

*The Districting Effect:**Long- and Short-Term Effects of Single-Member Representation in City Council**Introduction*

Can institutional reform change the political system at large? This question, like a lot of political ones, is best answered by “well, that depends.” Institutional reforms that replace policymakers themselves, however, are likely to. In the case of local institutional reforms that remove at-large elections for city council members in favor of electing them via districts, the shifting of the local political landscape is intended to facilitate this change. Proponents of district representation continue to point to council members who reside in, come from, and stand for parts of town previously left out of city politics to demonstrate the success of district elections in shifting the conversation, making politics more accessible. They may also point to a shift in priorities, a shift in the substance of the conversation that reveals the longer term gains for previously underrepresented communities/ groups/ parts of town.

Shifting the conversation to include new issues onto the formal government agenda means a shift in representation. For communities long neglected by public policy, substantive representation is important for long-postponed benefits and gains. Districts can help push the promise of substantive representation along, particularly for discursive stages of policymaking, such as agenda setting. As previously underrepresented communities gain a voice in local government, issues long ignored or long unaddressed can be raised to the agenda. Since city councils are legislative bodies (of course, at a smaller scale from a larger legislature like the US Congress, with 535 members of both chambers), the agenda is deliberative, collaborative, and requires majority votes for agenda items to make it through the entire policy process to become public law. The election of a council member

from a newly represented community does not guarantee immediate policy gains from passed law, but their presence on city council can make increased attention to long-ignored issues more likely.

The movement for district representation gained steam for cities with major population centers in the years following the 1965 Voting Rights Act that gave equal access to the vote for all regardless of race and ethnicity. Some cities maintained their district structure throughout history – cities like Chicago and Los Angeles have maintained a ward-based system of small, hyper-local councils throughout their city histories. For many others however, the at-large revolution of the late 19th century proved remarkably durable, and lasted until at least the later half of the 20th century. Many cities in the southwest were incorporated with at-large representation, and in the case of California, statewide legislation was required to reform at-large structures. The California Voting Rights Act was passed in 2009, and has had a jumpstart effect on district reforms (Cushing-Daniels, Jones, and Shannon 2025).

Most major American cities have district representation in their local legislatures. Some city councils have hybrid systems, boasting council members elected by district and a handful (slate? Number? A few?) members elected at-large with the city as electorate, rather than a single district/ward/ area of the city. Of the 68 US cities with populations greater than 300,000 in 2025¹, only two of them have completely at-large systems (Arlington, TX and Cincinnati, OH). Twenty-one others have hybrid systems, including some of the country's largest cities (Houston, TX² and Philadelphia, PA³ among them). In recent years, several major cities have experienced institutional reform that change city council structure from at-large to districts. Detroit, MI, Seattle, WA, Columbus, OH and

¹ US Census

² Houston is the country's 4th largest city, with a 14-member council. There are 9 districts and 5 council members serving at-large.

³ Philadelphia is the country's 6th largest city, with a 17-member council. There are 10 districts and 7 at-large council members.

had fully at-large councils until 2009, 2015, and 2024. In Detroit and Seattle, hybrid systems were chosen, but Columbus chose nine districts.

[Table 1 of local government structures and reforms?? City – Structure of what to what – Year of Reform]

Austin, Texas is a major city that had an enduring at-large structure. The at-large city council lasted 90 years, and was replaced by ten districted council seats in 2015. In 2012, voters chose between two propositions for reform; Proposition 3 offered a ten-member districted council and an independent redistricting commission, and Proposition 4 offered an eight-member districted council with two at-large members. Proposition 3 won, and the election for ten districted city council members was held in November, 2014. The new council members were inaugurated in the first meeting of city council in January, 2015. The 2012 election was the seventh attempt in 40 years, the first endeavor came in 1973. The successful reform was known as the “10-1” Plan, because the city mayor is the lone representative elected at-large.

The question of institutional reform’s capacity to enact lasting change drives this paper. Districts have shaped Austin’s local politics for ten years as of 2025, which provides a benchmark to examine long-term effects of the reform. In previous work on the districting reform in Austin, I found temporary, short-lived effects on the attention of city council (Shannon 2021). One decade following reform, I pose the following questions: Do district reforms affect attention of the city council to issues on the agenda/ Do the reforms affect council priorities via its agenda? Do district reforms signal a change in city council’s attention to government process? Is there a difference between an at-large and district council’s attention to core local issues such as housing, affordability, and growth?

Using a dataset of all items on the Austin City Council meeting agendas from 2005 through 2025, I explore the effects of the first decade of district representation in the city. Each of the X items is coded for policy substance. I find that districts have an indelible effect on the substance of that city council does, particularly for how government is run. For the core local agenda focused on development and growth, reform to district representation has significant, enduring effects.

Literature Review

Agenda Setting/ Friction/ Sticky Institutions

Getting a new issue on the government's agenda is difficult for anyone, at any level. In his presidential address to the American Political Science Association, Robert Dahl noted that for democratic institutions but particularly cities, the complexity of problems themselves is the largest impediment to problem solving (Dahl 1967). At any level of government, there are more problems to solve than time or capacity to solve them. At the city level, there are enduring stereotypes about core issues, even mythologized in quotes attributed to famous urban leaders. "There is no Republican or Democrat way to pick up the garbage," is often attributed to 1930s New York mayor Fiorella LaGuardia, in an acknowledgment of the pragmatic, problem solving nature of city politics. The complicated nature of problems and their profusion crowds the local agenda, making new issues ascending onto the agenda that much more difficult.

