

Off-cycle elections result in less-representative local governments

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Credit: BYU Photo

Americans tend to be far more consumed with national politics than with local politics. As places like Utah, Arizona, Michigan and Maryland gear up to hold local elections this summer and fall, history predicts that they

will see an average of 29-37% fewer voters than they would were their elections held "on cycle," in tandem with state and federal elections.

This apparent indifference to local policies can have serious consequences, according to BYU research recently published in the *American Political Science Review*.

The study found that local governments formed in 'off-cycle' years (like 2021) are less responsive to the majority's preferences and more responsive instead to organized [interest groups](#), particularly when the interest groups' desires oppose those of the masses. This may occur, for example, where developers want more higher-density housing, more commercial development and fewer [green spaces](#) than citizens or in conservative locations, where public employees generally desire more spending on salaries than residents.

"When turnout for local elections is lower, that opens opportunities for groups that are organized to get their people out to vote and elect those who are going to push policy in a way that benefits the interest groups," said BYU political science professor Adam Dynes, a co-author of the paper. "So election timing ends up being pretty important."

Of the more than 25,000 municipalities in the U.S., about 75% hold their elections off cycle, including many large cities like Chicago. When local residents don't vote—and in off-cycle elections, it's common for fewer than a quarter of eligible voters to participate—they relinquish significant power, Dynes observed.

"Our focus is often on national politics, whether that's because national politics reach everyone, because we are socialized to focus on national politics in school or because partisanship is increasingly becoming an important part of people's identities," he said. "But in our daily lives, we are arguably affected the most by local policies, which shape our water

access, our streetlights, our K-12 schools, events like Fourth of July celebrations. Local politics influence what your neighborhood is like and your quality of life."

To determine whether local governments are more responsive to the masses or to interest groups, Dynes and his co-authors concentrated especially on policies regarding public employees, who reliably organize together regardless of a city's political leanings.

Examining expenditures on public [employee](#) salaries in 1,600 [large cities](#) from the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau, the authors reasoned that more conservative cities would spend less on public employees because conservatives favor smaller government. That assumption was borne out in the data—but it was mostly driven by conservative places that held on-cycle elections. Conservative municipalities with off-cycle elections spent almost double per capita on public employee salaries compared to those with on-cycle elections, the same amount as more liberal-leaning places, suggesting the influence of public employee interest groups.

The study's findings inform the ongoing debate about the ideal timing of municipal elections. "If the goal is to have [election](#) outcomes reflect the preferences of your median voter," Dynes said, "then you may want to align local elections with state and national elections."

But even if most municipal elections never move to on-cycle years, Americans can still help ensure that their [local governments](#) are responsive to what matters to them.

"Find out when elections are in your city, show up to public hearings, sign up for email newsletters from local politicians and get involved," Dynes advised. "Local politics is the level of government where your individual actions can have the greatest influence."

More information: Adam M. Dynes et al, Off-Cycle and Off Center: Election Timing and Representation in Municipal Government, *American Political Science Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1017/S000305542100040X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542100040X)

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