

# BIG CITY, BIG TURNOUT? ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN AMERICAN CITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article seeks to describe and explain variation in voter turnout in American big city municipal elections using data from 332 mayoral elections in 38 large U.S. cities over 25 years. In my cross-sectional time-series analysis of turnout in mayoral elections, I find that city-level demographic factors are only weakly correlated with turnout. By contrast, institutional and campaign factors explain much of the variation. The effect of Progressive era reforms on depressing turnout is greatest in the most competitive elections. I conclude by discussing the implication of the overall downward trend in turnout and changes cities can make to increase participation.*

**P**olitical activity by city residents geared toward local issues has shown tremendous variation in recent times (e.g., Kelleher & Lowery, 2004). Some cities have had high rates of voting, protesting, and attending civic meetings, while residents of other cities are largely demobilized. This trend is particularly apparent for voter participation in mayoral elections, where turnout averages over 40% in Philadelphia but only in the single digits for Fort Worth. Oklahoma City recently elected a mayor who received the votes of less than 2% of its population, while more than half the eligible voters showed up for the 1991 Memphis municipal election. Eight major cities have seen recent elections for mayor with single digit turnout, while others have had local elections that drew more voters than Presidential elections.

This is not to say that each city has a fixed political identity; rather, there is tremendous geographic and temporal variation within individual cities as groups that were once mobilized become demobilized and apathetic groups become engaged. Boston has had voter turnout among eligible residents for general municipal elections vary from 11% to 48% over the last two decades, with similar extremes in Buffalo, Philadelphia, and Seattle.

Municipal elections are different from other elections in many ways. Most are nonpartisan, a result of Progressive era reforms that attempted to depoliticize local politics. Mayors may also have less power than other executives, as day-to-day control of the city can be in the hands of a manager appointed by the city council. Most city elections are held on their own election day, usually during odd-numbered years, running parallel to the traditional election calendar. Big cities produce big personalities, such as Chicago's Daley and New York's Giuliani, in a way that

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rarely occurs for other local officials, even governors or senators. Finally, from demographics to development, tremendous variation exists within U.S. large cities, from rustbelt Detroit to sprawling Phoenix to multilingual Los Angeles.

This article seeks to describe and explain this variation by looking at voter turnout in 332 mayoral elections in 38 large U.S. cities over 25 years. After comparing the overall turnout rates with other types of elections, the relative importance of institutional, demographic, and campaign-specific effects on turnout is tested. In a cross-sectional time series analysis of turnout in mayoral elections, I find that city-level demographic factors have little explanatory power, as turnout is largely driven by campaign-specific factors, such as the closeness of the race and the city's electoral and governance structures. Specifically, I find that cities with partisan primaries and without a city manager have higher turnout in competitive elections. These two factors are not related to campaign competition, and suggest that they these nonreform cities are more able to engage citizens in elections where an individual vote is likely to be most meaningful.

This study contributes to our knowledge of urban politics in a number of ways. First, it provides estimates for turnout at the local level based on all available elections for big city mayoral elections. This also allows us to see temporal trends in turnout over this period. Second, it expands on recent work by including multiple elections in each city and campaign dynamics, such as the level of competition and incumbency. Third, it examines determinants of the margin of victory, which has been previously unexamined. Finally, it looks at the conditions under which Progressive era reforms have the most effect on voters, explaining recent contradictory findings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Examinations of voter turnout at the municipal level usually focus on the structure of government and electoral procedures, part of a broader literature that emphasizes the way institutions mobilize and demobilize voters. This is in contrast to the dominant approach in voting scholarship that emphasizes individual attributes. Institutional effects are those that structure the rules and incentive structure for political participation. Institutional influences can be thought of as the "specific institutional structures, rules, and procedures that formally or informally define relationships among individuals and, in turn, influence individual behavior" (Johnson, Shively, & Stein, 2002). For political participation, this is generally limited to the formal set of rules regarding voter registration and party competition systems. Institutional political participation theorists usually look historically and comparatively to find supporting evidence (Piven & Cloward, 1989).

Institutional scholars that look historically usually emphasize the declining level of party competition at the close of the 19th century and the technical voting requirements (such as voter registration) that were implemented during this reform period. Walter Dean Burnham, following Schattschneider (1960), is the most influential of those who have pointed to declines in party competition as the central cause of low levels of American voter turnout in the 20th century (1965, 1974). He argues that The System of 1896 initiated a period with a predominately Republican North and West, and an almost exclusively Democratic South. As single-party dominance rose in each area, there was a concomitant decline in formal participation.

