INTRODUCTION

The Best Place to Live in America?

Austin is not the biggest city in Texas, but a case could be made for it being the most interesting large city in the Lone Star State. Although it shares some characteristics with its big-city counterparts—Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth, and El Paso—it is markedly different in many ways. Not only is Austin the capital of Texas; it has proclaimed itself “the live music capital of the world.” It embraces a quirky specialness, to wit, the “Keep Austin Weird” promotional campaign. After all, what other city hosts “Spamarama,” an occasional event that celebrates the often-mocked canned spiced meat? Where else do hundreds of residents and visitors alike gather along a bridge at sunset to watch more than one million bats take to the sky?

Another difference is the city’s plan for the future, a plan that can be loosely summed up as a hope that the benefits of growth will reach all communities in the city. This vision of the future is contested because it coexists with a persistent tension between what urban sociologist Anthony Orum termed “capitalists and democrats,” which often takes the form of conflict among developers, environmentalists, and neighborhood groups. In Austin, this conflict is not always resolved in favor of the capitalists/developers. Liberal ideology prevails in Austin, a community that is receptive to progressive ideas and approaches. In addition, Austin’s economy is far less dependent on the energy industry that predominates in other parts of the state. Instead, Austin has been said to exemplify Richard Florida’s conception of a creative city, one in which technology is a major component of the
local economy, and arts and cultural activity are essential elements. Austin scores high on measures of venture capital investment and start-up formation; it leads other large cities in the state in the requisite education and skills of a creative city workforce. Moreover, city government was an early investor in the local art and music scene. Together, these factors cause Austin to stand out amid other big cities in Texas. And it stands out beyond its Lone Star state counterparts: in 2017 and 2018, *U.S. News & World Report* named Austin as the best place to live in America, based on quality of life, job prospects, and affordability.

Any one of these features could be a subject worthy of research, but it is another significant difference that is the focus of this book: until 2014, Austin elected its entire city council at large. In other words, candidates for the governing body competed in citywide elections and the Austin electorate could vote for every seat. This type of electoral system generates numerous consequences, and it does not fit the profile of Austin as a progressive city.

City councils are worthy of study in that they are the “custodians of place,” to borrow a phrase used by urban policy scholars Paul Lewis and Max Nieman. The council’s decisions affect the city today and chart the city’s path to the future. The method of the council’s selection influences who is elected, whose interests are represented, and ergo, what decisions are made. Austin’s resistance to changing its electoral system, its eventual decision to do so, and the consequences of the new district-based system make for a compelling story.

**Austin: A Blueberry in the Tomato Soup**

Among the six biggest cities in Texas, Austin is the most liberal in terms of ideology, giving a greater share of its vote to recent Democratic presidential candidates. The liberal-leaning city is often at odds with the conservative political leadership of the state and has been called “a blue island in a sea of red,” or, more evocatively, “a blueberry in the tomato soup.” This ideological divergence has widened as the conservatism of the legislature has increased, and as a result Austin is often singled out for special attention from the legislature. A dispute between developers and environmentalists more than twenty-five years ago is illustrative. In 1992, Austin’s voters approved Save Our Springs, an initiative intended to regulate the development of land and preserve the quality of water in local watersheds. The development community opposed the new ordinance, hired a lobbyist, and turned to the state legislature for relief. The lobbyist convinced legislators that developers should be grandfathered in under the rules that existed at the time they purchased the land rather than being forced to comply with new regulations put in
place subsequently by Save Our Springs. The legislature passed an anti–Save Our Springs bill in 1993, but it was vetoed by Democratic governor Ann Richards. The following session, the bill to overturn Austin’s ordinance was passed once again, and, this time, it was signed by Republican governor George W. Bush. The developers’ lobbyist rejoiced, commenting hyperbolically that “the legislature has burned Austin to the ground.”

The efforts to burn continue. In the 2017 legislative session, proposals to preempt Austin’s ban on single-use plastic bags, its regulations for ride-hailing companies such as Uber and Lyft, its regulations on short-term residential rentals, its tree protection ordinances, and its policies that make Austin a sanctuary-like city were introduced. *Texas Monthly* summed up the tense relationship between the capital city and the legislature in this way: “In recent years, the Texas Legislature has passed laws restricting what regulations cities can pass—even if they originate in Austin.” For a blue city like Austin, crafting policy solutions that are responsive to citizen preferences, without raising the ire of a conservative legislature, is a continual challenge.

### The Electoral Difference and Contextual Conditions

Beyond its rocky relationship with state government, Austin provides an important political lesson about representation in a fast-changing urban environment. As noted above, until 2014, Austin was the largest city in the country to operate with a city council elected entirely at large, an electoral system that typically has the effect of reducing representation of minority groups. One consequence of the at-large structure was that, according to the city’s demographer, “70 percent of those elected to the council come from areas of town where 35 percent of the population lives, and all council members live within three to four miles of each other.” Hardly the electoral outcome one would expect in a city that celebrates its liberalism and forward-thinking nature. Huge swaths of the nearly three hundred square mile city had experienced limited to no representation for many decades. And, although, since the 1980s, the city council had regularly included an African American and a Hispanic among its membership, many observers questioned whether city government was sufficiently responsive to the interests of racial and ethnic minorities.

