COLUMBUS POLICY INSTITUTE

Who Represents Columbus?

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

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Kalitha Williams

Introduction

The outcome of the 2025 Columbus City Council 7th district election intensified conversation and grassroots action on the best structure council to serve citizens. Tiara Ross won her seat on council from opponent Jesse Vogel, with a narrow majority of 50.7% of the citywide vote. Despite losing the race, most voters in the district supported Vogel over Ross, 63% to 37%, respectively.[1,2] Concerns abounded on who should decide which council members are elected and demonstrate that electoral models can benefit one candidate over another.

In the last 20 years there have been citizen-led efforts to reform the council to be better responsive to the needs of the less politically powerful and ensure diverse representation. In 2018, voters passed a charter amendment to change Columbus City Council from an at-large model to a residential at-large model.[3,4]

Discussions on changing the current structure were met with apprehension that changes would impact diverse representation and impede local housing shortage strategies. There are two city-wide ballot initiatives for consideration on the November 2026 election. Each is focused on reforming the city council model.

This report explores the current structure of Columbus City Council and the potential outcomes of Issues 8 and 9 on the November 2026 ballot. This analysis will explain the differences among city council structures using local government research and Columbus' history of council reform, centering on diverse representation, neighborhood accountability, and housing policy. The purpose is not to advance a position on either ballot proposal, but to provide voters with factual information, relevant research, and an understanding of the uncertainties associated with each model.

Council Structures

Most municipal legislative bodies are one of three structures, at-large, district or hybrid.[5] At-large councils are elected city-wide and any elector in the city can vote for any council candidate. Each member represents the entire city. Proponents of this structure believe it

[1] Frankin County Board of Elections, 2025 General Election Official Results by Precinct, https://vote.franklincountyohio.gov/election-info/2025, accessed October 3, 2026.
[2] "Tiara Ross beats Jesse Vogel in citywide Columbus City Council race", Jordan Laird and Anna Lynn Winfrey, Columbus Dispatch. November 5, 2025. https://tinyurl.com/nhjexfsc, accessed October 2, 2026.
[3] Columbus City Council Ordinance 0650-2018, accessed from Columbus City Council Legislative center, October 7, 2026.
[4] Frankin County Board of Elections, 2018 Primary Election Official Results by Precinct. https://vote.franklincountyohio.gov/election-info/2018, accessed October 7, 2026.
[5] "The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Blacks and Hispanics", Susan Welch, Journal of Politics, Volume 52, Number 4. November 1990.

supports a broad approach to addressing issues that impact the entire city. Challenges to the structure could be lack of accountability and responsiveness to specific neighborhoods and higher campaign costs to win a city-wide election. District councils are divided into geographical areas. District councilmembers are required to live in the district they represent and only people who reside in the district can elect them. Supporters believe this model promotes neighborhood focus and accountability and the campaign costs are less expensive. Detractors of this structure believe district council members are too focused on their own area and may not be willing to advance policies that focus on the collective needs of the city. Hybrid councils, typically, have a mix of both at-large and district council members and are focused on increasing the benefits and decreasing the disadvantages of each model.

According to respondents from the International City/County Management Association's most recent survey, 68% of city councils are at-large, 18.4% are district, and 13.6% are a hybrid.[6] However, this pattern does not hold true in the nation's largest cities. Of the 20 US largest cities, 13 are district councils, 6 are hybrid councils and only one, Columbus Ohio, is an at-large council (Chart 1 and Appendix Table A). In fact, 8 of the 10 largest cities has a district council structure.