Others point to changes in the technical voter requirements that came about during this period (Converse, 1974; Rusk, 1974). These types of requirements were the focus of much agitation and eventually resulted in the 1965 Voter Rights Act and the 1993 Motor Voter Act (Piven & Cloward, 2000). As Piven and Cloward (1989) note, however, the two positions about changes that occurred in the late 19th century are not necessarily at odds. Rather, part of the game of politics is setting up a system of rules that privilege your access to power over that of others. Registration limitations are one of the few systematic variables that are regularly, but not always, included in individual and

contextual studies (Leighley & Nagler, 1992). This is usually operationalized as the days before an election by which one is required to have registered, and restrictive registration deadlines are frequently found to have a significant and negative impact on voter turnout.

Research on municipal elections has particularly focused on the impact of a city's institutional makeup on turnout. The consensus of this literature was that the host of municipal reforms enacted during the Progressive era, such as civil service, nonpartisan ballots, and the council-city manager form of government, resulted in reduced voter turnout. These institutional changes have been rooted in clashes in culture (Elazar, 1970, 1972; Hofstadter, 1955; Wilson & Banfield, 1964, 1971) and in class (Burnham, 1970; Bridges & Kronick, 1999; Hays, 1964, 1974), and modernization (Fox, 1977).

A centerpiece of the Progressive reforms was the nonpartisan election. On the East Coast, this was devised as a way to limit the role of ethnic machines, while on the West Coast supporters used it to squash budding socialist movements (Johnson, 2000). Currently three-quarters of municipalities hold nonpartisan elections (Wood, 2002). Elections involving these "teams without uniforms" (Schaffner, Streb, & Wright, 2001) have been linked to an overrepresentation of wealthy and white city council members (Welch & Bledsoe, 1986). In addition to providing important cues to voters (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), parties are thought to provide a set of resources for candidates, especially poor, nonwhite, and nonincumbents (Stucky, 2003) that result in increased voter turnout.

Early studies linked the switch to nonpartisan elections with reduced voter turnout. In an examination of 282 cities that held municipal elections in 1960 or 1961, Alford and Lee (1968) note a significant difference in turnout between partisan and nonpartisan elections. In cities without council managers, turnout among registered voters was 9 percentage points higher in partisan cities than nonpartisan cities (64%, 55%), and 7% higher in cities with council managers (47%, 40%). Similarly, Karnig and Walter's (1983) longitudinal study examined elections in three periods over 45 years for 310 cities, and found that cities that switch to nonpartisan elections experienced a greater decline in turnout than cities that retained partisan elections.

By contrast, more recent research on the impact of nonpartisan elections has produced mixed results. In an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis of 315 elections in 26 large American cities over 23 years, Lublin and Tate (1995) found that partisan and nonpartisan elections did not differ significantly in turnout of registered voters, after controlling for a host of demographic, institutional, and regional variables. Similarly, in Wood's (2002) analysis of municipal elections held in his random sample of 57 cities, he found no significant impact. In contrast, Schaffner et al.'s (2001) paired city comparison found that nonpartisanship decreased turnout.<sup>1</sup>

An additional reform split municipal elections from the traditional electoral calendar and was designed to remove the role of local party organizations on municipal elections (Hofstadter, 1955). Elections held on days different from Presidential or other major offices, however, are generally marked by lower turnout as there is less public attention focused on the election and fewer overall resources devoted to turnout (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003; Wood, 2002). Hajnal and Lewis estimated turnout among registered voters to be 36 percentage points higher when elections were held at the same time as Presidential elections and Woods estimated the effect at 29 percentage points higher.

Finally, the council-manager form of government, where day-to-day power for running the city is put in the hands of a professional manager selected by the city council rather than a directly elected mayor, has been repeatedly linked to depressed voter turnout (Alford & Lee, 1968; Hajnal & Lewis, 2003; Karnig & Walter, 1983; Wood, 2002). This is presumably because with less at stake, as critical decisions are not made directly by office holders, there is much less incentive for

voters to turn out, or for parties or other groups to mobilize. Hajnal and Lewis estimated turnout in cities with a mayor–council form of government at 6 percentage points higher among adult residents than in cities with a council–manager form of government.

Unexplored, however, is when these Progressive era reforms will matter most for voter participation. Previous research has assumed that the effect will be constant across different types of elections. Theoretically, however, we would expect that these reforms matter most when elections are closest. Parties, for example, have the greatest incentive to mobilize individuals when elections are close. Similarly, voters in a close election might be more convinced that their vote will make a difference when the office they are voting to fill is meaningful, as in cities without managers, and when the campaign is close enough that their vote might be the deciding one, or that the voter might feel a greater sense of civic duty when both these things are true.

## DATA AND METHODS

I analyzed voter turnout in 332 mayoral elections held in 38 large American cities between 1979 and 2003. The population of elections consists of all mayoral elections held during this period in cities with a peak population of more than 500,000. Covering 25 years, or approximately six mayoral election cycles in each city, allows for patterns to emerge and distinguish between factors that may be the result of national trends or local trends. This long view of political participation is also required because specific regimes may dominate a city for a significant period of time such as the Daley machine in Chicago.

