## STAFF REPORT

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| **Agenda Item:** |  | **Name:** | Brandi Vena |
| **Proposed No**.: |  | **Date:** | Updated February 6, 2019 |

**SUBJECT**

Government Structure in the 20 Most Populous United States Counties.

**BACKGROUND**

King County Council is currently the thirteenth most populous county in the United States with just over 2.1 million residents[[1]](#footnote-1). The county has an elected executive and a nine-member council elected from single-member districts. Each district represents approximately 240,000 residents. Councilmembers are elected to four-year terms.

In 1992 voters approved a charter amendment to increase the size of the council from nine to 13. In the 2004 general election voters approved a county charter amendment introduced via citizen initiative to reduce the size of the council from 13 to nine[[2]](#footnote-2) the size at which it remains today.

There are several counties across the United States with larger or similar populations to King County with a wide variety of representative governance structures. Below is a summary of the structures for the top 20 (excluding King County) most populous counties in the United States.

**SUMMARY**

***California***:

All counties in California have five-member boards of supervisors as was set out by the state legislature in 1852. Los Angeles County has a population of 9.8 million. Each supervisor represents more than two million people. There is no executive branch; the board appoints a Chief Executive Officer for the county[[3]](#footnote-3).

San Diego County has a population of 3.3 million[[4]](#footnote-4). The county government is composed of the elected five-member Board of Supervisors which operates in a legislative, executive, and quasi-judicial capacity and who each represent approximately 660,000 people. The board appoints a Chief Administrative Officer for the county[[5]](#footnote-5).

Orange, Riverside, San Bernadino, and Santa Clara counties all have the same structure as San Diego and Los Angeles counties. These four counties have populations of between 1.7 and 3 million with each district representing between 340,000 and 600,000 people.

***Illinois:***

Cook County has a population of 5.2 million[[6]](#footnote-6). The Cook County Board of Commissioners is the legislative body of county government. The board is comprised of 17 Commissioners, each serving a four-year term and elected from single member districts. Each district represents approximately 300,000 residents[[7]](#footnote-7). The County Board President is the county’s chief executive officer. The president directly supervises county departments. The president is elected to a four-year term by the voters of the entire county[[8]](#footnote-8).

***Texas:***

Harris County has a population of 4.6 million[[9]](#footnote-9). Counties in Texas are governed by a commissioners court which has five members: the county judge, who is separately elected and acts as the chief executive officer of the county, and four commissioners elected from single-member precincts. Each commissioner represents over one million people. The commissioners have no term limits[[10]](#footnote-10).

Dallas County, with a population of 2.6 million, Tarrant County, with an estimated population of 2 million in 2018, and Bexar County, with an estimated population of 1.9 million[[11]](#footnote-11), all have the same structure as Harris County because it is established in state law. Commissioners in those counties represent between 475,000 and 650,000 people.

***Arizona:***

Maricopa County has an estimated population of 4.3 million[[12]](#footnote-12). The County Board of Supervisors is comprised of five members who are elected to single member districts. Each district represents approximately 820,000 people. The positions do not have term limits. It has a strong-council governance structure with a county manager handling county administration and who is appointed by the board[[13]](#footnote-13).

***Florida:***

Miami-Dade County has a population of 2.75 million as of a 2017 census report[[14]](#footnote-14). The Board of County Commissioners is the legislative body, consisting of 13 members elected from single-member districts. Each district represents just over 200,000 people. The Mayor of Miami-Dade County is elected countywide to serve a four-year term and is considered a "strong mayor[[15]](#footnote-15)."

Broward County has a 2017 estimated population of 1.9 million[[16]](#footnote-16). The Board of County Commissioners is composed of nine members elected by district. Each district represents just over 200,000 people. Each year the Commission elects a mayor and vice mayor and appoints the County Administrator, County Attorney, and County Auditor[[17]](#footnote-17).

***New York:***

Kings County has a population of 2.6 million estimated in 2017[[18]](#footnote-18). The county is coterminous with the borough of Brooklyn and was consolidated with New York City in 1898. As part of the consolidation, all town and county governments within the city were dissolved, and their powers were given to the city and the boroughs. All five boroughs of New York City are coterminous with their respective counties. Brooklyn has a borough president who generally acts as an advocate for the borough to mayoral agencies and the city council[[19]](#footnote-19). The borough also has 16 out of 51 of the seats on the New York City Council[[20]](#footnote-20). Each member from this borough represents approximately 162,000 people.

Queens County has a population of 2.3 million in 2017[[21]](#footnote-21). It has the same structure as Kings County, but is coterminous with the borough of Queens and has 12 out of 51 seats on the New York City Council[[22]](#footnote-22). New York County is coterminous with the borough of Manhattan and has a population of 1.67 million; it has 10 out of 51 seats on the New York City Council[[23]](#footnote-23). The councilmembers for these boroughs each represent between 167,000 and 191,000 people.

***Nevada:***

Clark County has an estimated population of 2.2 million[[24]](#footnote-24). The county is run by the Clark County Commission which consists of seven members who are elected to serve staggered four-year terms. A county manager hired by the commission handles day-to-day operations[[25]](#footnote-25). Commissioners each represent approximately 314,000 people.