The pluralist vision of policy change is typified in the city politics-focused *Who Governs* (Dahl 1961). In the landmark study of local interest groups and their influence on policymakers, everyone wins sometimes, but no one wins every time. The nature of pressure on local leaders was idealized as cyclical; all issues are addressed eventually. The glaring omission of mid-century pluralism is civil rights for Black communities. The criticism of pluralism from Schattschneider's work on policy is

that its heavenly chorus sings with a heavy upper-class accent (1960), neglecting even acute problems faced by working class communities and people of color. Realistically, the government agenda is difficult to control by policymakers, particularly in incorporating new problems and issues onto the agenda. There is simply too much information, too many problems, for a city council (much less single city council member) to address every problem facing their constituents (Baumgartner and Jones 2015). The upper-class bias Schattschneider refers to may be less evident in a districted council, since council members must reside in the district, and in an economically stratified or segregated city, it is unlikely that each area would produce a wealthy, upper-class representative (Cushing-Daniels, Jones, and Shannon 2025). The complex problem environment requires/ includes strategy for policymakers to decide which issues appear regularly, sporadically, or not at all on the agenda.

The result of a consistent mismatch in problems, solutions, time, and capacity is building friction in an unresponsive political system. There are two sources of the friction that results in political stability, or stasis in policy change. The first is the institutions or “rules of the game” comprising the policymaking system, and the second is cognitive, referring to the mismatch in time, information processing capacity, and complexity of problems on the agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Deference to core issues that appear regularly on the agenda and little change in policy substance, particularly for new items in addition to the core agenda issues indicate a system with a lot of friction.

An abundance of friction can lead to overcompensating in fixing problems that have since subsided or evolved in what is known as a policy bubble. For instance, the national government passed a surge of policies to combat urban crime that had blighted major US cities in the 1970s and 1980s. These policies led to a dramatic increase in incarceration after crime rates had already begun

to subside, indicating a failure to solve a problem when it is increasing or at its height (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones, Thomas, and Wolfe 2014).

Heightened friction makes institutions “sticky,” slow to incorporate new issues onto the agenda, particularly when attention is elsewhere. Institutions are intended to be sticky, methodical in information processing, and dependent on stability (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003). Government response is not automatic; change becomes more difficult as friction builds through the policy process from agenda to public law. Even at the outset, agenda space is severely limited and outpaced by problems seeking policy solutions, competing for the attention of policymakers (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Additionally, a bias to the status quo makes access difficult for minorities at any stage of the process (Jones, Theriault, and Whyman 2019). Sticky local institutions have agendas full of long-standing problems and constraints on jurisdiction from state and national government, making a radically different agenda improbable, even with an institutional reform.

Local agendas are subject to a distinctive constraint, compared to the state and national level. The forces determining which issues are available for consideration are affected by institutional, cultural, and symbolic factors (Cobb and Ross 1997). Local government powers originate in the state legislature, the specific authority of city councils are outlined in state constitutions classifying cities by population and tax revenues, and through home rule charters which allow for municipal self-government, with parameters determined by the state (Leland and Whisman 2014). Consequently, city councils have less autonomy than legislatures at the state or national level (Agranoff 2014; Leland and Whisman 2014; Pelissero 2003; Zimmerman 1995, 2012). The most common policy areas allotted to city councils are in land use and housing, transportation, and local utility policy in water, waste, and electricity. Changes in representation and attention to previously neglected

communities/ parts of town may be in improving services in the core agenda areas, not necessarily in new policy domains.

At-Large and Districted City Councils

At-large city councils are underrepresentative, across the board, by design. One inherent reason for an inclination toward underrepresentation in at-large councils is constituency size. Council members in the country's largest cities, all with district representation, still represent large constituencies. Some represent more than 100,000 citizens in each district, which may pose an argument for a larger city council⁴. However, with out a political structure that ensures some semblance of geographic representation through district, the likelihood of council members residing in/ representing a small part of the city, is much higher. For instance, although Austin's at-large era lasted nine decades, 80 percent of all city council members and half its mayors were elected from two districts (according to today's map) which make up less than twenty percent of the city's land area and just ten percent of its population (Ballí 2013). Since there is no commitment to spatial representation in at-large systems, they are susceptible to inequity.

At-large systems privilege the whole, making it difficult for minorities to gain traction in city-wide elections. In the post-civil rights movement era, the biggest spotlight of the inequality at-large systems perpetuate has been on racial and ethnic minorities (Macmanus, Susan A. 1978; Meier 1984; Welch, Susan 1990). Progressive Era reformers preferred them in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for this reason; at-large councils proved effective in dismantling the political machines that built power by representing immigrant and ethnic enclaves clustered in tight-knit wards. Machine strength depended on the support of these enclaves, and aldermen/ representatives cultivated

⁴ Cities with constituencies over 100,000 per district are Los Angeles (15 council members), Phoenix (8), New York City (51), San Diego (9), San Antonio (10), Houston (16), and Columbus (9). Populations from US Census Dept, 2024.

support through patronage, whereas influence in at-large systems is typically enjoyed by business leaders and policy leaders who perceive the city as a corporation (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Trounstein 2008).

Mechanisms for maintaining the political system buttressed by an at-large council, or mechanisms for maintaining the social order emblemized by at-large city councils are found in the cost of campaigns at the city level appealing to the majority, rather than in a single district (Adams 2011; Heilig and Mundt 1984; Macmanus, Susan A. 1978).

Small tweaks/reforms have been used to strengthen at-large systems, to double down on the inherent inequalities present in the system. In 1950s Austin, a prominent Black man named Arthur DeWitty came in sixth place for a four-seat election in the at-large system. He was president of the local NAACP chapter, and a fixture at City Hall for council meetings advocating for the African American community. The year after his near-victory, city council put forth a reform to voters for a seat system. Council members were still to be elected at-large, but each candidate would run for an open numbered seat and needed a simple majority to win. The seat reform was a successful attempt to preclude people of color from running, much less winning council representation. The barrier to candidacy was sufficiently high, since candidates from working class neighborhoods and communities of color would likely need substantial monetary support to run a successful campaign.

