MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS, ELECTORAL SYSTEM DESIGN, AND VOTER TURNOUT IN LARGE AMERICAN CITIES

A dissertation presented

by

James D. Sutherland

to
The Department of Political Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of
Political Science

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
November 2016
MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS, ELECTORAL SYSTEM DESIGN, AND VOTER TURNOUT IN LARGE AMERICAN CITIES

A dissertation presented

by

James D. Sutherland

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of Northeastern University
November 2016
Abstract

Municipal elections across the United States have much lower voter turnout rates than elections at the state and federal level. Despite this, municipal elections are still understudied phenomena. Existing research shows that voter turnout rates in American elections are impacted by the institutional confines in which they are held. This study seeks to further our understanding of local elections by examining how electoral system designs impact voter turnout rates in large American cities. This study also seeks to understand the effects of other municipal institutions and measures of electoral competition on voter turnout rates. Election statistics, demographic data, and categorizations of municipal election structures are used to develop a cross-sectional time-series dataset comprised of observations from 37 cities between 1995 and 2014. By employing a series of generalized least squares random effects models, variations in voter turnout at the mayoral and city council level are examined. The results of this study confirm the hypothesis that variations in electoral system designs impact voter turnout rates in municipal elections. In addition, the results show that two Progressive Era reforms – off-year elections and reformed government structures – continue to have a negative impact on voter turnout. However, the results show that the use of nonpartisan ballots does not impact voter turnout. Finally, this study shows that electoral competition has a moderate effect on turnout in mayoral contests but little effect in city council elections. Overall, institutional arrangements were a greater predictor of voter turnout than the competitiveness of the election. These findings augment our understanding of how municipal institutions and electoral system designs operate and the impacts they have on voter participation in local elections.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the countless number of people who have helped me throughout my academic journey. First and foremost, I would like to thank my entire family. Mom, Dad, Dan, Erin, Colton, and Rowan (who I cannot wait to meet) – my entire life you have been unwavering in your support of me. I would not be where I am or who I am without you. And Chris, I am incredibly grateful for your support, encouragement, and patience over the past five years. You have managed to keep me sane and have developed an uncanny ability to make me smile (even when I do not want to).

I also owe a great amount of gratitude to my dissertation committee: William Mayer, Thomas Vicino, and James Connolly. Without your guidance, advice, counsel, and thoughtful comments this dissertation would not be possible. Countless other Northeastern professors, in one way or another, have also contributed to my academic success. In particular, I want to acknowledge Amilcar Barreto, John Portz, David Rochefort, William Crotty, and Michael Tolley. I am also thankful for some of my wonderful undergraduate instructors and mentors: Diana Dwyre (California State University, Chico); and Christina Kulich-Vamvakas, Petros Vamvakas, and Javier Marion (Emmanuel College).

My life has been forever changed since I moved to Boston: I have met some of the most amazing and generous people. I will be forever indebted to Boston City Councilor At-Large Ayanna Pressley and the rest of the A-Team for their friendship and for invigorating my interest in local politics. You have shown me the “Power of Us” and have helped me realize the positive role that local governments play in our society and in the day-to-day lives of people. I also owe so much to Larry DiCara for the guidance he has offered me and the doors he has opened for me. I have thoroughly enjoyed the time we have spent discussing and writing about our common
interest in election statistics and local government. I also would like to thank Rev. Dr. Gregory Groover for his friendship, support, and the new perspectives he has offered me. Finally, I would like to recognize all of my colleagues in the graduate programs at Northeastern. You have all contributed to a welcoming and supportive academic environment. I appreciate every friendship I have cultivated in my time at Northeastern.

Thank you all for being such staunch supporters of me in every avenue of my life.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2  

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................. 4  

Table of Contents ...................................................................................................................................... 6  

List of Tables .......................................................................................................................................... 7  

List of Figures ......................................................................................................................................... 8  

Chapter 1: Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 9  

Chapter 2: Voter Turnout and Municipal Elections ................................................................................. 21  

Chapter 3: Electoral System Designs ....................................................................................................... 54  

Chapter 4: Conceptual Model, Data Collection, and Methodology ......................................................... 78  

Chapter 5: Descriptive Findings and Regression Results ........................................................................ 112  

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion .................................................................................................... 147  

References ............................................................................................................................................. 173
List of Tables

Table 4.1: Sampled Cities ...................................................................................................................................... 92
Table 4.2: Mayoral Forms of Government and Electoral Systems .................................................................. 100
Table 4.3: City Council Types and Electoral Systems .................................................................................. 101
Table 5.1: Median Voter Turnout Rate by City ............................................................................................. 113
Table 5.2: Descriptive Statistics for Mayoral Elections .................................................................................. 116
Table 5.3: Mayoral Turnout by Election System Type .................................................................................. 117
Table 5.4: Mayoral Turnout by Partisanship .................................................................................................. 118
Table 5.5: Mayoral Turnout by Form of Government .................................................................................... 119
Table 5.6: Mayoral Turnout by Concurrent Election ..................................................................................... 119
Table 5.7: Mayoral Turnout by Incumbency .................................................................................................. 120
Table 5.8: Comparison of Original and Transformed Variables – Mayoral .................................................. 121
Table 5.9: Correlation Matrix of Mayoral Variables ...................................................................................... 123
Table 5.10: Descriptive Statistics for City Council Elections ........................................................................ 125
Table 5.11: City Council Turnout by Election System Type ....................................................................... 128
Table 5.12: City Council Turnout by Partisanship ....................................................................................... 129
Table 5.13: City Council Turnout by Form of Government ....................................................................... 130
Table 5.14: City Council Turnout by Concurrent Election ........................................................................... 130
Table 5.15: Comparison of Original and Transformed Variables – City Council ..................................... 132
Table 5.16: Correlation Matrix of City Council Variables ............................................................................ 134
Table 5.18: Random Effects Models of City Council Turnout ................................................................. 143
List of Figures

Figure 4.1: Electoral System Mechanics and the Costs of Voting ........................................ 84
Figure 5.1: Mayoral Election Turnout Histogram ................................................................. 114
Figure 5.2: Median Mayoral Voter Turnout by Cities ......................................................... 115
Figure 5.3: Frequency Distribution of Mayoral Black Variable ......................................... 121
Figure 5.4: Frequency Distribution of Mayoral Latino Variable .......................................... 122
Figure 5.5: Frequency Distribution of Mayoral College Educated Variable ....................... 122
Figure 5.6: City Council Election Turnout Histogram ......................................................... 126
Figure 5.7: Median City Council Voter Turnout by Cities ................................................... 127
Figure 5.8: Frequency Distribution of City Council Black Variable .................................... 132
Figure 5.9: Frequency Distribution of City Council Latino Variable .................................... 133
Figure 5.10: Frequency Distribution of City Council College Educated Variable ............... 133
Chapter 1: Introduction

Elections alone are not sufficient to make a government democratic, but contemporary democracies cannot exist without them. Elections are instruments; they are “the defining institutions of modern democracy” that serve as the primary gateway through which citizens interact with their governments (Powell 2000; Katz 1997, 1). In addition, elections maintain the accountability, accessibility, responsiveness, and legitimacy of politicians and other governing officials (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Mayhew 1974; Verba et al. 1995; Stimson et al. 1995; Shklar 1991). For these reasons, elections and their role in the democratic process are widely studied inside and outside of academia.