### Dependent Variable

No data set currently exists for municipal elections. While many European countries have central depositories for all subnational elections, this is not the case in the United States where most data are collected only at the city or county level and occasionally at the state level. Election data for this project were collected primarily from city clerks and other local elections officials. Unfortunately, municipal and county records are not well stored, and in a number of cases, particularly elections for the early part of this study, election data were not available. Information collected from local sources was supplemented with information from Tate (1995) for 27 elections, and from the Texas Legislative Council for an additional 23 elections (Texas Legislative Council, 2003). Table 1 lists the included cities, along with the number of elections analyzed for each city, the median turnout, the median victory margin, and the estimated size of the population eligible to vote in 2000 for each city.

The dependent variable is the number of votes cast for candidates for mayor divided by the estimated number of eligible voters. To provide consistency across elections, the numerator used is the sum of votes for each candidate. Some cities also provide totals for each election for the number of blank votes, undervotes, and overvotes. Unfortunately, these were not provided uniformly. Relying on the total number of votes cast for a given election creates problems when more prominent offices are also on the ballot. This is especially problematic in cities such as San Diego, which holds elections concurrently with Presidential elections, as there is a significant amount of voter roll-off between the top of the ballot and the mayor's office.

The denominator in the turnout fraction is my estimate of the number of eligible voters in the city at the time of the election, constructed from census data on the number of citizens over 18 years, in each city (Ruggles & Sobek et al., 2003). This is in contrast with the two dominant strategies in election research, which use either the number of registered voters or the entire

**TABLE 1****Election Information Collected for U.S. Cities That Have Ever had a Total Population over 500,000**

Name	First election	Total elections	Estimated voting eligible population (2000)	Median turnout	Median victory margin
Atlanta	1981	8	305,624	24%	21%
Austin	1979	18	438,460	20%	8%
Baltimore	1979	6	475,527	22%	61%
Boston	1979	12	388,579	26%	33%
Buffalo	1981	6	209,860	33%	48%
Charlotte	1979	9	371,067	24%	21%
Chicago	1979	8	1,789,020	48%	29%
Cincinnati	2001	1	242,247	36%	11%
Cleveland	1981	11	331,843	30%	22%
Columbus	1979	6	510,843	32%	10%
Dallas	1985	9	675,591	14%	17%
Denver	1979	12	372,817	34%	10%
Detroit	1981	11	630,777	26%	27%
El Paso	1983	10	318,154	16%	23%
Fort Worth	1989	4	331,930	5%	67%
Houston	1983	9	1,094,370	28%	18%
Indianapolis	1987	5	561,329	31%	22%
Jacksonville	1979	6	520,068	30%	14%
Kansas City	1979	14	315,069	24%	17%
Los Angeles	1981	8	1,834,370	26%	17%
Memphis	1979	10	452,455	37%	23%
Milwaukee	1980	10	399,352	25%	15%
Minneapolis	1979	12	264,333	19%	28%
Nashville	1987	7	400,227	25%	43%
New Orleans	1990	6	346,200	40%	10%
New York	1981	6	4,683,500	29%	11%
Oklahoma City	1979	7	353,047	12%	40%
Philadelphia	1979	7	1,071,780	44%	18%
Phoenix	1979	11	775,596	13%	44%
Pittsburgh	1981	5	257,622	27%	55%
Portland, OR	1980	7	381,178	36%	14%
San Antonio	1979	15	750,609	14%	28%
San Diego	1979	13	776,625	31%	10%
San Francisco	1979	13	553,675	41%	11%
San Jose	1982	8	494,192	27%	17%
Seattle	1981	11	431,375	35%	14%
St. Louis	1981	5	247,667	29%	49%
Washington	1982	6	411,044	33%	32%

voter-age population (McDonald & Popkin, 2001). Both of these are problematic, especially for municipal elections. The number of registered voters is problematic because it both excludes those eligible, but not registered, and includes those who are registered, but no longer eligible, primarily those who have died or moved. While certain cities manage their registration rolls very actively, others do so only occasionally. Relying on this figure introduces a tremendous amount of error. Importantly, the number of registered voters may be a product of a political campaign or electoral structures. Including registration as a variable in the equation would downwardly bias the effect size of these campaign and electoral structures, as including cancer as an independent effect on mortality decreases the effect size of smoking. Alternatively, one could follow the census

model and use the entire voter-age population and the denominator in the turnout fraction. This is also problematic because it includes a large number of non-citizens in some cities in some years, while very few in others. The effect is much greater for municipal elections than it is for national elections because of the concentration of ineligible voters in cities.

Given the limitation with these two methods, I use as the numerator the estimated number of eligible voters in each city in the year of the election, following McDonald and Popkin (2001). The number of eligible voters was computed for each election using the census 5% public use micro-sample to tally the number of citizens 18 years and older for each city. For the years between censuses, a value was imputed based on a linear rate of change.

