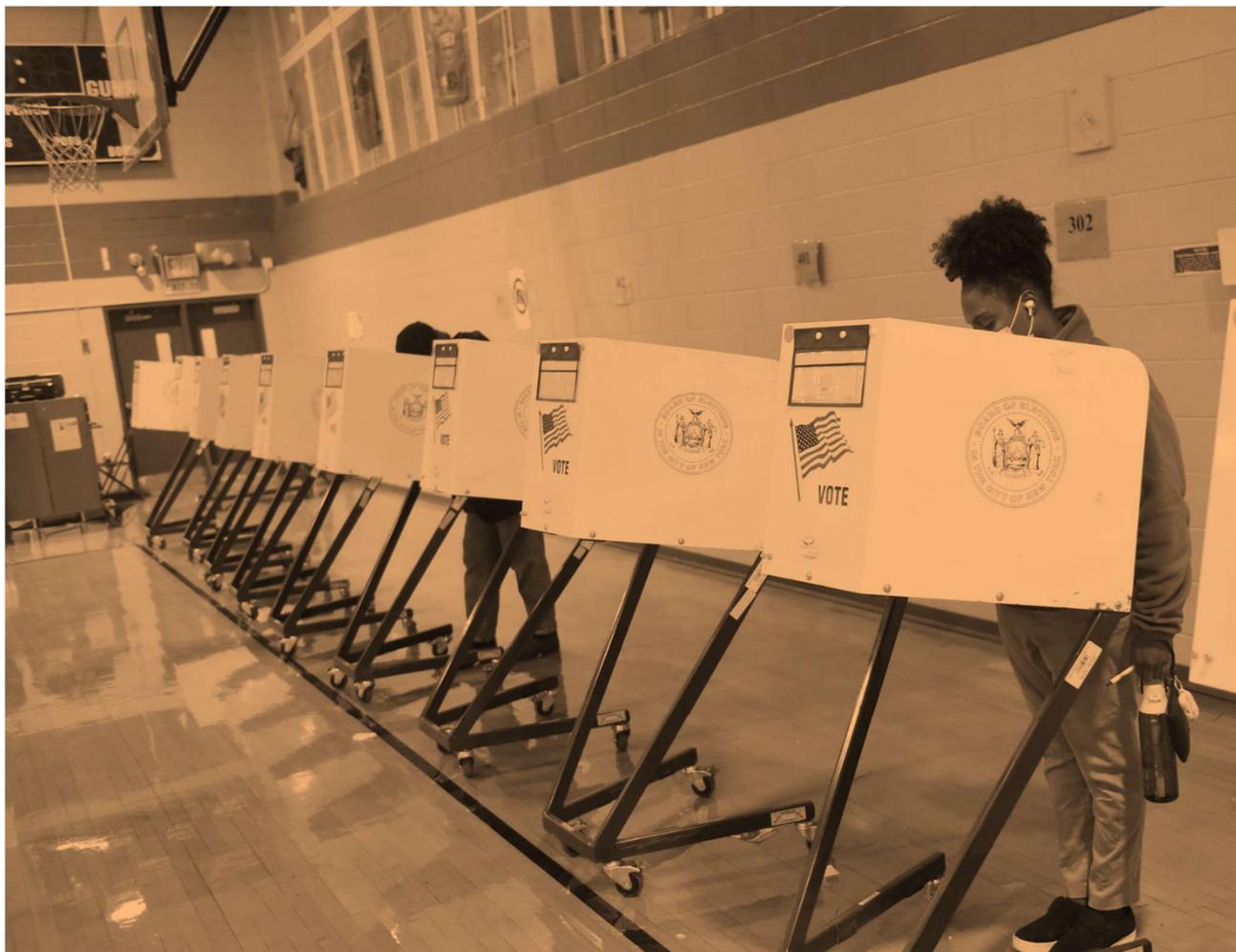


Moving Municipal Elections to Even-Numbered Years

How consolidating New York City's local elections with presidential or gubernatorial elections will boost turnout, diversify the electorate, and save money





Executive Summary

- New York City has suffered from low voter turnout in municipal elections for decades. Voting reforms have contributed to more open and equitable elections but have not led to substantially higher turnout rates.
- A key reason for low voter turnout in the races for local offices—mayor, comptroller, public advocate, borough presidents, and city council—is that they are held in odd-numbered, "off-cycle" years rather than aligned with gubernatorial (midterm) or presidential elections, which are held in even-numbered years.
- Low voter turnout means elected officials are held accountable to a smaller portion of their constituents. Consolidating municipal elections with presidential or gubernatorial elections will lead to higher turnout and a more representative electorate, meaning more New Yorkers have a say in who governs them at the local level.
- **Elections held in even-numbered years yield higher turnouts**
 - In New York City's general elections, turnout is consistently highest for presidential elections, followed by gubernatorial elections. Municipal elections receive the lowest vote totals. Since 2001, mayoral elections have averaged 29.5% turnout, gubernatorial elections averaged 35.6%, and presidential elections averaged 60.8%.
 - In other large cities in New York State, turnout over the last three to five general elections was at least double in presidential contests and about 10 percent higher in gubernatorial contests compared to odd-year municipal elections.
 - Across the nation, "on-cycle" municipal elections have significantly higher turnouts than "off-cycle" contests. The six largest U.S. cities that hold local elections in odd-numbered years see average mayoral turnouts of 10% to 38%, while the six largest cities that have their elections in even-numbered years see average mayoral turnouts that range between 50% and 75%.
 - Even-year elections also yield higher turnouts for down-ballot races. When comparing general elections for the New York State Assembly and the New York City Council in the same geographic areas, the Assembly races in even-numbered years had higher turnouts than Council races held in odd-numbered years.



- **Moving local elections to even-numbered years increases turnout**
 - In all cities that transitioned from odd- to even-numbered year mayoral elections, turnout immediately increased drastically and remained high in the following election cycles.
 - Examples of cities that consolidated their local elections with statewide or federal elections include Phoenix, AZ; Austin, TX; El Paso, TX; and Baltimore, MD. Turnout rates in these cities increased by 240% to 460%. Los Angeles held its first even-year mayoral election in November 2022, nearly doubling voter turnout in the city.
 - Because ballots in consolidating elections are longer, more voters do not complete the entire ballot (also known as ballot drop-off). But the number of new voters gained in consolidated elections far exceeds the votes lost due to ballot-off.
- **Primary elections and voter turnout per election year**
 - It is difficult to compare primary election turnouts between odd- and even-numbered years because of New York City's relatively unique closed partisan primary system, the varying levels of competitiveness in the primary races for governor and president in the last twenty years, and changing primary dates.
 - However, data suggests that moving local elections to even-numbered years would have relatively modest effects, if any, in boosting turnout for primary elections compared with the impact on the general election.
 - A solution for low turnout rates in New York City primaries would likely be found in opening the primary system and allowing all registered voters to vote ("open primaries").
- **Electoralates in even-numbered years are more representative of the population**
 - Studies have found that the median age of voters in local elections held in even-numbered years is significantly lower than in odd-years. In New York City, young voters are far better represented in presidential elections than in local elections. For example, voter turnout among 18-29 year-olds in the presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 was five-fold larger than in the municipal elections in 2013 and 2021.
 - Studies also found that municipalities with off-cycle elections have electoralates that skew whiter and wealthier. In contrast, cities that shifted to on-cycle elections moved closer to their actual demographic makeup.



- In New York City, a comparison of voter turnout among different racial and ethnic groups in different election years found that majority-minority assembly districts saw the sharpest turnout increases in even-numbered years compared to odd-numbered years. Latinx-majority districts saw the largest turnout gains. The data suggests that if New York City moved its mayoral election from odd-numbered years to even-numbered years, turnout gains would be highest for communities of color.
- **Other benefits and challenges to moving local elections on-cycle**
 - Consolidating elections will reduce the fiscal cost of election administration, possibly by tens of millions of dollars. No citywide elections would be held in odd-numbered years if municipal elections were moved.
 - Consolidating elections will reduce administrative fatigue and allow the New York City Board of Elections to adequately prepare for the next election.
 - Consolidating elections is a popular policy among people of all partisan backgrounds and has been approved every time it was on the ballot before voters across the nation.
 - Consolidating elections could lead to a different media environment, where less attention is given to local elections. However, experiences from other cities show it is not a significant issue.
- **Moving local elections to even-numbered years is a long process**
 - Moving city elections year requires amending the State Constitution, which currently mandates odd-numbered year elections for all New York cities.
 - Amendments to the constitution and corresponding state law could take different forms, depending on the power granted to the legislature or local governments to set their own election calendar.
 - Moving municipal elections on cycle would still leave other offices on the ballot in odd-numbered years. In New York City, these include judicial positions and district attorneys. Those elections could also be consolidated into even-numbered years. This report does not cover this question.
 - When transitioning between off-cycle and on-cycle elections, cities need to decide whether to extend terms by one year (consolidation with congressional midterms and gubernatorial election) or shorten terms by one year (consolidation with presidential elections).
 - The ballot will need to be redesigned to change the order of offices on the ballot.



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Cover photo: Michael Appleton/Mayoral Photography Office



Introduction

2021 was a historic year for local democracy in New York City. The Mayor, Comptroller, City Council Speaker, and a majority of City Council members were all term-limited. An unprecedented number of candidates ran in the municipal elections, which resulted in the most diverse and first-ever majority-female Council in New York City's history. It was also an election year that occurred in the midst of multiple crises, including the COVID pandemic and widespread racial justice protests. Given this, one would think a substantial percentage of voters would turn out for the 2021 municipal general election. In fact, the opposite occurred; a historic low of just 23% of registered voters cast a ballot.

Low levels of voter participation have been endemic to New York City's elections for about half a century. In recent years, the New York legislature has passed many election reforms making it easier for New Yorkers to vote, including implementing early voting, automatic and online voter registration, pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds, shortening voter registration deadlines, and improving absentee voting. New York City's electoral system has mechanisms that facilitate increased competition and fairness in local elections, such as term limits, a public campaign finance program, and Ranked Choice Voting.

While these essential reforms have contributed to more open and equitable elections, they have yet to address one of the most consequential elements of low voter turnout in municipal elections: election timing.

In New York City, as with nearly 75% of large cities in the U.S., local elections are held "off-cycle": they are in a different year than gubernatorial or presidential elections. These larger contests, which are held in even-numbered years, tend to have significantly higher voter turnout and more representative electorates.

This report aims to examine the potential benefits and impacts of moving New York City's municipal elections "on-cycle" to even-numbered years, to coincide with the presidential or gubernatorial/midterm elections. Using historical turnout data from New York, comparative data from other cities, and academic research, we analyze how consolidating elections would affect overall turnout, demographics of the electorate, and administrative burdens and costs. We also look into the experience of cities that have moved their local elections on-cycle in recent years, like El Paso, Phoenix, and Baltimore, and chart a path to change the election year in New York.

The report's findings clearly show that moving New York City's municipal elections to an even-numbered year would drastically improve voter turnout for both the top of the



ticket and down-ballot races, even when accounting for potential drop-off in voting that may occur from a longer ballot. Turnout gains for primary elections are harder to assess, but election consolidation would likely have relatively modest effects in boosting voter turnout in local primaries.

Consolidating elections would also likely change the makeup of the electorate in local elections. Younger voters and voters of color, especially the Latinx community, would be better represented in high-turnout, even-year elections.

Election administration may also benefit from consolidating local elections. Running elections every other year would likely mean significant taxpayer savings. Consolidated elections also can improve election administration by giving election officials an additional year to plan and prepare for future elections.

Despite the widespread benefits, there are common concerns about election consolidation. Some fear that if elections are consolidated, local candidates would have to compete for media attention with statewide or national races, which may limit media attention and airtime for local races. Others are concerned that voters will not be informed enough about their local races when a high-profile race is on the ballot. These challenges are addressed in chapter six. In

Across the nation, voters are actually highly supportive of consolidating elections. Polls show bi-partisan support for this policy, and ballot proposals on this issue are universally approved by voters.

As odd-year local elections are set by the New York constitution, moving the election year will require a constitutional amendment, including a statewide referendum. Removing the odd-year constitutional provision is only the first step; there is a range of legislative options, and lawmakers would need to decide how best to implement new election timing. The final section of this report offers a discussion of legislative options for lawmakers and the public and examples from other states.

Why turnout in local elections matters

This year, the Mayor and City Council agreed to a budget of \$101 billion. In other words, New York City's budget is larger than the budget of 45 states. Our local elected officials decide how to spend our tax dollars in ways that best suit the needs of everyday New Yorkers. Their decisions affect our schools, safety, environment, and nearly all other aspects of NYC life. Yet the elected officials making these essential decisions are chosen by a small and unrepresentative group of people. The relative few end up making decisions for the whole—who is elected, how our city is governed, and how our money is spent.



For example, 23% of New York City residents — representing 17% of the voting-age population — voted in the last mayoral election. Eric Adams, who received the vote of 753,801 people, was effectively voted to office by 11% of the city's voting age population. When accounting for the 2021 primary election, which ultimately decided what candidate would be on the Democratic ticket, just 9% of the overall electorate voted to bring Adams to Gracie Mansion. Adams is not alone. Former mayor Bill de Blasio was voted to office in 2013 by 753,039 people in the general election and 282,344 people in the primary, which accounted for 16% of the electorate in the general election and only 6% in the primary.¹ If a basic tenet of democracy is majority rule, NYC has been experiencing the opposite; the 2021 election, like many before it, was decided by only a small fraction of eligible voters.

It should be obvious, without any detailed exposition of political theory, that such low voter turnout poses a real challenge to the democratic legitimacy of our local government. Conversely, a higher turnout would mean greater democratic participation.

Moreover, the problem is compounded by the uneven nature of turnout, with some groups achieving disproportionate over-representation and others suffering from disproportionate under-representation. Do elected officials accurately represent the policy interests of diverse communities when those communities are not engaged in making their voices heard? Campaigns and elected officials can (and often do) ignore large swaths of the population, focusing instead on those whose votes they need to get elected. Research shows that voters' policy preferences are better represented than non-voters.² Low voter turnout also allows special interest groups to wield significantly more influence on elections.

Low turnout also skews the electorate; there is strong evidence that non-voters are demographically different in terms of age, race, class, and country of origin than voters.³ This, in turn, affects representation. Research shows that racial and ethnic minorities are less represented in low voter turnout elections and that underrepresentation declines when voter turnout improves.⁴ Thus, the views of marginalized groups are not adequately represented when turnout is as abysmal as it is in New York City.

¹ New York City Board of Elections, election results; U.S. Census voting age population estimates

² Griffin, John and Newman, Brian. "Are Voters Better Represented"

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2005.00357.x>

³ Hajnal, Zoltan Et. Al. "Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition." *American Political Science Review*, July 19th, 2021, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3888349.

⁴ Hajnal, Zoltan Et. Al. "Where Turnout Matters: The Consequences of Uneven Turnout in City Politics" https://pages.ucsd.edu/~zhajnal/page1/page2/files/page2_2.pdf



History of municipal election timing in New York City

During the second half of the nineteenth century, New York City switched between on-cycle elections and off-cycle elections four times⁵. Each change was advanced by a particular party that believed turnout changes would benefit it, and in all cases, voter turnout increased when elections were consolidated with state or national elections and decreased when local elections moved off-cycle.

Prior to 1850, local elections were held in April of odd-numbered years, separate from New York State and national elections. In 1848, the Whig Party commanded a majority of the New York state legislature and saw advantages in national elections. Seeking electoral gains on the local level as well, the Whigs pushed the state legislature to change the New York City charter in 1849 to align local elections with state elections. The first on-cycle election in New York City was held in November of 1850. The Whigs indeed won the mayoralty, and most seats they were running for in the State Assembly and Congress. In the short run, combined elections favored the Whigs. However, by the mid-1850s, the Whig party was divided over the issue of slavery and ultimately disappeared, leaving the Democrats temporarily unobstructed from gaining power.

The combined elections severely disadvantaged local political clubs, which were now competing with parties that had national or statewide bases. The City Reformers, one of the earliest reformist parties, unsuccessfully lobbied the state legislature in 1853 to move New York City's elections off-cycle. In 1857, they tried again, and found a more receptive audience in the Republican and Know-Nothing parties, who were in the midst of re-writing the city charter in response to Democratic Mayor Fernando Wood's corruption. The legislature moved the city elections to December of odd-numbered years. This favored the Republicans and reformers; Wood lost the mayoralty in the December 1857 municipal election even though city voters had elected all Democrats to their state delegation in the previous month's November election.

