

INFORMATIONAL BRIEF

Hybrid City Council Election Systems

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Core Question

This brief explores different types of election systems (district, at-large, mixed), the prevalence of hybrid/mixed city councils and their accompanying pros and cons, effects of multimember districts, and ends with an exploration of nested regional seats.

Summary of Topline Findings

The limited amount of research on hybrid city councils suggests a hybrid council made up of mostly district seats will provide as much representation as we may expect from a purely district-based system and may have the added benefit of providing greater gender diversity via its inclusion of at-large seats. Most current hybrid city councils are majority district-based arrangements and as such the force of arguments against purely at-large systems may be mitigated. With precedent in the California state constitution, the nesting of state Senate, Assembly, and Board of Equalization seats may provide a guide for the Los Angeles city council in designing a nested city council system.

Background & Information

Across the US, and particularly in California, many cities have transitioned away from at-large elections toward district-based elections on the basis of greater representation and influence for racial/ethnic groups and neighborhoods. California cities' transition from at-large to district-based elections began in the 1920s and dramatically accelerated after the implementation of the 2002 CA Voting Rights Act. To this day, many cities continue to transition and adopt district-based systems. While many cities retain at-large electoral systems, several of the largest cities and many smaller cities, are structured through a hybrid of at-large and district-based seats. Cities began to abandon at-large systems in favor of district-based or hybrid systems mainly since the 1965 Voting Rights Act (MacManus 1999). At the present, several American cities elect their city council through a mixture of at-large and district-based seats, see Table 1.

Table 1. US City Councils using Hybrid of District and At-Large Elections.

Population (Approximate)	City	District Seats	At-Large Seats
2.3 million	Houston, TX	11	5
2 million	Metro Council of Nashville & Davidson County	35	5
1.57 million	Philadelphia, PA	10	7
955k	Jacksonville, FL	14	5
907k	Columbus, OH	Currently 7 at-large seats, but will transition to 9 at-large general election seats to be first voted on by-district in a primary election*	
880k	Charlotte, NC	7	4
734k	Seattle, WA	7	2
713k	Washington, D.C.	8	5
711k	Denver, CO	11	2
655k	Boston, MA	9	4
641k	Portland, OR	Currently 4 at-large seats, but in 2024 will expand to 3 ranked-choice seats per each of 4 districts	
633k	Detroit, MI	7	2
508k	Kansas City, MO	6	6
496k	Atlanta, GA	13	3
470k	Raleigh, NC	5	2
434k	Oakland, CA	7	1
300k	Greensboro, NC	5	3
377k	New Orleans, LA	5	2
285k	Durham, NC	3	3
210k	Rochester, NY	4	5
112k	Peoria, IL	5	5
53k	Wheaton, IL	4	2

Note: Table created by Francisco Jasso, PhD. Cities that describe their structure as hybrid in reference to having their mayor elected at-large are excluded.

** This election system is also referred to as a "from district" system.*

Where are Hybrid Election Systems Situated in the Literature?

There is very little literature on the prevalence or dynamics of hybrid city councils despite many cities across the nation using this hybrid structure. Research on this seems to be limited to early research from the 1970s-1990s on the emergence of hybrid city council systems post-1965 Voting Rights Act and greater representational outcomes relative to at-large election systems (see MacManus 1990). Research focusing on southern cities in the 1970s found cities adopting hybrid systems produced increases in representation and minority influence (MacManus 1999). In general, hybrid systems were found to yield greater Black & Latino representation than at-large systems (MacManus 1978), certainly if the Black population was smaller than 20% of the city population (Welch 1990).

Apart from a handful of school district studies (Leal, Martinez-Ebers, & Meier 2004; Meier & Rutherford 2014), most research thereafter focuses on the representational benefits from transitioning away from at-large election systems toward district-based systems. In general, the literature finds district-based elections to increase racial/ethnic representation, particularly if the group in question constitutes a large enough share of the city population (Collingwood & Long 2021; Marschall, Ruhil, & Shah 2010; Trounstone & Valdini 2008). Although, modified at-large elections have also been found to yield representational gains akin to district-based elections (Brockington, Donovan, Bowler, & Brischetto 1998).

