

# Civic Engagement in Austin

VIEWS ON 10-1 GEOGRAPHIC  
REPRESENTATION

N O V E M B E R 2 0 1 5





## Executive Summary

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In November of 2014, Austin elected its city council under a new system of geographic representation. Ten City Council members were elected, each representing a newly drawn geographic district, along with a new Mayor. Many community leaders and groups supported this transition to a “10-1” system in hopes that it would open opportunities for diverse city council candidates, improve voter turnout, and increase the sense of connection between city council members and their constituents.

From January to April 2015, 172 Austinites from all ten districts were interviewed by the 60 members of the Leadership Austin Essential Class of 2015. The interviewees included citizens and community leaders, former candidates for city council, and all sitting members of the current city council. These interviews explored the ways Austin’s citizens are interacting with their communities, their thoughts about levels of engagement with city government among people in their districts, and their hopes and concerns for Austin’s new system of geographic representation.

While a range of views were expressed, some themes emerged strongly from these interviews:

- A sense of cautious optimism about the promise of Austin’s new 10-1 system to improve the representativeness and responsiveness of city government, tempered by concern about low or uneven levels of political participation across the city.
- A concern about socioeconomic, racial, and political divides across and within districts – the sense that the city may be far from “one Austin” – along with the hope that geographic representation can help close those divides.
- A sense that the 10-1 system should not be judged too quickly and that time will be needed to assess and perfect it, but also a sense that additional changes need to be put in place immediately to realize 10-1’s promise of creating a new relationship between the public and city government.

This report briefly explains how geographic representation came to Austin, paying particular attention to the city’s history of uneven and declining political participation and imbalanced ethnic and racial representation in city government. It then describes how Austinites from across the city view the transition to 10-1—their hopes, concerns, and suggestions for improvement.



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## How This Report Was Produced

The thoughts, concerns, and ideas captured in this report come from interviews conducted with 172 Austinites from January to April 2015. The interviews were conducted in person by the 60 members of the Leadership Austin Essential Class of 2015. Essential students came from a variety of backgrounds and community leadership positions. Each year the group completes a community engagement project designed to hone professional skills and better understand the greater Austin community. This year the Essential Class worked in small teams to interview candidates, residents, and other stakeholders from each of Austin's new geographic districts.

The 172 people interviewed included 30 candidates for city council, all 10 sitting council members, and a variety of community stakeholders from homeowners associations, advocacy organization, nonprofits, local businesses, and other community groups.

The major criterion for each stakeholder interview was that the individual have a strong personal and/or professional interest in the well-being and community engagement of that district.

Effort was made to gather roughly equal numbers of interviews from each district. A summary of the interviews conducted is shown in Table 1.

Each interview followed the same questionnaire, which included questions about the interviewee's own history of civic engagement, their thoughts about levels of engagement with city government among people in their districts, and their hopes and concerns for Austin's new system of geographic representation. The interviewers aimed to create a conversation with their subjects, so each interview could differ slightly from the rest, but every interviewee was asked the same basic set of questions. Except in a few cases, the individuals interviewed have not been identified by name in this report.

Interview transcripts and notes, with any personal identifying information redacted, were analyzed by the staff of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, an organized research unit at The University of Texas at Austin. The Institute analyzed the material to find patterns of responses and ideas, along with areas in which there was disagreement across interviews. No pre-conceived ideas guided this analysis, though the interview questionnaire was constructed around a strong interest in the new 10-1 system and in prospects for improved civic engagement in Austin.

**Table 1: Interviews conducted for this report, by district**

DISTRICT	CANDIDATES	STAKEHOLDERS	COUNCIL MEMBER	TOTAL
1	3	11	1	15
2	1	10	1	12
3	3	9	1	13
4	5	13	1	19
5	3	15	1	19
6	3	12	1	16
7	5	12	1	18
8	3	14	1	18
9	2	18	1	21
10	2	18	1	21
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>172</b>

# A Turning Point for Austin: The New 10-1 System

## Why 10-1?

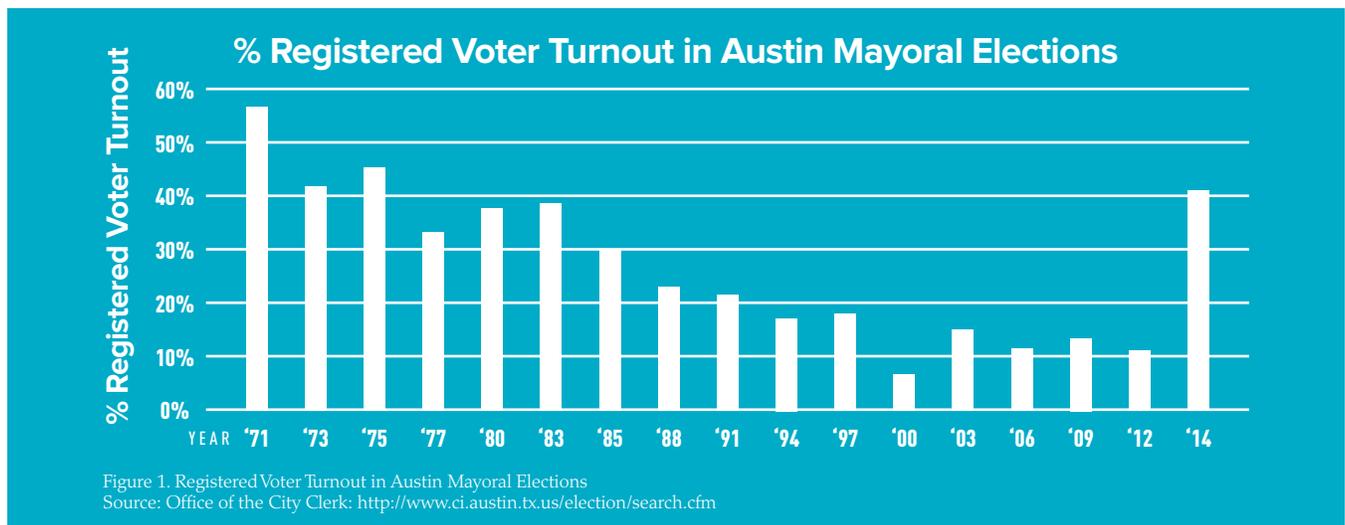
From 1953 until November of 2014, Austin city government operated with an at-large system of elections for City Council. Under that system, six members were elected by the whole city electorate to sit on the City Council with the Mayor. Austin was one of the last few major American cities of its size to use at-large representation rather than geographic representation in city government.<sup>1</sup> Under geographic representation, cities are divided into districts that each elects a representative, similar to the system for electing representatives to state and federal legislatures.