Elections held within a municipal setting are a particularly valuable topic of study. The city election is “at the heart of the urban political process” and the process of choosing local elected officials is “generally speaking the most important decision the community makes” (Lee 1960, 2). Despite the importance of municipal elections, scholars have long lamented the fact that the topic is understudied. At the time he authored Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups, V.O. Key (1958, 614) highlighted that “about all that can be concluded about voting in state and local elections is that scholars have a wonderful opportunity to narrow our focus of ignorance.” Over half a century later, Marschall, Shah, and Ruhil (2011, 97) echoed this point by claiming that “…to say that a field of study on local elections exists would be a bit of an overstatement.” Municipal politics in general tend to lack robust theories and findings (Trounstine 2009), and the data collection practices and methods employed to study municipal elections have been deemed “primitive” compared to other election types (Marschall, Shah, and Ruhil 2011, 97).

There are, though, reasons to study municipal elections aside from the fact that we know very little about them. The success of local governments is imperative for the well-being of
American democracy itself, a fact many early political observers noted. Alexis de Tocqueville (1835, Volume I Chapter 5) highlights the importance of local governing institutions to a healthy democracy, claiming: “A nation may establish a system of free government, but without the spirit of municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty.” Thomas Jefferson – who believed that local governments were “the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man” and provided for “the perfect exercise of self-government” (Jefferson 1816b) – proclaimed that the American system of local governments was “central to the survival of the republic” (Janiskee 2010, 117).1 This sentiment was shared with other Founders, who believed that the strength of local politics was directly linked to the welfare of the nation itself (Janiskee 2010).

These ideas were similarly echoed during the Progressive Era of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. During this time period city governments were considered by many to be “the one conspicuous failure of the United States” due to their “extravagance, corruption, and mismanagement” (Bryce [1888] 1995, 572). Yet despite widespread criticism, Progressive reformers also realized the consequences of poorly governed cities and how their governance was connected to the health of American democracy itself. In his address at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Frederick N. Judson (1908) proclaimed that “the future of representative government is closely connected with and indeed dependent upon reform in municipal administration.” In fact, scholars soon began trumpeting American cities as “the hope of democracy” (Beard 1912, 3; Howe 1905). It was within this ethos that reformers joined together to begin promoting municipal reform and good governance. A great

---

1 Jefferson’s use of the term ‘local government’ here differs from our contemporary understanding. His notion of local government was inherently anti-urban, and was more akin to New England towns and his “ward republics” (Norris 1998). Jefferson (1787) actually held quite a bit of disdain for urban areas, stating: “The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.”
deal of this advocacy was accomplished under the banner of the National Municipal League (now National Civic League).

Local politics are essential to the operation of American democracy. For one, the local arena provides a space for citizens to become educated about politics. For the majority of individuals in early America, local government was where “political life had its origins” (Tocqueville 1835, Volume 1 Chapter 5). Local politics serve as a “school for citizenship” where people learn about democracy and political participation (Lowndes 1995, 169). This knowledge can then be applied to higher levels of government as John Stuart Mill (1977, 63) argues: “…it is only by practicing popular government on a limited scale, that people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger scale.”

Localized structures of government also allow for greater political autonomy. Many early political scholars and observers saw the benefits associated with a decentralized government structure. In his account of democracy in early America, Tocqueville (1835, Volume 1 Chapter 5) comments that he “heard citizens attribute the power and prosperity of their country to a multitude of reasons, but they all placed the advantages of local institutions in the foremost rank.” One of the benefits that derived from a decentralized government structure was the ability of localities to self-govern. Thomas Jefferson wrote that “the way to have good and safe government, is not to trust it all to one, but to divide it among the many, distributing to every one exactly the functions he is competent to” (Jefferson 1816a). The diffusion of power Jefferson alludes to allows for a great deal of local autonomy in policy issues at the sub-state level. Tocqueville (1835, Volume 1 Chapter 5) concurred with Jefferson’s assertion, observing that local autonomy was necessary to protect private interests while also promoting national cohesion and democratic principles. Additionally, local autonomy serves as a “safety-valve” against
threats of tyranny (Mill 1977, 306; Syed 1966). By devolving some political power to local
governments the Founders sought to keep citizens engaged and included in the success of the
republic itself (Syed 1966; Janiskee 2010). Moreover, this proximity fosters individual
participation in local affairs which in turn “increases the feeling among individual citizens that
they ‘belong’ in their community” (Pateman 1970, 27). Localities can benefit from this sense of
attachment because it produces a greater sense of social capital and a general concern for the
common good (Putnam 2000).

Local governments then, are important to the theoretical and philosophical idea of
American democracy. However, the success of city governments and local democracy are
important for other, more practical reasons. Elections in cities are important because cities
themselves have become increasingly important both nationally and worldwide. Today’s cities
play an exceptionally large role in our world’s economic, political, and cultural health (e.g.,
Glaeser 2012). In fact, America’s large urban centers have become so essential to how our world
operates, that scholars such as Khanna (2016a) posit that “metropolitan and regional formations,
anchored by the great cities and urban archipelagos” and not individual states are the key to our
country’s economic future. Even further, Khanna (2016b) argues that cities have surpassed
nations as the most important global political units.

In the United States, the importance of cities lies in part with their responsibility in
policymaking. For the past century, city officials have seen their policymaking roles steadily
increase. Because local government is closest to the people it represents, cities have routinely
addressed salient quality of life issues (e.g., police and fire protection, trash collection, and
public libraries), some of which may only be issues at the local level. However more recently,
American cities have also become effective policy innovators. Katz and Bradley (2013) highlight
the successes that cities have had in encouraging environmental sustainability (Portland, OR), connecting with cities and nations across the globe (Miami, FL), managing immigration (Houston, TX), and fostering the innovation economy (Boston, MA). The issues cities are currently expected to tackle require smart policymakers that are often dealing with ever-decreasing levels of state and federal funding.

While cities have confronted a wide range of new and old policy issues, they are also experiencing demographic change. The United States is an urban nation (Monkkonen 1988; Rae 2003; Teaford 2006). Just over 71% of the American population resides in an urbanized area (U.S. Census 2010). Moreover, roughly one-third of Americans live within the ten most populated metropolitan statistical areas (Badger 2014). Large metropolitan areas are also driving almost all of the population growth in the country (Badger 2014). The raw annual population growth in metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) has outpaced the nation’s population growth in four of the last five years. Between 2010 and 2015, the combined population of the country’s MSAs has grown at a rate of 4.64%, compared to a nationwide population growth rate of just 3.91% (U.S. Census 2015).

Local governments comprise over 99% of the roughly 90,000 government entities in the United States. Of these roughly 90,000 local governments, almost 36,000 (39.8%) are classified by the Census Bureau as municipalities or townships (U.S. Census 2012). In addition, roughly 51% of the over 500,000 elected officials in the United States come from municipal or town governments (Lawless 2012). Municipal governments are also the source of the bulk of all

---

2 The U.S. Census defines an “urbanized area” as an area with more than 50,000 people. As of 2010, there were 486 urbanized areas in the country. If you include the country’s 3,087 “urban clusters” – areas with a population between 2,500 and 50,000 people – then 80.7% of the country’s population resides within an urban setting.

3 These 10 MSAs include New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, Philadelphia, Washington, Miami, Atlanta, and Boston.

4 This calculation excludes elected officials of school districts and other special districts (e.g., water and sewer). See Table 3.1 on page 33 of Lawless (2012).
government hiring. Local governments are staffed by about 13.9 million full- and part-time employees, which equates to 63.3% of the nationwide total of government employees (U.S. Census 2012).

The sheer number of local governments and municipal elected officials, coupled with the rising population levels of urban centers, makes local governments an incredibly valuable and fruitful unit of analysis. In his 1932 dissent in *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandies stated that each of the fifty American states is akin to a “laboratory” of democracy (Morehouse and Jewell 2004). Because of demographic, cultural, and political idiosyncrasies, Brandeis believed that states were fertile ground for the testing of legislation and policy which could later be applied to the national level. This same logic applies, perhaps even more, to cities. Studying government and elections within a local context allows scholars not only to garner a better understanding of municipal democracy, but also to test theories that originated from studies about both state and national levels of government (Marschall 2010; Marschall et al. 2011; Trounstine 2009).

