

Report finds oldest voters 10-20 times more likely to vote for mayor than youngest ones

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Voters ages 65 and older are 10-20 times more likely to cast ballots in mayoral elections than 18-to-34-year-olds, according to a new Portland State University (PSU) study of four U.S. cities.

Phil Keisling, director of PSU's Center for Public Service and former Oregon Secretary of State, co-led the [pilot study](#) with Jason R. Jurjevich from PSU's Population Research Center. Funding came from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

"Who Votes for America's Mayors?" tracked [voter participation](#) in seven primary and general mayoral elections in four cities: Charlotte, N.C.; Detroit, Mich.; St. Paul, Minn.; and Portland, Ore. Researchers found low turnout in local elections in three of the four cities. An average of less than 30 percent of registered voters cast a ballot in mayoral elections.

"The picture painted here—of notably low, overall turnout for mayoral contests and utterly abysmal turnout among younger and minority residents— isn't a pretty one," said Keisling, pictured left. "But for that very reason, it will hopefully serve as a loud wake up call for those citizens of all ages to work together to better engage their entire urban communities in the democratic process."

In the 2013 general election, Charlotte saw an average of 19.2 percent [voter turnout](#); St. Paul turnout was 19.9 percent; and Detroit was 24.2 percent. Portland was the only city in which the mayoral elections were

held in 2012 to coincide with the [presidential elections](#) and more than 70 percent of registered voters went to the polls. Some areas of Charlotte, Detroit and St. Paul had voter turnouts in the single digits.

Furthermore, 18-to-34-year-olds are voting in mayoral races at even lower rates than they do in national elections in all four cities. In six of the seven elections studied, the median age of voters was anywhere from 13 to 17 years higher than the citywide median age of the adult population.

"Although many 18-to-34-year-olds are helping shape the social and economic landscapes of many American urban centers, these data strongly suggest that to date they've largely ceded political governance to their grandparents' generation," said Jurjevich, assistant director of the Population Research Center and co-principal investigator of the study.

Other findings from the pilot study include:

- Elderly residents have more "voting clout" than young people in mayoral elections, because they vote at higher rates.
- Charlotte, Detroit and St. Paul have "voting deserts," census tracts where the voter turnout in mayoral elections is less than half of the average turnout in the rest of the city.
- Racial/ethnic differences in voter turnout are dramatic in Charlotte as revealed by voter registration data available in North Carolina, due special protocols under the Voting Rights Act.

"Our cities are suffering from low civic participation especially in local elections," said Carol Coletta, Knight Foundation's vice president for Community and National Initiatives. "We hope to build on this study to develop a better understanding of voter participation in local elections and gain insight into how people are motivated to get involved in shaping the success of their city."

Three out of the four cities in the pilot study, Charlotte, Detroit and St. Paul, are among the 26 communities where Knight invests. Knight Foundation and Portland State are planning to expand the study to include the 30 largest cities in the U.S. as well as the other communities served by the foundation.

More information: The report is available online: www.pdx.edu/prc/

Provided by Portland State University

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