**Concern about bias in the at-large system.** Since the early 1970s, under Austin’s prior system, city council operated under an unofficial “gentlemen’s agreement” that allotted two seats for racial and ethnic minorities. The agreement reserved one seat, Place 6, for an African American representative and another, Place 2, for a Latino/Hispanic representative.<sup>2</sup> Many observers agree that these predetermined seats made Austin’s City Council unrepresentative of the city’s diverse and growing populace, including the city’s African-

American community and its growing Latino/Hispanic community. As the Texas Monthly observed in 2013, “In the past forty years, half the city council members and fifteen of seventeen mayors have been from four zip codes west of I-35, an area that is home to just a tenth of the city’s population.”<sup>3</sup>

Austin’s at-large system was therefore viewed by many as a relic of the days when white majorities reacted to the entrance of minorities into the political sphere, “within the legal boundaries of the Voting Rights Act, by changing electoral rules so as to minimize expected minority influence.”<sup>4</sup> Austin’s at-large system reflected research showing that in many cities, at-large elections introduce an upper-middle class bias to urban politics.<sup>5</sup>

Many observers also believe that this at-large system was at least partly responsible for Austin’s declining political participation. According to the Texas Observer, elections under the “gentlemen’s agreement” became predictable, and voter turnout fell dramatically. Citing a 2009 study by Austin Community College’s Center for Public Policy and Political Studies<sup>6</sup>, journalist Michael Kanin explains, “In 1971, not long before the gentlemen’s agreement was forged, 56.8 percent of registered Austin voters showed up at the polls... turnout then began a steep decline. By 2009, just 13 percent of voters turned out. In 2011, a mere 7.4 percent of eligible Austinites bothered to vote in city elections.”<sup>7</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Kanin, Mike. “What’s Left?” Texas Observer, December 2, 2013. <http://www.texasobserver.org/whats-left/>

<sup>2</sup> Samuels, Katherine. December, 2008. “Single-Member Districts in Austin.” University of Texas, LBJ School of Public Affairs. <http://www.soa.utexas.edu/files/gis/AnalysisSMDsAustin.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Balli, Cecilia. “What Nobody Says About Austin.” Texas Monthly, February 2013. <http://www.texasmonthly.com/story/what-nobody-says-about-austin>

<sup>4</sup> Aghion, Philippe, Alberto Alesina, and Francesco Trebbi. “Choosing Electoral Rules: Theory and Evidence from US Cities.” Harvard Institute of Economic Research, March 2005. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=690761](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=690761).

<sup>5</sup> Welch, S. (1990). The Impact of At-Large Elections on the Representation of Blacks and Hispanics. Journal of Politics, 52(4).

<sup>6</sup> Young, William “Peck”. “Study of the City of Austin’s Voter Turnout in Austin City Council Elections.” ACC Center for Public Policy & Political Studies: Office of External Affairs, Sept. 2009. <http://www.austinctc.edu/cppps/pdfs/voterturnoutincityelections09.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Kanin, Mike. “What’s Left?” Texas Observer, December 2, 2013. <http://www.texasobserver.org/whats-left/>

Moreover, voter turnout in Austin has been disproportionately Caucasian. For example, in the highest turnout precincts in the 2009 municipal elections, over 90% of voters identified themselves as white.<sup>8</sup> This in a city which, according to the 2010 Census, 48.7% of residents are Caucasian, 35.1% are Hispanic or Latino, and 8.1% are African American.<sup>9</sup>



## Choosing 10-1

For decades, many city leaders called for the removal of the “gentlemen’s agreement,” claiming that it stifled minority representation. Community leaders like former Council member Mike Martinez claimed that the “gentleman’s agreement” was a barrier to entry for Latino and African American representation.<sup>10</sup> Declining voter turnout reinforced claims that the at-large structure of Austin City Council was no longer representative of the population. Groups including the League of Women Voters of the Austin Area and the Austin Neighborhoods Council called for a change to geographic representation, claiming that the previous system restricted representation and limited opportunities for less connected candidates. Many proponents believe that geographic representation can improve the quality of government by increasing the sense of connection between council members and citizens.

In 2012, Austin voters were presented with two options for changing the at-large system. Proposition 3 proposed a switch to ten single-member districts based on geographic location and one mayor elected at-large. Proposition 4 also proposed an eleven-member council, but eight council members would be elected from individual districts and two would be elected at-large,

creating a “hybrid” council that, its proponents argued, would reduce the chances for “ward politics” driven by competing interests of districts.<sup>11</sup> Both propositions garnered over 50% of the vote; however, 51.1% of voters chose Proposition 4, while 60.1% of voters chose Proposition 3.<sup>12</sup>

Following the passage of Proposition 3, a fourteen-member Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission was tasked with dividing the city into ten distinct districts of equal population. After a series of public hearings and meetings from August to November 2013 and significant plan revisions, the commission determined the finalized ten districts made up of roughly 80,000 people each.<sup>13</sup>

Another ballot measure also passed in 2012. Proposition 1 permanently moved the date of city council elections from early May to November to coincide with state and federal elections that typically attract higher voter turnout. Together, proponents argued, these two changes to the elections system allowing voters to choose from candidates to represent specific geographic districts and holding city elections in the fall—could foster greater political participation in Austin.

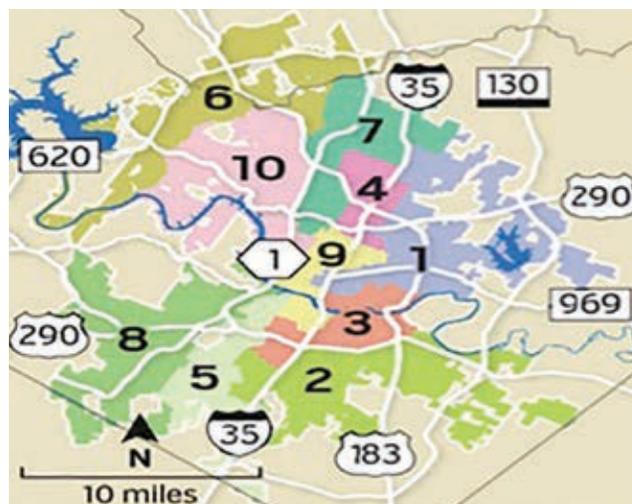


Figure 1. Registered Voter Turnout in Austin Mayoral Elections  
Source: Office of the City Clerk: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/election/search.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> Young, p.7.

<sup>9</sup> United States Census Bureau. “State & County Quickfacts.” US Census Bureau. July 8, 2014. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4805000.html>

<sup>10</sup> Guerra, David. “Hispanic Leaders Call for Change to Gentlemen’s Agreement—Just not yet.” KUT News. April 23, 2012. <http://kut.org/post/hispanic-leaders-call-change-gentlemens-agreement-just-not-yet>

<sup>11</sup> Dunbar, Wells. “Everything You Need to Know About Prop 3 and Prop 4.” KUT. October 23, 2012. <http://kut.org/post/everything-you-need-know-about-prop-3-and-prop-4>

<sup>12</sup> City of Austin. “City’s Demographic Maps Library.” <http://www.austintexas.gov/page/demographic-maps>

<sup>13</sup> Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission (ICRC). “Austin Redistricting.” <http://www.austinredistricting.org/>; City of Austin. “10-ONE City of Austin Council Districts”. Austintexas.gov. <http://austintexas.gov/department/10-one>.