CHART 1: Council Structures of The 20 Largest US Cities

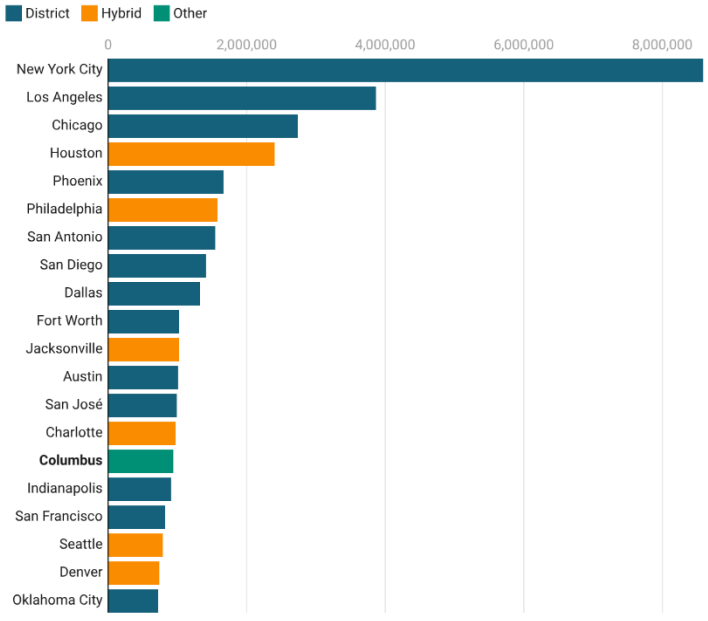

Chart: Columbus Policy Institute • Source: Population from the United States Census Bureau The 15 Most Populous Cities: July 1, 2025 and Census Bureau — Vintage 2025 City and Town Population Estimates. Council Structures analyzed from reviewing each city's current charter • Created with Datawrapper

[6] 2018 Municipal Form of Government Survey, International City/County Management Association. July 2019. https://icma.org/2018-municipal-fog-survey, accessed October 2, 2026.

Columbus City Council Brief History

The town of Columbus was incorporated on February 10, 1816. [7] In 1834, the state legislature instituted a new charter for the city of Columbus and divided the city into three wards with 4 council members representing each ward for total of 12 council members. Over the next 60 years, the number of Columbus City Council members fluctuated between 12 - 20 members.

The Ohio Constitution of 1912 allowed cities to make changes to their own charter without approval from the state legislature.[8] The electors of the City of Columbus voted to create a commission to determine the best structure of government. The new city charter, that was recommended and passed by the voters, created an at-large city council of seven members that serve in 4-year terms.

In the last 10 years, there have been efforts to change the structure of Columbus City Council. Advocates have pointed to various combinations of the following reasons for reform:

- The lack of campaign contribution limits coupled with the expense of running citywide gives the affluent and politically-connected too much influence on elections and access to city resources
- Increasing the voting power of communities of color
- Smaller groups and communities lack the power to hold council members accountable to neighborhood concerns.

In 2016, Represent Columbus, a grassroots organization, led a citizen organized ballot initiative to create a hybrid structure that failed to pass in the August Special election.[9] Afterwards, city leaders created the Columbus Charter Review Commission to examine the structure and make recommendations. In 2018, the grassroots organization, Everyday People for Positive Change put forward proposal that would have created a hybrid council and instituted campaign finance limits. [10] It did not make the ballot, because City Council voted that it violated the single-subject law requirement and the Ohio Supreme Court upheld the vote. Informed from the recommendations from the Charter Review Commission[11], City Council put forward a 2018

[7] History of the City of Columbus, Ohio, Osman Castle Hooper, Memorial Publishing Company, pages 105 – 113. 1920.
[8] History of the City of Columbus, Ohio, Osman Castle Hooper, Memorial Publishing Company, pages 105 – 113. 1920.
[9] "Low Turnout, Negative Campaigning Help Defeat Issue 1", WOSU 89.7. August 3, 2016. https://www.wosu.org/news/2016-08-03/low-turnout-negative-campaigning-help-defeat-issue-1, accessed October 7, 2026.
[10] "Ohio Supreme Court Rejects Activist Attempt To Overhaul Columbus Council", Gabe Rosenberg, WOSU 89.7. April 5, 2018. https://www.wosu.org/news/2018-04-05/ohio-supreme-court-rejects-activist-attempt-to-overhaul-columbus-council, accessed on October 8, 2026.
[11] 2016 Columbus Charter Review Committee Final Report

ballot proposal to voters that would increase council from 7 to 9 members and create residential districts. All council members would be elected by a city-wide vote and must live in established residential districts in which they are running to be elected. The council-approved proposal was passed by voters, and the provisions are in place today.[12]

