Executive Summary

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Political observers’ assumptions about local election trends are often based on anecdotes, incomplete observation, or simply conventional wisdom. However, the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and its Center for Local Elections in American Politics (LEAP) offer a first-of-its-kind way to analyze elections.

In California cities where mayoral elections coincide with the presidential elections, voter turnout is more than double that of cities where mayoral elections are conducted off cycle, LEAP found. This study confirms existing work on the relationship between the timing of elections and turnout but also sheds important new empirical light on the nature and magnitude of this relationship. Policymakers will find this analysis helpful when seeking ways to improve political participation and strengthen local democracy in America.

Background

The study focuses on direct elections of California mayors, which occur in 168 of the state’s 482 cities. Mayoral election dates may coincide with presidential elections, Congressional midterm elections, or neither (known as off-cycle elections). This research comes on the heels of a 2015 state law requiring cities with low voter turnout to move their election dates so they coincide with state elections in an effort to improve turnout.

Methodology

LEAP software automates the collection of election results, resulting in a database containing records on municipal elections in 22 states dating as far back as the 1980s. The California dataset includes 1,062 mayoral elections from February 1995 to November 2014.

Findings

• Mayoral elections held concurrently with presidential elections have the highest turnout (39.6 percent), while those held off cycle have the lowest turnout (17.5 percent). Those that coincide with midterm elections fall in the middle (28.5 percent).

• Off-cycle elections are disproportionately held in California’s largest cities (populations greater than 100,000), where they make up 45 percent of the mayoral contests. In the state’s smallest cities (populations below 20,000), off-cycle elections make up fewer than 14 percent of contests.

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69 percent of all California municipalities holding off-cycle elections are located in Los Angeles County.

The larger number of off-cycle elections among the state’s largest cities, combined with low average turnout in these elections (17 percent), means turnout is disproportionately suppressed in those cities.

Over the last two decades, turnout for off-cycle mayoral elections in medium and large cities has declined from about 20 percent to about 10 percent.

Cities that voluntary switched to election dates that coincided with midterm or presidential elections saw turnout improve by an average of nearly 15 percentage points.

**Figure 5.3:** Turnout in mayoral contests that coincide with presidential elections is more than double that of elections held off cycle.

**Figure 5.7:** Off-cycle elections have the lowest turnout of any time and are conducted most frequently in large cities, disproportionately suppressing turnout in those places.