## The 2014 Elections

If one of the aims of geographic representation is to increase diversity on City Council, 10-1 might provisionally be called a success, based on the 2014 elections. The newly elected City Council is more diverse than past councils. Seventy candidates ran for City Council and eight ran for the mayor's office. Following the general election in November, seven out of ten races went to runoffs in December, including the mayoral race. Voters elected three Latino members and one African American member. There are now seven female members, including Mayor Pro-Tem Kathie Tovo. The new system also (at least temporarily) largely eliminated incumbent advantage, as Tovo is the only member of the new council who has previously served.

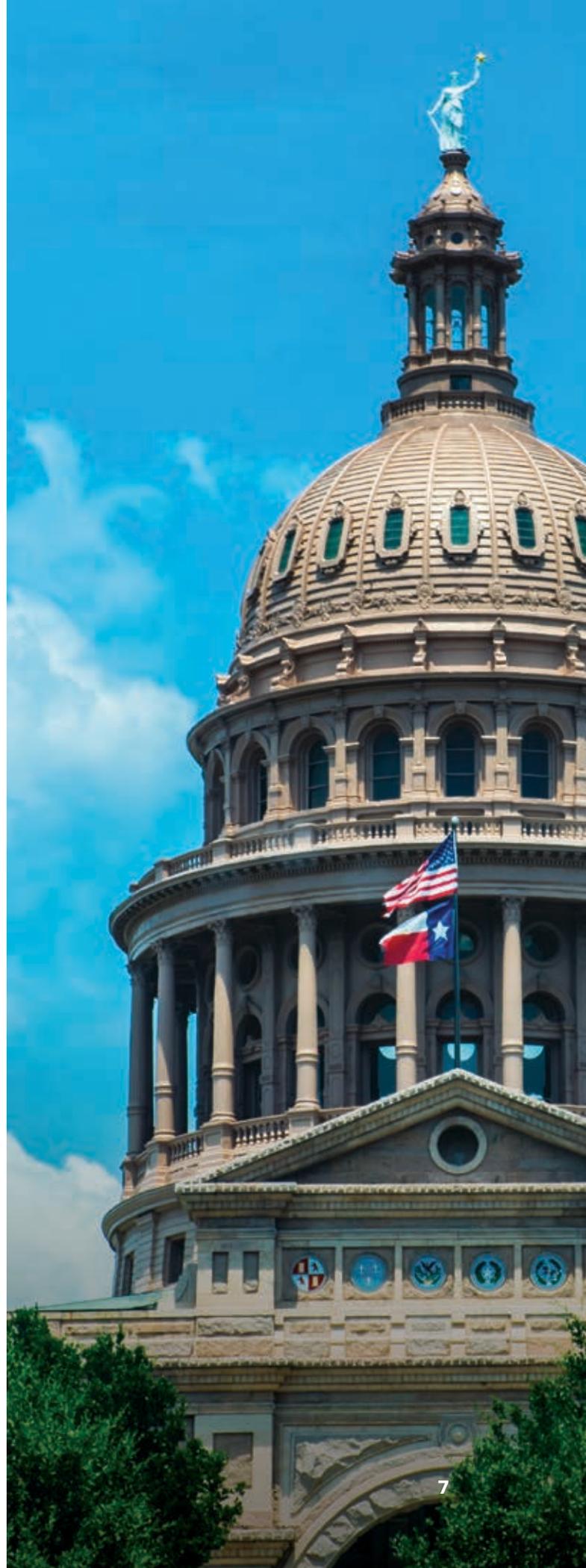
As proponents had hoped, voter turnout also improved in 2014. It is not entirely clear, however, whether the transition to 10-1 itself increased turnout, or whether that was mainly due to moving the date of city elections to coincide with the fall general elections. Whatever the cause, the 2014 election had the highest turnout for a mayoral contest since 1975: 40.4% of registered voters (see Table 2); however, the December 16th run-off election in which seven of the ten council seats were ultimately chosen, drew a turnout of only 15.6%.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 2: City of Austin Voter Turnout November 4, 2014, by district<sup>15</sup>**

DISTRICT	REGISTERED VOTERS	BALLOTS CAST	PERCENT TURNOUT
1	44,508	16,597	37.29%
2	35,108	10,600	30.19%
3	42,736	13,277	31.07%
4	28,845	10,127	35.11%
5	59,231	26,246	44.31%
6	67,835	22,288	32.86%
7	54,753	24,520	44.78%
8	55,377	26,628	48.08%
9	65,809	24,916	37.86%
10	63,516	33,941	53.44%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>517,718</b>	<b>209,140</b>	<b>40.40%</b>

<sup>14</sup> City of Austin. "Election History." <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/election/search.cfm>

<sup>15</sup> Travis County Clerk. "Travis County Election Results." <http://travisselectionresults.com>





## Views on 10-1 from Across Austin

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The long-term effects of 10-1 on candidate diversity and voter turnout remain to be seen. Moreover, if the third aim of geographic representation is to improve the quality of government by enhancing citizen connections with city council, it is probably too early to judge whether that goal has been achieved.

What is clear is that geographic representation presents new opportunities and challenges for a rapidly growing city. This report will now explore those opportunities and challenges through the eyes of Austinites themselves.

Three patterns emerged strongly from our interviews:

- A sense of **cautious optimism** about the promise of Austin's new 10-1 system to improve the representativeness and responsiveness of city government, tempered by **concern about low or uneven levels of political participation** across the city.

- A **concern about socioeconomic, racial, and political divides across and within districts** – the sense that the city may be far from “one Austin” – along with the hope that geographic representation can help close those divides.

- A sense that **the 10-1 system should not be judged too quickly** and that time will be needed to assess and perfect it, but also a sense that **additional changes need to be put in place immediately to realize 10-1's promise** of creating a new relationship between the public and city government.

The 172 Austinites interviewed for this report are highly engaged in their communities. They serve and lead a variety of community organizations, sit on school boards and city commissions, have raised families and grown businesses rooted in their communities, and some have even run for office. Each conversation began by asking how they define “civic engagement” and how they personally have been civically engaged. Our interviews revealed a rich civic life in communities around Austin.

## Cautiously Optimistic

### Feeling “part of the process”

Our interviewees across the districts see tremendous value in community involvement, but many have struggled to connect that work and the issues they care about to the political and policy process. A consistent theme across districts was the question of how to connect city government back to community groups and causes.

One—though by no means the only—reason our interviewees stated for that disconnect between community involvement and political participation is that city government in Austin has often seemed unrepresentative and unresponsive. Many of the people interviewed for this report expressed hope for greater representation and an improved relationship between the public and city government as a result of Austin’s transition to geographic representation. Some believe that having city council members come from geographic districts will improve the sense of connection between council members and their constituents. As one stakeholder from District 6 put it, under 10-1 “the representative only has to listen to 80,000 people instead of a million.”

Quite a few of the people interviewed believed that their districts’ residents will feel more “part of the process” now that city council is not, as one stakeholder put it, “run by Tarrytown.” For example, one 2014 candidate described how flooding at Williamson Creek could be remedied if the city were to clear brush and debris from the creek and drainage system. The “neighborhood [couldn’t] get traction” on that problem under the old system, he said, but now the community can engage with their district council member to try to fix the problem.

