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Maps Prove a Select Few Govern Austin

Forty Years of Election History Expose Extent of Disparities

by Ken Martin

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It should come as no surprise that the greatest political power is exercised by those whose wealth, influence, and avid participation enable them to move the levers of democracy in their favor.

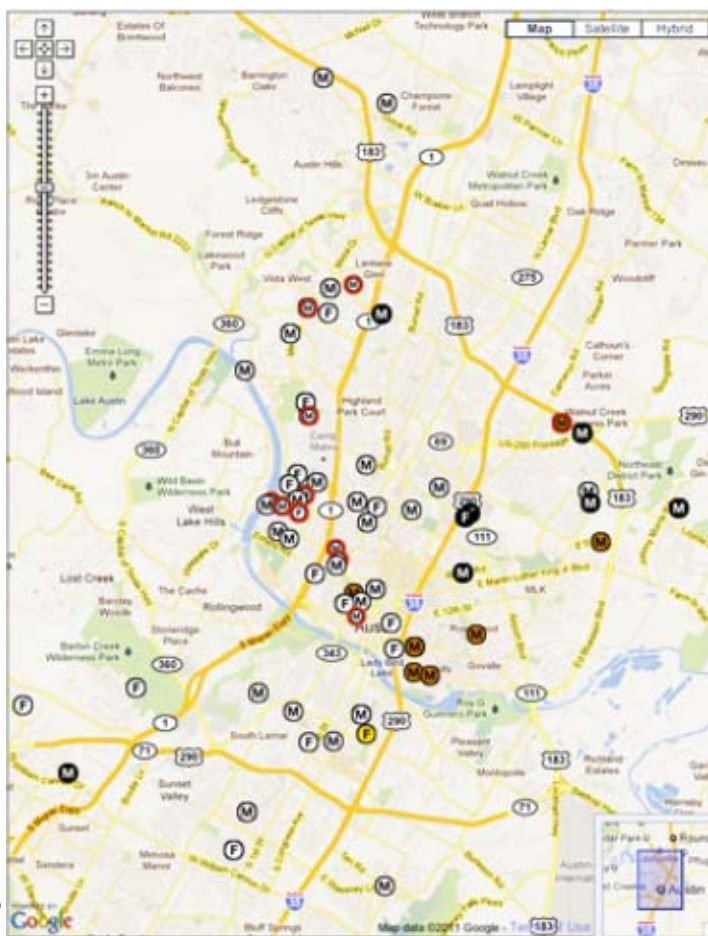
The extent to which this is true in Austin is laid bare by [maps](#) constructed by *The Austin Bulldog* that pinpoint the residential location of every mayor and council member elected over the last four decades.

The unalterable fact that emerges is that large parts of Austin are not represented—or are grossly underrepresented—because of the at-large system of elections established by the Austin City Charter.

This is not a new revelation. Attempts to gain voter approval for some form of council districts that would provide for equitable geographic representation have been put on the ballot six times, beginning in 1973, and six times failed to win majority support.

The ship of democracy continues to sail in the direction ordered by the majority. Which is how democracy is supposed to work.

But at what cost to those who feel disenfranchised by Austin's at-large election system? The at-large system effectively means that all citizens—all 800,000 of us—are represented by every member of the city council. This system fails to make any one council member responsible for our concerns, or those of our neighbors. When every council member is responsible to every citizen, by definition, no one council member is responsible to a particular citizen.



Electee Residences Map 1971-2011 (Click to see live maps)

The Austin City Council and a growing coalition of citizens are separately working on two different plans to give voters another opportunity in 2012 to approve a City Charter change to require the majority of city council members to be elected from geographic districts.

Based on what's been discussed so far, these two initiatives differ significantly regarding how many council districts would be proposed, what procedure would be used for drawing district lines, the length of council terms, and whether terms would be staggered.

Both initiatives are still in the formative stages.

The City Council is scheduled to approve a resolution today (Item 28 on the agenda) to establish a 2012 Charter Revision Committee composed of 15 members who shall be appointed no later than August 25. The committee's recommendations for charter amendments, and a map that includes any combination of at-large

The city's plan or the grass-roots plan, or both, could wind up on the ballot next year.

