

Population Shifts and Forms of Government

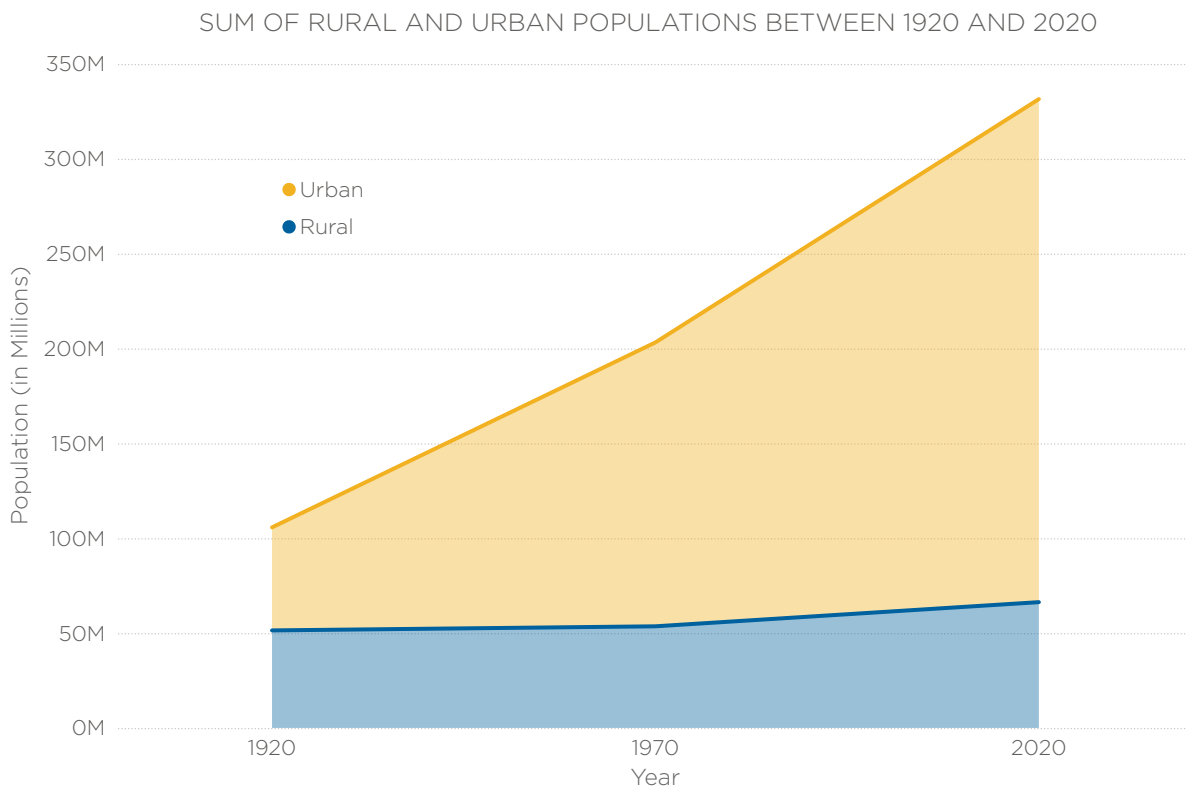
AMERICAN CITIES 1920-2020

This brief, part of a series to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the National League of Cities, explores trends in urbanization and forms of government over the last century.

Introduction

The US crossed a significant threshold in the 1920 Census: that year marked the first time that more than half of the US population, which was then 106,021,537, lived in an urban or incorporated area such as a city, town, or village.¹ One hundred years later, in 2020, 80 percent of the US population of 331,449,281 lived in urban areas.

FIGURE 1
Urban Population Has Nearly Quadrupled in 100 Years; Rural Population Mostly Stable



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, accessed 2024.

Nearly all population gains (94%) during that 100-year period occurred in urban areas, with the urban population nearly quadrupling. In contrast, the rural population increased by less than 30 percent over the past century. In terms of incorporated places (see Figure 2), the largest growth was registered in the number of communities with populations of 50,000 to 99,999, which increased more than fivefold, from 76 in 1920 to 474 in 2020. The average population of cities, towns, and villages more than doubled from around 4,000 in 1920 to 11,000 in 2020. There was minimal change in communities of less than 5,000 people over the past century.