A stakeholder from District 2 gave a more pointed example: “When I was a child, a friend’s mother called 911 because of a drive-by shooting, and the police said they don’t come to Dove Springs. If we had had a council member down the street, we could have called them and asked, ‘What are you going to do about it? Otherwise we’re not going to vote for you next time.’”

A few people we interviewed did not see things this way, however, arguing that geographic representation leaves them feeling less able to influence city

government. As one stakeholder from District 3 said about support for 10-1 in her community:

*“It was pretty divided in the community. I was personally against it...I felt like I had more entrée into the system before because more council members seemed to care about issues I cared about. If I had a problem, I could frame it in multiple ways, and more council members may have been willing to hear about it. Now that I have one council member – why would the other nine care about me? It feels like I have the ear of one-tenth of the council, but before I could get more to hear me.”*

Another stakeholder from District 5 said:

*“While [10-1 is] designed to [create] more contact, you still could face barriers depending on who your city council member is. If there is no satisfaction, what do you do? In the previous model, you could hop around to a different member. Now, if you just have one person to go to, it cuts down on your opportunity for involvement and engagement.”*

Overall, however, most people we spoke with expressed cautious optimism that 10-1 will improve the representation of Austin’s diverse communities and reduce the sense that city council is dominated by a narrow slice of the city’s population. Overall, many seemed to agree that defined geographic districts create more defined constituencies for representatives to address.

*“My District definitely embraced the [transition]. 10-1 was a huge benefit for areas east of I-35 that have traditionally been unrepresented.”*  
(District 3 stakeholder)

*“For years, Austin kept an at-large system with a gentleman’s agreement to keep one Black and one Latino on the council. The 10-1 election was open. People were involved. People really did hit the streets and did door-to-door campaigning. When we had council people who lived in Districts 9 or 10, they never walked the streets of Dove Springs.”*  
(District 2 stakeholder)

*“I love it. There was no representation for us out here. Now candidates have to come to us and get our issues and problems or we’ll vote them out.”*  
(District 4 stakeholder)

*"I saw Austin changing in ways that I did not like. We have grown as a city but our solutions have not. With limited public input, we are like an oligarchy. I took this on [because] somebody had to represent the people who live outside the urban core." (District 5 candidate)*

*"10-1 was a natural evolution that has long been needed... Loud voices have always carried undue weight and dominated conversation. We should hear more voices now." (District 9 stakeholder)*

## **Increasing political participation**

Many interviewees believe that 10-1 will improve levels of political participation in their districts. Indeed, quite a few said they had personally seen greater interest in the 2014 city council election because of 10-1. As one recently-elected council member put it, "I absolutely do believe that the 10-1 is critical to engagement. I believe this with even more certainty after running."

*"The move was good overall and desperately needed. It is the first time I saw my neighborhood, Avery Ranch, actively participate in the election process." (District 6 stakeholder)*

*"[10-1] let more people know that they truly have a voice and that they can make a difference. Once I saw that I could just make a phone call to talk to a council member face-to-face, I wanted to vote that much more. It's like it made it real." (District 3 stakeholder)*

The exceptions to this pattern were found in a few interviews with people from districts with already high levels of turnout, and from districts with historically low levels, who think more than just the change to 10-1 will be required to boost participation in their communities. For example, one stakeholder from District 8 said,

*"I live in a rather affluent community with a higher voter turn-out than most other areas in Austin. Thus, I don't believe the 10-1 system really had a significant impact on civic engagement in our neighborhood as much as it may in other areas of the city. I do believe it will provide greater opportunity for other communities to be represented and may encourage more to become involved locally."*

A District 4 candidate said:

*"... there's only a handful of people that are running everything. I think there's only a small proportion of people who know we switched to 10-1 even though they got 100 robo calls, but the robo calls probably only go to the people who voted... So the robo calls were just bugging the people who already knew, and the people who didn't vote, who aren't already involved, they still don't know."*

## **Motivating more candidates to run**

Many mentioned that under geographic representation it has become easier and less expensive for candidates to reach out to voters. Some also observed that less expensive campaigns would help equalize representation, making it more possible for less affluent candidates to seek office. As one District 10 candidate said approvingly about 10-1, "I ran in 2012 under the at-large system and there was no way to reach every constituent due to time and money limitations."

In fact, various sitting council members and candidates said that the change to 10-1 was what motivated them to run for office. As one council member said, "If you are running at-large, the budget is huge. You can do it for considerably less than that in a smaller area. I would never have run for city council without the 10-1 opportunity."

Some also expressed satisfaction with other benefits of 10-1, such as giving voters more candidates to choose from. One sitting councilmember observed, "The fact that there were nine candidates [in my district] was an indicator that it worked." A District 9 stakeholder said of the election overall, "I think having 71 or 72 candidates was a good thing. It was muddy...but you can't say there weren't a lot of choices."

## **Will 10-1 bring lasting change?**

Not all the people we interviewed agreed that 10-1 spurred greater citizen engagement. In fact, as we explore further below, many were disappointed with what they saw as lackluster voter turnout in their districts in 2014. A few worried that the changed timing of city elections will actually make it harder for city candidates to win voters' attention on a long and crowded ballot.

Overall, however, most interviewees expressed some degree of optimism about 10-1 and satisfaction with its preliminary results. Most seemed to believe 10-1 can help bring more responsive leadership to the city council. Many also observed, however, that time will be needed for the new system to solidify and problems with it addressed.

Some interviewees expressed concern about a new city council made up of relatively inexperienced members. Many said that the new city council, and the new structure for electing it, need to be given time to develop and to improve. On the other hand, quite a few said that the new council members seem collegial, hard working, and earnest about improving how city government operates. And some said that the new council's lack of experience was a plus, since they cannot fall back on "old" ways of operating. As one District 3 stakeholder said, "As time goes by, we'll find the kinks in the 10-1 system that have to be worked out."

