

The Gray Vote: How Older Home-Owning Voters Dominate Local Elections

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Abstract

Local elections are widely recognized as low turnout affairs compared with their national level counterparts. But, scholars have little systematic national data on the composition of the local electorate, and how compositional disparities may vary by context. In this paper, we use a national voter file to compare turnout in general, midterm, and off-cycle local elections in over 500 cities. We provide novel estimates of turnout gaps by race, age, and homeownership status in local elections, and identify stark inequalities compared with national and state elections. We find sizable turnout gaps both by age and homeownership status at the local levels, far exceeding those in national contests. Turnout disparities by age and homeownership status are twice as large as those between Black and white voters, and are considerably larger in off-cycle contests.

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Senior citizens are basically the only people who vote in local elections. So if you want to win you gotta get the gray vote.

– Ben Wyatt, *Parks and Recreation* (S4E17)

Introduction

Cities are sites of pivotal policymaking in American federalism. Through their powers over land use, they control what housing and infrastructure gets built and where these investments are placed (Burns 1994; Trounstine 2018). They shape the distribution of essential services that profoundly shape residents’ day-to-day well-being, including policing, sanitation, and water (Trounstine 2018). City elections affect how local governments make these important decisions (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016).

Despite the importance of these electoral contests, we know relatively little on a national scale about *who* shows up to vote in these elections, and how any turnout gaps vary by context. A wide body of scholarship compares *overall* turnout, both between different cities and between the local, state, and federal levels. This research broadly shows that local elections are low turnout affairs compared with those at the national level—especially when cities hold contests off-cycle (Bridges 1997; Hajnal and Trounstine 2010; Anzia 2014). Turnout is higher, though, in smaller cities and towns (Oliver, Ha and Callen 2012).

In general, research on *turnout gaps*—that is, studies that examine differences in the composition of the electorate—have faced a paucity of data. Some studies have relied on survey data (Kaufmann 2004; Hajnal and Trounstine 2010; Hajnal 2010; Arnold and Carnes 2012) and aggregated vote returns (Trounstine 2008; Anzia 2018), while others have used national voter files to study a relatively small subset of communities in one or several states (Hall and Yoder 2018; Holbein and Hassell 2018; Einstein et al. 2019; Hajnal, Kogan and Markarian 2022; de Benedictis-Kessner and Palmer 2023).

When merged with other administrative data, voter files present a novel opportunity to investigate the composition of the local electorate across a variety of demographic characteristics and city types. Recent studies of national elections have used individual-level administrative data on voters from voter files or other commercial vendors (Hersh 2015; Fraga 2018). The availability of these

data has revolutionized political campaigns (Hersh 2015) and radically improved the precision with which researchers can assess political participation (Fraga 2018).

Existing analyses from voter files that assess the composition of the local electorate suggest stark inequalities in participation in local politics. Much of the research using these fine-grained data has centered on school board elections. Moe (2006) employs county voter files to measure turnout among school district employees; he shows that teachers who live in the districts in which they work are substantially more likely to vote in school board elections than the general public. Kogan, Lavertu and Peskowitz (2018) reveal that, while interest group participation is higher in off-cycle school board elections, it is likely not pivotal; but, senior overrepresentation is electorally critical. They also find that the electorate of off-cycle elections is slightly less white, though these disparities pale in comparison with the age differences. Holbein and Hassell (2018) investigate race in local elections, though their research is limited to North Carolina. They find that local school performance shapes the racial composition of the electorate in school board contests; white voters mobilize to vote when performance standards indicate failure for either their in-group or out-group, while black voter turnout increases when performance standards suggest their in-group is failing.

Outside of the school board context, Hall and Yoder (2018) show that homeowner turnout is dramatically higher in local elections, especially when zoning issues are on the ballot. Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019) find that white homeowners are substantially more likely to attend public meetings related to housing development, and that Latinos, in particular, are dramatically underrepresented. Using individual-level voter information from the voter file data vendor Catalist, Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja (2020) illuminate stark racial and class inequalities in local political representation, with the ideological interests of people of color less likely to be reflected in their political representations. Finally, and most relevantly to our proposed analysis, Hajnal, Kogan and Markarian (2022) use California vote returns to show that on-cycle elections create electorates that are more representative by race, age, and partisanship.