FIGURE 2
Places with 50,000-99,999 People Have Increased More Than Fivefold



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, accessed 2024.

Note: Places refer to incorporated places thus requiring that they meet the state requirements for official incorporation.

Measuring Sprawl and Migration

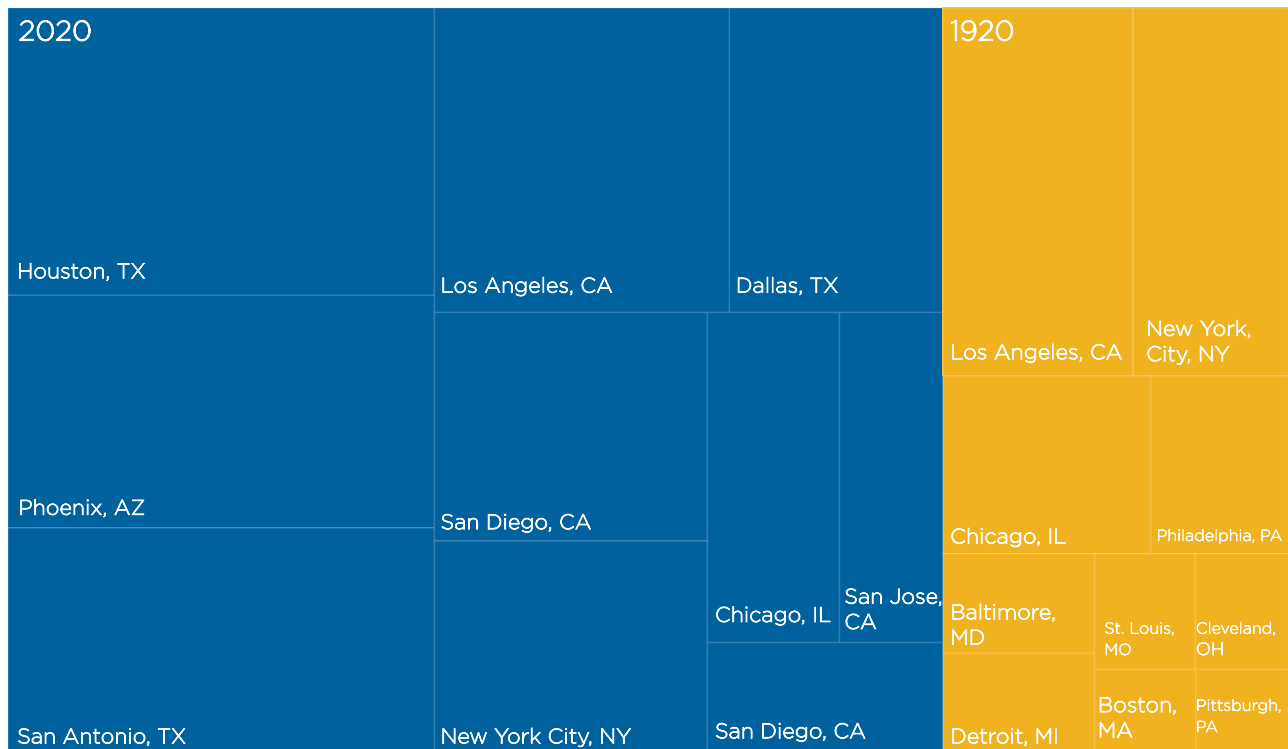
THE 10 LARGEST AMERICAN CITIES, 1920 AND 2020

The population total of the 10 largest American cities increased by 70 percent between 1920 and 2020, while the total land area of the 10 largest cities has almost doubled (+171%). In early years of the pandemic (2020-2021), large cities and metropolitan areas experienced population declines as people moved to rural areas and regions in the South and West,² although people began to return to urban areas over the course of 2022 and 2023.³

FIGURE 3

Combined Land Area of the Top 10 Most Populated US Cities Has Almost Tripled From 1,343 Square Miles to 3,633 Square Miles

LAND AREA OF TOP 10 MOST POPULATED CITIES (1920 AND 2020)