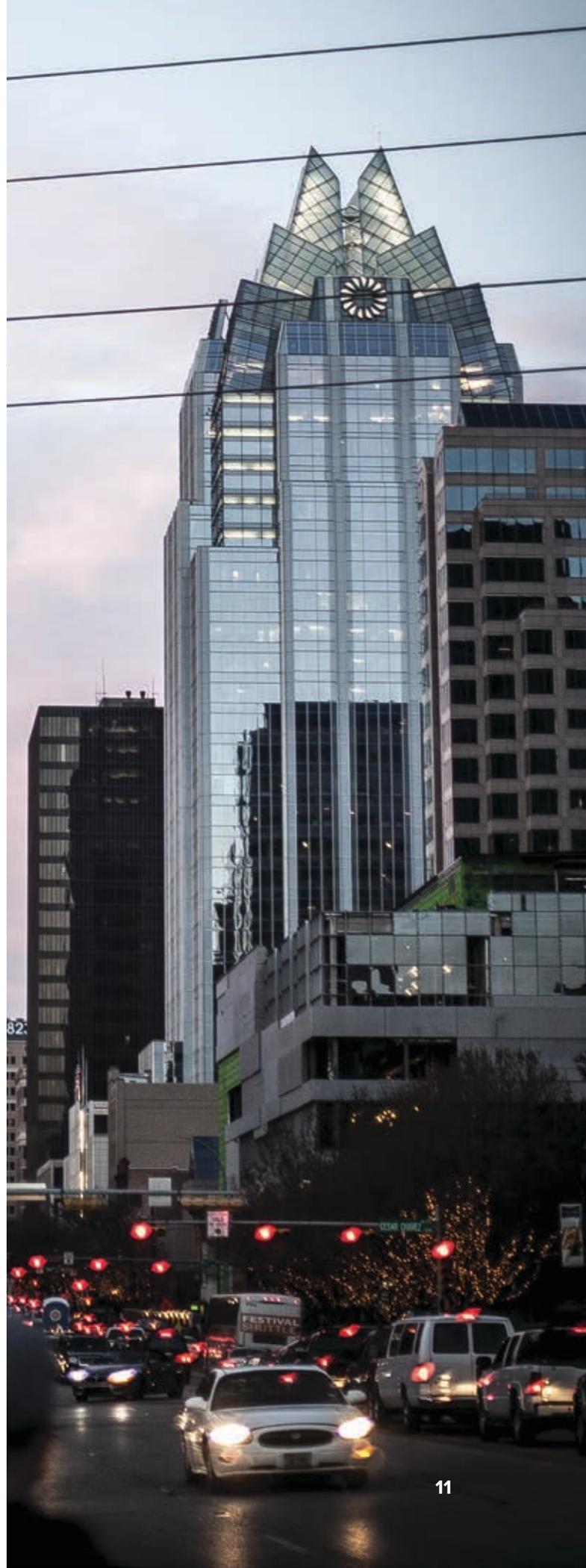
But some were skeptical about whether 10-1 will bring about fundamental and positive change.

*"This 10-1 system is going to take time. The former council did nothing on civic engagement in this district so there's a lot of work to do. People need to be listened to and they need to see that voting matters more than it used to." (District 3 stakeholder)*

*"I hope that council members won't just try to get to know the community right before election time. They need to be engaged monthly." (District 2 stakeholder)*

*"In theory, 10-1 is great as it gives more of a voice to folks. In practice, I have a fear that folks will only care about their district rather than Austin overall. It is possible that council will become focused more on horse trading or blocking rather than working together for the greater good." (District 6 stakeholder)*

Among quite a few interviewees, hopes for 10-1 were tempered by longstanding concerns about how the Austin city government has conducted its business. Many said the processes for citizens to give input to city council need to change. Some were skeptical that they will. Many interviewees said, for example, that city council meetings have been held at inconvenient times, have been dominated by a narrow swath of voices and interests, and have not been followed with responsive



candidate's district, and many commented on how long and detailed the questionnaires were. A few did say that answering the questionnaires prepared them to answer questions raised at public forums.

One recently-elected council member said, "As a candidate, you had to make a decision whether to complete another questionnaire, or shake hands and meet voters and knock on doors." Another said, "You have to hire people just to fill out all these forms, and they get very specific because they're looking for a specific stance. Overall, there were simply too many questionnaires." And as one unsuccessful candidate put it,

*"It's like writing a book during the busiest time of your life. Yet no one ever said to me, 'Oh, I read your response online...!' So there was no obvious benefit. I can see some conceptual value, but in practice, I never saw an impact."*

Some of the candidates we interviewed offered suggestions for improving the campaign process in the future. Several suggested combining questionnaires and forums on behalf of broader, city-wide coalitions of groups. Others suggested streamlining the timing of questionnaires and forums so that candidates can address broader city-wide issues first, then hone in on their own district as voters start paying attention close to the election.

## **Lackluster engagement in 2014**

Despite the many ways they see Austinites contributing to their communities, many interviewees' optimism about 10-1 was tempered with concerns about low voter engagement. One sitting council member said, "Those of us that are active civically think everyone is engaged civically. What becomes apparent in an election is that civic engagement is lower than we wish it could be."

As discussed further below, interviewees gave many reasons for low political participation in Austin. Some highlighted a lack of knowledge about the new system; others suggested voters might be unsure where to vote or frustrated by long lines and complex ballots; and others cited a general lack of socialization about the importance of political participation or the difficulties of political participation for low income and non-English speaking citizens. Overall, while some respondents

were enthusiastic about the public response to 10-1, many others were disappointed with what they saw as public disengagement with city politics and government. As one District 9 candidate shared,

*"I used to think that people in Austin were super engaged. But when I started block walking, people had no idea about 10-1. They didn't know what it meant and needed a lot of education. They were not aware. It really surprised me."*

Each interviewee was asked to rank civic engagement in the city of Austin on a scale of one to ten (with ten being highly engaged). Though some respondents questioned their ability to assess Austin's engagement compared to other cities, and some questioned the value of trying to assign a number to it, overall, respondents gave civic engagement in Austin an average ranking of just over 5. There was wide variation across these responses, however. Many seemed to believe that civic engagement needs to improve, though some argued that Austin's civic engagement is better than that of most other cities.

One stakeholder from District 8 expressed a view that quite a few of our interviewees seemed to agree with:

*"Austin has a reputation of high community engagement but [voter] turnout doesn't reflect that." But some were more positive, such as the stakeholder from District 9 who ranked Austin's engagement at 5 out of 10: "Despite abysmal turnout, the passion and commitment of those that do turn out and help is amazing."*

Another stakeholder from District 10, who ranked civic engagement in Austin at 8, said, "on the things that matter, there are really committed people that are involved. Non-elected leadership is important and very active in our community." Some spoke of higher engagement in their own neighborhoods because of demographics (e.g. higher average education levels) or because their neighborhoods are "ground zero," as one respondent put it, for changes happening in the city.

Many of our interviewees said that a few citizens are highly engaged while the majority of citizens are not. Many also pointed out a disparity between levels of community involvement and levels of political participation.



*"I would give it a failing grade - not more than 4. ... Unless you have money and influence, your voice does not mean anything." (District 4 stakeholder)*

*"My instinct is to say a 3, but I will actually give it a 4.5. There is a bunch of people who could come together but need to be motivated or leveraged to do it. So they trust the engaged folks to represent them. But there is only a handful that are very engaged in fighting for issues." (District 3 stakeholder)*

*"Austin as a whole has certain people who attend all public forums. They tend to be the loudest voices and the ones who shape policy. But the general public is not engaged, so I give the city a 4." (District 2 stakeholder)*

*"7.5... We don't vote, but we do speak up, give money and engage in other ways." (District 9 stakeholder)*

*"[I'd give it an 8] because we have huge numbers of civic organizations and nonprofits, lots of groups providing services. Austin is doing better than most places. Still, the percentage of voter turn out is too low." (District 7 stakeholder)*

We explore Austinites' attitudes toward civic and political engagement in more depth in the last section of this report.

## One Austin or A City Divided?

A key question for Austin's future is whether 10-1 will improve or exacerbate socioeconomic, racial, political, and lifestyle divides across the city. Will a more representative city council allow Austin to become a more unified city, or will geographic representation devolve into "ward politics" pitting sections of the

city against one another? Will the more diverse city council consider a broader array of perspectives on the city issues, or will council members beholden to districts lose sight of the bigger picture? Will greater diversification of city council continue in future elections, or will minorities ultimately hold fewer seats at the table? At a more basic level, will Austin's new geographic districts form coherent and inclusive identities, or will these new districts feel artificial to the people living inside them?

