



ISSUE BRIEF

The Timing of Missouri Municipal Elections: Advantages and Disadvantages of Merging Municipal and Federal Elections

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Executive Summary

Missouri municipal elections are held in the spring. One cost-cutting proposal is to move municipal elections to the fall, concurrently with county, state, and federal elections. Moving municipal elections, particularly if held simultaneously with the general election in November of even-numbered years, has both benefits and costs. Two primary benefits of merging municipal and state/federal elections are reducing costs and increasing turnout. County election officials could save money by holding fewer elections. Moreover, voter turnout in federal elections is significantly higher than in spring municipal elections.

However, there are unintended consequences for merging municipal and other elections. First, merged elections are likely to nationalize local elections. November voters are drawn to the election by partisan preferences, and these divisions would naturally seep into local contests. Second, many Missouri municipalities hold non-partisan elections, and spring election voters seem more informed and concerned about local issues than November voters. Third, a large ballot roll-off from state to municipal contests should be expected, particularly for municipalities with non-partisan elections. Fourth, the cost of local election campaigns should increase, due to market competition from simultaneous national, state, and county campaigns. Fifth, the outcome of state elections, particularly ballot propositions, may be disproportionately influenced by large urban areas with competitive contests and higher turnout.

The decision to merge municipal and other state elections comes down to a choice between values. Should we increase the rate of voter turnout for municipal elections or should municipal election outcomes be determined by more engaged and knowledgeable, local-oriented voters.

Municipal Voter Turnout

Voter turnout in municipal elections is lower, much lower, than turnout in federal or state elections. One proposal for increasing the rate of voter participation is to hold municipal and other local elections concurrently with federal and state elections. Political scientists and other scholars have long observed that if increasing turnout is the fundamental goal, then moving local elections to the November ballot is an effective, simple solution.¹ But that change also brings other unintended consequences with it. As the discussion of combining local elections with federal and state elections rises on the political agenda, a consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of such a change in timing may be useful.

Cost and Benefits of Merging Elections

The benefits of combining federal, state, and local elections on a fall ballot are straightforward. Voters—and electoral officials—are burdened by numerous election contests held periodically throughout the year. In addition to the state and federal general elections in November of even-number years and party primaries in the preceding August (with the possibility of a presidential preference primary in March), there may be special elections or ballot propositions in odd number years, annual municipal elections in Missouri in March or April, the potential for bond elections in February, and other special elections under unusual circumstances.² This election frequency places significant informational demands on potential voters, particularly on those who pay scant attention to politics. Missourians may be more fortunate than some other states that hold elections with greater frequency and less regularity. At the extreme, New Jersey appears to hold a ‘steady stream of elections every year’.³

Reducing the number of elections would reduce costs, both tangible and informational. For county clerks, each additional election requires printing of ballots, ensuring the availability of voting equipment, securing polling place locations, publicizing the upcoming election to potential voters, hiring qualified poll workers, and producing quick and accurate results on election day. Reducing the frequency of elections would reduce the overall financial cost for county officials.⁴ Similarly, citizens would have fewer informational demands on when and where to vote and on what is contained on their ballots, as well as fewer tangible costs of voting such as traveling to the polling place or filing an absentee ballot.⁵

From a democratic perspective, the key benefit of combining local elections with federal and state elections is to increase voter turnout. One consistency, across the country and throughout two centuries of American elections, is that more citizens vote in statewide elections than in local electoral contests. To emphasize this point, voter participation rates for recent elections in five Missouri counties are shown in Table 1. Turnout for general municipal election days tends to range from 10% to 20% of registered voters.⁶ This is dwarfed by turnout among registered voters for presidential elections (60-75%) as well as midterm elections (typically 30-45%).⁷ As shown in the accompanying table, citizens voting in municipal elections are a fraction of voters generally.⁸ This turnout discrepancy is not unique to Missouri or the United States.

