

Revitalizing Local Democracy: The Case for On-Cycle Local Elections

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Introduction

Localism is a cherished principle and cornerstone of American democracy.¹ But its virtues rely on ordinary citizens being sufficiently active and engaged to hold their local elected officials accountable. Too often, the opposite is true. The turnout in local school-board elections, for example, is minuscule—10%–15%—and incumbents are rarely held accountable for their performance. Meanwhile, special interests—most notably, teachers’ unions—play an outsize role in these elections. The turnout for other contests—including mayoral elections in major U.S. cities—is also routinely disappointing. At the end of the day, far too many Americans are poorly represented by local officials.

A growing body of evidence suggests that one reason turnout is so low in local elections is that they are held separately and apart from regular state and federal elections, which are held in November of even-numbered years. They are, to use the common term, “off-cycle.” With voter turnout in off-cycle elections lower—by as much as half—than on-cycle elections, those who do vote are often unrepresentative of the community. The balance of power tilts in favor of groups with the resources to mobilize their supporters; as a result, officials have less incentive to respond to the needs and preferences of the average citizen.

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The good news is that state policymakers can do something to fix the problem. States have total autonomy to move their local elections on-cycle so that they are concurrent with higher-turnout federal (and most statewide) November elections in even-year races. The reform does not require amending the U.S. Constitution, and it isn’t costly. In fact, consolidating elections usually saves local governments money.

Based on empirical research, this paper urges that state governments move local elections to coincide with regular even-year November elections, and to do so now. The advantages include:

- Increasing voter participation at reduced election administration costs
- Reducing interest groups' ability to capture local politics
- Ensuring more accountable local government
- Improving political representation and government responsiveness

The Size and Scope of the Problem

Owing to Progressive Era reforms more than a century ago, the vast majority of states today either mandate or allow their local governments to hold elections for important political offices off-cycle—that is, separate and apart from regular, even-year federal November elections. Sarah Anzia explains: “During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Progressive Era municipal reformers separated local elections from state and national elections. They claimed that doing so would help ensure that voters would vote in city elections based on local issues—not on the basis of their partisan loyalties or national issues irrelevant to local politics.”²

Today, however, there are few (if any) established benefits of this practice but substantial empirical evidence that it does significant harm, undermining core nonpartisan principles of good government. At a time when our nation is mired in hyper-partisan battles over election reform, election consolidation—the adoption of on-cycle elections—provides a rare opportunity to forge bipartisan consensus.

Today, one estimate is that 18 states *mandate* off-cycle municipal elections and 22 states *allow* city officials to choose off-cycle election dates.³ The larger the city, the more likely it is to elect its local officials in off-years, when few citizens pay much attention to politics. In one study that I coauthored, an estimated three-quarters of all U.S. cities and towns with populations greater than 20,000 use off-cycle municipal elections.⁴

The practice is even more widespread in public education. About 35% of the nation's public school students are enrolled in states where school-board elections are held on-cycle. About 35% are enrolled in states where board elections are uniformly held off-cycle. The remaining 30% are in states that leave it up to local school districts.⁵ The reality is that as many as two-thirds of the nation's 90,000 school-board members are chosen in elections where an estimated 10%–15% of citizens vote.⁶ And in the past few years, Americans have experienced firsthand how their local school-board members make some of the most important decisions affecting public education in their community. From Covid-19 safety protocols, negotiations with teachers' unions over school reopenings, and debates over how to teach about sensitive questions related to race and American history, school-board decisions have serious implications for the 90% of students—and their families—who attend public schools. Yet so many of these decision-makers are chosen by a small and unrepresentative slice of voters.

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Much the same can be said of municipal officeholders. They, too, work with state governments to craft sensible Covid-19 guidance affecting businesses and important governmental services in their communities. Municipal officeholders must also make sensitive decisions about government employees related to compensation and retirement (pension) benefits. Citizens have a right to expect that their local officials strike a reasonable balance between the demand for

high-quality public service without incurring long-term financial liabilities that can arise from labor contracts that promise unsustainable benefits to unionized city workers. Citizens also have a right to know that developer interests or even NIMBY antidevelopment homeowner preferences will not override the interests of the majority of citizens who want to keep housing prices affordable.

