



CHICAGO
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HOW CHICAGO'S ELECTION TIMING SUPPRESSES VOTING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disproportionate and low voter turnout presents challenges for municipal democracy nationwide. However, a straightforward reform acknowledged by scholars and policymakers – aligning the timing of municipal elections to coincide with general elections – offers a clear solution to enhance voter participation significantly.

Research shows the timing of local elections influences voter turnout, which subsequently impacts policy decisions. Off-cycle municipal elections raise the marginal cost for participating voters, resulting in “selective participation,” and, as a result, policy outcomes from such elections often favor special interest groups.

Chicago is the only big city in the country to hold its municipal elections in February of an odd year. Utilizing an original dataset, we found a severe drop-off in turnout for white, Black and Hispanic voters in Chicago municipal elections. Overall, municipal election turnout is 40% lower than participation in November elections in Chicago, with several wards seeing an average drop-off of more than 50%.

Our findings suggest holding concurrent elections would boost voter turnout and, in turn, strengthen municipal democracy in Chicago.



INTRODUCTION

Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of any democracy. But voter turnout across all United States municipalities remains alarmingly low compared to other countries (Marschall and Lappie, 2018). Extensive research has shown constituents generally favor consolidating elections because of the time and effort it saves for voters. The benefits of election consolidation are manifold, including improving the representation of working-age voters, renters and those from lower economic statuses, diluting the political power of special interest groups, enhancing accountability within local government and its legitimacy, and saving millions in taxpayer dollars.

In Chicago, some wards see fewer than 1 in 4 registered voters turn out in a given municipal election. For example, Wards 16 and 28 recorded the lowest average municipal election turnout from 2015 to 2023, at 24% and 25.2%, respectively. The average voter turnout for general elections in the same period for Ward 16 was 44.5% and Ward 28 was 50.3%.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORY: CONCURRENT ELECTIONS AND VOTER COMPOSITION

Theoretical frameworks suggest off-cycle local elections may yield a less representative electorate. It is unlikely the reduction in voter turnout is randomly distributed, as the unusual timing of local elections compels voters to incur additional costs to participate in the political process. The added expenses associated with stand-alone local elections, including the need for voters to confirm the election date, locate their polling place and travel specifically to vote on local issues, may not affect all potential voters uniformly.

Election timing is expected to have less effect on high-propensity voters than on low-propensity voters. High-propensity voters, typically described as older, white and of higher socioeconomic status, demonstrate a well-established voting habit that remains unaffected mainly by minor changes in voting costs (Plutzer, 2002). Thus, a modest rise in expenses may significantly influence decision making and deter participation among occasional voters, who are generally younger, more likely to belong to minority groups and at lower income levels (Berry and Gersen, 2010). The electorate in high-cost, off-cycle elections is anticipated to comprise a more significant proportion of high-propensity voters, such as older, white homeowners with substantial political resources. In contrast, low-cost, on-cycle elections will likely attract a relatively higher number of low-propensity voters, including younger individuals, racial minorities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The extent to which on-cycle elections produce a more representative electorate remains an empirical inquiry with limited evidence available. States with higher voter turnout usually exhibit reduced class bias in electoral participation (Hill and Leighley, 1992). According to Lijphart, some cross-national studies also indicate a correlation between lower-class participation and increased turnout (1997). However, several measures aimed at improving voter turnout inadvertently exacerbate inequities in participation (Berinsky, 2005; Burden, et al., 2014).

Kogan et al. (2018) demonstrate that voters participating in off-cycle school tax referenda are predominantly white and more conservative than those voting in on-cycle elections. Numerous other studies indirectly deduce variations in voter demographics by analyzing changes in subsequent outcomes, such as teacher salaries (Anzia, 2014; Berry and Gersen, 2011).

