

Big Cities – Tiny Votes? America’s Urban Voter Turnout

Zoltan Hajnal and Avi Green¹

December 2024

Key Points: High Urban Turnout in 2024 and 2020, Low Turnout in Local Elections

In 2024, about 63 to 64 percent of eligible Americans cast a ballot. (In some jurisdictions, numbers are still being finalized).

In 2020, about 66 percent of eligible Americans cast a ballot.

While much has been made of this slight decrease, in context, both elections represent high points for voter participation in America.

Looking across all the presidential elections from 1980 onwards, on average, about 63% of eligible Americans voted.

Midterm congressional elections are worse, averaging about 48 percent over the same time period, and only occasionally passing the 50 percent mark. (Census 2024, McDonald 2023 and University of Florida Election Lab 2024).

As this report will show, America’s most significant turnout problem is not in federal elections.

¹ Zoltan Hajnal is a Professor of Political Science at the University of California San Diego and Co-Director of the Yankelovich Center for Social Science Research. zhajnal@ucsd.edu Avi Green is an independent policy consultant and owner of Green Mountain Strategies. avi@avigreen.org

Presidential and Mayoral Turnout in America’s Biggest Cities

To conduct a rapid, post-2024 election review of turnout, we look at participation – turnout as percentage of registered voters -- in the nation’s 50 largest cities and the counties where they reside.²

Table 1: Presidential Turnout in America’s Biggest Cities

City	Presidential Turnout	City	Presidential Turnout
New York	54	Las Vegas	68
Los Angeles	66	Memphis	55
Chicago	68	Detroit	59
Houston	58	Baltimore	56
Phoenix	73	Milwaukee	89
Philadelphia	65	Albuquerque	71
San Antonio	58	Fresno	62
San Diego	75	Tucson	77
Dallas	57	Sacramento	73
San Jose	73	Kansas City	54
Austin	63	Mesa	73
Jacksonville	73	Atlanta	72
Fort Worth	63	Omaha	75
Columbus	67	Colorado Springs	77
Charlotte	70	Raleigh	76
Indianapolis	56	Long Beach	66
San Francisco	79	Virginia Beach	66
Seattle	80	Miami	72
Denver	78	Oakland	71
Washington	71	Minneapolis	78
Nashville	57	Tulsa	64
Oklahoma City	64	Bakersfield	62
Boston	57	Wichita	63
El Paso	48	Arlington	69
Portland	72	Aurora	78

There is variation in these numbers and many of these numbers have not yet been certified, but by and large, they tell the same story – presidential urban turnout was relatively high. Across all 50 cities and

² In a small number of cases, we were able to acquire city-level turnout figures for the presidential contest. Turnout percentages here and in the pages that follow voters casting ballots divided by total registered voters. Some of the 2024 presidential numbers are provisional or unofficial election night totals. Voter participation divided by total eligible voters (the sum of registered voters and those eligible but not registered) might be a better measure and is used by McDonald et al for the overall national participation rates on page 1, but such up-to-date figures for all counties could not be compiled in the short time after the national election for this report.

counties, turnout averaged 67.4 percent. In twenty of these urban areas turnout exceeded 70 percent. And only in one (El Paso) did a majority of registered voters fail to participate.

A review of mayoral election turnout in the same cities tells a very different story.

Turnout in the most recent mayoral election in these cities was exceptionally low. Across the 50 cities, mayoral turnout averages only 37.1 percent. In seventy percent of these cities (35 cities) most registered voters did not make it to the polls. And in a third of these cities, less than a quarter of registered voters turned out to vote.

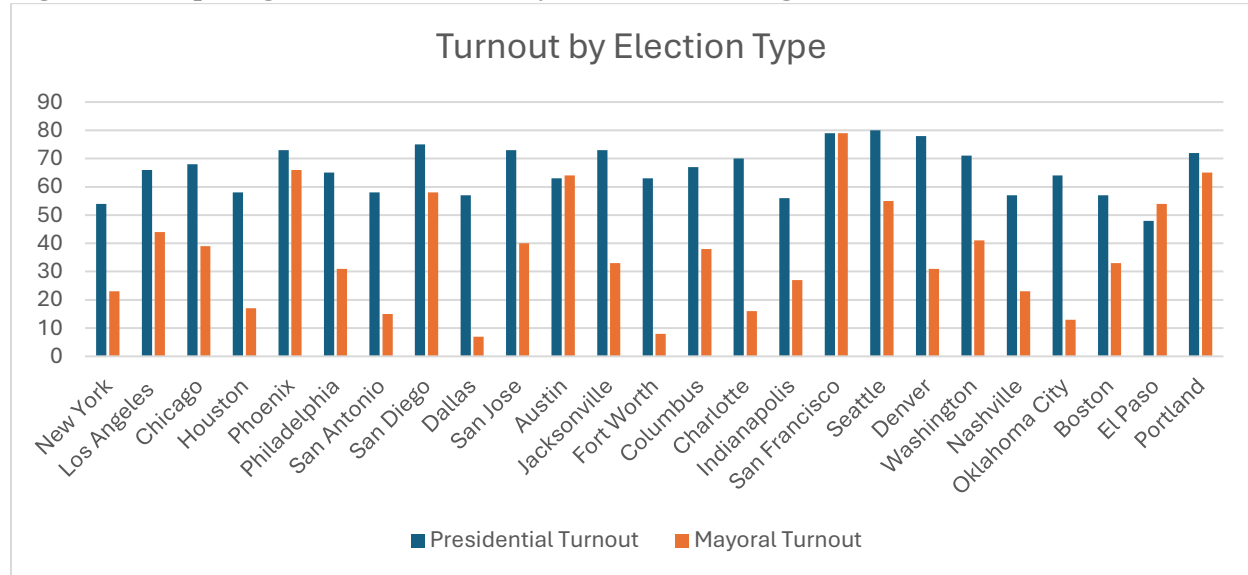
Table 2: Mayoral Turnout in America’s Biggest Cities

