

DEMOCRACY REFORM PRIMER SERIES

The Timing of Local Elections

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Summary

While federal and state races garner the most media attention, the vast majority of elections in the United States are for offices in local government. Collectively, these local positions total nearly half a million elected officials. Despite their importance, and increased relevance to the average citizen, turnout in local elections is startlingly low, often less than 20%. Electoral laws allow local governments to set the dates for their election cycles, with many opting intentionally to set local elections to be ‘off-cycle’ from federal election dates. These local elections that occur asynchronously from higher-draw elections, such as state or federal races, tend to have extremely low turnout rates. Empirical research is conclusive that synchronous elections have a strong, sometimes doubling, effect on voter turnout. The higher turnout rate encourages a voter population that is demographically closer to the whole of the electorate and produces more representative candidates. Despite synchronous elections’ impact on voter turnout, many critics argue that voter participation should not be artificially increased, preferring the draws of issues or candidates. This “selective participation” would allow elections to be decided by the most interested and knowledgeable voters. Further, critics argue that off-cycle municipal elections allow voters a chance to focus on local issues.

Empirical research demonstrates that special interest groups are disproportionately influential in local elections when turnout is low. Voters in local elections are disproportionately white, affluent, and elderly. Elderly voters cast ballots at 2-5 times the rate of voters aged 18 to 34, resulting in an average gap of 15 years between the median age of voters and

the median age of the voting-eligible population. Comparatively, voters in synched local elections are more representative of the electorate overall, and candidates in synched elections are more likely to hold preferences that are aligned with their constituents. Additionally, merging local and higher-draw elections lowers the cost of election administration, but may capture a swath of additional voters who are less informed about the nuances of local issues. This prompts us to consider the benefits of high turnout versus the potential pitfalls of an ‘uninformed voter’ who absent a synchronous election would not engage in local races. First, the idea that poll access should be restricted to the most knowledgeable voters is anti-democratic and runs counter to US election law. Second, the most knowledgeable voters may have interests that diverge from “the masses.” Regardless of whether election turnout should be artificially bolstered, conclusive research supports that synched elections can drastically increase the turnout rate in local elections.