ANTI-DEMOCRATIC CONDITIONS: A LINK TO THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

During the first century of U.S. history, municipal elections varied in timing, influenced by various parties and factions seeking political advantage (Anzia, 2014). From 1894 to 1917, the Progressive movement used election scheduling to dismantle the political machines in American cities, where local elites orchestrated patronage networks to maintain power and mobilize ethnic voters for their parties. Decoupling municipal elections from national elections and scheduling them at unconventional times further insulated city governance from widespread participation, turning it into a stronghold for an elite demographic – comprised of an older, predominantly white, affluent homeowner class (Anzia, 2012). This pattern has persisted ever since.

Once off-cycle city elections were established in state law and municipal charters during the Progressive Era, a new culture of municipal politics emerged, typically favoring incumbents.

As participation costs increase because of inconveniently timed elections, voter turnout declines, altering the identity of the median voter; conversely, as participation costs decrease, turnout may rise, reshaping the median voter's profile. The structure of political participation costs influences the perceived or actual median voter (Berry and Gersen, 2011). In contrast, special interest voters consistently engage in elections despite rising costs, prioritizing election outcomes more than the general populace.

Voters with minimal stakes are less likely to engage in local elections, resulting in outcomes that favor special interests over the majority's concerns. Policies designed to benefit special interest groups may impose significant costs on society to satisfy a small group, provoking a fight-or-flight response among the populace. As Chicagoans and Illinoisans know all too well, governments that enact policies at odds with voter preferences can face an exodus of residents and capital (Hill, 2025).

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DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Suppose other studies' accounts of electoral timing, selective participation and special interest influence are accurate. In that case, voter turnout should drop significantly in off-cycle municipal elections, allowing minoritarian interests to dominate. We would anticipate that election timing would influence high-propensity voters – typically older, white and of higher socioeconomic status – less than low-propensity voters, who are usually occasional voters, generally younger, more likely to be from ethnic or racial minority backgrounds and poorer. Consequently, high-cost off-cycle elections would reflect a demographic disproportionately composed of more high-propensity voters with ample political resources. Compared, low-cost concurrent elections would attract more low-propensity voters, including younger voters and marginalized communities.

Is this the case in Chicago?

By utilizing census block-level data and voter turnout information from the Chicago Board of Elections, we created an original dataset that disaggregated Chicago precinct election results over the past 10 years to the census block level. This data was then reaggreated to today's precincts and wards, allowing us to better analyze Chicago's turnout trends by race and geography.

THE UNIQUE CASE OF CHICAGO

Illinois state law governs the timing of municipal elections in Chicago.

Because state law requires off-cycle elections, the general City Council election takes place every four years on the last Tuesday in February of odd-numbered years. In Chicago, mayoral elections are nonpartisan. And a runoff election occurs only if no candidate secures a majority. The last election occurred in February 2023 with an April runoff, and the next will be held in February 2027.

While little empirical evidence suggests weather affects low turnout in Chicago, it is reasonable to assume most Chicagoans would prefer not to venture outside during the harsh winter months. This could be one of many reasons why people choose not to vote. Additionally, the day of the week and time of day may be contributing factors. In a city with commuter traffic and where public transportation is both busy and often delayed, it is plausible that many individuals struggle to find time to visit their designated polling places to vote.

In Chicago, the average turnout in municipal elections during the past decade is 36.4%. Average turnout is highest in Ward 19 at 55.7% and lowest in Ward 16 at just 24%.