City	Mayoral Turnout	City	Mayoral Turnout
New York	23	Las Vegas	57.9
Los Angeles	43.9	Memphis	22.0
Chicago	38.7	Detroit	19
Houston	17.0	Baltimore	46.9
Phoenix	66.3	Milwaukee	29.3
Philadelphia	31.1	Albuquerque	32
San Antonio	15.3	Fresno	26.3
San Diego	57.9	Tucson	21.0
Dallas	7.1	Sacramento	57.0
San Jose	39.8	Kansas City	19.3
Austin	64.1	Mesa	61.6
Jacksonville	33.1	Atlanta	22
Fort Worth	8.1	Omaha	33
Columbus	38.2	Colorado Springs	35.3
Charlotte	15.5	Raleigh	63.6
Indianapolis	26.5	Long Beach	40.4
San Francisco	78.5	Virginia Beach	56.5
Seattle	55	Miami	18
Denver	31.1	Oakland	53.3
Washington	40.8	Minneapolis	54
Nashville	23.0	Tulsa	69.5
Oklahoma City	12.9	Bakersfield	35.1
Boston	33	Wichita	23.9
El Paso	54.1	Arlington	11.3
Portland	64.8	Aurora	30.2

These local elections, then, are where America’s turnout problem can be found. Unlike in presidential elections, in local elections most people don’t get out and vote. In contests to choose mayors, city council members, and school board members, and on local ballot questions and bond measures turnout falls far below what we see in national contests. Nationwide, only about a third of the registered citizens turn out to vote in the typical citywide contest, and that number drops even further for lower-level contests like school board elections ([Hajnal 2010](#)). While Americans can and perhaps should be concerned about

turnout in federal elections, turnout at the local level is often less than half of what we achieve for midterms and a third or less of presidential turnout (Warshaw and De Benedictis Kessner 2024). A comparison of presidential and mayoral turnout, focusing in on just the top 25 cities, makes this plain.

Figure 1: Comparing Presidential and Mayoral Turnout in Big Cities



Local voter turnout is not just low. It is badly skewed. In local elections, homeowners, wealthier people, and older people are far more likely to participate, and young people, parents, renters, low-income people, and Black and Latino Americans far less likely to participate (Hajnal et al 2021, Kogan et al 2018). The turnout disparities in elections like these are jaw-dropping, and far worse than disparities decried in mid-term and presidential elections. To take one shocking example, in big cities with lower turnout, residents 65 years and older are up to 56 times more likely to vote than residents 18-34 years old (Jurjevich 2016).

This matters. Local elections impact decisions that touch every American. Local elections not only determine who runs our cities, they also help to shape how are cities are run. Local governments spend nearly \$2 trillion per year, determining policy on issues from education to zoning to policing. Broad, representative turnout is essential, because these elections provide signals to elected officials about what matters to community members – and give communities the opportunity to “throw the bums out” if they think their elected officials are doing a poor job or if they prefer someone else. At the end of the day, in many cities, a small and unrepresentative segment of the population is determining who leads and how they lead.

Timing is Everything.

It might not have to be this way. Abysmal average turnout figures hide enormous variation between cities. Few cities had worse turnout than Dallas saw in its 2023 mayoral election, in which only 7.1 percent of registered voters participated. San Francisco on the other hand, can boast that 78.5 percent of the city’s registered voters took part in their most recent mayoral contest.

Although there are many factors that drive turnout, this report hones in on what we believe is the simplest answer to the question, why is voter participation in local elections often so much lower than in presidential ones. We hypothesize that having fewer election dates, and holding local elections on the

same day as federal ones, makes voting in local elections easier. When local elections are *not* held on the first Tuesday in November with national races, voters need to learn the date of their local election, find their local polling place, and often make a separate trip to the polls just to vote in local contests. (Administrators, also, face the costs of holding entirely separate elections, and civil society groups and modestly-resourced local candidates take on the challenge of informing and turning out the public). When, however, local elections occur on the same day as presidential or midterm contests, citizens already planning to vote for higher-level offices need only check off a few more boxes further down the ballot.

Elections are public goods, costing taxpayer funds for administration, and requiring the time and attention of citizens. If off-cycle elections are less efficient uses of these funds, and fail to engage most Americans, the issue is important: off-cycle elections are currently in place in about two-thirds of all municipalities in the United States (de Benedictis Kessner and Warshaw 2024).

This report begins by comparing turnout in mayoral elections in two types of cities: cities that held their mayoral elections on November 5th this year and those that held local elections off-cycle in odd-years. Because different cities differ not just on election timing but also on a range of other factors that could impact turnout, we also examine changes in turnout some cities that have undergone the transformation from off-cycle to on-cycle mayoral elections. Finally, to assess the impact of election timing on the composition of the vote – not just how many vote but who votes – we compare the makeup of the vote in a mayoral contest with the makeup of the vote in a presidential contest in the same city. For that deeper analysis we focus on New York city. We do so not because New York is the largest city in the United States but rather because legislators are considering moving New York city and other cities in the state to on-cycle elections. Before legislators make that move, it is critical that we know the likely effects of that move.

Timing and Turnout: The Mayoral Vote in 2024 and Beyond

To see if election dates make a difference, we start by comparing turnout in two types of cities: cities that hold their mayoral elections on the same day as a presidential elections and cities that hold off-cycle contests on other days.³ We expect that turnout will be substantially higher when mayoral contests are held the same day as a presidential election – simply because it is relatively easy for the many voters who are already participating in the presidential election to also participate in the local contest. The only thing these already active presidential voters need to do is to check off vote for mayor is to check off a box further down the ballot.

By contrast, when cities hold off-cycle mayoral elections on dates when local contests are the main focus of the election, potential voters need to do more work to vote. To participate in those off-cycle contests, potential voters need to learn the date of the local election, to figure out how to vote in that local election, to fill in the ballot for that local election, to submit that ballot (either by mail or in-person), and in some case to register to vote. In short, the costs of voting in off-cycle contest where the only candidates on the ballot are local are much higher than the costs of voting in a presidential election where a range of higher-level offices are up for grabs.

³ A small percentage of cities (10 percent) hold mayoral elections on the same date as federal midterms and a few others allow a candidate that wins a majority in the spring primary to forgo the general election.

Specifically, the analysis focuses on the 50 largest cities in the United States and singles out and compares cities that held their last mayoral election on November 5, the same day as the presidential election and compares them to cities that held off-cycle local elections in previous years. These cities therefore include a range from New York with a population of over 8 million to Aurora, Colorado where there are roughly 400,000 residents.

