

Why Does No One Vote in Local Elections?

Timing is everything — and moving them to align with national polls would drive up participation.

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America is facing a crisis on which, for once, Democrats and Republicans can agree: low voter turnout in local elections. Nationwide, only 27 percent of eligible voters vote in the typical municipal election.

New York City is typical. In 2017, 25 percent of the city's registered voters participated in the mayoral contest. In Los Angeles turnout has been so low — 20 percent of registered voters in 2017 — that the City Council has used cash prizes to encourage voting. The numbers get even worse as you go down the ladder to county, school board and special elections.

The result is that an extraordinarily unrepresentative set of residents determines how local governments distribute services and spend the almost \$2 trillion that local governments control. In some places, that means that politically active conservative, wealthy, older, white voters have disproportionate sway over local government. In others that means that organized and energetic unions can move policy their way. Seldom is that control shared across the spectrum — and democracy suffers as a result.

This isn't a new problem, and its causes are fairly obvious: Many local elections are held on dates other than national elections. Sometimes it's a different day; sometimes it's an off-year, in between midterms and presidential votes. It's hard enough getting people to vote for president and Congress; it's even harder to get them out again to vote for county and city officials.

Fortunately, there's an equally simple solution, and it comes at little cost: Move the dates of local elections to coincide with statewide and national contests.

The logic is clear. When local elections are not held on the first Tuesday of November with other statewide and national contests, local voters need to learn the date of their local election, find their local election polling place and make a specific trip to the polls just to vote on local contests. That is a lot of extra work just to vote for a school board contest or a special district measure. By moving those elections to coincide with national elections, though, we make local voting essentially costless. Citizens who are already voting for higher level offices need only check off a few more boxes further down the ballot.

That small change in timing makes a huge difference in turnout. In 2016, Baltimore moved to on-cycle elections and its participation soared. Registered voter turnout went from just 13 percent in the last election before the switch to 60 percent in the first on-cycle election.

San Diego has on-cycle city elections and generally high turnout — 76 percent in November 2016. But when scandal forced the city to hold an off-cycle mayoral contest in 2013, turnout dropped to 35 percent. Research shows that participation in local elections in cities doubles in on-cycle elections. And when turnout doubles, the skew in turnout declines, local government becomes more representative of its residents and policies become more responsive to the broader public.

Remarkably, in these days of partisan polarization, Democrats and Republicans both overwhelmingly favor the same solution. The only national survey done on the subject shows that 73 percent of Democrats and 61 percent of Republicans favored on-cycle over off-cycle elections.

And perhaps even more remarkably, Democratic and Republican leaders are both pushing the same reform. In 2015, California's overwhelmingly Democratic state government passed a law mandating on-cycle local elections when local turnout falls below a certain threshold. This year, Arizona's overwhelmingly Republican state government passed an almost identical law.

But there is still a lot of work to be done. The vast majority of cities around the country continue to hold off-cycle elections. And despite the obvious gains to our democracy, many do not want to change. Incumbents who have won office under the old, low turnout system often fight the shift. And interest groups that have been allowed to dominate sparsely populated elections won't want to give up their power.

POPULATION OF FLORIDA BY MINOR CIVIL DIVISIONS, BY RACE AND VOTING AGE, ALSO 1920 TOTALS—(Continued).

Minor Civil Divisions	1925			1920	Voting Age, 1925		
	Total	White	Negro	U. S. Totals	Total	White	Negro
Precinct 2, Fullford	621	537	84		512	272	40
Precinct 3, Archer Creek	1,033	854	179		574	480	94
Precinct 4, Little Silver	2,977	2,903	60		1,694	1,657	37
Precinct 5, Lemon City	4,090	3,433	657		2,361	2,007	354
Precinct 6, Buena Vista-Miami	3,828	2,602	20		1,755	1,735	20
Precinct 7, Part of Miami (2)	4,437	4,145	292		2,536	2,404	132
Precinct 8, Part of Miami (3)	13,475	5,321	3,108		9,086	3,737	3,369
Precinct 9, Part of Miami (3)	9,498	3,000	6,400		6,523	2,030	4,493
Precinct 10, Part of Miami (4)	5,430	4,354	681		4,199	3,770	420
Precinct 11, Part of Miami (5)	9,868	9,212	643		8,384	7,894	500
Precinct 12, Part of Miami	2,537	2,523	4		1,743	1,740	3
Precinct 13, Miami Beach (6)	2,342	2,279	56		1,920	1,578	42
Precinct 14, Part of Miami and Outside	3,337	3,000	247		3,493	3,332	141
Precinct 15, Fla. Keys, Coconut Grove and Silver Bluff	5,835	3,903	1,932		3,465	2,461	1,004
Precinct 16, Coral Gables (b)	1,321	1,303	18		1,039	991	48
Precinct 17, Larkins	1,041	1,178	403		647	673	274
Precinct 18, Perrine	1,391	782	629		747	417	330
Precinct 19, Goulds	417	213	204		219	112	107
Precinct 20, Silver Palms	149	131	18		86	76	10
Precinct 21, Princeton	648	494	154		314	231	83
Precinct 22, Redland	308	273	33		200	179	21
Precinct 23, Homestead (b)	3,010	2,115	795		1,555	1,158	397
Precinct 24, Florida City (b)	691	438	203		430	315	115
Precinct 25, Part of Miami	1,116	1,113	3		745	742	3
Precinct 26, Hialeah	1,494	1,040	445		944	691	253
Precinct 27, Part of Miami (7)	5,105	4,854	250		3,651	3,451	200
Precinct 28, Miami (b)	14,004	8,319	5,775		7,999	4,694	3,105
Precinct 29, Miami (b)	4,303	4,141	162		2,913	2,788	125
Precinct 30, Miami (b)	4,107	4,167	50		2,618	2,538	23