In order for our cities to be successful, and in turn, positively affect the rest of the country, they need to be well-managed and representative of the people they serve. Local leaders are doing more and more in terms of policy creation; therefore, it is critical to understand how municipal elected officials get into office and what sort of mandate they hold from their constituents. Similarly, the sizable proportion of the American population residing in urbanized areas, coupled with the considerable number of local governments means that municipal politics and elections are an increasingly significant component of American democracy that is worthy of further study.
Turnout in Municipal Elections

One facet of local governments that has been studied is voter turnout. Turnout rates in local elections are abysmally low compared to other levels of government. Many scholars have studied the issue of declining turnout in American elections at every level of government (e.g., Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Cassel and Luskin 1988; Jackman 1987; Bullock III 1990). However, nowhere is turnout as continuously low as it is in local elections (Bullock 1990; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Karnig and Walter 1983; Caren 2007). Studies have shown that on average, local turnout is typically half that of national elections (Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1993; Morlan 1984; Trounstine 2008). For many cities, this means that turnout is equal to about 25% of the voting age population (Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Bridges 1997), but can fall below ten percent of the voting age population in some cities (Hajnal et al. 2002). Municipal turnout across the country is also highly variable and may even be in a steady decline (Karnig and Walter 1983; Verba et al. 1995). In fact, it is not uncommon for some cities to see twenty-percentage-point swings in turnout from election to election (Caren 2007).

There is some disagreement among democratic theorists about the importance of high voter turnout. Some scholars argue that, for a variety of reasons, low turnout does not matter for a functioning democracy (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Polsby 1963). For instance, both Berelson et al. (1954) and Weisberg and Grofman (1981) argue that low turnout is a sign of an electorate satisfied with their current governing situation. Voter abstention indicates that citizens are content with any and all of the candidates or policies up for election at a given time (Weisberg and Grofman 1981). Others maintain that turnout levels do not matter because the attitudes and preferences of voters and nonvoters are similar enough that higher turnout
would not result in a different electoral outcome (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Gant and Lyons 1993; Highton and Wolfinger 2001). In fact, an entire issue in the academic journal *Electoral Studies* is devoted to highlighting how concerns about low turnout are unfounded (See issue introduction by Lutz and Marsh 2007).

In contrast, many other scholars believe that low turnout is dangerous, and inhibits the proper functioning of democracies (Amy 1993; Lijphart 1997; Piven and Cloward 1988; Teixeira 1992; Verba et. al. 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Lijphart (1997, 1) calls low turnout democracy’s “unresolved dilemma” while Katz (1997, 102) claims that low turnout “call[s] into question the legitimacy of the [government] system” and “indicate[s] that something is wrong.”

It is also important to have high voter turnout levels because elections serve as the primary connection between citizens and their government (Hansen 1975; Verba and Nie 1973).

The consequences of low turnout levels at the local level are particularly acute. While preferences of voters and nonvoters may be somewhat similar at the federal level (Teixeira 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), preferences of voters and nonvoters at the municipal level can be quite divergent, often reflecting on social, economic, and racial affiliations (Alford and Lee 1968; Wattenberg 1998; Hajnal 2010). Oliver (2012) also finds that this division between voters and nonvoters may split between homeowners and long-term residents versus renters and more transient populations. In high turnout federal elections, scholars have shown that the less-educated, racial and ethnic minorities, and the economically disadvantaged vote less regularly (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Hajnal 2010). If voters and nonvoters have different interests and opinions, then there is a chance that the result of the electoral contest is biased toward groups that are more educated, wealthier, and Caucasian.
The relationship between who votes and who does not vote severely impacts the strength and inclusiveness of local democracy as well as the ultimate outcome of an election. The likelihood of a skewed electorate is theorized to be inversely proportionate to that election’s total turnout (Tingsten 1937). As turnout levels increase, inequalities in group participation and influence are diminished (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Lijphart 1997; Wattenberg 1998). Low and distorted turnouts can produce overrepresentation (or underrepresentation) of particular groups come Election Day. Moreover, low turnout may in fact affect the ultimate outcome of an election (Guinier 1994; Cassel 1986; Hajnal and Trounstine 2005; Hajnal 2010), as well as the policies adopted by a local government (Schumaker and Getter 1977), and the attention paid to certain communities by elected officials (Key 1949; Burnham 1987). This means that in low turnout environments the concerns of certain groups of voters will not be adequately addressed by the government (Key 1949; Martin 2003; Piven and Cloward 1988; Bennett and Resnick 1990). Most scholars are typically concerned with the overrepresentation of the affluent and well-educated at the expense of lower economic classes (Mills 1956; Schattschneider 1970; Schumaker and Getter 1977; Lijphart 1997), or the underrepresentation of racial minorities (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Hajnal 2001; Eisinger 1983).

A lack of citizen participation is not only a concern over representativeness and policy outcome, but also a normative concern for the democratic health of a political unit (Arendt 1958; Barber 1984; Pateman 1970; Verba 1996; Lijphart 1997). Low levels of voter turnout can distort how representative a political body is in the eyes of a population (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Similarly, high turnout levels are seen as a necessity if elected officials are to be
responsive to the public (Lipset 1963; Lipset and Schneider 1983; Lijphart 1997), or if they are to claim an electoral mandate (Dahl 1956). Furthermore, participation at the local level is crucial for trying to promote general political and community engagement. As many scholars and political observers argue, local participation aids in the establishment of a democratic citizenry (Dahl 1967; Lowndes 1995; Tocqueville 1835; Mill 1977). Local government, because of its close proximity to the people that it represents, serves as a mechanism to politically socialize and empower citizens. In turn, low rates of voter participation are a concern when they signal a lack of confidence and trust in governing institutions (Pateman 1970; Lipset and Schneider 1983; Bennett and Resnick 1990; Oliver 2001; Hajnal and Lewis 2003).

**Purpose and Significance of this Study**

Cities across the country vary in their levels of turnout in municipal contests. Low levels of voter turnout should be a concern for municipal policymakers and academics alike. Thus the purpose of this study is to examine how municipal institutions and electoral system designs can impact voter turnout in mayoral and city council elections held in large American cities. Scholars that have attempted to account for varying rates of voter turnout in municipal elections often turn to Progressive Era reform institutions – nonpartisan and off-year elections, city manager systems, and at-large city councils – as explanatory variables. However, research on voter turnout in local elections has continually neglected the different electoral system designs employed across municipalities. This study will expand upon previous scholarly works that have outlined how municipal institutions can impact voter turnout rates by categorizing and analyzing electoral system designs and their impact on citywide turnout rates. To this end, three research questions are posed:
1) What is the relationship between electoral systems and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities?

2) What is the relationship between “reformed” municipal institutions and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities?

3) What is the relationship between electoral competition and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities?

