

Questions about Equity and Measure 2E

A Collection of Articles

This issue piqued my interest with these questions: Would this move engage young people to participate in *local* politics? And, would this move *increase* the representativeness of our city council? I looked for research that would answer these questions. Others have considered the issues of ballot fatigue and orphaned elections which you can find at savelocalelections.com.

After careful review of the research, my analysis is that moving to even year elections will not increase our racial and ethnic representation. Based on Boulder's unique demographic mix, the effect of this change would be minimal. To make a meaningful impact, the City should instead do outreach to UNLIKELY voters, not existing even year voters, helping them understand the impact of local issues on their lives. And doing this outreach in odd years, without the distraction of a national election, would be more effective. Here is the research that helped me reach these conclusions:

The Stanford Social Innovation Review has a series of articles discussing voter turnout. You can find them at:

https://ssir.org/increasing_voter_turnout

A quote from this article:

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/do_we_actually_want_higher_youth_voter_turnout

"More important, the turnout rate for a whole generation of youth in any given election is a misleading statistic because it conceals differences among young people of the same age, which can dwarf generational changes. The biggest gaps are by education, as the figure below demonstrates. For young people, education is the best proxy for social class. Thus, the graph reveals the relentless replication of political inequality by class: More educated young people tend to turn out to vote at higher rates. Gaps by education also imply racial disparities, since people of color are somewhat overrepresented among youth with no college experience—although young African Americans have voted at relatively high rates."

Here I'll add that Sam Weaver and I looked closely at a data set that he fused using CU data, American Community Survey data and Kaiser Family Foundation voting rates. It's not conclusive, but points in a direction that would validate the above. Essentially, without expressly working to change voting *rates*, the status quo gets baked in. Changing to even year elections would mostly bring additional CU Boulder students to the vote for City Council and the student body has low racial diversity and a median household income of \$81,000 year.

Spreadsheet available upon request.

Reference for CU demographics: <https://www.collegesimply.com/colleges/colorado/university-of-colorado-boulder/students/>

This article:

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/increasing_voter_turnout_what_if_anything_can_be_done makes the following points,

- *“There is no silver bullet for increasing turnout—a mix of strategies would need to be pursued, each (on their own) with incremental effects.*
- *Improving the representativeness of the electorate, and knowledge about policies at stake, may be a more important (and realistic) goal than dramatically increasing overall turnout.”*

With respect to silver bullets:

“A range of structural changes could each bring about relatively modest percentage point increases, mostly in the single digits.”

With respect to representativeness:

“Improving the electorate’s representativeness and understanding of policy issues may be a more important target than trying to radically increase turnout.”

‘Professors Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler suggest that the best way to increase turnout and improve the representativeness of voters (whether by age, race, or income) may be by increasing the information citizens have about candidates’ policy positions. Berinsky agrees, and notes that structural reforms “designed to make voting ‘easier”” can actually “magnify the existing socioeconomic biases in the composition of the electorate.”’

Goes on to say (emphasis mine):

*“**Nonpartisan opportunities** to improve turnout among specific groups, or for specific types of elections, may offer more hope. And, to end on an optimistic note, voting is sticky: 30 to 50 percent of the people who turn out due to GOTV efforts in one election will continue to vote in future elections.”*

This reference from the PFVT site (emphasis mine):

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/who-votes-city-election-timing-and-voter-composition/39CE6B9F0E906228F695248C874C0C36>

*“The shift to presidential **election timing reduces the white share of voters by less than 5 percentage points in cities where whites represent more than 80% of the voting-age population**, but the effect is more than 15 percentage points in cities where white residents account for only a quarter of the adult population. Even more dramatically, **holding local elections concurrently with presidential contests increases the Latino share of voters by less than 5 percentage points in a city where Latinos account for a fifth of the adult population**. But the effect increases to 25 percentage points in a city that is 55% Latino.”*

In Boulder, both of the former conditions hold true, thus the expected improvement in representativeness (based on this CA study) would be very small. The study did not consider ballot fatigue.

When ballot fatigue is considered, about 5% to 10% who vote for president typically don’t vote for races lower like mayor. Thus, cancelling out any gains in turnout, while not actually engaging new people in city government.

The paper ends with this:

“But important questions remain. One wonders whether the effects that we see here in California generalize to other states around the country. That we find more pronounced effects

on minorities in cities where more minorities live suggests that the representational gains are likely to be greatest in the most diverse jurisdictions. More research is necessary to understand how timing affects democratic outcomes such as who is elected and whether minority candidates fare better when the electorate is broader and more diverse. And finally, are there effects for how cities spend their money and, ultimately, who wins and who loses in local democracy? Ongoing efforts to reform local election timing promise to provide fertile ground for research on these and related questions.”

This brief from California:

<https://greenlining.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Research-Brief-Odd-Year-vs-Even-Year-Consolidated-Elections-in-California.pdf>

reflects what most peer reviewed articles I read on changing to even years (emphasis mine),

“CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

*Cities currently conducting off-cycle elections in odd years could save taxpayer dollars and increase voter turnout by consolidating elections with state elections. We encourage cities to conduct their own cost-benefit analysis **and factor in other local considerations** when assessing whether consolidation makes sense in their city.*

***Part of that analysis should include an evaluation of the racial/ethnic representation** among voters who turn out and whether those demographics fairly represent the general population. Jurisdictions whose off-year elections effectively skew the electorate and minimize the vote of people of color should consolidate their elections immediately to avoid voting rights violations.”*

Another study making the same recommendation (an analysis done in Minneapolis, like I wish Boulder had done):

<https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/206592/Record%20Turnout%20An%20Analysis%20of%20Moving%20Minneapolis%20Municipal%20Elections%20to%20Even-Numbered%20Years.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

“Changing the timing of elections does appear to have an effect on turnout, though policymakers may wish to consider other implications of moving municipal races to even-numbered years. These considerations are many and have varied levels of research behind them. Ultimately, tradeoffs must be weighed and accepted if a change to when elections occur is to be adopted.”

Our own County Clerk made the same recommendation and our City Council ignored her.

There *are* local considerations and no such analysis was done. The major unintended consequence is the abandonment of school board elections. The following link to a KGNU debate on this issue brings BVSD issues to the forefront:

<https://www.kgnu.org/apublicaffair>

Wed, 9/28, 8:30am show. The 2E segment starts at 3 minutes into the piece. The president of BVSD board recently withdrew her early support for this measure.

Without an analysis we don't really know if this move would help or hinder representativeness. A notable barrier that needs to change more than election timing: Council pay.

Based on my eight years of experience on council and research I've done on this topic, if we, as a community decided we wanted to increase the representativeness of our council we would

work to do it and make it happen. We now have a racial equity plan that can justify time and money to spend on this. Making such progress would be easier in odd years without all other election distractions and we could focus on *local* issues. We're a small community with small racial and ethnic representation. With a concerted effort, we could easily reach unlikely voters one on one to make the case for local government whose issues are vastly different from state and national. The state and national campaigns that would drive our local elections, should we move forward with 2E, would do no such thing.

I'll end with a link to a Guest Opinion I wrote.:

<https://www.dailycamera.com/2022/09/29/guest-opinion-mary-dolores-young-there-are-better-ways-to-engage-voters-than-even-year-elections/>