



We Can Double the Number of Americans Voting: Reschedule Elections to Make Local Politics More Representative

Zoltan L. Hajnal, University of California-San Diego

Most elections in the United States are at the local level. Every year, we elect tens of thousands of local elected officials, and what they do matters. Local spending is approaching \$2 trillion annually and local governments control our schools and many of the services that we use each week. Despite the stakes, however, few Americans participate in these contests. Only about a quarter of residents turn out to vote in the typical citywide contest, and that number drops even further for lower level contests. The problem is not just that a tiny fraction of the population votes--it is that those who do turn out to vote in local elections do not look at all like those who fail to participate. In short, an extraordinarily unrepresentative set of residents is determining how local governments allocate local resources.

The problem is clear, but so too is the solution. The easiest, most politically viable, and most effective way to expand turnout and make local democracy more representative is to shift the timing of local elections so that officials in cities and suburbs are elected at the same time as presidents, governors, and legislators, at times when voter interest and turnout is at a peak.

Election Timing Matters

Simply changing the timing of local elections substantially alters who votes, who wins office, and the types of policies that local governments pursue. My research demonstrates the many advantages that flow from moving from "stand-alone" local elections held at different times than general elections – the system currently in place in about 70 percent of all municipalities in the United States – to on-cycle elections scheduled on the same date as statewide and national contests. This switch has the potential to dramatically increase the number of voters and the representativeness of the local voting population. Because voter turnout is routinely higher for statewide primaries and general elections, scheduling local contests at the same time makes it almost costless for citizens to vote for local representatives. They need only check off additional names further down the ballot.

The data on improved representation from synchronized elections are unequivocal.

- Across the nation, turnout in comparable cities with on-cycle elections is almost double the turnout in cities with off-cycle elections.
- Studies show that shifting to on-cycle elections greatly reduces the underrepresentation of the working class, younger Americans, and racial and ethnic minorities in the local electorate.
- Minority representation in office gets a boost when elections are aligned, because higher turnout cities elect city officials who are much more demographically representative. My analysis shows that increasing turnout could reduce up to one-third of the underrepresentation of minorities on city

councils and in mayoral offices.

With one small step, in short, suburbs and cities could switch from local elections dominated by tiny and unrepresentative slices of voters to local elections with broad and significantly more representative participation. Given that the vast majority of cities currently hold off-cycle elections, the potential to expand citizen participation in these vital arenas of American governance is enormous.

Local Government Works Better When It is Representative

Cities with higher turnout and greater minority representation tend to enact policies that are more in line with the needs and preferences of all citizens, including lower-income people and those from racial and ethnic minorities. In particular, higher turnout is associated with greater social welfare spending and increased hiring of minorities into city government posts – including police jobs. Other researchers have also shown that shifting to on-cycle elections reduces the ideological gap between citizens of color and their elected officials (Schaffner, Rhodes, and La Raja 2020).

More Benefits

In addition to improving participation and minority representation, synchronized local elections create strong cost-savings for local governments and taxpayers. Indeed, the primary motivation for this move has usually been cost savings. In most states, municipalities pay the entire administrative costs of stand-alone elections but have to cover only a fraction of the costs of on-cycle elections.

Moreover, cities change their electoral timing regularly. A survey in California found that more than two-fifths of cities had changed the timing of municipal elections in recent years. A municipal ordinance is all that is required in many places. States can also require this sort of change – Arizona, for example, has passed legislation mandating that many of its cities hold local elections that coincide with statewide contests. And if governments do not act, citizens can get involved. Citizen’s groups can raise the issue; and in many states with direct democracy, initiative campaigns can put local election timing on the statewide or local ballot.

Making sure that local elections happen at the same time as statewide and national contests is, in short, a straightforward, cost-saving reform that could go a long way toward making local governments more representative and responsive.

Getting It Done

Early efforts have shown that change is possible. With almost no outside investment, a small group of activists, nonprofits, and researchers have won statewide victories and city level changes around the country. Using academic research local and statewide leaders have won legislative victories to change election times in five states and over a hundred cities.

The first state to move was California, where the state legislature passed a law mandating a move to consolidated local elections in all low-turnout cities in 2015. Arizona passed a similar law in 2018. Nevada came next in 2019. Virginia followed in 2022. The next year New York passed a law mandating on-cycle county and town elections across the state.

The net effect of these changes in local election timing has been to add more than 5 million new voters to local democracy - new voters who have made the electorates in their cities and districts more representative of the underlying communities. In Los Angeles alone turnout grew by more than half million votes - from 400,000 before to 1 million after the switch - and city elected its first Black woman as mayor.

Also, a result of progress to date, the share of places that hold even year November elections has grown dramatically in the last two decades. Change has been most pronounced at the city level where the share of cities with even year mayoral and city council elections has more than doubled (from around 15 percent to over 30 percent). As a result of these reforms, most school board contests are now held on-cycle (Warshaw and De Benedictis Kessner 2024).

How did all of this happen? One big part of the answer is that the move to on-cycle elections is extremely popular. National survey data show that at least 70 percent of all Americans prefer to vote on one day. Critically, that support is non-partisan. It also doesn't hurt that majorities of Democrats and Republicans both prefer on-cycle elections.

All of this suggests that even more change is possible - perhaps even likely. Most mayoral and city council elections are still held on stand-alone off-cycle dates that generate exceptionally low and uneven turnout and that ultimately lead to less representative elected officials and less responsive governance. Nationwide, 24 states still mandate off-cycle election dates. In thirteen more states, where cities have control of their own timing, most haven't yet shifted. New legislation is already underway in Idaho, Montana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Washington and major cities in Florida, Texas, Minnesota, and elsewhere are actively considering the move. A little more research and a little more support might just get them there.