



RESEARCH

WILL CONCURRENT ELECTIONS RESHAPE THE ELECTORATE?

Jonathan Collins, Brown University
Eddie Lucero, University of California, Merced
Jessica Trounstone, University of California, Merced

Funding Acknowledgment: We are grateful to the University of California Office of the President's Multicampus Research Program for providing funding for this survey through the MRP-17-454899 grant.

Research Question

In 2015, Governor Jerry Brown signed the California Voter Participation Rights Act (SB 415) into law. As its title suggests, the bill aimed to increase turnout in local elections by forcing all California jurisdictions to hold elections concurrently with statewide elections (in June or November of even years). Turnout in local elections is significantly lower than national turnout, averaging only 20% by some estimates (Alford and Lee 1968, Wood 2002, Hajnal and Lewis 2003, Caren 2007, Hajnal 2009). Scholars have found that election timing is the most important predictor of differences in aggregate turnout rates across cities (Alford and Lee 1968, Anzia 2014, Anzia 2011, Hajnal and Trounstone 2005). Hajnal and Lewis find that city elections that coincide with presidential elections are associated with a turnout of registered voters 36 percentage points higher than turnout in cities that do not hold elections that coincide with the presidential election (2001, 656). Caren finds that cities holding elections concurrent with the presidential election increase voter turnout by 27% compared to cities that do not (2007, 41). The logic behind SB 415 is that moving local elections to coincide with national elections will improve electoral participation.

State Senator Benjamin Hueso, who authored SB 415, also argues that “as a result of low voter turnout, the voting population often does not look like the general public as a whole and neither does the city council.” On this point about inequality, existing research raises an important paradox. On the one hand, moving local elections to coincide with national elections could reduce the costs of voting (Downs 1957). In off-cycle elections, certain segments of the population, like municipal employees and homeowners, are more likely to vote, despite the additional barrier that off-cycle elections present (Fischel 2001; Moe 2011; Anzia 2011; Brookman and Skovron 2018). This means that without the implementation of a policy like SB 415, we should expect to see a skewed electorate at the local level; one that favors higher socio-economic status, White voters, homeowners, and organized interested groups (Anzia 2014, Hajnal 2010). Because voting costs are more acute among marginalized subsets of the population, such sub-populations may benefit most from reforms that reduce those costs. This could, in theory, mean that marginalized groups are better represented in concurrent elections.



An additional body of literature, however, reveals that although removing institutional barriers to participation increases voter turnout, it may not increase the representativeness of the electorate. Several scholars have found that election reforms that decrease the costs of voting exacerbate rather than diminish inequalities in the electorate. Berinsky (2005) argues that while cities and states may reduce the costs of voting (be it by offering election day registration or with concurrent elections), citizens may still be unwilling to participate because they lack the political efficacy to do so. We might register a voter at 18, mail them a ballot, and send them information on the issues and candidates, but a voter may still refuse to cast that ballot because they do not feel that their participation makes a difference or that politics affects them. Berinsky explains that the individual costs of participating in elections may vary from group to group or from person to person. Reducing the costs of voting may make it easier for some to vote, but it may still not be enough for others.

In this research note, we ask whether concurrent elections are likely to alter the composition of the electorate.

Summary of Findings

To better understand how SB 415 could affect California elections, we analyze *who* participates in concurrent versus nonconcurrent elections. The arguments in favor of on-cycle elections presume that there is a set of voters who would participate in local elections if only they were held at the same time as national elections. Is this assumption plausible? We draw on a large survey of low-propensity voters in California that asks about turnout in different kinds of elections.

The survey, fielded in August/September 2018, polled over 11,000 California citizens; nearly half of whom did not vote in the 2018 primary election. The data were gathered by Lucid through an on-line panel weighted to California demographic data from the 2017 Current Population Survey. We asked, "Do you always vote in local elections, do you sometimes miss one, do you rarely vote, or do you never vote?" We code *Local Voters* as those who responded that they "always vote." We find, similar to national elections, that respondents who say they always vote in local elections are more likely to be older, male, more educated, White or African American. Meanwhile, they are less likely to be Latino, Asian, have actual and perceived knowledge about local government, believe everyone should vote, believe they have influence over local government, or be strong partisans. However, for election timing to produce a different electorate in off-cycle versus on-cycle elections, it must be the case that patterns of turnout are different in local elections in comparison to national contests. To determine whether this is the case, we compared respondents' answers to our local vote question with their turnout response in national elections.



Table 1: Local and National Participation

	% of Local Non-Voters who...	% of Local Voters who...
Voted in 2018 Primary	29%	93%
Voted in 2016 General	57%	97%
Voted in 2016 Primary	44%	93%
Total N	6,617	4,417

Table 1 reveals nearly all local voters participate in national elections. But the inverse is not true. A substantial share (between about 30 and 60%) of non-voters at the local level participate in national elections, suggesting that local voters are a subset of the national electorate. However, a turnout differential between local and national elections does not mean that there is a necessarily difference in the demographic makeup of the two electorates.