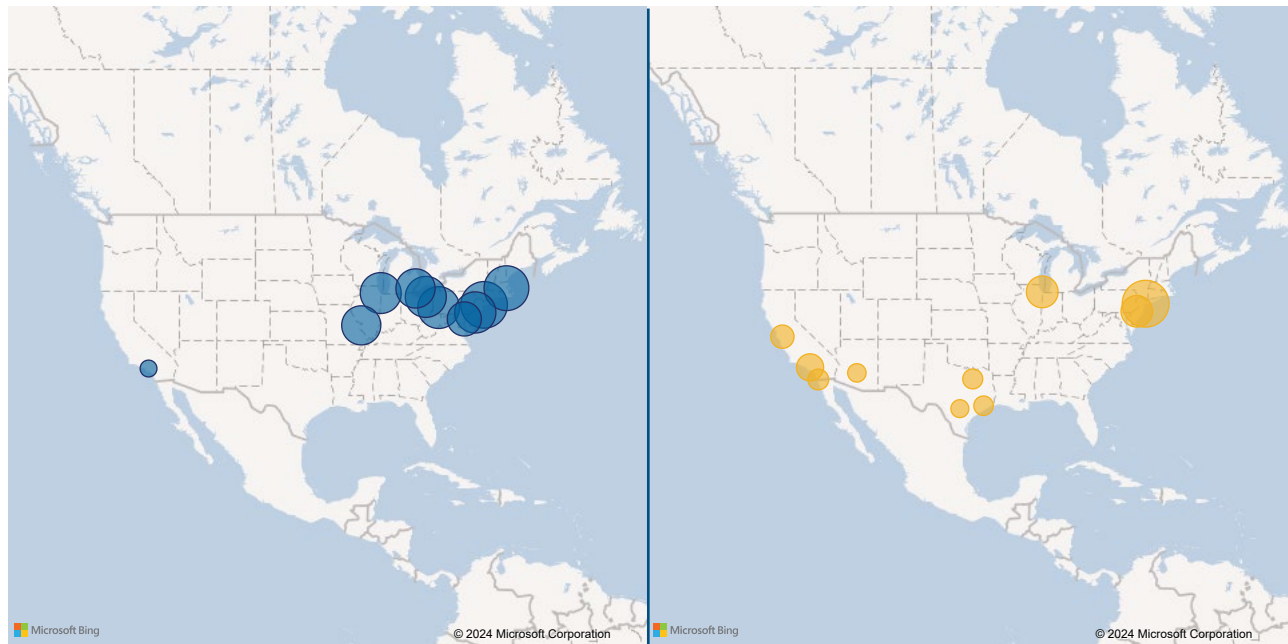


Source: U.S. Census Bureau accessed 2024.

In 1920 the list was dominated by Northeastern and Midwestern cities with just Los Angeles from the West. By 2020 the list only had two cities from the Northeast and one from the Midwest. The rest are in the Southwest and West, indicative of the westward and southern migration over the past century.

FIGURE 4
Most Populated Cities Have Shifted From Mostly Northeast to the Southwest

TOP 10 MOST POPULATED CITIES BY POPULATION DENSITY
1920 2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, accessed 2024.

Note: The 10 cities in each year were selected based on their status of being within the top 10 most populated city in that year. The size of their bubble is proportional to their population density. In both years, the most densely populated city was New York City with a population

Forms of Government

FROM 1934 TO THE PRESENT

Since 1934 the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) has conducted an annual sample survey of cities to identify the most common forms of municipal government and published the results in their annual [Municipal Year Book](#). Based on nearly a century of research, ICMA breaks down municipal forms of government into five categories in its [2018 Municipal Form of Government Survey](#):