2026 Ballot Initiatives and their Impact

On July 16, 2026, Our City Our Say, a coalition of residents[13],submitted 23,000 signatures to the Columbus City Clerk to advance a new council reform ballot initiative.[14] The proposal would make Columbus City Council a traditional district council. The number of 9 council members would be the same, but each member could only be elected by voters that reside in their respective geographic district. After a public hearing and reported discussions with Our City Our Say[15], Columbus City Council offered their own proposal. Their plan would change the structure of council to a hybrid model with 4 at-large council members and 9 district council members.[16] On August 25, 2026, Columbus City Council voted to send both proposals to ballot for the November 2026 election. The Franklin County Board of Elections assigned the Our City Our Say ballot initiative as Columbus Issue #8.[17] The Columbus City Council plan was named Columbus Issue #9.[18]

Issues 8 & 9 are primarily focused on answering the question, Who elects a council member? Issue 8 is designed so only voters in a district can decide who will represent them on council. Issue 9 allows voters to elect the council members for their district and elect at-large members to represent the entire city. Both ballot proposals include a provision that the recall procedure for a district council member must start with a petition from residents who live in the district. Other changes in Issue 9 that are absent in Issue 8 are focused on growing Council from 9 to 13 members, including requirements for quorum and voting minimums. The full amendment language provides detail on all provisions.

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[12] Charter of the City of Columbus
[13] Our City Our Say website, https://www.ourcityoursay.com , accessed September 17, 2026.
[14] "Group aiming to reform Columbus council system nets 23,000 signatures", Jordan Laird and Cole Behrens, Columbus Dispatch. July 16, 2026. https://www.aol.com/articles/group-aiming-reform-columbus-council-173159000.html , accessed on October 1, 2026.
[15] "Labor, NAACP leaders weigh in on Columbus City Council overhaul", Jordan Laird, Columbus Dispatch. August 8, 2026. https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/elections/local/2026/08/18/labor-naacp-leaders-join-columbus-council-districts-reform-debate/91306308007, accessed October 1, 2026.
[16] "Two charter amendments overhauling Columbus City Council head to voters", Jordan Laird, Columbus Dispatch. August 24, 2026. https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/2026/08/24/two-columbus-city-council-reform-amendments-headed-to-november-ballot/91389533007 , accessed on October 1, 2026.
[17] Franklin County Board Of Elections, https://vote.franklincountyohio.gov/getmedia/a7a2dd78-e53f-4e74-933a-0ba0de9aaa4c/8-Full-OCOS-Charter-Amendment, accessed October 1, 2026
[18] Franklin County Board of Elections, https://vote.franklincountyohio.gov/getmedia/6ea104b7-9ca4-4f85-8712-40ca51d2d4e9/9-Full-Charter-Amendment-No-2, accessed October 1, 2026

The future of Columbus City Council will be determined by the prevailing votes for each ballot issue. There are four possible combinations:

- A) No on Issue 8; No on Issue 9,
- B) Yes on Issue 8; No on Issue 9,
- C) No on Issue 8; Yes on Issue 9, and
- D) Yes on Issue 8; Yes on Issue 9.

If Columbus voters reject both proposals (option A), then the current council structure will remain. If voters pass Issue 8 and vote against issue 9 (option B) then Issue 8 provisions will be implemented. If Issue 8 fails and Issue 9 passes, then Issue 9 requirements will be put in place. But, if voters pass Issue 8 and Issue 9, the outcome will be as if Issue 9 passed alone. When Columbus City Council members voted to send both proposals to the ballot, they decided that the provisions were "complementary" and "non-conflicting".[19] The main election structure changes are shown in Table 1.

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

[19] 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.