In short, in recent years, an increasing number of studies in local politics have used extraordinarily detailed administrative data to learn more about voter turnout. But, none of these studies have assessed the demographic composition of the local electorate on a national scale. Having a

broader, national understanding of variations in the local turnout gap allows for the investigation of a number of important questions. First, a larger number of observations allows researchers to explore *which* types of communities experience greater disparities in turnout by characteristics like race, homeownership status, and age. Second, a more national scope of analysis allows us to jointly consider these demographic traits; seeming differences in turnout by race, for example, might actually be explained by age or homeownership status.

This paper marshals a national voter file to study turnout gaps among millions of voters by race, homeownership, and age in over 600 cities. We compare turnout gaps by demographic characteristic and between cities. We find that homeowners and older voters are overrepresented in mayoral elections: relative to their share among registered voters, these groups account for a larger share of voters in mayoral contests. This finding is consistent across racial groups and is especially pronounced in mayoral elections that do not coincide with presidential or midterm elections. Disparities in turnout by race, in contrast, are quite small in comparison with those by age and homeownership status.

Turnout in Local Elections: Age, Race, and Homeownership

Our analysis investigates disparities in turnout across three key variables: age, race, and homeownership. All three demographic traits are important predictors of participation in local politics. Senior citizens are renowned for their high levels of turnout at all levels of government (Campbell 2005). At the local level, they form organized interest groups and turn out consistently at exceptionally high rates to achieve key policy goals (Anzia 2018; Kogan, Lavertu and Peskowitz 2018). We anticipate our data to similarly show disproportionate senior representation in local electorates.

We predict that homeowners will turnout at far higher rates than renters. As with seniors, homeowners' overrepresentation in local politics is well-documented (Fischel 2001; Hall and Yoder 2018; Einstein et al. 2019). Homeowners hold deep financial investments in their communities (Fischel 2001; Hall and Yoder 2018). They also tend to stay in place for longer, leading to higher turnout—in part because voter registration in the United States is based on geographic address, making frequent moves an added hurdle to political participation. Indeed, this same phenomenon also

helps to explain age disparities in turnout (Ansolabahere, Shepsle and Hersh 2012). Consequently, we expect homeowners to turn out at higher rates in cities across the country.

Race also plays a potent role in city elections. Studies of vote returns reveal that: (1) race strongly predicts *vote choice and candidate approval* (Kaufmann 2004; Hajnal and Trounstein 2010); (2) race predicts *turnout*, with white voters, on average, turning out at higher rates than voters of color. Qualitative studies of cities and their elections illuminate the complexities of urban racial coalitions in local politics elections, with cross-racial coalitions (and polarization) emerging depending upon the electoral context (Sonenshein 1993; Mollenkopf 1994). Taking this body of work in concert, we expect that, on average, white turnout will exceed Black and Latino turnout, but that racial turnout gaps will vary more sharply between cities than disparities by age and homeownership.

One limitation of previous research is that it, for the most part, considers these variables in isolation. For example, studies might assess whether homeowners or white people participate at higher rates. These studies do not, however, consider these variables jointly. For example, white turnout may, on average, exceed Black turnout in most communities; but, white homeowners and Black homeowners may participate in politics at similar rates. Given the large effect sizes of homeownership and age in previous studies of local politics, we anticipate that many racial disparities may become more muted when we focus our analysis on, say, Black seniors or Black homeowners. Indeed, a growing body of recent research contends that non-white people hold diverse political views, and should not be treated as a monolith in studies of public opinion and voting behavior (Beltrán 2010; Greer 2013; Forman Jr. 2017). By examining a large number of cities, we obtain the statistical power necessary to better understand the voting behavior of these important population subgroups.