Relatively few of these cities held their mayoral contest on the same date as the presidential election. In fact, only 12 of 50 held on-cycle mayoral contests on November 5, 2024. That fits with the larger pattern across the nation. Across the country research shows that only about 30 percent of cities hold their mayoral and city council contests on-cycle on the same day as presidential or midterm contests (De Benedictis Kessner and Warshaw 2024).

That leaves most of America's major cities with off-cycle or off-cycle contests. More than half of the top 50 – 28 cities – scheduled their most recent mayoral contest in an off-year (either 2023 or 2021) when turnout is likely to be lower.⁴ Again, this mostly off-cycle pattern is not unusual. Nationally, about two-thirds of all mayoral and city council contests are held on off-cycle dates (De Benedictis Kessner and Warshaw 2024, Durning and Newman 2024).

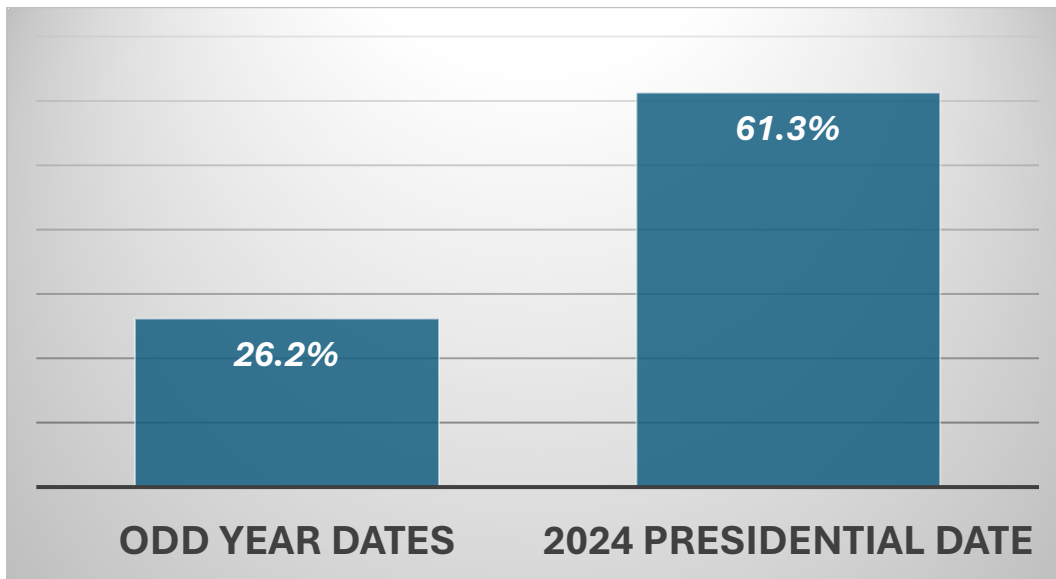
The data show that timing matters. As Figure 2 illustrates, turnout is much higher in on-cycle elections. On average, only 26.2 percent of registered voters turned out to vote in the most recent mayoral election in off-cycle cities. Put more starkly, that means that three-quarters of the eligible electorate did not participate. That in turn means that a small minority of voters determined who holds the mayoralty in most major cities in this country.

Not only was turnout generally low in off-cycle elections, it was also consistently low. In only two of the 28 cities, did a majority of registered voters get to the polls. Turnout was just over 50 percent in Seattle and Minneapolis – two cities that held mayoral elections in 2021. At the opposite end of the spectrum, turnout fell below 10 percent in two Texas cities – Dallas and Fort Worth- and it hovered just above 10 percent in a third – Arlington.

Voter turnout patterns were markedly different when mayoral elections were held on November 5th aligned with the presidential contest. In these on-cycle cities, the overwhelming majority of eligible voters participated. Turnout averaged 61.3 percent in the twelve cities that voted for mayor on November 5th of this year. In all but one of these on-cycle cities, a majority of registered voters participated and in half more than 60 percent of registered voters went to the polls. In San Francisco, the highest turnout contest, more than 78 percent went to the polls to choose a mayor.

Figure 2: Mayoral Turnout and Election Timing

⁴ The remaining 10 cities have slightly different election timing. Five of the ten held their last mayoral election on the same day as the midterm election in 2022. We examine turnout in these cities later in the report. Five other cities are nominally on-cycle (aligned with either the presidential or the midterm elections), but they use these on-cycle elections only as run-offs if no candidate wins a majority in an earlier election. In all five cases, one of the mayoral candidates won the majority of the vote in the city's last primary election. Thus, in all five cities (Fresno, Bakersfield and Milwaukee in 2024 and Oklahoma City in 2022), there was no run-off aligned with the general federal election.



Just how important is the timing of local contests? The data suggests that timing determines whether a small minority or a large majority of voters participate in elections to decide who runs America’s cities. Comparing the two types of cities and the two numbers in Figure 1, we learn that voter turnout is 2.3 times higher on presidential dates than it is on off-cycle dates.

All told, 4.8 million voters participated in these low turnout off-cycle mayoral elections 2021 and 2023. That may appear to be a big number but if these 28 cities all shifted from off-cycle to consolidated elections and if turnout in these cities grew 2.3 times higher, turnout might be expected to grow to 11.3 million voters. Just by moving the dates of local elections in these cities, we could add 6.4 million voters to mayoral contests in America’s biggest cities.

What Happens When Cities Change the Dates of Their Elections

The comparisons we have seen so far are telling. They hint at the power of on-cycle elections to dramatically expand turnout and revitalize local democracy. But one can raise questions about the results. The cities that hold on-cycle elections may be different than the cities that hold off-cycle elections in ways that could impact their turnout. Their residents might differ by income, by education, by race, and by other demographic characteristics that are associated with voter participation. The two types of cities could also have different local electoral structures. Factors like at-large versus district elections, partisan vs nonpartisan elections, and mayoral powers could influence voter participation. And on- and off-cycle cities are often from different states with different rules for early voting, registration deadlines, and mail-in options that might make voting easier or harder. None of these factors are accounted for in a simple comparison of turnout in on- and off-cycle cities.