Using hierarchical linear modeling, this study will examine the relationship between municipal institutions (both previously-studied Progressive Era reform institutions and electoral systems) and electoral competition and voter turnout in mayoral and city council elections across 37 of America’s largest cities between 1995 and 2014. The results of this study will expand upon our understanding of voter turnout, electoral institutions, nonpartisan elections, and municipal governance.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter Two offers a review of the pertinent literature that helped guide the formation of my hypotheses. This chapter draws on the fields of urban studies, democracy, and elections and voting. Here I outline some of the principal theories of voter turnout, particularly as they pertain to municipal elections. Additionally, this chapter traces the history of municipal reform from the age of urban political machines through the Progressive Era and up until the present day. Chapter Three expands upon the discussion in Chapter Two by focusing on one institution in particular: the electoral system. This includes a
look at the importance of electoral systems within democracies and the impacts they can have on a political entity. In addition, this chapter provides a categorization of the different types of electoral systems currently employed in large American cities. Chapter Four begins with a review of this study’s research objectives and the associated hypotheses. From there, I explain the data collection methods and research design I have developed to answer my research questions. Chapter Four also contains a description of the variables used in my statistical model. In this chapter, I also provide an overview of the random effects generalized least squares regression models used to analyze the hypotheses I have developed. Chapter Five starts with a descriptive analysis of the impact that municipal institutions and electoral competitiveness have on turnout in mayoral and city council elections. I then provide a statistical analysis by examining the eight generalized least squares random effects models – four mayoral and four city council – in the context of my hypotheses. Chapter Six provides a summary of my findings. These findings are then discussed and evaluated in the context of previous works on electoral systems as well as on voter turnout in American cities. This chapter also assesses the implications and limitations of this study. Finally, I conclude with a brief description of potential avenues for future research on municipal election systems and voter turnout.
Chapter 2: Voter Turnout and Municipal Elections

The importance of voter turnout to democratic studies is demonstrated by the fact that scholars have developed a plethora of theories, supported by a bounty of empirical evidence, in an attempt to better understand voter turnout rates. Theories of voter turnout can be divided into four broad categories based on their primary causal mechanism: 1) institutional theories; 2) rational choice theories; 3) individual and demographic theories; and 4) electoral competitiveness theories. Since much of the current research on municipal elections focuses solely on political institutions, this review draws on research from other realms of the political participation literature.

Institutional Theories

Particularly since the pioneering studies of Powell (1982, 1986) and Jackman (1987), comparativists have sought to better understand how political institutions can impact voter turnout. Electoral institutions dictate who is eligible to vote, as well as when, where, and how the act of voting occurs. As a result, political institutions dictate how individual preferences are translated into political power, and likely have a causal impact on varying levels of political participation (March and Olsen 1984; Jackman 1987; Milner 2002; Smets and van Ham 2013). Institutions provide the ‘rules of the game’ in politics and as such, can impact the behavior of groups and individuals alike. Institutions define participants, create political strategies, and can alter the preferences of individuals (Steinmo 2001).

Scholars have looked to explain relative turnout levels using a multitude of institutional variables. For instance, in his cross-national study Powell (1986) concludes that the institutional context of American elections limit voter turnout compared to the other countries in his study. He attributed higher turnout levels to countries with “strong party-group linkages” and more-
competitive nationwide districts. Jackman’s (1987) study shows that five institutional variables positively impact turnout in his 19 country study: national districts, multi-party systems, unicameralism, compulsory voting, and electoral disproportionality. Other scholars have made similar conclusions: political institutions can play a role in macro-levels of turnout across political units (Teixeira 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998).

In terms of the effects that political institutions can have on voter turnout, municipalities are no different from any other level of government. Any discussion of the impact of political institutions at the municipal level begins with a history of urban political party machines and the subsequent Progressive Era reforms that followed. The next section highlights the development of contemporary urban political institutions. From there, I delve into the impacts that municipal reforms have had on voter turnout.

*The Municipal Reform Era*

Residents and legislators of individual municipalities are responsible for developing city government institutions within the confines of state laws. Because of the uniqueness of individual American cities, municipal governing structures vary more across jurisdictions than at any other level of government in the United States (Saunders 1982; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). The structure of contemporary municipal institutions can be traced back to the machine politics era and the values and reforms subsequently promoted by the Progressive movement. By the late 1800s, cities governments were modeled after the federal government: a single executive in the mayor and a bicameral district-based legislative branch. Prior to the turn of the twentieth century, cities had very few functions (Erie 1988). However, with the influx of immigrants from mostly poor European countries and as the waves of industrialization took hold, cities began to expand rapidly in both population and purpose.
By the late 1800s, and through the first part of the twentieth century, political machines came to dominate urban politics across the country.\(^5\) Two main factors contributed to the rise of urban political machines: immigration and industrialization (Bridges 1984). City populations during this period rapidly grew as immigration rates soared and more economic activity and opportunity became centered in urban areas. The arrival of immigrants coincided with the spread of universal male suffrage and the growth of the mass electorate. In addition, American cities were experiencing widespread industrial growth by the end of the 1800s. As the economic activity of cities increased, so too did the need for a larger municipal government and an increased payroll (Philips 1960). Between 1870 and 1900 the growth rate of municipal workforces outpaced that of city populations (DiGaetano 1988). Similarly, municipal governments at this point in time had larger budget expenditures than both the state and federal governments (McDonald and Ward 1984).

Urban machines became dominant forces within local politics because of their ability to bring a sense of stability to cities that had gone from having a very limited governmental role to systems that needed to account for new immigrants, increased diversity, and an increase in the demands on the political structure (Bridges 1984). Municipal governments that might have been successful just decades prior were pushed beyond their capacity (Schiesl 1977). Local political parties often were able to fill the void left by governments struggling to deliver basic city services (Hofstadter 1955). The political machines that emerged typically found their greatest support in industrial cities and neighborhoods that were predominantly white, lower or working class, and had heavy concentrations of immigrant populations (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Trounstine 2008).

---

\(^5\) Political machines are hierarchical party organizations, typically controlled by a single leader (or “boss”), that rely on material incentives and handouts to foster political loyalty and voter support (Judd and Swanstrom 2004).
Urban machines governed cities through local party organizations (Trounstine 2008). Machines were administered both hierarchically and geographically, with a party boss delegating responsibilities to ward leaders and precinct captains. Party loyalty and votes were both guaranteed through a system of patronage – usually in the form of material rewards like jobs, city contracts, and city services – to party loyalists and immigrants (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Trounstine 2008). The party machines and their bosses soon became synonymous with corruption and graft (Bridges 1997; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Despite their political support amongst parts of the population, urban machines were distrusted by a large segment of the population in many cities.

Many residents within cities became apprehensive about rampant corruption and the mismanagement of their governments under machine rule (Murphy 2002). It became apparent to advocates of municipal reform that party machines and bosses were the roots of the evils they saw in the management of their city (Bridges 1997). The far-reaching belief that the democratic nature of city politics had been infected by machine politics was channeled into the municipal reform movement. The municipal reform movement was part of the larger national Progressive Era that took place between the 1880s and the 1930s (Hofstadter 1955; Morgan et. al. 2007; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Many of the reformers were members of the middle and upper class who abhorred the conditions of their cities and their loss of political power to the machines (Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood 2004). Instead of the greed and corruption they associated with machines, urban reformers advocated for government efficiency and an assortment of good government practices (Judd and Swanstrom 2004).

The Progressive reformers’ primary target was the power base of the bosses and machines: the political party. Progressive reformers believed that their goals could be realized
through the amendment of city charters to promote effective, efficient, and less corrupt municipal governments (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Bridges 1997; Morgan et. al. 2007; Frederickson et al. 2004; Schiesl 1977). Municipal electoral reform efforts included nonpartisan elections, unicameral at-large city councils, provisions for recall and referenda, and altering the timing of city elections so that they did not align with federal and state contests (Banfield and Wilson 1963, Chudacoff and Smith, 2010).

Nonpartisan elections were promoted by reformers as a way to curtail the power of urban machines. Additionally, they were touted as mechanisms for removing the “politics” out of urban governance while simultaneously promoting the professional management of cities (Adrian 1952; Banfield and Wilson 1963; Trounstine 2010). Reformers believed that parties had an undue influence on local elections and at times could corrupt the electoral process (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Hawley 1973; Lee 1960). By ridding cities of the influences of party machines, reformers thought that residents would be able to have a greater influence over government decision-making (Duncan 1913; Hofstadter 1955), and that they would be “emancipated from the tyranny of national and state political parties” (National Municipal League 1900, 144-145).

