

THE
PEW
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Philadelphia
Research
Initiative

CITY COUNCILS IN PHILADELPHIA AND OTHER MAJOR CITIES:

Who Holds Office, How Long They Serve, and How Much It All Costs

February 2, 2011

KEY FINDINGS

The 17 current members of Philadelphia City Council have served longer, on average, than their peers in 14 other big cities, and they comprise Philadelphia's longest-tenured council in at least the past six decades.

At 15.5 years, Philadelphia's average council tenure at the end of 2010 was approached only by Baltimore and Chicago at roughly 13 years each. In Philadelphia, first-term members held only 18 percent of the seats; they held more than a third in most of the other cities studied. Council President Anna Verna has been in office 35 years, longer than any other Philadelphia City Council member since at least 1920, and two other members have served for more than 30 years.

Longevity, which can be both a positive and a negative force in government, is one of a number of measurable characteristics of city councils that The Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative examined in the nation's 10 most populous cities plus five other large cities chosen because of their similarity and/or proximity to Philadelphia. They are Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, San Antonio, San Diego, San Jose and Washington, in addition to Philadelphia.

This examination was conducted on the heels of a recession that has led many cities to cut their budgets. City councils were heavily involved in those decisions, and councils' own spending levels have come under increased scrutiny. And the cities are about to engage in the once-a-decade council redistricting process that will define the parameters of local political representation for the next 10 years.

The study compares such measurable items as council budgets, staffing, salaries, certain electoral conditions, tenure and representativeness. In examining comparative costs, the report also looks at Denver, Nashville and San Francisco, three other large municipalities that, like Philadelphia, have the added responsibilities that come with being consolidated city/counties. No attempt is made to assess the political effectiveness of any council.

Among the other key findings are these:

- The Los Angeles City Council spends the most per seat, about \$1.7 million, and Pittsburgh the least, about \$226,000. The 15 councils cost local tax-payers a median of about \$607,000 per seat this past year, the biggest part of which was salaries and benefits for staff and members. The Philadelphia City Council's 2011 budget for staff salaries, employee benefits and operations was roughly \$1.1 million per seat, sixth highest among the cities. On a per-resident basis, Washington, which functions as a city, county and state, spent the most on its council, \$32.41, while Phoenix spent the least, \$2.10. Philadelphia has one council employee (including members) for every 7,900 city residents compared with 1 for 13,500 across all the cities studied.
- Detroit's council consumes 1.01 percent of city general-fund spending, the largest among the cities studied. New York's 0.10 percent is the lowest. Across all 15 cities, the median is 0.46 percent of total general-fund spending. That share changed little through the recession (fiscal 2008 to 2011) for many of the cities including Philadelphia, which is at 0.50 percent. After inflation, seven of the councils reduced their own budgets during the period, led by Phoenix's 33 percent cut, while seven recorded increases.
- Los Angeles has the highest average salaries for council members, \$178,789, and San Antonio has the lowest, a maximum of only \$1,400 per member. The average council salary in Philadelphia is \$121,107, fourth-highest out of the 15 councils studied.
- The size of city councils ranges from 51 seats in New York and 50 in Chicago, to 17 in Philadelphia, to just eight seats in San Diego. Relative to local populations, Los Angeles has the smallest council, with just one seat for every 255,500 residents. Pittsburgh has the biggest, one seat per 34,600 residents. Philadelphia's 91,000 residents per seat is at the middle of the pack.
- As for historically under-represented groups, most of the cities have about the same percentage of blacks in council as in their general populations; in Philadelphia, blacks make up 43 percent of the population and 41 percent of the council. Philadelphia has the second-highest proportion of women in council, at 41 percent. Dallas has the highest, 47 percent, while Los Angeles is lowest at 13 percent. Hispanics and Asians have smaller shares of council seats compared to populations in most of the cities.
- Democrats dominate councils in the six cities that have party-based voting. The other nine cities have non-partisan elections.
- Philadelphia City Council has the most weeks during which no hearings or sessions appear on its official calendar—12 weeks during a typical summer—although many members continue to work during that period. In contrast, Houston, officially a part-time panel, schedules some type of council business every week of the year, although often only partial days.
- Only three councils—Philadelphia, Detroit and Los Angeles—provide a city-owned car to each member. Most other councils give an auto allowance or reimbursement instead.
- Most of the councils, including Philadelphia, post videos of council meetings online as well as searchable databases of legislation. A majority do not post members' personal financial disclosure statements or lobbying records. Philadelphia plans to start doing the latter in 2011.

Overall compared to other city councils, Philadelphia's 17 members on average have held their positions longer and are less likely to be first-termers. They are comparatively well-paid and well-staffed, and they have more unscheduled time in the summer. They are more likely to be women. More of them use a city-owned car. And they are among the few council members who must quit their terms early to run for another elective office.

All of the cities are different in fundamental ways, as are their governments. Several are city/counties, and Washington is a city, county and state. Four of the cities—Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose—have "council-manager" systems, in which council members generally have fewer duties than in the "mayor-council" systems used in the other 11 cities. In some cities, council service is full-time; in others, it is not. These factors account for some of the statistical variations among the councils.

TENURE

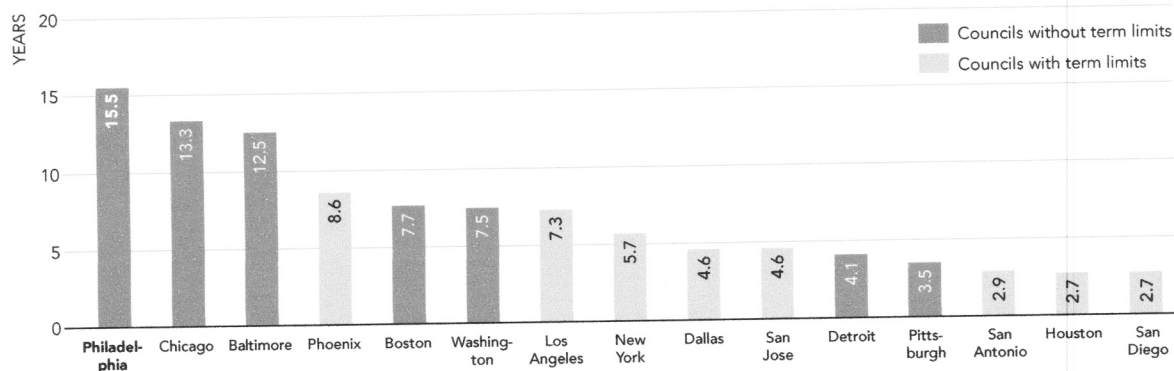
How long council members choose to stay in office—and how long the voters let them stay—are major parts of any city's political culture and civic life.