A little more than a decade later, Democrats moved local elections back to even-numbered years. In 1870, Tammany Hall's William (Boss) Tweed pushed the legislature to amend the City Charter to move municipal elections to November of even-numbered years, among other changes. Spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes, Tweed got the even-year provision included in the bill that revised

⁵ The following section is based on Anzia, Sarah. "Partisan Power Play: The Origins of Local Election Timing as an American Political Institution" May 31, 2011. https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/Anzia_Partisan_Power_Play_5_31_11.pdf

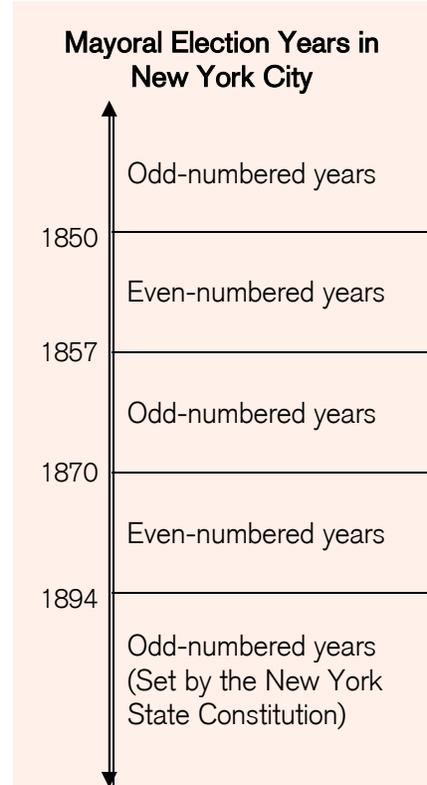


the Charter. Starting in 1870, elections were once again held concurrently with the presidential election, resulting in large Tammany victories at the local level.

The rapid changes ended in 1894. In the early stages of the progressive era, opposition to Tammany Hall grew stronger, and reformers sought new ways to weaken the party machine through the ballot. Believing that separating local elections from national politics would help to elect candidates "on their merit" instead of their affiliation to the state party, reformers lobbied the legislature to move elections off-cycle. They were supported by Republicans, eager to weaken the Democratic machine in New York, Brooklyn, and Buffalo. The effort proved successful in the 1894 Constitutional Convention, which added a provision to the State constitution that required all city elections to be held in November of odd-numbered years.⁶

In reality, the goals of reformers did not come to fruition. Superior organization by Tammany Hall led to an increase in its vote share even though overall turnout declined. However, the constitutional amendment that municipal elections in all New York cities be in odd-numbered years remained in place to this day, 128 years later.

Ironically, the founders of the Citizens Union party, the reformist political group that preceded the organization behind this report, actively lobbied for odd-year elections. In fact, Citizen Union's 1897 Declaration of Principles, signed 125 years ago, opens by stating, "*We uphold the principle...that municipal elections shall be held separately from the State and national elections, to the end that the business affairs of municipal corporations may be managed upon their own merits uncontrolled by*



⁶ The new provision, Section 3, Article 12 of the 1894 constitution, stated: *All elections of city officers, including supervisors and judicial officers of inferior local courts, elected in any city or part of a city, and of county officers elected in the counties of New York and Kings, and in all counties whose boundaries are the same as those of a city, except to fill vacancies, shall be held on the Tuesday succeeding the first Monday in November in an odd-numbered year, and the term of every such officer shall expire at the end of an odd-numbered year. The terms of office of all such officers elected before the first day of January, one thousand eight hundred and ninety-five, whose successors have not then been elected, which under existing laws would expire with an even-numbered year, or in an odd-numbered year and before the end thereof, are extended to and including the last day of December next following the time when such terms would otherwise expire; the terms of office of all such officers, which under existing laws would expire in an even-numbered year, and before the end thereof, are abridged so as to expire at the end of the preceding year. This section shall not apply to any city of the third class, or to elections of any judicial officer, except judges and justices of inferior local courts.*



national or State politics...". Citizens Union was not alone in seeking that goal. The separation of the city from state and national elections became a cornerstone of urban reformers and good government groups, including the National Municipal League.

The current constitutional language has been in place since voters approved it in 1965. The provision maintained the 1894 requirement but excluded elections for judicial positions. Article 13, section 8 of the New York Constitution currently says:

All elections of city officers, including supervisors, elected in any city or part of a city, and of county officers elected in any county wholly included in a city, except to fill vacancies, shall be held on the Tuesday succeeding the first Monday in November in an odd-numbered year, and the term of every such officer shall expire at the end of an odd-numbered year. This section shall not apply to elections of any judicial officer.

In each of these historical examples, municipal voter turnout drastically increased as elections were moved on-cycle and decreased when local elections moved off-cycle.

The 1849 change led to a much higher turnout for city elections in 1852 and 1856. From 1857 through 1870 (the period of off-cycle elections), turnout routinely fell well below the presidential and gubernatorial elections. For example, the 1861 mayoral election saw nearly 25% fewer voters than the presidential contest the year prior. After the 1870 change back to presidential years, mayoral turnout increased by more than a third. Municipal election turnout hovered around 60% in the 1890s, and it dropped after off-cycle elections were written into the State Constitution. In 1925, only 28% of New York adults voted for mayor, a drop of over 50% when compared to the on-cycle elections prior to the constitutional change.



Elections Held in Even-numbered Years Yield Higher Turnouts

In general, more voters go out to vote to elect the U.S. President or their state Governor than they do to elect local officeholders. Since regular elections for those higher offices (and federal mid-term elections) occur in even-numbered years⁷, voter turnout is higher in even-numbered years than in odd-numbered, "off" years.

The difference in turnout between election years has been widely documented in academic research. Studies on election timing show that "on-cycle November elections generally double local voter turnout compared to stand-alone local contests", and scholars suggest that consolidating elections is the most important policy change a jurisdiction can undertake to increase voter turnout.⁸

Cities that hold their municipal elections at the same time as elections for higher offices see high turnout rates for local offices as well. The difference in turnout between municipal elections held in even-numbered years and odd-numbered years is substantial and consistent.

As this chapter will show, this trend holds true in New York City and other cities in the state and the country, and it applies to the top of the ticket and to down-ballot races.

Voter turnout in New York City's general elections

There are stark differences in New York City's voter turnout depending on which offices are up for election. Turnout is consistently highest for presidential elections, followed by gubernatorial elections, with municipal-only elections receiving the fewest vote totals.⁹

Voter turnout in **mayoral elections** has steadily declined over the last half-century, with the exception of the 1989 and 1993 races between David Dinkins and Rudy

⁷ Except for Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia, where gubernatorial elections occur on odd-numbered years.

⁸ Hajnal, Z., Kogan, V., & Markarian, G. 2022. "Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition". *American Political Science Review*, 116(1), 374-383. Hajnal, Zoltan L. 2010. *America's Uneven Democracy: Turnout, Race, and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Anzia, Sarah. 2014. *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Marschall, Melissa, and John Lappie. 2018. "Turnout in Local Elections: Is Timing Really Everything?" *Election Law Journal* 17:3. Berry, Christopher R., and Jacob E. Gersen. 2011. "Election Timing and Public Policy." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9: 103-35

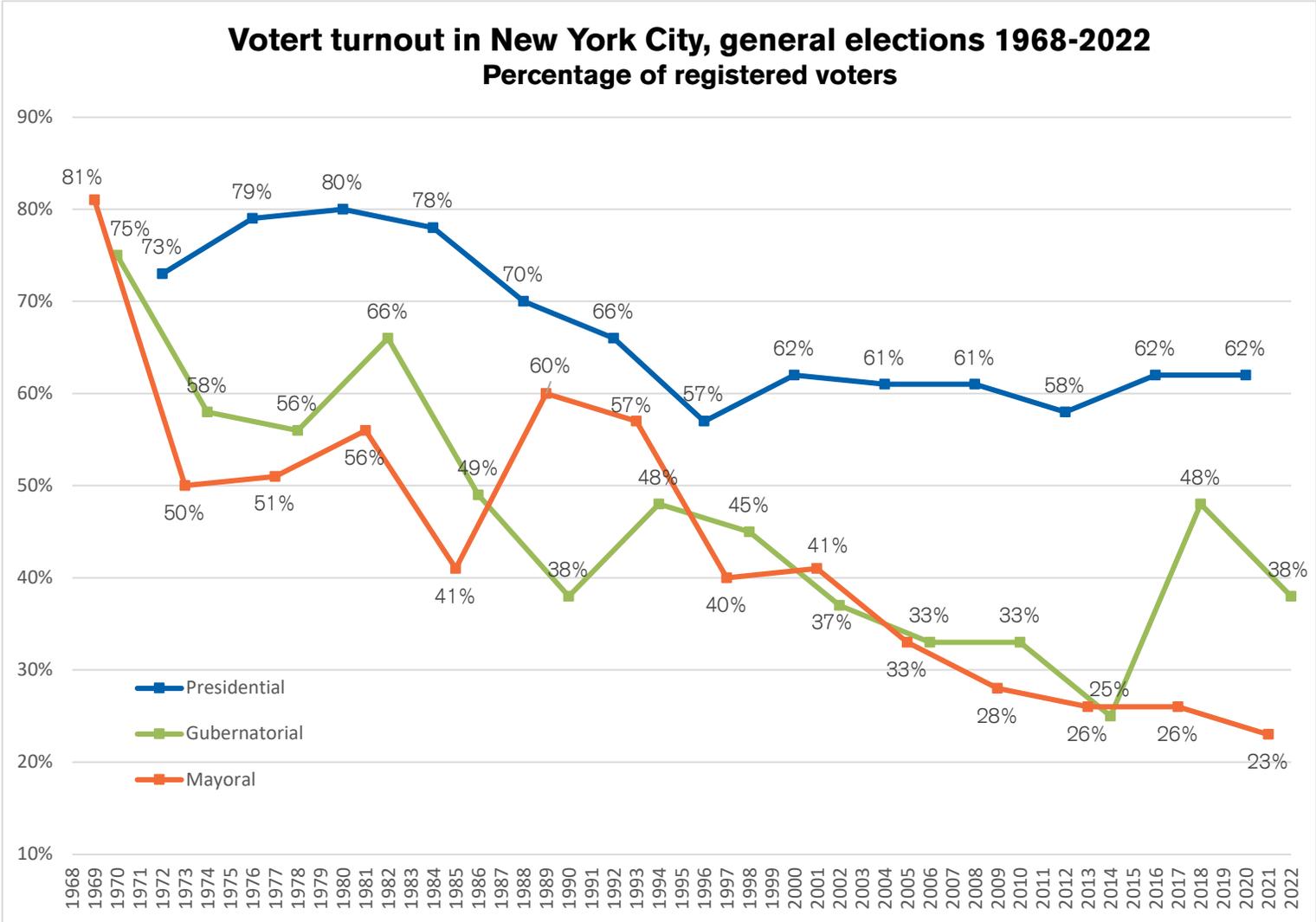
⁹ All turnout data in this section is from the New York City Board of Elections 2021 Annual Report, https://vote.nyc/sites/default/files/pdf/annualreports/BOE_Annual_Report_2021_online_complete.pdf



Giuliani. The elections of 1997 and 2001 saw about 40% turnout. Over the last decade, mayoral turnout has consistently been below 30%, reaching a historic low of 23% in the 2021 general election.

Turnout rates in **gubernatorial election** years (which are also midterm elections for the U.S. Congress) have also been declining. In the 1980s and the 1990s, turnout averaged just below 50%. In the 21st century, turnout rates have dropped to the 30th percentile and even lower. The notable exception was the 2018 election, with a 48% voter turnout, likely a response to the results of the 2016 Presidential election.

The most steady turnouts have been for **presidential contests**, which have seen less dramatic ebbs and flows over the last half-century. Presidential election years have averaged a 61% turnout in general elections since the early 1990s.





The persistent difference in turnout based on election years suggests that moving mayoral elections "on cycle" would yield an increase in voter turnout. Since 2001, mayoral elections averaged 29.5% turnout, gubernatorial elections averaged 35.6%, and presidential elections over this period averaged 60.8%. For every one person who votes in the mayoral general elections, two vote in the presidential elections.

Voter turnout in other cities in New York

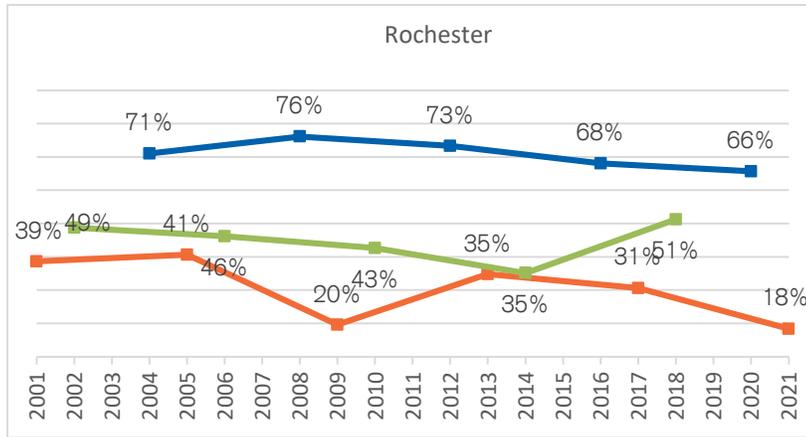
New York City's voter turnout patterns are not an anomaly. The next five largest cities in the state of New York see similar voter behavior: substantially fewer people vote in local elections, which are required by the state constitution to be held in odd-numbered years, than in gubernatorial and presidential elections held in even-numbered years.

When comparing the last three to five general elections (depending on data availability) for every type of election, turnout is at least double in most presidential contests than in odd-year municipal elections. Gubernatorial contests see turnout rates of about 10 points higher than mayoral races, although the situation is different in NYC, which sees the lowest gubernatorial turnouts in the state.

In Yonkers, voter turnout in even-numbered years has been more than double the turnout in mayoral, odd-year elections over the past decade. Rochester's turnouts since 2001 averaged 36% for mayoral elections, 45% for gubernatorial elections, and 71% for presidential elections. Buffalo, the second largest city in New York, does not release turnout data for presidential and gubernatorial turnout for the city proper. However, it saw the lowest mayoral turnouts among the state's big cities, averaging 21% in the past two decades.

