data/education-data/residential-racial-segregation-metro-areas.html>



(Trounstine and Valdinì 2008). Lower levels of Hispanic and immigrant segregation, then, mean that district elections will not have the same impact on their representation on city councils. Moreover, Hispanic turnout is significantly lower than that of Black people (Fraga 2018). Even when spatially segregated, then, Hispanic residents may not be empowered by district-level contests to the same extent as their Black counterparts. Importantly, these differences do not appear to be driven by demographic differences between cities that hold at-large and district-level contests. Among our mayors' cities, the racial demographics do not differ dramatically between at-large and district cities. Cities with district elections in our sample tend to, on average, have slightly larger Black populations (16 percent Black in district cities, versus 10 percent Black in at-large cities), but the Hispanic populations are virtually identical (17 percent of the population in at-large cities is Hispanic, on average, compared with 19 percent in their counterparts holding district elections). Thus, differences in racial demographics are unlikely to explain mayoral perceptions of the representation of different racial and ethnic groups on their city councils.

Figure 1: Representation on City Councils



One of the more striking differences emerges when we asked mayors about the representation of senior citizens and young people on their city councils. Mayors of cities with district elections were 13 percentage points more likely to believe that senior citizens were overrepresented on their city councils, and twelve percentage points more likely to see young people as underrepresented. Mayors may perceive senior citizens to be better represented, either by getting elected at high rates or by being disproportionately high participators in local politics (Kogan et al. 2018, Einstein et al. 2019).

Mayors of cities with at-large elections were, in contrast, more likely to be worried about the overrepresentation of homeowners. These mayors were 16 percentage points less likely than their counterparts governing cities with district elections to believe that the representation of renters was “just right,” and eight percentage points more



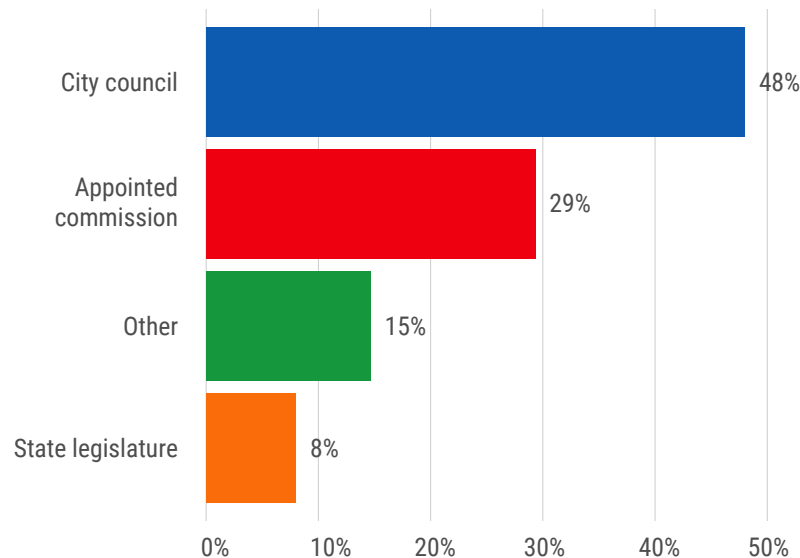
likely to see renters as underrepresented. Renters are often concentrated in specific neighborhoods, which may contribute to depressing their political power in at-large contests.⁵

Finally, turning to partisan bias, mayors of cities with district elections are 20 percentage points more likely to believe that Democrats are overrepresented in their city councils. Those same mayors are 16 percentage points more likely to believe that Republicans, in contrast, are underrepresented. Democrats are, on average, more likely to live in politically homogenous neighborhoods (Rodden 2019); district elections may empower these Democratic neighborhood clusters. In contrast, in at-large systems, the voting power of these neighborhoods is may be more diluted. Additionally, many cities use systems where all at-large candidates run in the same ballot and seats are filled by the order in which they finish. So, if there are five seats to fill, the top five candidates win. In this case, there may be more representation of minority party members because they do not have to defeat all of the candidates of the majority party.

DRAWING NEW DISTRICTS

Thirty percent of the cities in our sample do not draw districts; all of their city councilors are elected at-large. Among the cities that elected city councilors by district, no one strategy for drawing district boundaries dominated. In 48 percent of cities with district elections, the city council draws its own district boundaries. Twenty-nine percent of cities rely on an appointed commission, while another eight percent use state legislatures. Fifteen percent of mayors selected the “other” category; among these mayors, the systems they cited included a county commission, the city clerk, a demographer appointed by the city council, the Secretary of State, and outside consultants. In one case, the city had transformed its system—which had previously held exclusively at-large elections—in response to a lawsuit about minority underrepresentation. In many of these cases, the city council still reviewed and approved the final redistricting plans. City councilors thus appear to have a lot of sway in many cities over what their electorates look like.

Figure 2: Who draws the city council district boundaries in your city?