Fortunately, many cities have shifted their timing in the past and many continue to do so today. By looking at these ‘switchers’ we can see how turnout changes over time in the same city. By measuring turnout in the same place over several elections, we can essentially control for all of these other different

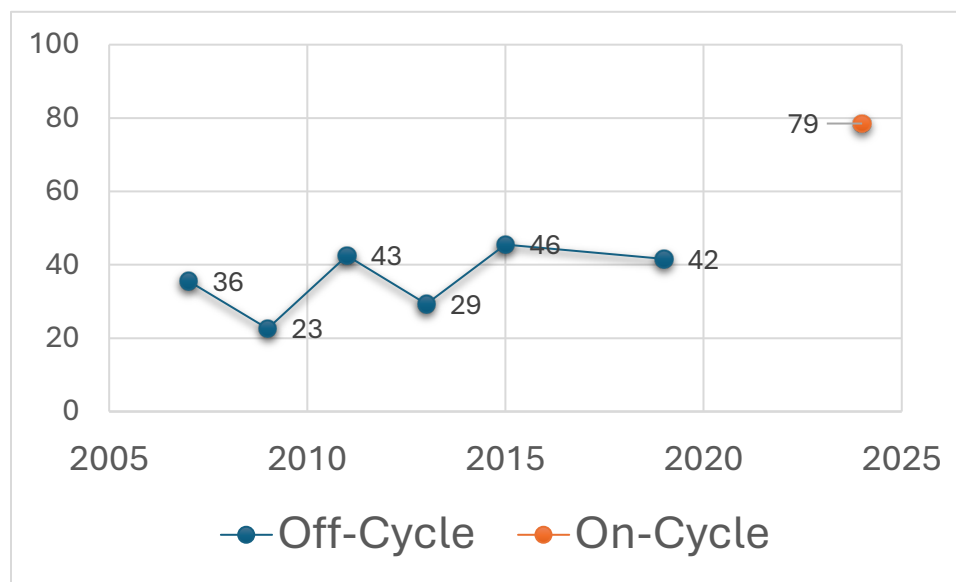
factors that vary from city to city but that typically do not differ over time within a city. We can, in essence, get a better look at how timing impacts turnout.

San Francisco

San Francisco is one of the nation’s most recent switchers. On November 2022, voters in the city passed Prop H moving elections for mayor and other local offices from odd-numbered years to November of presidential years.⁵ On November 5, 2024, the city held its first on-cycle mayoral election. To assess the impact of that change, we examined turnout across the last seven mayoral elections in the city.

The pattern is crystal clear. Turnout was universally and consistently low when mayoral elections were held off-cycle. As Figure 3 reveals, turnout in the last six off-cycle elections fell somewhere between 46 percent in 2015 and 23 percent in 2009. The average for those six odd-year, off-cycle contests was 36 percent. Turnout jumped dramatically when the city held its first mayoral contest this November – some 78.5 percent of all registered voters in the city participated. Shifting to an on-cycle election more than doubled voter turnout in the city.

Figure 3. Timing and Turnout in San Francisco



Across the previous six off-year elections, on average only 164,000 voters participated. On November 5, 2024, 412,000 voters voted for mayor. That represents an almost three-fold increase in turnout.⁶

⁵ Some local office (i.e. Board of Supervisors) were held in even-years prior to 2024.

⁶ The proposed Charter change passed with 70% support of voters. Groups supporting the measure cited the difference in between San Francisco’s persistently low voter turnout in odd-year municipal elections and its higher turnout in presidential cycles, as well as a projected savings in election administration costs, which the city comptroller assessed at \$6.9 million every two years (Citizens Union 2022).

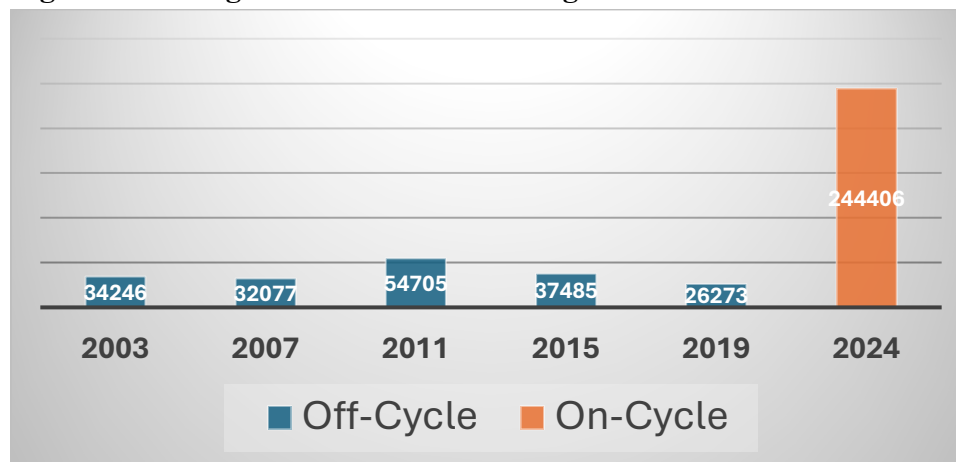
Las Vegas

In Las Vegas, the same shift in election timing had essentially the same effect: mayoral turnout grew more than five-fold. Until recently, cities in Nevada employed a variety of election timing options. Some opted for odd-numbered contests and others chose even year elections. In 2011 in an attempt to standardize the state election calendar, the Nevada State Legislature allowed chartered cities to move their local elections to coincide with the state gubernatorial election. But only two cities decided to do so. That largely unsuccessful endeavor led the governor to sign a new law in 2019 that required all municipalities to conduct elections in November of even-numbered years. As is often the case, the legislation was designed both to increase voter turnout and to reduce elections costs.⁷

The net effect was that Las Vegas, the largest city in Nevada, was forced to move the date of its mayoral election. The end result was a huge gain in turnout. A city that had suffered from consistently low turnout rates, reaching as low as 10 percent in the 2019 mayoral election, suddenly saw turnout jump to 58 percent in 2024.

That sharp shift in turnout is reflected in Figure 4 which shows total turnout for the last six election cycles in the city.⁸ In the last five off-cycle elections held in Las Vegas only about 37,000 people turned out to vote for mayor and total participation never exceeded 55,000. In a city with over half a million residents those are not big numbers. But when the city aligned its mayoral contest with the presidential election in 2024, more than 200,000 voters participated in the mayoral contest. That represents more than six times the citywide average. It also means that for the first time a majority of registered voters (58 percent) had a say in who became mayor.

