



Relative Benefits, Representation, and Autonomy:

A Look at a Charles County Charter Amendment and the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland

The possibility of a charter government amendment brings questions of Charles County's relationship with autonomy, self-governance, and adjacent counties (specifically St. Mary's and Calvert) to the forefront. The Tri-County Council, originally created when all three counties were more similar in population, demographics, and political/social priorities, now serves as black box process in which two less populous, more rural, less diverse counties essentially hold a supermajority in all decision making regarding the efforts, and associated funds, for economic, transportation, and agricultural planning and development administered by the Tri-County Council.

Population Growth and Demographic Shifts

Historical and Projected Population Growth

	Population in 2000	Population in 2020	Population in 2040 (projected)
St. Mary's	86,211	113,777	146,350
Calvert	74,563	92,783	99,160
Charles	120,546	166,617	205,290
% of Tri-County Residents in Charles County	43%	45%	46%

Source: msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/pop.html

From the year 2000 to 2020, St. Mary's and Calvert Counties experienced 32% and 24% population growth respectively, while Charles County's population increased by 38%. This parallels well-documented trends in recent years in our area and the state of Maryland, in general, related to generational shifts, housing and homeownership, and changes to jobs and the workforce. However, projected population growth from 2020 to 2040 shows an increase of 29% for St. Mary's, 7% for Calvert, and 23% for Charles Counties. Essentially,

- Over 40% of people affected by the priorities and decisions made by the Southern Maryland Tri-County Council have resided in Charles County, this has been so for the past 20+ years
- This percentage is projected to increase over the next 20-30 years to close to 50%
- The current structure of the Tri-County Council (approximately equal representation from all three counties, plus two state representatives and elected state legislators) undemocratically gives those from St. Mary's and Calvert Counties outsized representation, while diminishing the voice and interests of Charles County
- Additionally, Waldorf is now the 4th largest unincorporated area in the state, with a 360% population increase between 2000 and 2020, over 8 times larger than La Plata, the largest incorporated municipality in Charles County

Population by Race and/or Ethnicity Within the Tri-Counties

	% White	% Black	% Hispanic Origin	% Asian	% Indigenous American	% Non-white
St. Mary's	72.0%	17.0%	5.8%	4.7%	2.5%	28.0%
Calvert	75.4%	15.6%	4.5%	3.2%	2.6%	24.6%
Charles	35.2%	53.6%	7.0%	4.8%	3.0%	64.8%

Source: census.gov

- Racial/Ethnic diversity in Charles County has steadily increased over the past 20 years, and in 2022 became the wealthiest majority-Black county in the US
- The percentage of the population identifying as white has decreased between 2010 and 2020 in all three counties. However, those changes have been miniscule in St. Mary's and Calvert Counties (both at a 0.8% decrease) but significant in Charles County (20.5% decrease)
- Again, this calls representation on the Tri-County Council into question. 43.6% of residents in the total population of the tri-county area are non-white but are not proportionately represented on the council
- Additionally, the "equal" power split between the the counties ensures that a resident from Calvert County (3 times more likely to be white than any other race/ethnicity) is given roughly two times as much representation on the Tri-County Council as a resident from Charles County (2 times more likely to be non-white than white)
- Within Charles County, Waldorf is 67% non-white, higher than the county's average, but is unincorporated and lacks any self-governance, being overseen by decision makers in La Plata, which has a significantly less diverse population of 46% non-white residents

Political Preferences and Governance Priorities

Originally in the 1960s, the Tri-County Council was founded to advance the economic development of what were three similarly rural, agricultural, and sparsely populated counties making up the vast majority of what was considered the Southern Maryland region. At this time, and 30 years forward, the counties maintained roughly similar demographics, economic drivers, and social/political priorities. By the turn of the millennium, Charles County had experienced a significant population boom, resulting in increased diversity, more housing and commercial areas, and a massive increased tax base. In contrast, St. Mary's and Calvert Counties saw slower and less diverse population growth, remaining largely agricultural and majority white. These changes, as seen across Maryland and the US in general, resulted in shifts to the political landscape and governance priorities of Charles County residents, especially as compared to St. Mary's and Calvert Counties.

Rural and Urban Population Changes

	% Population Rural in 2000	% Population Rural in 2020	% Change in Rural Population (2000 to 2020)	% Population Urban in 2000	% Population Urban in 2020	% Change in Urban Population (2000 to 2020)
St. Mary's	62.2%	50.0%	- 19.6%	37.8%	50.0%	+32.3%
Calvert	45.8%	39.0%	- 14.8%	54.2%	61.0%	+12.5%
Charles	33.7%	30.0%	- 11.0%	66.3%	70.0%	+5.6%

Source: census.gov

- Even while experiencing significant population growth, Charles County has seen only a moderate decline in the portion of its residents residing in rural areas. In contrast, St. Mary's County and Calvert Counties have experienced an exodus from their rural areas to more densely populated ones, mirroring the national trend prior to 2020.
- While all three counties are identified as rural, according to the State of Maryland and qualify for assistance through initiatives such as the Office of Rural Health, these, and other initiatives, are largely administered by the Tri-County Council
- According to the USDA Agricultural Statistics Service, while St. Mary's County has twice as many acres of farmland and produces 46% more in agricultural products value as Charles County, Calvert County has less than half the acres of farmland and value of agricultural products produced than Charles County. The Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission is a large part of the functional mandate of the Tri-County Council, yet is limited in its attention to Charles County because of the lack of proper representation and focus mentioned above

- Regional planning and transportation are very much affected by the balance of rural/urban residents and associated agricultural/non-agricultural industries within each county. But again, a supermajority on the part of two more similar counties (St. Mary's and Calvert) and a lack of population reflective-representation diminishes benefits to Charles County.