As we've established, district representatives have smaller direct constituencies than at-large council members. Thus, responsiveness to problems in a district council is likely to diverge from responsiveness in the city at large. Minority representatives introducing issues that affect previously neglected areas do indicate substantive representation but does not necessarily indicate policy change at the law level. Instead, policy change begins at the agenda setting level in the policy process, which is where this study takes place.

Substantive or policy representation is certainly more difficult to come by, due to minority politics/ majoritarian politics, and escalating friction throughout the policy process. Extant literature points to a variability of effects from districts, effects are not uniform (Mansbridge 1999; Preuhs 2005; Preuhs, Robert R. 2006; Trounstein and Valdinì 2008). District systems are more responsive to minority groups, particularly when they are geographically concentrated and/ or in multi-ethnic coalitions (Gillam, Frank D., Jr. 1996; Sass 2000). Others have found representation benefits go mostly to African Americans communities, who are more likely to be geographically concentrated due to the legacy of segregation and redlining (Karnig 1976; Trounstein and Valdinì 2008).

Better Representation through Districts

Districts reforms are the most common vehicle for enhanced quality of representation, given the crowded agenda and bias for a status quo of stasis or path dependence in long-standing at-large systems. Although the relationship between electing a member from an underrepresented community (descriptive representation) and policy gains (substantive representation), the two can have strong links. Lerman and Sadin find the presence of descriptively representative candidates can serve as heuristic for Black voters that signal policy preference, but they do not always align (2016). The presence of Latino candidates was found to mobilize Latino voters (Barreto 2007), but others find the relationship is underpinned by partisanship, segregation, and population size, not necessarily policy preferences (Abott and Magazinnik 2020; Hero and Tolbert 1995).

Like other cities that experienced district reforms from at-large city councils, motivations in Austin were to make city government more representative for communities long absent from the local policy agenda. The coalition in support of the successful 2012 proposition included Latino community leaders, and neighborhood activists from central and suburban Austin who felt unrepresented by the at-large system's downtown-focused power centers. Along with Latino and

Asian neighborhoods, women and conservatives from districts on the northern and western peripheries of the city won representation in the district reform (Bowman 2020; Tretter 2016).

District reform can affect the priorities of local government in its most common/ numerous/ important/ focused core policy area, housing. District representation has substantial effects on housing policy, for example. District elections in cities with more spatial segregation/ concentration restrict the permitting of new housing, but allow for more diffused costs in housing (Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023). Districts affect how the city council perceives and approaches land use and housing politics. In Los Angeles, districted council members are able to balance their district-specific expertise with policies that affect the city as a whole, which has the effect of specialization on council similar to specialization via the committee system in Congress (Burnett and Kogan 2014). The structure of local government can affect the landscape of politics in these ways; policy outcomes are affected by the changed power balance in city politics as districts spread the centers of influence throughout the city, and hyper-local expertise affects how council members see political opportunity through expertise and representation.

If institutional reform can affect the priorities and policy agenda of local government, then politics in the city will be permanently changed. Considering the long-term effects of districts to the city council is possible only now, given the decadal time series available. This leads me to the following hypotheses:

1. District reforms have a short-term effect on the priorities of city council, making the policy agenda **less** diverse immediately following implementation.
 - b. District reforms have a long-term effect on the priorities of city council, making the policy agenda **more** diverse in the years following the reform.

2. Districted city councils make more diverse policies on government operations than at-large councils.
 - b. Districted city councils pay more attention to operations of local government.
3. Districted city councils make more diverse housing policies than at-large councils.
 - b. Districted city councils pay more attention to housing policy.

Data

Collecting and coding each item from the Austin City Council is done through the established codebook rules according to the international Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) norms. CAP is the international community studying policy agendas founded by the United States-focused Policy Agendas Project (PAP). The Austin Agendas Project codebook was created by incorporating codebooks from PAP and the local Danish project. Each item on the local agenda is given a single policy code for its substance. The codebook features 21 major topics, and each of these contains more than 200 fine-grained subtopics that offer more substantive value in categorizing policy content.

In this dataset, an item is each thing considered or discussed on the agenda. Items can be ordinances which are policy, whereas commemorative proclamations, resolutions that make statements without the weight of an official policy, or communications from residents to council during a meeting. Each item from the city council minutes was collected and given its own substantive policy code with the help of several undergraduate researchers at the University of Texas at Austin. Below is a table of summary statistics compiled from Austin City Council agendas. Data are separated by year and major topic; housing and government operations are consistently the largest major topics. The bottom of the agenda in terms of the council's agenda is education, culture,

and race/ civil rights. Local agendas are known to be pragmatic and focused on service delivery, and this early look into the substance appears to confirm the stereotype.

[Table 2 of local government agenda – includes year # items, major topic # items, demographics (?),

SMD. All by n, mean, SD, min, max]

After removing process items such as approving the previous week's minutes, and items devoid of policy substance, from 2005 through 2025, the city council discussed 57,662 items. The dataset contains 21 years and includes a decade following the institutional reform and one decade before. The last ten years of the at-large regime are critical to capture the legacy agenda and any changes in leading up to incorporating district representation, and of course any substantive policy changes that followed the reform.

Methods

I use a measure of diversity to explore whether changes in government structure amount to a changed policy agenda. Commonly called an entropy score when used in agenda setting, Shannon's H information entropy formula was originally developed to apply natural science principles of studying thermodynamics to communication and diffusion of categorical information (Boydston, Bevan, and Thomas 2014). Shannon's H helps deduce variation by major topics that the city council focuses on to represent residents of Austin. In this study, perfect diversity would mean council's attention spanning the codebook with little repetition, addressing each topic in uniform proportion. Conversely, agenda homogeneity would reflect council paying attention to a single policy issue each year.