Figure 4. Timing and Turnout in Las Vegas



⁷ The Nevada Independent, March 1 2019, Secretary of state's office presents bill to end municipal elections in odd-numbered years <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/secretary-of-states-office-presents-bill-to-endmunicipal-elections-in-odd-numbered-years> Las Vegas Sun, June 25, 2019, New local election law shifts term lengths, cuts costs for Southern Nevada cities <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2019/jun/25/new-local-electionlaw-shifts-term-lengths-cuts-co/>

⁸ Turnout data are from:

<https://www.nvsos.gov/SOSelectionPages/results/2024StateWideGeneral/ElectionIndex.aspx>

Las Vegas’s recent electoral history highlights the importance of timing in one other critical way. Like some other cities, Las Vegas now holds a general election in the spring (aligned with the statewide primary). Then, if no candidate wins a majority in the spring election, the city holds a run-off that coincides with the presidential contest. In 2024, the city held both a general election and a run-off. The timing of those two contests was reflected in turnout in the two contests. The spring primary election brought in more voters (72,434) than had been the case in previous elections – likely because it was aligned with a statewide contest. But since statewide primaries draw a much smaller share of the electorate than presidential general elections, turnout in the primary was dwarfed by turnout in the November general. That matches previous research which shows that while aligning with primary elections can increase turnout, the gains in turnout from aligning with federal general elections are much greater (Hajnal 2010, Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2003).

Phoenix

In Phoenix, turnout more than doubled when the city aligned the mayoral election with a presidential contest. The city’s change in happened because voters passed a charter amendment in 2018 that moved the city’s mayoral elections from August of odd-numbered years to November of even-numbered years. A clear majority of residents (72 percent) favored the move. Indeed, over the last decade, 37 cities have considered ballot measures to consolidate election timing. All but one of those ballot measures passed – a 97 percent success rate.

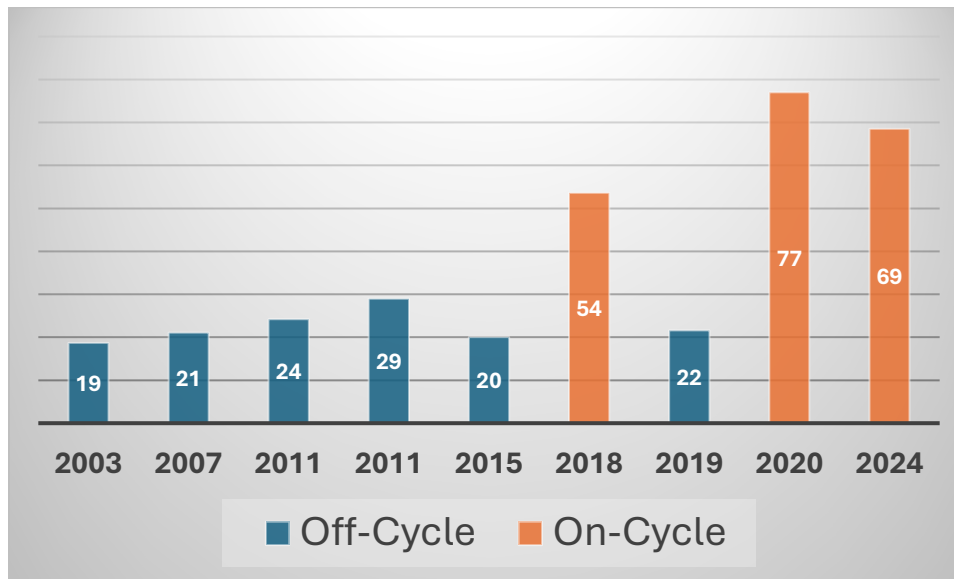
Turnout patterns in Phoenix are interesting, and in some ways even more compelling than they are in other cities, because the presence or absence of run-off elections has moved Phoenix back and forth between on- and off-cycle mayoral elections over time.⁹ As Figure 5 illustrates, Phoenix held all of its mayoral elections off-cycle until 2018.¹⁰ In that early off-cycle period, turnout averaged only 23 percent and never exceeded 30 percent. In the next three on-cycle elections turnout averaged 67 percent and grew as high as 77 percent. In Phoenix moving on-cycle tripled turnout in the city.

Figure 5. Timing and Turnout in Phoenix

⁹ 2024 results from: <https://elections.maricopa.gov/results-and-data/election-results.html>

Other results from: <https://elections.maricopa.gov/results-and-data/historic-results.html>

¹⁰ Phoenix held an on-cycle mayoral election in 2018 because the mayor resigned in the spring of that year triggering a special election in November.



Also interesting is the variation in turnout from 2018 onwards. Because no candidate won a majority of the vote in the November 2018 contest, the city held a run-off election for mayor in March 2019. That shift back to an off-cycle local election fully reversed any turnout gains and turnout in March of that year reverted back to the historical off-cycle average. The turnout pattern in Phoenix also demonstrates the importance of aligning with presidential as opposed to midterm contests. In the two mayoral elections aligned with a presidential contest (in 2020 and 2024) turnout was higher – an average of 73 percent – than it was in the one mayoral contest aligned with a federal midterm – 59 percent. Moving to on-cycle matters. Moving to an on-cycle presidential date matters even more (Hajnal 2010).

Other Cities That Have Made the On-Cycle Move

When cities shift from off-cycle dates to on-cycle dates, the turnout gains we have seen so far are impressive. The gains are both remarkably consistent and remarkably large. In every case turnout doubles or more than doubles.

Skeptics might still wonder if something other than a change in timing is at play here. Looking at additional cities, especially if those new cities have changed their timing in different years, would help to increase confidence in the results. Fortunately, in the last decade dozens of other cities around the country have moved to even year elections and they have done so in different parts of the country at different times.

In Table 3 we examine turnout changes in five of the nation’s 100 largest cities as each experienced changes in timing.¹¹ The first consolidated elections for Baltimore, Los Angeles, Austin, El Paso, and Corpus Christi were held in 2016, 2022, 2014, 2020, and 2012 respectively.