Our interviews revealed different attitudes, civic habits, and experiences across districts, as well as a lack of awareness—or at least a perceived lack of awareness—of citizen concerns. The theme of disparities across the city came up repeatedly in our interviews.

*"The city is not one city anymore. Different parts of the city are dramatically different from others in terms of civic engagement. Parts of the city are super engaged. There are parts that are almost proactively encouraged not to engage." (District 6 candidate)*

*"There's a very small number of people in the city who are actively engaged and a certain percentage who are not engaged at all. ... We often hear from a vocal minority of loud people; they do not always represent the vast majority." (District 10 stakeholder)*

*"If you live downtown or in Mueller, it is a 10. If you live in other neighborhoods, it is a 3." (District 7 stakeholder)*

*"It's a tale of two cities – in west Austin it could be 7 or 8 due to access to resources, but in east Austin it could be 1 to 2 because some people don't even know where to talk about their needs and who to talk to." (District 1 stakeholder)*

In some districts, feelings of alienation from city government were acute—particularly in District 6, where, as one interviewee put it, people had been “annexed against their will.” A candidate from that district told us, “The...surprising thing was that people assume people in District 6 don’t care about Austin and want to be left alone. But, when you talk to people about city issues, they are passionate. They want to be heard but don’t feel like that is happening. That was both surprising and encouraging.”

### ***Districts in name only?***

Many interviewees also described lack of awareness and identity within the new districts. Some critiqued the way district boundaries had been drawn, which they felt created oddly-constructed districts that did not reflect natural or already-existing communities. One former candidate from District 8, for example, said that her district “never had a unifying topic to develop us as a community,” in contrast to some other areas of the city whose “personality” developed around common issues, she said.

A District 4 candidate noted that over 50 languages are spoken in her district and that many people lack Internet access, making it difficult for people to get involved. Others noted that some districts are dispersed, making it hard to schedule community meetings that are convenient for everyone in the district to attend. “In District 9, for example,” said one stakeholder, “most people are north of river, but some are south so there isn’t going to be anywhere to meet that would service everyone – any location would be convenient for some and not for others.”

Some mentioned explicitly that racial and ethnic differences are a source of tension in their districts. This same former candidate observed, “This is not easy to say...our community is not comfortable with race issues yet.” One recently-elected council member observed that, “the way the conversation around Austin’s racial history unfolded among the candidates was interesting. At first, no one wanted to talk about the challenges.” Some are concerned that 10-1 will not meaningfully increase representation for minorities.

For example, one interviewee from District 7 speaking about Muslim communities noted that 10-1 “may help



where certain minority communities are concentrated, but if there are minorities outside of a district with a high concentration of those minorities, then they may not have representation.”

## Concerns about ‘ward politics’

Some interviewees expressed concern that geographic representation will open the door to “ward politics,” balkanizing the city and reducing incentives for cooperation. A few noted that they had supported the 8-2-1 plan (Proposition 4) rather than the 10-1 plan (Proposition 3) because they thought it would better protect the interests of the city overall. Others were worried that individual council members won’t stay updated on neighborhood issues that might be of concern to citizens outside their own districts. As one stakeholder from District 10 put it, there’s a danger that “if I am in [District] 10 why would I want to help [District] 4?”

*“In theory 10-1 is a great format, but...we are an area with a big Latino population that does not have a voice at the table, so they have a wait and see attitude toward the results of this change. City council members will need to be diligent about representing all interests rather than specific interests.” (District 10 stakeholder)*

*“A number of people felt like I did—that neighborhoods within the city were being pitted against each other and not looking at policy in terms of what was best for the city as a whole, not just their geographical district.” (District 9 stakeholder)*

*“We...have to get with other districts to get six votes [on city council]. People don’t understand that even though you work with our councilwoman, she’s not the only one who can make it happen. Every other district is going to need six votes too! The whole community needs to work together.” (District 2 stakeholder)*

*“The opportunity for 10-1 is finally getting our issues heard. The challenge will be whether anybody else will care.” (District 6 candidate)*

*“The most important thing to me is the leadership - not just in their district - that they understand their civic duties for the good of the community as a whole. [Leaders will need] to think bigger than just ‘me and my district’ - to think about the whole community.” (District 10 stakeholder)*

Some, however, saw these challenges in a more positive light. Many interviewees clearly supported 10-1 because they believe it has the potential to close gaps among Austin’s many diverse communities and create a more unified city—or at least a more inclusive city government. As one councilmember put it, “You can’t just have one-size-fits-all City that just operates from downtown.” A District 9 stakeholder stated a similar view: “One opportunity overall might be to recognize and acknowledge those differences. This may be an opportunity to talk together and work together to optimize decisions.”

## The Moment Is Now

The third major theme to arise from our interviews was the sense that Austin is poised at a unique moment in its history, with the city’s future hanging in the balance. Many Austinites we interviewed expressed fervent concerns about how city government has been run in the past and hopes for how it could be different if this moment is seized.

Academic studies suggest that the effects of transformed city elections on political participation are not guaranteed. In fact, some studies suggest that the switch to geographic representation does not in and of itself boost citizen engagement. Initial increases in voter turnout brought about by the shift may level off rather quickly and long-term patterns of low participation may prevail, particularly as incumbents establish themselves, creating “safe” uncontested districts.<sup>16</sup>

***Those research findings combined with our interviews raise an urgent question: How can Austin seize this opportunity to reboot civic engagement and improve city government?***

## Re-engaging Austin Voters

As noted above, the majority of interviewees were at least somewhat disappointed in levels of voter turnout and citizen engagement in 2014.

*“I’ve found that where I live now in east Austin, people are much more engaged than where I grew up. But the majority of people don’t know or don’t believe that they have a voice.” (District 3 stakeholder)*

<sup>16</sup> Bullock, C. S. (1990). Turnout in municipal elections. *Review of Policy Research*, 9(3), 539-549; Hajnal, Z. L., & Lewis, P. G. (2003). Municipal institutions and voter turnout in local elections. *Urban Affairs Review*, 38(5), 645-668; Oliver, J. E. (2001). *Democracy in suburbia*. Princeton University Press.