How can citizens be assured that their interests will be considered, when so few of them vote in off-cycle elections? They can't. Common sense dictates that the policy decisions that school-board members, city councillors, and mayors make on these (and other) important issues will be shaped by political considerations—namely, who they see as their political base of constituents (voters), come election time.

The Evidence Favors Moving Elections On-Cycle

There are a variety of reasons for states to act now to consolidate their local elections. Among the most important:

Greater and more equitable participation. Voter turnout in off-cycle local elections, as discussed, is abysmal, not only for school boards but also for single-purpose governments, such as park and library districts. “Every published study on election timing and [voter] turnout,” according to Zoltan Hajnal, Vladimir Kogan, and Agustin G. Markarian, “shows that utilizing concurrent elections is the single most important change that local governments can undertake to increase turnout. Most show that turnout doubles compared to off-cycle elections.”⁷

Especially for the political health of the country's municipalities, increasing turnout matters. Voting signifies the consent of the governed; and it is much harder to take seriously the democratic nature of public policymaking if local political authorities are elected only by a tiny fraction of the electorate, especially if that fraction is unrepresentative of the community. Vladimir Kogan, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz recently uncovered a huge disconnect between the type of students that public school districts serve and the makeup of the electorate that participates in their school-board elections. In a study of California, Oklahoma, Ohio, and Illinois, they found that “most of the school districts with majority-nonwhite student bodies are governed by school boards elected by a majority-white electorate—in many cases, an overwhelmingly white electorate,” and “most school-board voters do not actually have kids, which could exacerbate the implications of this demographic disconnect.”⁸ Put simply, the lack of participation and representation in off-cycle school-board elections calls into question how “public” public education systems are when they are elected by an unrepresentative group of the citizens they purport to serve. By all accounts, holding low-turnout off-cycle elections only exacerbates this representational gap, weakening the linkage between citizens and their local officials.

Lower costs. In many states, when local or special elections are held separately from regular federal or statewide races, local governments (taxpayers) have to pick up the tab. That's not the case when local elections “piggyback” on regular federal or statewide races. “In most states,” as Zoltan Hajnal explains, “municipalities pay the entire administrative costs of stand-alone elections but have to cover only a fraction of the costs of on-cycle elections. The city of Concord, California, for example, estimated that the cost of running a stand-alone election would be \$58,000, more than twice as much as the \$25,000 estimate for holding the local election on-cycle.”⁹

In today's polarized political climate, where there are few policy proposals that fiscal conservatives and Progressives who value civic participation can rally behind, consolidating elections presents an easy win: allowing citizens to make one trip to the polls—rather than two or three separate trips—is popular across party lines. Multiple surveys show widespread support across all groups in the electorate in favor of election consolidation.¹⁰

Reducing the power of special interests. Studies have shown that off-cycle local elections tend to give organized interests extra power in local politics. Among these interest groups, public-employee unions loom large, especially teachers' unions.¹¹ Over several years, I collected data on thousands of teacher-union endorsements in school-board elections in California. In nearly 2,000 board elections held during 1995–2020 (1,367 on-cycle races and 565 off-cycle ones), union-endorsed candidates did significantly better in off-year races.¹²

Consistent with previous empirical work on union power in school-board politics,¹³ teachers' unions were fairly dominant in all elections but were especially formidable when they faced less political competition in odd-year (off-cycle) elections. Specifically, I found that union-backed board candidates won, on average, 76% of all competitive board races in off-years, compared with a more modest 68% in on-year races.¹⁴ Even in a liberal pro-union state like California, this is a significant added advantage for already-powerful union interest groups.

The electioneering advantages that public unions have in off-cycle elections pay off in policy-making. In several studies, Sarah Anzia has shown that teachers and firefighters receive more generous pay and benefits (including more generous pension commitments) when school-board and municipal elections are held at odd times of the year.¹⁵ “The point is not that generous pay for teachers or firefighters is bad or good,” she notes. “It's that something as simple as the date of an election can tip the scales in favor of certain [special] interests, and against the wishes of the broader voting public.”¹⁶