Across all variables, we anticipate that disparities will be more dramatic in off-cycle contests. Multiple studies reveal that, when local elections do not coincide with presidential election years, more privileged and organized segments of the electorate dominate (Bridges 1997; Anzia 2014; Hajnal, Kogan and Markarian 2022).

Data

Unlike national elections, mayoral elections can occur at different times throughout the year. We began our analysis by collecting data on the dates of the most recent mayoral election for all cities in the United States with a population of at least 50,000 people. We obtained these dates by scraping and parsing the United States Conference of Mayors (USCM) website, which lists the corresponding cities and dates of upcoming (or not yet finalized) mayoral elections. We used the Internet Archive to access snapshots of this page over time to ensure we had complete coverage of mayoral elections since 2019. The majority of city and state combinations from the USCM election data exactly matched to a unique city name according to the U.S. Census Bureau; we assigned the rest with a manual matching procedure guided by string similarity scores.

To examine voter turnout by race in local elections, we relied on state voter files and voter histories from the data vendor L2. The voter file data includes the name and address of each voter, and supplements the data provided by the state with critical demographic variables. For each voter, L2 estimates their race using a variant of the BISG algorithm (Imai and Khanna 2016), estimates their political party for voters in states without party registration, and matches voters to property records to determine if they are a homeowner (or live in a homeowner-occupied residence). L2 also geocodes each voter to identify their census block.

Despite the high-quality voter data provided by L2, there are several challenges to measuring turnout in local elections. First, ideally, we would obtain a voter file following each election, identifying every eligible voter and whether or not they participated in the election. However, such voter snapshots are rarely available.¹ Consequently, we use a single recent voter file for each state, with the caveat that some voters who participated in their city’s more recent mayoral election may have moved or no longer be registered to vote.

Second, we need to identify which voters live in each city. City or town names sometimes are recorded variably within the same city in the voter file. For example, there are more than 80 different place names given in the residential addresses of voters in Los Angeles; only 52% of voters

¹For example, North Carolina has voter file snapshots available following many recent general and midterm elections, but does not have them following most off-cycle elections.

in Los Angeles use the city name in their address in the voter registration list. There are more than 60 different place names used by voters in New York City, and more voters list their city as “Brooklyn” than “New York.” Moreover, the same place name may be used for multiple places in the same state. To avoid these issues, we used the geocoded coordinates of every voter and the geographic boundaries of each city from the U.S. Census Bureau to identify the registered voters of every city, regardless of how they write their address.

Third, voter files are fluid; new voters register, some move within or out of the city and state, some become ineligible to vote or die. The composition of the pool of eligible voters is always changing. In order to examine the voting behavior of the same voters across multiple types of elections, we subset our voter files to registered voters who meeting the following two criteria:

1. The voter was registered to vote for both the 2020 Presidential election and the most recent mayoral election in their city.
2. The voter remained a registered voter through the date of the voter file used.

Examining only this subset of voters allows us to make clearer comparisons of voting behavior across election types. Every voter in the sample in each city has the same opportunity to vote; new registrants, voter deaths or ineligibility, and other factors do not complicate the analysis.² Since voter history files generally only record when a person votes, and *not* when a person is eligible to vote but does not, this subsetting process creates the best possible comparison group of non-voters in each election.

Cities

Overall, we collected election and voter data for 535 cities with populations over 50,000 people. We classified the cities in our sample into three categories: “Presidential” (16%), where the mayoral election aligns with the November presidential elections, “Midterm” (25%), where the mayoral election aligns with the November midterm elections, and “Off-Cycle” (59%), where the mayoral election occurs at some other time. There is significant variation within the “Off-Cycle” category.

²One issue we cannot fully address is voters who move into the city of interest from somewhere else in the state midway through the time period we study. In this case we cannot identify when they became eligible to vote in the city.

