



## One Year In, Johnson's City Council Spends One-Third of its Time on Honorary Resolutions

### Description

A year of City Council meetings since the 2023 elections hasn't seen much change in the body's time management: Roughly one-third of regular meeting time, from the end of public comment to adjournment, is still spent on honorary, non-binding resolutions, much as it was [under the Lightfoot administration](#).

What has changed is the frequency with which the body meets. City Council has held multiple regular meetings in six of the past twelve months, compared to only two months per year in which the Council held multiple meetings during the three Lightfoot years for which full digital recordings exist. Johnson's first year in office has also seen more special sessions called: seven since last May, compared to three in the year previous.

The result has been a seesaw of meetings, some of which are more than half comprised of honorary speeches and others of which are entirely spent on binding legislative matters.

Since inauguration on May 15, 2023, the current Council has held 23 regular meetings, totalling roughly 52 and a half hours of official business. (Totals do not include the pledge of allegiance, invocation, and public comment period that precede meetings. Those introductory matters typically add another 30 to 45 minutes to each meeting.)

Under Mayor Brandon Johnson, the body has spent roughly 17 hours on honorary, non-binding resolutions, and just under 36 hours on binding legislation. All told, 32% of the Council's time in session has been devoted to honorary matters. During the three years of Mayor Lightfoot's administration for which digital recordings are available, the Council spent 36% of its time on non-binding or honorary matters.

Those totals do not include appointments to city positions, which often include tributary speeches similar to resolutions, but which conclude in an official, binding action by the Council.

The new Council appears to have almost exactly the same appetite for speech-making as their predecessors: at meetings where resolutions were heard, the average time spent speaking on non-binding business was 1:11:56 during the first year of the Johnson administration, compared to 1:12:11 under Lightfoot.

The current City Council has met 30 times in its first year since inauguration, compared to an average of nineteen times per year under the Lightfoot administration.

According to [city ordinance](#), Council holds a regular meeting on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month, but in practice for many years the Council has passed ordinance at each of its regular meetings setting the date and time of the next meeting for one month later. Under Johnson, Council has returned to meet multiple times a month far more frequently than under Lightfoot, when it largely stuck to its informal once-a-month schedule.

The more-than-monthly meetings under the Johnson administration have largely stemmed from legislative delays and maneuvering. [State law](#) allows any two alderpersons to defer and publish a committee report, effectively forcing an item up for final passage to the next regular meeting.

Several of Johnson's signature initiatives have been deferred and published before their final passage. Most recently, the mayor's \$1.25 billion bond plan was deferred and published at April's first regular City Council meeting, as was an appropriation of an additional \$70 million for migrant aid. Both items were heard again and passed at a second regular meeting scheduled two days after the deferral, the quickest turnaround possible under the state Open Meeting Act's 48-hour notice requirement.

The trend towards holding multiple regular meetings per month has caused a shift in how City Council divides its time between binding and non-binding business. Resolutions are almost always heard at the first regular meeting of the month, which in Council's traditional practice would be the only meeting. If a second meeting is called — as is happening with increasing frequency — it is much less common for resolutions to be heard at that meeting, which usually focuses on only one or two items of business that were deferred or otherwise delayed from passage at the first meeting.

The result has been initial meetings with a more skewed binding/non-binding business ratio, followed by meetings that handle only binding business. Under the Johnson administration, at meetings where resolutions are heard, an average of 49% of the meeting time is dedicated to honorary, non-binding matters. However, the new Council has held far more regular meetings where no resolutions are heard: nine of the first year's 23 regular meetings, compared to only two in the previous year, and only one in the year before that.

In addition to regular meetings, at which any matters following the standard procedures laid out in Council's rules can be addressed, the current City Council has increasingly convened for special sessions outside of the regular order of business.

Special sessions can be called by either the mayor or any three alderpersons. Only matters specified in the call can be considered, meaning special sessions rarely include any resolutions.

Seven special sessions have been called in the year since the current City Council was sworn in. During the four years of the Lightfoot administration, thirteen special sessions were called. Seven were

called during Mayor Emanuel's second term in office, and nine during his first.

The combination of more special sessions and increasingly frequent regular meetings has substantially increased the amount of time city Council spends in session. The current city Council has met for roughly 53 hours in regular session in its first year, compared to an average of 41 hours annually for the three years of the Lightfoot administration for which complete digital recordings are available.

The additional meetings mean that, while the overall *ratio* of non-binding, honorary business to substantive, binding business at City Council has stayed roughly the same, the city's legislature is spending more *total* time — both theirs and spectators' — on purely ceremonial matters.

Chicago's City Council is unique among the legislatures of large cities in allowing unlimited and largely unscheduled interruptions of the regular order of business to hear honorary matters. New York's city council limits members to a timer-enforced one minute of remarks on honorary resolutions, while Houston's will only hear up to three presentations regarding public interest per meeting, each one limited to a maximum of ten minutes. Honorary announcements are less strictly limited in the Los Angeles city council, but are typically heard at the end of meetings, after substantive business has been concluded.

There is no official space on the standard Chicago City Council agenda for resolutions, but in practice they are almost always heard immediately after public comment, at the start of the meeting. Combined with the introductory matters (quorum call, invocation, etc.) and public comment, Council's current practice means that substantive matters are often not addressed until two hours or more into a meeting.

Limits such as those used by other, similarly large municipalities would increase Council's efficiency and reduce the time sacrificed by members of the public attending and offering public comment. The Better Government Association urges and supports the adoption of time limits on honorary speeches and the movement of honorary speeches to the end of the regular agenda as common-sense measures to prioritize binding legislative business and respect the spectators and public commenters who take time out of their lives to attend City Council.