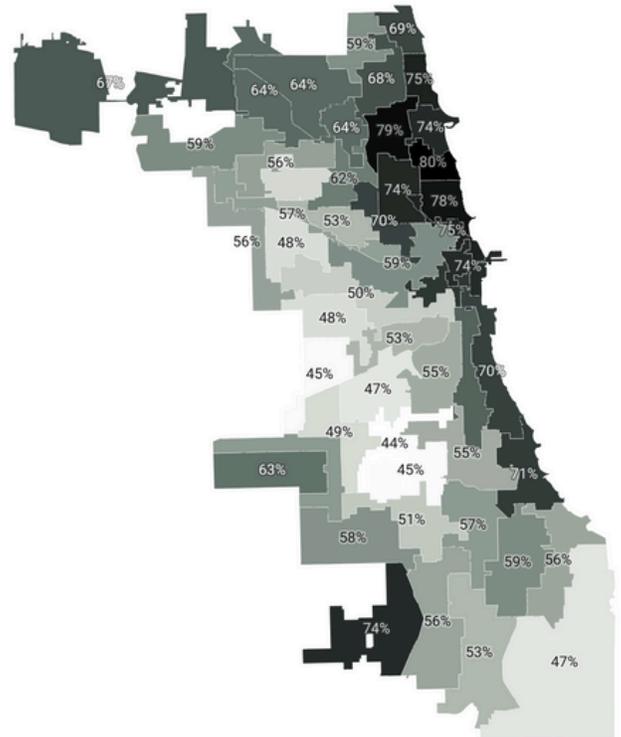
In contrast, Chicago's average turnout in November general elections is 61.4%. The general election average turnout is highest in Ward 44 at 79.9% and lowest in Ward 15 at 44%.

This means Chicago's average municipal election turnout is 25 percentage points lower than the average general election turnout, reflecting a drop-off rate of more than 40%.

The most significant drop-off occurs in Ward 34, which saw a decline of 56.2%, while the smallest drop-off is in Ward 11, which experienced a 24.3% decrease.

General election turnout by ward

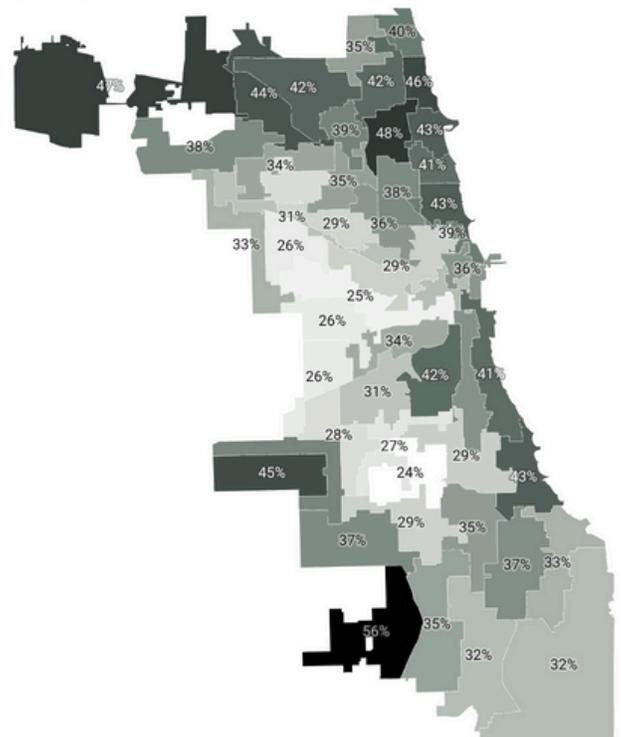
Average general election turnout, calculated as a share of registered voters, 2014-2024



Source: Chicago Policy Center analysis of Chicago Board of Elections data • Created with Datawrapper

Municipal election turnout by ward

Average municipal election turnout, calculated as a share of registered voters, 2015-2023



Source: Chicago Policy Center analysis of Chicago Board of Elections data • Created with Datawrapper

Does this drop-off vary between demographic groups?

In Chicago, 16 wards are predominantly Black, 18 are predominantly white, 10 are predominantly Hispanic, and six have no significant racial majority. Because Chicago has clear lines of division across racial groups, our mapping shows a higher average turnout in white-majority wards than in Black and Hispanic ones. Most white-majority wards are located on the city's north side; Black-majority wards comprise the South and West sides; and Hispanic-majority wards are on Chicago's Southwest Side.