I include only elections in which all registered voters are eligible to vote, excluding partisan primaries. While including them would be instructive, computing a comparable denominator would be impossible. Descriptive statistics for the turnout variables and independent variables are located in Table 2.

### Demographic Controls

The vast majority of the literature on formal political participation focuses on individual characteristics. This includes both resources-based models (e.g., Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980), rational choice models (e.g., Downs, 1957; Kanazawa, 2000), and psychological models (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960). This is the “normal science” of political participation (Aldrich & Simon, 1986). As such I include a series of demographic control variables.

I measure city-level demographic variables with information from the U.S. Census. The data are from 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial Census, as reported in the State of the Cities Data Systems (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2002). As with voter-eligible population, values for years between censuses were imputed based on a linear growth rate.

To measure *city size*, I include a measure of the total population based on the natural logarithm of the total city population. Previous research has suggested that the impact of population size is not linear (Oliver, 2001). For the racial and ethnic makeup of the city, I include the percentage of

**TABLE 2**

**Summary Information for Variables**

Variables	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Turnout	27.25	11.68	3.02	67.92
Population (ln)	13.47	0.62	12.58	15.90
Black(%)	25.84	19.38	2.71	81.74
Latino(%)	15.65	17.35	0.72	79.09
Asian(%)	6.07	6.75	0.44	36.11
SES Factor 1	0.00	0.95	-1.77	3.32
SES Factor 2	0.00	0.77	-1.79	1.78
City growth rate	4.63	13.91	-34.83	41.01
General	0.74	0.44	0.00	1.00
Margin of victory	27.56	22.68	0.00	99.31
Field vote	9.83	13.32	0.00	58.52
Incumbent	0.55	0.50	0.00	1.00
Nonpartisan	0.75	0.43	0.00	1.00
Council-manager	0.33	0.47	0.00	1.00
Polling hours	12.89	0.78	12.00	15.00
Concurrent election	0.08	0.26	0.00	1.00
Presidential election	0.01	0.11	0.00	1.00

black, percentage of Latino, and percentage of Asian (which includes Asian and a small number of non-white, non-black, non-Latino, non-Asians) in each city. The left-out category is the percentage of the city that is non-Latino white. The population *growth rate* for each city is included, as a control for the length of local residence.

Several correlated measures of socioeconomic status were collapsed into two factors, *SES Factor 1* and *SES Factor 2*. The original variables were inflation-adjusted median family income, percentage of households in poverty, percentage of college graduate among residents over 25 years old, and percentage of housing units that are owner-occupied, measured at the city level for each election year from census data, as above. The variables are highly correlated and the collapsed two factors account for 97% of the variance in income (largely through Factor 1), 87% of the variance in poverty (largely through Factor 1), 94% of the variance in college attainment (Factors 1 and 2), and 65% of the variance in home ownership (largely through Factor 2). This method follows Hajnal and Lewis (2003).

### Campaign Measures

Studies of voter turnout have often looked to factors specific to the particular contests taking place. For example, the spending by various candidates (Patterson and Caldeira, 1983) and the tone of advertising (Ansolabehere et al., 1994) have been found to increase or decrease turnout. A fairly robust finding has been that close elections increase turnout (Hill & Leighley, 1999; Lublin & Tate, 1995). Additionally, the presence of more than two candidates on the ballot for the same office has the potential to draw additional voters to the polls (Norrander, 1986). As such, I anticipate that close elections and those with more than two candidates will have higher levels of participation than noncompetitive elections or those with few candidates. Additionally, incumbent office holders may be able to command greater resources, and therefore increase turnout.

Measures of internal campaign dynamics are constructed from the election data. *Margin of victory* represents the winning candidate's margin of victory over the second place finisher. The smaller the value, the more competitive is the race. Most urban elections are not close, with the median margin of victory at 21.5% and fewer than a third of the campaigns are decided by 10% between the top two candidates. For races with more than two candidates, the total percentage of votes cast for candidates placed third or lower is combined in the *field* variable. In half of all elections, the number of votes going to these candidates is less than 5%. The larger the value, the greater is the vote received by these candidates. Data on incumbency comes from municipal elections offices, city websites, and local newspapers accessed through Lexis-Nexis. Elections where an *incumbent* is running for reelection score a 1, all others a 0.