Analysis of new jurisdictions transitioning to district-based elections post-2002 California Voting Rights Act finds increases in Latino representation (Abott & Magazinnik 2020; Hertz 2023; Levitt & Johnson 2016). Nonetheless, while district-based elections increase racial/ethnic representation, at-large systems increase gender representation (Trounstone & Valdini 2008; *See* Huang, Murray, & Hofer (2018) for a review on the racial and gender trade-offs between at-large and district-based elections).

The dominant critique in the literature against purely at-large systems is racial/ethnic vote dilution and underrepresentation (see Davidson & Korbel, 1981), while the dominant critique against purely district-based elections is the fear and incentive of logrolling and parochialism – privileging their district to the detriment of the city’s general interests (Banfield & Wilson 1963). Burnett & Kogan (2014) challenge this critique leveraging roll call votes from the LA City Council and argue that council members rather practice a norm of conditional deference where they defer to council members on legislation affecting their districts but are very willing to oppose bills from individual members that negatively affect the whole city. This may be the only relevant study that focuses on the LA City Council.

There may be other representational costs to the addition of at-large councilors. Again, with the caveat that most research compares pure district systems to pure at-large ones, at-large city councilors spend less time helping constituents, and are focused more on citywide issues and business concerns compared to district councilors (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; see also Polinard, Wrinkle, Longoria, and Binder 1994). Communities of color also may feel less efficacious and voter engagement may suffer as a consequence of at-large seats (Hajnal and Trounstone 2005; Lindgren 2007; Welch and Bledsoe 1988, 110). At-large seats may also produce councilors of considerably higher socioeconomic status (Welch and Bledsoe 1988), and cause overall levels of campaign spending to increase (Lindgren 2007).

Potential Questions That May Arise

A proposal for a hybrid city council for LA can raise a few questions, namely:

1. Would a hybrid system stand Constitutional scrutiny?
2. How would a hybrid system affect current representation?
3. How would a hybrid city council change behavior between city council members?

There is very little research on hybrid city councils to offer confident answers to these questions. However, a 2016 National League of Cities document on at-large, district-based, and hybrid

election systems suggests hybrid systems would be more likely to stand Constitutional scrutiny provided that most seats were district-based. The document does not provide justification for this expectation but given that the literature's critiques of at-large systems refer to purely at-large systems, their application to majority district-based hybrid systems should be mitigated. A recent report on San Francisco's governance structure additionally explored mixed systems concluding that "While this system has been less studied, the available evidence is that mixed systems provide governing boards with a more balanced policy perspective that accounts for both neighborhood and citywide needs. Mixed systems are not immune from suit under the CVRA, but are likely to be less vulnerable than purely at-large systems."¹ As Table 1 shows, most current hybrid councils are majority district-based arrangements and as such the force of arguments against purely at-large systems may be weaker.

A bit of research on hybrid city councils suggests a hybrid council made up of mostly district seats will provide as much representation as we may expect from a purely district-based system and may have the added benefit of providing greater gender diversity via its inclusion of at-large seats. As such, LA communities worried that an expanding City Council would mean loss of their current representation may be more willing to support an expanded council with at-large seats they could additionally compete for. This of course calls for an LA-specific consideration given the uniqueness of LA and its small council relative to its population.

At-large councilors will provide a citywide focus to policy problems, which may prove beneficial to local policymaking (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Polinard, Wrinkle, Longoria, and Binder 1994). At-large seats would align the constituencies of the mayor and the at-large members of the city council, which may result in greater policy action and success. On the other hand, however, with their constituencies aligned, at-large members may confront powerful incentives to challenge an incumbent mayor for reelection thus reducing the incentive to cooperate on policy. Interviews with key informants in Philadelphia and Seattle suggest little for this proposition, however (see Krebs_mixed_system_interview summaries). Within the council, at-large seats reduce district-based turf battles, and engender less policymaking conflict (Welch and Bledsoe 1988). For less geographically concentrated communities of color, namely Latinos, at-large seats may produce opportunities to gain seats (Trounstine and Valdinini 2008).