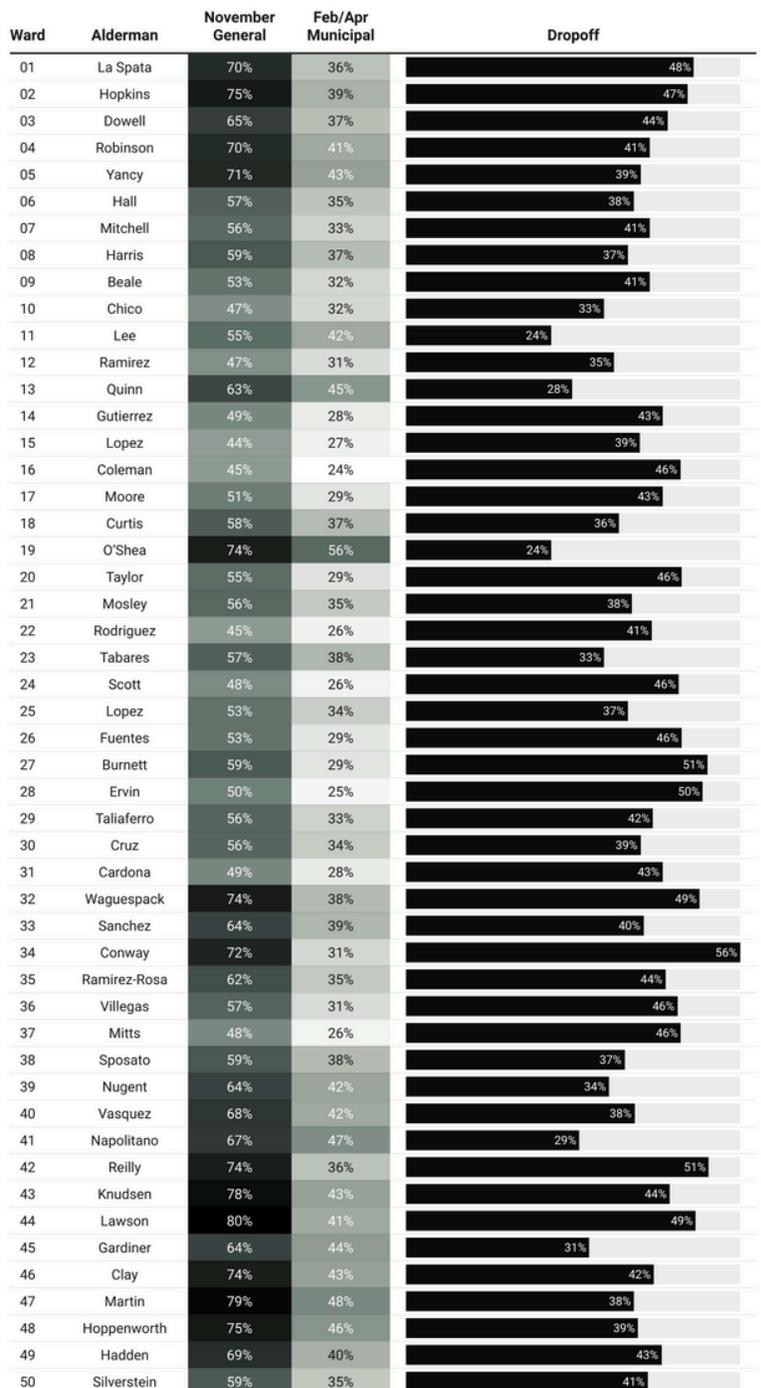
Ward 16, located on the Southwest Side of Chicago, [AB1] consistently has one of the lowest turnout rates. The community takes pride in its historic and diverse neighborhoods, including Chicago Lawn, Englewood, Gage Park, New City and West Englewood. It is predominantly Black, with approximately 64% of residents identifying as Black and nearly 75% of this population being of voting age, evenly distributed across all age groups, or about 15% per age range.