Diversity scores often vary between homogenous 0 to 3 at the most diverse. However, government agenda diversity is most frequently between 1 and 2 (**CITES – Peter etc.**). Others normalize the score between 0 and 1 to demonstrate an easier to read score. The score tending towards 1 indicates a roughly equal proportion of major topics across the agenda, while a lower value reflects an agenda dominated by one or a small number of topics (Ramezani 2012). Shannon's H is calculated by multiplying the proportion of total attention the policy category receives by the natural log of the proportion it receives of the whole. In the formula below, x_i represents each policy category, $p(x_i)$ is the proportion the category receives that year, $\ln(x_i)$ is the natural log of attention proportion and N is the number of categories (Boydston, Bevan, and Thomas 2014).

Formula 1: Normalized Shannon's H

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (p(x_i)) * \ln p(x_i)}{\ln (N)}$$

First, I test the whole local agenda's diversity using all 21 major topics in the Austin Agendas codebook. Then, for a more nuanced look into agenda changes, I test the variation in subtopics within the two largest major topics, housing and government operations. This provides a better look into how council's attention may shift within a single policy domain. Housing and urban policy is the largest/ most plentiful/ dominant/ biggest/ most important subject on the local policy agenda, as it includes questions of land use, building, and assorted other development questions. Housing and urban issues underscore local government's policymaking power, which is most often in this policy domain.

Government operations is the second largest subject on the local agenda. This issue domain is important for any government, because it includes items on the city council itself, but also government efficiency, local elections, appointments, and administration of the local City Hall. While

urban and housing issues represent a main focus of local government jurisdiction in cities across the country, government operations is a policy domain critical for any government system, because it primarily concerns administration of government itself. For a government undergoing a structural reform, government operations is likely even more critical/ important/ in focus during the era leading up to reform, and for the early districted council, as they learned local process and staffed agencies with bureaucrats.

This closer look into the two major topics requires the same analysis as the whole agenda, the Shannon's H diversity index. To do so, each topic is added together (for the whole agenda, each major topic; for the housing and government operations piece, each subtopic), and divided by the total agenda items per year. Most codebook topics are present every year, but attention varies over time, particularly following institutional reform in council.

Finally, I use OLS regression to find the relationship between changes to the agenda and the districting reform of 2015. I include control variables for demographics in the city, such as total population change, and Black and Latino populations. I include several binary controls for whether there was a local election that year, the number of incumbent city councilors in the election, and the tenure of the city's mayor. The model is below:

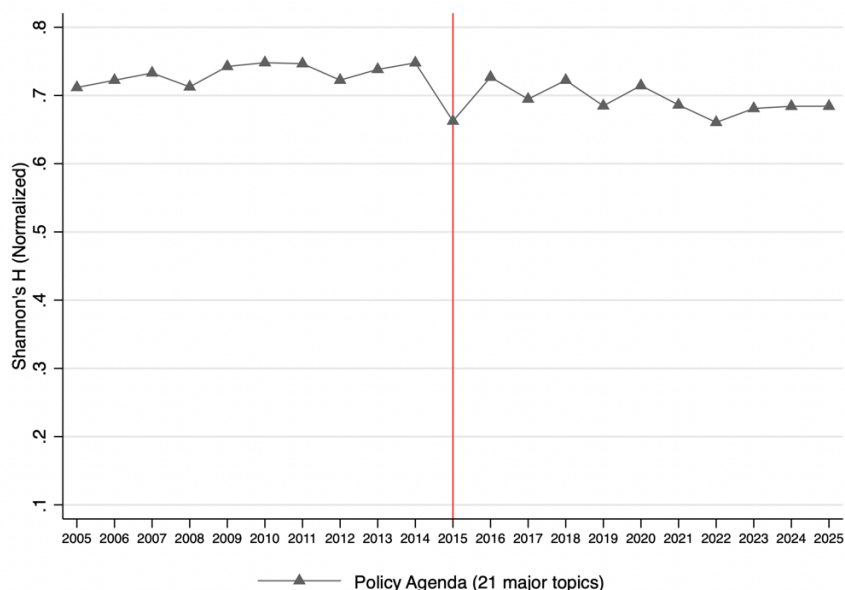
[OLS regression model with controls here]

Results

Institutional reform that changes the structure of government affects who can get elected to office, and what the substance of politics becomes in the city. I find big changes in levels of attention to different issues on the agenda, and a wake of change from the reform that left less consistent levels

of attention to even the most represented issues on the local agenda. We begin with the agenda as comprised of 21 major topics to explore the first two hypotheses about the short- and long-term effects of district reforms. Turning to Figure X, each year's normalized Shannon's H score is given. The annual agenda is relatively diverse, hovering around .7. The reform implemented in 2015 is clearly a critical juncture in agenda diversity and uniformity, becoming less consistent in the districted city council.

Figure X: Agenda Diversity, 2005-2025

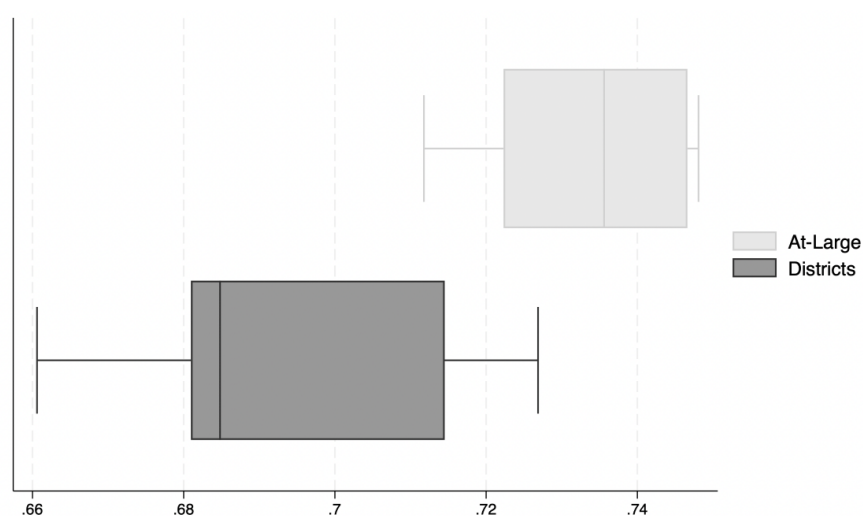


The year of reform implementation, the agenda becomes 11.42% less diverse in the second decade, after newly districted representatives were inaugurated. This is the largest annual percent change in the dataset. The following year however, the agenda's diversity bounces back 9.73%. The short-term effects of the district reform are clear from normalized Shannon's H scores, but the substance of the policy agenda is not yet understood.