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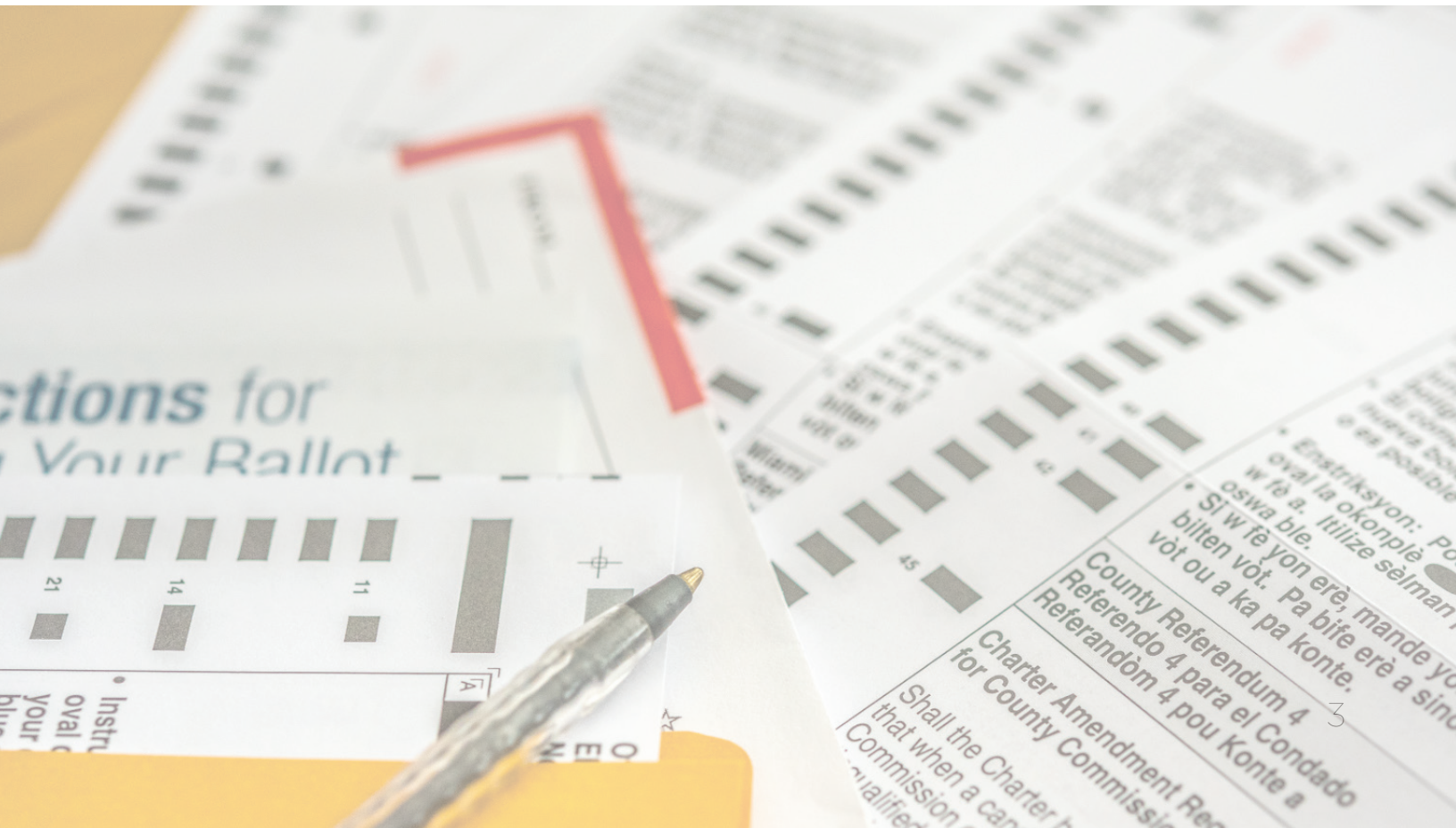
Analyses of municipal elections in other states such as California confirm that voter turnout is often 35% lower in off-cycle elections than in presidential elections.⁹ Municipal participation rates are generally lower than national turnout across all democratic countries, though the gap between the two is much wider in the U.S.¹⁰

Table 1. Number of Voters and Registered Voter Turnout in Five Missouri Counties

County	April 7, 2020*	November 3, 2020	April 6, 2021
Boone	13,529	91,837	16,792
	(11.9%)	(70.1%)	(13.7%)
Buchanan	6,967	36,950	13,450
	(13.6%)	(69.3%)	(26.7%)
Cape Girardeau	6,529	40,576	4,501
	(12.3%)	(73.3%)	(8.6%)
Greene	2,440	142,752	23,914
	(6.7%)	(84.7%)	(13.3%)
St. Louis County	102,594	540,597	96,913
	(16.1%)	(79.3%)	(14.4%)

Not all registered voters in a county resided in areas with a general municipal election (e.g., Greene 2020), but most did.