Approximately 46% of households in the ward have an annual income of under \$25,000. Ward 16 has an average municipal election turnout of 24% and 44.5% for the general election. This represents a 20.5 percentage point drop-off from the general election, or a 46% decline.

Compare this to Ward 19, a predominantly white ward on the South Side that encompasses Beverly, Mount Greenwood, Morgan Park and Washington Heights. Nearly 53% of Ward 19's population is white, and 76.4% are of voting age. Ward 19 is one of the more affluent areas of Chicago, where nearly one-quarter of the population has an annual household income between \$75,000 and \$125,000, while over 30% earn more than \$125,000 annually. With an average general election turnout of 73.7% and a municipal turnout of 55.7%, the drop-off reflects a 24.4% decline – one of the lowest drop-off rates in the city.

All wards see significant drops in voter turnout during municipal elections

Average general and municipal election turnout, calculated as a share of registered voters, 2014-2024



Source: Chicago Policy Center, Chicago Board of Elections • Created with Datawrapper

Black precincts experienced the highest average drop-off rate at 71%, even though the drop off was roughly the same across all racial groups. Race seems to have no significant effect on drop off between the municipal and November general elections.

PRESIDENTIAL, SCHOOL BOARD AND MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Chicago’s recent school board elections were a rare opportunity to observe Chicago voters choosing local leaders on the same ballot as federal leaders.

According to Chicago Board of Elections data, approximately 80% of Chicagoans, or 4 in 5 voters, who submitted ballots in the November general election also participated in Chicago’s school board election. Wards in the south and west communities had the lowest voter turnout, contributing to lower turnout in their corresponding school board districts. Overall, roughly 53% of registered voters submitted a ballot and selected a candidate in one of the school board races – though turnout varied widely by ward.

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Empirical research indicates constituents benefit from improved representation by their elected officials when local elections coincide with higher-level contests, as individuals serving on school boards are more likely to synchronize their political inclinations with their constituents when elected during on-cycle campaigns, as opposed to off-cycle elections (Hartney and Hayes 2021).

All races see much lower turnout in Chicago municipal elections

Chicago turnout by precinct-level racial majority, 2014-2024

Election	All	White	Black	Hispanic	No majority
Nov 2024	67.9%	81.8%	55.9%	53.6%	68.1%
Nov 2022	46.4%	58.0%	38.5%	31.4%	45.2%
Nov 2020	73.3%	83.2%	64.6%	63.2%	73.9%
Nov 2018	60.7%	71.0%	54.1%	47.5%	60.1%
Nov 2016	71.0%	78.7%	65.4%	63.7%	70.4%
Nov 2014	48.8%	53.9%	49.4%	36.3%	45.8%
Average Nov.	61.4%	71.1%	54.6%	49.3%	60.6%
Apr 2023	38.7%	48.8%	30.1%	27.3%	38.9%
Feb 2023	35.8%	43.4%	29.4%	27.5%	36.1%
Apr 2019	33.1%	37.3%	32.3%	23.5%	32.4%
Feb 2019	35.4%	40.9%	31.6%	28.9%	35.5%
Apr 2015	41.1%	45.8%	36.1%	40.9%	41.4%
Feb 2015	34.0%	37.0%	32.1%	30.8%	34.1%
Average municipal	36.4%	42.2%	31.9%	29.8%	36.4%
Drop-off %	40.7%	40.6%	41.6%	39.6%	39.9%

Table: @illinoispolicy • Source: Chicago Policy Center, Chicago Board of Elections • Created with Datawrapper

Chicago school board elections saw much higher turnout than other municipal races

Turnout calculated as a share of registered voters, 2023 municipal and 2024 general elections