Political Preferences

As the populations of all three counties have shifted relative to each other, no difference is as stark as the voting and political party preferences apparent in past three presidential elections. The mutual benefit and commonality on which the Tri-County Council was founded in the 1960's is long gone, and a new era of two political parties with vastly different views on the role and benefit of government has emerged. Two counties with a solid Republican majority easily unite in their shared beliefs to influence and outvote a larger, more diverse, more economically impactful majority-Black county with an overwhelming Democratic voting majority. More than a simple lack of proportionate representation, this dynamic imposes the current Republican party positions on the importance, efficacy, and base functionality of government on a vast majority of Charles County residents who, unequivocally, do not share these ideas.

Presidential Election Votes by Southern Maryland County

	2020 Dem	2020 Rep	2020 Other	2016 Dem	2016 Rep	2016 Other	2012 Dem	2012 Rep	2012 Other
St. Mary's	41.6%	55.4%	3.1%	35.2%	57.5%	37.3%	41.2%	56.0%	2.8%
Calvert	46.0%	51.6%	2.4%	38.4%	55.2%	6.4%	45.1%	52.6%	2.3%
Charles	69.5%	28.6%	2.0%	63.0%	32.7%	4.3%	64.8%	33.5%	1.7%

Source: elections.maryland.gov

- While Maryland had experienced the same polarization as the US in general, within Southern Maryland, St. Mary's and Calvert Counties remain Republican strongholds, with Calvert arguably electing increasingly conservative candidates
- In contrast, Charles County has increased its Democratic majority, partially driven by a concurrent increase in younger, non-white residents occupying both higher education and income brackets
- Much of this growth in Charles County has been within the unincorporated area of Waldorf, which holds both the vast majority of the county's Democratic voters and tax base
- Charles County residents who are relatively new to the county may not be aware of the current use of home code rule within the county, the existence or functions of the Tri-County Council, or Waldorf's unincorporated, and therefore, nonautonomous status

A Challenge to Leaders and Residents of Charles County

The Tri-County Council, alongside the current home code rule of Charles County government, denies the vast majority of Charles County residents proper representation, reasonable oversight, and opportunities to participate in shaping the future of their home county. Efforts of the Charter Board to inform Charles County residents of the activities and solicit feedback from the public on potential aspects of a charter amendment have excluded many who don't pay property taxes, aren't already involved in local politics and/or county government efforts, or simply have not been adequately engaged in the process of radically changing the county's system of government in a way that would impact a multitude of aspects of daily life. Contrary to the questions posed to the public at Charter Board hearings so far, the vast majority of county residents are not overly concerned with term limits, council member compensation, or subpoena power. What is missing from this conversation is how a possible charter government amendment would directly affect residents' experience with, benefits from, and power within such a structural change. Also, residents remain largely uninformed regarding the Tri-County Council's existence, its role in decisions made for Charles County, and how those would change under charter government.

For example:

1. How would Charles County councilmembers serve (or not) on the Tri-County Council under a charter government and would the vast inequality of proportionate representation on the Tri-County Council be continued into the future?
2. How would regional planning, agricultural and economic development, and transportation improvements within Charles County change under charter government, as those are currently determined by the Tri-County Council dominated by two more rural, more Republican, more non-white, and less economically strong counties (both of whom are governed by a commissioner, not home code rule)?
3. How would a Charles County populace, more involved and more autonomous under charter government, be able to view, analyze, and modify the county's participation within the Tri-County Council's framework?

Transparency and an Honest Risk/Benefit Analysis is Needed

- The current Tri-County Council provides insufficient details on current and past operations, either through public-facing sources like their website, or government-facing sources, like the Maryland Department of Commerce, regarding their structure, function, and activities.
- Major legislation related to the creation and evolution of the Tri-County Council spans five decades and is contained in dozens of bills in the years 1966, 1970, 1972, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1990, 1993, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2006, making it next to impossible for the average county resident to obtain this information

- Centering the lack of proper representation of Charles County's interests on the Tri-County Council, residents have a right to know how funds and other resources are distributed by the Tri-County Council, including how state and federal dollars are funneled through the Tri-County Council to various efforts in Charles (and St. Mary's and Calvert Counties) relative to each other
- Also considering this lack of transparency and representation, how would a charter government amendment change this current dynamic, and how would large, underrepresented, nonautonomous, unincorporated areas like Waldorf stand to benefit from any proposed changes?