Diverse Representation

After the Civil War, several municipalities in Southern states changed their council structures from district to at-large to weaken the voting power of freed slaves.[20] Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the 1986 US Supreme Court ruling in Thornburg v. Gingles (1986) provided the legal foundation to challenge at-large council structures that unlawfully diluted minority voting strength.[21] Earlier this year, *Louisiana v. Callais,* the US Supreme Court set a higher standard on applying the VRA to race in electoral representation that will, likely, impact the representation of communities of color in local, state and federal legislatures.[22]

While not conclusive, most research has shown that councils have more representation of diverse racial groups in a community than at-large councils.[23] A study of over 300 cities with a population of 50,000 or more with at least a 5% Black or Latino population, found differences for racial representation across different council structures. It found that Blacks residents were more likely to be represented in district councils than at-large or hybrid structures. Latinos were also more likely to be represented on district councils if the communities were geographically concentrated, though at a lower representation level than Blacks. Difference could be attributed to citizenship rates, age distribution, voter turnout, and social and political diversity. Another study of over 7,000 cities found that geographic concentration and group size were the most important factors in electing diverse people to district council elections.[24]

Columbus City Council has included a substantial number of members of color in recent decades.[25] Yet, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund has raised concerns that the election and appointment of council members has weakened the voices of Black voters.[26] Table 2 shows the racial and ethnic diversity of the current Columbus City Council members and the race and ethnic demographics of the districts they represent. In the displayed estimates, no individual racial or ethnic minority category exceeds 50% in any district. However, the table does not

[20] "District vs. At-Large Elections: Democracy Primer Series", Jessica Trounstine, Center for Effective Government, Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago. 2024

[21] "Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act at the Supreme Court" Michael Li, The Brennan Center for Justice – New York University of Law. October 15, 2025. https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/section-2-voting-rights-act-supreme-court, accessed October 1, 2026

[22]" Protecting fair representation for Black voters in Louisiana and safeguarding the Voting Rights Act", NAACP Legal Defense Fund https://www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/louisiana-v-callais/ , accessed October 1, 2026

[23][23] "The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Blacks and Hispanics", Susan Welch, Journal of Politics, Volume 52, Number 4. November 1990.

[24] "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.

[25] Review of Columbus City Council Directories available through the Columbus Metropolitan Library

[26] https://www.naacpldf.org/press-release/ldf-sends-letter-to-columbus-city-council-over-at-large-electoral-method/, accessed October 1, 2026

establish whether the combined non-White population constitutes a majority.[27] Of the three districts with the highest population of Black people, only one of is represented by a Black council member; two districts with majority White populations are represented by Black council members. With reporting from the Columbus Dispatch, that no candidate has won an election from an incumbent in nearly three decades, it is not clear if Columbus' unique at-large model of council is responsible for the large number of people of color serving on council, the power of incumbency, or some other factor. [28]

TABLE 2: Columbus City Council Diversity and District Populations

District	Name	Race of Council Member	% White Alone	% Black Alone	% Asian Alone	% Latino population (any race)
1	Christopher Wyche	Black	59.74%	19.17%	8.95%	7.64%
2	Nancy Day-Achauer	White	70.53%	9.06%	9.93%	8.22%
3	Rob Dorans	White	76.61%	5.78%	9.92%	4.50%
4	Emmanuel Remy	White	36.63%	44.70%	3.71%	11.63%
5	Nick Bankston	Black	44.49%	38.57%	5.91%	6.98%
6	Melissa Green	White	62.78%	17.44%	2.27%	13.27%
7	Tiara Ross	Black	61.80%	26.28%	2.63%	5.62%
8	Lourdes de Padilla	Latina	39.88%	46.95%	1.13%	7.19%
9	Shannon Hardin	Black	35.29%	46.15%	6.51%	6.45%

Table: Columbus Policy Institute • Source: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU'S 2019–2023 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS) FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES. City of Columbus Council District GIS and City of Columbus Corporate Boundary GIS. Non-Hispanic race groups plus Hispanic/Latino ethnicity of any race. Latino residents can identify as any race. Race-only percentages exclude Latino residents and therefore need not total 100. • Created with Datawrapper

[27] Latino is an ethnicity, not a race and can overlap racial groups.

