

Elections and Voter Participation

Introduction

One obstacle to consolidation of governments that is frequently cited is a perceived loss of local control over services and spending decisions. The theory is that the further away the voter is from the decision maker, the less accountability the decision maker will feel toward their needs and concerns. The irony is that based on voter participation numbers, the closer the voter gets to the decision maker, the fewer cast votes.

There are probably a number of factors negatively affecting voter turnout, including election dates that don't coincide with other levels of government and lack of transparency in the process and the results. Other factors identified in the discussions surrounding the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) may also come in to play, such as physical inaccessibility, voter registration procedures, and lack of confidence in voting technology. The bottom line is that in some jurisdictions, the old joke "What if they held an election and no one showed up?" is too close to reality.

Electing Our Leaders

Let's look at some recent voting figures. In November of 2004, a presidential election year, an average of **63%** of enrolled voters statewide and **68%** of voters outside of New York City (NYC) cast a vote. This compares to **70%** of the electorate voting nationwide.

In 2006, a gubernatorial election year, **40%** of enrolled voters in New York State chose to cast their vote with a higher rate of non-NYC voters participating in the election.

Elections for town offices (except special elections) are held in odd-numbered years when there are no gubernatorial, presidential, or general elections (for state legislators). For elections in the fall of odd years, the State Board of Elections (BOE) collects data on votes for supreme court justice races, special elections for members of the State Senate and Assembly, as well as the results of statewide ballot initiatives. They do not collect data on town elections, so determining participation rates for local elections is a challenge. (More on that later.)

Voter Participation Rates			
Election	NYC %	OUTSIDE NYC %	ALL %
Presidential	55	68	63
Gubernatorial	31	46	40
General Election in Odd-Numbered Year (Ballot Proposition)	30	36	33

It is in the odd years when voter interest outside of NYC wanes, despite that these are the elections closest to home for local officials who have a direct impact on property taxes, fees and services.



One way to see how many people come to the polls in a year where there are no national races, and few if any state races, is by examining the State BOE records of voting on statewide ballot initiatives in odd years. For example, in November 2005 over **35%** of enrolled voters outside NYC registered their support or opposition to a transportation bond act and a Constitutional amendment relating to the state budget process. Likewise, **36%** of voters outside of NYC participated in the 2003 vote on a proposition to eliminate small cities from constitutional debt limitations. However, these numbers do not necessarily correspond with voting in town elections, as they include city residents and people who have chosen not to support a candidate but to vote for a proposition.

Village Elections

State law generally establishes the date for village elections as the third Tuesday in March, but villages may adopt a proposition to hold the elections on a different date. The vast majority (**463 out of 556**) of villages hold their elections in March, though not all on the statutorily prescribed date. Others hold their elections in April, June, and November. Villages can conduct their own elections or opt to have the county board of elections conduct the elections. However, the date of the election is still controlled by the village.

When the county BOE conducts village elections, it must retain information on the results of the election. Villages which conduct their own elections are not required to file the results of their elections with any state or county entity, nor are they required to file the information with the town or towns they are located in. The one exception is that the results of justice court elections must be reported to the Office of Court Administration.

Months in which Village Elections are Held	
Month of Vote	Number of Villages
March	463
April	4
June	59
November	30

Town Elections

While the BOE does not maintain a statewide database of voting statistics for town elections, other data sources may be available.

School Budget Votes

School districts and some forms of libraries are the only type of local governments where voters have direct approval of budgets. Outside of the big cities, school budgets must be approved by the voters. School budget votes are conducted on the third Tuesday in May and are held concurrently with the vote for school board members. Enrolled voters in school districts of cities less than 125,000 population were given the ability to vote on their budgets by Chapter 171 of the Laws of 1996. Voters in the Big



Five cities – NYC, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers -- do not vote on school budgets, which instead are subject to the control of the city government.

Participation in School Budget Votes (Selected Counties)	
County Cluster	% of Enrollment Voting
Sullivan	10.4
Monroe, Niagara, Orleans	12.6
Albany, Cayuga, St. Lawrence, Onondaga and 23 other Counties	12.9
Dutchess	14.6
Nassau	15.6
Suffolk	20.0
Statewide	14.2

Data on school budget votes is collected by the State Education Department and posted on their website. The information is listed by school district and grouped by BOCES district, whereas enrollment figures are listed by the State BOE by county.