Among the seven city councils with no term limits, Philadelphia's council had the longest average tenure at the end of 2010, 15.5 years; Pittsburgh's had the shortest at 3.5 years; and the eight-city average was 10.9 years. Among the eight cities with term limits, Phoenix had the longest average at 8.6 years, Houston and San Diego the shortest at 2.7 years, and the overall average was 5.1 years. Among all the cities, term-limited or not, the typical incumbent city council member had 7.9 years of service. See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

AVERAGE YEARS IN OFFICE

At the end of 2010, the average tenure was 7.9 years for members of all 15 councils and 10.9 years for members of the seven councils without term limits (blue bars). Average tenure was 5.1 years in the eight councils with term limits (gray bars); term limits were six years in Houston, 8-12 years in the others. Tenure is calculated as of Dec. 31, 2010 from the date of each member's first election or interim appointment. Tenure includes any earlier terms for "second-time" members who returned to office after a gap in time. Calculations include the mayors of Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose, who are members of their city councils.



SOURCE: Member biographies, election calendars and council officials in each city.

At the close of 2010, three of Philadelphia’s 17 council members had been in office for more than 30 years, representing 18 percent of the body. The only city studied which had more such members is Chicago; there, four of the 50 members were 30-year veterans, representing 8 percent of the council. In the other 13 cities, there was only one other council member (from Baltimore) with at least three decades in office.

Philadelphia had the second-largest imbalance between veterans and newcomers. As Figure 2 shows, its share of first-termers was less than half the median of 37 percent.¹ Only Los Angeles had a lower percentage of first-termers, 2 out of 15 for 13 percent. At the other extreme was San Diego, which has term limits; six of its eight members, 75 percent, were in their first four-year terms. To reach the median, Philadelphia would need seven first-term members, four more than it has now.

For any city, longevity in office can be positive, negative or both. Experienced city council members may be better able to advocate for their constituents and neighborhood interests. Or they may become roadblocks to change. New members, on the other hand, can bring fresh ideas, issues and constituencies into the governing process, although the newcomers may be handicapped by lack of knowledge of the workings of government.

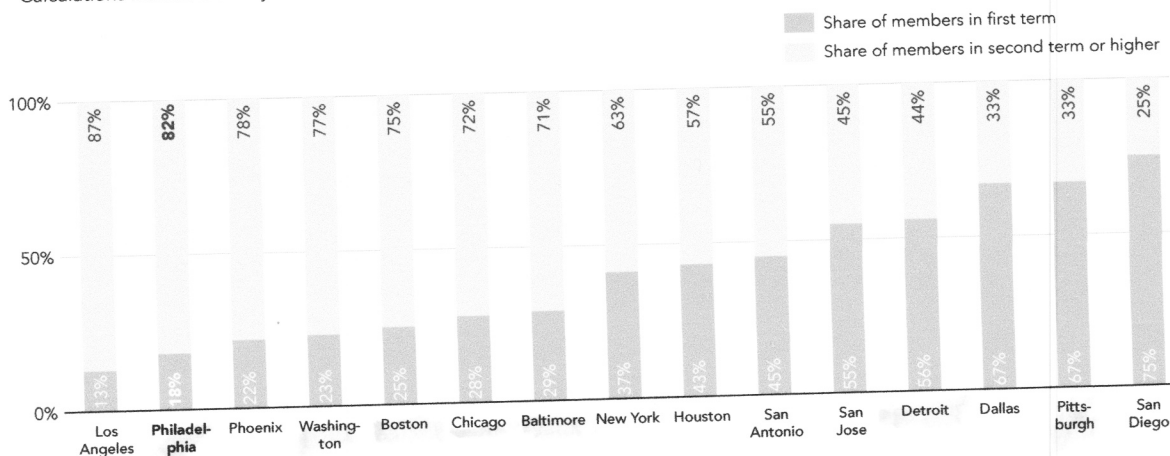
A number of factors affect the desirability of anyone’s retaining a seat long term. Among them are pay, benefits and the ability of council members to work with the mayor to get things done.

One factor for which Philadelphia stands out is its city charter’s ban on any member running for another elective office while serving any part of his or her term. This forces them to step down as soon as they announce a candidacy for another position. Members say this has had the effect of deterring their colleagues from launching such candidacies. Two other cities in the study—

FIGURE 2

VETERANS VS. FIRST-TERMERS

Across all 15 councils, more than a third of members were serving their first terms in office at the end of 2010. First-termers include those appointed to vacancies but do not include “second-time” members who returned to office after a gap in service. Calculations include the mayors of Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose, who are members of their city councils.



SOURCE: Council Web sites, city election boards and calendars, and news clips.

No term limit

Dallas and Phoenix—also impose so-called “resign-to-run” rules. But Phoenix exempts office-holders in the last year of their terms, and both cities have term limits that cap how long a council member may serve.² Philadelphia council members have often criticized the rule. When the issue was put on the ballot in 2007, the voters refused to change it.³

In the other cities without term limits, a factor contributing to shorter stays in office appears to be the councils’ relative lack of power vis-à-vis the mayor and other officials. In Pittsburgh and Boston, for instance, council longevity is relatively low, 3.5 years and 7.7 years respectively, despite the lack of term limits. Observers in those cities say council seats don’t hold much long-term appeal for local politicians. In Pittsburgh’s case, the city operates under state fiscal oversight that curtails the autonomy of its nine-member council and mayor.⁴ In Boston, the 13-member council has been widely perceived as weak compared to five-term Mayor Thomas Menino.⁵

Similar factors, though, can have the opposite effect. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley has dominated the 50-member city council for much of his 24 years in office. Even so, there has been little council turnover; the average tenure is 13.3 years.⁶ Now that Daley has decided not to seek a seventh term, and the balance of power between the council and mayor might change, there has been a rush of candidates for the council. Some local researchers and commentators believe the council is in store for its biggest turnover in years.⁷

Philadelphia has a lot of conditions in place that tend to keep members in office. Its council seats are seen as attractive and influential, especially the district council seats; all three of the city’s 30-year veterans are district members.⁸ The at-large seats, which require candidates to run citywide, hold special appeal for people with strong name recognition; three of the seven current at-large members are sons and namesakes of former mayors.⁹ Over the years, council office budgets have held stable or grown in relation to other departments. Members get relatively high salaries and can have outside jobs if they want. In short, there are good reasons to stay. And most members do, some until death: in the past four decades, six members have died in office.¹⁰

Council President Verna won her first council election in 1975 in South Philadelphia’s Second District, a seat left vacant after her father died in office. According to the official *Journal of City Council*, no other council member since 1920 has served as long as Verna—35 years as of the end of 2010.¹¹ In announcing that she would not seek a tenth four-year term, Verna called her council service “my life’s work.”¹²

Four long-serving council members—including Verna and 31-year veteran Joan Krajewski—are not seeking re-election, meaning there will be at least four new members in 2012.