Rather than relying on political parties as a voting cue, the removal of party labels from ballots requires citizens to gather more information if they wish to knowledgeably choose who should represent them. This requires a greater effort by the individual voter. Voters that do not choose to gather this additional information may end up making a less-informed choice or even vote against their own interests. By introducing nonpartisan ballots, reformers believed that stronger, more direct bonds would be formed between candidates and voters (Lee 1960). Removing party labels would also limit the influence that the machines held over less-educated immigrants who made up large proportions of the machines’ vote totals. Municipal reformers
also argued that better candidates would run for office because they would not have to work their way through the machine hierarchy prior to mounting a campaign (Lee 1960). In an effort to further reduce the power of political parties, reformers proposed that local elections should not be held concurrently with partisan contests at the state and national levels (Trounstine 2008).

In addition to nonpartisan elections, reformers believed that citywide, or at-large, city council elections would reduce the machines’ grasp on power that had been prevalent under ward-based councils (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Judd and Swanstrom 2004; Morgan et al. 2007; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Under machine rule, aldermen elected by wards promoted very narrow interests based on the constituencies that they represented. By moving away from a ward-based political system toward a citywide one, the city government could better operate to promote the general welfare of the entire city (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Lineberry and Fowler 1967). Additionally, at-large elections would work to limit the influence of party bosses by requiring candidates to win votes citywide, rather than in machine strongholds (Judd and Swanstrom 2004; Morgan, England and Pelissero 2007; Welch and Bledsoe 1988).

In addition to curtailing corruption and the role of the political party in city affairs, municipal reformers sought to increase the efficiency of government itself by removing the political aspects from government decision-making and moving toward a government more focused on administrative service (Trounstine 2010). Efforts to reorganize city governments were based on the premise that modeling the city after a business would promote efficiency (Adrian 1952; Frederickson et al. 2004; Hays 1964; Holli 1974; Judd and Swanstrom 2004; Link 1959; Ludwig 1959; McCormick 1981; Morgan, et al. 2007; Schiesl 1977; Weinstein 1962; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Reformers believed that “certain citizens – professionals, experts, and the well-educated – were more fit to govern than others” (Hawley 1973, 9). This mission was
carried out in part by the National Municipal League. Founded in Philadelphia in 1894 at the First Annual Conference for Good City Government, the National Municipal League produced its first model city charter in 1899 (National Municipal League 1916). Their proposed model charter, along with subsequent iterations, advocated the reorganization of city governments, new municipal electoral institutions, and civil service reform (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Stewart 1950).

The National Municipal League’s first model city charter called for a strong-mayor system alongside a popularly-elected council. Prior to 1900, most cities had weak-mayor systems which promoted the interests of the much more powerful aldermen as well as the political machines that backed them (Adrian 1972). In contrast, the strong-mayor system placed greater authority and independence in the office of the mayor. However, not long after the National Municipal League’s endorsement of the strong-mayor system, cities began experimenting with the commission form of government. The commission form of government developed in 1900 in Galveston, Texas in response to the city government’s inability to respond successfully to the destruction caused by a hurricane. The efforts to rebuild the city were spearheaded by a group of business leaders instead of by the elected local government. As the rebuilding efforts were underway, the state legislature obliged the request by Galveston to codify its newly formed government consisting of a five member commission with both legislative and administrative powers. The new form of government called on each commissioner to oversee a city department, and required that they be elected by the city at-large. The commission form of government proved popular because of its similarities to a business’s board of directors and its purported ability to govern without conflicts of interest (Schiesl 1977). The commission plan’s popularity and success led to it becoming a component of the 1908 Des Moines Plan for a model city.
charter. By 1913 roughly 300 cities had implemented the commission plan and by 1917 it had spread to over 500 cities nationwide (Weinstein 1962; Phillips 1960).

However, the success of the newly created commission governments was short-lived. While the commission plan appeared to model itself after a board of directors, the linking of executive and legislative authority within a single board proved cumbersome and created fractures amongst city commissioners. Because individual commissioners oversaw the making and implementation of policy within a single department, they lacked any accountability over expenditures and decision-making. Coordination across departments also proved difficult and as a result, government efficiency suffered (Schiesl 1977; Phillips 1960).

As criticism of the commission model mounted, reformers continued their search for a more efficient structure of governance (Schiesl 1977; Adrian 1972). Reformers soon turned to the council manager form of government (also known as the city-manager form of government). Council-manager systems are unique in that a bureaucratic appointee – the manager – acts as the chief executive officer for the city. The city council would be responsible for appointing and removing the manager from his or her position. While council-manager systems still retain their mayor and city council, the roles of these institutions are limited to policymaking. Meanwhile, the city manager was tasked with handling the day-to-day operations of the city. Reformers began to favor the council-manager plan over the commissioner plan because it separated legislative and executive functions. The dispersion of power – by placing administrative authority with the city manager and policymaking with the mayor and council – was thought to reduce the influence that political machines could have over city governance (Trounstine 2010). Reformers believed that managers would be appointed based on their administrative ability and could operate outside of the realm of political pressure. The National Municipal League bought
into the council-manager concept. By 1915, their model city charter was revised to include the
council-manager plan instead of the strong-mayor plan it had advocated in 1900. The eighth and
most recent edition of the model city charter put forth by the now-named National Civic League
in 2003 still recommends the use of the council-manager system. It continues to be the most
widely used governing structure in cities and towns of all sizes across the country (National
Civic League 2003).

The extent to which reforms were successfully implemented has varied by city and
region. Large industrial cities with dense immigrant populations were the least likely to
implement reformed governing systems, although some adopted components of the reform
agenda, for instance Los Angeles (1909), Boston (1909) and Detroit (1918) all implemented
nonpartisan at-large elections (Bridges 1997). In the Southwestern United States, nonpartisan at-
large elections were adopted easily which has resulted in city governments maintaining a culture
focusing on “frugality, efficiency, and professionalism in public administration” (Bridges 1997,
146). The variety of reforms put forth during the Progressive Era has resulted in the many
different forms and combinations of contemporary municipal governments. Researchers today
still use Progressive Era reforms to categorize municipal governments. Classic machine cities or
“machine descendants” are those that utilize mayor-council systems and partisan district
elections (Bridges 1997, 131). These cities are typically found in the Northeast and Midwest
(Bridges 1997). Meanwhile, reformed cities typically have council-manager plans and
nonpartisan at-large elections (Trounstine 2008; Bridges 1997).

*Municipal Reform and Voter Turnout*

The “institutional package” a city adopts can impact political participation levels (Svara
1977). Although much of the wider literature on voting behavior focuses on individual factors,
most of the research on municipal voter turnout looks at the effects that Progressive-era institutions have on political participation. In this context, the impact that institutional structures have is typically understood vis-à-vis the way electoral rules and procedures incentivize political participation (Johnson, Shively, and Stein 2002; Piven and Cloward 1989). Thus, the Progressive Era electoral reforms of the early twentieth century form the basis of most studies on urban voter turnout. It is typically hypothesized that the majority of these reform institutions – nonpartisanship, council-manager governing systems, and off-year elections – have had a negative impact on voter turnout. The results on the impact of at-large city council elections have been a bit more mixed. Each of these reforms will be discussed in turn.

Despite the fact that many political scientists tout the importance of political parties to a functioning democracy (Schattschneider 1942; Aldrich 1995; Beck 1997), Progressive Era reformers linked partisanship with corruption and inefficiency (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Hawley 1973; Lee 1960; Tounstine 2010). Nonpartisan elections were promoted as a way to limit the power of urban machines. As a result, today a majority of American cities utilize nonpartisan elections (Wood 2002; Tounstine 2010; ICMA 2011).