(1) Includes 29 other races. (2) Includes 6 other races. (3) Includes 8 other races. (4) Includes 4 other races. (5) Includes 3 other races. (6) Includes 7 other races. (7) Includes one of another race. (b) Includes town of same name.

County (a) (1)	Total	White	Negro	U. S. Totals	Total	White	Negro
Collier County (a) (1)	8,061	6,193	1,754	23,434	4,367	3,357	1,010
Precinct 1, Pine Level	233	232	21		136	119	17
Precinct 2, Eganor	245	205	40		129	100	29
Precinct 3, Owens	233	234	0		142	136	6
Precinct 4, Ft. Windsor	69	58	1		33	31	1

Precinct 6, Brownville	274	274			137	137	
Precinct 6, Avant	258	240	18		134	127	7
Precinct 7, E. Arcadia (b)	1,630	1,347	22		1,039	1,027	12
Precinct 8, W. Arcadia (b)	2,343	1,512	1,331		1,636	874	762
Precinct 10, Nocatee	1,322	1,125	184		669	507	162
Precinct 11, St. Odgen	661	433	128		324	249	75

(a) Boundary changed 1921. (1) Total includes 114 inmates Baptist orphanage. (b) Includes town of same name.

County (a)	Total	White	Negro	U. S. Totals	Total	White	Negro
Dixie County (a)	4,238	2,751	1,485		2,302	1,378	614
Precinct 1, Fletcher	409	343	66		190	160	30
Precinct 2, Oldtown	270	210	60		141	111	30
Precinct 3, Cross City (b)	264	251	3		130	129	1
Precinct 4, Shelton	1,194	964	230		601	464	137
Precinct 5, Hines	135	125	7		70	70	
Precinct 6, Shamrock	323	357	171		239	180	109
Precinct 7, Hines	612	309	403		331	110	263
Precinct 8, Shamrock	318	272	546		484	146	338

(a) Organized from part of Lafayette County, 1921. (b) Includes town of same name.

County (1)	Total	White	Negro	U. S. Totals	Total	White	Negro
Duval County (1)	128,481	73,570	50,441		73,460	43,569	29,891
Precinct 1, Part of Jacksonville (2)	5,707	5,700	7		3,700	2,700	6
Precinct 2, Part of Jacksonville	9,716	5,053	4,663		5,704	2,981	2,723
Precinct 3, Part of Jacksonville	3,163	2,160	1,022		3,008	1,430	633
Precinct 4, Part of Jacksonville	3,445	2,665	780		2,516	2,026	491
Precinct 5, Part of Jacksonville (3)	4,573	1,703	2,799		3,180	1,394	1,825
Precinct 6, Part of Jacksonville (4)	12,180	5,024	7,156		7,666	3,333	4,313
Precinct 7, Part of Jacksonville (5)	7,932	1,357	5,970		5,617	1,305	4,312
Precinct 8, Part of Jacksonville (6)	9,353	1,353	7,999		5,433	1,032	4,380
Precinct 9, Part of Jacksonville	7,363	4,797	2,566		4,631	2,974	1,657
Precinct 10, Part of Jacksonville	5,123	4,313	315		3,230	3,023	197
Precinct 11, Part of Jacksonville	7,633	3,543	4,108		4,022	1,777	2,245
Precinct 12, Part of Jacksonville	4,066	2,450	1,596		2,128	1,231	697
Precinct 13, Part of Jacksonville	6,972	4,734	4,225		3,009	3,610	2,190
Precinct 14, Part of Jacksonville	2,871	2,241	630		1,334	1,201	333
Precinct 15, Part of Jacksonville	2,570	3,236	574		1,557	1,366	191
Precinct 16, Panama Park	2,568	2,157	411		1,409	1,135	274
Precinct 17, Panama Park (7)	1,435	1,181	253		775	642	131
Precinct 18, Moncrief	1,451	784	697		762	398	363
Precinct 19, Grand Crossing (8)	1,043	943	94		508	451	57
Precinct 20, (9)	1,492	1,333	35		738	698	40
Precinct 21, Dinamore	544	400	123		289	208	61
Precinct 22, Marietta	678	546	132		350	279	71
Precinct 23, Baldwin (b)	616	331	285		290	147	143
Precinct 24, Maxwell	372	260	112		194	131	63
Precinct 25, Murray Hill	1,379	1,033	186		746	650	96
Precinct 26, Ortega (10)	5,103	4,519	579		3,023	2,719	306