

Consolidation of Elections in California Creates Massive Gains in Local Voter Turnout

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While federal elections draw large interest and voter turnout, local elections, including city council elections, have historically drawn much lower voter turnout. These local elections are arguably just as important as the higher-profile federal elections, determining who sits in the local halls of power and how well community interests are represented in local government. Low voter turnout in “off-cycle” local elections (not conducted with statewide election dates) leads to a non-representative electorate making policy decisions that impact California’s communities. A recent reform in California set out to address this problem by mandating that, under specific conditions, local elections move “on-cycle” to match with statewide election dates.

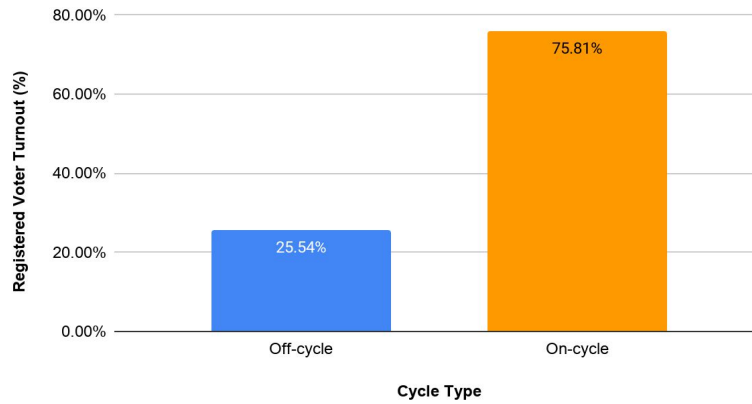
This report finds that voter turnout in municipal elections tripled, on average, in cities across California that consolidated their elections from off-cycle dates to on-cycle dates.

In 2015, California Common Cause was a lead supporter of the [California Voter Participation Rights Act](#) (SB 415, Hueso), which sought to fight the persistent problem of very low voter turnout in critically important local elections, which often happened on off-cycle dates. The bill mandated that cities move their municipal elections to statewide election dates (or “on-cycle”) if their elections saw voter turnout that was 25 percent or more lower than the voter turnout for the previous four statewide general elections. Former Governor Jerry Brown signed the bill into law in September 2015. [Prior research](#) has found that cities and counties in California experience a significant increase in voter turnout when local elections are moved from off-cycle to on-cycle, but no research to this point has examined the impact of SB 415.

Our research examining elections conducted between 2012 and 2020 found that 54 cities that switched from off-cycle elections in 2016, 2018 and 2020 experienced very significant turnout increases.

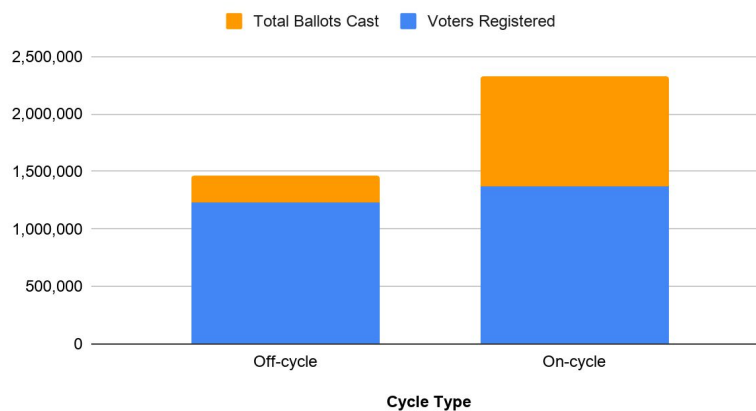
- **Cities that switched to on-cycle elections experienced on average a tripling of their voter participation in municipal elections.** The average off-cycle registered voter turnout in these cities, prior to their switch, was 25.54%. The average on-cycle registered voter turnout, after their switch, was 75.81%.

Average Total Turnout By Cycle Type (All 54 Cities)



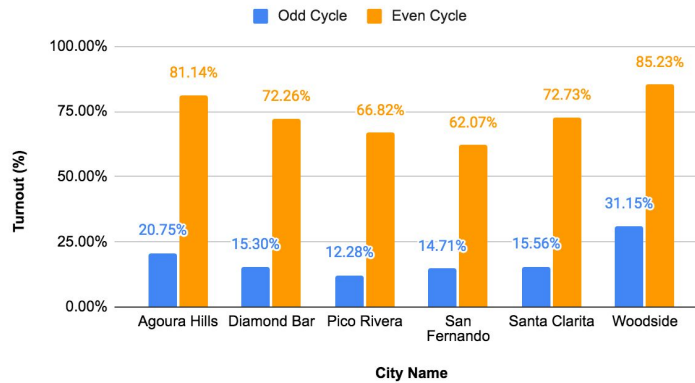
- Among the 29 cities studied that provided specific data from all of their four previous elections (two off-cycle and on-cycle elections), there was a 297% increase in votes cast after the switch.** Over the two off-cycle elections studied in those 29 cities, 241,009 votes were cast. Over the two on-cycle elections studied, 959,112 votes were cast. This increase in votes cast significantly outpaced growth in voter registration. Over the time studied, voter registration increased 11% in the 29 cities examined.