### Institutional Measures

Cities with a *council-manager form of government* are coded 1, while cities without a city manager are coded 0, based on data from International City Management Association (ICMA, various years). Elections that are held without primaries restricted to political party members are considered *nonpartisan* and score a 1. All other elections score a 0, based on information provided by local election officials. Elections that are held on the same day as *Presidential elections* or *concurrent* with major other elections are coded a 1 using two dichotomous variables based on data from elections officials. Municipal elections held on their own election day score a 0 for both these measures. A measure of potential barriers to voting is the total number of hours that the polls are open (www.fec.gov). The number of hours that *polls* are open is a continuous variable, ranging from 12 to 15. Elections that can actually elect a candidate to office are coded with a 1 for *general*; all preliminary elections are coded 0.<sup>2</sup>

**TABLE 3**

**Correlation Matrix of Variables**

Variables	Turnout	Population (ln)	Black (%)	Latino (%)	Asian (%)	SES Factor 1	SES Factor 2	City growth rate	General	Margin of victory	Field vote	Incumbent	Non-partisan	Council-manager	Polling hours	Concurrent election	Presidential election	
Turnout	1.000																	
Population (ln)	0.122	1.000																
Black(%)	0.169	-0.023	1.000															
Latino(%)	-0.326	0.351	-0.510	1.000														
Asian(%)	0.188	0.158	-0.392	0.036	1.000													
SES Factor 1	-0.003	-0.005	-0.568	0.009	0.681	1.000												
SES Factor 2	0.104	0.000	0.134	-0.024	0.259	0.022	1.000											
City growth rate	-0.333	0.086	-0.604	0.495	0.177	0.539	-0.030	1.000										
General	0.091	0.111	0.010	0.042	-0.123	-0.035	-0.130	0.053	1.000									
Margin of victory	-0.418	-0.037	0.135	-0.054	-0.191	-0.168	-0.105	-0.128	0.305	1.000								
Field vote	-0.043	0.006	-0.120	0.092	0.173	0.123	0.124	0.081	-0.677	-0.231	1.000							
Incumbent	-0.229	-0.007	0.025	-0.018	-0.034	-0.059	-0.015	-0.086	0.126	0.347	-0.172	1.000						
Nonpartisan Council	-0.228	-0.039	-0.318	0.324	0.178	0.143	-0.024	0.313	-0.230	-0.167	0.143	-0.007	1.000					
manager	-0.413	-0.059	-0.377	0.289	-0.025	0.324	-0.262	0.621	0.047	-0.028	0.041	-0.048	0.270	1.000				
Polling hours	0.350	0.291	0.084	-0.246	0.455	0.107	0.100	-0.261	-0.016	-0.042	0.051	0.030	-0.254	-0.161	1.000			
Concurrent election	0.121	-0.012	-0.074	-0.055	0.156	0.194	-0.061	0.046	-0.014	-0.012	0.063	-0.039	0.059	0.044	0.101	1.000		
Presidential election	0.287	0.039	-0.101	0.007	0.098	0.086	-0.002	0.093	0.065	-0.089	-0.082	-0.066	0.064	0.099	0.087	-0.032	1.000	



Table 3 contains a correlation matrix of all the variables used in this analysis. There is no evidence of extreme multicollinearity. While the SES and racial variables are highly correlated, only SES Factor 1 has VIF score higher than 5 and none have a VIF over the critical value of 10. To control for any period-specific factors, four dummy variables are included in each of the models, representing 5-year periods, with the first 5 years as the left-out category.

## **DESCRIBING TURNOUT**

What did voter turnout look like in big American cities between 1979 and 2003? Turnout, as measured by the percentage of citizens 18 years and older casting a vote for mayor, in this period averages 27%, and largely bounces between 20% and 40%. Turnout seems to have settled in at about 25% over the last 8 years of this period. Turnout for mayoral voting is much lower than the voter turnout for other types of elections. Comparable turnout rates for presidential elections over this period are 54% and 59% in the 2004 President election, and 38% for off-year elections for Congress and Governors (McDonald & Popkin, 2001). This turnout gap is somewhat counterintuitive, as city governments play a major role in residents' life, particularly around schools, policing, and development, and it is at the local level where government is often thought to be most authentic, and to be most representative of residents, as opposed to politicians inside the beltway or in the state capital.

This low average turnout obscures the large degree of variation in voter turnout both between and within cities. As listed in Table 1, Fort Worth has the lowest turnout, where on average only one in 20 citizens shows up to vote for mayor, and Oklahoma City is second worst with a 12% turnout. At the high end is Chicago averaging 48% turnout and Philadelphia at 44%. A tremendous variation also exists within cities over time. Most cities experience 20-point swings in turnout over this period. This is something particularly unique to city elections. Turnout in state and national elections is typically much more stable.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

In this section I present the results from the two analyses. The first is a cross-sectional time series analysis of turnout in mayoral elections using a generalized least squares (GLS) random effects model. In my second analysis, I briefly explore the correlates for margin of victory.

### **Method**

A GLS random effects model is used to control for the geographically clustered nature of the data, as the data set includes 332 elections occurring in 38 cities. The data set is case dominated, with many more cities than elections within cities, rather than temporarily dominated, as is the case more often in time-series cross-sectional research (Beck, 2001). I employ a GLS random effects model, which allows for both time-varying and time-invariant variables (e.g., Beckfield, 2003; Kenworthy, 2002; Western & Beckett, 1999). A Hausman specification test was performed on each of the models. This indicated that for the time-varying variables, the consistent fixed effects estimators were not significantly different from the more efficient random effects estimators. Consequently, random effects models are used in this article. The models were estimated using Stata's `xtreg` command for estimating GLS random effects. The coefficients can be interpreted similar to LS regression coefficients. The data file and code for replication are available from the author.