¹¹ San Jose also recently decided to switch their timing – from midterm years to presidential years. But they have not yet held a mayoral election that coincides with a presidential contest. Similarly, Henderson Nevada recently moved to on-cycle elections but has not yet held a November even year contest. Boulder moved from odd-year

Table 3. Other Large American Cities that Have Switched to Even Year Elections: The Impact on Turnout

City	Turnout		Change in Turnout	Extra Voters
	Last Off-Cycle	First On-Cycle		
Baltimore	13%	60%	4.9 times higher	187,000
Los Angeles	20%	44%	2.3 times higher	522,000
Austin	11%	34%	3.3 times higher	111,000
El Paso	8%	55.1	6.6 times higher	185,000
Corpus Christi	8%	38%	10.3 times higher	65,000

Patterns in these cities mirror what we have already seen.¹² In every case turnout jumped dramatically after the city switched to on-cycle elections. In each city, on-cycle elections brought out at least 2.3 times more voters than odd-year elections had in the past.

These cities also highlight the distinction between elections that are aligned with federal midterm elections and those aligned with presidential elections. The three cities that shifted to presidential election years (Baltimore, El Paso, and Corpus Christi) experienced far bigger gains in turnout. Turnout also jumped in the two cities that moved to midterm years (Los Angeles and Austin). But the gains there were not quite as large.¹³

Changes in timing have also occurred elsewhere around the country beyond these major cities. Those changes have been systematically studied by academic researchers. Across the nation, close to 100 cities and towns have moved to on-cycle elections in the last decade. Every published study – and there have been more than a dozen – finds that on-cycle elections have major effects on turnout (Marschall and Lippie 2018, Kogan et al. 2018, Anzia 2014). Indeed, it is rare in the field of political science for every published study to reach the same conclusion. These studies reveal that turnout improves in the first consolidated election and that turnout gains are sustained in subsequent on-cycle contests. They also show that the effect of election timing on turnout endures even after controlling for a range of institutional and demographic factors (Marschall and Lippie 2018, Hajnal and Lewis 2003). In addition, they demonstrate that election timing has a greater impact on turnout than do potential reforms like moving to district elections, shifting to partisan contests, or changing from an appointed city manager to an elected mayor. (Hajnal 2010).

Turnout in America’s Largest City

New York City turnout in off-cycle local elections turnout is low – often shockingly low. In the last mayoral contest in 2021, 1,125,258 New Yorkers turned out, just 23 percent of registered voters. Federal

contests to even year elections – the first of which will happen in 2026. Finally, due to an administrative error, Greensboro, North Carolina held an election in 2022, but it was not aligned with a federal contest.

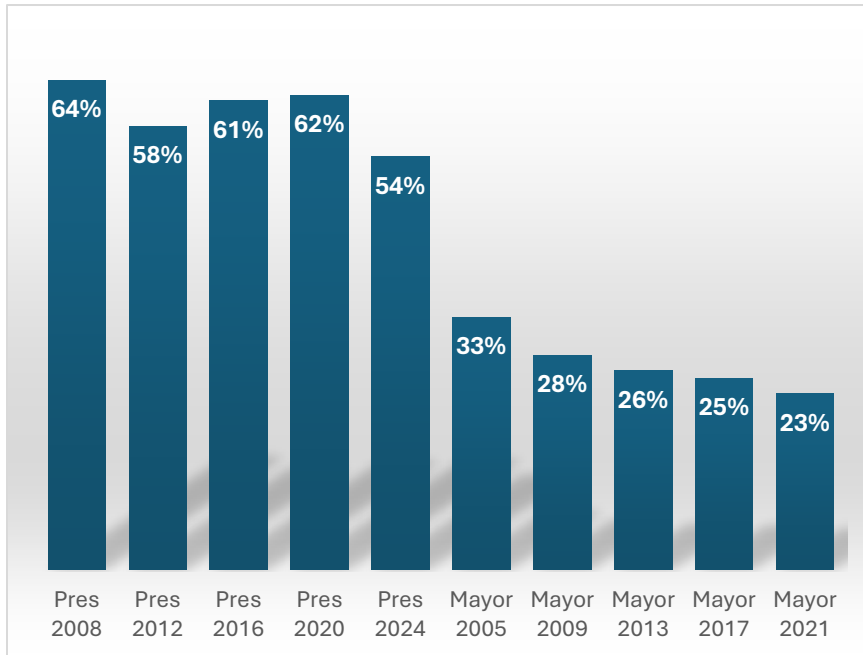
¹² Data are from: <https://boe.baltimorecity.gov/boe-past-results> <https://spreadsheets.latimes.com/100-years-l-mayoral-turnout/> [https://ballotpedia.org/Mayoral_election_in_Austin,_Texas_\(2024\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Mayoral_election_in_Austin,_Texas_(2024)) <https://epcountyvotes.com/election-archives>

¹³ Interestingly, Austin switched its election timing again in 2021 – this time to the presidential year. When the city held its first mayoral election on the same day as a presidential contest, turnout increased even more. Turnout for the 2024 mayoral election was 12 points higher than it had been in the previous mayoral election held in conjunction with the 2022 midterms.

elections are very different. On November 5, 2024, more than twice as many people voted, some 2,582,175 people, making up 54 percent of the city’s registered voters, according to early returns.

Those two contests are not exceptions. As can be seen in Figure 6, the sharp contrast between mayoral turnout and presidential turnout in the city has persisted over time. Over the last five mayoral contests on average only 27 percent of registered voters took part, while the average across the last five presidential elections is 60 percent.