First, I took the average annual agenda diversity in a difference of means test between the two city council eras, revealing a more diverse agenda under the at-large council and a less diverse

agenda under the districted council. This shift reveals a shift in attention between the major topics of the policy agenda, or more plainly, that the districted council paid attention to fewer policy issues than the previous council. We turn to the two most prominent major topics on the agenda to see how attention shifted substantively; we expect that housing and government operations provide context for the decline in diversity on the local agenda.

Figure X: Difference of means (two-tailed t-test) in agenda diversity, 2005-2025



Finally, OLS regression models for a) total items and b) normalized Shannon's H diversity score for the agenda reveal effects of single-member representation for diversity, but not size of the annual agenda. Neither the political environment context, demonstrated by local elections, number of incumbents elected, nor length of mayor tenure affect size of the local agenda. Changes to population size, a variable that traditionally indicates agenda size for city council in how it approaches policymaking, is also insignificant in both models. The diversity of the local agenda is affected most by districts, decreasing how many issues a city council considers. To a lesser extent, the tenure of local mayor also decreases diversity, reflecting an increased influence of city council as a governing institution.

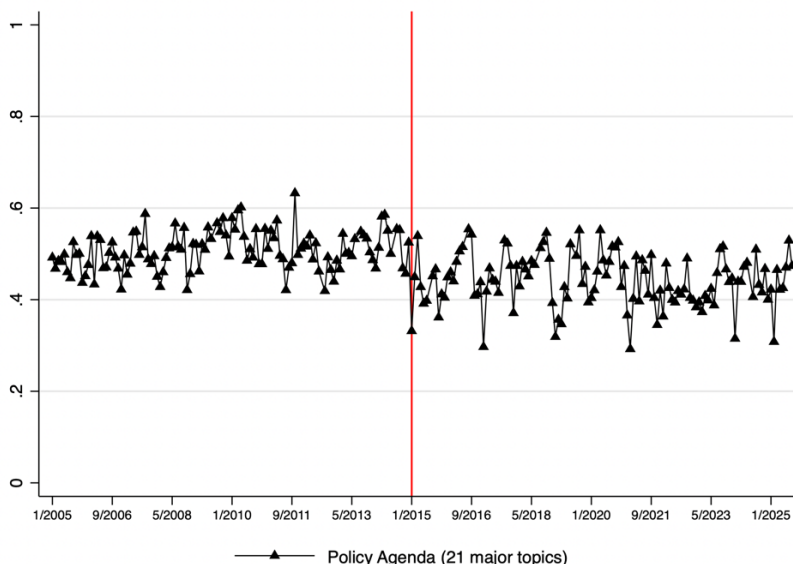
Table X: OLS Regression Models for Annual Agenda, 2005-2025

	Item Count	Normalized Shannon's H
	(1)	(2)
District Reform	235.467 (169.626)	-.0401*** (.013)
Council Election	199.344 (273.492)	.0032 (.0202)
Incumbents	-139.974 (89.397)	.0013 (.0066)
Mayor Tenure	-10.692 (34.817)	-.0013** (.0026)
Population pct. change	8506.233 (6668.35)	.0236 (.4915)
Constant	2655.085*** (283.971)	.733*** (.0209)
Adjusted R^2	.0829	.4301
Observations	20	20

Note: *p<0.10; *p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Variation in seasonal activity for city councils can fluctuate quite a bit to accommodate slow summer seasons and an increase in activity nearing a new fiscal year. It's possible that shifts represent monthly or seasonal differences in local policymaking. Months with fewer than 20 items were dropped from the sample, and all were in special called sessions over the summer. The months were July 2009 (1 item), July 2014 (4), July 2015 (1), July 2016 (18), and June 2024 (7). The figure below highlights the annual diversity scores in Figure X; in the months following January 2015, the agenda becomes less clustered and consistent across its major topics. Instead, monthly diversity scores are farther apart from each other monthly, which shows the bigger swings in how many issues the government takes on at a time.