Although the political power of teachers' unions wasn't the sole reason that California lagged behind other states in returning students to the classroom, it played a key role. California reopened its schools far more slowly than even other blue states. Using the state's database to track district reopenings this spring (obtained via a public records request), I found that many school districts directly cited their inability to ink a union agreement as the primary barrier to reopening. Even after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the California Department of Public Health relaxed social distancing guidelines for schools in March 2021—and after President Biden's CDC director stated that vaccines should not be a prerequisite to reopen schools—California districts continued to cite educator resistance to reopening in April.¹⁷ The net result: students in blue states such as California got 66 fewer days of in-person instruction than their counterparts in red states, such as Florida, where schools had been open since the fall.¹⁸

A bright note in all this is that California has finally enacted a law (now in full effect across the state) that will require school-board elections to be held entirely on-cycle.¹⁹ Although it will take some time to fully reshape the composition of boards, as many incumbents were initially elected in low-turnout off-cycle races, over time these reforms should bring a tinge of greater political balance to the process.

Promoting greater accountability. Incumbent school-board members are unlikely to be sanctioned at the ballot box for poor in-office performance by the subset of voters who participate in off-cycle elections, according to research by Julia Payson. By contrast, board incumbents who ran for reelection in on-cycle presidential election years (when turnout is considerably higher and more representative) saw their electoral support affected by the trajectory of student test-score growth during their time in office.²⁰

Specifically, Payson found that incumbent board members are reelected at a rate that is “8% higher if their district oversaw test score improvements that were one standard deviation above the mean rather than one standard deviation below the mean for that year.” In contrast, in off-cycle environments, she found “no relationship between district achievement and incumbent electoral performance.”²¹

Why do off-cycle elections diminish the extent to which incumbent governments are held accountable at the ballot box for student performance? According to Payson, “teachers and the other voters who dominate off-year elections almost certainly evaluate board members on a broader and more nuanced set of criteria than just test scores. For example, the California Teachers Association priorities include less testing, smaller class sizes, safe school environments, higher salaries, and more time for professional development.”²²

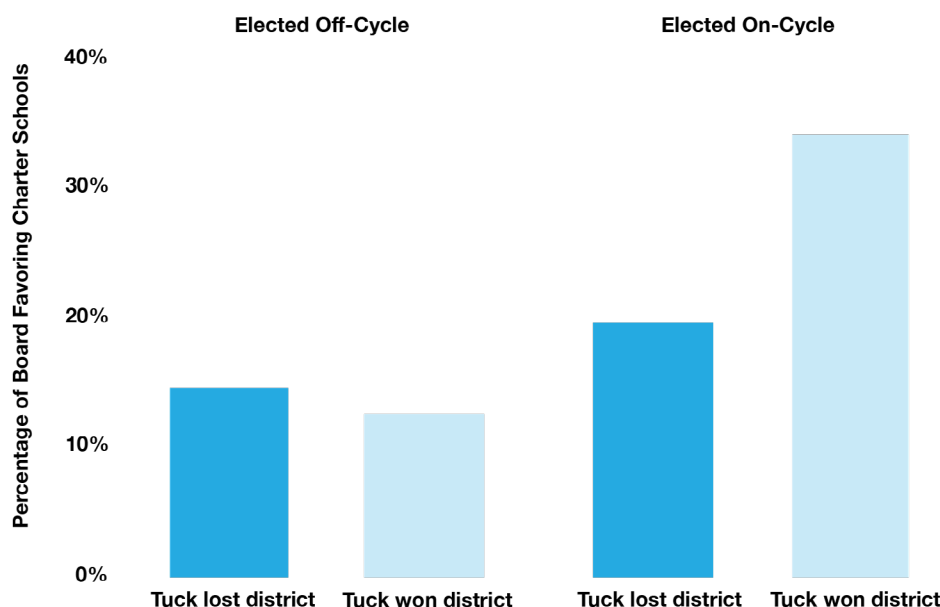
Altogether, these findings indicate that a different type of electorate is influential in on-cycle local elections. Voters in on-cycle races appear to focus on the broader concerns of the community; off-cycle races seem to bring out an electorate with narrower, parochial concerns.