A majority of these cities (66%) have mayoral elections in November of odd-numbered years. In other cities, the mayoral election is held at other times of year, and may or may not coincide with other state or special elections. After November, April and May are the most common months for off-cycle mayoral elections. Of the largest cities with non-November elections, Chicago holds its mayoral elections in February and April (runoff), and San Antonio holds its mayoral election in May.

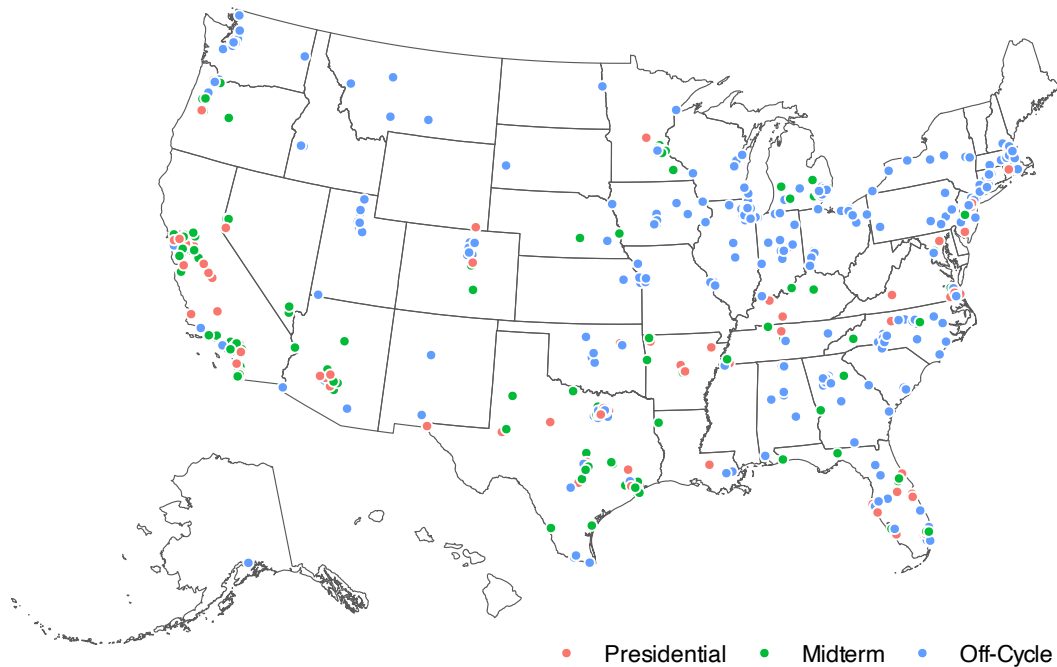


Figure 1: Map of Cities in Sample, Colored by Election Type

Turnout in mayoral elections varies widely across cities. Figure 2 plots voter turnout in the 2020 presidential election on the x-axis, and voter turnout in the most recent mayoral election on the y-axis. The top group shows turnout in the cities where the presidential and mayoral elections coincide. The second group, in green, shows turnout for cities with midterm mayoral elections. While there is a high correlation between turnout in the two elections, the midterm turnout is significantly lower than the presidential turnout in every city. Finally, the third group, in blue, shows turnout for cities with off-cycle mayoral elections. Turnout is significantly lower than

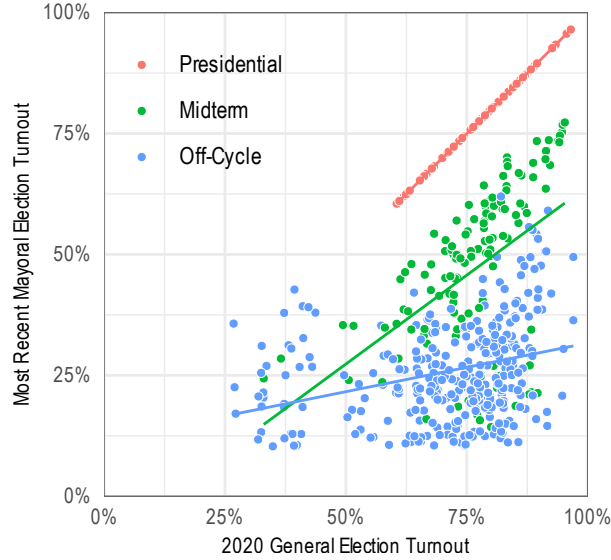


Figure 2: Relationship between Presidential Election Turnout and Mayoral Election Turnout

presidential election turnout, but the correlation is also much lower than for cities with midterm mayoral elections.