Partisan elections are thought to elicit higher turnout rates due to direct influence on the benefits and costs associated with the act of voting (Downs 1957, Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Partisanship impacts the perceived benefits a voter receives from casting a ballot (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). If we accept that a given person possesses a psychological attachment to a political party (Campbell et al. 1960; Stokes 1999), then he or she will receive a benefit from voting and demonstrating support for that party in an election (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). This in turn would lead to higher turnout rates in partisan cities compared to nonpartisan cities.
It is also theorized that cities which allow partisan ballots demonstrate higher turnout because they lower the information cost associated with voting. Voters often lack adequate information to make thoughtful political decisions (Downs 1957; Converse 1964); however, voters are typically successful at using heuristic cues to make more informed decisions (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991). It is typically thought that the most accessible and utilized voting cue in American politics is partisan affiliation (Campbell et al. 1960; Karnig and Walter 1983; Rahn 1993; Beck 1997; Stokes 1999; Dalton 2007). Party labels can shape voter perceptions of candidates by signaling a candidate’s probable ideological orientation and policy preferences. Where the partisan cue is not available, as is the case in most city elections, voting becomes more costly to the individual. In turn, the voter may decide that it is best to abstain from voting in the election (Lineberry and Fowler 1967). In addition voters may instead seek out other readily available cues in order to make more informed decisions (Schaffner et al. 2001). In nonpartisan settings these cues can include ballot position (Bain and Hecock 1957), incumbency (Schaffner et al. 2001), and especially race or ethnicity (Kamin 1958; Lorinkas, Hawkins, and Edwards 1969; Arrington 1978; Squire and Smith 1988; Hill et al. 2001; Liu and Vanderleeuw 2001; Kaufmann 2004; Stein et al. 2005; Barreto 2007).

Elections held within the context of a party system can decrease information costs in other ways too. Partisan campaign efforts can provide voter mobilization and larger get-out-the-vote operations (Karnig and Walter 1983; Schaffner, Wright, and Streb 2001; Trounstine 2010). Partisanship aids voters who keep a “running tally” of party performance in order to help them when making their voting decisions (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). Partisan elections can also indirectly increase turnout by providing resources and benefits to non-incumbent candidates, especially those that are ethnic minorities (Stucky 2003). Finally, partisanship seems to be most
important when the results of a municipal election are expected to be close (Caren 2007). In closely contested elections, parties have a greater incentive to mobilize potential voters and are more likely to expend party funds to win the election (Cox and Munger 1989).

At the municipal level, numerous studies have found empirical evidence showing that nonpartisan cities exhibit lower voter turnout rates than those that use partisan ballots (Dixon 1966; Alford and Lee 1968; Hawley 1973; Karnig and Walter 1983; Squire and Smith 1988; Schaffner et al. 2001; Hajnal 2010; Trounstine 2012; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). However, research conducted by Lublin and Tate (1995), Wood (2002), and Caren (2007) does not find a significant difference in turnout rates between partisan and nonpartisan cities. Their findings corroborate public opinion research by Kaufmann (2004, 18), who argues that partisanship is not necessarily important at the local level because municipal governments are responsible for “maintain[ing] or enhance[ing] the immediate quality of life” and “provid[ing] necessary services” – acts that are not typically associated with parties.

A second Progressive reform, the form of government, is also linked to varying turnout rates. Municipal government forms are typically divided into two categories: reformed and unreformed. Cities utilizing council-manager or commission structures fall within the reformed classification while cities with a strong mayor and a city council are categorized as unreformed (Svara 1977). One of the primary goals of the Progressive reforms was to take the “politics” out of municipal governance by shifting the focus to administrative services. By doing this, reformers effectively altered the “balance of electoral versus managerial power” in cities adopting council-manager plans (Lubell et al. 2009, 653). By transferring political power from an elected mayor to an unelected city manager, the incentive to vote is reduced because, in the eyes of citizens, votes cast will not have a direct effect on the administrative outcomes of the city.
(Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Bridges 1997). Under mayor-council systems, both the mayor and members of the city council are held directly accountable in the voting booth.

Voter turnout rates in cities utilizing council-manager systems are consistently lower than cities that have mayor-council forms of government (Lee 1960; Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Bridges 1997; Oliver 2001; Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Trounstine 2010). Caren (2007) also shows that council-manager cities have lower turnout rates for mayoral elections even in instances where the elections are considered more competitive.

Powell (1986) and Popkin (1991) offer foundational insight into why the council-manager form of government can impact voter turnout rates. Both scholars attribute low turnout rates in the United States (relative to other countries) to the dispersal of political power under the federal structure of American government. Because political power is not centralized, voters have a difficult time trying to “connect problems and votes” (Popkin 1991, 222). Following in this logic, Wood (2002, 215) argues that council-manager cities allow for a greater “diffusion of political power” amongst actors when compared to cities with the mayor-council form of government. This in turn makes it difficult for voters to connect the successes or failures of a city’s government with a central political figure that is directly accountable to voters. For voters, it may also appear that less is actually at stake in an election when the city’s executive is not directly elected (Oliver and Ha 2007), or when the mayor has limited power. In fact, scholars argue that the governments within council-manager cities are less sensitive to election results (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Karnig 1976; Lyons 1978; Liebert 1974; Morgan and Pelissonero

---

6 However, a more recent study by Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) argues that the form of government has no impact on mayoral turnout.
7 The competitiveness of the mayoral races was measured using the margin of victory between the top two candidates.
A change in the timing of elections was a third institutional reform promoted by the Progressives of the early twentieth century (Hofstadter 1955; Banfield and Wilson 1963). In order to further reduce the power of political parties, it was thought that local elections should not be held concurrently with partisan state and federal elections (Trounstine 2008).

Concurrent elections can impact how a voter calculates the cost of voting in a given election. Holding multiple elections at once reduces the cost of voting in any single race. If a voter is concerned enough with one of the races on the ballot to go and vote, they will already be at the polling location when other elections are on the ballot (Wuffle 1984). If the cost of voting is fixed for any given election day, then that cost can theoretically be spread out across the different races on the ballot (Filer and Kenny 1980; Carter 1984). This essentially reduces the cost of voting in any given race: voters are getting ‘more bang for their buck’ when elections are held concurrently.

Cox and Munger (1989) also argue that concurrent elections reduce the cost of voting but they do so through a different theoretical lens. Specifically, concurrent elections increase voter access to information and draw greater civic attention to the election. They note that campaigns are more likely to spend money on mobilization efforts when multiple offices are up for grabs on a single ballot. Cox and Munger also maintain that the media has more interest when multiple races are occurring simultaneously. Conversely, elections not held concurrently with other major offices attract less public attention and fewer resources (Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003). This is especially true for municipal elections, most of which are held non-concurrently and in
odd-numbered years. Many are also held in the spring or early summer, and not in November like state and federal elections.

A well-known characteristic of American elections is the discrepancy in voter turnout between presidential election years and midterm election years. Voter turnout in presidential elections is consistently higher than during midterm elections (Campbell 1960; Conway 1981; Wolfinger, Rosenstone, and McIntosh 1981; Boyd 1989; Burden 2000). This pattern also holds true for municipal elections. When municipal elections are held concurrently with state or federal elections they have much higher turnout rates than when they are held as stand-alone elections (Lee 1960; Alford and Lee 1968; Hawley 1973; Wood 2002; Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Hajnal 2010; Trounstine 2012; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). Arguing that the timing of elections has the strongest impact on voter turnout of any other electoral mechanism, Hajnal and Lewis (2003) estimate that local turnout is 36 percentage points higher when held concurrently with a Presidential election. Wood (2002) finds a similar effect, estimating local turnout to be 29 points higher when held concurrently with a Presidential election. Despite these significant increases in voter turnout, concurrent elections can lead to longer ballots. Local candidates and issues will struggle to gain the attention of voters and the media when they are up against a presidential or gubernatorial election. In turn, this may result in ballot roll-off, where voters show up to the polls but refrain from casting votes for the local races at the bottom of a long ballot.