Enhancing political representation and government responsiveness. On-cycle elections improve two important dimensions of political representation in local government. The first is what’s called descriptive representation. That is, elected officials are more likely to share important descriptive characteristics with their constituents when there is higher turnout in the election. For example, studies have shown that African-Americans achieve more descriptive representation in local government in municipalities that hold on-cycle elections.²³ This is especially important in education policy because descriptive representation on school boards has been linked to all sorts of positive outcomes for racial minorities, including the hiring of more administrators and teachers of color, which has been shown to improve outcomes for minority students.²⁴ One related negative consequence of low-turnout off-cycle school-board elections is that local electorates are extremely unrepresentative of the student populations in public school districts. For example, one recent study showed that racial achievement gaps are much higher in districts where school-board electorates are much whiter and wealthier than the students enrolled in the district schools.²⁵ On-cycle elections would likely increase voting among low-income citizens and, at least at the margin, improve the degree to which school-board electorates are descriptively representative of the students that local school districts serve.²⁶

Second, on-cycle elections would very likely also improve *substantive representation*—the degree to which local government policy reflects the preferences of the majority of constituents. This is the upshot of two studies. In 2018, I surveyed a large sample of California school-board members, examining their attitudes and policy preferences relative to their constituents. Using voter support for a strongly pro-charter-school candidate who ran in 2014 for statewide superintendent—Marshall Tuck—as a proxy for Californians’ support for school choice, I found that board members elected in on-cycle elections were far more likely to share their constituents’ views on charter schooling than candidates who had been elected in off-cycle races (FIGURE 1).²⁷

Figure 1

Support for Charter Schools: Voters vs. School-Board Members



Source: Michael T. Hartney and Sam D. Hayes, “Off-Cycle and Out of Sync: How Election Timing Influences Political Representation,” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* (Mar. 30, 2021): 1–20. (Marshall Tuck, who supported charter schools, lost the election to Tom Torlakson, who promised to slow their growth. Both are lifelong Democrats.)

In other words, citizens who resided in school districts where their board members had been elected off-cycle were more likely to be governed by politicians who did not share their views about school reform. Rather than promoting greater congruence between citizens and their elected officials, off-cycle elections tend to sever the linkage between citizens and public officials.

Off-cycle municipal elections also appear to reduce elected officials’ responsiveness to citizens. The second study is one that I coauthored in the *American Political Science Review* that examined fiscal policymaking in 1,600 large American cities. Consistent with studies showing that off-cycle elections tend to enhance the power of special interests, we found that, contrary to the wishes of more politically conservative electorates, cities that elect mayors and councillors off-cycle spend more on public employees than do cities that hold on-cycle elections.²⁸ And the deleterious effects of election timing on substantive political representation in municipal government are not a partisan affair: liberal cities that use off-cycle elections are also less likely to spend more than liberal cities with on-cycle elections—strong evidence that on-cycle elections bring out a more representative electorate. For conservative cities, this means a more conservative electorate; but for liberal cities, this means that younger citizens and more nonwhite citizens show up on higher-turnout elections. In other words, election timing isn’t a partisan issue but rather an issue of representation writ large.

These findings jibe with the conclusion of a recent book on political inequality in local government.²⁹ In their analysis of why local governments are more responsive to higher-income citizens than lower-income citizens, Brian Schaffner, Jesse Rhodes, and Raymond La Raja write: “There is just one electoral institution that appears to be an important predictor of ideological congruence representation: election timing. This institutional factor is fairly important in

predicting the ideological congruence representation received by low and middle wealth residents (though not high wealth residents).³⁰ In other words, when local governments are elected on-cycle, the average American is simply better represented by his local municipal officials.

The Case Against On-Cycle Elections

Defenders of the status quo tend to raise three main objections to on-cycle local elections.³¹ The first is that while fewer Americans vote in off-cycle races, those who do vote are more politically knowledgeable and thus more capable of making informed decisions at the ballot box. The second is that on-cycle elections will make nonpartisan local offices like school boards more politically partisan. The third is that on-cycle local elections would cause down-ballot races to be “lost” on a long ballot. That is, the higher turnout in on-cycle elections would be less meaningful because many who came to the polls simply wouldn’t make it to the bottom of the ballot and cast either an uninformed vote or no vote at all in local races—a phenomenon called “voter roll-off.”