Figure X: Monthly Agenda Diversity, 2005-2025

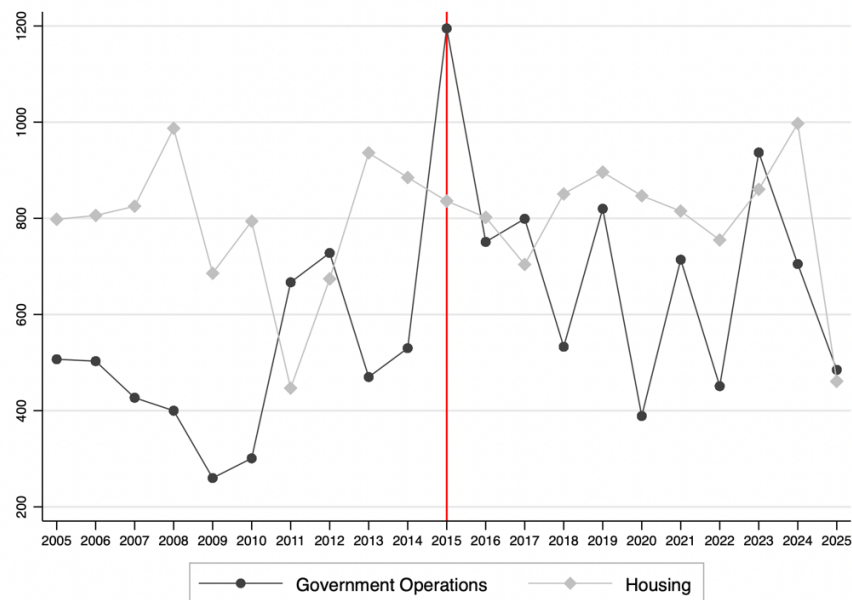


The at-large council's agenda appears relatively set in its process; from month to month, the normalized diversity score is right in the center, hovering at .5. This reveals an established agenda and process, the city council had perfected the issues it considered, and rarely incorporated new policy areas. While the new districted city council declined in diversity, operating less smoothly in its operations, fluctuation indicates a shift in attention to new issues. A monthly perspective into changes in diversity give a better view into how the agenda changed in the new council era. Districts may lead to a less diverse agenda across all major topics, but this reform brought less uniformity to the substance of what city council concentrates on. Whether the council focuses on fewer issues to solve problems, or if a major reform ushers in an extended learning curve reflecting a loss of specialization and expertise is unclear, so we turn to two of the most frequently discussed policy areas, government operations and housing.

The two most numerous major topics on the agenda follow distinct trends in the 21-year period of reform. Figure X below shows the trajectory of the two major pieces of the core local agenda. Housing policy is the largest major topic of this period and begins a consistent pattern of high attention in 2013 as the at-large city council began to prepare for a potential shakeup that

would pose a detriment to their development policies. Leading up to the district reform, the final at-large council felt an urgency to enshrine their agenda with respect to development since they did not know what the future held in a districted city council (Spelman 2017). Increased attention to government operations reflects an onboarding process in a new government; a spike in attention to local government itself in 2015 gives way to a new oscillating pattern of heightened then relaxed attention to administering the city.

Figure X: Housing and Government Operations Items, 2005-2025

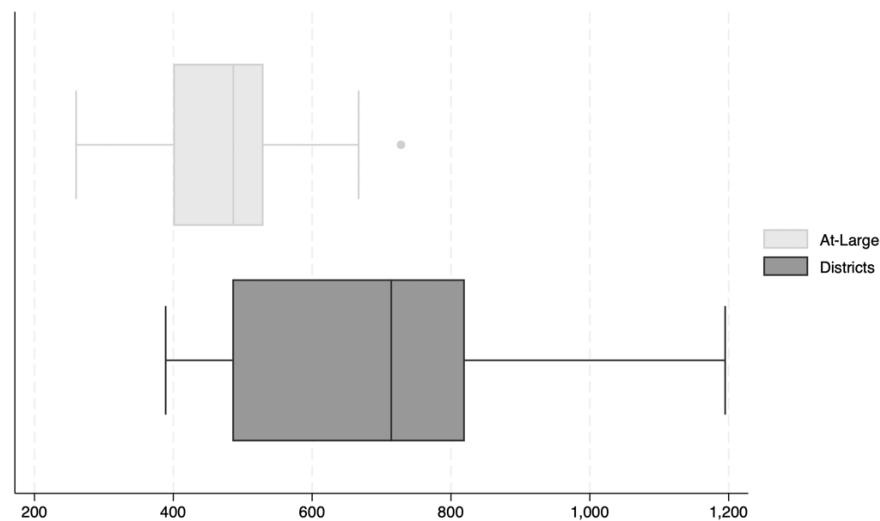


Government operations

As one of the two largest policy areas on the local agenda, government operations increased in focus even more following institutional reform, particularly the first year it was implemented. In 2015, city council focused on government operations for 35% of its agenda, 1,195 out of 3,410 total items. This was the largest monthly item total for a major topic in the largest agenda (by item number) in the dataset. The 2015 surge shows a significant shift in attention, indicating the large investment in local government operations undertaken when the political system changes. Figure X below displays

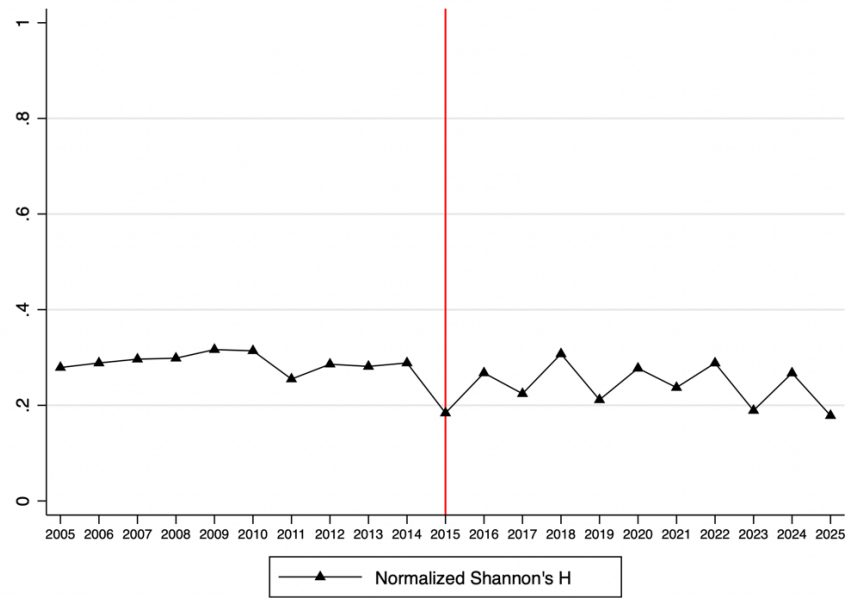
the effects that district reforms had on attention to government operations. Before, the annual average in number of items on the agenda were similar, with little variation. The districted council increased attention to the major topic as it settled into its new role and structure of local government. This shift in means is highly significant, with a p value of 0.167, reflecting a high likelihood that the 2015 reforms is the cause of the change.