TERM LIMITS

The voters, of course, have the power to terminate the service of any council member at election time. Beyond that, one way to guarantee turnover and new members is through term limits. Of the 15 cities studied, eight have term limits for their city councils. Houston's limits are the toughest, allowing members no more than three two-year terms, or just six years in all. All other cities allow 8-12 consecutive years. The other cities in this study with term limits are Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, San Antonio, San Diego and San Jose. See Figure 3.

Philadelphia has never had term limits. In early 2010, Councilman W. Wilson Goode, Jr. floated a proposal to limit members to three four-year terms. His stated goal was to increase opportunities for newcomers. "Long tenure, in and of itself, is not important," said Goode, an 11-year member himself.¹³

Goode's proposal never got to a committee vote. At least one early supporter, first-term Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez, changed her mind after concluding that recently-adopted term limits in New York have tended to reduce the number of Hispanic council members there.¹⁴ In fact, voters in some cities with term limits have eased them in recent years. Los Angeles changed its limit on council's four-year terms from two to three in 2006, a decade after imposing them.¹⁵ New York voted to go from two to three terms in 2008, although it has since gone back to two terms.¹⁶ San Antonio in 2008 increased the limit on its two-year terms from two to four.¹⁷ "The mood was that it was too restrictive, and council members needed more time in office," said Christopher Callanen, Assistant to the San Antonio City Council.¹⁸

FIGURE 3

LIMITS ON COUNCIL SERVICE

Eight of the 15 cities studied impose limits on service. In seven of the cities, the limits apply to consecutive years, meaning members must leave when they reach the limit but may run again in the future. One city, San Antonio, imposes a lifetime limit, meaning members may never return after reaching the limit. In New York, the eight-year limit applies only to members elected in November 2010 and thereafter. For members elected before then, the limit is 12 years. All of the cities listed that have no term limits are in the Northeast and Midwest.

6 Years	8 Years	12 Years	No Limits
Houston	Dallas New York San Antonio San Diego San Jose	Los Angeles Phoenix	Baltimore Boston Chicago Detroit Philadelphia Pittsburgh Washington

SOURCE: Council Web sites and officials.

THE PRICE OF REPRESENTATION

There are many ways to view how much city councils spend on themselves. One way is the total budget divided by the number of seats. Philadelphia's \$18.84 million cost of council salaries, employee benefits and general operations in fiscal 2011 amounts to \$1.1 million per seat (although the office budget is not divided up equally among members). At least five other cities also spend more than a million dollars per seat: Los Angeles (\$1.7 million), Washington (\$1.5 million), Detroit (\$1.5 million), San Diego (\$1.3 million) and New York (\$1.3 million).¹⁹ See Figure 4.

Another way to compare costs is in relation to population. Philadelphia's council budget amounts to \$12.17 per resident, more than the per-capita spending by most of the other councils studied; Chicago, for instance, is at \$10.65 and Boston is at \$9.15. Of those examined, Philadelphia trails only Detroit at \$14.53 and Washington at \$32.41, the latter an outlier, at least in part, because it serves as a city, county and state.

FIGURE 4

COUNCIL COSTS

Ranked in relation to the number of seats, the Los Angeles City Council is the most expensive among those studied and Pittsburgh the least expensive. Ranked in relation to residents, Washington is most costly and Phoenix least. Ranked by ratio of employees to residents, Washington has the biggest staff and Phoenix the smallest. All figures are based on departmental budgets and employee benefit costs (health insurance, workers' compensation and pension contributions) in fiscal 2011 for every city except Philadelphia, where the last available benefit costs were from fiscal 2010, and Pittsburgh, where the last available benefit costs and departmental budgets were from fiscal 2009–2010. Number of employees is the authorized full-time equivalent count listed in the council departmental budgets, whether or not those positions were filled and excluding any council-related positions in other departments. Cost figures for Dallas and San Antonio include the mayors' offices, which are reported as part of combined mayor/council budgets.

	Total budget including employee benefits	Budget per council seat	Budget per resident	Number of council employees, including members	Number of residents per council employee, including members
Los Angeles	\$ 25,350,580	\$ 1,690,039	\$ 6.62	108	35,480
Washington	\$ 19,434,000	\$ 1,494,923	\$ 32.41	198	3,029
Detroit	\$ 13,232,197	\$ 1,470,244	\$ 14.53	88	10,351
San Diego	\$ 10,434,551	\$ 1,304,319	\$ 7.99	93	13,989
New York	\$ 64,481,900	\$ 1,264,351	\$ 7.68	624	13,449
Philadelphia	\$ 18,837,029	\$ 1,108,061	\$ 12.17	195	7,935
San Jose	\$ 8,234,591	\$ 823,459	\$ 8.54	62	15,560
Chicago	\$ 30,369,307	\$ 607,386	\$ 10.65	385	7,406
Boston	\$ 5,904,180	\$ 454,168	\$ 9.15	83	7,801
San Antonio	\$ 4,636,458	\$ 421,496	\$ 3.38	88	15,610
Phoenix	\$ 3,344,000	\$ 418,000	\$ 2.10	38	41,938
Houston	\$ 5,473,508	\$ 390,965	\$ 2.42	83	27,204
Baltimore	\$ 5,412,670	\$ 360,845	\$ 8.49	71	8,978
Dallas	\$ 3,672,560	\$ 244,837	\$ 2.83	36	36,098
Pittsburgh	\$ 2,032,453	\$ 225,828	\$ 6.52	33	9,444

SOURCE: Published adopted budgets, budget officials, U.S. Census Bureau 2009 Population Estimates and Chicago's Better Government Association.