*“My co-millennials just flat out said they weren’t going to vote. I just don’t understand the apathy. Maybe they are jaded about government.” (District 10 stakeholder)*

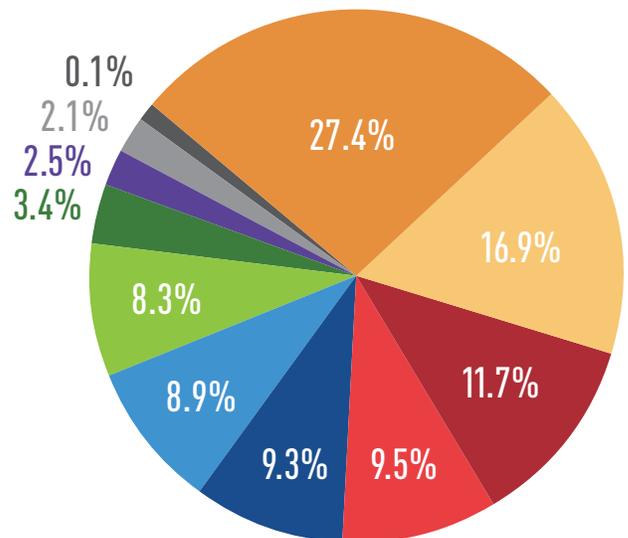
Some respondents were concerned in particular the low turnout in the December run-off elections that decided most city council contests. One candidate from District 8 noted “voter fatigue” during the run-off. “When you called people back, some were almost hostile,” he reported. “Cajoling people to get out and vote, it’s very frustrating.” And an unsuccessful candidate from District 8 said,

*“People aren’t used to having an election in December. There were people who didn’t know there was a run-off on the day of the election. A surprising number of people didn’t even know. That’s probably the barometer for who is truly engaged....We’re doing this grand experiment to increase voter participation, but then we throw a wrench into it by scheduling the run-off in December.”*

### **Why don’t more Austinites vote?**

When asked why they think voter turnout and other forms of civic engagement are so low, some of the reasons our interviewees gave mirrored findings from the Texas Civic Health Index. That report, based on 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data, showed that one of the main reasons nonvoters in Texas give for not voting is that they are too busy or have a conflicting work schedule. Many others say they are not interested or believe that their vote “doesn’t matter.”

### **Reasons Texans Did Not Vote in 2010**



- Too busy, conflicting work (27.4%)
- Not interested, felt vote didn't matter (16.9%)
- Illness or Disability (11.7)
- Out of town or away (9.5%)
- Other (9.3%)
- Didn't like candidates (8.9%)
- Forgot to vote (8.3%)
- Registration problems (3.4%)
- Transportation problems (2.5%)
- Inconvenient hours, polling (2.1%)
- Bad weather conditions (0.1%)

Source: 2010 CPS

Candidates and stakeholders from across Austin’s new districts echoed these concerns—not for themselves,

since most of our interviewees are highly engaged in politics and their communities, but for people in their districts and around the city. Several interviewees noted that Austin is a city of “transplants” and “transients” who have recently moved to Austin and so are not yet socially or politically connected—though a few others believe that these transplants are bringing more active habits of citizenship with them from other regions of the country.

Many noted that economically pressed communities and communities for whom English is not the primary language have less time, ability, motivation, and/or socialization to become more engaged. Some also mentioned that their districts contain large numbers of immigrants, some of whom aren’t eligible to vote. One sitting council member said that over one-third of her district’s population does not have U.S. citizenship.

*“People are working just to make ends meet. Your day is filled with work. Your evening is filled with PTA, children’s activities, and so on. Coming to meetings is foreign. If you look at the audience at meetings, most are over age 60.” (District 2 candidate)*

*“Overall, the more economically disadvantaged you are, the less you are engaged. Many of my families have two jobs, undocumented, and live in poverty. It is very hard for them to vote....Right now, civic engagement is a luxury.” (District 4 stakeholder)*

*“How do you build a community when people are afraid all of the time?... Most of the parents [in my district] are undocumented and afraid of being found out.” (District 4 stakeholder)*

*“Our district has a high percentage of non-English speakers and the highest percentage of people who have lived here less than two years.... Our turnout was second worst.” (District 2 candidate)*

*“Along SES [socioeconomic] lines, there were differences in levels of engagement. The higher the SES, the more likely they knew what was going on. Most didn’t know what district they were in and many didn’t know if they were registered.” (District 4 candidate)*

*“I had to pull teeth to get people to vote. My parents didn’t vote. They are unengaged because of the disparity that their lives are engulfed by.” (District 4 stakeholder)*

Many interviewees also talked about the challenges of becoming informed—particularly in the 2014 city council race in which there were very few incumbents on the ballot and thus less voter familiarity with the candidates. Some also mentioned a lengthy ballot with many races and issues to vote on—a problem for city elections since voting rates typically drop off further down ballot. As one District 10 candidate put it, “People are overwhelmed. It was a huge ballot and voters were asked to do a lot of research.” Some of our interviewees disagreed, however. As one District 8 stakeholder put it, “Uneducated, apolitical, or indifferent people will never vote in an election, period. I think one must have been living under a rock to not know about 10-1. In my opinion, there is nothing more that could have been done to inform Austin citizenry about the election.”

Many we spoke with said that their communities were not very aware of the transition to 10-1. Interviewees related stories of people in their districts who didn’t know what geographic district they live in or weren’t aware of the new way of electing city government. One stakeholder from District 7 said flatly, “We hadn’t really heard anything about 10-1 in our community.” Some said that the city hadn’t done enough to help people understand the change to 10-1 (although not everyone agreed on this point). One council member claimed that, “[The city] spent nearly \$1 million in promoting the bag ban but spent hardly anything to promote the shift to 10-1.”

Many interviewees mentioned a general lack of civic and political knowledge as a factor in low voter turnout. Some related stories of people in their communities who weren’t sure whether they were registered to vote. For example, one candidate from District 4 said, “I was surprised that one of the women in my neighborhood thought that because she had a driver’s license, she was registered to vote. Her level of knowledge surprised me, because she is a very intelligent woman.”

Others mentioned that people in their districts don’t pay attention to the news. As one candidate from District 6 put it, “Nobody really gets the Statesman or Chronicle out here. That lack of city media consumption is challenging.”

Quite a few interviewees also mentioned uncertainty or confusion about polling places and inadequate hours or inconvenient times during which polls were open.

*"We need a polling place on the west side of I-35. Many people walk and our polling place is at Fiesta, which is east of 35. It's too dangerous to walk across the Interstate." (District 2 stakeholder)*

*"Some people had to wait two hours, three hours and more in the rain. That's a long time to expect people to wait. At the main polling place in our area at UT library, although polls closed at 7, when I left at 8:30 the line still wrapped around the building." (District 9 candidate)*

In addition to making voting more convenient, some interviewees also talked about the need for citizens to encourage one another to vote.

One interviewee, a District 1 stakeholder, laid some responsibility at the feet of community leaders:

*"As civic leaders we should feel responsible – because we had the chance to reach out to people and get them involved."*

A District 8 stakeholder said,

*"I think people who are involved need to be more outspoken. We tend to be shy about asking people if they are registered or if they have voted....People need to engage with their neighbors at every opportunity."*

It's worth noting that a few respondents pushed back against the notion that voter turnout is too low or that higher numbers of voters should be the goal, arguing that it's more important to have well-informed voters.

*"Who says more is better? People may show up and not know who the candidate is. An educated voter is a good voter....On game day—do you know where you live? Do you know what district?... An alternative ideal to 100% voter participation is that 100% of participants are people who have come to a decision about their interests with good information." (District 9 stakeholder)*

Ultimately, many people we interviewed might agree with one stakeholder from District 8 who said, "10-1 is a step in the right direction but is far from the ultimate solution" for voter disengagement. However, some of our interviewees also expressed faith in the power of civic involvement—what one District 5 stakeholder described as a "bedrock American value"—to transform

individuals and communities. As one candidate from District 3 put it, "People don't feel their voice is their vote, but that can be changed. Consistent voting increases your own personal power over time."