*Due to coronavirus pandemic, the April 7, 2020 election was held June 2, 2020 (Executive Order 20-03).



Partisan and Nonpartisan Elections and Voter Engagement

Moving municipal elections to the fall ballot may serve as a cost-saving device and produce higher rates of turnout, yet, there may be other unintended consequences. Chief among these is the nationalization of local politics. Federal and state elections are partisan in orientation so many voters, particularly peripheral voters who are drawn to the election by their reaction to short-term forces such as major events, salient national issues, or charismatic party leaders, cast ballots according to their preferences concerning national politics.¹¹ Indeed, peripheral voters tend to be less well-informed and less politically engaged than traditional voters.¹² A study of suburban voters in five states found that participants in off-cycle elections were more knowledgeable about candidates and more connected to local issues than participants in communities with on-cycle elections.¹³ Although full political representation is an important ideal for representative democracy, the notion of municipal government operated on the basis of national political preferences seems less salient in a culturally diverse and geographically diverse country like the U.S.

Although some Missouri municipalities hold partisan elections, many more do not.¹⁴ Nonpartisan elections tend to have lower levels of voter turnout generally. An increase in voter turnout stimulated by partisan politics may have a less predictable impact on nonpartisan election outcomes. The informational demands on citizens, already large for November voters in even-numbered years, grows in magnitude as more local election contests are added to the long ballot with federal, state, and county officials. Absent significant canvassing of voters, it is less clear how peripheral voters would confront a nonpartisan contest lower down the ballot.

Ballot Length and Roll-off

Existing general elections already suggest that many voters may roll-off, tending to cast votes at the top of the ballot and skipping (nonpartisan and other) contests lower on the ballot. For instance, in Jackson County, 16.8% of ballots did not include a vote for the last judicial retention election in November 2020. In 2018, 21.7% of ballots cast no vote for the last retention election. Comparable roll-off rates for St. Charles County were 19.2% in 2020 and 22.1% in 2018.¹⁵ Although overall turnout is high for federal and state elections, many voters omit races down-ballot suppressing the participation rate for some contests. Ballot propositions and judicial elections offer voters an identifiable choice (yes or no). Nonpartisan elections offer little information for less knowledgeable and peripheral voters other than candidates' names. Without party labels, nonpartisan contests offer voters a choice between teams without uniforms, increasing the influence of name recognition and incumbency.¹⁶

Ballot length appears to be associated with the rate of roll-off, that is, of voters skipping down-ballot races. However, it does not appear that voters simply grow fatigued and stop voting at some point. A better analogy for a voter confronting a long ballot, such as those for November elections of even-number years, might be a student taking a difficult, multiple-choice test.¹⁷ A voter simply may skip questions for which the voter has little or no information and answers—or casts a vote—when the voter has more information. According to this idea, the informed voter is more likely to make choices given a cue, such as candidates' political party identification or an informative political campaign.¹⁸ Most voters know what choices they

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want to make following contested presidential, congressional, or statewide campaigns with their accompanying canvassing efforts and media coverage. Many voters do not receive as much information about state legislative, county, or municipal candidates or about most ballot propositions.¹⁹

Municipal Campaigns

Conducting campaigns for municipal elections, especially nonpartisan races, may be more difficult within the electoral cacophony of federal, state, and county contests. Certainly, a candidate's media campaign would need to compete not only with the opposition's but also with voters' attention for other campaigns running simultaneously. This is particularly the case when the clarity of responsibility for many government decisions is not evident to the typical less-informed voter.²⁰ Wholesale political campaigns of the mass market variety, necessary for urban at-large elections, may prove more expensive and less successful. Most successful municipal campaigns, particularly for smaller communities and for district elections in urban and suburban cities, are of the retail campaign variety. Local elected officials typically make more direct contact with constituents, canvassing for voters through personal contacts made by themselves or other campaign workers. A study of Missouri state legislative races, for instance, finds that campaigns that focus on direct voter mobilization are more successful at attracting votes than overall campaign expenditures.²¹

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Other effects

Other institutional effects of merged state and local elections may be more difficult to predict. For example, in Texas, municipalities originally held elections in May, and the state shifted most of these to November in odd-numbered years. These off-cycle November elections often include statewide ballot propositions, which are typically low turnout contests. However, concurrent elections with competitive municipal contests in large cities like Houston may bring more voters to the polls who would otherwise abstain on these state ballot questions. Some evidence suggests that increased turnout for city elections may exert disproportionate influence over statewide ballot proposition outcomes. However, there is little evidence that turnout for Texas municipal elections increased in the move to off-year November elections.