Philadelphia's 178 full-time authorized staff positions plus its 17 elected members (195 total) corresponds to one employee for every 7,935 residents. (A number of the staff positions went unfilled for much of 2010.) That ratio of employees to residents is higher than for most of the other cities, including New York, which has 13,449 residents per council employee and Los Angeles, which has 35,480. Philadelphia's per-capita employee count was behind Washington (one per 3,029), Chicago (one per 7,406) and Boston (one per 7,801).²⁰ At the other extreme was Phoenix, with 41,938 residents per employee and a cost of \$2.10 per capita.

One explanation that Philadelphia officials give for their council's relatively large per-capita staff and budget is that the city operates as a consolidated city/county government, meaning that its council members also perform some functions of a county council. (To put it another way, Philadelphians, unlike residents of most of the cities studied, do not have to help pay for an elected county board.) Officials in Washington give a similar explanation for their costs, noting that the District of Columbia city council performs the functions of a state legislature, as well as a county and city council.

But a comparison of six city/counties—Denver, Nashville and San Francisco as well as Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington—shows that having such a governmental structure does not automatically result in high council costs. Denver and Nashville have low council costs. See Figure 5. Among the six city/counties, Philadelphia ranks second behind Washington on cost per seat. It ranks third behind Washington and San Francisco on cost per resident.

In some of the cities, spending on councils has taken a hit as the result of recession-related budget cuts. Seven of the 15 councils reduced their own budgets between fiscal 2008 and 2011, adjusted for inflation, led by Phoenix's 33 percent cut. Seven councils recorded increases, led by Washington's 11 percent hike.²¹ Philadelphia City Council's total 2011 spending of \$18.84 million (including

FIGURE 5

COUNCIL COSTS IN CITY/COUNTY GOVERNMENTS

Among six large city/county governments, Washington's city council is the most expensive in relation to the number of seats, followed by Philadelphia and San Francisco. Ranked in relation to residents, Washington, which also functions as a state, again has the most expensive council, followed by San Francisco and Philadelphia. By any standard, the council in Nashville is the least expensive of the six and is less expensive than any of the cities in this study, regardless of governmental structure. All figures are based on departmental budgets and employee benefit costs (health insurance, workers' compensation and pension contributions) in fiscal 2011. Number of employees is the authorized full-time equivalent count listed in the council departmental budgets, whether or not those positions were filled and excluding any council-related positions in other departments.

	Total budget including employee benefits	Budget per council seat	Budget per resident	Number of council employees, including members	Number of residents per council employee, including members
Washington	\$ 19,434,000	\$ 1,494,923	\$ 32.41	198	3,029
Philadelphia	\$ 18,837,029	\$ 1,108,061	\$12.17	195	7,935
San Francisco	\$ 10,482,231	\$ 952,930	\$ 12.86	62	13,149
Baltimore	\$ 5,412,670	\$ 360,845	\$ 8.49	71	8,978
Denver	\$ 4,167,500	\$ 320,677	\$ 6.83	42	14,446
Nashville	\$ 2,669,800	\$ 43,380	\$ 2.80	48	13,162

SOURCE: Published adopted budgets, budget officials, U.S. Census Bureau 2009 Population Estimates.

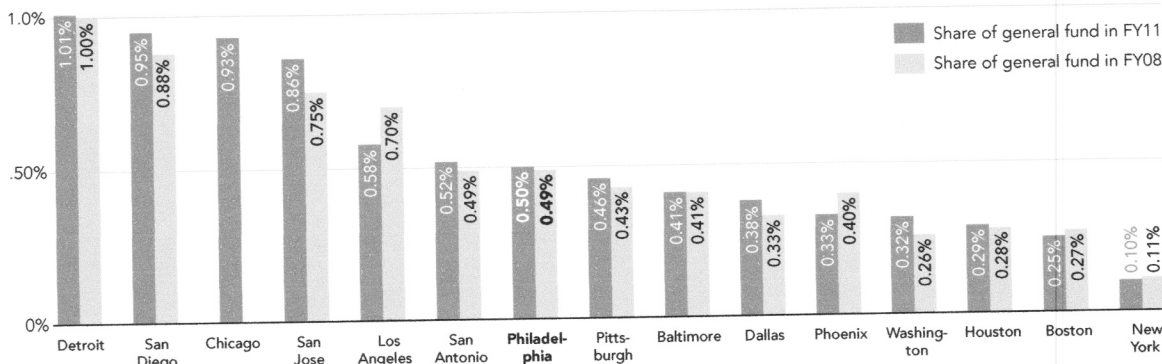
employee benefits) was about 2.6 percent less than in fiscal 2008, adjusted for inflation. The council would have had a modest increase had it not agreed during budget negotiations last spring to trim its own budget by \$1 million.

Are councils consuming a bigger or smaller slice of the local tax pie? Six councils saw their shares of total city spending grow by varying amounts between fiscal 2008 and 2011, led by San Jose and San Diego. Three saw their shares shrink, led by Los Angeles. And five remained essentially unchanged, including Philadelphia, which consumed 0.49 percent of the city general fund in 2008 and 0.50 percent in 2011. The Detroit City Council has the biggest proportion (1.01 percent) of city spending in 2011, and New York City Council the smallest (0.10 percent). The median proportion of city spending is 0.46 percent.²² See Figure 6.

FIGURE 6

COUNCIL SHARE OF CITY SPENDING

The 15 councils in this study consumed a median of 0.46 percent of their cities' general fund budgets for their own salaries, employee benefits and operations. The median share stayed essentially flat through the recession from fiscal 2008 to fiscal 2011. All figures are based on departmental budgets and employee benefit costs (health insurance, workers' compensation and pension contributions) in fiscal 2011 for every city except Philadelphia, where the last available benefit costs were from fiscal 2010, and Pittsburgh, where the last available benefit costs and departmental budgets were from fiscal 2009–2010. Chicago data for 2008 were unavailable. Cost figures for Dallas and San Antonio include the mayors' offices, which are reported as part of combined mayor/council budgets.



SOURCE: Published adopted budgets and budget officials in each city.

SALARIES

The most visible single cost item is the salary of council members. Philadelphia members' average salary of \$121,107 this year is fourth-highest among the councils studied. Los Angeles pays the highest average salary at \$178,789, and San Antonio the lowest at just \$1,400.²³ See Figure 7.

