

RESEARCH BRIEF

Public
Policy
Institute of
California

MARCH 2002

ISSUE #56

Increasing Turnout in City Elections: Is Timing Everything?

In 2001, a strong and diverse field of candidates ran for mayor of Los Angeles, and surveys indicated that the race was too close to call. Yet only about one-third of the city's registered voters cast ballots in the primary nominating election and runoff. This sort of turnout has raised concerns about declining civic participation and its potential consequences. One such concern is that low turnout can lead to unrepresentative city government: If nonvoters and voters differ systematically in their political preferences and needs, local priorities and policies are less likely to represent the views of all citizens. Another concern is that nonparticipation is associated with a host of negative attitudes about government and politics. If unchecked, declining civic engagement and turnout could compromise the legitimacy of government.

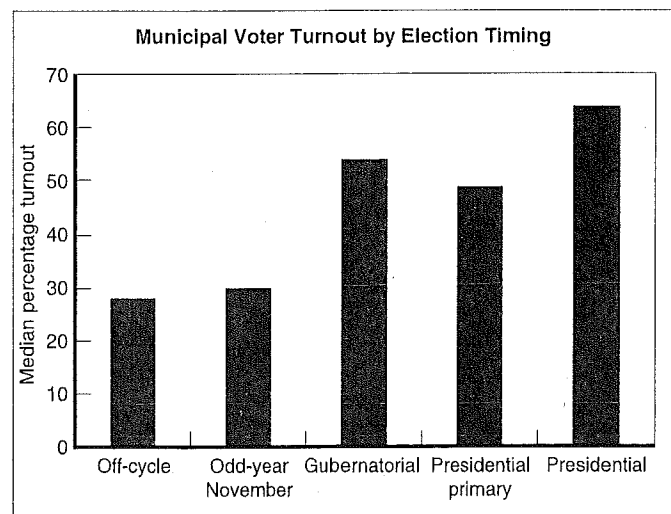
In *Municipal Elections in California: Turnout, Timing, and Competition*, Zoltan Hajnal, Paul Lewis, and Hugh Louch address these issues by documenting voter turnout in California's municipal elections and investigating the causes of turnout differences. To assess the political vibrancy of municipal elections, they also examine the degree of competition for and turnover in municipal offices. Drawing most of their data from a questionnaire completed by 350 city clerks in California, the authors calculate that less than half of all registered voters living in cities cast ballots in the most recent municipal elections. However, the authors also point out that overall turnout in city elections could be increased substantially simply by rescheduling more of them to coincide with state and national contests.

Turnout Varies Greatly, Depends on Election Timing

The data indicate that the average turnout was 48 percent of registered voters for city council elections and 44 percent for mayoral races. However, these averages mask dra-

matic differences in voting rates across California's communities, where turnout ranged from a low of 10 percent to a high of 89 percent. To account for this variation, the authors considered several factors—election timing, institutional structures, and the local political context—while controlling for city-level demographic characteristics that are known to affect turnout.

Their analysis indicates that about half of the difference in turnout among California cities can be explained by election timing. Ever since the Progressive Era of a century ago, many California cities have scheduled off-cycle or "local-only" elections, most of which occur in spring. However, local contests that coincided with presidential elections drew 36 percent more turnout than these off-cycle elections. Similarly, local contests that ran concurrently with gubernatorial races and presidential primaries drew 26 and 21 percent more registered voters, respectively (see figure below).



Controlling for other factors, municipal contests that coincide with presidential or gubernatorial elections experience significantly higher turnouts of registered voters than do off-cycle elections.

Cities that provide more services with their own staff—as opposed to those that contract out to firms or make arrangements with other local governments—also drew a larger share of voters to the polls. The authors speculate that city governments that provide services directly have more control over basic issues that affect city residents' quality of life. They also note that municipal employees tend to be a well-mobilized segment of the local electorate. By contrast, distinctions between charter cities and general-law cities, and those between cities with and without term limits, had no direct relationship with local turnout.

The political context of the municipal election was also related to turnout. When at least one proposition appeared on the municipal ballot, cities tended to draw about 4 percent more registered voters to the polls. Similarly, the degree of competition for an office—as measured by the number of candidates—was positively related to turnout.

Election Timing, Incumbent Success, and Competition for Office

Noting that more than one-third of the state's cities continue to hold off-cycle or odd-year elections, the authors maintain that a move to concurrent elections has the greatest potential to expand voter participation in California's local political arena. Their data also indicate that more than 40 percent of cities have rescheduled municipal elections recently, in most cases switching from off-cycle to on-cycle elections. The reason for the rescheduling was often budgetary; city governments pay a smaller share of election costs when their elections are held concurrently with statewide contests.

In considering a timing change, policymakers may wish to consider the unintended consequences that may arise from election rescheduling. For example, there is mild evi-

dence that on-cycle elections favored incumbents over challengers. Although the vast majority of incumbents win regardless of election timing, city council incumbents were 4 percent more likely to be reelected in cities with concurrent elections. Large cities also tended to have higher reelection rates and lower turnout rates. However, cities with citizen initiatives on the ballot—a possible reflection of community controversy—had significantly lower reelection rates for incumbents.

The data bring out other patterns of political competition at the municipal level as well. Predictably, the presence of an incumbent council member or mayor seemed to dissuade potential competitors from entering local races; but where independent and third-party voters constituted a larger share of the registered voting public, more candidates sought city office, even though party labels do not appear on the ballot in California's local elections. Finally, more candidates ran for mayor where full-time salaries and longer terms came with the office.

How Important Is Increasing Local Turnout?

The authors estimate that if all municipal elections in the state had coincided with a presidential election, 1.7 million more Californians would have voted in their most recent city council contest. They also note, however, that even this measure would probably fail to increase voter participation beyond the relatively low levels already found in statewide and national contests. Also, higher turnout may not translate into higher interest in local politics or broader participation in community affairs. Finally, on-cycle elections may make it slightly more difficult for challengers to defeat incumbents. The authors conclude, however, that increasing voter participation at the local level remains an important way to enhance democracy in a diverse state with powerful city governments.

*This research brief summarizes a report by Zoltan L. Hajnal, Paul G. Lewis, and Hugh Louch, *Municipal Elections in California: Turnout, Timing, and Competition* (2002, 124 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-041-8). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.*

PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA
500 Washington Street, Suite 800 • San Francisco, California 94111
Telephone: (415) 291-4400 • Fax: (415) 291-4401
info@ppic.org • www.ppic.org