**TABLE 4**

**GLS Random Effects Model of Individual and Institutional Factors on Voter Turnout in Big City Mayoral Elections, 1979–2003**

Variables	(1) Turnout	(2) Turnout	(3) Turnout
Population (ln)	3.55 <sup>†</sup> (2.10)	3.20 <sup>†</sup> (1.79)	1.29 (1.66)
Black (%)	-0.03 (0.10)	0 (0.08)	0.01 (0.07)
Latino (%)	-0.18 <sup>†</sup> (0.11)	-0.16 <sup>†</sup> (0.09)	-0.08 (0.08)
Asian (%)	0.41 (0.25)	0.38 <sup>†</sup> (0.21)	0.19 (0.20)
SES Factor 1	-1.07 (1.78)	-0.45 (1.44)	0.29 (1.32)
SES Factor 2	1.9 (1.73)	1.18 (1.46)	1 (1.26)
City growth rate	-0.15 <sup>†</sup> (0.09)	-0.19** (0.07)	-0.1 (0.07)
General		7.77** (1.16)	7.53** (1.07)
Margin of victory		-0.21** (0.02)	-0.20** (0.02)
Field vote		0.03 (0.04)	0.06 <sup>†</sup> (0.03)
Incumbent		-2.77** (0.76)	-2.59** (0.70)
Nonpartisan			-2.29 (1.96)
Council-manager			-7.54** (2.45)
Polling hours			1.46 (1.41)
Concurrent election			4.28* (1.82)
Presidential election			26.67** (3.39)
1983–1988	-3.99** (1.51)	-2.55* (1.18)	-3.06** (1.08)
1989–1993	-3.11 <sup>†</sup> (1.75)	-3.02* (1.40)	-4.29** (1.27)
1994–1998	-6.53** (2.09)	-5.59** (1.67)	-6.26** (1.51)
1999–2003	-7.62** (2.42)	-6.91** (1.96)	-8.12** (1.74)
Constant	-14.34 (27.23)	-9.94 (23.23)	0.12 (23.61)
Observations	332	332	332
Number of cities	38	38	38
<i>df</i>	11	15	20
Wald $\chi^2$	58.14	305.07	446.54
$R^2$ within	0.12	0.48	0.57
$R^2$ between	0.35	0.58	0.70
$R^2$ overall	0.28	0.54	0.67

Standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>†</sup> Significant at 10%; \* Significant at 5%; \*\* Significant at 1%.

**DETERMINATES OF TURNOUT**

Table 4 reports the results from the first three models, which estimate the effects of demographic, campaign-specific, and institutional factors on turnout. Model 1 includes only demographic measures along with time period controls. The model explains 12% of the within-city variation in turnout, 35% of the between-city variation in turnout, and 28% of the overall variation. Notably, within-city demographic changes explain almost none of the variation in within-city turnout. A model with only time dummy variables explains 11% of the within-city variation, and Model 1, with demographic and time dummy variables, explains only 12%.

In Model 1, three of the demographic variables, population size, percentage of Latino voters, and growth rate, are significantly correlated at the  $p < 0.10$  level. In the full model in the table, each of these effect sizes becomes not significant. This strongly suggests that the relationship between these variables and turnout is spurious. Unfortunately, we cannot draw much inference

from this finding, as we do not have individual demographic data, but rather the data are aggregated to the city level.

The time control variables show a dramatic decrease in overall turnout rates through this period, with elections held in the last 5 years of the study, 1999–2003, having turnout 8 percentage points lower than turnout in the first 5 years, 1979 to 1983. This is a robust finding that appears in all of the models presented. This is quite a large effect, and appears to be a speeding up of the trend in declining turnout in municipal elections over the 20th century.

Model 2 in Table 4 adds campaign-specific variables that significantly increase the explanatory power ( $\chi^2$  of 251 with 4 additional *df*), with the model now explaining 48% of the variation within cities, 58% of the variation between cities, and 54% of the variation overall. General elections, those that are potentially decisive, have much higher turnout than preliminary elections, by almost 8 percentage points. Elections that are close have higher turnout than noncompetitive elections, with each 5 percentage point increase in the margin of victory decreasing turnout by one percentage point. A campaign where the top two candidates finish with less than one percentage between them has a turnout of about 4.5 percentage points higher than an election with average level of competition.

The presence of an incumbent mayor running for election decreases turnout by more than 2 percentage points. In contrast to the notion of big city mayors using all of their municipal resources to increase turnout, this suggests that potential voters are less engaged in reelection campaigns.