Figure 6. Comparing Mayoral and Presidential Turnout in New York City



The Demographics of the New York Vote

Given that New York City is considering the possibility of changing the timing of its elections, we examine turnout in 25 assembly districts that were comprised largely by members of one racial and ethnic group. The analysis focuses on the five districts with the highest percentage of non-Hispanic Whites (74 percent White on average), the five districts with the highest percentage of African Americans (76 percent Black on average), the five districts with the highest percentage of Latinos (69 percent Hispanic on average), and three majority Asian districts (64 percent Asian on average).¹⁴

An analysis of turnout in those districts indicates gains across the board. Turnout is higher everywhere on presidential election days. Turnout in assembly districts with the most non-Hispanic Whites was 223 percent higher on November 5th, 2024, than it was in the same districts for the last mayoral contest. But the gains were somewhat greater in Hispanic districts (a 308 percent increase) and Black districts (a 253 percent increase), and roughly the same in majority Asian districts (a 209 percent increase). These patterns suggest that if New York moved to mayoral elections from odd years to even years, turnout gains

¹⁴ The assembly districts are: non-Hispanic White majorities (districts 62, 73, 76, 66, and 48); Black majority (58, 83, 60, 55, and 29); Hispanic majority (72, 86, 84, 78, and 85); and Asian majority (40, 25, and 49).

would be shared across the board, while moving the demographics of the participating electorate closer to the city's actual demographics.

Similar or perhaps even stronger effects are likely for the age distribution. However, the availability of data limits our analysis of age. Turnout data from New York City's 2024 election are not yet available by age. Thus, the analysis focuses on turnout by age in the city in the 2020 presidential election and compares those numbers to turnout by age in the city in the last mayoral contest in 2021.

That comparison suggests that young voters would gain the most from the move to presidential dates. For younger voters – those ages 18-29 – turnout was 434 percent higher for the 2020 presidential election than it was for the 2021 mayoral election. For older voters – those ages 60-69 – turnout was only 95 percent higher for the presidential contest, because older voters are much more likely to be supervoters, those rare Americans who participate in every election. Judging by these numbers, it seems clear that moving to even-year mayoral elections would increase the share of voters who are younger and thus make the electorate more representative of the city population by age as well as race.¹⁵

Given these demographic shifts in the vote, it would not be surprising to see shifts in the types of candidates who run for at the local level. Indeed, newly published research demonstrates that after cities in California moved to on-cycle dates, the number of Latinos running and winning office grew – so much so that shifting dates eliminated, in proportional terms, all of the underrepresentation of Latinos on city councils in places that shifted. (Hajnal et al 2024).

Questions

There are worthy questions for additional research. Some wonder if city residents might pay less attention or know less about local politics when local elections are held at the same time as presidential or federal contests. Little research has been done in this area, but what has been done indicates that voters in on-cycle elections are as knowledgeable or more knowledgeable about local political affairs than are voters in off-cycle elections (Payson 2017). And we do know that there has been a decline in traditional local journalism, including local news television shows, radio, and newspapers. Given this decline, even communicating the most fundamental facts of an off-cycle election – that such an election is occurring in a given municipality on a certain date – can be a daunting challenge for election administrators, civil society groups, political campaigns, and America's remaining local journalists alike. With national news coverage and campaigns in high gear in on-cycle elections, this challenge is much less severe in midterm and close to nonexistent for presidential elections.

Another set of questions on which research could be done are the impacts on candidate campaigns. Do the costs of local campaigns go up when they run on federal ballots, as candidates aim to compete in more active political environments? Or do they stay the same or even decline, since candidates need invest less in turnout operations, and can focus instead on communications, take advantage of media attention on the election, and collaborate with broader electoral groups like political parties?

A related concern is that coupling local elections with federal contests might lead to greater partisanship and polarization at the local level. Regardless of election timing, it is true that local elections across the

¹⁵ We thank Citizens Union for providing the data required to do this analysis. For a more detailed analysis of turnout patterns in New York state see Citizens Union (2022).

country are becoming more partisan over time (Gaudette, forthcoming). At the same time, research in process by Hajnal finds that moving from off-cycle to consolidated elections increases the share of voters who identify as ideological moderates as well as the share who identify as nonpartisan or unaffiliated. More work needs to be done in this area before we can offer firm conclusions.

Impacts on governance are better documented. Studies indicate that the power of organized special interests are reduced in on-cycle elections (Anzia 2014). Voters appear to hold local incumbents more accountable for their actions when elections are held on-cycle, than when they are held as off-cycle contests (Payson 2017). And cities that move to even year local elections tend to have elected policies that are more in line with the median resident (Schaffner et al 2020, Dynes et al 2021).

Impacts for election administrators are also fairly well-understood. The transition to on-cycle elections has already occurred in several states and nearly a hundred cities. A survey of administrators in municipalities that have experienced the shift in timing reports that the transition was seamless and that no major problems emerged (Hajnal 2021). Budget projections for a variety of jurisdictions indicates holding fewer, consolidated elections leads to cost savings. A report by the Sightline Institute estimated that consolidating local elections in three northwestern states would save between 57 and 88 percent of election administrative costs (Durning 2023). That would yield savings of more than \$30 million every two years in the three states. Another study found that election costs were 5 to 10 times higher for off-cycle cities in California (Greenling 2013). All of this makes sense given the underlying logic – running one election with multiple contests on the same day is likely to be more efficient than running multiple elections across multiple different jurisdictions on multiple days. Keeping local elections separate from national elections almost certainly costs taxpayers money. Research on these topics, however, are limited and additional analysis could be helpful.

Some raise concerns that the benefits of aligned elections will be offset by voter roll-off, that is by the number of voters who do not fill out their entire ballot, and thus might miss voting in a local election if it were placed below federal and state elections on a long ballot. The evidence indicates that this concern is misplaced: despite voter roll-off, aligned elections greatly increase total votes cast and the percentage of voters who vote in local elections. True, some voters who vote for president choose not to vote in local elections further down the ballot, but even after taking into account roll-off, the research finds that on-cycle elections roughly double local voter turnout (Berry and Gersen 2010, Caren 2007). That is to say, it is generally the case that many more people fill out their votes in contests that are at the bottom of presidential election ballots than total voters who come out for anything at all in off-cycle elections.

Conclusions

This review of turnout in America's biggest cities indicates that 2024 urban turnout, though modestly lower than 2020's level, is quite high in comparison to other recent elections. 2024 presidential participation, like 2020, 2016 and other presidential elections is well above midterm levels, and dramatically higher than off-cycle local election turnout.

The numbers on off-cycle, local elections in America's large cities tell a different story, a story of low participation by a skewed sliver of the electorate.

Our look at Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Francisco and other cities that have shifted elections from off-cycle to even-year federal elections shows that cities can successfully increase participation by changing their

election dates. And our examination of New York's voting shows that presidential participation is dramatically higher than local participation for everyone, across race, ethnicity, and age.