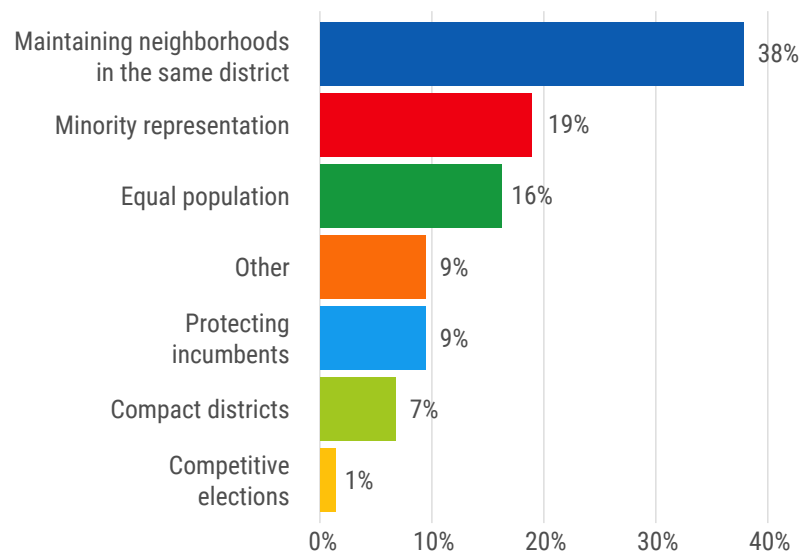


⁵ <https://www.governing.com/topics/health-human-services/gov-segregation-housing.html>,
<https://www.curbed.com/2018/5/24/17390040/rent-discrimination-segregation-neighborhood-fair-housing-act>



Mayors identified a range of top priorities when drawing new districts. Thirty-eight percent of mayors said the top priority was to maintain neighborhoods in the same district or preserve communities of interest. Nineteen percent emphasized the importance of minority representation. Sixteen percent stated that their top goal was to achieve equally populated districts.⁶ Nine percent mentioned that incumbency protection was a top priority. Only seven percent emphasized compactness, and only one mayor said their city prioritized competitive elections. One mayor noted their power in the redistricting process, telling us that their city's top priority was "What's best for me." Another mayor described the process as full of "Random nonsense," reflecting the conflicting priorities among city councilors, who are responsible for redistricting in that city. Overall, a majority of mayors said their city's top priority was to maintain neighborhoods or represent minority groups, goals which political scientists have found to generally improve the quality of representation.

Figure 3: However the council districts are drawn, what is prioritized?



CONCLUSION

Our findings illuminate substantial differences in perceptions of legislative representation between mayors governing at-large cities and their counterparts governing district-level systems. Importantly, though, there is not one type of institutional configuration under which mayors believe the quality of city council representation is consistently better. In other words, mayors of cities of district-level elections do not see better representational outcomes for all social, economic, and racial groups (or vice versa). This result is consistent with academic research suggesting important representational tradeoffs between district-level contests and at-large elections. Our research does, however, suggest that mayors of cities with district-level elections see better representational outcomes for Black people; policymakers hoping to enhance the representation of sizable and highly segregated minority groups should look to district-level elections as important and effective tools.

⁶ Several other mayors stated that equally populated districts was a goal alongside something else. Since districts in every city need to come close to equal population, we consider their top priority to be the other choices they gave. For the sixteen percent of mayors in the figure who listed "equal population" as their top goal, this was the only priority that they specified.



This report also provides grounds for both optimism and pessimism about legislative redistricting in cities. More positively, the redistricting process appears substantially less partisan and divisive at the city level compared to the state and national levels. While national partisan polarization has filtered down in many ways to the local level, redistricting appears to be driven primarily by compactness and keeping neighborhoods together—goals that are largely apolitical and foster better representative government. In a more concerning trend, though, city redistricting is controlled by elected officials in many places. This may potentially lead the process to be governed by strategic politicians’ (or parties’) electoral self-interest. While these somewhat more individually-oriented concerns did not emerge in our survey data, it is hard to imagine mayors admitting that their redistricting processes are driven primarily by incumbents’ electoral calculus. Given the strong role that elected officials play in driving city-level districting in many communities, local governments should be highly attentive to the possibility that individual electoral self-interest may contribute to district drawing that does not enhance community representation. When possible, cities should move to make redistricting apolitical through independent commissions. Doing so allows representation—and not reelection—to dominate conversations about district boundaries.

To learn more about mayoral priorities related to housing, climate change, and other key issues visit www.surveyofmayors.com

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Boston University Initiative on Cities

The Initiative on Cities at Boston University seeks to research, promote, and advance the adaptive urban leadership strategies and policies necessary to support cities as dynamic centers of inclusive economic growth and sustainable development in the 21st century. Founded by a proven urban leader, the late Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, and a highly regarded academic, Professor Graham Wilson, the Initiative serves as a bridge between world-class academic research and the real-life practice of city governance.

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