## **Rebooting Political Participation and Improving City Government**

Many people we spoke with were enthusiastic about the possibilities for 10-1 to increase the sense of connection between political leaders and the public. But many also complained that it was hard for people to become informed in the 2014 election. Many interviewees wanted to see better ways of informing citizens about the candidates, the issues, and the voting process. Many wanted to see more use of technology to get people registered and voting. Some suggested online registration and/or online voting, though some also noted likely opposition to those ideas, particularly from those concerned about voter fraud.

*"I wish there was a better campaign around why you should vote and not just who you should vote for." (District 6 stakeholder)*

*"This community did not understand the move to 10-1, and they did not embrace it. No one was educating us at the community level." (District 2 stakeholder)*

Some interviewees wondered whether future candidates will continue to reflect the greater diversity that is the promise of geographic representation. One unsuccessful

candidate, for example, argued that, “With a district like this one with a high number of registered voters, you have to have money to run. That’ll be a challenge going forward. Are we going to have people locked into the seats? If it ends up that there isn’t a true contest every time, we’re back to where we started.” (District 8 candidate)

Moving beyond elections to the question of how city government conducts its work, many of our interviewees offered suggestions for improving the way the city gathers citizen input—some of which the city has begun to enact since our interviews were conducted, such as holding meetings at times more people can attend. Other suggestions included broadcasting or live streaming city council meetings, and conducting surveys so that small but vocal groups don’t drown out the “silent majority,” as one person expressed it. Many interviewees said they wanted to see their new council members—or the entire city council—hold regular forums within each district to hear citizen input. Many seemed to think that, as one District 5 stakeholder put it, “The challenge is to encourage more people to show up and say what they think.”

Others talked about the need for the city to show responsiveness after community input has been gathered, and to streamline or otherwise reform the city’s decision-making systems. One District 9 stakeholder said that people in his district who have tried to engage with city government in the past “feel the commitment of time and energy were wasted. I hope that under the new structure, council will revisit the commissions with an eye toward whether efforts can be acknowledged more meaningfully.” Similarly, a stakeholder from District 1 described serving on various boards and commissions but feeling that few of the issues were ultimately addressed by the Council.

*“Communication with decision makers in the city needs to be made available so that anyone can partake, not just connected people.” (District 9 stakeholder)*

*“It is a two way street. What I mean by that is that government needs to engage with the population as well as the population to engage in government.” (District 6 candidate)*

*“Civic engagement needs to be transparent, legitimate, credible, meaningful, accessible, and safe.” (District 9 stakeholder)*



## Conclusion

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On January 6, 2015, Austin’s new city council became the first elected under 10-1 geographic representation. As a first initiative, Mayor Steve Adler and the council called a hearing on public engagement and proposed drastic changes in council governing structure to better increase citizen participation. The council announced it would rely on council committees and public hearings to vet legislation and issues prior to council meetings. The measures aim to increase the accessibility of council and increase civic engagement, a major stated priority of the new council. As a stakeholder from District 3 said, “We have to convince folks that we are all in this together.”

These new policies were consistent with suggestions offered by many of the Austinites interviewed for this report. A consistent theme sounded in those interviews was the need for better opportunities for citizens to make their voices heard. Moreover, many interviewees agreed that the performance of the first city council elected under 10-1 will shape citizen engagement with city government and politics for the future. If the new council doesn’t make good on the promise of greater representation and citizen input, they said, the public will be discouraged. But if the new city council proves responsive and effective, that should encourage greater voter involvement in the future—both greater voter turnout and greater citizen involvement with local government.

Overall, almost all the people interviewed for this report expressed at least some satisfaction with the change to 10-1 overall, with many observing that it has created new opportunities for representation and engagement with few serious downsides manifest so far. Perhaps one stakeholder from District 1 captured the sentiment best:

*“Austin has an opportunity for a new beginning.”*

A question in many people’s minds seems to be whether and to what extent the city can seize that opportunity.

## Summary: Challenges and Opportunities for 10-1

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Many of the 172 Austinites interviewed for this report—citizens, candidates, and council members—offered a number of suggestions for how to improve citizen engagement with city government. The challenges and potential solutions noted by the interviewees include the following:

### Educating the Public about 10-1 and the Importance of Political Participation

- Improve awareness of 10-1 and the potential benefits of geographic representation
- Communicate more about the importance of voting

### Improving the Local Electoral Process

- Streamline candidate questionnaires
- Reduce the number / improve the structure of candidate forums
- Take steps to maintain the competitiveness of city council elections

### Enhancing Communication and Connection between Representatives and Citizens

- Create more and better opportunities for citizens to convey their views to city government
- Increase the transparency of city government processes

### Addressing Hurdles to Voting

- Increase the numbers and convenience of polling places
- Rethink scheduling of run-off elections
- Create new and better ways for citizens to learn about candidates and issues



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## Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life

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The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life is an organized research unit in the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin. Based in the nation's second most populous state at a premier public research university, the Annette Strauss Institute is aligned with the University's public role of designing and testing new ways of increasing civic involvement. Founded in 2000 and named after former Dallas Mayor Annette Greenfield Strauss, the Institute seeks to understand and overcome obstacles to civic engagement through scholarly research and nonpartisan educational outreach programs.

Learn more at [annettestrauss.org](http://annettestrauss.org)

## Leadership Austin

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Leadership Austin offers emerging and community leaders a unique opportunity to develop skills; learn about community issues and build relationships with others to find solutions to the issues affecting Greater Austin. In 1979 Leadership Austin was founded—by

the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce (GACC) — with the mission of providing leadership training to those with a passion for Greater Austin. In 2002 Leadership Austin became a stand-alone 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation with a continued focus on collaborative, inclusive, and sustainable leadership for our community.

Learn more at [leadershipaustin.org](http://leadershipaustin.org)

## The Lowell H. Lebermann Forum

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The Lebermann Forum is a public dialogue and civic engagement partnership between the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, KUT Public Radio and KLRU-TV. In honor of the great life of Lowell H. Lebermann, a prolific businessman and active citizen, the forum seeks to foster constructive, bipartisan conversations about the issues facing our city. Remembering his boisterous humor, unending energy, unparalleled ability to bring people together, and endless generosity, the forum will embody his values and personal motto: "get it done."

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## Author

**Regina Lawrence, PhD**  
Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life  
Moody College of Communication  
The University of Texas at Austin

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**Christopher Kennedy**  
LEADERSHIP AUSTIN

**Geronimo Rodriguez** *2015 Board Chair*  
LEADERSHIP AUSTIN

**Ashley Phillips** *MA*  
LEADERSHIP AUSTIN

**Emily Einsohn** *MPAff and MSW*  
ANNETTE STRAUSS INSTITUTE

**Olivia Arena** *Plan II Honors student*  
UT-AUSTIN

**Maegan Stephens** *MA / PhD candidate*  
UT-AUSTIN

**Tracy Del Bianco** *MPAff candidate*  
UT-AUSTIN