Ward	President '24	School Board '24	Mayoral Runoff '23	Mayoral Runoff '19
1	81%	59%	46%	30%
2	84%	65%	46%	34%
3	69%	57%	38%	36%
4	75%	64%	43%	40%
5	76%	64%	43%	44%
6	57%	48%	33%	37%
7	56%	47%	30%	33%
8	60%	51%	35%	38%
9	54%	46%	29%	32%
10	50%	40%	30%	23%
11	59%	47%	48%	30%
12	50%	43%	28%	24%
13	66%	56%	44%	32%
14	49%	43%	22%	18%
15	46%	38%	22%	25%
16	43%	35%	21%	25%
17	50%	42%	26%	30%
18	59%	50%	35%	35%
19	77%	68%	62%	50%
20	56%	47%	27%	30%
21	56%	48%	33%	35%
22	47%	41%	23%	18%
23	60%	51%	35%	26%
24	49%	25%	25%	24%
25	59%	54%	34%	31%
26	59%	52%	30%	23%
27	64%	36%	31%	28%
28	52%	28%	25%	25%
29	58%	31%	33%	31%
30	62%	52%	36%	32%
31	54%	46%	26%	26%
32	85%	72%	48%	34%
33	70%	63%	41%	37%
34	86%	52%	38%	27%
35	68%	62%	39%	32%
36	63%	39%	35%	26%
37	48%	25%	24%	25%
38	66%	52%	42%	30%
39	69%	57%	45%	40%
40	73%	65%	45%	42%
41	74%	57%	53%	38%
42	85%	64%	42%	31%
43	88%	72%	52%	39%
44	94%	79%	51%	35%
45	70%	57%	49%	36%
46	82%	70%	49%	41%
47	87%	79%	57%	49%
48	82%	71%	53%	43%
49	75%	67%	42%	35%
50	63%	54%	37%	28%

Source: Chicago Policy Center, Chicago Board of Elections • Created with Datawrapper

Empirical research indicates constituents benefit from improved representation by their elected leaders when local elections coincide with higher-level contests, as individuals serving on school boards are more likely to synchronize their political inclinations with their constituents when elected during on-cycle campaigns, as opposed to off-cycle elections (Hartney and Hayes, 2021).

THE EFFECTS OF CHANGING ELECTION TIMING

Research on municipal election timing suggests transitioning to on-cycle elections is the most significant step local communities can take to enhance voter turnout. Election consolidation in major U.S. cities has been shown to nearly double voter engagement, with engagement remaining high in subsequent election cycles (Benedictis-Kessner, et al., 2023; CEDA, 2003; Durning, 2024; Dynes, et al., 2021).

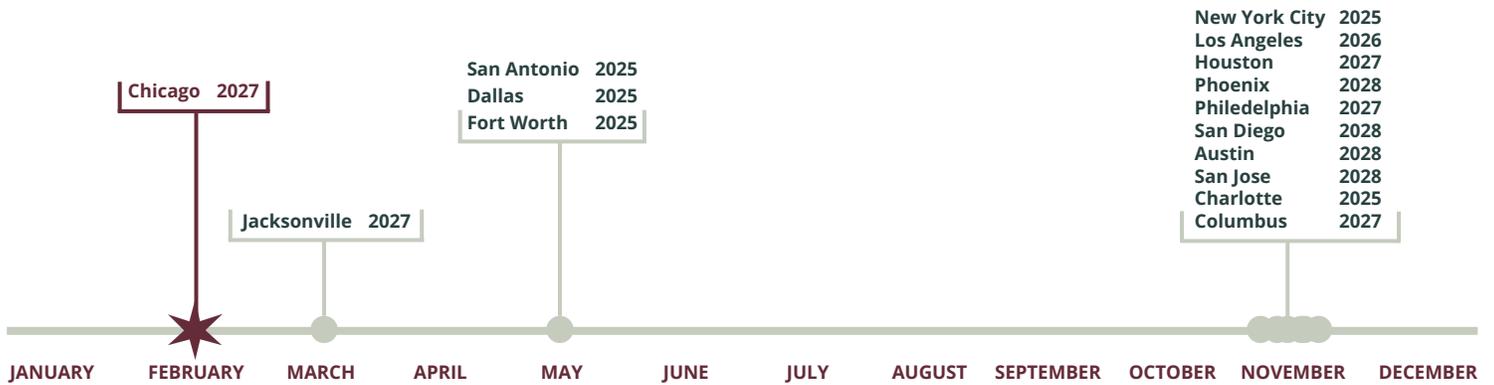
In Austin and Phoenix, voter participation more than doubled after a change in election timing; in Baltimore, it increased more than 3.5 times; in El Paso, 4.5 times (Kaminsky and Weinberg, 2022). In California, contests for the Los Angeles City Council more than tripled. The average local turnout tripled among the 54 California communities that moved to even-year November elections (Durning, 2024).