None of these claims is well-founded. “As for the argument that people who don’t vote in off-cycle elections are uninformed,” notes Anzia, “it cuts both ways. One study found that voters in off-cycle municipal elections are more likely to vote based on local issues. But majorities of people in on-cycle elections also say that they base their local votes on local issues.”³²

To shed light on this question, David Houston and I examined whether citizens who vote in off-cycle school-board races are more knowledgeable about education policy in their districts than those citizens who vote in on-cycle board contests. To do so, we examined on- and off-cycle voters’ responses to several questions embedded in the annual, nationally representative, Education Next (EN) poll fielded by Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG). Overall, on- and off-cycle school-board voters demonstrated similar levels of knowledge about school spending and school performance in their local communities, as well as equal familiarity with charter schooling. In sum, we found no evidence to suggest that moving school-board elections on-cycle would increase voter ignorance of education issues.³³

Will on-cycle elections make nonpartisan local offices such as school boards more politically partisan? The answer is probably yes—but partisanship and national political cleavages already shape local politics.³⁴

Consider the response of local governments, especially local school boards, to the Covid-19 pandemic during the 2020–21 school year. Although the majority of the nation’s school boards are already elected in nonpartisan elections that are held off-cycle, numerous studies have shown that school-reopening decisions were driven by partisanship. In fact, a variety of evidence shows that board decision-making was shaped by the strength of special interests (teachers’ unions) and the partisan commitments of the adults in their local community, far more than public health indicators such as hospitalizations and Covid severity in a given community.³⁵ The claim that moving school-board elections (and other local elections) on-cycle would polarize and “nationalize” local elections is—at best—naive. If anything, off-cycle elections tend to diminish responsiveness to voters while doing little to soften the hyper-partisan debates around Covid and critical race theory (CRT) that have raged throughout local school districts since 2020.³⁶

What, finally, can one say about the claim that on-cycle elections will increase voter roll-off and therefore undercut the benefits of higher and more representative turnout promised by advocates of election consolidation? It is true that on-cycle elections create longer ballots, which

can result in some voters neglecting to follow through and vote for candidates running in the local races who appear at the end of the ballot. However, the available evidence shows that any roll-off arising from on-cycle elections is modest and limited in nature.

In their study of the 2012 mayoral and presidential election in San Diego, Zoltan Hajnal, Vladimir Kogan, and Agustin G. Markarian detected no significant differences in roll-off rates by race or partisanship. There was a meaningful roll-off among younger voters, but they noted that “these age effects are far more modest than the representational gains produced by on-cycle elections.”³⁷ In other words, the benefits of moving elections on-cycle—in terms of turnout and representativeness of the electorate—far outweigh the minor roll-off losses that occur. There is no significant empirical evidence that on-cycle elections result in massive amounts of voter roll-off that make election consolidation reform less worthwhile.

Conclusion

Local democracy in the U.S. is at a crossroads. Turnout in off-cycle municipal elections is extremely low and highly unrepresentative, while organized interest groups wield outside power. Whatever the supposed benefits of insulating local elections from national politics, the reality is that national partisan cleavages and special interests pervade local political institutions, from city governments to school boards.

Thanks in part to off-cycle elections, a majority of local officials are chosen by a small and unrepresentative handful of citizens. These officials have the authority to set policy in cities and school districts across the country, and this is to say nothing of the thousands of tiny special-purpose governments that undermine democratic accountability and responsiveness.³⁸ Not only are local governments elected off-cycle chosen by fewer and less representative citizens; this report has also shown that they are less likely to authentically represent the will of democratic majorities in their community.