A final Progressive reform that has been perceived as influencing municipal turnout is the introduction of at-large city council seats. Reformers thought that at-large council elections would reduce the urban machines’ grasp on power that had been prevalent under ward- and district-based councils (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Judd and Swanstrom 2004; Morgan, et al.
The switch to an at-large political system was done under the premise that a citywide council would better promote the general welfare of the entire city rather than the narrow interests promoted by ward-based machine councilors (Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Trounstine 2010). To date, most of the scholarship on the effects of district and at-large elections focuses on the representation of ethnic or racial minorities and women.  

Bullock (1990) outlines some of the rationale for why the use of at-large or district council structures could positively impact voter turnout. It is possible that at-large elections are better at highlighting citywide issues, which could in turn spur greater turnout. However, the same rationale can be used in regards to district elections and the salience of neighborhood concerns (Welch and Bledsoe 1988). At-large elections may insulate elected officials from their constituents because they are representing a larger population than a district councilor would be representing. Bridges (1997) argues that reformed political structures, including at-large elections, generate barriers to political participation. This increased distance between voter and elected official may reduce engagement and work to depress voter turnout. In a similar vein, district elections may boost turnout because smaller constituencies “enhance the potential for retail politics” and allow for direct connections between voters and candidates (Bullock 1990, 541). Because district elections create smaller constituencies, each individual’s vote is more likely to have an impact on the final outcome of the election (Karlan 1989). This can promote a greater sense of political efficacy amongst residents and make voting seem like a more rational act, leading to higher turnout (Downs 1957; Bullock 1990).

---

However, Bullock (1990) also contends that the mass media’s role in contemporary politics may make the differences in population of a district versus an at-large council seat not important. After all, the highest voter turnout in American politics comes from presidential elections, the office furthest removed from the individual American voter. Although Bullock (1990) was only postulating about the role of television, his theory is still notable today given the widespread access to the Internet and the emergence of social media. Candidates for higher-level offices are more apt to capture media attention than candidates for lower-level offices that remain reliant on grassroots campaign organizing. Simultaneously, district councilors may be less likely to seek out media ads than at-large councilors. Any media buy made by a district councilor would extend far beyond the boundaries of that district, thus wasting a large amount of campaign money (Welch and Bledsoe 1988). This contrasts with at-large councilors who would be making the same media buy for the same price, but it would be more cost efficient for them since it would target the city in its entirety.

Bullock (1990) concludes that at-large elections provide voters with greater incentive to vote because they are more likely to be contested and competitive. Because many at-large elections essentially use a citywide multi-member district, oftentimes you have a handful of incumbents running against each other. This in turn leads to more competitive elections and greater public interest as incumbents fight against each other to hold on to their positions. To the extent that electoral competitiveness spurs greater voter turnout, more competitive elections can support a healthy and inclusive local democracy.

The empirical evidence about the impact of at-large or district elections on turnout have been mixed. In their study of nonpartisan municipal elections in California, Hajnal and Lewis (2003) find that the use of district elections has a negative impact on turnout among adult
residents, but no effect on turnout of registered voters. Trounstine (2012), using a 1986 ICMA dataset, finds a significant negative relationship between the percent of council seats elected via districts and turnout of registered voters; however, this relationship disappears with the use of eligible-voter turnout as the dependent variable. In contrast, Wood’s (2002) study of 57 cities with a population between 25,000 and 1,000,000 people finds that there is no significant impact on voter turnout between district, at-large, and mixed election methods. Similarly, Oliver (2001) finds no relation between the method of council election and voter turnout.

Rational Choice Theories

The foundation of the rational choice school of political participation comes from Downs’ (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Downs’s *homo economicus* model posits that a prospective voter calculates the expected utility of voting prior to determining whether to cast a ballot. The prospective voter will choose to vote if the benefits of voting exceed the costs associated with casting a ballot. This thought process is outlined in the equation:

\[ r_i = p_i b_i - c_i > 0 \]

where \( r_i \) is the expected utility of voting; \( p_i \) is equal to the probability that the prospective voter’s vote will determine the outcome of the election; \( b_i \) is the difference between the expected utility of the candidates’ policy positions; and \( c_i \) stands for the cost of voting. If the net expected utility of voting exceeds zero, a voter will decide to cast a ballot in an election.

The probability of a single vote affecting the final outcome of an election \( (p_i) \) is extremely low (Owen and Grofman 1984; Gelman et al. 1998; Mulligan and Hunter 2003). Because of this, and that fact that most political actions \( (b_i) \) are inherently a collective good.

---

9 It is plausible that the use of different denominators in the calculation for voter turnout will lead to disagreeing conclusions as is demonstrated in this study. Trounstine’s use of two separate measures of voter turnout is based in her arguments about the theoretical expectations of the institutional variables in her study.
(Olson 1965; Aldrich 1993; Whiteley and Seyd 1996; Opp 2001), the \((p_i b_i)\) term in the equation is likely to be very low. If the \((p_i b_i)\) term is close to zero, then any expected cost of voting \((c_i)\) will almost surely prevent a prospective voter from actually voting. According to Downs, prospective voters may incur any cost associated with the act of voting out of a desire to perpetuate democracy. Scholars vary in their determination of how costly it is to vote and to what extent that cost is likely to prevent someone from voting.\(^\text{10}\) For instance, there are the costs with physically carrying out the act of voting, such as registering to vote (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Filer, Kenny, and Morton 1991; Brians and Grofman 1999; Highton 2004), and the time spent going to the voting booth and filling out the ballot (Niemi 1976; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1985; Aldrich 1993; Dyck and Gimpel 2005). Additionally, there is the cost of information collection about candidates and policy positions. Although this will be fully developed later within a municipal elections context, Converse (1964, 1970, 2000) claims that these costs are prohibitive, while Downs (1957) and Aldrich (1993) argue this not to be the case.

For rational choice scholars, voter turnout presents a theoretical problem: the “paradox that ate rational choice theory” (Fiorina 1990; Grofman 1993). No single individual is likely to determine the final outcome of an election (Downs 1957), especially in a large electorate. Thus under a strict rational choice theory, since the cost of voting is almost always thought to exceed any expected benefits, then nobody would vote! A strict adherence to the rationalist ideology is unable to fully understand political behavior such as voter turnout (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1995; Van Winden 2003; Frey and Meier 2004). Likewise, the traditional rational choice theory cannot directly explain why certain variables tend to be related to voter participation, such as age (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

\(^{10}\) For instance, Aldrich (1993) believes that voting is a low cost-low benefit decision, thus many variables can affect turnout because individual choices would be altered by anything affecting the cost-benefit analysis. In contrast, Niemi (1976) claims that the cost of voting is typically low for most citizens.
This theoretical problem has resulted in many scholars attempting to alter Downs’ original formula. Riker and Ordeshook (1968) made one of the first attempts at doing this by adding a new term to Downs’ original equation that accounts for the benefit an individual obtains for fulfilling a civic duty. The premise that voting is perceived as a civic duty has both theoretical and empirical backing. The idea that it is a civic duty to vote reaches back, albeit briefly, to Campbell et al. (1960). In this vein Meehl (1977) argues that voting is an ethical act not akin to economic decision-making, while Goldman (2002) argues the importance of voting on a more philosophical level. Civic duty continues to be an important predictor of voter turnout in many contemporary studies (Blais 2000; Campbell 2006; Feddersen and Sandroni 2006; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). In their post-election survey, the 2000 Annenberg election study shows that 71% of Americans felt guilty when they failed to vote. In addition, Dalton (2008) notes that when asked about the importance of voting in elections on a scale from 1 to 7, the mean score for Americans was 6.2.