Figure X: Difference of means (two-tailed t-test) government operations policy, 2005-2025



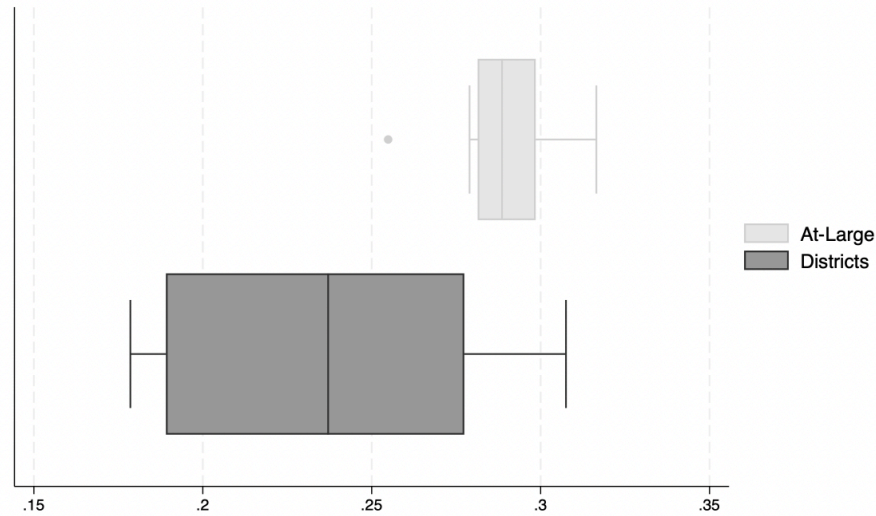
The government operations major topic contains 24 subtopics, 23 of which are in our dataset. The outlier is “regular or mandatory items,” covering process that occur in all meetings such as approval of the previous week’s agenda, invocations, or musical performances. Figure X shows much lower diversity in this major topic than the agenda as a whole; attention is not well spread across subtopics. Instead, city council largely focuses on a handful of subtopics. There are seven subtopics with more than 500 total items in the 21-year dataset. They concern civil service, nominations/ appointments, contracts, publicly owned buildings and property, claims against the city, regulating policy on regional local governments, and the city council itself.

Figure X: Government Operations Diversity, 2005-2025



Although the annual diversity is consistently low throughout the last two decades, the pattern following 2015 is familiar. The newly districted council is less consistent and focused in the proportion of attention each receives. The agenda becomes less reliable/ uniform in a districted council. Looking to the averages of items in government operations before and after the reform, it is clear that the different government structures pay different levels of attention to government operations. Figure X shows that in the newly varied attention to government operation subtopics, there is fewer diversity in how many subtopics do appear on the agenda. Attention to the various aspects of government administration got more concentrated with districts.

Figure X: Difference of means (two-tailed t-test) government operations policy, 2005-2025



Attention to government operations is undoubtedly increased in the wake of institutional reform. Table X below indicates reform affects both attention to and diversity in government operations as a policy area. Given the extended time series, it can be said that districts pay closer attention to administration of local government than at-large councils, particularly the year reform is implemented. The political context and demographics may have changed throughout this time, with an increasing annual population, ongoing elections, new and incumbent council members, and mayoral turnover have no significant impact to policymaking in government operations. While attention increased in response to the reform, the diversity of the policy area decreased as city council focused on staffing the new government, appointing civilians to local boards, and reforming elections. The wake of reform is evident in this policy area more than others.

Table X: OLS Regression Models for Government Operations, 2005-2025

	Item Count (1)	Normalized Shannon's H (2)
District Reform	329.0*** (105.664)	-.0497*** (.0160)
Council Election	33.549 (170.364)	-.0043 (.0258)
Incumbents	-52.366 (55.687)	.0140 (.0084)
Mayor Tenure	-25.197 (21.688)	.0039 (.0033)
Population pct. change	5275.974 (4135.885)	-.0861 (.6295)
Constant	499.849** (176.892)	.2606*** (.0268)
Adjusted R^2	.5231	.3971
Observations	20	20

Note: *p<0.10; *p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Housing

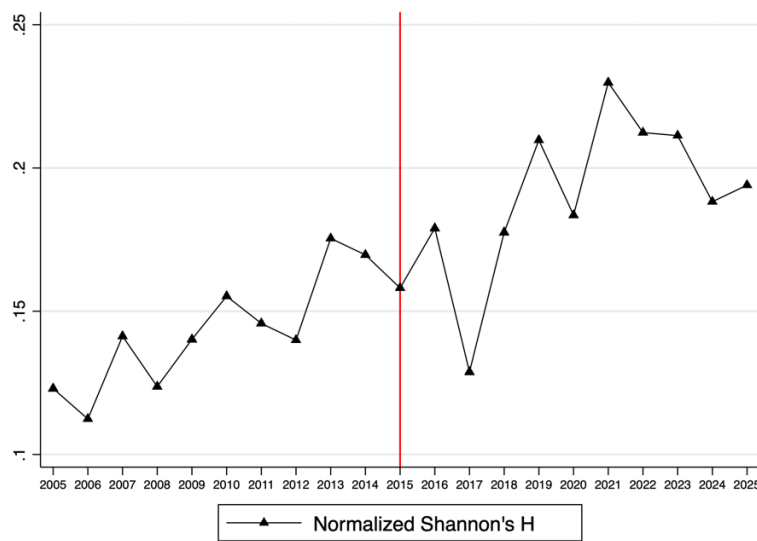
Development, housing, and planning are a huge part of what local government does. The local agenda of any government is necessarily focused on some facet of land use. Before and after institutional reform, this policy domain is a main priority of city council. The difference in means of attention to housing and urban policy shown in Figure X on page X underscore the importance of these topics to local government. Whereas the 2015 reform increased attention to government operations, the means of attention to housing is not statistically significant due to districts. Put more simply, local government must concentrate its efforts on housing and urban policy. Austin is a growing city, and an increasingly expensive place in which to live, but every city spends a great deal of its policymaking energy on housing (CITES). This analysis supports this assertion; although other core agenda areas declined in attention due to reform, districted and at-large councils alike must make policy in land use, development, and housing.