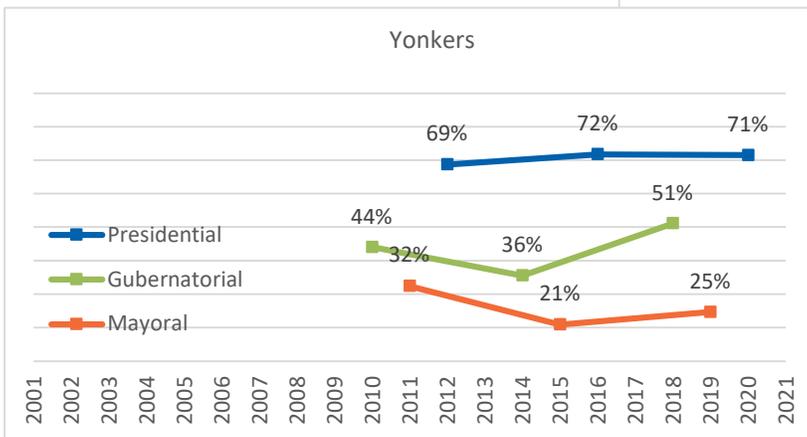
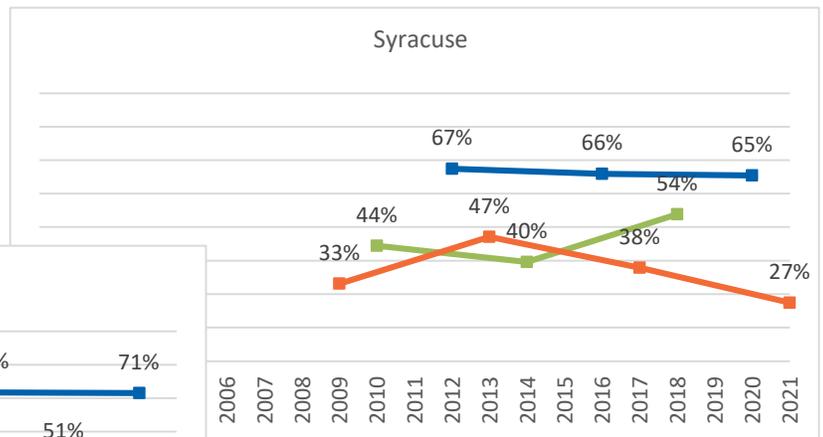
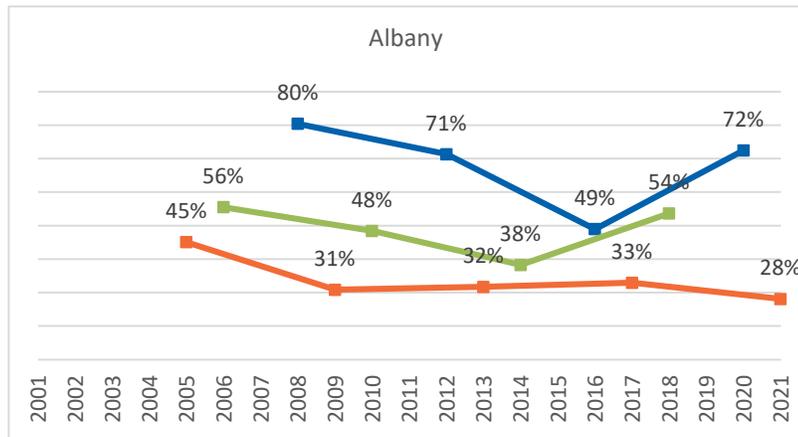
Voter turnout in New York's six largest cities						
Average for contested general elections, 10 to 20 recent years						
	NYC	Yonkers	Rochester	Syracuse	Albany	Buffalo
Population	8,804,190	211,569	211,328	148,620	99,224	278,349
Presidential	60%	71%	71%	66%	68%	<i>N/A</i>
Gubernatorial	35%	44%	45%	46%	49%	<i>N/A</i>
Mayoral	29%	26%	36%	36%	34%	21%
Source: see footnote ¹⁰ Data does not include uncontested mayoral elections (Buffalo 2009, Rochester 2009 and 2001).						

¹⁰ Turnout and enrollment rates sourced from boards of elections: Monroe County <https://www.monroecounty.gov/elections-results>, Erie County <https://elections.erie.gov/ElectionArch> (no info on presidential and gubernatorial turnouts only in the City of Buffalo), Albany County



The charts on this page show voter turnout rates in the last three to five general elections (depending on data availability) from four other large cities in New York.

** Rochester's mayoral elections in 2009 and 2021 were uncontested.*



<https://app.albanycounty.com/boe/electionresults/> and data sent by Board officials, Westchester County <https://citizenparticipation.westchestergov.com/election-dates-and-calendars/enrollment-figures-and-election-results>, Onondaga County <https://ongov.resultscaster.com/feed.aspx?usersessionid=none>.

Mayoral voter turnout in other cities in the U.S.

Low voter turnout rates in mayoral elections are also visible across the nation's largest urban centers. In the last two decades (three to five general elections), the six largest U.S. cities that hold their local elections in odd-numbered years—Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, San Antonio, and Dallas—saw average mayoral turnouts range between 10% to 38%.

In some of those cities, elections are held off-cycle both in terms of the year (odd-numbered years) and the month (not in November). And in most large cities, primary elections are nonpartisan.

Voter turnout in large cities with odd-numbered year mayoral elections							
	Los Angeles, CA	Chicago, IL	Houston, TX	Phil., PA	San Antonio, TX	Dallas, TX	NYC, NY
Pop.	3.9 million	2.7 million	2.3 million	1.6 million	1.4 million	1.3 million	8.8 million
2021							23%
2019		35%	23%	28%	13%	13%	
2017	20%				13%		26%
2015		34%	27%	24%	12%	7%	
2013	23%		18%		7%		26%
2011		42%	13%	16%	7%	13%	
2009	18%		19%		11%		28%
2007		33%	14%	27%	10%	13%	
Avg.	24%	38%	19%	24%	10%	12%	27%

Source: see footnote¹¹

Data does not include special elections or run-off elections.

Los Angeles held mayoral election in March, with run-offs held in May; Chicago holds mayoral elections in February, with run-offs in April; Houston held mayoral election every two (odd) years until 2015, when the mayor's term was extended to four years; San Antonio holds mayoral contests every two (odd) years in May; Dallas holds mayoral elections in May, with run-offs in June.

¹¹ Voter turnout and enrollment numbers sourced from: Chicago Board of Election Commissioners <https://chicagoelections.gov/en/election-results.html>, Los Angeles County Registrar <https://www.lavote.gov/home/voting-elections/current-elections/election-results/live-results>, Office of the Philadelphia City Commissioners <https://www.philadelphiavotes.com/en/resources-a-data/ballot-box-app>, Harris County Elections Administrator's Office <https://www.harrisvotes.com/ElectionResults>, Dallas County Elections Department <https://www.dallascountyvotes.org/election-results-and-maps/election-results/historical-election-results/#ElectionResults>, Bexar County Elections Department <https://www.bexar.org/2186/Historical-Election-Results>, New York City Board of Election, Election Results <https://vote.nyc/page/election-results-summary>



Los Angeles, which until recently held mayoral contests in March and May of odd-numbered years, did not cross the 23% turnout in the last three election cycles. In Chicago, mayoral elections hovered around 34%, except for the 2011 election—the first time in six decades that an incumbent mayor did not seek reelection. Houston, the fourth largest city in the nation, has seen an average turnout of 19% in the last 15 years. Houston had two-year terms until those were extended in 2015.

Voter turnout in mayoral elections held in even-numbered years

Comparing voter turnout for mayoral contests between the nation's urban centers, it is clear that cities that hold their local elections in even-numbered years enjoy significantly higher turnouts than cities that hold local elections in odd-numbered years.

While the six largest U.S. cities that hold their local elections in odd-numbered years see average mayoral turnouts of 10% to 38% (as surveyed above), six relatively large cities that hold their elections on-cycle saw average mayoral turnouts that range between 50% and 75% in the same period.

Honolulu has been holding mayoral elections in concurrence with presidential elections since 1946. Its last mayoral election, a competitive contest for an open seat in 2020, had a record-shattering turnout of 70%. Its previous mayoral election, a less competitive contest in 2016 with an incumbent running for reelection, saw a 58% turnout. This is higher than any mayoral election in NYC in the last three decades.

In San Diego, which has held on-cycle mayoral elections in presidential years since 1986, 83% of registered voters voted for mayor in the last election. In 2012, the previous time a mayoral election was on the ballot in November, the turnout was 69%. When mayoral elections coincided with presidential primaries (in San Diego, if a candidate wins a majority in the primary, no election is held in November), they drew turnouts of 52% (2016) and 37% (2008).



Voter turnout in large cities with even-numbered year mayoral elections						
	San Diego, CA	San Jose, CA	Honolulu, HI	Portland, OR	Baton Rouge, LA	Richmond, VA
Pop.	1.4 million	1 million	1 million	652,000	227,000	226,600
2022		48%				
2020	83%		70%	78%	68%	72%
2018		37%*				
2016	52%*		58%	63%*	65%	76%
2014		47%				
2012	69%		63%	59%	68%	78%
2010		38%*				
2008	37%*		66%	62%*	38%	72%
2006		53%				
2004	74%			82%	45%	70%
Avg. Nov Elections	75%	49%	64%	73%	57%	73%
Source: see footnote ¹² Data does not include special elections * - Elections not held concurrently with the November General Election Day (nonpartisan primary elections; if a candidate wins a majority of the vote, no run-off election is held in November)						

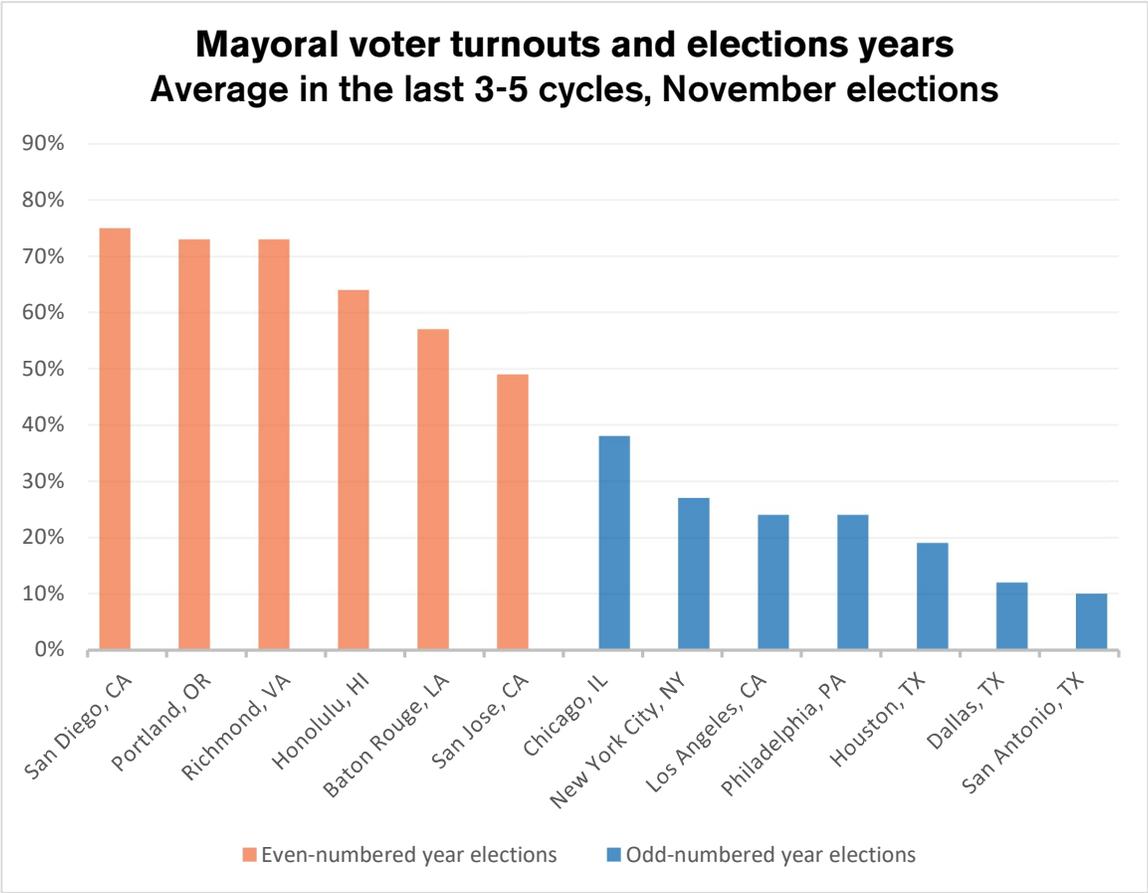
Turnout is significantly higher in each of the on-cycle cities presented in the table above than in every off-cycle election city mentioned before. The city with the lowest turnout from the on-cycle subset is San Jose. It is also the only city on this list that has concurrent elections with the congressional midterms and not the presidential election. Yet even San Jose is 11 percentage points higher than Chicago, the off-cycle city with the highest average turnout.

The comparison of similarly sized cities is also telling. San Antonio, a city of 1.4 million people that holds mayoral elections off-cycle, has had an average of 10%

¹² Voter turnout and enrollment numbers sourced from: Portland Auditors Office <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/record/14324576/>, San Diego Office of the City Clerk <https://www.sandiego.gov/city-clerk/elections/city/past/results#races>, San Diego County Registrar of Voters <https://www.sdvote.com/content/rov/en/past-election-info.html> Virginia Department of Elections <https://historical.elections.virginia.gov>, City and County of Honolulu, Office of the City Clerk https://www.honolulu.gov/rep/site/clk/clk_docs/CCH_Historical_Voter_Reg_Turnout.pdf, County of Santa Clara Registrar of Voters <https://sccvote.sccgov.org/elections/past-election-information-and-results>



mayoral turnout over the past 15 years. San Diego, which holds mayoral elections in presidential years and has the same population size, averaged 75% voter turnout over a similar time frame (for elections held in November).



Voter turnout in down-ballot races of even-numbered and odd-numbered years

Voter turnout is significantly higher in even-year presidential contests than in odd-year mayoral contests. Is the same true for smaller, down-ballot races?

To understand the impact that election year has on down-ballot races, we compared voter turnout for two legislative offices in roughly the same geographic area with generally the same voters: the New York State Assembly, which is elected in even-numbered years, and the New York City Council, which is elected in odd-numbered years. We randomly selected corresponding districts that had contested elections in several elections cycles and sampled each of the five boroughs of New York City. Because many Assembly seats remain uncontested, creating a citywide comparison

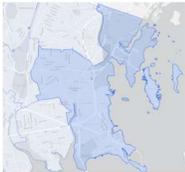


of all legislative districts is difficult. We included examples from areas that tend to have high turnout rates and areas that tend to see low turnout rates.

Even though City Council elections are often considered more competitive because they are held every four years, incumbents are term-limited, and candidates' campaigns are publicly funded, State Assembly elections were the ones that saw higher turnout rates. Voter turnout was significantly higher in presidential years and slightly higher in gubernatorial years than in the two previous large City Council elections, held in odd-numbered, mayoral election years in the same area.

For example, in the East Bronx, 38% of voters (30,975) cast a ballot in the November 2022 election for Assembly District 82, when Democratic incumbent Michael Benedetto was challenged by Republican John M. Greaney Jr. In the November 2020 election, when Benedetto was facing Republican John DeStafano, voter turnout was 60% (53,678 people).

In comparison, in the November 2021 election for City Council District 13, which covers roughly the same area as the 82nd assembly district, only 20% of voters (19,674 people) voted for their Council Member. Democrat Marjorie Velazquez and Republican Alex Mici were both running for an open Council seat.

District		General election	Turnout rate
	Assembly District 82	2020 Presidential	60%
	East Bronx	2016 Presidential	57%
	Assembly District 82	2022 Gubernatorial	38%
	East Bronx	2018 Gubernatorial	44%
	Council District 13	2021 Mayoral	20%
	East Bronx	2013 Mayoral	20%



A similar example comes from South Queens. The November 2021 election for City Council 32 was one of only a few competitive races in that general election. Democratic candidate Felicia Singh and Republican candidate Joann Ariola competed for an open seat in a district that covers the Rockaways, Ozone Park, and parts of Central Queens. The race drew high levels of spending, attention, and involvement from national political figures, yet voter turnout remained at 27%.

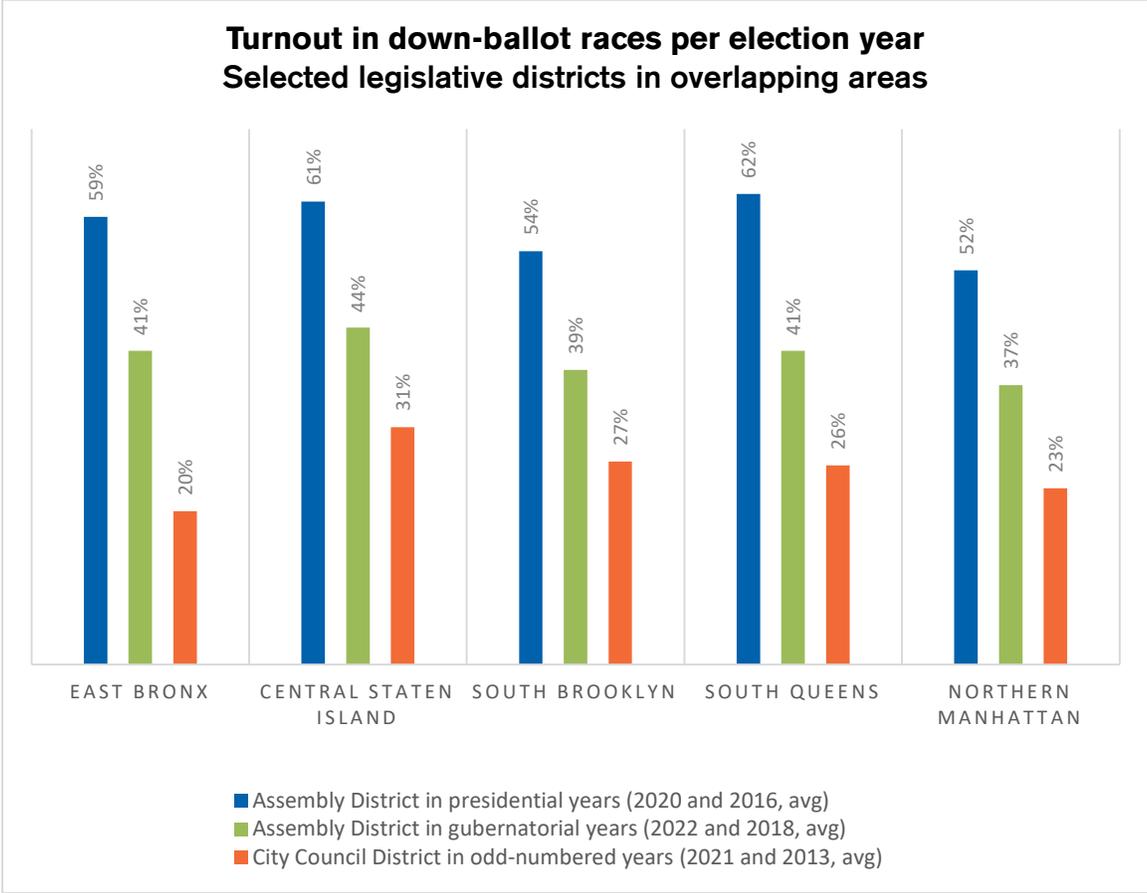
In comparison, the two previous general elections for State Assembly in that area drew higher turnouts. 42% of registered voters came out to vote for their Assembly member in 2022, and 62% of registered voters did so in 2020.