None of the six failed propositions got on the ballot through a grass-roots petition drive. In the past, voters have only been able to react to whatever plan the city proposed—and the reaction has always been unfavorable.

Some may wonder why council districts are needed. After all, the city is not being pushed by legal action because it ran afoul of the Voting Rights Act, which ensures the opportunity for minority representation.

Although geographic representation is not a matter of concern to federal authorities, one need only look at the [Aggregate Map 1971-2011](#) to realize the gross inequities in geographic representation that have existed for much of the last four decades. From the aggregate map you can navigate to 26 other maps, one for each election conducted over the past four decades. Every map pinpoints where each member of the council lived when elected.

Forty-nine of those seats were won by people who lived in West and northwest Austin (see zip code map for 78703 and 78731).

Mayors prefer 78703—Eleven of the 17 mayoral elections were won by candidates from zip code 78703.

The map displays the following data for zip codes within the Los Angeles area:

Zip Code	Number of People Speaking Spanish at Home	Category
78703	34	15 or more
78731	15	15 or more
78727	1	9 or more
78759	4	9 or more
78753	2	9 or more
78752	4	9 or more
78723	9	9 or more
78724	2	9 or more
78705	4	9 or more
78722	5	9 or more
78702	9	9 or more
78704	8	9 or more
78744	1	9 or more
78749	1	9 or more
78745	7	9 or more
78735	2	9 or more
78746	2	9 or more
78701	5	9 or more
78706	1	9 or more
78751	1	9 or more
78757	2	9 or more
78758	2	9 or more
78729	2	9 or more
78728	2	9 or more
78719	2	9 or more
78717	2	9 or more
78713	2	9 or more
78712	2	9 or more
78711	2	9 or more
78710	2	9 or more
78709	2	9 or more
78708	2	9 or more
78707	2	9 or more
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78699	2	9 or more
78698	2	9 or more
78697	2	9 or more
78696	2	9 or more
78695	2	9 or more
78694	2	9 or more
78693	2	9 or more
78692	2	9 or more
78691	2	9 or more
78690	2	9 or more
78689	2	9 or more
78688	2	9 or more
78687	2	9 or more
78686	2	9 or more
78685	2	9 or more
78684	2	9 or more
78683	2	9 or more
78682	2	9 or more
78681	2	9 or more
78680	2	9 or more
78679	2	9 or more
78678	2	9 or more
78677	2	9 or more
78676	2	9 or more
78675	2	9 or more
78674	2	9 or more
78673	2	9 or more
78672	2	9 or more
78671	2	9 or more
78670	2	9 or more
78669	2	9 or more
78668	2	9 or more
78667	2	9 or more
78666	2	9 or more
78665	2	9 or more
78664	2	9 or more
78663	2	9 or more
78662	2	9 or more
78661	2	9 or more
78660	2	9 or more
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78658	2	9 or more
78657	2	9 or more
78656	2	9 or more
78655	2	9 or more
78654	2	9 or more
78653	2	9 or more
78652	2	9 or more
78651	2	9 or more
78650	2	9 or more
78649	2	9 or more
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78646	2	9 or more
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78640	2	9 or more
78639	2	9 or more
78638	2	9 or more
78637	2	9 or more
78636	2	9 or more
78635	2	9 or more
78634	2	9 or more
78633	2	9 or more
78632	2	9 or more
78631	2	9 or more
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78626	2	9 or more
78625	2	9 or more
78624	2	9 or more
78623	2	9 or more
78622	2	9 or more
78621	2	9 or more
78620	2	9 or more
78619	2	9 or more
78618	2	9 or more
78617		

won city council seats lived in zip codes 78703 and 78731, leaving 68 council seats for the rest of the city.

South Austin underrepresented—Nineteen of the 100 city council contests—and no mayoral races—were won by candidates who lived south of the Colorado River.

In other words, out of 117 mayoral and council seats, 16.2 percent were won by candidates from an area that has 40 percent of the city's population, according to City Demographer Ryan Robinson.