The pay differences reflect a wide variety of conditions, rules and histories in the various cities, and the pay scales only roughly track with cost of living. For example, of the cities examined, New York and San Jose rank third and sixth in salary (\$121,725 and \$89,710, respectively) but first and second in cost of living.²⁴ Likewise, the salaries of council members officially listed as "full-time" generally are higher than those of members officially listed as "part-time," though not always. For example, Washington's "part-time" members have the second-highest average salary (\$130,538). In many of the cities, the official designations of "full-time" and "part-time" have become irrelevant for council members.

The impact of outside income on pay levels is hard to discern. Only two of the 15 cities bar members from supplementing their city pay, and one of them is Los Angeles, which has the highest salaries. The older, bigger cities with a "mayor-council" form of government—such as Philadelphia, New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago—tend to have higher salaries along with other costs.

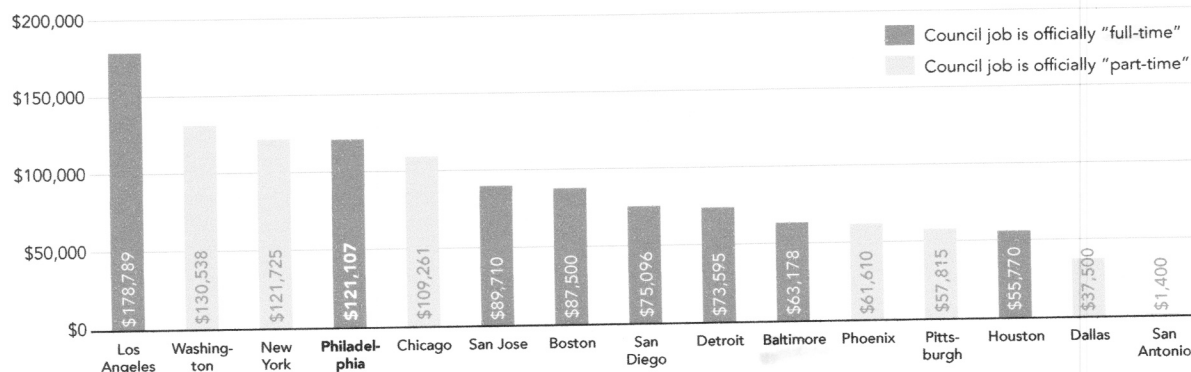
In 2009, after a bruising city budget battle in Philadelphia, council members received a mandated 5.13 percent cost-of-living raise but most of them donated part or all of it back to the city or to charities.²⁵

In most of the cities studied, council members accrue time toward pension benefits. Alone among the cities, Philadelphia allows council members to participate in a deferred pension payment plan, known in Philadelphia as the deferred retirement option plan, or DROP. The program has become controversial, particularly because it has allowed re-elected officials to retire for a day, collect a lump-sum payment from the city pension fund and then remain in office.

FIGURE 7

COUNCIL MEMBERS' SALARIES

The average salaries listed here are based on each member's authorized base salary, plus additions for committee or leadership positions, in the last fiscal year available. The amounts exclude any furloughs, donated pay, auto stipends or outside income. Salaries for the elected mayors of Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose are not included. While they are council members, they have distinct status and a different set of responsibilities than other council members.



SOURCE: Published adopted budgets, budget officials and New York Citizens Union.

DISTRICTS VS. AT LARGE

Councils vary widely in size. New York's has 51 seats, Philadelphia's 17 and San Diego's just eight. Relative to local populations, Los Angeles has the smallest council, with just one seat for every 255,500 residents. Pittsburgh has the biggest, one seat per 34,600 residents. Philadelphia's one seat per 91,000 residents is at the middle of the pack.

The cities studied in this report also vary in the way they elect council members. Some elect members by district. Some elect members at large, meaning citywide. And some use a mix.

In theory, district council members tend to focus on the needs of the neighborhoods and the individuals they represent, while at-large members tend to look out for the city as a whole. Six cities elect all members by district, one elects all members at large, and eight, including Philadelphia, have a mix. See Figure 8. Five of the cities elect the council president at large, and in four of them the mayor is a member of council, the only at-large member.

From the voters' perspective, the system of election determines the number of candidates he or she gets to select. Among the 15 cities, Philadelphia voters have one of the highest number of choices at six, one vote for a district council member plus five votes for at-large members in the general election.²⁶ Only Detroit has a higher number, with all nine seats chosen citywide, although its voters

FIGURE 8

SIZE OF CITY COUNCILS

Based strictly on the number of seats, New York has the biggest city council with 51 members and San Diego the smallest with eight. Relative to city population, Los Angeles has the smallest council and Pittsburgh the biggest. The membership numbers include the mayors in Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose, where they are also at-large council members. In early 2011, Houston began a process of increasing its district seats from 9 to 11.

	At-large members	District members	Total	Population	Population per council seat
Los Angeles	0	15	15	3,831,868	255,458
Phoenix	1	8	9	1,593,659	177,073
New York	0	51	51	8,391,881	164,547
San Diego	0	8	8	1,306,300	163,288
Houston	5	9	14	2,257,926	161,280
San Antonio	1	10	11	1,373,668	124,879
Detroit	9	0	9	910,921	101,213
Philadelphia	7	10	17	1,547,297	91,017
San Jose	1	10	11	964,695	87,700
Dallas	1	14	15	1,299,542	86,636
Chicago	0	50	50	2,851,268	57,025
Boston	4	9	13	645,169	49,628
Washington	5	8	13	599,657	46,127
Baltimore	1	14	15	637,418	42,495
Pittsburgh	0	9	9	311,647	34,627

SOURCE: Council offices and U.S. Census Bureau 2009 Population Estimates.

have approved a shift to district-based representation in 2013.²⁷ Washington and Houston also give voters six choices each.²⁸ Most cities in the study give each voter just one or two choices: a district seat and sometimes one at-large position.

Each council's configuration and powers are defined by its city charter. Philadelphia's current charter, written in 1951, gives Philadelphia a "mayor-council" form of government with a chief executive in charge of policy and most operations, and a council with oversight and approval powers. Ten other cities in the study have a mayor-council system like Philadelphia and four have a "council-manager" system in which the elected mayor is also a council member and a hired city manager runs city operations. Those four are Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose.

REPRESENTATIVENESS

Another way to look at city councils is how representative they are of population blocs that have been underrepresented historically.