District		General election	Turnout rate
	Assembly District 23	2020 Presidential	62%
	South Queens	2016 Presidential	61%
	Assembly District 23	2022 Gubernatorial	42%
	South Queens	2018 Gubernatorial	42%
	Council District 32	2021 Mayoral	27%
	South Queens	2013 Mayoral	25%

In each case reviewed, the results were similar. In the five areas compared, the average voter turnout in State Assembly races occurring during the presidential election year was 2.3 times higher than turnout in City Council races in the same area, occurring in an off-cycle odd-numbered year. The average turnout in those areas was 1.7 times higher in Assembly races in the gubernatorial election year than in Council races on off-cycle years in the same location.



Below is a chart with the average turnout in each of the five areas examined. The full district-based turnout numbers appear in figure 1 in the appendix.



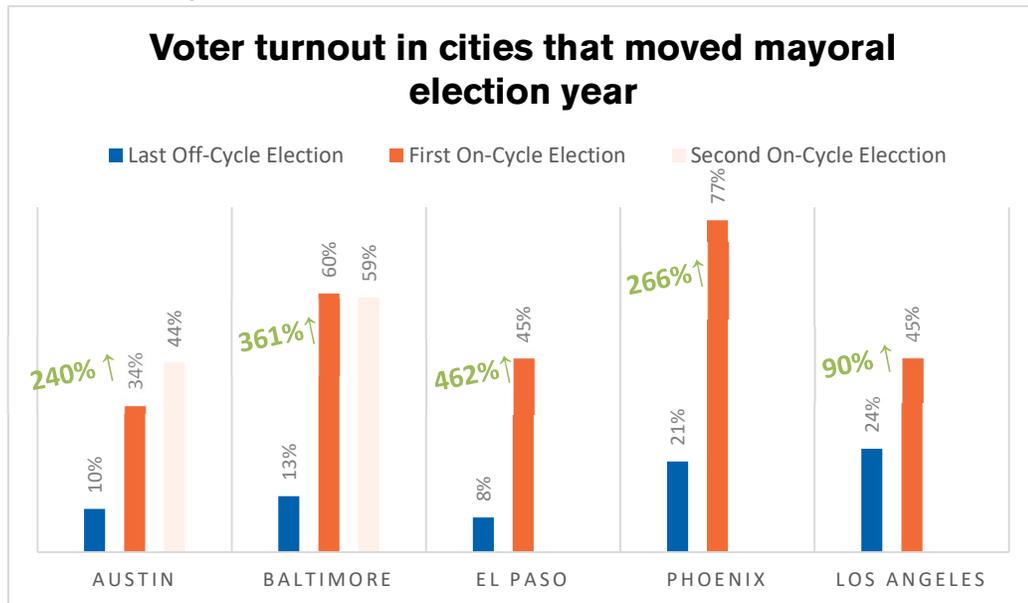
Moving Local Elections to Even-numbered Years Increases Turnout

Examples from cities that moved on-cycle

Persistent low turnout rates in local elections have led many jurisdictions to reexamine how and when they hold elections. In the last two decades, cities and states across the U.S. have taken steps to consolidate elections.

In cases like California and Arizona, it was state legislatures that required municipalities to standardize elections and move them "on cycle." In other cases, city residents approved charter amendments to move their local elections. In New York, the recently passed John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act provides the courts the power to move the dates of regular elections to be concurrent with elections to higher offices, if a political subdivision is found to be disenfranchising voters.¹³

In all cities that transitioned from off-cycle to on-cycle mayoral elections, turnout drastically improved in the first consolidated election. Not only were turnout gains immediate, but they were also sustained, as the next election saw similarly high turnout levels. Surveyed below are several examples: Los Angeles, Phoenix, Austin, El Paso, and Baltimore. However, dozens of other smaller cities have also made the shift in recent years.



¹³ Law of New York 2022, Chapter 226 (S1046E/A6678E). In an earlier version of this bill, jurisdictions that held certain off-cycle elections where voter turnout was at least 25% lower than the presidential turnout in the same jurisdiction, were presumed "that the date of election results in the denial or abridgement of the right to vote".



Phoenix, Arizona

In 2014, the Arizona state legislature passed a law that required municipalities throughout the state to consolidate their elections to an even-year election cycle. The city of Tucson sued the state on home rule grounds, claiming that the legislature cannot force charter cities to change their election timing. Tucson won the case. A second law, passed by the state legislature in 2018, tied the transition to even-years to findings of low voter turnout in a given municipality. The Arizona Supreme Court ruled in favor of Tucson again, thwarting attempts to move all municipalities in the state to on-cycle elections.¹⁴

In lieu of statewide action, the Phoenix City Council passed a charter amendment in 2018 to move the city's mayoral election from August of odd-numbered years to November of even-numbered years, consolidating it with presidential elections. 72% of Phoenix voters approved this ballot measure. With a population of 1.6 million, Phoenix is one of the largest cities to have completed an election year change. Although in Phoenix's Council-Manager form of government, the mayor is not the chief executive (that would be the City Manager, appointed by the Mayor and City Council), it is the only citywide elected official.

The change yielded a higher turnout immediately. When local elections were held in odd-numbered years, Phoenix had an average turnout of 20% in mayoral elections, dating back to 2007. Exactly 20.8% of registered voters voted in the 2015 Phoenix mayoral election, the last regular election held in an odd year. In the first on-cycle mayoral election after the change (and the only one so far), which was held concurrently with the 2020 Presidential election, 77% of registered voters voted for mayor. In numerical terms, that is an increase from 136,729 voters to 658,217 voters.¹⁵

Baltimore, Maryland

The City of Baltimore held its mayoral elections in odd-numbered years since the 19th century. In 1999, Baltimore residents voted to move mayoral elections to presidential years, starting in 2004. However, because of a dispute with Maryland's state legislature, which refused to allow the city to move its primary election, only one consolidated mayoral election occurred, in November 2004.

¹⁴ AZ Supreme Court Upholds Tucson's Off-Cycle Election System. April 2021. Arizona Election Law blog. <https://azelectionlaw.com/index/?p=759>

¹⁵ Turnout and enrollment data from the Phoenix City Clerk <https://www.phoenix.gov/cityclerk/services/election-information/city-election-results>



In 2012, Maryland's state legislature finally approved a measure to align Baltimore's voting cycle with presidential elections. The measure extended the term of incumbent city officials by one year, aligning the first on-cycle election in Baltimore with the 2016 presidential election.

Under 13% of voters cast a ballot for Baltimore Mayor in November 2011, the last off-cycle election. This was not unusual – voter turnout for the 2007 Mayoral general election was 12%. In Baltimore's first on-cycle election in 2016, voter turnout skyrocketed to 60%. In 2020, the city's second concurrent election, 59% of voters cast a ballot for mayor.¹⁶

Austin, Texas

The capital of Texas used to elect mayors for a three-year term, with elections held in May. This off-cycle election calendar yielded predictable low voter turnout, with elections for mayor in 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2012 getting turnout rates of 15%, 11%, 13%, and 10%, respectively.

In 2012, Austin voters approved a city charter amendment that extended mayoral terms to four years and moved elections to November of even-numbered years, aligning it with statewide elections and the federal midterms. The mayoral winner of that year was elected to an abbreviated two-year term. Austin operates under a Council-Manager system, where the mayor does not hold executive power, but mayors are elected as citywide representatives.

Turnout more than tripled in the first consolidated election: 34% of registered voters voted for mayor in November 2014, up from 10% in 2012. In 2018, turnout increased further to 44%.¹⁷

Seeing turnout benefits in consolidating elections, advocates argued that Austin needs to strive for a more representative electorate in choosing who runs the city.¹⁸ A petition-led ballot measure to re-align Austin's mayoral elections to coincide with presidential elections, starting in 2024, was approved by 66% of voters in 2021.

Austin, with a population of almost a million residents, is the only large city to have made that change twice. The mayor elected in 2022 will be elected to a two-year term to accommodate the change.

¹⁶ Turnout data and enrollment from the Baltimore Board of Elections <https://boe.baltimorecity.gov/boe-past-results>

¹⁷ Turnout and enrollment data from Travis County Clerk's Office, Elections Division <https://countyclerk.traviscountytx.gov/departments/elections/>

¹⁸ Conversation with Andrew Allison, Austinites for Progressive Reform

El Paso, Texas

The city of El Paso has been electing mayors in May of odd-numbered years for a two-year term for over a hundred years. A 2004 charter amendment extended mayoral terms to four years and moved city government to a council-manager system, but kept mayoral elections in May of odd-numbered years.

Off-cycle mayoral elections in El Paso suffered from very low turnout, with an average of 10.6% between 2001 and 2017. In that last election—a race to fill an open seat—less than 8% of registered voters turned out to vote for mayor.

In 2013, voters approved a charter amendment to move municipal general elections from May of odd-numbered years to November of even-numbered years, beginning in 2020. The term of the mayor elected in 2017 was shortened to accommodate the change.

Turnout more than quadrupled in the first on-cycle mayoral election, held concurrently with the 2020 presidential election. 45% of registered voters came out to vote for the mayor, as compared to an average of 10% in the two preceding decades.¹⁹

Los Angeles, California

The second largest city in the nation has struggled with low voter turnout rates for years, experiencing similar turnout to New York City. For more than a century, mayoral elections in Los Angeles were held in March or April of odd-numbered years.

In 2015, Los Angeles voters approved a charter amendment to move municipal elections from odd-numbered to even-numbered years, starting with the 2020 election cycle. Los Angeles is the largest city to make this change, and unlike other cases reviewed in this chapter, it opted to consolidate mayoral elections with gubernatorial and midterm elections rather than presidential elections. City officials elected in 2017 had their terms extended, including the mayor, who was elected to a second and last term (Los Angeles mayoral elections were parallel to New York City).

Turnout gains were already seen during the first on-cycle 2020 City Council election, where seven out of the 15 council seats were up for election (Council members serve staggered four-year terms). According to an analysis by Common Cause California, the number of votes cast in that Council election increased from 198,866 in the

¹⁹ Turnout and enrollment data from the El Paso County Elections Department https://epcountyvotes.com/election_archives

March 2015 primary to 803,512 in the March 2020 primary.²⁰ Other factors might have affected the higher turnout, like increased voter registration during this period and several competitive elections.

In November 2022, Angelinos voted in their first on-cycle mayoral election. Turnout improved dramatically compared to recent off-cycle mayoral elections; 45% of voters cast a ballot for mayor in 2022.²¹ Over the previous four mayoral elections, the voter turnout was 24%. In raw numbers, more votes were cast for mayor in 2022 than in any other mayoral contest in Los Angeles' history.²² Other factors might have impacted the turnout, such as the lack of an incumbent, the high profile of the candidates in the race, or the large sums of money being spent.

Smaller cities in California

In 2015, the California legislature passed SB 415, which required all political subdivisions to hold their elections on statewide election years if their average voter turnout fell 25% or more below the average statewide voter turnout in the previous four general elections. Although charter cities (including San Francisco) have argued that the law does not apply in their cases²³, dozens of other cities have made the shift. This made California an important case study for the effects of election timing, used by many researchers.

A 2021 analysis by California Common Cause that examined 54 cities that switched to on-cycle municipal elections found turnout tripled, on average. Across these 54 cities, the average voter turnout was 25.5% prior to the switch and 75.8% after the switch. These cities include Modesto, Alhambra, Fairfax, Piedmont, Malibu, Culver City, Brisbane, and Norco, among others. None of them are comparable in size to New York City.

²⁰ Getting to 100: How Moving Elections to Even Years Increased Voter Participation in Local Elections. October 2020. Common Cause CA www.commoncause.org/california/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2020/10/LA-City-Voter-Turnout-Analysis-1.pdf

²¹ Turnout and enrollment data from the Los Angeles County Registrar <https://www.lavote.gov/home/voting-elections/current-elections/election-results/live-results>

²² LAist, November 21 2022, LA's Contentious 2022 Election Now Has Highest Number Of Votes Ever Cast For Mayor <https://laist.com/news/politics/turnout-la-mayoral-race-2022>

²³ California's Voter Participation Rights Act Does Not Apply to Charter Cities. April 2020. Best Best & Krieger Law. <https://www.bbklaw.com/news-events/insights/2020/legal-alerts/04/californias-voter-participation-rights-act-does-no>

Summary: Large cities that switched to even-numbered year municipal elections and the impact on turnout				
City	Municipal election moved to...	Voted to move election on	Turnout before the change	Turnout after the change
Phoenix, Arizona	Presidential years	2018	20%	77% (2020)
Baltimore, Maryland	Presidential years	2012	12-13%	60% (2016) 59% (2020)
Austin, Texas	Midterm years	2012	10-15%	34% (2014) 44% (2018)
El Paso, Texas	Presidential years	2013	8-10%	45% (2020)
Los Angeles, California	Midterm years	2015	24%	45% (2022)

Cities that have recently switched to on-cycle local elections

San Francisco, California: In November 2022, voters in San Francisco voted to move elections for Mayor, Sheriff, District Attorney, City Attorney, and Treasurer from odd-numbered years to the November of presidential election years. The proposed Charter change passed with 70% support of voters. Groups supporting this measure cited the difference between San Francisco’s 43% average voter turnout in odd-year municipal elections and 80% in presidential cycles, as well as the savings in cost, which the city’s comptroller assessed at net savings of \$6.9 million every two years. To accommodate for the change, the officials elected to municipal offices in 2019 would serve a five-year term. San Francisco has 815,201 residents as of 2021.²⁴

Las Vegas, Nevada: For years, cities in Nevada have held their local elections on different years, with some opting for odd-numbered years. In 2011, the Nevada State Legislature attempted to facilitate standardizing the election calendar by allowing chartered cities to move their local election to coincide with the state gubernatorial election. Only two cities decided to do so.

²⁴ Ballotpedia, San Francisco, California, Proposition H, Move Local Elections to Even-Numbered Years and Change Initiative Petition Signature Requirements Amendment (November 2022)
[https://ballotpedia.org/San_Francisco,_California,_Proposition_H,_Move_Local_Elections_to_Even-Numbered_Years_and_Change_Initiative_Petition_Signature_Requirements_Amendment_\(November_2022\)](https://ballotpedia.org/San_Francisco,_California,_Proposition_H,_Move_Local_Elections_to_Even-Numbered_Years_and_Change_Initiative_Petition_Signature_Requirements_Amendment_(November_2022))



Eight years later, Nevada's governor signed a new law that required all municipalities to conduct elections in November of even-numbered years, corresponding with county, state, and federal elections. The new legislation, passed with the support of Nevada's Secretary of state office, was meant to boost voter turnout statewide and reduce election costs for cities. Elected officials who were in office while the law was passed saw their terms extended by one year.²⁵

Las Vegas, the largest city in Nevada, has suffered from low turnout rates, reaching as low as 10% in the 2019 mayoral election. It will hold its first even-numbered mayoral election in 2024.²⁶

Boulder, Colorado: Voters in Boulder recently approved a proposal, referred to the ballot by the Boulder City Council, to move regular municipal elections from odd-numbered years to the gubernatorial/midterm election year, beginning with the November 2026. The measure passed with 62% support. To implement the transition, the term of the council members elected in 2023 and 2025 would be reduced to three years and the term of the mayor elected in 2023 would be extended to three years. According to the 2020 Census, Boulder has a population of 108,250 people. ²⁷

San Jose, California: The largest city in the Bay Area has been electing local officials in even-numbered, mid-term years for decades. Therefore, although San Jose's turnout rates have been higher than most other large cities—50% average turnout for November mayoral elections over the last two decades—they are still lower than odd-year election cities that hold elections in presidential years (see pages 15-18). In 2022, voters in San Jose supported, by a 55% majority, moving the election for Mayor to the same year as presidential elections beginning in 2024. With this, San Jose follows the example of Austin, which voted a year earlier to move municipal elections from midterm to presidential years.