[28] "Columbus voters must ditch rigged council system. The status quo must go", Columbus Dispatch, October 5, 2026. https://tinyurl.com/5hb7crkb , accessed on October 5, 2026.

Housing

Supporters of at-large councils assert they are better suited to address city-wide housing shortages.[29] The reasoning is that district council members are too focused on their own neighborhoods and impede efforts to develop and implement local housing strategies. Columbus is confronting a housing shortage crisis. A regional housing report found that between 2009-2018, only 1 home was built for every 2.5 jobs created in Central Ohio.[30] The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that the Columbus metropolitan area needs over 60,000 affordable housing rental units to meet local demand.[31]

Research has shown this thinking is less straightforward and deserves more analysis. A study reviewed surveys from over 2,500 communities and found those that changed from at-large to district councils had an overall decrease in housing permits. However, Low-Income Housing Tax Credit permits in neighborhoods with low rates of homeownership increased.[32,33] Another study focused on communities in California that reformed from at-large councils to district councils, found a decrease in multifamily housing permits and an unsubstantial decrease in permits for single-family units.[34] It also found that most new developments were unevenly focused in communities of color. Researchers concluded that at-large councils targeted communities that were politically weak for new development, while district councils gave these communities power to prevent projects they did not want. While the outcomes in these studies should not be treated as predictions for Columbus, they do demonstrate that evaluating the best council structures to address housing shortages should include not just total housing production, but also distribution of housing throughout the city and the ability of a residents to shape housing developments in their neighborhoods.

Conclusion

As Columbus voters consider reforming city council government, the arguments that one structure is better at addressing diverse representation and housing policy are unsubstantiated.

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[29] "Columbus' council elections are broken but ward system a bad idea", Mindy Justis, Guest Opinion. Columbus Dispatch. April 7, 2026.

[30] "Finding Home in the Heart of It All", Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio, October 24, 2023

[31] "2024 Gap Ohio Fact Sheet", National Low Income Housing Coalition, https://nlihc.org/gap/state/oh . Accessed October 3, 2026

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

[33]The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit is a federal program used to promote low-income housing by allowing private developers to get a $1 to $1 reduction in their tax liability for developing affordable housing

[34] "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.

Currently, most Columbus City Council members are people of color, but it is unclear whether changing the structure will have a meaningful impact on the racial diversity of its membership. The success of advancing housing strategies should include more than the sheer number of units built across the city. Addressing citywide housing shortages is important, but it should be balanced by a community's ability to advocate for the type of housing that will best meet their needs.

Issues 8 and 9 offer different approaches to reform Columbus City Council centered on council being more responsive to neighborhood concerns and removing barriers to serving as a council member. However, it is uncertain whether either will have an impact on representation of communities of color or addressing housing scarcity. If either proposal passes, further analysis will be necessary to determine their impact in each area.