Conclusion

The decision of whether municipal elections should be held separately, in the spring, or concurrently with state and federal elections, in the fall, is a choice between two aspirational goals for democracy. Representative government works better when more voters participate and when more voters make informed political choices.²² If increasing level of participation is the primary goal, then moving local elections to the fall ballot better raises the quantity of participation. However, if participation by informed voters is more fundamental, then maintaining separate elections on a spring ballot is a better mechanism for improving the quality of voter participation. Both the quantity and the quality of voter participation are important facets of political engagement and representation, but these goals may conflict as dissimilar electoral contests appear on the same ballot.

References

¹ Michael Martinez, "Why is American Turnout So Low, and Why Should We Care?" in Jan E. Leighley, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Elections*, 2010, pp. 107-124, at p. 120. See also Zoltan L. Hajnal and Paul G. Lewis, "Voter Turnout in Local Elections," *Urban Affairs Review* 38(5): 645-668.

² RSMo sect. 115.121,123.

³ Sarah F. Anzia, *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups*, 2014, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, at pp.7-9. Anzia's book provides the best available research on the timing of local elections and how separate municipal elections favor local, organized interest groups.

⁴ Of course, a reasonable argument can be made that these expenses are simply the necessary costs of democratic government. In addition, the frequency of elections may produce demand for professionalization within the office of the county clerk. The latter, however, seems to be the case more for urban counties which can hire staff devoted to tasks such as voter registration and election preparation than rural counties which do not have the budgetary discretion to hire additional staff or develop election-related expertise.

⁵ Transportation to the polls may also be a critical cost for some voters. See Joshua J. Dyck and James G. Gimpel, "Distance, Turnout, and the Convenience of Voting," *Social Science Quarterly*, 2005, 86(3): 531-548. Missouri and some states require a notary or travel to a polling center prior to filing an absentee ballot for most voting early.

⁶ Election scholars typically dismiss turnout among registered voters. Voting in most of the United States is a two-step process involving registration in advance as well as casting a ballot in an election. The registration process itself may hinder voter participation (e.g., Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* 1980, New Haven: Yale University Press, Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*, 1993, New York: Macmillan, and Benjamin Highton, "Easy Registration and Turnout," *Journal of Politics* 59(2): 565-575). A better measure of voter turnout uses Census Bureau estimates of the voting age-population as the denominator to compute the turnout rate. However, even this method is flawed as Census estimates include non-citizens and others who may be disenfranchised due to felony convictions. See Michael D. McDonald and Samuel Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review*, 2001, 95(4): 963-974, and Michael D. McDonald, "Turnout in the American States," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*, 2002, 2(2): 199-212.

⁷ Voter turnout was somewhat higher for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections and much higher than normal for the 2018 midterm election.

⁸ Moreover, some voters in local elections may not participate in federal and states elections. Studies of turnout across elections suggest that voters may pick and choose among elections; not all spring voters cast ballots in the fall. See Richard W. Boyd, "Decline of U.S. Voter Turnout: Structural Explanations," *American Politics Quarterly* 9: 133-159, and Lee Sigelman, Philip W. Roeder, Malcom Jewell, and Michael A. Baer, "Voting and Nonvoting: A Multilevel Perspective," *American Journal of Political Science* 29: 749-765. Some voters may be parochialists, concerned with local issues, with little concern about partisan election campaigns (see Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America*, 1972).

⁹ Zoltan Hajnal, Paul G. Lewis, and Hugh Louch, *Municipal Elections in California: Turnout, Timing, and Competition*, 2002, San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. See also Neal Caren, "Big City, Big Turnout? Electoral Participation in American Cities," *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 2007, 29(1): 31-46, and Curtis Wood, "Voter Turnout in City Elections," *Urban Affairs Review*, 2002, 38(2): 209-231.