The political longevity of some of those who were elected from South Austin before term limits were imposed mitigated some of the disparity. Nevertheless, seven of the city councils formed as a result of the 26 election-cycles had not one council member who lived in South Austin. Forty percent of Austin citizens had no geographic representation.

Other areas also slighted—Large areas of Austin have rarely or never been represented, some because of not being within the city limits until annexed in more recent decades (e.g., Circle C in Southwest Austin, and Anderson Mill in Northwest Austin), others for reasons that are less clear (e.g., Oak Hill in Southwest Austin; Central Austin north of U.S. Highway 183; and Central Austin, south of William Cannon Drive).

Proximity to City Hall—A solid majority of those who have been elected to the city council over the last four decades lived within three miles of City Hall, as the grackle flies. Using Google maps, an analysis shows that of 117 positions available, voters elected:

- 67 people who lived within three miles of city hall (57 percent)
- 30 who lived three to five miles from city hall (26 percent)
- 20 who lived more than five miles from city hall (17 percent)

Statistically speaking, this is just another way of saying that political power is highly concentrated within the central city.

Minority voter choices not heeded

Although minority representation on the city council has been sufficient to stave off legal intervention, informed observers will note that the minority members elected were not put in office on the strength of their support in the minority communities, but by the Anglo community.



Longtime political consultant William R. "Peck" Young, now director of Austin Community College's [Center for Public Policy and Political Studies](#), underscored this phenomenon immediately after the May 31, 1997, council runoff elections, which were won by African American Willie Lewis and Anglo Bill Spelman.

In an opinion piece published in the *Austin American-Statesman* June 4, 1997, "Racial paternalism must yield to single-member district voting," Young noted that Eric Mitchell, an African American elected in 1994 and running for reelection, and Manuel Zuniga, a wealthy Latino seeking election, were both heavily supported within their respective minority voting precincts. Yet both lost.

Peck Young "...the white majority finally and irrefutably demonstrated that the selection of the minority representatives is the white majority's prerogative and the ethnic communities' preferences are not determinative," Young wrote. "What this says to blacks and browns is simply that you will be heard at City Hall, but we will choose your voice."

This has always been the case—if for no other reason than the Anglo (white non-Latino) population vastly outnumbers the minority populations.

While the Anglo population has declined from 61.7 percent of the population in 1990 to 48.7 percent in 2010, according to the [City of Austin Demographic Profile](#), and Latino population has grown from 22.8 percent to 35.1 percent in the same two decades, Anglos historically have shown a far greater tendency to actually cast votes.

African-American population fell from 11.9 percent in 1990 to 7.7 percent in 2010, while Asian-American population grew from 3.3 percent to 6.3 percent in the same period. The Voting Rights Act, however, treats only African Americans and Latinos as protected classes.

Though the African-American population has been in a long-term decline it still must be factored into any

proposal for council districts to provide for representation.

‘Statesman’ editorial unrealistic

The *Austin American-Statesman* published an editorial yesterday, “Council, ensure fair election debate,” that is at best naive.

This article states that proponents of a system of geographic council districts and some at-large positions, including Mayor Lee Leffingwell, are wrong in thinking that system would provide better geographic representation than the current at-large system.

“Though well intended, they are misguided,” the article states. “The reason certain areas of the city lack representation on the council is not because of a lack of voter opportunity; it’s because of a lack of voter participation.

“The problem could easily be resolved if more people from all areas of Austin would vote.”

While increased voter turnout would be good for any number of reasons, no amount of voting is going to provide representation to candidates that come from less affluent areas of the city or minority candidates, neither of which are usually able to muster the resources to organize an effective campaign and reach the larger population with their messages.

As long as Anglos greatly outnumber minorities and continue to possess significantly more resources and influence, the at-large system will continue to produce the skewed results reflected over the past 40 years. To think otherwise is akin to believing that doing the same thing over and over again will produce a different result.

Disclaimer: While all of these statistical conclusions are relevant and helpful in understanding the results of how political power has been wielded in Austin, no effort was made to analyze the residence locations of the many hundreds of candidates who unsuccessfully ran for mayor and council positions.

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