Indeed, if structural low turnout is endemic in any part of America elections, off-cycle local elections are at the heart of the problem.

Work Cited

- Anzia, Sarah. 2014. *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups*. New York: Cambridge.
- Berry, Christopher, and Jacob E. Gersen. 2010. "The Timing of Elections." *University of Chicago Law Review* 77: 37-64.
- Caren, Neal. 2007. "Big City, Big Turnout? Electoral Participation in American Cities." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 29: 31-46.
- Census Bureau. 2024. "Historical Reported Voting Rates."
- Citizens Union. 2022. "Moving Municipal Elections to Even-Numbered Years." <https://citizensunion.org/portfolio-item/cu-report-moving-municipal-elections-to-even-numbered-years/>
- De Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, and Christopher Warshaw. 2024. "The Electoral and Policy Effects of Election Timing in City and County Governments."
- Durning, Alan. 2023. "Idaho, Montana, and Washington Could Save \$30 Million by Moving Local Elections to National Election Day." *Sightline Institute*.
- Durning, Alan, and Todd Newman. 2024. "When Do Cities Hold Elections? A Us Dataset on Election Consolidation." <https://www.sightline.org/2024/06/10/when-do-cities-hold-elections/>
- Dynes, Adam M., Michael T. Hartney, and Sam D. Hayes. 2021. "Off-Cycle and Off Center: Election Timing and Representation in Municipal Government." *American Political Science Review* 115: 1097-103.
- Gaudette, Jennifer. Forthcoming. "Polarization in Police Union Politics." *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Greenling Institute. 2013. "Odd-Year Vs. Even-Year Consolidated Elections in California." In *Secondary Odd-Year Vs. Even-Year Consolidated Elections in California*. <https://greenlining.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Research-Brief-Odd-Year-vs-Even-Year-Consolidated-Elections-in-California.pdf>
- Hajnal, Zoltan L. 2010. *America's Uneven Democracy: Turnout, Race, and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hajnal, Zoltan. 2021. "Assessing the Move to on-Cycle Elections: California City Clerks Survey." In *Secondary Assessing the Move to on-Cycle Elections: California City Clerks Survey*.
- Hajnal, Zoltan L., Vlad Kogan, and Agustin Markarian. 2024. "Who Wins When: Election Timing and Descriptive Representation." *American Journal of Political Science*.
- Hajnal, Zoltan L., Vladimir Kogan, and G. Agustin Markarian. 2022. "Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition." *American Political Science Review* 116: 374-83.
- Hajnal, Zoltan L., and Paul G. Lewis. 2003. "Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 38: 645-68.

Hajnal, Zoltan L., Paul G. Lewis, and Hugh Louch. 2002. *Municipal Elections in California: Turnout, Timing, and Competition*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.

Jurjevich, Jason. 2016. "Who Votes for Mayor."

Kogan, Vladimir, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz. 2018. "Election Timing, Electorate Composition, and Policy Outcomes: Evidence from School Districts." *American Journal of Political Science* 62: 637-51.

Marschall, Melissa, and John Lappie. 2018. "Turnout in Local Elections: Is Timing Really Everything?". *Election Law Journal* 17.

McDonald, Michael. 2023. "United States Elections Project." <https://www.electproject.org/>

Payson, Julia. 2017. "When Are Local Incumbents Held Accountable for Government Performance? Evidence from Us School Districts." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 42: 421-48.

Schaffner, Brian F., Jesse H. Rhodes, and Raymond J. La Raja. 2020. *Hometown Inequality: Race, Class, and Representation in American Local Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix Table A: Turnout in Mayoral Elections in Major Cities

OFF-CYCLE ELECTION DATES			
CITY	DATE	TURNOUT	VOTES
Omaha	5/11/2021	32.7	97327
Albuquerque	11/2/2021	32	118403
Atlanta	11/2/2021	21.6	96158
Boston	11/2/2021	32.7	144380
Detroit	11/2/2021	18.6	92111
Miami	11/2/2021	17.6	27323
Minneapolis	11/2/2021	54	143974
New York	11/2/2021	23	1125258
Seattle	11/2/2021	54.6	198359
Chicago	2/28/2023	38.7	612514
Jacksonville	3/21/2023	33.1	217398
Colorado Springs	4/4/2023	35.3	110244
Kansas City	4/4/2023	19.3	41259
Arlington	5/6/2023	11.3	17482
Dallas	5/2/2023	7.1	45535
Denver	5/2/2023	31.1	162986
San Antonio	5/6/2023	15.3	136927
Fort Worth	6/5/2023	8.1	43450
Nashville	8/1/2023	23	114317
Memphis	10/5/2023	22	82071
Aurora	11/7/2023	30.2	74613
Charlotte	11/7/2023	15.5	82907
Columbus	11/7/2023	38.2	216838
Houston	11/7/2023	17	201528
Indianapolis	11/7/2023	26.5	163525
Philadelphia	11/7/2023	31.1	307752
Tucson	11/7/2023	21	96021
Wichita	11/7/2023	23.9	64260
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION DATES			
Austin	11/5/2024	64.1	349082
Baltimore	11/5/2024	46.9	183598
El Paso	11/5/2024	54.1	183598
Las Vegas	11/5/2024	57.9	244406
Mesa	11/5/2024	61.6	183936
Phoenix	11/5/2024	66.3	534603
Portland	11/5/2024	64.8	302000
Sacramento	11/5/2024	57	160042
San Diego	11/5/2024	57.9	475352
San Francisco	11/5/2024	78.5	409747
Tulsa	11/5/2024	69.5	137173
Virginia Beach	11/5/2024	56.5	194953

MIDTERM ELECTION DATES

Long Beach	11/8/2022	40.4	110669
Los Angeles	11/8/2022	43.9	929974
Oakland	11/8/2022	53.3	112888
Raleigh	11/8/2022	63.6	220093
Washington	11/8/2022	40.8	188474

HYBRID DATES

Fresno	4/2/2024	26.3	69828
Milwaukee	4/2/2024	29.3	79175
Oklahoma City	2/8/2022	13.0	60785
Bakersfield	3/5/2022	35.1	53774
San Jose	3/5/2022	39.8	167064