Registration and Votes Cast By Cycle (29 cities)



This conclusion held for many different kinds of cities. Several cities that are home to historically underrepresented communities saw a dramatic increase in voter turnout when they switched from an off-cycle election to an on-cycle election. Pico Rivera, Diamond Bar, and San Fernando, which are home to historically underrepresented communities and previously had local turnout rates under 16%, each saw a very substantial increase in ballots cast when they moved from off-cycle to on-cycle elections. Pico Rivera, for example, saw an over 5x increase.

Average Turnout By City



About the Data

This data includes results from 187 municipal elections up to and including the November 2020 general election. The data is derived from 54 cities across California that switched from off-cycle to on-cycle elections. There are other variables that may play a role in voter participation in California elections, including changes in voter registration laws, competitive races, and demographic changes. Although other variables could impact voter turnout, the raw data from these 54 cities indicates a dramatic increase in voter turnout in municipal elections when those elections are moved from off-cycle to on-cycle. This increase exists both in traditionally high turnout cities and historically underrepresented and disenfranchised communities. Looking forward, more data from on-cycle elections (2022 and beyond) may give us a clearer picture of the law’s effect.

Recommendation -- Based on these findings, we recommend cities that have not yet moved from off-cycle to on-cycle elections act swiftly to consolidate their elections beginning in 2022. Greater turnout makes for a stronger democracy.

Note - Common Cause used voter turnout data from a number of sources including Alameda County, Imperial County, Los Angeles County, Riverside County, Marin County, Monterey County, and Stanislaus County. Special thanks to William Brega (intern) for creating graphics, Seamus Caslin (former intern) for data collection, and Sean McMorris (consultant) for assisting with research.

Appendix: Cities studied that moved from off-cycle to on-cycle elections

Average of registered voter turnout in off-cycle elections prior to switch subtracted from average of on-cycle elections after switch.

County	City	Percentage Point Increase	County	City	Percentage Point Increase
Alameda	Piedmont	40.3	Los Angeles	Burbank	64.6
Imperial	El Centro	37.8	Los Angeles	Culver City	57.6
Imperial	Brawley	38.6	Los Angeles	Lawndale	54.4
Los Angeles	Agoura Hills	60.4	Los Angeles	Lomita	49.9
Los Angeles	Baldwin Park	46.9	Los Angeles	Manhattan Beach	59.1
Los Angeles	Calabasas	53.5	Los Angeles	Palos Verdes Estates	61.3
Los Angeles	Carson	44.1	Los Angeles	Rancho Palos Verdes	59.6
Los Angeles	Claremont	55.4	Los Angeles	Rolling Hills	43.6
Los Angeles	Cudahy	36.7	Los Angeles	Signal Hill	59.1
Los Angeles	Diamond Bar	57	Los Angeles	South El Monte	56.3
Los Angeles	El Monte	45.3	Los Angeles	West Hollywood	54.9
Los Angeles	Hawaiian Gardens	43.3	Marin	Fairfax	45.5
Los Angeles	Hawthorne	53.7	Marin	San Anselmo	49.3
Los Angeles	La Puente	46.7	Monterey	Carmel-by-the-Sea	32.7
Los Angeles	Lynwood	47.0	Riverside	Desert Hot Springs	34.2
Los Angeles	Malibu	42.9	Riverside	Norco	55.1
Los Angeles	Montebello	49.3	Riverside	Blythe	45.8
Los Angeles	Pico Rivera	54.6	San Mateo	Belmont	50.6
Los Angeles	San Fernando	47.4	San Mateo	Foster City	47.7
Los Angeles	Santa Clarita	57.2	San Mateo	Millbrae	46.2
Los Angeles	Santa Fe Springs	46.7	San Mateo	San Carlos	45.7
Los Angeles	Walnut	45	San Mateo	Woodside	54.1
Los Angeles	Westlake Village	58.1	San Mateo	Brisbane	47.6
Los Angeles	Artesia	42.2	San Mateo	Portola Valley	51
Los Angeles	Bell Gardens	40.5	San Mateo	San Bruno	56.7
Los Angeles	Bellflower	62.7	San Mateo	San Mateo	58.1
Los Angeles	Beverly Hills	61.8	Stanislaus	Modesto	51.2