On the 3rd question raised, it seems that the only article we can draw from is Burnett & Kogan (2014). We cannot say how council member behavior would change from the addition of at-large seats, but we can expect that a proposal for a hybrid LA City Council with majority district-based seats would not negatively affect the norm of conditional deference and general concern for the city's interests that Burnett & Kogan find.

Effects of Multi-Member State Legislative Districts

At-large city councilors can be thought of as representing a multi-member district (MMDs), the boundaries of which are the city as whole. But at-large elections, whether they are part of a mixed electoral structure or a stand-alone system of representation, are not present just at the city level. In fact, the use of MMDs was quite common at the state level until the 1960s when court

¹ See Heidorn, N., Miller, K. P., Nadon, B., & by TogetherSF, C. (2023). Re-Assessing San Francisco's Government Design.

decisions about their legality under the federal Voting Rights Act motivated state legislatures to adopt single-member districts (SMDs). Today, only nine states use multi-member districts to select the representatives of at least one of their legislative chambers, and only four—Arizona, New Jersey, South Dakota, and Washington—use this format to elect members of both chambers.²

The literature on state politics sheds light on a number of things relevant to the current proposal for a mixed system in LA. For example, scholars have examined whether the incumbent electoral advantage was greater in MMDs relative to SMDs. Cox and Morgenstern (1995) examined 16 years' worth of election data in 40 states and found that while the incumbent advantage grew under both systems, the rate of growth in MMDs was slower than that of SMDs, suggesting a greater incumbency advantage in SMDs. Hirano and Snyder (2009), however, showed that incumbent advantages were substantial in multi-member districts relative to SMDs and that the source of the advantage was officeholder benefits (e.g., committee assignments, leadership positions) and incumbent quality. They also found that the effect of district office holder benefits is greater in more professionalized legislatures, which characterizes the LA city council.

Research on the electoral effects of MMDs on the election of women and minorities to state legislatures suggests that women candidates are advantaged (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1985; King 2002), while minority candidates, especially African American, candidates are not (Bullock and Gaddie 1993; Gerber, Morton, and Rietz 1998). The latter view may be changing, however. In a recent study of state legislative elections in Maryland, Herrnson, Rouse, and Taylor (2020) demonstrate that African American candidates may not be hindered by MMDs in patterns of candidate emergence, or primary and general election vote share. They attribute this break with conventional wisdom to several factors, including a reduction in racial gerrymandering and racial intimidation in more recent election cycles; deracialized campaign strategies on the part of African American candidates; “single shot” voting whereby African American voters select only African American candidates in multi-member contests; and greater willingness on the part of non-black voters to support black candidates. Not surprisingly, partisan polarization also plays a role in reducing the negative effect of candidates' race; since most African American candidates are Democrats, they benefit from increases in polarization among party voters.

In addition to effects associated with descriptive representation, research on MMDs has focused on substantive representation. Larimer (2005) found that higher concentrations of MMDs in upper state legislative chambers negatively affected the generosity of welfare programs, while the concentration of MMDs in lower chambers had no effect on generosity, controlling for minority and female descriptive representation in state legislatures. More generally, evidence suggests that representation in MMDs is more ideologically diverse than in SMDs (Adams 1996; Bertelli and Richardson 2008; Hale 2019).

Another topic is collaboration, or the willingness of representatives from MMDs to cooperate on shared policy and district objectives. According to research by Snyder and Ueda (2007) counties receive more in state intergovernmental transfers when represented by people elected in MMDs compared to SMDs. This is so because members cooperate to deliver district improvements, thus

² See [https://ballotpedia.org/State legislative chambers that use multi-member districts#cite_note-26](https://ballotpedia.org/State_legislative_chambers_that_use_multi-member_districts#cite_note-26), accessed October 22, 2023.

solving the collective action problems expected in these representation schemes. Research by Kirkland (2012) also shows that legislators representing MMDs collaborate effectively.

Scholars also have examined the effects MMDs on civic engagement. According to Herrnson, Taylor, and Curry (2015), MMDs may experience higher levels of voter roll-off or the tendency of voters to submit incomplete ballots. Candidates' campaign donor bases are also more diverse in MMDs than SMD elections (Curry, Herrnson, and Taylor 2013).

Nested Regional Seats - An L.A. Solution to an L.A. Problem?