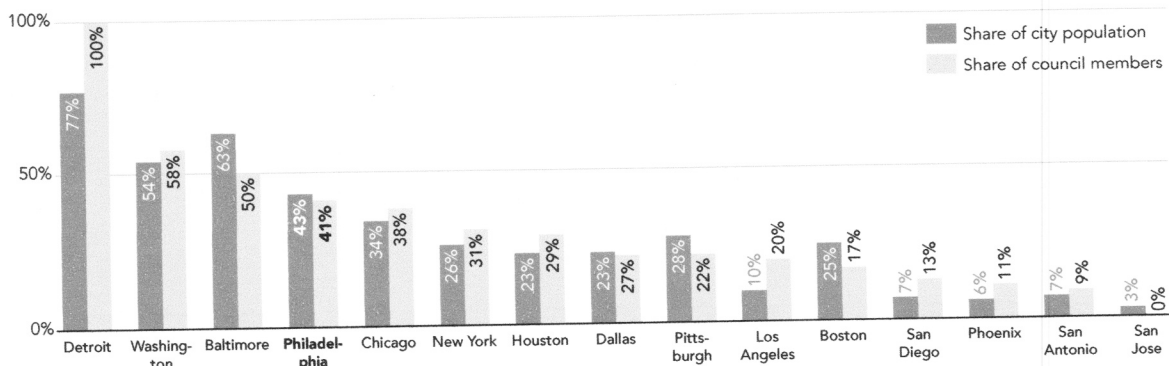
One such group that generally does well in the councils studied is African Americans. See Figure 9. In Philadelphia, for instance, where they occupy 43 percent of the population, they occupy 41 percent of the council seats, 7 out of 17.

In all 15 cities, the share of African Americans on city council effectively meets or exceeds the percentage of African Americans in the population. This assessment is based on 2009 population surveys by the U.S. Census Bureau and on council rosters as of the end of 2010. Only San Jose, where African Americans are 3 percent of the population, has a council with no blacks. Detroit's population is 77 percent black and its city council, in which every member is elected at large, is 100 percent black, showing that an at-large voting system tends to favor a city's majority group.

FIGURE 9

AFRICAN AMERICAN REPRESENTATION

At the end of 2010, in all of the 15 cities studied, the percentage of African Americans in city councils met or exceeded their proportion of the citywide population. Calculations were based on filled seats; Baltimore, Boston and Chicago had vacant seats. The membership numbers include the mayors in Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose, where they are also council members.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau 2009 American Community Survey and council rosters in each city as of Dec. 31, 2010.

Other groups are not as well represented. Hispanics, the fastest-growing ethnic group in Philadelphia and many other cities, have exceeded their citywide proportion only in San Antonio, where they are 62 percent of the population and have 73 percent of council seats. See Figure 10. Hispanics are most underrepresented in Phoenix, where they account for 43 percent of the population but only 11 percent of the council seats. Philadelphia's population is 12 percent Hispanic, and its council is 6 percent Hispanic—one seat held by Quiñones-Sánchez. One commonly-cited reason for the group's general underrepresentation in elective office is that many Hispanics are non-citizens or undocumented residents and therefore ineligible to vote. Many of the Hispanics on councils in the 15 cities got there by winning district seats rather than being elected at large.

Asians represent less than 10 percent of most cities' population and hold seats in only a third of the councils. In Philadelphia, Asians represent about 6 percent of the population but hold no seats in council. Asians are most underrepresented in Los Angeles, where they are 11 percent of the population but have no members in council. In San Jose, however, they represent 33 percent of the population and have 27 percent of the seats.

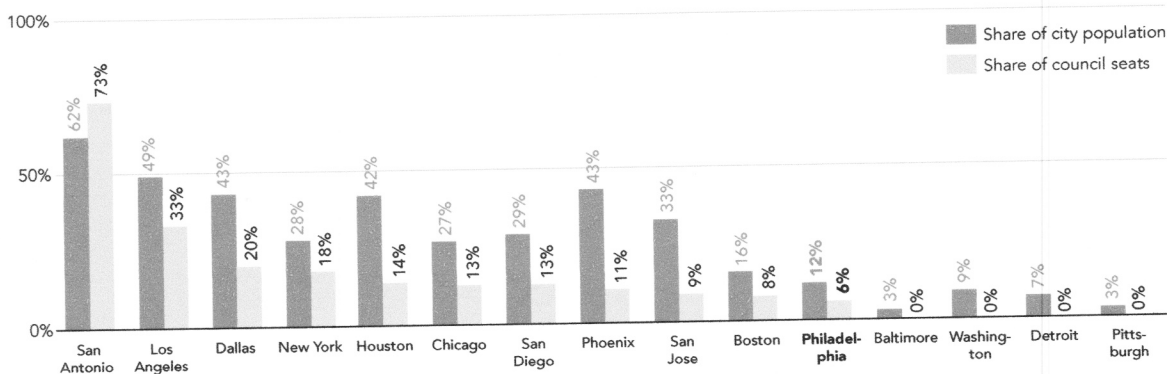
Women held at least two seats in every council at the end of 2010. But only one city, Dallas, came close to giving women proportional representation; 47 percent of council members were women compared to 48 percent of the population. In Philadelphia, where 53 percent of the population is female, 41 percent of council members were women. The city with the fewest women members in proportion to population was Los Angeles (50 percent and 13 percent). See Figure 11.

As for sexual orientation, nine of the cities have at least one openly gay or lesbian member. San Diego's city council has the highest share at 25 percent (2 of 8 members). Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Phoenix and Pittsburgh have one openly gay or lesbian member each. Washington has two and New York four.²⁹

FIGURE 10

HISPANIC REPRESENTATION

At the end of 2010, Hispanics held seats in 11 of the 15 councils studied but were underrepresented in all but one of them, relative to population. Their strongest showing was in San Antonio. Calculations were based on filled seats; Baltimore, Boston and Chicago had vacant seats. The membership numbers include the mayors in Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose, where they are also council members.