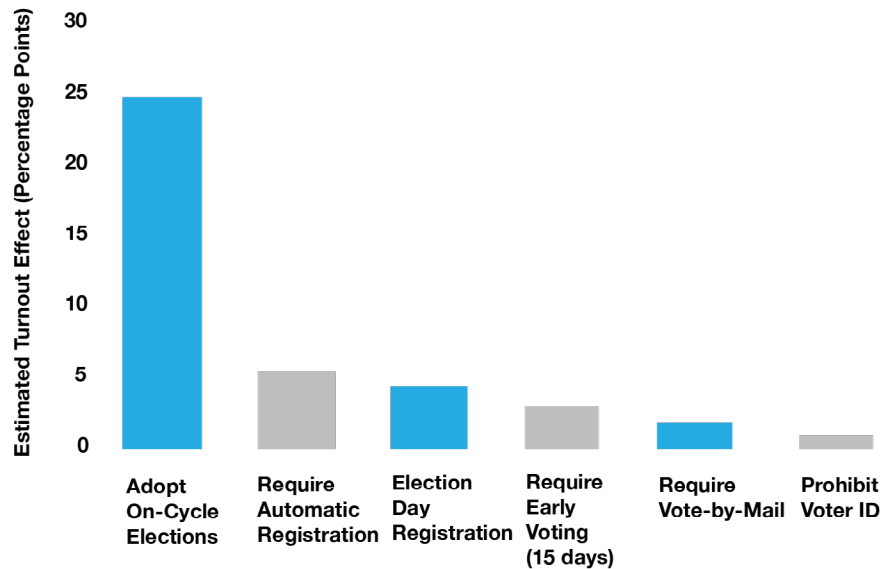
Consolidating to on-cycle elections offers a rare opportunity to forge bipartisan support for election reform that “does no harm.” Turnout will increase. The power of special-interest groups—especially relative to the political preferences of the average voter—stands to be reduced. On the whole, a single election will increase efficiency in election administration and reduce onerous costs facing local governments that run go-it-alone elections.

Importantly, the supposed downsides of reform are simply not borne out by the research on election timing. Rarely does political-science research converge to provide evidence that points in a nearly uniform direction. But research on election timing does. It unambiguously shows that the benefits of consolidation far outweigh any demonstrated costs. Consolidation is therefore the reform that does no harm while eradicating several clearly established deficiencies hampering off-cycle local governments.

Unfortunately, politicians today look at election reform through a purely partisan lens that will do little to enhance the actual quality of American democracy. Consider the common perception—echoed by the media—that the federally mandated election changes in Congress’s HR1 would substantially increase voter turnout and the representativeness of the American electorate. The evidence for these claims is remarkably thin. HR1, for example, has called for 15 days of early voting, election-day registration, automatic registration, vote-by-mail, and the prohibition of voter ID laws. Yet, as FIGURE 2 shows, empirical estimates from political-science research find that on-cycle elections would boost turnout far more than every other major provision of HR1 combined.

Figure 2

Estimated Effects of HR1 Electoral Changes



Source: **On-cycle elections:** Zoltan L. Hajnal, Vladimir Kogan, and Agustin G. Markarian, “Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition,” *American Political Science Review*, forthcoming; **Mandated early voting:** Ethan Kaplan and Haishan Yuan, “Early Voting Laws, Voter Turnout, and Partisan Vote Composition: Evidence from Ohio,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 12, no. 1 (2020): 32–60; **Mandating election-day registration:** Michael J. Hanmer, *Discount Voting: Voter Registration Reforms and Their Effects* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); **Automatic voter registration:** Seo-young Silvia Kim, “Automatic Voter Registration as a Housewarming Gift: Quantifying Causal Effects on Turnout Using Movers,” May 24, 2021; **Vote-by-mail:** Daniel M. Thompson et al., “Universal Vote-by-Mail Has No Impact on Partisan Turnout or Vote Share,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 25 (June 23, 2020): 14052–56; **Voter ID:** Justin Grimmer et al., “Obstacles to Estimating Voter ID Laws’ Effect on Turnout,” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018): 1045–51; Justin Grimmer and Jesse Yoder, “The Durable Differential Deterrent Effects of Strict Photo Identification Laws,” *Political Science Research and Methods* (Jan. 28, 2021): 1–17

Specifically, even after accounting for the fact that many voters fail to mark a choice on down-ballot local elections, on-cycle elections have still been shown to increase turnout by 25 percentage points. By comparison, the most rigorous estimates of the effects of voter ID laws indicate that—at most—they reduce turnout by one percentage point.³⁹ For mandatory early voting (EV), one highly cited study found that it would not enhance turnout at all;⁴⁰ in arguably the most well-designed empirical study, the positive effects were estimated to raise turnout a mere 0.22 percentage points per additional day of EV.⁴¹ By this account, HR1—requiring 15 days of EV would (at best) boost turnout by 3.3 percentage points.

Moving local elections on-cycle, instead, offers a rare opportunity to forge bipartisan support for a reform that will significantly increase turnout and the representativeness of the voting electorate, reduce the power of special-interest groups—and save money.

Endnotes

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