To begin an investigation into the composition of different electorates, Figure 1 presents demographic characteristics of people who say that they always vote in local elections compared to those who say they voted in the 2016 Presidential election. Categories that reveal statistically significant differences are marked with an asterisk.

Figure 1: Demographic Composition of Local versus National Electorate

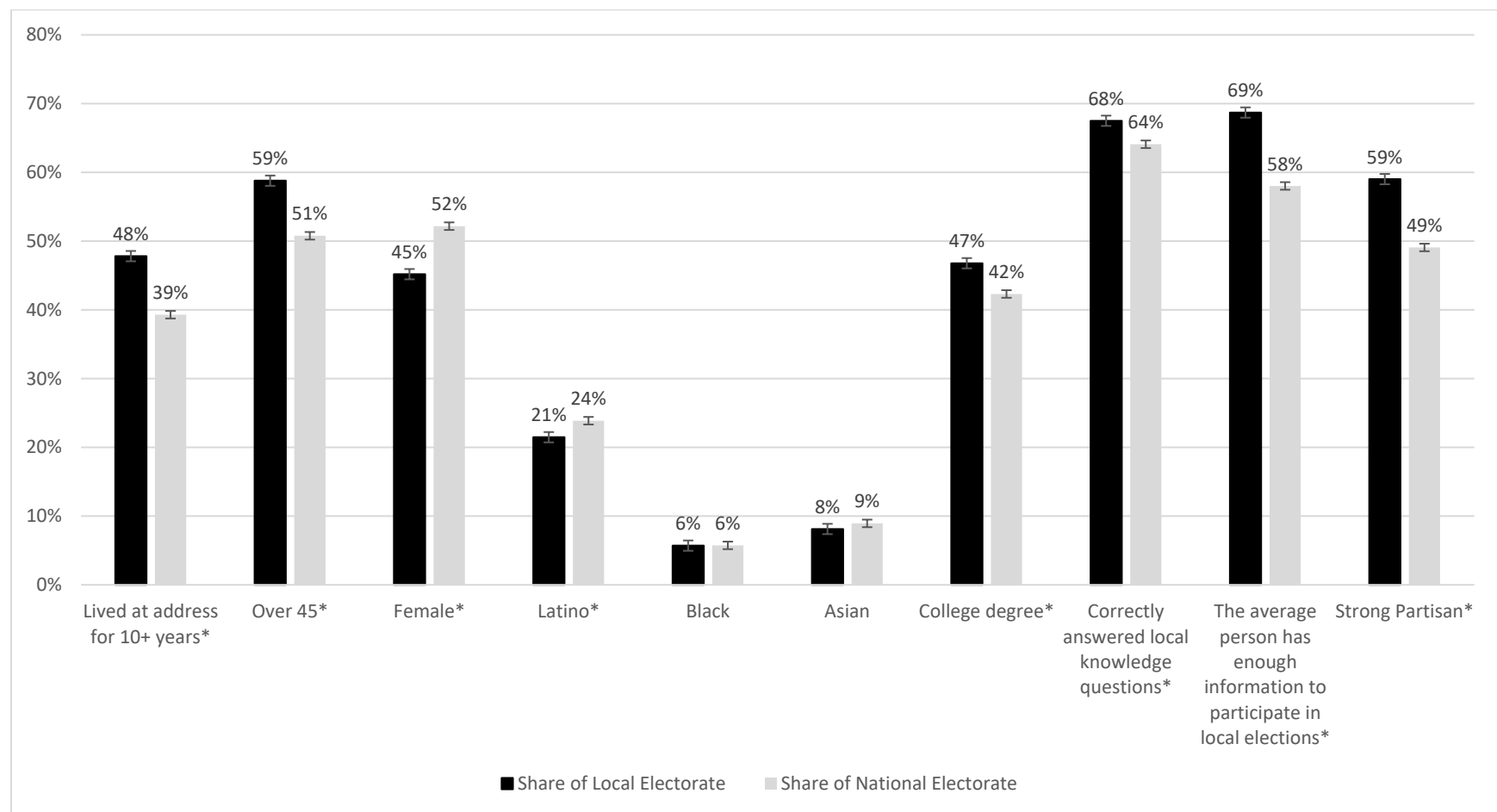




Figure 1 reveals that local electorates are comprised of voters who are: more likely to be permanent residents, over 45, male, strong partisans, highly educated, and efficacious, and less likely to be Latino. To better understand the differences between these electorates, we next turn to investigating the demographic and attitudinal correlates of the voters who participate nationally, but **not** locally.

To do this, we generated a measure of voters who *dropout* at the local level. The variable is coded one if voters participated in the 2016 general election but are not coded as local voters. We regress this measure on demographic variables including *race*, *age*, *gender*, and *education-level*. We also measured the length of *time registered at their current address*, and *strength of partisan affiliation*. We asked several questions to understand feelings of efficacy:

"Compared to you, how much do you think the people who vote in local elections know about which candidate ought to win?" Response scale (know-much-less to know-much-more) *Local Knowledge Candidate*.