***Michigan:***

Wayne County, with an estimated population of 1.7 million, and has an elected county executive as well as a 15-member county commission elected from single-member districts. Commissioners are elected every two years in even-year elections[[26]](#footnote-26). They each represent approximately 113,000 people.

***Summary Tables:***

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **County** | **Population**  **(millions)** | **No. of Representatives**  **(From most to fewest)** |
| Cook County, IL | 5.2 | 17 |
| Kings County, NY | 2.6 | 16 |
| Wayne County, MI | 1.7 | 15 |
| Miami-Dade County, FL | 2.75 | 13 |
| Queens County, NY | 2.3 | 12 |
| New York County, NY | 1.67 | 10 |
| Broward County, FL | 1.9 | 9 |
| King County, WA | 2.1 |
| Clark County, NV | 2.2 | 7 |
| Los Angeles County, CA | 9.8 | 5 |
| San Diego County, CA | 3.3 |
| Orange County, CA | 3.0 |
| Riverside County, CA | 2.2 |
| San Bernadino County, CA | 2.0 |
| Santa Clara County, CA | 1.7 |
| Maricopa County, AZ | 4.3 |
| Harris County, TX | 4.6 | 4 |
| Dallas County, TX | 2.6 |
| Tarrant County, TX | 2.0 |
| Bexar County, TX | 1.9 |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **County** | **No. of Representatives** | **Population (millions)** | **Population Represented by Each Representative (Ranked from most to fewest)** |
| Los Angeles County, CA | 5 | 9.8 | 2 million |
| Harris County, TX | 4 | 4.6 | 1 million + |
| Maricopa County, AZ | 5 | 4.3 | 820,000 |
| San Diego County, CA | 5 | 3.3 | 660,000 |
| Dallas County, TX | 4 | 2.6 | 650,000 |
| Orange County, CA | 5 | 3.0 | 600,000 |
| Tarrant County TX | 4 | 2.0 | 500,000 |
| Bexar County, TX | 4 | 1.9 | 475,000 |
| Riverside County, CA | 5 | 2.2 | 440,000 |
| San Bernadino County, CA | 5 | 2.0 | 400,000 |
| Santa Clara County, CA | 5 | 1.7 | 340,000 |
| Clark County, NV | 7 | 2.2 | 314,000 |
| Cook County, IL | 17 | 5.2 | 300,000 |
| King County, WA | 9 | 2.1 | 240,000 |
| Miami-Dade County, FL | 13 | 2.8 | 211,000 |
| Broward County, FL | 9 | 1.9 | 211,000 |
| Queens County, NY | 12 | 2.3 | 191,000 |
| New York County, NY | 10 | 1.7 | 167,000 |
| Kings County, NY | 16 | 2.6 | 162,000 |
| Wayne County, MI | 15 | 1.7 | 113,000 |

***Updates since January 23, 2019 meeting:***

The Charter Review Commission asked staff to look into whether there are studies providing qualitative measurement of resident satisfaction with their county government structure. While there are several studies and surveys measuring resident satisfaction with county and local government provision of services, there does not seem to be a body of work measuring satisfaction with the structure of county government. Much of the research available focuses on what the size of a city or county council means in terms of representation of minority groups, whether a larger or smaller council better represents residents living in poverty, and whether council size has an impact on voter engagement[[27]](#footnote-27). The results of many of these studies are inconclusive[[28]](#footnote-28).

The King County Charter Review Commission has the following options going forward:

1. Take no action with regards to making a recommendation as to council size; or
2. Direct staff to draft a charter amendment that would do one of the following to the number of members of the King County Council
   1. Increase(decrease) the number
   2. Add at-large members

1. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/kingcountywashington,miamidadecountyflorida,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. URL: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/independent/charter-review-commission/about/history.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. URL: <http://www.lacounty.gov/government/supervisors/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sandiegocountycalifornia,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. URL: <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/home.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cookcountyillinois,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. URL: <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/content/about-cook-county> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. URL: <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/agency/office-president-0> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/harriscountytexas,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. URL: Katharine Shilcutt, *So, What Exactly Is the Harris County Commissioners Court?*, Houstonia, March 31, 2016, available at <https://www.houstoniamag.com/articles/2016/3/31/peoples-court-harris-country-commissioners-court-april-2016> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/bexarcountytexas,tarrantcountytexas,dallascountytexas,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/maricopacountyarizona,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. URL: <https://www.maricopa.gov/3598/About-Maricopa-County> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/miamidadecountyflorida,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. URL: <https://www8.miamidade.gov/global/disclaimer/about-miami-dade-county.page> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/browardcountyflorida> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. URL: <https://www.broward.org/Commission/Pages/default.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. URL: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/kingscountybrooklynboroughnewyork,US/PST045218> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. URL: <https://council.nyc.gov/about/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. URL: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/data-maps/nyc-population/current-future-populations.page> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. URL: <https://council.nyc.gov/about/> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. URL: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. URL: <https://www.clarkcountynv.gov/county-commissioners/Pages/default.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. URL: <https://www.waynecounty.com/elected/commission/home.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Aaron A. Moore, The potential and consequences of municipal electoral reform, 2017, available at <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/78793/1/IMFG_perspectives_20_electoral_reform_AaronMoore_Oct_17_2017.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Id. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)