



How the Timing of Elections Shapes Turnout, Election Outcomes, and Public Policy

Sarah F. Anzia, University of California, Berkeley

Media coverage of elections focuses on candidate personalities, horserace polling, campaign ads and soundbites, and even, at times, the issues – but almost never considers the *timing* of elections. Most people probably have not given any thought to the timing issue, yet the majority of more than 500,000 elected officials in the United States are not voted into office on what we typically think of as “Election Day” – the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even-numbered years. Across the 50 states, elections are held all the time – during the spring, in odd-numbered years, and in close succession to one another. Rarely does a week pass without an election happening somewhere in the United States. And this is more than a mere curiosity. My research shows that this little-considered aspect of representative democracy matters in many ways. When elections happen influences who votes, who wins, and the policies that result.

Different Election Days Mean Different Voters

Election timing matters most basically because voter turnout is much lower in off-cycle than in on-cycle elections. Looking at California, for example, I find that average voter turnout in off-cycle city elections is 35 percentage points lower than turnout when city elections are held at the same time as presidential elections. Furthermore, election timing alone explains two-thirds of the variation in voter turnout across city council elections in California. To predict turnout, timing matters more than even how competitive elections happen to be. Similarly, another study found that the average turnout rate for Michigan school board elections held at off-times in 2000 was just 7.8% of registered voters – compared to a typical turnout of about 65% of Michigan registered voters in presidential elections.

Lower turnout, in turn, benefits organized groups in politics. As my new book shows, the lower turnout that typifies off-cycle contests enhances the electoral influence of organized groups and their members or active supporters. This happens for two main reasons:

- Voters with the most at stake turn out at high rates regardless of when the election is scheduled – and many of these intensely motivated voters are members of organized groups. Overall, members of organized groups tend to cast higher proportions of the ballots in off-cycle elections.
- Organized groups regularly get actively involved in elections, of course. But when overall turnout is low, as it tends to be in off-years or months, their efforts at mobilization have a larger impact on the outcome.

The Politics of Election Timing

The fact that mobilized supporters of organized groups make up a greater proportion of voters in off-cycle elections has big consequences for election outcomes and public policy. Because this reality is usually well understood by the people involved, politicians, policymakers, and organized groups have always contended over the scheduling of elections. In the 19th century, city and state officials regularly tampered with election timing to benefit preferred candidates. And in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, progressive reformers made off-cycle local elections standard throughout the United States. Reformers argued that separating local and national elections would encourage voters to focus on local issues, but these reformers also believed that their preferred candidates would fare better in off-cycle elections.

Even if organized groups favor off-cycle elections, citizens in general think differently. When I surveyed a representative sample of U.S. voters, the vast majority of both Democrats and Republicans said they would prefer to have local elections on the same day as national elections.

Given such citizen preferences, why are most local elections still held off-cycle? Over the past decade, state

legislatures have considered hundreds of bills to consolidate elections, yet almost all have failed to pass – in large part because groups that benefit from off-cycle timing fight such changes. For example, I found that teachers' unions and school board associations often turn up to testify against bills that would move school elections on-cycle. Somewhat surprisingly, Democrats generally vote to preserve off-cycle timing, while Republicans more often vote to move school board elections into alignment with national or state contests.

Policy Payoffs for the Organized

Low-turnout, off-cycle elections not only enhance the voting clout of organized groups; such elections also open the door to policies especially beneficial to organized constituencies.

- To estimate possible benefits from the off-cycle timing of school board elections, I looked at data on teacher salaries in eight states that have some districts with on-cycle elections and others with off-cycle elections. According to my results, districts with off-cycle elections pay their most advanced teachers more than 4% higher base salaries. For California teachers working in off-cycle districts, this amounted to an average salary boost of about \$3,000 per person in 2003. My studies of school districts in Minnesota and Texas documented the same pattern.
- Also, in California, off-cycle city elections enhance the clout of firefighters and police officers, two groups that tend to be active in urban politics. My estimates show that both types of city employees are better compensated in cities that hold off-cycle elections.

In sum, the timing of elections matters for turnout levels and the composition of the electorate – and consequently for election outcomes and subsequent public policymaking. Public officials installed in low-turnout, off-cycle elections are unusually dependent on support from organized interest groups – including their efforts to get out the vote. Candidates who win and hold onto office in such contexts tend to promote policies that benefit their most organized constituents, the ones who helped them win the last election and will be needed again in the next contest.

Read more in Sarah F. Anzia, *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups* (University of Chicago Press, 2014).