"Now, thinking about local elections, where would you place yourself on the following scale?" Response scale ("Everyone should vote in every local election" or "The people who care the most should vote") *Care Most Vote*.

"How much influence do you think people like you can have over local government decisions" Response Options (a lot, a moderate amount, a little, or none at all?) *Amount Influence Local Gov*.
"The average person has enough information about local government to participate in elections." Response options (agree or disagree) *Info to Participate*.

We asked two basic knowledge questions about local politics: "Are school board members elected or appointed?" and "Which level of government is most responsible for deciding where to place stop signs?" Respondents who answered both questions correctly were coded as *Local Questions Correct*.

Our regression analysis (shown in the Appendix) reveals that, compared to voters who vote in local elections, those who drop out at the local level are younger, more likely to identify as female, less educated, more likely to be Latino or Asian, less knowledgeable, less efficacious, more transient, and weaker partisans. We interpret these findings to conclude that election timing could substantially change the makeup of local electorates.

Finally, we sought to explore the reasons that people choose not to participate in local elections, even when they *do* participate in national elections. To probe individual explanations for lack of participation, we asked respondents, "Now, thinking about local elections (like for city council) - how much do you think each keeps **people like you** from voting in **local** elections." We offered 17 different explanations such as the location of polling places, or not feeling individual voters are able to make much of a difference.¹

¹ The 17 options were: The hours that polling locations are open. (1) Location, access, or transportation to polling locations. (2) That political events happen all the time but at the time of elections it's hard to remember all the events from previous years. (3) A feeling that individual voters aren't likely to make much difference. (4) Knowledge about when the election is. (5) Not knowing they are eligible to vote. (6) Not knowing others who usually participate in elections. (7) Feeling the candidates don't represent them, so what's the point. (8) The immediate costs of voting outweigh the longer-term benefits. (9) Even though people plan to vote and think it is



The survey asked the same question about reasons for not participating in national and statewide general elections. To understand the psychology of dropping out of local elections, we compare respondents' answers on the *Local* battery to the *National/Statewide* battery. That is, we are interested in understanding which barriers these particular voters highlight for local elections. By conducting paired t-tests among *dropouts*, we find four explanations that are given more weight for not voting in local (as compared to national) elections: knowledge about when the election is held (5), immediate cost of voting outweighs long-term benefits (9), not feeling qualified to choose candidates (11), and believing others will do a good job picking candidates (13). We interpret these results to suggest that a lack of procedural information *and* a lack of efficacy are the drivers of lower turnout at the local level.²

In conclusion, scholars of local politics have long understood the power of concurrent elections to bring voters to the polls. The authors of SB 415 drew on this body of work to generate a new state law forcing cities to hold elections at the same time as the national government. Observers predicted an increase in turnout for cities that change their election timing. But they also predicted that the demographic makeup of local electorates would change. Our analyses indicate that SB 415 is likely to have both effects. In this research note we have utilized a large-scale survey weighted to match California's diverse population to explore the composition of local versus national electorates. We find that local voters are a subset of national voters – those who vote in local elections nearly always participate in national elections, but the inverse is not true. We also find that this subset of local voters is whiter, older, more male, more educated, longer term residents, and stronger partisans than the national electorate.

important, challenges to voting on Election Day prevent them from doing so. (10) Not feeling qualified to choose which candidate to vote for. (11) Feeling the outcome of the election does not have a big effect on their life. (12) Believing that others who do vote will do a good job picking the right candidate for office. (13) Feeling that family and friends do not care if they vote or not. (14) The lines at the polling place will be long. (15) It isn't clear which party the candidates belong to. (16) Some local elections aren't held at the same time as state and national elections. (17)

² In a separate analysis we compared voters who dropout in local elections to those who vote in both national and local elections. In this comparison dropouts are more likely to highlight: that political events happen all the time but at the time of elections it's hard to remember all the events from previous years. (3); a feeling that individual voters aren't likely to make much difference. (4); knowledge about when the election is. (5); not knowing others who usually participate in elections. (7); feeling the candidates don't represent them, so what's the point. (8); not feeling qualified to choose which candidate to vote for. (11) feeling the outcome of the election does not have a big effect on their life. (12) So, in this comparison dropouts also appear to lack information and efficacy relative to avid voters.



Appendix

Modeling Voter Dropout from the 2016 Presidential Election to Local Elections

	β	SE	$P \leq t $
Age	-0.004	0.000	0.000
Female	0.105	0.010	0.000
Education Level	-0.016	0.003	0.000
Latino	0.028	0.013	0.028
Black	0.010	0.022	0.631
Asian	0.059	0.018	0.001
Local Questions Correct	-0.027	0.011	0.012
Time Registered at Current Address	-0.007	0.001	0.000
Strength of Party Affiliation	-0.139	0.010	0.000
Care Most Vote	0.021	0.002	0.000
Amount Influence Local Gov	-0.111	0.006	0.000
Info to Participate	-0.167	0.010	0.000
Local Knowledge Candidate	0.036	0.005	0.000
Constant	0.977	0.034	0.000
R^2	0.230		
N	7,920		

Note: OLS regression

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