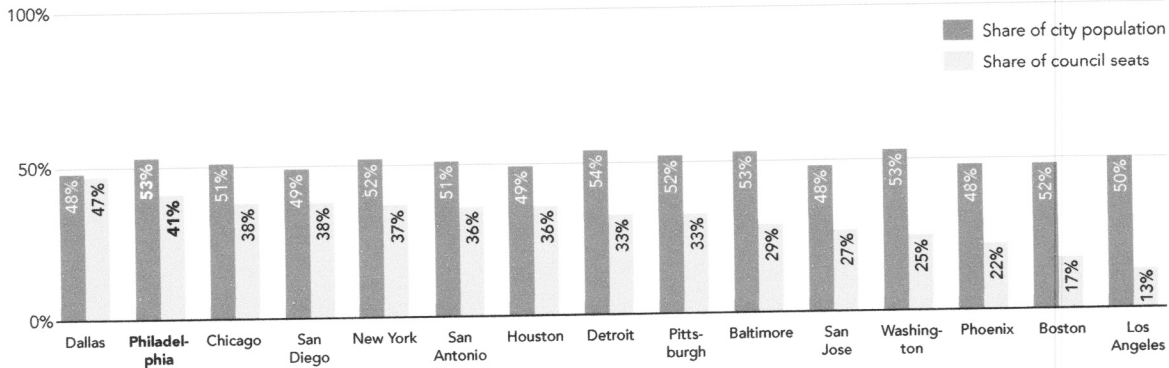


SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau 2009 American Community Survey and council rosters in each city as of Dec. 31, 2010.

FIGURE 11

WOMEN REPRESENTATION

At the end of 2010, women held at least two seats in every council studied but matched their share of the citywide population only in Dallas. Calculations were based on filled seats; Baltimore, Boston and Chicago had vacant seats. The membership numbers include the mayors in Dallas, Phoenix, San Antonio and San Jose, where they are also council members.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau 2009 American Community Survey and council rosters in each city as of Dec. 31, 2010.

PARTY BALANCE

In the six cities that hold partisan elections, Democrats occupy most or all of the council seats. In addition to Philadelphia, the cities are Baltimore, Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh and Washington. To ensure some representation for people who are not Democrats, two of the cities—Philadelphia and Washington—set aside two council seats for other parties.

As a result, the party balance in the councils of those two cities is closer to the citywide balance of registered voters. In Philadelphia, 79 percent of voters and 82 percent of council members are Democrats. In Washington, 77 percent of voters and 85 percent of council members are Democrats.³⁰ In Baltimore, where there are no such rules, 79 percent of voters and 100 percent of council members are Democrats.

REDISTRICTING

In 2011, council districts will be redrawn using once-a-decade census numbers. Based on the latest population estimates, Philadelphia would have roughly 154,700 residents per district, about 3,000 more than a decade ago. Los Angeles would have the most populous districts among the cities studied, about 255,500 people for each of its 15 district members. Pittsburgh would have the least populous, about 34,000 people each for nine members.³¹

While city charters typically set the number of districts, local leaders decide their shape and location. The nature of the districts matters. In general, the theory among political scientists is that having “compact” districts is a good thing. The argument is that the less “compact” the district,

the more likely that neighborhoods will be split, the harder for residents to organize, and the easier for incumbents to hold onto their seats. Among the cities in this study, Houston, New York and Baltimore have some of the least compact current districts, according to an analysis by Azavea Inc., a data-mapping company and creator of a non-partisan online redistricting tool.³² Among all of the districts in the 15 cities, Philadelphia had two of the least compact individual districts—its fifth, which includes parts of North Philadelphia, South Philadelphia and Center City, and its seventh, which includes parts of North Philadelphia, Frankford and Northeast Philadelphia.

The cities in the study go about council redistricting in a variety of ways. In Baltimore, council hires its own analysts to help it revise or reject maps proposed by the mayor. In San Diego, independent judges appoint a commission to propose maps for council approval. In several cities including New York, the mayor and council create a joint commission to come up with new districts. In Phoenix and Houston, due to past legal challenges, the U.S. Department of Justice must review the redistricting plan before approval.³³ The Philadelphia City Council and mayor had not decided by the time this study was released how they would conduct redistricting this time; the 2011 elections will be held using the current districts.³⁴ A group led by Quiñones-Sánchez has proposed that the council and mayor appoint a quasi-independent panel to review the new numbers and propose maps. Verna has said that she favors waiting to see how much the population of the districts has changed before deciding what process would be used to modify them.³⁵

SESSION SCHEDULES

There are no consistent rules among councils on vacation or recesses, and many council members feel they are on duty 24/7, even if they are considered part-time.

Based on the official council calendars of the 15 cities studied, Philadelphia City Council has the highest number of weeks without scheduled council sessions during the summer, a 12-week break. That was slightly longer than Baltimore's 10 to 11 weeks with no scheduled meetings, and about a month longer than Chicago's nine weeks. New York and Washington have eight weeks each. At the opposite end, Houston's city council has some kind of official business scheduled every week of the year, although the part-time body only works parts of days.³⁶ Most councils studied are in the middle, with a median of six unscheduled weeks during a summer.

Eight of the councils officially consider their work "full-time," and seven are officially "part-time." The full-time bodies like Philadelphia have slightly more unscheduled time, on average, but not a significant amount.

PERQUISITES AND TRANSPARENCY

Benefits such as cars for council members often are visceral issues with voters and the media, although there is no evidence that giving a member a city car is more expensive than providing a monthly stipend or mileage reimbursement on personal cars. Three cities—Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Detroit—provide members with city-owned cars at city expense, if members want them. Not all accept. In Philadelphia, seven of 17 members take the cars.³⁷ The car counts as taxable compensation, and council members must report it on their tax returns. More common is a flat monthly

allowance or stipend for cars and parking or mileage reimbursement.

The push for transparency and ethical conduct has affected all of the councils to various degrees. In addition to state laws, each council lays down its own ethics rules and typically has an “ethics committee” to hear about infractions. Some cities have an appointed “ethics officer” to watch for trouble.

As for transparency, councils have been experimenting with ways to instill it: 13 of the 15 councils including Philadelphia webcast their deliberations and hearings in addition to airing them on local cable access channels. Seven cities post a list of registered lobbyists, a feature Philadelphia will add during 2011 under a new public ethics law.

However, most of the cities—nine, including Philadelphia—do not post members’ financial disclosure and conflict-of-interest statements on the Internet for easy public review. Instead, anyone seeking the information must make a formal request and pick up paper copies, often for a fee.

Beyond numerous election and ethics violations, a number of current and former council members were convicted in the past 10 years or were facing open indictment as of the end of 2010 on serious offenses allegedly committed during their terms. Fourteen of the 15 cities, all but Phoenix, had at least one member in such a situation. New York had four, and there were two each for Detroit, Dallas, Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles and San Antonio. In 2006, Philadelphia council member Rick Mariano was convicted of a bribery charge.³⁸

One measure of a council’s standing is whether ambitious politicians regard it a path for advancement. Philadelphia’s last two mayors—John Street and Michael Nutter—used their council service as springboards to the mayor’s office. The last three mayors of Baltimore and Phoenix have been council members. All but one city in the study has had at least one of its last three mayors come from council. The exception? New York.