One difference between district and at-large seats is the geographic constituency that casts votes. At-large seats encompass the entire city jurisdiction while districts encompass a very limited geographic area. We can imagine however the possibility of seats that compromise between the geographic scope of district and at-large seats: regional seats. Regional seats would be larger than individual districts, yet smaller than the city-wide jurisdiction. It is important to note that regional seats are best understood in the presence of districts. In the absence of districts, the concept of regional seats is indistinguishable from districts as they serve the same purpose in relation to at-large seats.

There does not appear to be any research on regional seats as the bulk of the literature regards at-large systems, district systems, and the transition from the former to the latter. An additional, large area of research that is not explored in this brief regards alternative voting formulas such as ranked choice or proportional ranked choice formulas. Table 1 above shows two alternatives to the plurality-winner, single member districts system where at-large elections occur but initiate from districts (Columbus, OH) or have multi member ranked choice district elections (Portland, OR). San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Leandro use a single-member ranked choice voting system and Albany, CA uses a multi-member ranked choice version.³ Fifty-one US jurisdictions including 2 states and 3 counties use ranked choice voting.⁴

A proposal for Los Angeles to have a mixed system of districts and regional (instead of at-large) seats would be a unique configuration not found in other cities of comparable size and likely not practiced in any smaller city either. This would amount to an LA solution to an LA problem: regional seats superimposed over districts. In the case of LA, regional seats may aim to fulfill the purpose of at-large seats in terms of policy focus but would ensure diversity of geographic representation by preventing geographic areas of the city from having a near monopoly on these seats.

The California State Constitution, however, does provide precedent for the use of nesting.⁵ Proposition 11, voter-approved in 2008, added language to the California Constitution in Article 21 ranking state redistricting criteria in order of priority. After the redistricting requirements of

³ See Heidorn, N., Miller, K. P., Nadon, B., & by TogetherSF, C. (2023). Re-Assessing San Francisco's Government Design.

⁴ See FairVote, "Where is Ranked Choice Voting Used?" <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting-information/>, accessed November 22, 2023.

⁵ Other than Article 21 of the California State Constitution, Special Masters appointed by the state Supreme Court in the 1970s and 1990s also nested their districts (see Kogan & McGhee, 2012).

equal population, compliance with the VRA, district compactness, etc., it includes the nesting of state Assembly, Senate, and Board of Equalization districts:

“To the extent practicable, and where this does not conflict with the criteria above, each Senate district shall be comprised of two whole, complete, and adjacent Assembly districts, and each Board of Equalization district shall be comprised of 10 whole, complete, and adjacent Senate districts.”⁶

For the state 2010 redistricting cycle, perfect nesting was not required nor achieved given compliance with higher ranked criteria. Tension can exist between the different ranked criteria and therefore the pursuit of one higher ranked criterion will limit the extent to which a lower ranked criterion is met, hence “to the extent practicable.”⁷ In the case of Los Angeles, there may be a lower chance of tension given the smaller geography of Los Angeles relative to the entire state.

Nonetheless, tension among the criteria was less pronounced than otherwise expected in the state 2010 cycle.⁸ The maps drawn in the 2010 redistricting cycle achieved 3 nested Senate districts in the high 60s percent range, 15 in the 70 percent range, 10 in the 80 percent range, 9 in the 90 percent range, and 3 100% nested seats.⁹ The maps drawn in the 2020 cycle achieved 1 district nested at 52.3%, 3 in the high-60s percent range, 16 in the 70s range, 7 in the 80s range, 12 in the 90s range, and 1 100% nested district.¹⁰

If modeled on the practice of California state redistricting, the California Constitution establishes the legal framework for drawing districts in a nested manner.

⁶ <https://law.justia.com/constitution/california/article-xxi/section-2/>

⁷ See Barabas & Jerit (2004) and Cain & MacDonald (2007).

⁸ See Kogan & McGhee (2012), pages 14-16.

⁹ See State of California Citizens Redistricting Commission Final Report on 2011 Redistricting (2011): https://wedrawthelines.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/64/2011/08/crc_20110815_2final_report.pdf, page 25.

¹⁰ See California Citizens Redistricting Commission. (2021). Report on Final Maps, page 49.

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