To assess aggregate voter participation rates, the BOCES were grouped so that any districts that overlapped counties were clustered together for comparison with enrollment figures for those counties. The percentage of participation was obtained by totaling the number of votes cast in each district in the cluster and comparing them to the voter enrollment (less the enrollment for any non-participating cities).

Participation by enrolled voters ranged from **10.4%** in Sullivan County and **10.5%** in counties in southwestern New York, to **20%** of enrolled voters in Suffolk County. Overall, only **14.2%** of enrolled voters participated in the May 2006 school budget votes.

A range of conclusions are possible. One conclusion that could be drawn from those rates is that the time or place of the votes is unclear or inconvenient to the electorate. Another possible conclusion is that voters are largely empathetic to school budget or choose not to vote because they don't feel there is any real impact on school spending.

Fire District Elections

Fire districts hold annual elections for fire commissioners on the second Tuesday of December. The most recent elections were held December 12, 2006. Town Law §175 requires that the results of fire district officer elections be filed with the town clerk. In an informal survey of 20 town clerks whose jurisdiction includes 62 fire districts, we found that over **25%** of the fire districts failed to comply with the filing requirements. Only 45 of the 62 reported their votes.

Participation in fire district elections generally is minimal, whether the district is in an urban, suburban, or rural area. There were some anomalies in the voting totals for some rural towns. For example, in the Town of Greenfield (Saratoga County), 414 people cast ballots in the election for fire commissioners. However, this election



followed the defeat in a few months earlier of a proposition to purchase two ladder trucks (590 votes cast) and a candidate was challenging the incumbent who had been championing the purchase of the fire trucks.

Four of the districts in which the most votes were cast were in the Town of Huntington, population 195,289. The number of people voting in all of the Huntington fire districts was 2573 out of a total electorate of 125,692 or **2%**.

Commission-Run Special District Elections

Very little is reported about commission-run special district elections. However, a Nassau County report found that voter turnout rates for special sanitary districts in the county were extremely low. Voter turnout rates ranged from a high of **13.9%** to a low of **1.8%**. (See *Nassau County Special Districts: The Case for Reform.*)

A recent water district vote in the Town of Huntington saw only **66** votes cast in one district that has 11,500 consumers and 42,000 residents, and **2132** in another water district with a service population of more than 81,000 people.

Availability of Election Data

Surprisingly, very little data are available on elections, particularly for offices below the state level. County Boards of Elections (BOEs) are required to canvas the votes for federal, state, county, city, and town office, state and local ballot proposals, as well as for villages for which elections are conducted by the County BOE. However, they do not collect data on elections the villages conduct themselves, on school board elections, or on elections for fire or special districts.

The State BOE receives from the County BOEs the voting results of federal, state, and county offices, as well as for statewide ballot proposals. The State BOE does not routinely collect information on town, village and city elections, or on elections for fire districts or other special districts with elected commissioners. They also do not conduct school-related elections, such as votes for school board members, school budgets, or school-related propositions.

There is no central repository in the state for information about how many people are voting, voter enrollment information for each municipality, who is elected, what propositions were put before the voter, and what the results of the vote were. Therefore, it is difficult to get a good picture of voter participation rates in local elections.

Fire District Commissioner Total Votes (December 2006)	
Number of Fire Districts	Votes Cast (Per District)
18	0 - 50
8	51 - 100
5	101 - 200
6	201 - 300
7	300 - 600

Aligning Election Dates

There has been a variety of proposals to realign the dates of various local elections. The rationale in part is that by synchronizing the dates voters approve budgets or elect people to office there will be greater voter interest and participation. However, there may be some practical – though not insurmountable – difficulties in aligning the fire, library and school election dates. For example, would voters have to go to three different polling places? Would there be enough voting machines available? Would fiscal years need to be realigned based on new election dates? These issues, as well as issues of convenience and handicapped accessibility, could be addressed in theory by using voting technology that would allow a person to cast their vote on one machine at the voting center of their choice.