MOONLIGHTING IN PHILADELPHIA

The Philadelphia Research Initiative obtained paper copies of the financial disclosure forms for members of Philadelphia City Council for the past three years. Among other things, the forms show that Councilman James Kenney has worked for an architecture and engineering firm, Frank DiCicco for a real estate firm, and Brian O’Neill and Bill Green for law firms. And Blondell Reynolds Brown has a business for marketing inspirational products and her services as an inspirational speaker. Verna has said she is satisfied that the members have recused themselves whenever the council votes on issues related to their outside jobs.³⁹ The disclosure documents are downloadable at www.pewtrusts.org/philaresearch.

INTERACTIVE WEB GRAPHIC

An interactive Web graphic of this report, which allows users to compare councils across various measurable items, is available at www.pewtrusts.org/philaresearch.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For purposes of this calculation, “first-term” includes all members, whether elected or appointed, who had served less than a full term, which is four years in 12 cities and two years in three cities.
- ² In Phoenix, to run for another elective office, a council member must resign from office unless he or she has one year or less remaining to serve.
- ³ List of council bills, City of Philadelphia Ethics Board, found at www.phila.gov/ethicsboard/chart.html.
- ⁴ Interview with Rich Lord, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* political reporter, Oct. 2010.
- ⁵ Interview with Andrew Ryan, *Boston Globe* political reporter, Nov. 2010.
- ⁶ “An Explosion of Interest in Chicago’s City Council,” Micah Maidenbergl, *Progress Illinois*, Nov. 2010.
- ⁷ Interview with Dick Simpson, University of Illinois; see also “Turnover on Chicago’s City Council,” *Progress Illinois*.
- ⁸ Philadelphia and Chicago give district council members specified prerogatives to approve, disapprove or review projects within their districts.
- ⁹ The three are W. Wilson Goode Jr., Bill Green and Frank Rizzo Jr.
- ¹⁰ *Journal of City Council*, annual editions 1952 to 2010. Journals are held in the office of the Council Chief Clerk Michael Decker. The six council members who have died in office are John Anderson, William Cibotti, Beatrice Chernock, David Cohen, Herbert DeBeary, Sr., and Thacher Longstreth.
- ¹¹ *Journal of City Council*, annual editions 1920 to 2010.
- ¹² “Verna Confirms She Will Not Run for Re-election,” Catherine Lucey, *PhillyClout*, philly.com, Jan. 24, 2011.
- ¹³ Interview with author, Nov. 2010.
- ¹⁴ Interview with author, Nov. 2010.
- ¹⁵ “Looser term limits for L.A. city officials upheld,” David Zahniser, *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 25, 2008.
- ¹⁶ “Once Again, City Voters Approve Term Limits,” Javier C. Hernandez, *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 2010.
- ¹⁷ “Voters Approve Extended Term Limits,” KSAT.com, Nov. 4, 2008.
- ¹⁸ Interview with author, Dec. 2010.
- ¹⁹ Based on figures reported in each city’s departmental budgets and personnel budgets. Department budgets are taken from official adopted documents posted on city websites. Employee benefits including health insurance premiums, workers’ compensation premiums and pension contributions are taken from separate documents or “fringe rate” formulas provided by each city budget office. The per-member figure is derived from dividing the combined total budget by the number of seats in each council.
- ²⁰ Based on authorized full-time equivalent positions that are listed in city council departmental budgets. Excludes staff of other departments, such as the city clerk or law department, that may serve mayors or other city officials in addition to serving councils. For Chicago, the numbers come from the Better Government Association, a watchdog group.

- ²¹ Budget figures for fiscal 2008 and 2011 as reported by each city, adjusted for inflation. Chicago is excluded because its 2008 employee benefit costs were unavailable.
- ²² Excludes Chicago, which was unable to provide 2008 total costs including employee benefits. In Dallas and San Antonio, the budgets of the councils and mayors are combined under their council-manager forms of government.
- ²³ Data provided by council offices in each city and the Office of Council President Anna Verna in Philadelphia. In Dallas and San Antonio, the budgets of the councils and mayors are combined under their council-manager forms of government.
- ²⁴ Cost of living data from the Council on Community and Economic Research.
- ²⁵ "Most City Council members return pay," Jeff Shields, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 6, 2009. Since 2003, Philadelphia council member raises have been pegged to the Consumer Price Index.
- ²⁶ Under Philadelphia's rule, two of the seven at-large seats are reserved for minority party candidates. To guarantee that outcome, no party is allowed to run more than five candidates.
- ²⁷ "Bing, council spar over charter," Darren A. Nichols, *Detroit News*, Dec. 20, 2010. City leaders are debating various scenarios, including increasing the number of seats from 9 to 11, of which seven would be district seats and four at-large seats. A final plan will be put to voters in November 2011.
- ²⁸ Washington staggers its council elections, meaning a voter gets six choices over two elections, or three each time.
- ²⁹ Based on interviews with council officials in the cities.
- ³⁰ Based on party registration at the last general election for each city, according to reports of state election commissions.
- ³¹ Based on U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates, July 2009. Detroit had no district seats (only at-large seats) and is excluded from the analysis.
- ³² Based on four measures of compactness from data provided by Azavea at the request of the Philadelphia Research Initiative. The company's comprehensive analysis of all local, state and Congressional districts can be found at www.redistrictingthenation.com. Houston's oddly-shaped districts are attributed in part to its fast growth and annexation of adjacent areas in recent years. Its city charter calls for council to add two district seats if the official population exceeds 2.1 million, which is expected to happen in the 2010 Census.
- ³³ Author interviews with city officials.
- ³⁴ In 2001, Philadelphia's closed-door process was so contentious that the council missed its redistricting deadline and went several months without pay as a result.
- ³⁵ Interviews with author, Dec. 2010.
- ³⁶ Based on interviews with council clerks and a review of official calendars of each city council for 2008, 2009 and 2010, found at their individual websites.
- ³⁷ Information provided by the Office of Council President Anna Verna.
- ³⁸ Based on news reports, statements of federal prosecutors and interviews with local officials and journalists in each city.
- ³⁹ Interview with author, Dec. 2010.

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