

Turnout for mayoral elections abysmally low

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A new study released Thursday by researchers at Portland State University—part of its Who Votes for Mayor project—detail the shockingly low voter turnout that is now typical in elections for mayor across the United States. For the most recent round of mayoral elections in America's 30 largest cities, turnout of eligible citizens in 10 of them—including New York City, Baltimore, Dallas and Miami—was less than 15 percent. In Las Vegas, Fort Worth and Dallas, Texas, voter turnout was in the single digits.

In addition to abysmally low [voter turnout](#), the Who Votes for Mayor project revealed several additional findings:

- Younger voters aren't participating. In America's 30 largest cities, 46.7 percent of registered voters over the age of 65 voted in the last mayoral election, as compared to 9 percent of registered voters aged 18 to 34. As a result:
- Voters in mayoral elections trend older. The median age of those actually casting ballots—57—was nearly a full generation older than the [median age](#) of the eligible voting population. In eight cities, including Houston, Phoenix, Oklahoma City, San Antonio and Dallas, the median voter age was above 60.

Older residents have more "electoral clout," with residents 65 years and older up to 56 times more likely to vote than residents 18-34 years old.

Certain neighborhoods have dramatically higher turnout than others, yielding an uneven distribution of voting "oases" and "deserts" within the

same city. In Dallas, for example, nearly one in three residents live in voting deserts, which are neighborhoods where turnout was half (or less) than the citywide average.

How cities ranked

Across the country, cities varied greatly in how many people turned out and how representative of the population voters were. For a full comparison, visit <http://www.whovotesformayor.org/compare>

Lowest voter turnout

1. Dallas, Texas, 6.1%
2. Fort Worth, Texas, 6.5% turnout
3. Las Vegas, Nev., 9.4% turnout

Highest voter turnout

1. Portland, Ore., 59.4%
2. Louisville, Ky., 45.4% turnout
3. Seattle, Wash., 44.5% turnout

Most Voting Deserts

1. Dallas, Texas, 31.9% who live in voting deserts
2. Fort Worth, Texas, 24.8% who live in voting deserts

3. Phoenix, Ariz., 19.7% who live in voting deserts

"In the vast majority of local elections, young people are ceding decisions for the future to their grandparents," said Phil Keisling, Director of Portland State University's Center for Public Service. "There are a number of actions we can take to improve turnout, such as coupling local elections with national elections, increasing voter registration, changing where and how voters can receive and return their ballots, and reeling in the influence of money in politics."

The Who Votes for Mayor project breaks important new ground in the world of electoral research by combining voting and U.S. Census data from 85 mayoral elections in the nation's 30 largest cities, as well as 20 other smaller communities across the U.S. Researchers analyzed more than 23 million voting records and extensive demographic data from more than 10,000 U.S. Census tracts.

Interactive data on all 50 cities is available at <http://www.whovotesformayor.org>.

Every day, over half a million local elected officials across the country are making important and influential decisions about core services like police and fire, drinking water, economic development and roads and public transportation for the more than 80 percent of Americans who live in cities. When voter turnout in local elections is low, a small percentage of residents can have outsized influence in policy choices that have far-reaching consequences across cities and regions.

In three-quarters of the cities studied, mayors and other local officials are chosen in odd-number year elections (as opposed to Presidential elections and midterm elections), a remnant of decisions made over a century ago when these off-year elections were set up to give voters time to focus on local issues. Turnout is usually much higher during

Presidential election years, and several cities have moved their local elections into alignment with the Presidential contest.

"One person, one vote is a core principle of American democracy for a very good reason—when turnout is abysmally low, more attention is paid to the interests of small groups of people instead of community-wide issues of equity and good governance," said Benjamin de la Peña, Director for Community and National Strategy at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. "The danger of such low participation in local elections is the risk that elected leaders will not address serious and pressing issues that disproportionately affect historically disadvantaged communities."

Provided by Portland State University

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