Austin’s continued reliance on an electoral system that can produce disproportionate and discriminatory electoral outcomes is at odds with a city that embraces a progressive ethos. Other big Texas cities, most of them with council-manager forms of government as in Austin, had already switched to a geographic-based district system or a mixed district/at-large structure as far back as the 1970s. What explains the apparent anomaly in Austin?
In considering an answer to this question, several contextual conditions loom large: Austin’s status as a leading “creative city,” the ongoing strains among the development community, local environmentalists, and neighborhoods, and the contested vision of Austin’s future held by city leaders both inside and outside of city government. These contextual conditions intersect regularly when it comes to city policy making.

**Austin’s Status as a Leading Creative City**

In his 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida theorized that the postindustrial economy is increasingly driven by what he calls the “creative class,” defined as knowledge-based professionals in science and engineering, health care, and finance as well as “people in design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or creative content.”\(^{15}\) Cities (or more accurately, metropolitan areas) that attract the creative class will be the successful entrepreneurial cities of the twenty-first century. According to Florida, three characteristics are necessary for a city to attract and retain the creative class: talent (a highly talented, educated, and skilled population), tolerance (a diverse community with a “live and let live” ethos), and technology (the technological infrastructure necessary to fuel an entrepreneurial culture).

Austin, based on the metrics used in Florida’s creativity index, was a prototypical creative city.\(^{16}\) Subsequent criticism of Florida’s argument and measures notwithstanding,\(^{17}\) the book created a stir in Austin as the city proclaimed its designation at or near the top of the list, depending on the data year. Florida relates the story of a Carnegie-Mellon University graduate who spurned high-tech job offers in Pittsburgh to take a position in Austin. His important considerations when making the decision included liking the people in the software company and the work he would be doing, but the determinative factor was that the company was located in Austin, a city that offered the kind of lifestyle he was seeking.\(^{18}\)

The desirability of Austin was not confined to recent college graduates in the high-tech field. Others in the creative class found Austin beckoning, and, as a result, the city’s population and job base have increased rapidly and substantially. But this high rate of growth and development has produced several negative externalities: rapid escalation in the cost of housing, intensification of traffic congestion, increased pollution and the destruction of natural resources, a growing sense that the quality of life has diminished, and the emergence of tension between the high-salaried high-tech workers and the low-salaried local artists.\(^{19}\) Florida eventually acknowledged some of the downsides for creative cities, noting, for one, that:
On close inspection, talent clustering (in creative cities) provides little in the way of trickle-down benefits. Its benefits flow disproportionately to more highly-skilled knowledge, professional and creative workers whose higher wages and salaries are more than sufficient to cover more expensive housing in these locations. While less-skilled service and blue-collar workers also earn more money in knowledge-based metros, those gains disappear once their higher housing costs are taken into account.20

Being a creative city is not the unalloyed good that it was initially perceived to be. In fact, success at being a creative city appears to generate its own set of problems, many that are within the purview of city government to resolve. Consider the perspective of Javier Auyero, a sociologist who led an ethnographic study of Austin, which he referred to as “a thriving, rapidly growing, highly unequal, and segregated technopolis.”21 In theory, a geographically based city council should be more attuned to addressing these sorts of concerns than an at-large council would be.

Developers, Environmentalists, and Neighborhoods

Some issues in Austin pit adherents of what sociologist Harvey Molotch called “the growth machine” against what could be termed “quality-of-life enthusiasts.”22 In Austin, the issue that unites quality-of-life advocates is the maintenance of the environment, that is, the city’s natural attributes and its neighborhood scale. These types of clashes occur in communities throughout the United States, but what makes Austin remarkable is that environmentalists and neighborhood groups, through their fervor, persistence, and numbers, have become key players in local planning and policy-making processes. Their impact is evident, for instance, in the 1979 Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan, which “largely reflected the aspirations of those Austin citizens concerned about the destructive effects of continued urbanization on their neighborhoods and natural environment.”23

Over the past fifty years, many Austin City Council candidates have run on green platforms, and, if elected, they set about building coalitions with other council members to form a voting bloc. As a result, environmental perspectives have been brought to bear on numerous issues confronting city leaders. Furthermore, the city created an Environmental Commission to “act in an advisory capacity on all projects and programs which affect the quality of life for the citizens of Austin.”24 Neighborhood groups and homeowners’ associations abound in Austin, many of which are affiliated with the Austin Neighborhoods Council, an umbrella organization that holds much
sway in city politics. Their policy preferences at times—but not always—align with the views of the environmental community.

However, it would be a mistake to overlook the influence of the business community, and especially development interests, in Austin. The growth of a prosperous city is their top priority, and, although they are not oblivious to environmental concerns and neighborhood impacts, these factors are not necessarily paramount. All three interests—environmental groups, neighborhood associations, and the development community—often support council candidates through public endorsements and campaign funding. Their involvement does not end there; they regularly lobby council members on issues that come before the governing body.