APPENDIX TABLE A: Council Structure of 20 Largest US Cities

Rank	City	State	Population (2025)	Number of Members	Type	Notes	Council Structure Source
1	New York City	NY	8,584,629	51	District	City is divided into 51 Council districts.	https://council.nyc.gov/districts
2	Los Angeles	CA	3,869,089	15	District	City is divided into 15 Council districts.	https://lacity.gov/government/city-charter-rules-and-codes
3	Chicago	IL	2,731,585	50	District	City is divided into 50 Council districts.	https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/about/council.html
4	Houston	TX	2,397,315	16	Hybrid	11 district seats + 5 at-large seats.	https://library.municode.com/
5	Phoenix	AZ	1,665,481	9*	District	Mayor + 8 district councilmembers.*	https://phoenix.municipal.codes/Charter
6	Philadelphia	PA	1,574,281	17	Hybrid	10 district members + 7 at-large members.	https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/philadelphia/latest/philadelphia
7	San Antonio	TX	1,548,422	11*	District	Mayor + 10 district councilmembers. *	https://library.municode.com
8	San Diego	CA	1,406,106	9	District	City is divided into 9Council districts.	https://www.sandiego.gov/city-clerk/officialdocs/city-charter
9	Dallas[1]	TX	1,329,491	15	District	14 district members + Place 15, the mayor.	https://dallascityhall.com/departments/government-affairs/Charter-Review/DCH%20Documents/Dallas%20City%20Charter.pdf
10	Fort Worth	TX	1,028,117	11*	District	Mayor + 10 district councilmembers.*	https://www.fortworthtexas.gov/government/elected-officials
11	Jacksonville	FL	1,017,689	19	Hybrid	14 district members + 5 at-large members.	https://library.municode.com/
12	Austin	TX	1,002,632	11*	District	Mayor + 10 district councilmembers.	https://library.municode.com/
13	San José	CA	989,814	11*	District	Mayor + 10 district councilmembers. *	https://www.sanjoseca.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/130512/6
14	Charlotte	NC	964,784	11	Hybrid	7 district seats + 4 at-large seats.	https://library.municode.com/
15	Columbus	OH	938,396	9	Other	Members must live in residential districts, but all city voters elect all nine members citywide.	https://library.municode.com/
16	Indianapolis	IN	901,116	25	District	Consolidated city-county government. 25 councilors represent geographic districts.	https://library.municode.com/
17	San Francisco	CA	826,079	11	District	Consolidated city-county government. 11 supervisors elected from supervisorial districts.	https://library.municode.com/
18	Seattle	WA	784,777	9	Hybrid	7 district seats + 2 at-large seats.	https://library.municode.com/
19	Denver	CO	740,613	13	Hybrid	11 district seats + 2 at-large seats. Denver is a consolidated city-county	https://library.municode.com/
20	Oklahoma City	OK	719,849	9*	District	Mayor + 8 ward councilmembers.*	https://library.municode.com/

Table: 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 • Created with Datawrapper

Data Sources, Methodology, and Limitations

Data Sources. District demographic and socioeconomic statistics were developed using the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019–2023 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates, 2020 Decennial Census geographic and population data, and the official Columbus City Council residential district boundaries approved by Columbus City Council in December 2021. The City

of Columbus boundaries include Delaware, Fairfield and Franklin counties. The analysis incorporates Census data for the same portions of Columbus located in Franklin, Delaware, and Fairfield counties.

Geographic Methodology. Because the Census Bureau does not publish ACS estimates directly for Columbus City Council residential districts, district-level statistics were constructed by geographically allocating Census block-group estimates to the nine Council districts. The allocation methodology uses 2020 Census block geography and population-based fractional weights to estimate the portion of each block group's population attributable to each district. District estimates were calculated by aggregating the allocated values across the three counties. Percentages were calculated from the corresponding estimated numerators and denominators.

Modeling and Statistical Limitations. The resulting statistics are estimates rather than exact counts of district residents or households. ACS estimates are subject to sampling error, and allocating block-group data to Council district boundaries introduces additional geographic modeling uncertainty. Population-based weights may be less precise for characteristics measured at the household, family, housing-unit, or worker level. The analysis assumes that the relevant characteristics are distributed within each block group in a manner reasonably approximated by the allocation weights; actual distributions may differ. ACS margins of error do not fully capture this additional geographic allocation uncertainty. Consequently, small differences between districts should not be interpreted as statistically meaningful without further testing.

Geographic and Temporal Scope. The analysis applies the Council district boundaries approved in December 2021 to ACS estimates collected over the 2019–2023 period. It provides a consistent geographic framework for comparing districts but does not represent an exact population count for any single year. The Council districts are residential districts, not separate voting wards.

Interpretation. The district estimates are intended to support descriptive comparisons, public policy research, and community profiles. Findings should be interpreted considering the statistical and geographic limitations described above. The data should not be used to make claims of statistically significant differences without additional analysis.