¹⁰ Robert L. Morlan, "Municipal vs. National Election Voter Turnout: Europe and the United States," *Political Science Quarterly*, 1984, 99(3): 457-470.

¹¹ One legislative rationale for creating city charters, and home-rule charters in particular, was to separate local governance from state politics. During the late 19th and early 20th Century, Missouri was on the forefront among states granting home-rule authority to municipalities.

¹² Daron R. Shaw and John R. Petrocik, *The Turnout Myth*, 2020, New York: Oxford University Press.

¹³ J. Eric Oliver and Shang E. Ha, "Vote Choice in Suburban Elections," *American Political Science Review*, 2007, 101(3): 393-408. See also J. Eric Oliver, Shang E. Ha, and Zachary Callen, *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-scale Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

¹⁴ Robert R. Alford and Eugene C. Lee, "Election Systems and Voter Turnout: Experiments in the United States," *Journal of Politics*, 1968, 63(3): 902-915, and Albert K. Karnig and B. Oliver Walter, "Decline in Municipal Voter Turnout—A Function of Changing Structure," *American Politics Quarterly*, 1983, 11(4): 491-505.

¹⁵ Jackson County had 197,538 voters in 2020 with 14,321 casting a vote for the last judicial retention race. In 2018, 119,147 were cast of 152,209. For St. Charles County, the rate was 180,549 of 223,533 in 2020 and 138,178 of 177,404 in 2018. Retention questions are used for comparison as they are competitive at some level (voters choose yes or no to the question to retain). Ballots cast for county officials are typically low or lower, but the proportion of ballots cast depends on whether a candidate is unopposed and on voters' perceived prestige of the county office.

¹⁶ Brian F. Schaffner, Matthew Streb, and Gerald Wright, "Teams Without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections," *Political Research Quarterly*, 2001, 54(1): 7-30, and Jessica L. Trounstein, "Turnout and Incumbency in Local Elections," *Urban Affairs Review*, 2013, 49(2), 167-189.

¹⁷ Martin P. Wattenberg, Ian McAllister, and Anthony Salvanto, "How Voting is Like Taking an SAT Test: An Analysis of American Rolloff," *American Politics Quarterly*, 2000, 28(2): 234-250. Another analogy for voter behavior, particularly for nonpartisan elections, is consumer decisions in a market where there are many competing products. Voters, like shoppers, may be overwhelmed by a vast number of choices and either abstain or make poor decisions. On this paradox of choice, see Sheena S. Iyengar and Emir Kamenica, "Choice Proliferation, Simplicity Seeking, and Asset Allocation," *Journal of Public Economics*, 2010, 94(7-8): 530-539, and Saul Cunow, Scott Desposato, Andrew Janusz, and Cameron Sells, "Less is More: The Paradox of Choice in Voting Behavior," *Electoral Studies*, 2021, 69: 102230.

¹⁸ Identifying the source of undervotes is difficult without individual voters' cast vote records, the paper or electronic record of how each ballot is marked across all offices and ballot propositions. Scholars can say more about voter preferences when cast vote records are made available.

¹⁹ On voters for ballot propositions, see Arthur Lupia, "Shortcuts versus encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections," *American Political Science Review*, 1994, 88(1): 63-76. In Missouri, some propositions are associated with major advertising campaigns, but other ballot questions receive little attention by paid or news media.²⁰ Some low-information voters, for instance, have difficulty distinguishing between representatives for the U.S. Congress in Washington, DC, and the General Assembly in Jefferson City.

²¹ James W. Endersby, John R. Petrocik, and Daron R. Shaw, "Electoral Mobilization in the United States," in Richard S. Katz and William J. Crotty, eds., *Handbook of Party Politics*, London: Sage Publications, 2006, pp. 316-336. Moreover, Oliver and Ha found that a substantial percentage of municipal voters in suburban cities reported knowing candidates personally, p. 404. See also David Niven, "The Mobilization Solution? Face-to-face Contact and Voter Turnout in a Municipal Election," *Journal of Politics*, 2004, 66(3): 868-884.

²² Anzia makes this point forcefully in *Timing and Turnout*, pp. 200-204.