

A Look at City Council Size around the Country

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As the Memphis & Shelby County Metropolitan Government Charter Commission discusses the ideal number of members that should sit on the legislative body of the proposed metropolitan government, I thought it would be interesting to study the size of city councils and county commissions around the country.

In this post, I'll focus on city councils of the primary cities of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the nation; my next post will look at their county commissions.

The table below is ordered by metropolitan area, from largest in population to smallest (using 2009 estimates from the US Census Bureau). Only the primary city for each metropolitan area is studied. As is indicated in the far-right column, the percentage of the metropolitan population living in the primary city varies widely – from just 7% in Miami and Riverside (Calif.) to 65% in San Antonio. Memphis is actually one of only four cities in this list where the majority of the metropolitan population lives within the city limits of the primary city.

The population for each city and the number of members on its legislative body (which I will hereafter uniformly refer to as “city council,” regardless of its actual name) are indicated to determine the ratio of resident-per-council seat. Not surprisingly, the largest city councils in the country are in two of the three largest cities: New York and Chicago, with 51 and 50 members, respectively. But the ratios range from one council person for every 255,000 residents in Los Angeles to one for every 11,000 in Providence. At about one council person per 51,000 residents, Memphis is close to the average for these cities, which is one per 65,000.

No two city councils in these cities are alike. For example, in some cities, the mayor is actually a member of the legislative body and not the chief of a separate executive branch. For these cities, I did not include the mayor in the calculation of council members to allow for a clearer comparison.

Some cities still employ the city commission form of government; Portland elects four commissioners to act as heads of various municipal departments. Some cities have at-large seats. For example, New Orleans elects five council people from districts and its council president and vice-president at-large. All of the council seats in Detroit and Seattle are at-large, although Detroit recently voted to end this practice in 2013 and a similar movement is afoot in Seattle. Memphis has a unique take on at-large districts, electing six of its thirteen council members from two “super-districts.” Kansas City has a somewhat similar approach: it elects two members from each of its six large districts. Perhaps the most unique of all city councils was the one in Seattle from 1890-1896, where there was a bicameral council made up of a lower House of Delegates and an upper Board of Aldermen!

Cities with consolidated city-county forms of government typically have very large councils. This is the result of the combination of two legislative bodies into one. My next post will look at the size of the 50 primary cities’ county bodies, if one exists.

		2009	Council	Ratio	At-large	Metro pop
	City	city pop	seats	pop/seat	seats	in city
1	New York	8,363,710	51	163,994	0	44%

2	Los Angeles	3,833,995	15	255,600	0	30%
3	Chicago	2,853,114	50	57,062	0	30%
4	Dallas	1,279,910	14	91,422	0	20%
5	Philadelphia	1,547,297	17	91,017	7	26%
6	Houston	2,242,193	14	160,157	5	38%
7	Miami	413,201	5	82,640	0	7%
8	Washington, DC	591,833	13	45,526	5	11%
9	Atlanta	537,958	15	35,864	3	10%
10	Boston	609,023	13	46,848	4	13%
11	Detroit	912,062	9	101,340	all	21%
12	Phoenix	1,567,924	8	195,991	0	36%
13	San Francisco	815,358	11	74,123	0	19%
14	Riverside	293,761	7	41,966	0	7%
15	Seattle	598,541	9	66,505	all	18%
16	Minneapolis	382,605	13	29,431	0	12%
17	San Diego	1,279,329	8	159,916	0	42%
18	St. Louis city	354,361	28	12,656	0	13%
19	Tampa	332,888	7	47,555	3	12%
20	Baltimore	636,919	15	42,461	1	24%
21	Denver	598,707	13	46,054	2	23%
22	Pittsburgh	312,819	9	34,758	0	13%
23	Portland	557,706	4	139,427	all	25%
24	Cincinnati	332,252	9	36,917	all	15%
25	Sacramento	463,794	8	57,974	0	22%
26	Cleveland	433,748	21	20,655	0	21%
27	Orlando	220,186	6	36,698	0	11%
28	San Antonio	1,351,305	10	135,131	0	65%
29	Kansas City	451,572	12	37,631	0	22%
30	Las Vegas	558,383	6	93,064	0	29%
31	San Jose	948,279	10	94,828	0	52%
32	Columbus	754,885	7	107,841	all	42%
33	Charlotte	687,456	11	62,496	4	39%

34	Indianapolis	798,382	29	27,530	4	46%
35	Austin	757,688	6	126,281	all	44%
36	Virginia Beach	433,746	10	43,375	3	26%
37	Providence	175,255	15	11,684	0	11%
38	Nashville-Davidson	596,462	41	14,548	6	38%
39	Milwaukee	604,477	15	40,298	0	39%
40	Jacksonville	807,815	19	42,517	5	61%
41	Memphis	669,651	13	51,512	0	51%
42	Louisville-Jefferson	557,224	26	21,432	0	44%
43	Richmond	192,913	9	21,435	0	16%
44	Oklahoma City	551,789	8	68,974	0	45%
45	Hartford	124,512	9	13,835	all	10%
46	New Orleans	223,388	7	31,913	2	19%
47	Birmingham	229,424	9	25,492	0	20%
48	Salt Lake City	178,858	7	25,551	0	16%
49	Raleigh	392,552	7	56,079	2	35%
50	Buffalo	276,059	9	30,673	0	25%