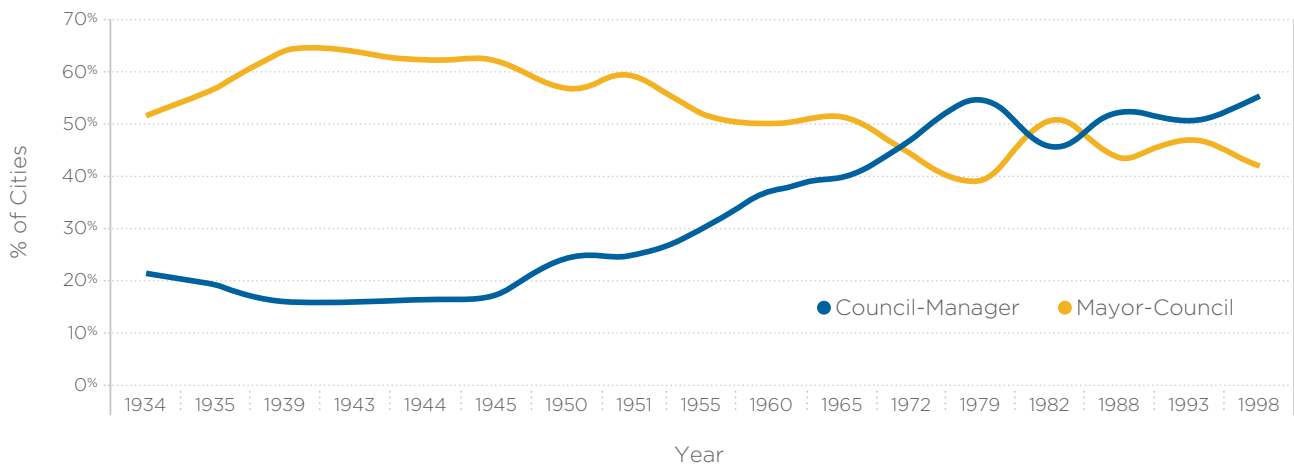
- ◆ **Mayor-Council:** Elected council or board serves as the legislative body. The chief elected official (e.g., mayor) is the head of government, with significant administrative authority, and generally elected separately from the council.
- ◆ **Council-Manager:** Elected council or board and chief elected official are responsible for making policy with advice of the chief appointed official (e.g., administrator/manager). A professional administrator appointed by the board or council has full responsibility for the day-to-day operations of government.
- ◆ **Commission:** Members of a board of elected commissioners serve as heads of specific departments while also collectively sitting as the legislative body of the government.
- ◆ **Town Meeting:** Qualified voters convene and act as a legislative body that makes basic policy, votes on the budget, and chooses a board. These elected officials may carry out the policies established by town meeting or may delegate the day-to-day management of the municipality to an appointed manager/administrator.
- ◆ **Representative Town Meeting:** Similar to town meeting (above) except that voters select residents to represent them at the town meeting. All residents may attend and participate in debate, but only the selected representatives may vote.

According to the 1934 ICMA Municipal Year Book, more than half (52%) of municipalities had a Mayor-Council form of government, followed by around one-fifth (22%) with a Council-Manager government, and the balance, more than a quarter (26%), a mix of Commission, Town Meeting, and Representative Town Meeting. Figure 5 shows the proportion of Mayor-Council and Council-Manager governments from 1934 to 1998, the top two forms of government that have comprised more than half of municipal forms of government for more than 80 years. The proportion of Commission, Town Meeting, and Representative Town Meeting, which is not shown in Figure 5, was cut in half from 26 percent in 1934 to just 12 percent in 2018 (2018 data not shown in figure)*.

FIGURE 5

Mayor-Council governments were dominant throughout most of the twentieth century and were overtaken by Council-Manager governments in the 1960s and 1970s

TOTAL MAYOR-COUNCIL AND COUNCIL-MANAGER CITIES BY YEAR



Source: H. G. Frederickson, B. Logan, and C. Wood. *Municipal Reform in Mayor-Council Cities: A Well-Kept Secret*. *State and Local Government Review*: Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter 2003): ppgs 7-14: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=a5e122cdd078b00bde71ef9ab2c04971b625abbe>