Results

We begin our analysis by comparing the demographics of voters in off-cycle mayoral elections to voters in presidential elections in each city. We calculated the share of the electorate in presidential and mayoral elections by homeownership, race, age, party, and gender. Figure 3 presents the results. Positive values indicate that this group makes up a larger share of the electorate in presidential elections compared to mayoral elections, and negative values indicate that this group makes up a higher share of the electorate in mayoral elections than in presidential elections. We find that homeowners and those 65 years and older are make up a larger share of the electorate in almost every off-cycle mayoral elections relative to their share of the electorate in presidential elections, while young voters, Hispanic voters, and Independents are a smaller share of voters. Consistent with previous research, disparities are considerably worse in cities that hold their elections at different times than their presidential and midterm contests.

To more clearly illustrate the overrepresentation of older homeowners in the electorate, we compare the percentage of registered voters who are both senior citizens and homeowners to the

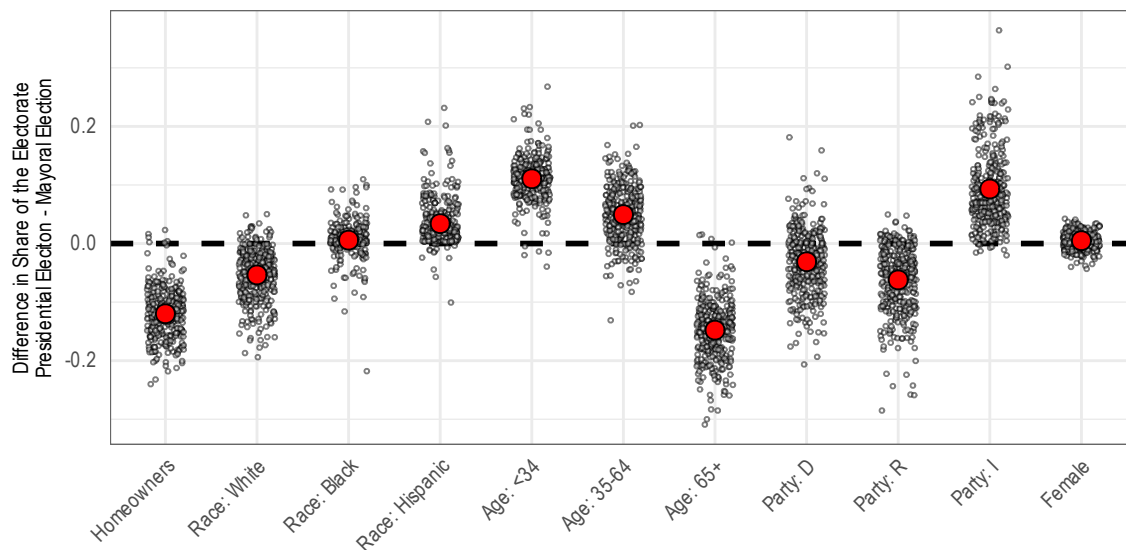


Figure 3: Electoral Demographics

percentage of mayoral election voters who are both senior citizens and homeowners in every city. Figure 4 presents the results by election timing. *In every city in our sample*, older homeowners make up a disproportionate share of the electorate. Put differently, there is *no* city that is effectively mitigating these turnout disparities. But, the overrepresentation of older homeowners worsens considerably when local elections do not coincide with presidential contests. Across our sample, older homeowners make up about 14% of the registered voters, but 17.5% of voters in presidential elections, 21.2% of voters in midterm elections, and 27.3% of voters in off-cycle elections.