²⁵ 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-end-municipal-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-election-law-shifts-term-lengths-cuts-co/>

²⁶ Las Vegas Review-Journal, June 12, 2019, Las Vegas voter turnout third worst in 20 years, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/las-vegas-voter-turnout-third-worst-in-20-years-1685820/> Las Vegas Sun, June 9 2005, Dismal turnout adds fuel to call for even-year vote - Las Vegas Sun Newspaper, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2005/jun/09/dismal-turnout-adds-fuel-to-call-for-even-year-vot/>

²⁷ Ballotpedia, Boulder, Colorado, Question 2E, Move Odd-Year Municipal Elections to Coincide With Even-Year State and National Elections Measure [https://ballotpedia.org/Boulder,_Colorado,_Question_2E,_Move_Odd-Year_Municipal_Elections_to_Coincide_With_Even-Year_State_and_National_Elections_Measure_\(November_2022\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Boulder,_Colorado,_Question_2E,_Move_Odd-Year_Municipal_Elections_to_Coincide_With_Even-Year_State_and_National_Elections_Measure_(November_2022))



The San Jose measure was referred to the ballot by the San Jose City Council. Supporters argued that this reform could increase voter turnout by up to 30% (particularly for the June primaries) and would especially help with underrepresented groups including communities of color, women, and young people. To facilitate the transition, the mayor elected in 2022 would see their terms reduced from four years to two years, but this person would have the option to run for reelection and serve as mayor for two additional successive four-year terms (instead of the regular two-term limit in San Jose). This would mean the candidate elected Mayor in 2022 could run for reelection in 2024 and 2028, potentially serving as Mayor for up to ten consecutive years if reelected.²⁸

Ballot drop-off after consolidating elections

One of the most common concerns about consolidating elections is that ballots will become longer and more complicated, resulting in fewer voters completing the entire ballot. Specifically, some fear that if we move municipal elections to the same date as presidential or gubernatorial elections, people will vote for the races at the top of the ticket but significant "ballot drop-off" for races down the ballot (like City Council or even mayoral races) would hinder overall voter participation.

The evidence from the cities that consolidated elections and from New York City does not suggest that ballot drop-off is a significant issue. The overall vote gains from moving elections on-cycle far exceed the votes lost to ballot drop-off.

For example, In the 2016 general election in Baltimore, the first to have municipal and presidential elections on the same ballot, the turnout gains for down-ballot races far outweighed the votes lost due to ballot drop-off. 239,454 people voted for President in Baltimore, while 221,063 voted for the down-ballot contest for City Comptroller: 18,391 people didn't make it all the way down the ballot. However, in the previous off-cycle municipal election, only 42,181 Baltimore residents voted for for the down-ballot Comptroller race. Even with ballot drop-off, for every one voter who voted for Comptroller in 2011, more than 5 people voted for Comptroller in 2016.

Other cities that have switched from off-cycle to on-cycle elections show similar trends. In these cities, there is a definite increase in the number of voters that didn't make it all the way down the ballot after the election was consolidated. In Phoenix, the ballot drop-off rate increased from 2.23% in 2011 and 0.36% in 2015 to 13.6% in 2020. However, the number of total voters for the lowest ballot position was still

²⁸ Ballotpedia, San Jose, California, Measure B, Mayor Elections Charter Amendment [https://ballotpedia.org/San_Jose,_California,_Measure_B,_Mayor_Elections_Charter_Amendment_\(June_2022\)](https://ballotpedia.org/San_Jose,_California,_Measure_B,_Mayor_Elections_Charter_Amendment_(June_2022))



an order of magnitude greater than when elections were held off-cycle. In the same Phoenix example, the turnout for a proposition in 2020 was 434% higher than the turnout for a proposition in 2015.

The following table shows how many voters a race "lost" due to ballot drop-off and "gained" due to higher turnout, after an election moved to an even-numbered year. Detailed numbers are found in figure 2 of the appendix.

Voter turnout gains and ballot drop-off after consolidating elections				
	Increase in voter drop-off for down-ballot race	Increase in total votes for down-ballot race	Type of down-ballot race	Election years
Baltimore	↓ 13,069	↑ 178,882	Comptroller	2011 municipal election; 2016 consolidated election
El Paso	↓ 33,539	↑ 159,847	Local judge	2017 municipal election; 2020 consolidated election
Phoenix	↓ 113,793	↑ 430,043	Ballot proposal	2015 municipal election; 2020 consolidated election

Current ballot drop-off rates in New York City

Data from New York City suggests ballot drop-off rates are not considerable. The results from the implementation of ranked choice voting showed little confusion and no falloff in voting participation, despite a longer ballot that had more candidates in five different city offices. In fact, an analysis conducted by the Campaign Finance Board found that more candidates on the ballot increased how much voters utilized their ranked ballot.²⁹

Some voters do not make it down the ballot and only vote for the most high-profile race. To examine how many voters show up to vote for president but pass on the opportunity to vote for their assembly member, we reviewed voter turnout for 20 assembly races – four in each borough – over the course of three presidential cycles. The results differ depending on the political context and the area; uncompetitive and uncontested assembly races see higher drop-off rates.

²⁹ New York City Campaign Finance Board 2021-2022 Annual Report http://nyccfb.info/pdf/2021-2022_VoterAnalysisReport.pdf



In 2020, 4.6% of voters in our sample voted for president and did not vote for their assembly members. In 2016, that number was 9.6%; in 2012 it was 7.8%. The number of votes "lost" due to ballot drop-off is small compared to the number of votes gained due to higher turnouts that occur in presidential elections.

The following table details the drop-off rates in our sample. See full data in figure 3 in the appendix.

Votes lost in low-ballot assembly races due to ballot drop-off				
Borough	Included districts	Average difference in turnout between the race for top of the ballot and race for assembly seat		
		2020	2016	2012
Bronx	80, 82, 84, 86	-2.2%	-8.9%	-6.9%
Brooklyn	41, 44, 54, 57	-2.9%	-4.4%	-7.1%
Manhattan	65, 68, 73, 76	-7.3%	-11.2%	-10%
Queens	34, 35, 38, 40	-6.3%	-8.9%	-11.1%
Staten Island	61, 62, 63, 64	-4.6%	-14.6%*	-4.3%

Source: New York City Board of Elections election results, New York State Enrollment Statistics
 * - There were two uncontested assembly races in Staten Island in 2016.

Ballot drop-off rates for ballot proposals are higher than for elected offices. That is because voters must flip the ballot to get to the proposals and because questions often include technical terms unfamiliar to the public. Therefore, a quarter of all voters sometimes choose not to vote on ballot proposals. The last three elections with ballot questions saw the following drop-off rates: 2018, -25% to -26% votes; 2019, -13% to -17% votes; 2021, -21% to -23% votes.³⁰

³⁰ New York City Campaign Finance Board 2021-2022 Annual Report http://nyccfb.info/pdf/2021-2022_VoterAnalysisReport.pdf



The Challenge of Primary Elections

NYC is a heavily Democratic city with closed primaries. This combination means whoever wins the Democratic primary (or, in some cases, the Republican primary) will likely win the general election. Considering that, it is necessary to look at the potential impact moving the local election year may have on primary turnout.

A review of voter turnout rates across different years and elected offices show that turnout mainly depends on the competitive nature of the contest. Primary elections for presidential, gubernatorial, congressional, and state legislative seats in New York City are often not competitive, and in many cases, they are canceled because the incumbent is uncontested. Therefore, it is difficult to point to clear turnout gains for even-year primary races compared to odd-year primaries. There is also far less scholarly writing on the effect of election timing and primaries.³¹

A comparison of primary turnout rates in down-ballot races shows there could be clearer gains in even-numbered years, though not to the same degree as for general elections.

Turnout rates in New York City primaries

Turnout in NYC's mayoral primaries has not crossed the 30% limit in three decades. In the crowded and competitive primary of 2021, 27% of all registered voters came out to vote, the highest number since 2001.³² In 2013, the last time the mayoral seat was open, voter turnout in the primary stood at 23% of all registered voters.³³ All other primaries in the previous twenty years saw turnout fall under 20%.

³¹ But see, for example. Hajnal, Zoltan Et Al. "Municipal Elections in California: Turnout, Timing, and Competition" https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/content/pubs/report/R_302ZHR.pdf *Public Policy Institute of California*. 2002

³² This number includes voters in primaries of all parties. NYC Board of Elections 2021 Annual Report https://vote.nyc/sites/default/files/pdf/annualreports/BOE_Annual_Report_2021_ONLINE_COMPLETE.pdf

³³ This number includes voters in primaries of all parties. NYC Board of Elections 2013 Annual Report <https://www.vote.nyc/sites/default/files/pdf/annualreports/BOEAnnualReport13.pdf>



Voter turnout in New York City mayoral primaries						
Democratic and Republican primary elections, 1989-2021						
	Registered Democrats	Turnout # Dem Primary	Turnout % Dem Primary	Registered Republicans	Turnout # Rep Primary	Turnout % Rep Primary
2021	3,780,378	942,031	25%	564,480	60,051	11%
2017	3,453,869	463,569	14%	No primary		
2013	3,140,469	691,801	22%	491,055	61,111	12%
2009	3,057,021	330,659	11%	No primary		
2005	2,909,215	478,818	16%	No primary		
2001	2,748,538	785,365	29%	523,761	72,961	14%
1997	2,708,886	411,459	15%	No primary		
1993	2,258,410	517,709	23%	No primary		
1989	2,202,222	1,080,557	49%	449,426	115,110	26%

Source: see footnote³⁴

It is difficult to compare turnout rates in local, odd-year primaries and even-year state and federal primaries because the competitiveness of these contests and the election calendar they use vary greatly.

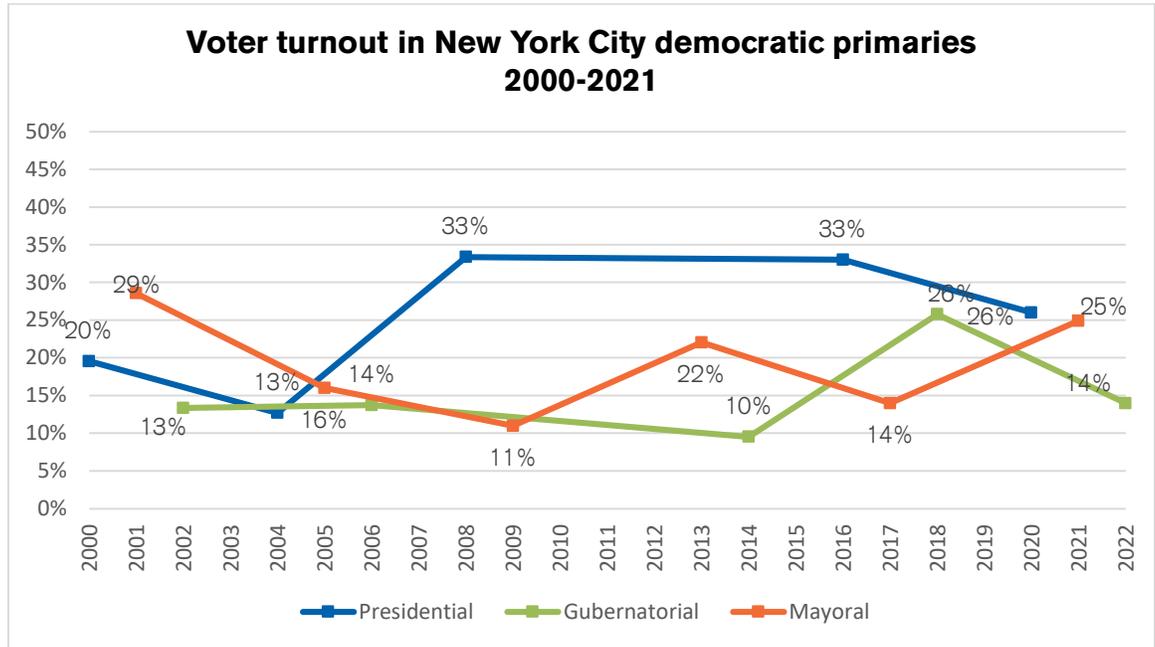
Primaries for New York City offices are very often competitive due to term limits and a supportive campaign finance system. This is not the case in federal and state offices. Primary races for governor and president in the last twenty years have not been very competitive and were sometimes canceled. There were no Democratic primaries in 2010 and 2012, and there are even fewer Republican primaries - six out of 11 even-year Republican primaries between 2000 and 2020 were uncontested. In the years where a presidential primary does occur, the nomination has often been secured, or the front-runner is clear by the time the primary reaches New York, further reducing interest and turnout.

In addition, most neighborhoods see active races for City Council seats in municipal elections, which helps to raise turnout and interest across the city. In contrast, not many local races are on the ballot in even-year state primaries; about two-thirds of

³⁴ Voter turnout numbers sourced from New York City Board of Elections election certification reports and annual reports. Voter enrollment numbers sourced from the State Board of Elections November enrollment reports.



the seats in the New York State Legislature representing New York City remain uncontested every election cycle.³⁵



The competitive presidential primaries do tend to see higher turnout than other contests, in line with voter behavior in general elections. The 2008 primary between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, held on a February Super Tuesday, saw a turnout of 33%, as did the 2016 contest between Clinton and Bernie Sanders. No other citywide Democratic primary in the last 20 years rose above 30% turnout.

However, the presidential primary is held at different times than other federal, state, or local primaries. It has shifted between different dates; it is currently set in April by law. If city elections were to move to a presidential year, the presidential primary would not directly impact the local June primary.

Gubernatorial primaries vary in turnout but remain low. The Democratic primary between Andrew Cuomo and Cynthia Nixon in 2018 had the highest turnout in the last two decades, but only 26% of eligible voters came out to vote. Other statewide primaries in the last twenty years were far less competitive and received between 11% and 14%, including the most recent June 2022 gubernatorial primary.

Changes in the election calendar have also hindered turnout in even-numbered year primaries. During most of the previous decade, statewide primaries were separated from congressional primaries under court order (June/September). This happened again in 2022 (June/August). The only consolidated primary in the last decade

³⁵ *Uncontested Incumbents*, Citizens Unions Voters Directory, Primary Elections, 2012-2022



happened in June 2020, and it got a higher turnout than usual for such contests, 27%.

Republican primaries in the last two decades have seen low turnouts and were often not held due to lack of competition.

Voter turnout in New York City Republican primaries, 2000-2021					
Year	Election type	Turnout	Year	Election type	Turnout
2022	Gubernatorial	14%	2010	Gubernatorial	9%
2021	Mayoral	11%	2009	Mayoral	No Primary
2020	Presidential	No Primary	2008	Presidential	15%
2018	Gubernatorial	No Primary	2006	Gubernatorial	No Primary
2017	Mayoral	No Primary	2005	Mayoral	No Primary
2016	Presidential	26%	2004	Presidential	No Primary
2014	Gubernatorial	No Primary	2002	Gubernatorial	No Primary
2013	Mayoral	12%	2001	Mayoral	14%
2012	Presidential	5%	2000	Presidential	17%

Source: New York City Board of Elections election certification reports and annual reports; State Board of Elections November enrollment reports

Turnout rates in down-ballot New York City primaries

In contrast with the previous section, there is some indication that turnout rates for down-ballot primary races are higher in even-numbered years. However, because assembly races are often uncompetitive or uncontested, it is difficult to make a citywide comparison that would include overlapping council and assembly districts that have competitive or contested elections, through several consecutive years, in both primary and general elections.