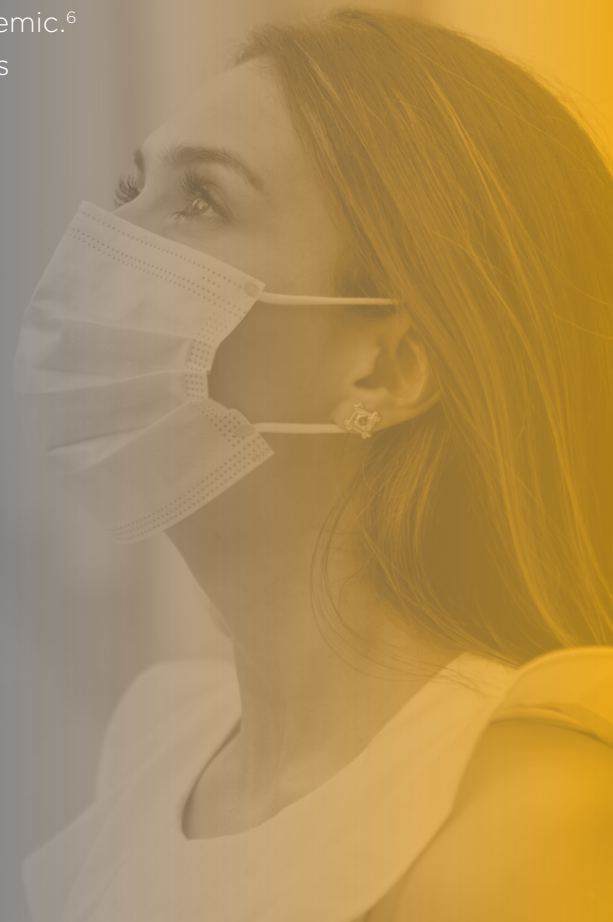
By the 1950s the proportion of Mayor-Council forms of government began to decline while Council-Manager governments increased. The proportion of Council-Manager governments surpassed Mayor-Council forms in the 1970s, and Council-Manager continues to be the dominant form of municipal government. According to ICMA's 2018 *Municipal Year Book*, Council-Manager governments dipped to 40 percent, followed by Mayor-Council at 38 percent, with the remaining 22 percent comprised of Commission, Town Meeting and Representative Town Meeting.

* The most complete compilation of the proportion of Mayor-Council and Council-Manager governments over the past century was found in the 2003 article by Frederickson, Logan, and Wood in the *State and Local Government Review*, which covered the period 1934 to 1998. 2018 information not shown in figure drawn from ICMA 2018 *Municipal Year Book* for comparison.

Pandemic Impacts on Population: 1920 and 2020

According to a 2007 Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis study, 675,000 or nearly one percent (0.8%) of the 1910 Census population died as a result of the 1918 flu pandemic.⁶

In contrast, 767,000 individuals died from COVID-19 over the 2020-2021 period⁷ or just 0.2 percent of the 2020 census population. Despite the 1918 pandemic and World War I, the US population grew at an average annual rate of 1.5 percent between 1910 and 1920, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In contrast, the population grew at less than half that rate at just 0.7 percent per year between 2010 and 2020.



Outlook for the Future

The Census Bureau recently projected that the US population may reach a peak of nearly 370 million in 2080, followed by a period of gradual decline.⁴ That would put the U.S. population at 366 million in 2100, for an increase of less than 10 percent over the 2020 Census. If urbanization trends over the past century continue, virtually all of the nation's population – as much as 99.8 percent – will reside in cities of some size by 2070.⁵

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to the NLC staff who also contributed to this brief.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Beginning in 1910, the U.S. Census Bureau classified “urban” as incorporated places with a population greater than 2,500. See “[History](#),” U.S. Census Bureau, Following the 2020 Census, the Bureau introduced changes to its urban area concept and criteria, including raising the population threshold to 5,000. See “[Nation’s Urban and Rural Populations Shift Following 2020 Census](#),” U.S. Census Bureau, December 29, 2022 and “[Redefining Urban Areas following the 2020 Census](#),” U.S. Census Bureau, December 22, 2022.
- 2 Toukabri, A. & Delbé, C. (2022, May 26). *New Data Reveal Most Populous Cities Experienced Some of the Largest Decreases*. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/05/population-shifts-in-cities-and-towns-one-year-into-pandemic.html>
- 3 U.S. Census Bureau. (2024, March 14). *More Counties Saw Population Gains in 2023*. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2024/population-estimates-more-counties-population-gains-2023.html>
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau. (2023, November 9). *U.S. Population Projected to Begin Declining in Second Half of Century*. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/population-projections.html>
- 5 Based on author’s calculations using the annual urbanization growth rate between 1920 and 2020 of 0.443%. At this rate approximately 90 percent of the U.S. population would live in urban areas by 2046 and 99.8% by 2070.
- 6 Garrett, T.A. (2007, November). *Economic Effects of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic: Implications for a Modern-day Pandemic*. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. https://www.stlouisfed.org/-/media/project/frbstl/stlouisfed/files/pdfs/community-development/research-reports/pandemic_flu_report.pdf
- 7 According to the CDC there were 350,831 COVID-related deaths in 2020 and 416,893 in 2021 for a total of 767,724 over the two years, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db456.pdf>