Since the 1900s, a notable trend has developed toward on-cycle municipal elections, mainly on the West Coast, in which states such as Arizona, California and Nevada, which were previously off-cycle states, are now predominantly on-cycle.

In contrast, Chicago elections are “off-cycle” in terms of the year and the month – no other city discourages voters in this way.

CHICAGO IS THE ONLY MAJOR CITY TO HOLD ELECTIONS IN FEBRUARY

MUNICIPAL ELECTION TIMING BY CITY



Source: Chicago Policy Center review of city and state election codes

California state law requires on-cycle municipal elections in most instances, with over 90% of local jurisdictions conducting elections in November in even-numbered years, including practically all large cities, such as Los Angeles.

Texas state law allows municipalities to choose between two uniform election dates: the first Saturday in May or the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Most Texas cities conduct elections outside the presidential and gubernatorial cycles, choosing either May or November of odd-numbered years. Houston holds municipal elections in November of odd-numbered years, while Dallas, Fort Worth and San Antonio hold elections on the first Saturday in May of odd-numbered years. Austin is one of the few major Texas cities to align local elections with presidential and gubernatorial election cycles in November of even-numbered years.

CONCLUSION

Chicago’s unique election timing coincides with a severe drop-off in municipal election turnout among white, Black, and Hispanic Chicagoans.

Chicago should ideally establish better election timing through creation of a city charter, as is the case in many other big cities.

Short of that, Illinois lawmakers should amend state law to allow for better election timing, and thus encourage more participation in local democracy.

This change could mirror the Texas model, where state law requires municipalities to pick from several uniform election dates, including those aligned with presidential and gubernatorial elections. Lawmakers could also take inspiration from the California Voter Participation Rights Act, which requires municipalities to consolidate their local elections with statewide elections if voter turnout in their standalone elections is at least 25% lower than the average turnout in the previous four statewide general elections.

Chicago deserves local leaders that represent the will of voters.

Today, those leaders too often represent voter apathy.

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NOTE: According to the Chicago elections data, turnout can exceed 100%. The Chicago Board of Elections has confirmed that this occurs due to Same Day Registration within a precinct, whether during the Early Voting period or on Election Day, as well as due to their locked registration method. The Board establishes the number of registered voters in a precinct based on the previous voter canvass and new registrations up to the start of Early Voting. Same Day Registrations are logged as new registrations, and their ballots are counted; however, these registrations are excluded from the finalized total before Election Day. After each election and the recording of new registrations, the total number of registered voters in the precinct is updated to include these registrations before the next election.

In high-turnout elections, such as the Presidential Election on November 5, 2024, turnout figures can occasionally exceed 100% compared to the precinct's officially recorded count of registered voters. For example, the 44th Ward had the highest overall voter participation in Chicago, achieving over 96%. Consequently, precincts with a significant number of Same-Day Registrations reported total ballots exceeding 100% in relation to the verified precinct figures.

The Chicago Board of Elections acknowledges that this arrangement might not be ideal, as it can create confusion; however, the continuous updates of precinct voter registration totals during and after election day throughout the counting period may lead to fluctuating reports or other complications. The Board uses the method of providing fixed registration totals for precincts before the voting period.



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