While the percentage of the vote that goes to candidates not among the top two is not significant in this model, it is significant in all of the other models, suggesting that third- and fourth-party candidates are successfully able to mobilize new voters to the polls, although the effect is quite small. A third place finisher with 10% of the vote increases turnout by only about one half of a percentage point. This suggests that 95% of that candidate's vote is among individuals who were going to vote anyway, and only 5% is among the newly mobilized.

Model 3 adds the set of institutional variables and the model fit improves greatly, with an increase in the  $\chi^2$  by 131 with 5 additional parameters. The model explains 68% of the overall variation in turnout, 58% of the within-city variation, and 70% of the between-city variation. The largest effect is the timing of the elections. Elections held concurrent with presidential elections increase turnout by 27%, while elections held concurrent with other state and federal elections increase turnout by about 4%. It is important to note that this is not just a count of the total number of people who showed up to the polls that day—it is the total percentage of eligible residents who cast a vote in the mayoral elections. As such, the people who showed up to vote just for president and then left the rest of their ballot blank are not counted.<sup>3</sup>

The findings for the two other Progressive reforms are mixed. As expected, council managers have a strong and negative effect on turnout. Cities with council managers have a turnout 7.5 percentage points lower than cities with strong mayors. While the coefficient for nonpartisan elections is negative, the standard error is large and the confidence interval for the effect size includes 0. This suggests that a large role for parties does not necessarily increase turnout under all conditions.

Table 5 explores further the impact of city and election structures on voter turnout. Here I explore the campaign conditions under which these structures are most relevant. Model 1 includes an interaction between nonpartisan election structure and margin of victory. The model, with only one additional parameter, is a significant improvement over Model 3 from Table 4 ( $\chi^2$  17, 1 *df*), although the percentage of variation explained is roughly the same. The interaction effect has a positive effect, which means that the difference in turnout between elections held under partisan and nonpartisan conditions is at its highest when elections are close.

**TABLE 5**

**GLS Random Effects Model of Institutional Interactions on Voter Turnout in Big City Mayoral Elections, 1979–2003**

	(1) Turnout	(2) Turnout	(3) Turnout
Nonpartisan	-5.50* (2.22)	-2.34 (1.98)	-4.32† (2.25)
Council–manager	-7.58** (2.37)	-10.79** (2.66)	-10.24** (2.56)
Nonpartisan * margin	0.10** (0.04)		0.06† (0.04)
CM * margin		0.12** (0.03)	0.10** (0.03)
Constant	3.84 (22.88)	0.89 (24.17)	3.07 (23.01)
Observations	332	332	332
Number of cities	38	38	38
<i>df</i>	21	21	22
Wald $\chi^2$	466.97	475.69	484.47
$R^2$ within	0.58	0.59	0.60
$R^2$ between	0.72	0.69	0.70
$R^2$ overall	0.68	0.68	0.68

† Significant at 10%; \* Significant at 5%; \*\* Significant at 1%.  
 Standard errors in parentheses.  
 Demographic, campaign, and temporal variables are included in the model, but not listed.

Model 2 includes a similar interaction between the margin of victory and council manager, with similar results. Again, reform cities produce lower turnout when races are close. Model 3 includes both of the interaction effects, and produces the best-fitting model (overall  $\chi^2$  501.88 with 20 *df*). Both of the interaction effects remain significant. This final model suggest that a city with both of the reform features will have a turnout that is 17 percentage points less than a nonreform city in a race with a very small margin of victory, all other things being equal. With a 20% margin of victory, the gap between the two types of cities is still sizeable, but is reduced to 13.5%. In sum, reform cities have lower turnout, all other things being equal, and the turnout is even lower when participation is most important, in highly competitive elections.

Table 6 looks briefly at the determinates of the margin of victory, a critical factor behind overall turnout. Using all of the factors from Table 4 Model 3, minus margin of victory and field vote, we find that the margin of victory is not well explained. Only two of the explanatory variables have a significant impact, incumbent and final election. This is not surprising, as incumbents often face weak opponents, and many final elections are foregone conclusions after contentious primaries. None of the other factors has an impact that is significantly different from 0 including the time control variables. The Progressive era reforms have no effect, suggesting that the effects from the previous table are not biased by the inclusion of a variable that may be their outcome.

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This article looked at some of the central determinates of voter turnout as applied to political participation in municipal elections. For the 332 elections that I looked at, held in 38 cities between 1978 and 2003, I find that turnout averaged 27%, with a considerable amount of variation both between and within cities. Average turnout declined by more than 20% over the period I studied. Using cross-sectional time series models, I found that aggregate socioeconomic differences

TABLE 6

**GLS Random Effects Model of Individual and Institutional Factors on Margin of Victory in Big City Mayoral Elections, 1979–2003**