Notably, the overrepresentation of older homeowners persists across all racial groups—and exceeds turnout gaps by race. Figure 5 presents the same results as Figure 4, but splits the electorate by racial and ethnic group. Older homeowners of all groups are more likely to vote than younger people or non-homeowners in their racial or ethnic group.

These results demonstrate how turnout gaps differ substantially when we examine the intersection of demographic categories, rather than each alone. Table 1 presents the percentage of voters participating in off-cycle mayoral elections by race and other demographics. The top row shows the percentage of registered voters of each racial group that voted in the mayoral election. There is a 10 percentage point gap between White and Black voters. Among older voters, however, the gap

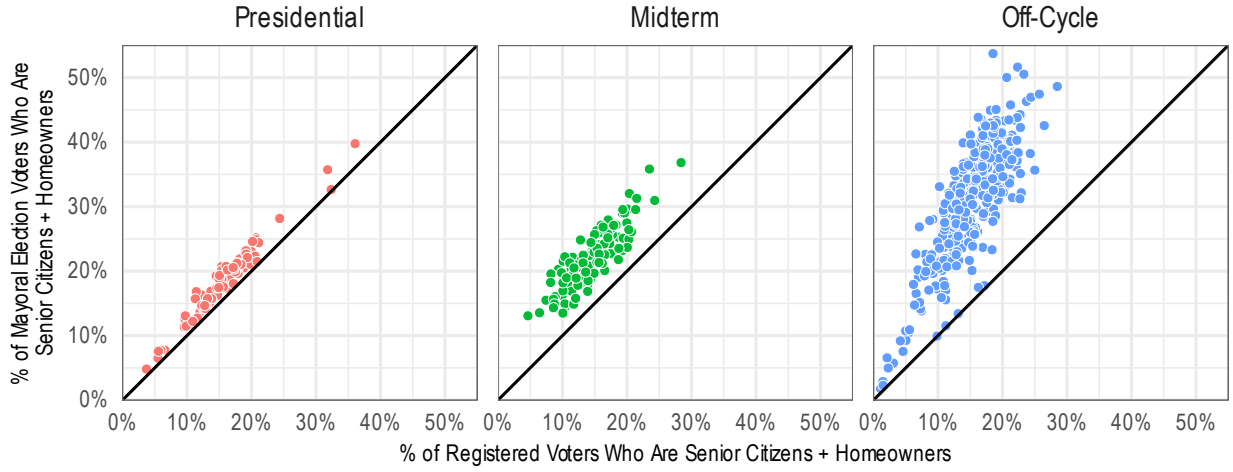


Figure 4: Senior Homeowners in the Electorate by Mayoral Election Type

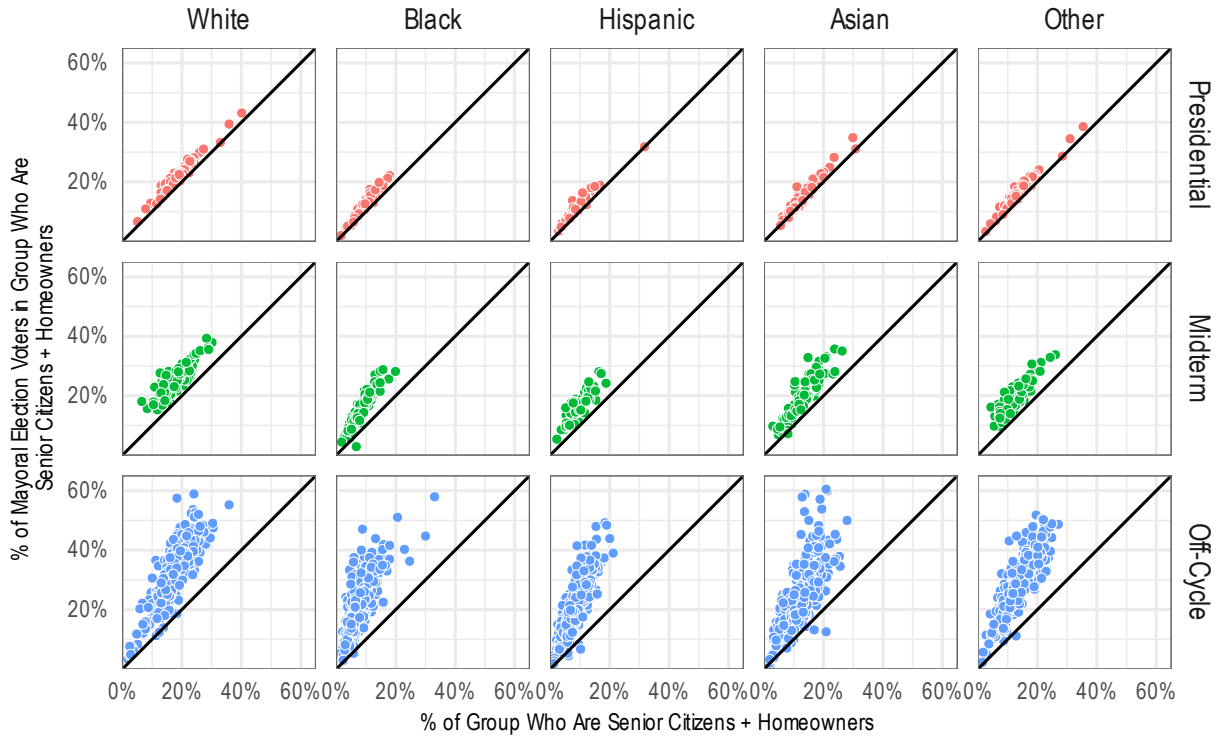


Figure 5: Senior Homeowners in the Electorate by Mayoral Election Type and Race

| | White | Black | Hispanic | Asian | Other |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|
| All Voters | 30.3% | 20.9% | 15.8% | 20.7% | 26.5% |
| Age \leq 34 | 13.0% | 6.3% | 6.9% | 11.9% | 12.8% |
| Age \geq 65 | 46.7% | 40.1% | 28.7% | 29.9% | 43.4% |
| Homeowner | 39.1% | 35.6% | 22.1% | 24.1% | 35.0% |
| Age \geq 65 and Homeowner | 52.6% | 50.6% | 35.3% | 33.3% | 50.9% |

Table 1: Percentage of Voters Participating in Off-Cycle Mayoral Election

declines to 6.6 percentage points, among homeowners the gap is 3.5 percentage points, and among older homeowners the gap is only 2 percentage points. Black and White older homeowners are participating at essentially the same rates. Importantly, even among older homeowners, Hispanic and Asian residents participate at far lower rates, though some of this disparity may be an artifact of household size.³

To more fully examine differences in turnout by age, we estimated linear regression models predicting individual turnout in off-cycle mayoral elections as a function of turnout in the 2020 presidential election, homeowner, party, gender, race, and age. We included city fixed effects and clustered the standard errors by city. Table 2 presents the results. The first two models include all of the voters in our data. The interaction of Black and Age in Model 2 is close to zero and not statistically significant; while Black voters turnout in mayoral elections at lower rates overall, the relative increase in turnout with age is the same as for White voters. In contrast, Hispanic and Asian voters have smaller increases in turnout with age. Model 3 includes only Homeowners, and Model 4 only renters.

