

Why Almost No-one Votes in Local Elections and What We Can Do About it

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Voter turnout in local elections in Washington State and in King County is troubling. Statewide, well under half of all adults participate in local contests. Even worse is that an extraordinarily unrepresentative set of residents often determines how local governments make policy and distribute services. In these low turnout affairs, residents over 65, whites, and the wealthy are greatly overrepresented. The result is that local outcomes reflect the will, not of the majority, but of a small and unrepresentative minority.

Fortunately, King County is considering a measure that would quickly and simply change all of that. That measure would move the date of all county elections from odd years when participation is low and skewed to even years on the same date as statewide and presidential contests when interest and participation are much higher.

The Problem: Low and Uneven Turnout

Elections for cities, counties, school boards, and special districts in Washington State are generally held in odd years. Turnout in these elections is low. Since 2000, voter turnout in local elections has averaged only 46 percent.

Moreover, turnout in these odd year local contests tends to be extremely skewed. Young adults (those aged 18-24) represent a little over 12 percent of the state's population, but the [Secretary of State's](#) own data reveal that over the last two decades young adults accounted for only 3 percent of local voters. By contrast, older voters (those aged 65 or older) tend to dominate odd year contests. In odd year elections around the country, working class Americans, racial and ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged groups are similarly [underrepresented](#).

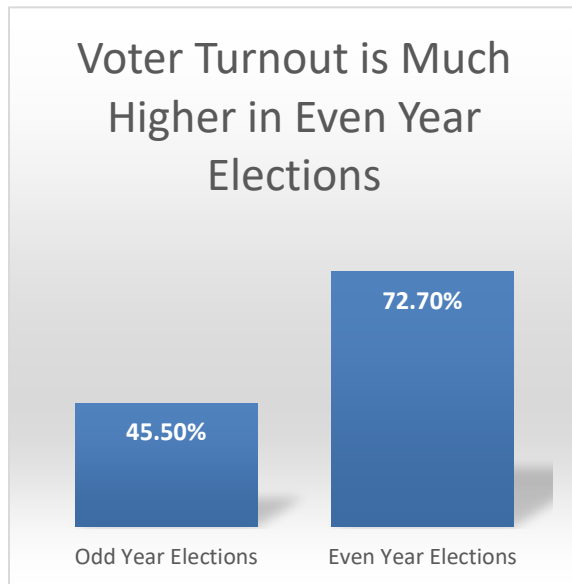
Shifting to On-Cycle Elections Greatly Increases Turnout

Why would simply changing the date of local elections make a difference? The logic behind the change is straightforward. By moving local elections to even years to coincide with national elections, local voting becomes essentially costless. Citizens who are already voting for higher level offices need only have to check off a few more boxes further down the ballot.

One small change in timing makes a huge difference in turnout. Every one of the eight published studies on local election timing finds that moving to even year elections (often called on-cycle elections) is by far the biggest thing that localities can do to increase turnout. Nationwide, local voter turnout generally doubles when elections move from off-cycle to on-cycle contests.

The impact of election timing in Washington State is also obvious. As the

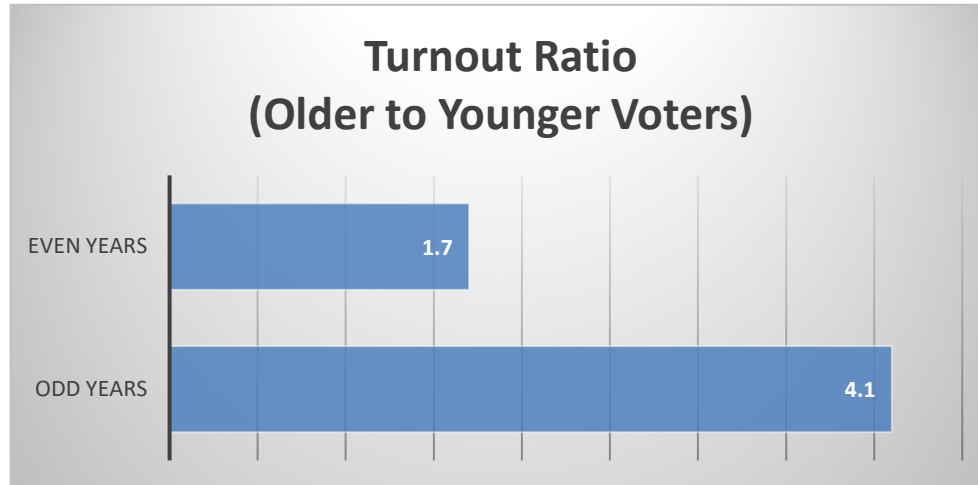
accompanying figure shows, turnout in the state jumps dramatically in even year contests. Across the state on average only 46 percent of registered voters turn out in odd year general local elections across the state. But turnout almost doubles when elections are held in even years. Over the same time period, turnout in even year contests averaged almost 73 percent in Washington.



On-Cycle Elections Make the Vote Much More Representative of the State Population

When turnout increases, voters also become more representative of the local population. Turnout data in Washington reveal that younger voters – often the group least likely to be involved in American democracy - have a much bigger say in even year contests. The turnout of younger residents (those aged 18-24) grows from a paltry 18 percent in odd year local contests to a much more impressive 50 percent in even year elections across the state. Older residents tend to turn out at high rates regardless of the timing of elections, but the gap in turnout between older and younger residents drops dramatically from 54 percentage points in odd year elections to 38 points in even year elections.

Critically, as the figure below shows, the rate at which older residents outvote younger residents declines dramatically from 4.1 times as high in odd year elections to only 1.7 times as high in even year elections.



All of this translates into less of a partisan skew to the vote. Because younger voters in the state tend to favor Democratic candidates and the Democratic Party, their exceptionally low turnout in odd year local elections tends to reduce the Democratic vote. By contrast, because older voters in the state are much more likely to favor Republican candidates and the Republican Party, their dominance in odd year local elections tends to inflate the Republican vote. In other words, by shifting to even year local elections and expanding the voices and votes of younger Washingtonians, we can reduce the Republican skew in local contests.

Local Government Works Better When Voters are Representative

Cities with higher turnout and a broader electorate also tend to elect leaders who are more representative of the public. One [nationwide study](#) found that the share of racial and ethnic minorities on city councils is substantially higher in cities with high turnout elections, even after taking into account factors like the demographics of the city (Hajnal 2010). Higher turnout also means that cities tend to enact policies that are more in line with the needs and preferences of *all* citizens, including lower-income people and racial and ethnic minorities. In particular, higher turnout is associated with greater social welfare spending and increased hiring of minorities into city government posts.

Getting It Done

One of the key advantages of this reform is that it is incredibly popular. Surveys show that individual Americans would much rather vote once in even years than multiple times across different years. Remarkably, even in these days of partisan polarization, surveys find that clear majorities of Democrats (73 percent) and Republicans (61 percent) both favor on-cycle local elections. Moreover, in the dozens of cities where on-cycle elections have been put on the ballot, voters have approved them by overwhelming majorities.

Another advantage of this reform is that we are close to achieving it. The County is considering an initiative that would move local contests to even years. Interest groups that have been allowed to dominate sparsely populated local elections and incumbents who have won office under the old, low turnout system won't want to give up their power,

but given the potential of this reform to expand participation and improve local democracy and given the widespread bipartisan support behind it, this is a rare opportunity to make a real difference. Help transform local democracy by supporting legislation that moves King County to even year local elections.

<https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/research/data-and-statistics.aspx>

Data are from the file "[Voter Participation Data](#) (Excel Spreadsheet - 2000-Current - Updated: December 2021)"