Housing subtopics appear on the agenda regularly. Half of its fourteen subtopics appear more than 500 times each in the 21-year dataset. General housing plans, downtown, low-income and affordable housing, homelessness, property taxes, subdivision and housing plans, and the buying and

selling of property/ land are all well represented throughout. The subtopic on subdivision and housing plans includes zoning ordinances, which represent 65% of the total housing major topic and has the most items of any subtopic in the codebook at 10, 917.

Zoning items and subdivision plans may dwarf the other subtopics in the housing major topic, because its diversity score is low. Figure X shows the diversity score for housing subtopics. Although attention to housing policy issues was rising in the at-large council, the new districted council members make policy on more housing policy issues. Incorporating affordable housing and solving the multifaceted problems associated with homelessness have emerged as a central issue for the districted council, in addition to the core agenda priorities of developing the city, making housing available at market rates.

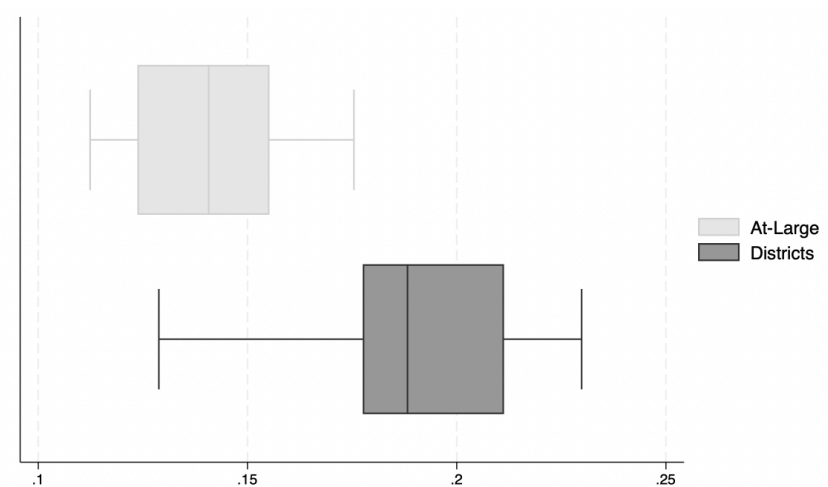
Figure X: Housing & Urban Policy Diversity, 2005-2025



The new energy in tackling housing problems/ issues in a variety of ways is reflected in a difference of means test between diversity scores for at-large and districted city council structures. While the council's attention stayed on housing throughout the early 20th century and continues to discuss the subject at nearly every city council meeting, a districted city council expands its focus on

the most important issue facing local government: housing. The difference in Figure X is statistically significant at the .0005 level, reiterating that the 2015 reform made all the difference in expanding housing attention to more issues.

Figure X: Difference of means (two-tailed t-test) housing & urban policy, 2005-2025



At-large and districted councils do many things differently. Some of these differences are a major impetus behind reforms; that representation on policy issues can shift for city council with single-member representation is a firm/large/chief/main selling point. Most of the candidates for city council's new district elections in 2014 held housing/ affordability as a main campaign issue (CITES?), but housing is necessarily a gargantuan part of any city council's agenda. Not only do at-large systems focus on housing and urban issues as a core part of the local agenda, but in the case of Austin, the focus on housing increased in the two years between initial district plan vote and new council member elections.

Can attention to housing change in the wake of reform, and do district councils approach housing in a different way than at-large systems? Results indicate what differences in means demonstrated: attention to housing policy is largely impervious to city council structure or local

political context, because every city council *must* engage with housing policy as a major policy focus. Table X below shows that diversity in housing policy is affected by districted councils. In an at-large council that is concerned primarily with the city as a whole, representation is intended to “lift all boats.” Policy is often beneficial to business communities and downtowns, whereas the center of power is diffuse in district councils. Housing policy is expanded in its definition in district councils, as council members put forward more policies on affordability, homelessness, and property taxes onto the agenda.

Table X: OLS Regression Models for Housing & Urban Policy, 2005-2025

	Item Count	Normalized Shannon's H
	(1)	(2)
District Reform	77.465 (74.608)	.0330** (.0146)
Council Election	103.213 (103.213)	-.0291 (.0235)
Incumbents	-51.992 (39.320)	.0065 (.0077)
Mayor Tenure	10.305 (15.314)	.0041 (.0030)
Population pct. change	-519.391 (2932.97)	-.4308 (.5736)
Constant	756.705*** (124.900)	.1483*** (.0244)
Adjusted R^2	-.0752	.4686
Observations	20	20

Note: *p<0.10; *p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conclusions

District elections have become an important mechanism for increasing local representation, government responsiveness, and for enhancing local democracy. Particularly for communities of

color and working-class neighborhoods, the ability to elect a city council member from a previously unrepresented part of town means achieving agenda access. Issues affecting populations like lower renters and people of color may not affect business communities, downtown districts, or the majority. At-large councils by design are unlikely to represent those issues, instead preferring to represent the city as a whole (and the communities they are from).

This paper investigated the short- and long-term effects of districts on policy. I find that institutional reforms have large effects in their implementation year, and long-term effects within major topics on the core agenda. Housing policy, zoning, and subdivision plans will always be found on city council agendas, but affordable housing and homelessness policy is much more likely to be found on a council represented by districts. Indeed, district representation is better for these communities.

Heightened attention to government operations in the wake of reform results in less attention to the pragmatic core policy areas of the local agenda such as water, waste, and electricity, other policy areas were affected by reforms. These areas all fell precipitously following district reform as the city council's agenda became more dominated with government operations. Less ubiquitous policy areas that are not in the local policy core, such as food and agriculture, transportation, parks, and culture, also shifted focus following districts. Put more simply, district representation affects local government priorities, which means they serve the purpose reformers intend, increasing visibility for previously unrepresented groups.

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