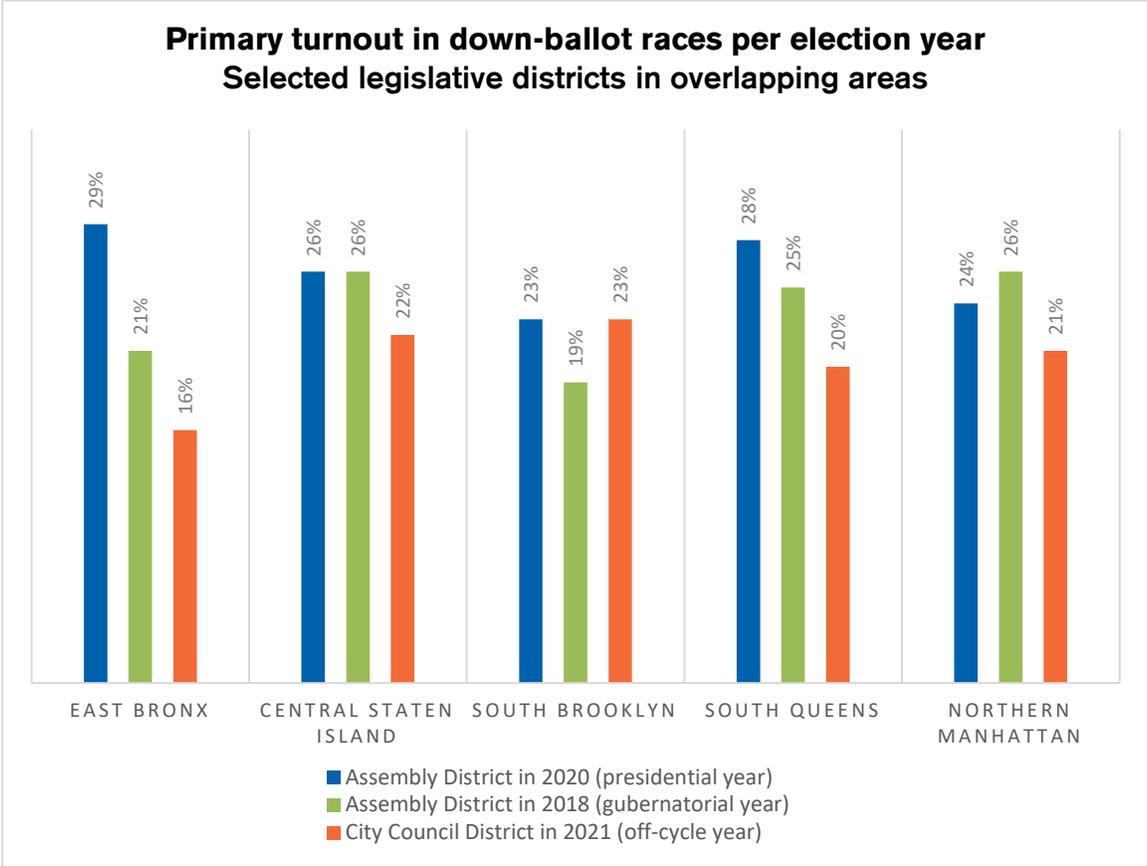
When comparing between districts in the same five sample areas listed in the previous chapter – East Bronx, South Queens, Northern Manhattan, South Brooklyn, and Central Staten Island – and over three competitive citywide election years, 2021, 2020, and 2018, we found that in most cases, turnout in State Assembly primaries of even-numbered years (2020 and 2018) was higher than turnout was for City Council primaries in the odd-year election (2021).

For example, in the East Bronx, 29% of registered voters cast ballots for their Assembly member in the 2020 primary, 21% in the 2018 primary, and 16% for their City Council member in the 2021 primary. In Northern Manhattan, turnout for assembly in 2020 and 2018 was 24% and 26%, respectively, while turnout for City



Council was 21%. However, in our south Brooklyn example, the 2021 primary turnout was the same as in 2020 (23%) and higher than in 2018 (19%).

Turnout numbers on each district in this sample appear in figure 4 in the appendix.



Turnout rates in primaries in other cities

Most large cities in the U.S. hold some form of nonpartisan local elections. For many, the open primary election is held in the middle of the year and acts as a sort of general election. The November election is often administered as a run-off election in case no candidate receives a majority of the vote.

In Philadelphia, the other large city that holds closed primaries for local elections, turnout is similar to New York City: 24% average turnout in the Democratic primary for mayor over the last 20 years.

Baltimore is the only U.S. city that we know of to recently switch to on-cycle elections while also using a closed primary system. In the 2007 and 2011 Baltimore mayoral primaries, the average voter turnout was 20%. Since moving to on-cycle elections, two mayoral primaries were held on the same day as the presidential



primary. The average voter turnout in these two contests was 34%.³⁶ This is a significant increase, though modest, compared to the turnout gains in general elections.

Open primaries reform and voter turnout

The above turnout data suggests that election consolidation would have relatively modest effects, if any at all, in boosting turnout for primary elections when compared to the effects on the general election.

Another reform that could be beneficial for raising voter turnout in New York City primary elections is “open primaries”. By opening the primary election to all registered voters regardless of partisan affiliation, more people would be able to vote in the primary. 85% percent of American cities use nonpartisan elections for local offices, including 23 of the 30 largest cities in the U.S. In New York City, research by the Campaign Finance Board has shown that being an unaffiliated voter (“independent”) is the strongest predictor for not voting.

³⁶ Turnout data from the Baltimore Board of Elections <https://boe.baltimorecity.gov/boe-past-results>



Electoralates in Even-numbered Years Are More Representative of the Population

From the data presented in the previous chapters, it is clear that more New Yorkers would vote in local elections if they were held concurrently with larger elections. An entirely separate question is whether consolidating elections would affect who is voting. In a city as diverse as New York City, policy solutions that address voter turnout must also center communities where voter turnout is lowest and help narrow participation gaps.

In New York City, age, race, and education are some of the strongest demographic predictors to participation in elections. A study of voter turnout over a ten-year period (2008-2018) by the New York City Campaign Finance Board³⁷ found that the areas with a higher share of residents over 50, with high school degree or higher, and Asian or White residents constantly see greater voter participation. Among the factors associated with negative voter participation are naturalized citizenship, disability status, and Latino residents.³⁸ The five community districts with the highest participation rates in New York City are all in wealthier areas in Manhattan or Brooklyn, while the five districts with the lowest rates are all in the Bronx. Conversely, the city has identified several groups and areas of low-propensity voters that are the focus of outreach programs, including young voters under 30, immigrant voters, and several community districts in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx.³⁹

Moving local elections on cycle has the potential to improve turnout in several of those groups.

The impact of election year on the age of the electorate

Perhaps the most dramatic change in voter composition that occurs when off-year elections are consolidated with even-year elections is related to age representation. Research has found that the share of young voters increases in even-year elections.

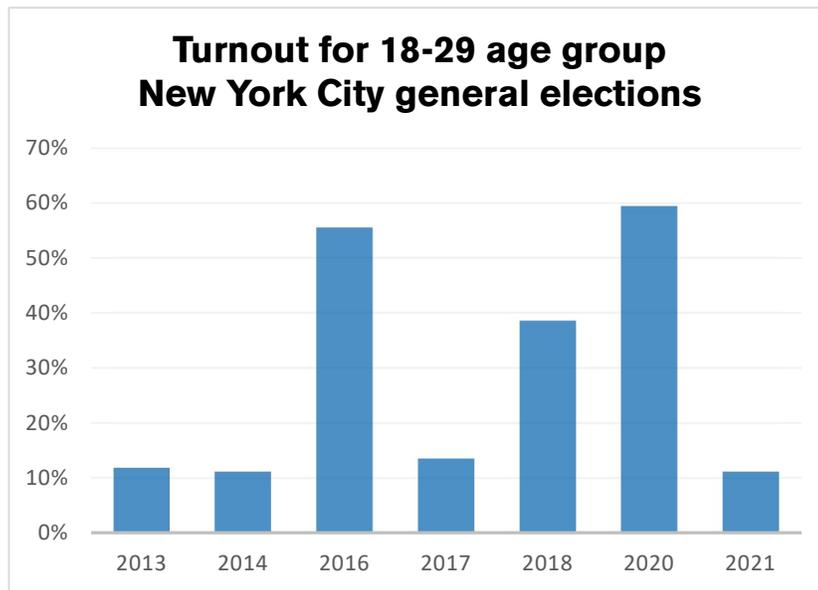
³⁷ NYC CFB Voter Analysis Report 2019-2020 nycfb.info/media/reports/voter-analysis-report-2019-2020/

³⁸ Being an unaffiliated voter (“independent”) is the strongest predictor for not voting in NYC, according to this study.

³⁹ NYC Votes Issues Annual Report and Community Profiles, April 30 2020, <http://nycfb.info/media/press-releases/nyc-votes-issues-annual-report-and-community-profiles/>



Currently, young voters in New York City are far better represented in even-year elections than in odd-year local elections.⁴⁰ In the last two open mayoral elections, 2021 and 2013, turnout among 18-29 year-olds was only 11.1% and 11.8%, respectively, compared to five-fold that number in the last two presidential general elections: 59.3% of registered voters ages 19-29 voted in 2020, and 55.4% voted in 2016. In 2018, turnout for young voters was more than three times the odd-numbered year turnouts, with 38.5% of registered voters in the 18-29 age group voting. The 2014 turnout for that age group was as low as in local elections, in line with the overall low turnout in that year.



In fact, young voters gain the most from the overall increase in voter turnout associated with even-numbered years. For example, the growth in turnout between the 2021 mayoral election and the 2020 presidential election equaled 95% for voters ages 60-69 and 434% for voters ages 18-29.

The median age of voters is lower in cities that hold local elections in even-numbered years. A study from Portland State University, which examined mayoral election turnouts in 50 cities over a five-year period, found that in municipalities with off-cycle elections (in 35 cities), the average voter was 17 years older than the adult median age in that city, while in municipalities with local elections on midterm years (9 cities), the average age difference between voters and residents dropped to 11.6 years. In the two cities in this study that hold their mayoral elections on-cycle with the

⁴⁰ Age turnout data retrieved from the New York City Campaign Finance Board's Voter Analysis Reports from 2022 to 2018



presidential election, the average age difference between the median voter and the median city resident was only 4.7 years.⁴¹

The age difference is also stark in down-ballot, hyper-local elections. A 2018 study that looked at 10,000 school districts found that election timing has the most significant impact on voter age. Elderly voters were the most overrepresented group in low-turnout elections in the study.⁴²

It is thus unsurprising that changing the election year of local elections also improves youth turnout. A landmark study by Zoltan Hajnal, a Professor of Political Science at the University of San Diego, found that the turnout rate for younger Americans nearly doubled in California cities that switched to on-cycle elections, and the share of older adult voters dropped up to 22 points when elections were consolidated. The study found that older Americans make up half of the municipal voters in off-cycle elections, but account for one-quarter of city residents throughout California.⁴³

The impact of election year on the race and ethnicity of the electorate

Academic research on election timing also finds that on-cycle elections draw electorates that are more broadly representative of a city's demographics. This includes not only age, but also race, wealth, and political attitudes. The study by Prof. Zoltan Hajnal mentioned above, which surveyed four election dates between 2008-2016 for each of California's roughly 500 cities, found that municipalities with off-cycle elections had electorates that skewed whiter, older, wealthier, and more conservative than their city's median demographics. When cities shifted to on-cycle elections, the overrepresentation of white voters reduced, and the underrepresentation of Hispanic and Asian votes moved closer to their actual demographic makeup in that locality. The Black vote was unaffected by election timing. Working class voters also saw substantial turnout gains and were better represented in on-cycle elections. This means those with the least participation rates in American democracy stand to gain the most with on-cycle elections.⁴⁴

Of course, moving elections on-cycle does not "produce" a new electorate. Instead, it ensures the voter demographics will better reflect that city's existing demographic

⁴¹ *Who Votes for Mayor?* A project of Portland State University <http://www.whovotesformayor.org/>

⁴² Kogan, V., Lavertu, S. and Peskowitz, Z. (2018), Election Timing, Electorate Composition, and Policy Outcomes: Evidence from School Districts. *American Journal of Political Science*, 62: 637-651. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12359>

⁴³ Hajnal, Z., Kogan, V., & Markarian, G. (2022). Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition. *American Political Science Review*, 116(1), 374-383. doi:10.1017/S0003055421000915

⁴⁴ Ibid.



and its median voter. In the California study, diverse cities saw greater demographic changes in the electorate when switching to on-cycle elections than more homogenous cities. For example, in cities where the white population is over 80% of voters, moving to consolidated elections reduced their share of the vote by less than five percentage points. In cities where white adults account for a quarter of the population, the white share of the vote at the polls decreased on average by more than 15 percentage points.

For a city as diverse as New York City, consolidating elections in even-numbered years could bring significant demographic changes to the electorate in municipal elections.

To examine whether, like the California study suggests, communities of color in New York City would see greater turnout gains in on-cycle elections, we compared voter turnout among different racial and ethnic groups in odd- and even-numbered years. The comparison included 12 assembly districts whose population is predominantly one group: three majority white districts, three majority Black, three majority Asian-American, and three majority Latinx. We picked the districts with the highest share of voters from each group, and included districts in all five boroughs. Although further research could be done by looking at every election district or Census tract in New York City, this sample of assembly districts offers a good indication of how moving local elections might impact the demographic of the city's electorate.

In keeping with the findings presented in previous chapters, turnout was highest in all assembly districts sampled in 2020, an even-year presidential election, followed by 2018, an even-year gubernatorial election.⁴⁵ Turnout was lowest in 2021, an odd-year municipal-only election.⁴⁶

Similar to the California study, assembly districts with majority communities of color saw the sharpest rates of turnout increases in even-year general elections compared to odd-year elections. Latinx districts saw the largest turnout gains.

In the three assembly districts with the largest share of white population – districts 62 (Staten Island), 73, and 76 (Upper East Side) – average turnout was higher by 120% in the 2020 presidential election than in the 2021 mayoral election. In the three largest Asian districts – assembly districts 40, 25 (Queens), and 49 (Brooklyn) – average turnout was higher by 172% in the 2020 election than in the 2021 election. For Black majority assembly districts – 58, 60 (Brooklyn), and 83 (Bronx) – turnout

⁴⁵ Data for 2022 will be available with the publication of the next annual Voters Analysis Report.

⁴⁶ All turnout numbers refer to voting for the top ballot race of that elections: presidential in 2020, mayor in 2021, and governor in 2018

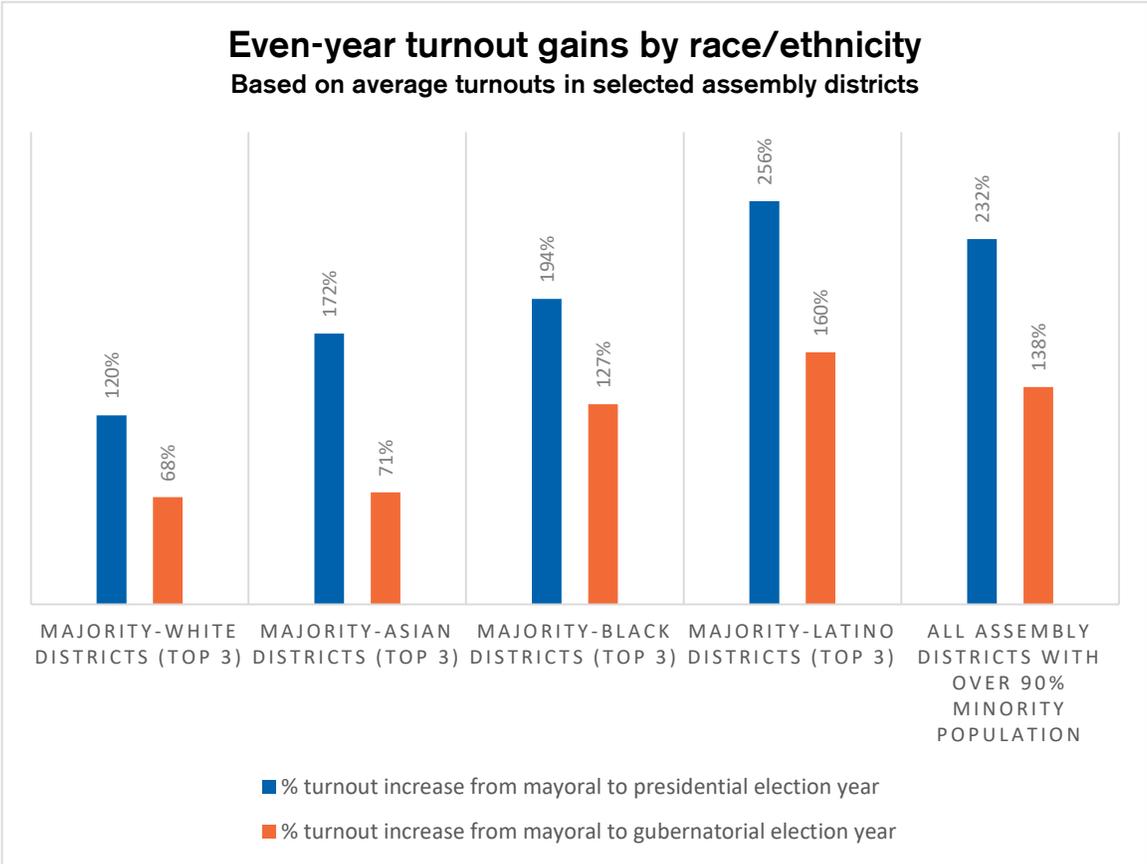


gains were even higher, a 194% increase in 2020 than in 2021. Latinx-majority assembly districts – 72 (Manhattan), 86, and 84 (Bronx) – saw the biggest difference between the odd- and even-numbered year: average turnout was higher by 256% in 2020 than in 2021.

