COLUMBUS POLICY INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

October 2026

Who Represents Columbus?

Examining City Council Reform, Voter Representation, and the Implications of Issues 8 and 9

Kalitha Williams

Since 2018, Columbus City Council has been structured as a unique residential at-large council. There are 9 council members who must live in one of the geographic districts. Members are elected in city-wide elections which allows any Columbus voter to elect any member to council on the ballot.

Most city councils across the country are one of three structures, at-large, district or hybrid. At-large council members are elected by and represent voters across the city. District council members live in and represent a specific geographical area. Only people who reside in the district can elect them. Hybrid council is a mix of at-large and district council members. Most city councils (68%) are at-large councils, but most of the nation's largest cities are district councils, as shown in Chart 1.[1]

CHART 1: Council Structures of The 20 Largest US Cities

(By population)

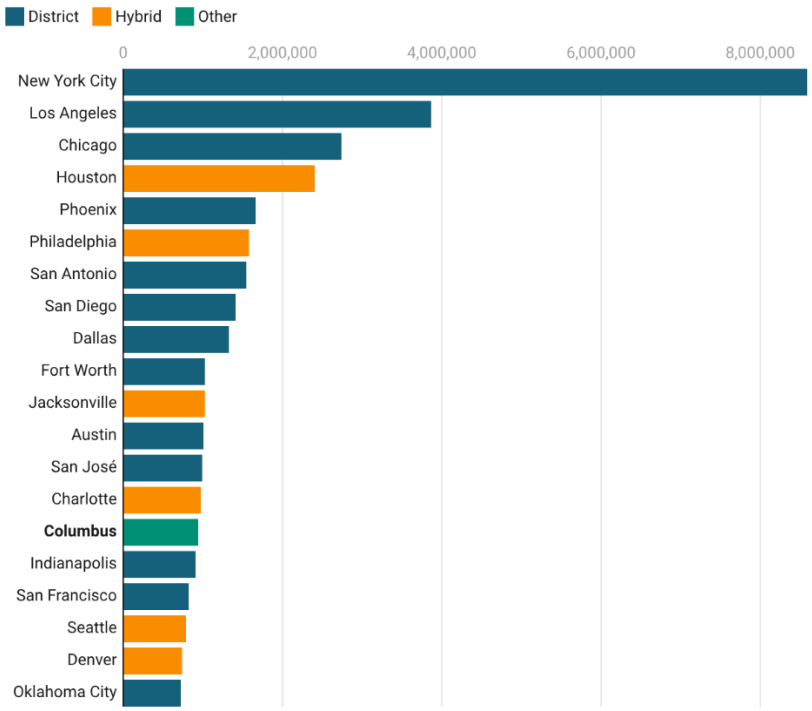

Chart: Columbus Policy Institute • Source: Population from the United States Census Bureau The 15 Most Populous Cities: July 1, 2025 and Census Bureau — Vintage 2025 City and Town Population Estimates. Council Structures analyzed from reviewing each city's current charter • Created with Datawrapper

[1] 2018 Municipal Form of Government Survey, International City/County Management Association. July 2019. https://icma.org/2018-municipal-fog-survey, accessed October 2, 2026.

Questions on who should elect Columbus City Council members have led to two ballot proposals that will be on the November 3, 2026 ballot. Issue 8 is citizen-initiated that will change the current council structure to a district model. Issue 9 is backed by Columbus City Council and will create a hybrid system of 13 council members with 9 district seats and 4 at-large seats. The future of Columbus City Council will be determined by four possible outcomes combinations with specific provisions, as shown in Table 1 .[2, 3]

TABLE 1: Comparing the Possible Voting Outcomes of Columbus Issues 8 & 9

	No on 8, No on 9, Current Structure Remains	Yes on 8, No on 9	No on 8, Yes on 9	Yes on 8, Yes on 9
Number of Council members	9	9	11 – 1/1/2028, 13 – 1/1/2030	11 – 1/1/2028, 13 – 1/1/2030
Number of Council Members Elected By District	0	9	9	9
Number of Council Members Elected At-Large	9	0	2 – 1/1/2028, 4 – 1/1/2030	2 – 1/1/2028, 4 – 1/1/2030
Requirement for New District Maps to be Re-drawn	2031	2031	2027 and 2031	2027 and 2031
Election of Council candidates	Columbus voters may vote for any council candidate on the ballot	Columbus voters may only vote for council candidates in the district in which they live	Columbus voters may vote for any at-large council candidate on the ballot AND only the district candidates for the district in which they live	Columbus voters may vote for any at-large council candidate on the ballot AND only the district candidates for the district in which they live

Table: Columbus Policy Institute • Source: Charter of the City of Columbus and Issue 8 and Issue 9 proposed City Charter Amendment language from Franklin County Board of Elections. Does not include list of all changes. • Created with Datawrapper

Supporters of at-large council models have stated that changing the structure of Columbus City Council could negatively impact the racial representation of its members and obstruct efforts to tackle the city's housing shortage crisis. Despite most Columbus City Council members being people of color for decades, studies have found that district councils are more likely to have representation from people of color than at-large councils and hybrid councils.[4,5] While research has also shown that councils that changed their structure from at-large to district models saw declines in housing production, it was not the case with all housing units, and one study saw an increase in permits for low-income housing.[6,7] There was also evidence that politically weaker communities had more influence on housing development in their neighborhoods when they were represented by district councils.

It is inconclusive if there is any city council model that is best at addressing racial diversity on city council or housing shortages. Analysis on the implementation of any approved city council reforms would be required to determine their impact on these areas.

---

[2] The City of Columbus Charter Section 42-13 states that if there are two questions on the ballot, City Council can vote to determine if they are competing issues. On August 18, 2026, City Council voted to affirm the primary provisions for Issue 9 were complementary to Issue 8. Thus, making the outcomes of voter Yes for Issue 8 & Yes for Issue 9 the same as voting No for Issue 8 & Yes for Issue 9 the same.

[3] Other changes in Issue 9 that are absent in Issue 8 are focused on growing Council from 9 to 13 members. Read the full ballot language for operational changes on quorum, voting minimums and recalls.

[4] "The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Blacks and Hispanics", Susan Welch, Journal of Politics, Volume 52, Number 4. November 1990.

[5] "The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity " Jessica Trounstine and Melody Valdini, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 52, No. 3. July 2008.

[6] "Warding Off Development: Local Control, Housing Supply, and NIMBYs", Evan Masta, The Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University. July 2020

[7] "The Supply-Equity Trade-Off: The Effect of Spatial Representation on the Local Housing Supply," Michael Hankinson and Asya Magazinnik, The Journal of Politics Volume 85, Number 3. May 3, 2023.