
New Electorate Study

Who Stays Home?

Low Propensity Voters in Local Elections

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In 2015, Governor Jerry Brown signed the California Voter Participation Rights Act (SB 415) into law. As its title suggests, the bill aimed to increase turnout in local elections by forcing all California jurisdictions to hold elections concurrently with statewide elections (in June or November of even years). Existing research supports the main assumption made by SB 415: election timing is the most important predictor of differences in aggregate turnout rates across cities.

However, State Senator Benjamin Hueso, who authored the bill, also argues that “as a result of low voter turnout, the voting population often does not look like the general public as a whole and neither does the city council.” On this point about inequality, existing research raises an important paradox. On the one hand, voting costs are more acute among marginalized subsets of the population, which means that members of such sub-populations may benefit most from reforms that reduce those costs. On the other hand, several scholars have found that election reforms that decrease the costs of voting exacerbate rather than diminish inequalities in the electorate.

In this paper, we ask what the advantages and limitations of on-cycle elections are particularly for low-propensity voters who are typically members of marginalized sub-populations.

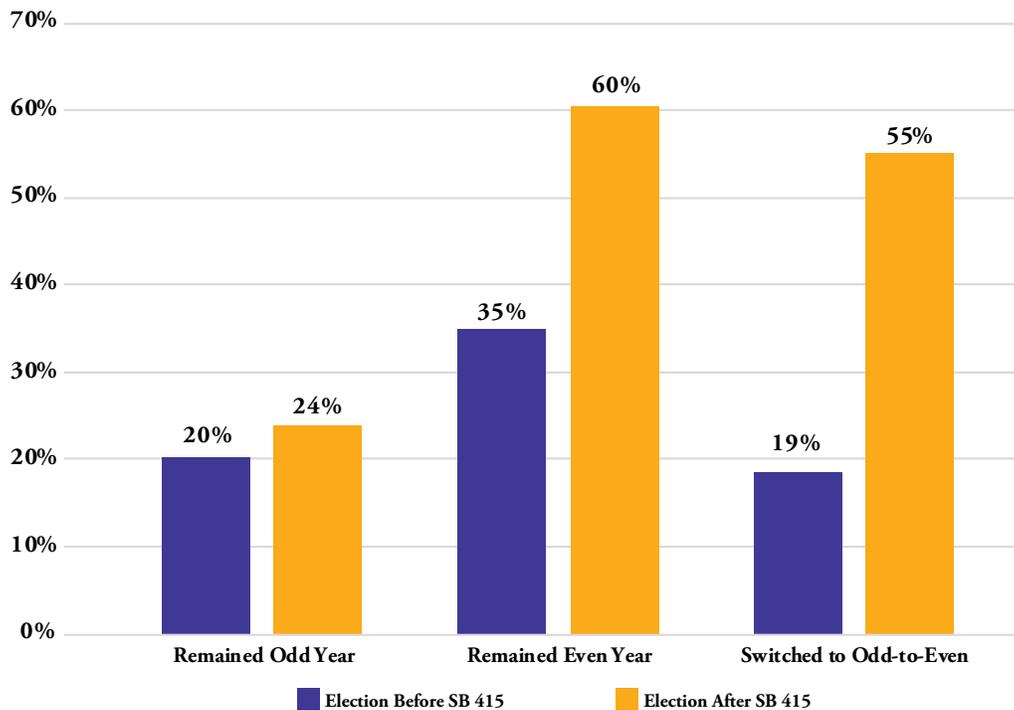
SUMMARY OF RESULTS

To answer our research question, we first need to establish who participates in concurrent versus nonconcurrent elections. The arguments in favor of on-cycle elections presume that there is a set of voters who would participate in local elections if only they were held at the same time as national elections. So, we begin by analyzing the composition of noncurrent and concurrent elections to determine if this assumption is plausible. We draw on a large survey of low-propensity voters in California that asks about turnout in different kinds of elections and find that compared to avid voters, those who drop out at the local level are younger, more likely to be female, less educated, more likely to be Latino/Asian, less knowledgeable, and weak partisans. We find that a lack of procedural information about elections and a lack of efficacy are the primary explanations that these individuals give for low turnout in local elections. The fact that different types of voters participate in concurrent and non-concurrent elections means that changing election timing has the potential to reshape the electorate.

Then, relying on the change dictated by SB 415 which altered local election schedules, we analyze how concurrent elections affect turnout. We look first at local turnout in the aggregate. We find that changing to concurrent elections results in significantly higher turnout. Then, we draw on individual level information from the California voter file to show that when cities switch to even year elections the makeup of the electorate is more representative of the population with regard to race, class, age, and strength of partisan affiliation.¹

Figure 1 represents one of our main findings – that changing to concurrent elections increases turnout of registered voters. In our analyses we have three types of cities, those that always had concurrent elections during our study period, those that always had nonconcurrent elections during the study period, and those that switched as a result of SB 415. Cities that always had concurrent elections generally have higher turnout overall. A more interesting comparison is between the cities that stayed nonconcurrent and the cities that switched. We can assume that the switching cities would have looked very similar to the nonconcurrent cities if they maintained their nonconcurrent elections. Instead, turnout jumps up dramatically for the cities that changed their election timing.

Figure 1: Local Election Turnout in California Cities, by Election Timing Before and After the Passing of SB 415



1. We also find that individual level inequalities in the probability of voting are exacerbated in the change to concurrent election. However, because turnout increases across the board, groups with large shares of nonvoters end up comprising a greater share of the total voting population in the aggregate.