A comparison of the 2021 turnout rates with the other even-numbered year election, the 2018 gubernatorial year, reveals a similar trend. The increase in turnout is higher in the districts with a majority community of color. Detailed numbers are presented in the chart below.

We also examined the increase in turnout for all majority-minority districts in New York City with over 90% non-white population. These 17 assembly districts saw an average turnout increase of 232% from 2021 (mayoral) to 2020 (presidential) and an average increase of 138% from 2021 to 2018 (gubernatorial).

This data suggests that if New York moved its mayoral election from odd-numbered years to even-numbered years, turnout gains would be highest for communities of color, and the demographic of the electorate would more closely accurately reflect the city's actual demographics.





Turnout in different New York City assembly districts							
Even-year and odd-year general elections							
Area	District	Racial/ethnic composition	Turnout Governor 2018	Turnout President 2020	Turnout Mayor 2021	% Increase Mayor to President	% Increase Mayor to Governor
SI: South Shore	62	82% White	49%	74%	40%	86	22
MN: Upper East Side	73	75% White	58%	72%	29%	144	96
MN: Upper East Side	76	73% White	60%	74%	32%	132	88
QNS: Flushing	40	71% Asian	35%	55%	21%	164	67
QNS: Fresh Meadows	25	61% Asian	38%	60%	21%	180	78
B.K.: Bensonhurst	49	59% Asian	31%	50%	18%	172	68
B.K.: Flatbush	58	91% Black	47%	59%	22%	169	114
BX: Eastchester	83	76% Black	46%	60%	19%	216	146
BK: East NY	60	75% Black	40%	54%	18%	197	121
MN: Washington Heights	72	71% Latino	44%	57%	19%	202	132
BX: Fordham	86	70% Latino	36%	50%	13%	288	182
BX: South Bronx	84	69% Latino	35%	50%	13%	277	167

Demographic data source: 2020 Census
 Voter turnout source: New York City Campaign Finance Board analysis. Turnout is for the top of the ticket.

Findings on turnout in primary elections presented a similar trend. The largest gains occurred in even-numbered year primaries in Latino-majority assembly districts, followed by black-majority districts. However, as detailed in the earlier chapter on primary elections, given the difference in the dynamic of primary contests, it is difficult to provide an accurate comparison.



Additional Benefits to Moving Local Elections to Even-numbered Years

Reducing fiscal costs

Consolidating elections has the potential to save localities significant amounts of money. The money to run New York City's elections comes from the municipal budget. According to the New York City Board of Elections, the cost of the June 2021 primary was \$28,094,702, and the November 2021 general election cost \$31,407,348. This means that the 2021 election season (not including special elections) cost New York City taxpayers about \$60 million.⁴⁷

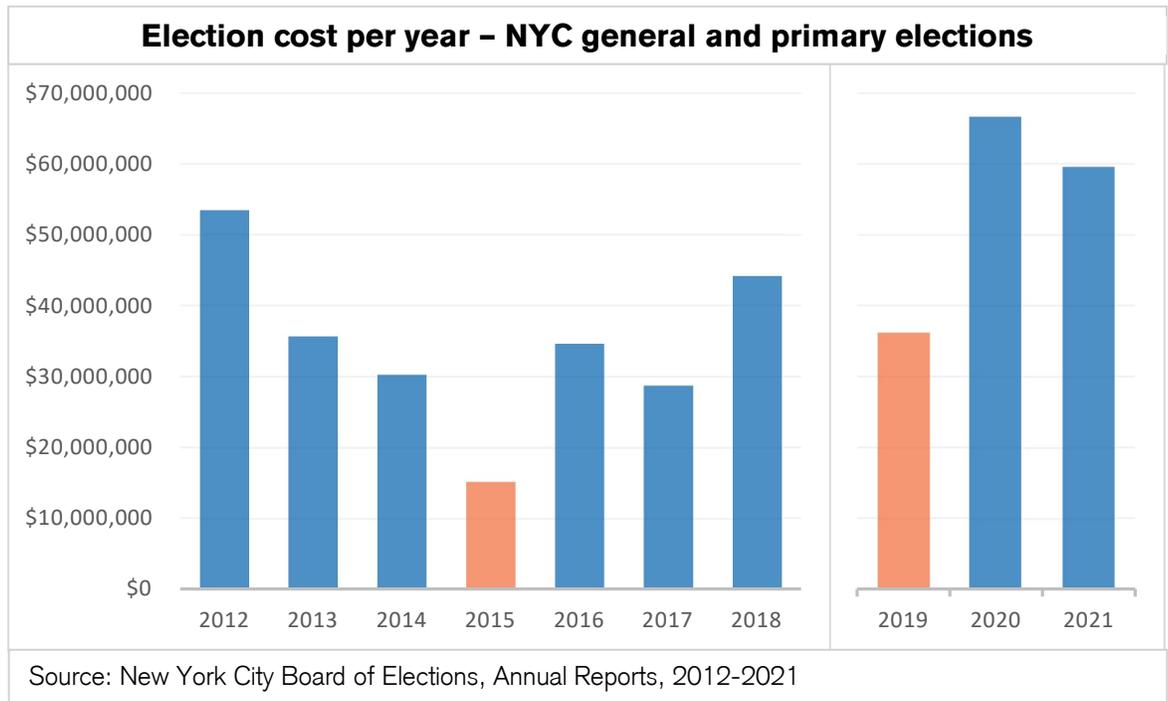
In 2017 and 2013, local elections cost half that amount, not including run-off elections, which have since been canceled.⁴⁸ But the state now spends more on election administration, including by deploying and staffing early voting sites.

If municipal elections were held in even-numbered years, very few races would remain on the ballot in odd-numbered years in New York City: county-based elections to judicial offices and county-based elections to district attorneys. (Citywide ballot proposals can also be on the ballot.). The total election cost that year would be substantially lower.

Total election costs in odd-numbered years with only judicial elections on the ballot, marked orange in the following chart, have been substantially lower than in any other election year. The 2015 primary and general elections cost \$15 million, much less than municipal election years that decade (\$28-35 million), midterms (\$30-44 million), or presidential years (\$34-53 million). And since election reforms like early voting were implemented, the least costly election year was 2019, which included judicial positions, one citywide election (public advocate), and ballot proposals. The 2019 primary and general elections cost \$36 million, compared to \$66 million in 2020 (presidential year) and \$59 in 2021 (mayoral year).

⁴⁷ NYC BOE Annual Report, 2021.

⁴⁸ NYC BOE Annual Report, 2017 and 2013.



Consolidating elections would also make election spending more efficient, reducing the cost per ballot. For example, while the cost per ballot in the 2021 general election was \$27 (1.15 million voters), it was just \$10.43 in the 2020 general election (over 3 million voters) and \$10.19 in the 2018 Gubernatorial general (2.14 million voters).

Analyzing exactly how much money New York City would save by not running elections in odd-numbered years requires more research. For example, ballot printing expenses could increase when more offices and candidates appear on the ballot. Voter outreach programs, including those operated by the New York City Campaign Finance Board, could also be affected. Moving election years should not impact the City's matching funds program, which is set by City law. Yet, those added costs likely pale compared to the overall cost savings of running fewer elections.

Reducing election administration fatigue

Having a year off between election cycles would allow election administrators and officials to recoup, focus on internal organizational work, and adequately prepare for the next election.

The New York City Board of Elections, which is already burdened by inefficiencies leading to errors and problems with ongoing elections, would benefit from a year with

no citywide elections on the ballot. Currently, City election administrators often find themselves in a “perpetual state of elections,” according to Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the New York City Board of Elections.⁴⁹ Improvements in processes and procedures are nearly impossible to be made in the midst of a live election.

It is worth noting that a survey of city clerks in California in 2020, which sought to assess logistical hurdles during the statewide move to even-year elections, found that 93% of those surveyed found the transition to on-cycle elections easy. They identified no problems related to consolidating their elections.⁵⁰

Implementing a popular policy

Consolidating elections is a politically popular policy among people of all partisan backgrounds. In general, people like the idea of voting less often. Moving elections on-cycle grants voters a year off from learning when the election is, where it is, and who the candidates are. It also gives voters a break from the endless campaign ads and mailers, and grants them a reprieve from carving out the time to go to the polls.

This sentiment is backed by data. A national survey conducted by Sarah Anzia, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, found that 70 percent of Americans are in favor of consolidated elections. The survey found high numbers of support regardless of partisan affiliation. In a country as polarized as the U.S., finding something this politically popular is rare.⁵¹

And indeed, when consolidating elections comes before the voters through a popular referendum, it passes with overwhelming support. 72% of L.A. voters approved consolidation in 2015. In Phoenix, 72% of voters approved the ballot measure of 2018⁵². In Austin, Texas, 76% of voters approved it in 2012 and then again, 66% in 2021.⁵³ Similar majorities were seen in other cities in California that switched to on-cycle: 83% voted for it in Pasadena, 81% voted for it in San Mateo. A survey of ballot propositions in California from 1978 to 2000 found no case of a proposition that received this level of support.⁵⁴ Voters in California don't agree on almost anything as much as they agree on consolidated elections. In fact, we know of no

⁴⁹ Meeting of the Commissioners of Elections in the City Of New York, Tuesday, November 15, 2022
<https://vote.nyc/page/commissioners-meetings>

⁵⁰ Hajnal, Zoltan. *Assessing The Move to Concurrent Elections. A Survey of Local City Clerks.*

⁵¹ Anzia, Sarah. 2014. *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵² Phoenix 2018 board of election results for Prop 411.

<https://www.phoenix.gov/cityclerk/site/Documents/Phoenix%20Final%20Summary%20Report.pdf>

⁵³ Austin 2012 Board of Elections results for Prop 2.

<https://www.austintexas.gov/election/byrecord.cfm?eid=196>

⁵⁴ Hajnal, Zoltan. *Expert Report on Municipal Election Timing on Behalf of the Defendant in City of Redondo Beach v. State of California.*



case nationally in which voters have voted down a proposition to consolidate local elections.

The New York City Council Speaker, Adrienne Adams, recently said she would “definitely” support moving local NYC elections from odd-numbered to even-numbered years, citing voter fatigue and confusion stemming from multiple elections.⁵⁵ And New York City voters voted to consolidate elections when they approved Ranked Choice Voting in a 2019 referendum, which eliminated run-off elections. Some lawmakers have proposed consolidating local elections outside New York City.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ethan Geringer-Sameth, Gotham Gazette, September 29, 2022. *Council Speaker Outlines Priorities, Weighs In On Key Issues Facing the City*. <https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/11604-city-council-speaker-adams-outlines-priorities>

⁵⁶ S6197D (Skoufis)/A8560D (Paulin) would move county, town, village elections outside of New York City to even-numbered year <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/s6197/amendment/d>; A4228 (Abinati) would establish a temporary commission to investigate the prospect of consolidating all public entity elections by the county boards of elections and moving to the date of the November general election https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?default_fid=&leg_video=&bn=A04228&term=&Summary=Y&Actions=Y&Memo=Y&Text=Y



Challenges in Moving Local Elections to Even-Numbered Years

Informed voters in consolidated elections

One challenge presented by consolidating elections together concerns how informed voters would be about local races. Some argue that when local and national elections are separated, those who show up to vote in municipal elections are the residents who are informed and have opinions about city government and local issues, while the voters who would be showing up to vote for the president or the governor may be less informed about local candidates.

It is a fundamental democratic principle that voting eligibility is not contingent on knowledge, education, or familiarity with policy. Already today, New Yorkers are asked to vote on many positions in one date, with many voters undoubtedly uninformed about all the candidates on their ballot. For some New York City voters, the 2018 November ballot included elections to a dozen elected offices. In primaries, voters are also asked to vote for several party positions. Those ballots already mix hyper-local races, like judicial positions or party district leaders, with high-profile contests like the U.S. President. Voter guides, local media, and endorsement lists help New Yorkers to make choices about their vote even if they don't know a particular candidate. And the city will indeed need to invest funds to expand voter education efforts once elections are consolidated.

In addition, we must ask what makes an informed voter. In high-turnout elections, people from a greater variety of ages, classes, and racial and ethnic backgrounds will show up to the polls to make their preferences known. To presume that a greater diversity of people means a less informed electorate misses the importance of life experience and diverse backgrounds in shaping our politics.

High-turnout elections would also require campaigns for local offices to reach many more people, and more information about local candidates will be distributed. Our current, low turnout election system encourages local campaigns to cater their ads and messaging to the small percentage of people who vote, limiting the visibility of elections and candidates.



Media attention and local focus

Another challenge to consolidated elections is that off-cycle city elections allow the electorate and the media to focus on local issues and candidates without the distraction of state or federal races. That was certainly the theory upon which good government groups supported the shift to off-year municipal elections at the end of the 19th century.

However, it seems equally likely that combining city elections with federal or state elections would actually increase focus on city issues and candidates as more voters engage in the election process generally. Indeed, one of the reasons for the falloff in turnout in off-year elections is that voters really don't wish to come out to vote in three years out of every four.

Already today, during presidential year elections, state legislative campaigns have the "benefit" of more people being tuned into politics. In addition, jurisdictions all around the country have proven this is not a substantive impediment, whether these are cities that hold local elections on-cycle or the dozen states that hold gubernatorial elections on the same cycle as presidential elections.

There is not much academic research on media and voter information concerning the election year, and those that do exist focus on school district elections. In one forthcoming study, researchers from Columbia University and Boston College surveyed voters in on-cycle and off-cycle school board elections and found that voters had similar levels of knowledge about key local education policy issues, regardless of the timing of the election.⁵⁷ Another study looked at media attention in school board elections. Surveying 300 news publications in California from 2003-2012, it found no difference in media attention to school board races in on- versus off-cycle contests.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Michael T. Hartney and David M. Houston, "School Board Election Timing and Voter Information Levels: Comparing On-Cycle and Off-Cycle Electorates," forthcoming.

⁵⁸ Payson, Julia. When Are Local Incumbents Held Accountable for Government Performance? Evidence from US School Districts. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/lsg.12159>



How to Move Local Elections to Even-numbered Years in New York

Possible legal paths

Moving municipal elections to on-cycle years will require amending Article 13, section 8 of the New York Constitution, which requires all elections for city officers in the state to be held in the November of odd-numbered years. An amendment to the state constitution must pass in two consecutive state legislatures (meaning an election must occur between the first and second passing). Then, a majority of voters must vote to approve the measure. The earliest that a new constitutional amendment can be brought before the voters at the time of writing this report is November 2025.

Several legal paths can be taken to implement on-cycle municipal elections. The constitution can be amended to simply replace the current odd-year mandate with an even-year mandate, require a specific election year (i.e., concurrent with presidential or gubernatorial elections), or remove the election year requirement altogether by deleting Art. 8, section 1. The amendment can also empower the legislature to set the dates of municipal elections, or it can leave some power to local governments, either by allowing them to opt out of statutory requirements or requiring their consent. The amendment can apply to all 62 cities or only to New York City.