Conclusion and Future Research

Our results reveal large disparities in turnout between homeowners and renters and seniors and non-seniors. Older homeowners are dramatically overrepresented in local elections—particularly those that are held off-cycle. The gap in turnout between homeowners and renters, and between

³We categorize an individual as being a “homeowner” if they live in an owner-occupied household. This is necessary because the people who view themselves as homeowners may not necessarily be listed on the deed. For example, two people may effectively own the home and pay the mortgage and property taxes together, but only one may be listed as the legal owner. However, in communities that have larger households, that means that some individuals categorized as homeowners may in practice see themselves as renters in their economic and political lives.

| Dependent Variable: | Voted Mayoral | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|---|---|---|
| Model: | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| <i>Variables</i> | | | | |
| Voted 2020 General | 0.2150*** (0.0094) | 0.2148*** (0.0093) | 0.2597*** (0.0104) | 0.1975*** (0.0099) |
| Men | 0.0049*** (0.0011) | 0.0051*** (0.0011) | 0.0071*** (0.0011) | 0.0041*** (0.0013) |
| Renter | -0.0946*** (0.0031) | -0.0939*** (0.0031) | | |
| Party: Ind. | -0.1067*** (0.0090) | -0.1061*** (0.0092) | -0.1358*** (0.0090) | -0.0913*** (0.0104) |
| Party: Rep. | -0.0182*** (0.0060) | -0.0185*** (0.0060) | -0.0204*** (0.0049) | -0.0186*** (0.0070) |
| Black | -0.0471*** (0.0068) | -0.0405** (0.0171) | -0.0705*** (0.0168) | -0.0506*** (0.0167) |
| Hispanic | -0.0792*** (0.0042) | 0.0236*** (0.0089) | -0.0065 (0.0133) | 0.0089 (0.0073) |
| Asian | -0.0784*** (0.0055) | 0.0189 (0.0147) | 0.0070 (0.0204) | 0.0115 (0.0113) |
| Other | -0.0208*** (0.0020) | -0.0022 (0.0034) | -0.0189*** (0.0037) | 0.0025 (0.0033) |
| Age | 0.0047*** (0.0001) | 0.0051*** (0.0001) | 0.0059*** (0.0002) | 0.0043*** (0.0001) |
| Black × Age | | -0.0001 (0.0003) | 0.0007** (0.0003) | -1.37×10^{-5} (0.0003) |
| Hispanic × Age | | -0.0021*** (0.0002) | -0.0019*** (0.0002) | -0.0016*** (0.0002) |
| Asian × Age | | -0.0019*** (0.0003) | -0.0022*** (0.0004) | -0.0012*** (0.0003) |
| Other × Age | | -0.0004*** (6.42×10^{-5}) | -9.57×10^{-5} (6.26×10^{-5}) | -0.0004*** (6.26×10^{-5}) |
| <i>Fixed-effects</i> | | | | |
| City | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| <i>Fit statistics</i> | | | | |
| Observations | 28,001,687 | 28,001,687 | 11,572,716 | 16,428,971 |
| R ² | 0.22309 | 0.22416 | 0.21832 | 0.18706 |
| Within R ² | 0.16675 | 0.16789 | 0.13417 | 0.13143 |

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 2: OLS Regression Predicting Voting in Off-Cycle Mayoral Elections. Models 1 and 2 include all voters. Model 3 includes homeowners only, and Model 4 includes renters only.

seniors and young voters, is twice the size of the Black-white turnout gap, all else equal. In short, while racial disparities in turnout and representation are consequential, they pale in comparison with homeowner/renter and age disparities in voter composition. By failing to consider the age and homeownership status of voters jointly, previous research has failed to fully document inequality in local politics.

Moreover, while turnout disparities are omnipresent across all cities and election types, they are considerably worse the more local elections are separated from other contests. Nearly 60% of cities hold their elections separately from midterm or presidential contests, ensuring that older homeowners are starkly overrepresented in a wide swath of American communities.

Future research might unpack the policy consequences of these disparities. The overrepresentation of homeowners and seniors plausibly could distort housing and education policy outcomes in particular, and create formidable political challenges for politicians hoping to build more housing or invest in local schools. The failure of American local housing policy to meet the needs of young renters (Schuetz 2022), for example, may have its roots, in part, in the political dynamics outlined here. As a growing number of local communities attempt to reform local housing policy in the face of an escalating housing crisis, the political inequities generated by off-cycle elections may prevent communities from addressing their most pressing challenges.

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