	Margin of victory
Population (ln)	-1.48 (3.53)
Black (%)	0.09 (0.16)
Latino (%)	0.06 (0.18)
Asian (%)	-0.25 (0.50)
SES Factor 1	1.02 (3.54)
SES Factor 2	-3.15 (2.78)
City growth rate	-0.22 (0.19)
General	10.45** (2.60)
Incumbent	14.44** (2.20)
Nonpartisan	-4.24 (4.66)
Council–manager	2.7 (5.32)
Polling hours	-1.2 (3.10)
Concurrent election	3.76 (5.36)
Presidential election	-12.36 (10.78)
1983–1988	1.5 (3.53)
1989–1993	5.24 (3.78)
1994–1998	2.43 (4.37)
1999–2003	5.41 (4.72)
Constant	46.11 (50.41)
Observations	332
Number of cities	38
<i>df</i>	18
Wald $\chi^2$	83.55
$R^2$ within	0.19
$R^2$ between	0.27
$R^2$ overall	0.24

Standard errors in parentheses.

† Significant at 10%; \* Significant at 5%; \*\* Significant at 1%.

explained little of this variation in turnout. In contrast, both campaign dynamics and the electoral and governmental structures of the city mattered tremendously. I found that voters are apathetic when incumbent mayors are running for reelection and fewer turn out to vote. The potential of a fresh face is more compelling than the track record of an office-holder. Related to this, a strong alternative to the top two candidates draws more voters to the polls, but only a small number of his or her total votes come from people who would have otherwise stayed home. Many Progressive Era reforms also significantly lower turnout. Cities with reform structures such as nonpartisan elections and city managers have lower turnout, especially in competitive elections. Similarly, municipal elections held on separate dates from other elections draw fewer people.

The last quarter of the 20th century witnessed a slow and steady decrease in average turnout rates. Average turnout declined by approximately 7% from the first 5 years under examination to the last 5-year period. This turnout decline exists even after controlling for other factors that might also have been changing over this time period. If this trend continues, I would expect that with each new mayoral election in a city, average turnout would be about one percentage point lower than it was in the previous election. While a one-percentage point change is not large by itself, its cumulative effect could be devastating on turnout rates. In another 25 years, a quarter fewer people will show up to vote.

Unfortunately, the cities experiencing the largest growth in population are also those with the lowest rates of participation. As more people will be living in these apathetic cities, national rates

of participation in local politics will continue to decrease. While the analysis in this project has focused here on participation rates within cities, the average participation rates I have presented have ignored the relative size of cities. While this may be appropriate analytically and theoretically for the issues I have explored, when looking at the future of participation, it is central to look at the relative size of cities. The cities with high levels of participation, like Buffalo, Cincinnati, and New Orleans are also those cities that have negative population growth. In contrast, the fast-growing cities like Austin, Dallas, and Phoenix have participation rates that are, on average, half that of the fast-growing cities. These growing cities are also those that are most likely to have electoral structures designed to decrease turnout. This means that in the coming years, the absolute number of people who participate in local politics is likely to drop, as a direct result of this population distribution.

While voter turnout has declined over the last 25 years, the level of competitiveness in campaigns has not, and I do not anticipate that it will in the coming years. The degree of competitiveness is a major factor in turnout. If it were also declining, this would be yet another factor pointing to a decrease in turnout in the coming years. As competitiveness has remained stable over this period, this major influence on turnout will not exacerbate the downward trend. Competitive elections are also a sign of a healthy democracy. Looking at elections held in other countries, independent monitors often view high turnout combined with a lack of competitive elections as a sign of a lack of democracy. On this measure, democracy in our cities looks pretty good; or at least, it is not getting any worse.

This project has looked at some of the conditions under which reform structure depresses turnout. Further research in this area would greatly benefit from studies that link individual demographic data with city-level data on structures, along the lines of Oliver (2001). While this article established that reforms matter most when elections are tight, it was unable to say which voters were mobilized or demobilized. If the voters whose occasional turnout patterns are driving the fluctuation in turnout are demographic and ideologically similar to the consistent voters, their turnout is not a critical issue. If however, the turnout rates of particularly racial, economic, or political groups vary with municipal structure, scholars need to establish the size of the effect and the mechanism by which it is happening. This can best be done with data on individuals linked to their electoral and governance context.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Two other recent studies, Hajnal and Lewis (2003) and Kelleher and Lowery (2004) look at the impact of a host of political structures on municipal turnout. Unfortunately, both samples consist exclusively of cities with nonpartisan elections. As such, the authors were unable to estimate the impact of nonpartisan elections.
- 2 Portland primary elections where one candidate received a majority of votes cast are coded as final despite the fact that there always is a general election, because, in this case, the primary winner runs uncontested in the general election.
- 3 The 2004 mayoral election in San Diego shows some of the possibilities of drawing extra voters into municipal elections. In this overwhelmingly conservative city, the mayoral election was almost won by a write-in candidate, Donna Frye, who was running as an outsider to the city's establishment. In the 2005 mayoral election, which

was not held concurrently with any major elections, Frye lost by 8 percentage points in an election with much lower turnout.

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