If the constitutional requirement is removed and the state legislature is empowered to legislate the municipal election year, lawmakers would also be faced with several options. For example, they could pass a general law requiring even-year local elections, which authorizes local governments to opt-out under certain conditions. They could also mandate the election year for all cities in New York. Local governments could argue this mandate violates their home rule, and the matter would need to be settled by the courts. Article 9, section 2(c)(ii)(1) of the New York State Constitution gives local governments the power to set “terms of office” of the “mode of selection” of local officers, and the terms of elected officials during the transition period will indeed be shortened or extended. It is also worth noting that The Municipal Home Rule Law (MHR Section 23) and the New York City Charter (Charter Section 38) both require a referendum be held if a local law “changes the term of an elective officer.”

Jurisdictions across the country regulated local election years using various means. In Hawaii, the state constitution requires all general elections in the state, regardless of

the level of government, to be in November of even-numbered years.⁵⁹ California, Arizona, and Nevada regulated local election calendars through state law. The California legislature required cities with voter turnout 25% below the statewide average in the previous four general elections to move their local elections on-cycle and gave all other cities the right to choose when to hold their elections.⁶⁰ The Arizona legislature required most political subdivisions to hold elections with either state or national elections and later added a turnout trigger like one used in California. The Nevada legislature first gave certain city councils the authority to change their election timing to even-years if they so choose. Eight years later, it followed that up with a statewide requirement that applies to all cities. In the case of Baltimore, the Maryland legislature amended the state election law to move only Baltimore City's municipal election to "the November in the year in which the President of the United States is elected."⁶¹

Some of these cases involved litigation between the state and local governments. California and Arizona lost legal battles against charter cities that argued they have home rule on the timing of elections. Arizona courts rejected the legislature's argument that this issue fell under "state concern."⁶²

Term lengths during transition

When transitioning between off-cycle and on-cycle elections, cities need to decide how to handle the term length for elected officials during the transition.

If New York City local elections were to align with congressional midterms (gubernatorial election), then terms would be extended by a year. For example, the mayor, council, and other local elected officials elected in 2025 would serve until 2030 instead of 2029, completing a five-year term. This would likely be politically popular with local elected officials and yield less political pushback.

⁵⁹ Hawaii State Constitution, Article 2 section 8: "General elections shall be held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in all even-numbered years. Special and primary elections may be held as provided by law; provided that in no case shall any primary election precede a general election by less than forty-five days." <https://law.justia.com/constitution/hawaii/conart2.html>

⁶⁰ California SB 415 - http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/15-16/bill/sen/sb_0401-0450/sb_415_bill_20150901_chaptered.htm

⁶¹ 2012 Laws of Maryland, Chapter 548, SB 597 https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2012rs/chapters_noln/Ch_548_sb0597T.pdf

⁶² See: AZ Supreme Court Upholds Tucson's Off-Cycle Election System. April 2021. Arizona Election Law blog. <https://azelectionlaw.com/index/?p=759>; Tucson Gets To Keep Holding Its Local Elections In Odd Numbered Years, April 2021, Arizona Daily Independent <https://arizonadailyindependent.com/2021/04/14/tucson-gets-to-keep-holding-its-local-elections-in-odd-numbered-years/>, California's Voter Participation Rights Act Does Not Apply to Charter Cities, April 2020, <https://www.bbklaw.com/news-events/insights/2020/legal-alerts/04/californias-voter-participation-rights-act-does-no>



If New York City's local elections were to align with presidential elections, then the terms of city elected officials would be shortened by a year. For example, a municipal election will be held in 2025 and again in 2028, giving incumbents a three-year term. Considering the timeline of amending the state constitution, as discussed above, most, if not all, of the incumbents currently in office now will not be in office when election consolidation takes effect.

Jurisdictions that have made that change have chosen varied paths for dealing with terms length. Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Las Vegas extended terms by one year. Phoenix, Austin, and El Paso shortened terms during the transition. In Nevada, the law that allowed cities to move their election years also forbade them to affect the terms of elected officials in office.⁶³

Moving the election year of other offices

There are other elected offices on the ballot in New York City in odd-numbered years besides municipal offices. They include judicial positions - county supreme court, county civil court, county surrogate court, and New York City civil court - and District Attorney offices. The primary election ballot in odd-years also features party positions. If municipal elections were moved to even-numbered years, voter turnout for the positions that remain on the ballot could be impacted negatively. Although this report focuses on elections to New York City government, it stands to reason that all elections in odd-numbered years could be moved to even-numbered years to increase turnout, improve the representation of the electorate, and reduce costs.

The state constitution only provides a specific year (odd-numbered year) for the election of city officers. For judicial offices, article 6 of the constitution only sets the term lengths of elected judges, but elections to various judicial officers occur in both even- and odd-years.⁶⁴ For district attorneys, the constitution empowers the legislature to set their terms and elections.⁶⁵ The elections to party positions are set by the state election law.

⁶³ Nevada Laws of 2011, Chapter 218 Assembly Bill 132

https://www.leg.state.nv.us/Session/76th2011/Bills/AB/AB132_EN.pdf

⁶⁴ See for example the following sections of Article 6 of the New York State Constitution: § 6. [Judicial districts, number and composition; supreme court, continuation and composition, election and terms of justices]; § 10. [County court; judges; terms of office]; § 12. [Surrogate's court; composition; term of office; jurisdiction]; VI § 15. [Civil and criminal courts in New York City; merger into single court; judges, election and term of office; jurisdiction]

⁶⁵ Article 13, section 13 provides that "In each county a district attorney shall be chosen by the electors once in every three or four years as the legislature shall direct". New York State County Law Section 926 controls the terms of the district attorneys in the five counties of New York City.



Redesigning the ballot

Since Ranked Choice Voting was implemented in New York City, city voters receive two sheets of ballots - one for local offices and one for state offices (for example, District Attorney). Two separate ballots are also required to implement non-citizen voting, or "municipal voting", under a new local law. Therefore, consolidating municipal races in one election date with higher offices will not require a substantial change of ballot format or structure.

However, the ballot would need to be redesigned if other cities in New York move their mayoral elections on cycle. State election law currently states that "the offices appearing on all ballots shall be listed in the customary order."⁶⁶ It would likely need to be changed to allow certain executive offices like the mayor to be listed above legislative seats. There could be other changes to make the ballot more voter-friendly.

⁶⁶ E.L § 7-104(11)



Appendix

Figure 1: Voter turnout in down-ballot races in the same area, even-numbered years and odd-numbered years

Location	District	Year	Registered voters	Ballots cast	Turnout %
East Bronx	Assembly District 82	2022	81,051	30,975	38%
East Bronx	Council District 13	2021	100,602	19,674	20%
East Bronx	Assembly District 82	2020	89,756	53,678	60%
East Bronx	Assembly District 82	2018	83,101	36,538	44%
East Bronx	Assembly District 82	2016	80,098	46,001	57%
East Bronx	Council District 13	2013	89,756	18,198	20%
Central Staten Island	Assembly District 64	2022	93,199	39,869	43%
Central Staten Island	Council District 50	2021	115,817	36,937	32%
Central Staten Island	Assembly District 64	2020	89,217	55,360	62%
Central Staten Island	Assembly District 64	2018	80,496	35,786	44%
Central Staten Island	Assembly District 64	2016	77,937	46,362	59%
Central Staten Island	Council District 50	2013	89,217	26,864	30%
South Brooklyn	Assembly District 46	2022	84,539	31,135	37%
South Brooklyn	Council District 43	2021	105,453	26,924	26%
South Brooklyn	Assembly District 46	2020	83,847	46,109	55%
South Brooklyn	Assembly District 46	2018	77,012	30,778	40%
South Brooklyn	Assembly District 46	2016	74,951	39,772	53%



Location	District	Year	Registered voters	Ballots cast	Turnout %
South Brooklyn	Council District 43	2013	83,847	22,357	27%
Northern Manhattan	Assembly District 71	2022	92,210	31,589	34%
Northern Manhattan	Council District 10	2021	123,268	20,670	17%
Northern Manhattan	Assembly District 71	2020 (uncontested)	104,270	48,679	47%
Northern Manhattan	Assembly District 72	2018	89,542	34,874	39%
Northern Manhattan	Assembly District 71	2016	94,993	53,113	56%
Northern Manhattan	Council District 10	2013	80,527	23,049	29%
South Queens	Assembly District 23	2022	79,466	33,190	42%
South Queens	Council District 32	2021	97,851	26,245	27%
South Queens	Assembly District 23	2020	80,934	49,951	62%
South Queens	Assembly District 23	2018	73,708	31,253	41%
South Queens	Assembly District 23	2016	70,257	42,780	61%
South Queens	Council District 32	2013	80,934	20,516	25%

Source: All turnout data from New York City Board of Election, Election Results: <https://vote.nyc/page/election-results-summary>. Enrollment numbers are based on the closest report by the SBOE, except for the November 2021 Council races; the last available enrollment numbers there are from February 2021.

Figure 2: Voter turnout and ballot drop-off rates in cities that moved their municipal election to even-numbered years

	Year	Mayoral votes	Down-ballot votes	Down-ballot turnout rate	Votes lost due to ballot drop-off	Increase in <u>ballot drop-off</u> after election consolidation	Increase in <u>votes</u> after election consolidation
Baltimore	2020	233,580	209,603	52.80%	27,858		167,422
Down-ballot race: Comptroller	2016	234,055	221,063	56.78%	18,391	13,069	178,882
	2011	47,503	42,181	11.33%	5,322		
El Paso	2020	217,484	188,067	46.02%	38,240	33,539	159,847
Down-ballot race: Judge	2017	32,921	28,220	6.74%	4,701		
	2013	45,833	26,727	7.47%	19,106		
Phoenix	2020	658,217	558,803	65.70%	116,136	113,793	430,043
Down-ballot race: Proposition	2015	131,103	128,760	19.59%	2,343		
	2011	141,300	126,881	19.61%	14,419		

Figure 3: Ballot drop-off for State Assembly races during presidential general elections in New York City, selected districts

Dist.	2020 General Election			2016 General Election			2012 General Election		
	Pres. race turnout	Assembly race turnout	Down-ballot drop-off	Pres. race turnout	Assembly race turnout	Down-ballot drop-off	Pres. race turnout	Assembly race turnout	Down-ballot drop-off
BX									
80	37,683	35,856	-1,827	35,314	29,340	5,974	32,728	28,323	4,405
82	52,446	51,331	-1,115	45,694	38,407	7,287	42,694	37,901	4,793
84	34,488	32,478	-2,010	33,425	28,294	5,131	30,749	25,931	4,818
86	30,794	28,879	-1,915	30,492	23,742	6,750	27,531	23,933	3,598
	Average drop-off rate: -2.23%			Average drop-off rate: -8.92%			Average drop-off rate: -6.86%		
BK									
41	45,629	43,305	-2,324	39,590	36,191	3,399	37,101	32,969	4,132
44	49,862	47,336	-2,526	44,661	40,763	3,898	39,392	33,759	5,633
54	36,281	34,575	-1,706	33,454	30,703	2,751	29,746	25,117	4,629
57	66,198	62,251	-3,947	59,246	55,206	4,040	54,736	47,888	6,848
	Average drop-off rate: -2.81%			Average drop-off rate: -4.39%			Average drop-off rate: -7.09%		
MN									
65	49,068	40,928	-8,140	44,662	19,046	25,616	37,277	30,099	7,178
68	49,396	45,901	-3,495	47,151	42,710	4,441	43,703	31,575	12,128
73	64,591	60,823	-3,768	61,332	56,697	4,635	55,477	46,671	8,806
76	63,830	49,568	-14,262	59,156	55,206	3,950	52,750	44,776	7,974
	Average drop-off rate: -7.29%			Average drop-off rate: -11.17%			Average drop-off rate: -9.96%		
QU									
34	36,032	33,435	-2,597	31,550	24,275	7,275	25,615	18,869	6,746
35	31,898	29,172	-2,726	28,255	22,388	5,867	24,727	19,028	5,699
38	37,032	34,752	-2,280	32,443	29,792	2,651	26,361	19,844	6,517
40	29,572	21,917	-7,655	25,321	21,915	3,406	23,436	19,905	3,531
	Average drop-off rate: -6.29%			Average drop-off rate: -8.86%			Average drop-off rate: -11.14%		
SI									
61	49,864	47,830	-2,034	42,650	31,995	10,655	39,163	35,853	3,310
62	66,882	56,430	-10,452	55,362	N/A		44,895	42,006	2,889
63	57,055	54,580	-2,475	47,716	34,701	13,015	41,408	38,307	3,101
64	42,966	40,917	-2,049	35,571	27,710	7,861	28,714	26,140	2,574
	Average drop-off rate: -4.66%			Average drop-off rate: -14.57%			Average drop-off rate: -4.29%		

Figure 4: Voter turnout in down-ballot races in the same area, even-numbered years and odd-numbered years – primary elections

Location	District	Year	Registered voters	Ballots cast	Turnout %
East Bronx	Council District 13	2021	61,866	9,960	16%
East Bronx	Assembly District 82	2020	57,906	16,846	29%
East Bronx	Assembly District 87	2018	61,133	12,707	21%
Central Staten Island	Council District 50	2021	39,133	8,591	22%
Central Staten Island	Assembly District 64	2020	24,706	6,546	26%
Central Staten Island	Assembly District 61	2018	47,114	12,058	26%
South Brooklyn	Council District 38	2021	53,125	12,116	23%
South Brooklyn	Assembly District 51	2020	45,293	10,618	23%
South Brooklyn	Assembly District 46	2018	40,560	7,559	19%
Northern Manhattan	Council District 10	2021	95,133	19,583	21%
Northern Manhattan	Assembly District 71	2020	80,527	19,439	24%
Northern Manhattan	Assembly District 72	2018	70,608	18,615	26%
South Queens	Council District 30	2021	47,267	9,612	20%
South Queens	Assembly District 37	2020	53,323	14,873	28%
South Queens	Assembly District 30	2018	38,926	9,801	25%

Source: All turnout data from New York City Board of Election, Election Results: <https://vote.nyc/page/election-results-summary>. Enrollment numbers are based on the closest report by the SBOE, except for the November 2021 Council races; the last available enrollment numbers there are from February 2021.

Figure 5: Turnout in NYC per year (based on NYC BOE data)

Year	Election Type	Turnout #	Turnout %	Year	Election Type	Turnout #	Turnout %
2022	Governor	1,820,157	38%				
2021	Mayoral	1,149,172	23%	1993	Mayoral	1,898,437	57%
2020	Presidential	3,066,581	62%	1992	Presidential	2,211,473	66%
2018	Governor	2,137,624	48%	1990	Governor	1,159,134	38%
2017	Mayoral	1,166,313	26%	1989	Mayoral	1,899,845	60%
2016	Presidential	2,759,922	62%	1988	Presidential	2,126,418	70%
2014	Governor	1,102,400	25%	1986	Governor	1,170,904	49%
2013	Mayoral	1,102,400	26%	1985	Mayoral	1,170,904	41%
2012	Presidential	2,447,897	58%	1984	Presidential	2,340,181	78%
2010	Governor	1,154,802	33%	1982	Governor	1,685,956	66%
2009	Mayoral	1,154,802	28%	1981	Mayoral	1,305,368	56%
2008	Presidential	2,615,770	61%	1980	Presidential	2,013,164	80%
2006	Governor	1,244,874	33%	1978	Governor	1,526,574	56%
2005	Mayoral	1,315,360	33%	1977	Mayoral	1,486,536	51%
2004	Presidential	2,459,652	61%	1976	Presidential	2,143,345	79%
2002	Governor	1,520,443	37%	1974	Governor	1,822,567	58%
2001	Mayoral	1,520,443	41%	1973	Mayoral	1,790,053	50%
2000	Presidential	2,282,944	62%	1972	Presidential	2,267,237	73%
1998	Governor	1,537,010	45%	1970	Governor	2,290,020	75%
1997	Mayoral	1,409,347	40%	1969	Mayoral	2,458,203	81%
1996	Presidential	2,028,013	57%	1965	Mayoral	2,652,451	80%
1994	Governor	1,576,160	48%	1961	Mayoral	2,467,546	76%
				1957	Mayoral	2,224,054	91%