Although jockeying among these interests persists, the Austin way is to attempt to find common ground. The model for this approach is the Smart Growth Initiative (SGI) of the late 1990s, led by an Austin mayor who had a reputation as a mediator and was later elected to the state senate. Voters approved a package of $712 million in bond issues for city improvements in support of SGI. The city began developing several empty city-owned blocks offering tax abatements and fee waivers to private developers who selected in-town building sites rather than raw land on the outskirts of the city.²⁵

Over time, SGI has led to the densification of downtown Austin with the construction of sleek office towers and high-rise residences as well as mixed-use developments. As anticipated, it has reduced pressure for the development of pristine land on the city’s edges. One observer commented, “Smart Growth meant that Austin could grow its economy best by preserving that which attracted people to Austin: its environment.”²⁶ But over time, SGI spurred gentrification of close-in East Austin neighborhoods, areas with proportionately large numbers of African Americans and Hispanics. Longtime residents and businesses have been displaced, a phenomenon the city council was slow to address. Balancing the interests of environmentalists, neighborhood activists, and developers to find common ground is not an easy task.

The Contested Vision of Austin’s Future

Mayors and city council members typically have a sense of where their city fits among other cities. Moreover, they often have a vision of what the city could become, that is, an aspiration for the future. In pursuit of that vision, the city council often mobilizes public capital, investing its resources in desired economic development projects and supporting causes and events that promote the city.²⁷ Seldom is Austin mentioned among the United States’ so-called world cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Some Austin leaders would like to see their city become part of that top tier of U.S. cities.
In pursuit of this vision, in 2015, one of Austin’s assistant city managers dispatched his staff to study whether Austin would be well served by constructing a sports stadium to attract a professional team to the city. After all, he reasoned, major cities in the United States are home to professional sports teams, and, to be a big-league city, you need a stadium. The staff found that the consensus among sports economists was that public investment in sports stadiums rarely pays off.\textsuperscript{28} Professional sporting events are one more competitor for the local entertainment dollar; they typically do not stimulate additional spending but instead move existing spending around. The stadium idea was shelved, only to reemerge more forcefully in 2018 when the city council voted 7–4 to approve a deal for a privately financed major league soccer stadium on city-owned land, with the expectation of attracting a franchise relocating from Columbus, Ohio. The goal of pushing the city onto a higher plane among the pantheon of great U.S. cities remains among some local leaders but, at the same time, others lament the passing of the quirky Austin. Still others have a different vision, one in which Austin strengthens its commitment to social justice and equity to become a place where the voices of the less fortunate are heard and responded to.

One local entertainment event that has put Austin on the national stage is South by Southwest (SXSW). It began as a local music festival that, in its first year (1987), attracted seven hundred people who paid $10 for a wristband giving them access to all of the venues. Now, the ten-day event features, in addition to music, film and interactive media and attracts more than eighty thousand registrants from across the country, with an individual all-access festival ticket costing between $1,150 and $1,650. Many locals grumble that the success of the event has priced them out of attendance. As suggested above, they are not alone in believing that the city is moving along the wrong path. In March 2016, the publication \textit{Texas Monthly} featured a lengthy discussion that compared laid-back “old Austin” with tech-savvy, design-conscious “new Austin.”\textsuperscript{29} One question recurred throughout the piece: “Has Austin lost its soul?” As an unsuccessful candidate for the city council in 2014 commented, “We have gotten caught up in feeding a growth industry. It’s like we’re on one of those hamster wheels and we’re afraid to stop.”\textsuperscript{30} What does Austin want to be? Where does it fit? Is what made Austin uniquely Austin being sacrificed amid a quest to move to a higher tier of cities? Ultimately, what kind of vision will prevail?\textsuperscript{31}

The Road Ahead

The three contextual conditions discussed above set the stage for the consideration of a conundrum: Why did a progressive city retain a decidedly
nonprogressive electoral system long after other big cities in the state had replaced their at-large systems? For forty years, repeated proposals to adopt a more progressive geographically based system for electing council members were defeated by Austin voters. Then, in 2012, voters approved a ballot measure to elect city council members from ten geographic districts, with only the mayor being elected citywide. Two puzzles motivate the research in Reinventing the Austin City Council: one is the explanation for the long delay and the eventual adoption of a district system; the other is the impact of the new districts on the operations and outputs of the council and on the residents of Austin.

For source material, this case study relies on documents available at the Austin History Center, news media accounts, prior studies conducted by social scientists, and semistructured interviews with numerous Austinites, as city residents are called. Among those interviewed were longtime observers of Austin politics, leaders of local civic groups, community activists, local political consultants, and current and former elected officials and city staff.

The book proceeds in this manner. In Chapter 1, the focus is on how Austin became the city it is today by looking at the evolution of its government, particularly the city council. Chapter 2 addresses Austin’s system of representation, and its repeated consideration—and voter rejection—of geographic districts, leading up to voter approval in 2012. In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to consequences, what the change in the electoral system has meant for the city. The book concludes with a thematic summary and a look ahead.