The revised formula developed by Riker and Ordeshook (1968) is as follows:

\[ r_i = p_i b_i - c_i + d_i > 0 \]

where \( d_i \) represents a psychological benefit of not only expressing oneself politically, but also the fulfillment of completing a civic duty. Leaving the rest of the original formula as is, Riker and Ordeshook argue that we can better explain voter turnout when using a looser construction of rationality and introducing a civic duty term into the cost-benefit calculus. However, Hirschman (1982) warns that the inclusion of the \( d_i \) term conflates the costs and benefits of turning out to vote because the cost of voting itself becomes a benefit too. That is, if voters derive a psychological benefit (\( d_i \)) from exerting the time and energy to vote (\( c_i \)), the electoral cost and benefit are related. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (1995) further warn that the inclusion of the \( d_i \)
term borders on tautology because using the rationality of civic duty can become all-encompassing.

**Rational Choice and Information Theory**

As a result of the debates that followed Downs, the rational choice school of thought is not characterized by a single coherent theory for voter turnout, but rather contains several theories including one that connects higher rates of voter turnout with greater amounts of ‘information’. The basic rationale behind this is that individuals who are more informed about candidates and issues, or more confident in their political opinions about candidates and issues, are more likely to vote (McMurray 2015). The information theory of voter turnout stems from Simon’s (1957) theory of bounded rationality as well as Downs’ (1957) contention that citizens unsure in their candidate choice would receive a lower benefit from the act of voting as compared to a citizen who was confident in his or her decision.\(^\text{11}\) However, the information theory was largely developed through the work of Matsusaka (1995).

Matsusaka (1995) begins with the assumption that individuals are predisposed to vote.\(^\text{12}\) From there, Matsusaka addresses how information levels can lead people to vote as they are predisposed to do, or to abstain. Those that end up with enough information will vote. This is corroborated by Palfrey and Poole’s (1987) study showing a correlation between information levels and the probability of voting in the Presidential election of 1980. Conversely, the voter lacking sufficient information is unable to determine which candidate to vote for, leading them to abstain from casting a ballot. Thus, the probability of actually voting is connected to the

---

\(^\text{11}\) Briefly put, Simon (1957) argues that because information levels are likely to be incomplete, individuals lack the capacity to thoroughly analyze all available options before them.

\(^\text{12}\) Matsusaka (1995) cites Brody’s (1978) statistic that 90% of Americans believe they should vote. A 2006 Pew Research Center survey finds that 88% of regular voters, 80% of intermittent voters, and 60% of rare voters “completely agree” that it is a citizen’s duty to vote. Similarly, the same study shows that 72% of regular voters, 70% of intermittent voters, and 57% of rare voters feel guilty when they do not vote.
information levels possessed by the individual. This is particularly germane to municipal elections, which are typically considered to be low-information contests.

The rationality of abstaining is rooted in the cost-benefit analysis of the prospective voter: rational voters will experience a smaller benefit from voting if they are unable to evaluate completely the choices before them. The confidence in one’s vote choice is directly related to the amount of raw information an individual possesses. Husted, Kenny, and Morton (1995) demonstrate this in their study about U.S. Senator’s voting records. They argue that individuals possess a more accurate depiction of their Senator’s record when they are more informed. Likewise, Triossi (2013) shows that educated citizens have more accurate political information.

The causal link between information and turnout is both direct and indirect. Greater political knowledge can directly lead to a more complete understanding of one’s surroundings and in turn, more confidence in a voting decision. Political knowledge can indirectly cause increases in information by increasing the value of it, pushing individuals to acquire more of it (Matsusaka 1995).

Others have attempted to expound upon Matsusaka’s information theory. Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996, 1997) argue that uninformed citizens are actually incentivized to defer their vote to more-informed voters. For these citizens, it becomes rational to abstain from voting in a given election. In their ‘swing-voters curse,’ uninformed voters are only able to affect the election outcome by voting for the incorrect candidate. Thus, assuming that individuals have common values, deference to more informed voters is not only rational, but likely one’s best option. Extending this rationale, Degan and Merlo (2004) claim that because the uninformed lack certainty in choosing the ideal candidate, they can experience greater regret from voting decisions as the likelihood of choosing the ‘incorrect’ candidate is larger for uninformed voters.
Empirically speaking, Gerber et al. (2015) show that individuals believe an “acceptable excuse” for abstaining from voting is a lack of knowledge about candidates and issues on the ballot.

Multiple studies have connected voter participation with information and knowledge variables. One of the most common demographic variables associated with higher voter turnout is education level (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Leighley and Nagler 1992). Others have shown that political knowledge is correlated with turnout (Palfrey and Poole 1987; Bartels 1996, Degan and Merlo 2011). In fact, Strate et al. (1989) and Larcinese (2007) show that political knowledge is actually a greater predictor of voter participation than education. Finally, Wattenberg et al. (2000) find that voters who are more informed about their member of Congress are much more likely to vote in biennial House elections.

Matsusaka (1995) is clear about the limitations of information-dependent models of voter turnout. Namely, this theory cannot explain the existence of voter turnout itself. Only variations in the probabilities of individuals can be accounted for. Yet, the theory can still be useful in explaining why turnout differs across election types and from election to election. For instance, we would expect a greater level of information availability in a presidential election as compared to an election for the county sheriff.

Scholars have typically studied turnout in high-profile settings where the costs of information acquisition are likely to be much lower compared to other elections, such as those at the local level or partisan primaries (Aldrich 1993). Information costs are especially high in cities that utilize nonpartisan elections. Because party identification can be understood as a “standing decision” (Key 1966), elections without party labels increase the cost of information collection and processing for voters.
Normatively thinking, democracies require well-informed citizens. Unfortunately this is typically not the case, especially in local contests. However, scholars have shown that individuals have the capacity to use heuristics or shortcuts to make somewhat reasonable decisions, a type of “low information rationality” (Popkin 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). McDermott (1997) shows that these heuristics are especially useful in low-information elections, such as municipal elections, or when voting decisions are extremely complex (Lau and Radlawsk 2001). Perceived electability and endorsements – particularly for ballot initiatives and elections at the local level – are just two shortcuts voters use when information is not readily available (Abramowitz 1989; Stone et al. 1992; Stone et al. 1995; Lieske 1989; Lupia 1994; Krebs 1998; Bowler and Donovan 1998). Despite these findings, reliable cognitive heuristics are often unavailable at the municipal level where voters struggle to recognize their mayor or local councilperson.

The literature on the use of voter shortcuts also shows how heuristics may bias voters, and thus election outcomes. Voter shortcuts can favor candidates that identify as white (Terkildsen 1993; Sigelman et al. 1995), or male (Smith and Fox 2001), those that are considered more physically attractive (Sigelman et al. 1987) and, especially at the municipal level, incumbents (Krebs 1998). Without complete information about candidates and their platforms, the use of heuristics can lead to an embrace of perceived stereotypes about gender and race (Rosenwasser and Dean 1989; Leeper 1991; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; McDermott 1998).

**Individual and Demographic Theories**

Much of the research on political participation – and voter turnout in particular – concentrates on individual-level predictors. The previous section outlined some of this literature,
specifically as it relates to the rational choice (e.g., Downs 1957; Olson 1965; Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Aldrich 1993) and information theories of political participation (Matsusaka 1995). However, there are also resource-based models (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), and psychological models (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960) of political participation. Most studies of municipal turnout, this one included, are particularly concerned with the effects of political institutions on aggregate voter turnout. Despite this, attention to some individual level variables is necessary due to the diversity of residents found in American cities. Demographic data is often used as a control variable in studies of city-level voter turnout. Since this data is utilized in aggregate, it cannot be used to interpret individual behavior. This is especially true because many of the aggregate-level findings about demographic effects on turnout contradict the more appropriate individual-level studies (Dixon 1966; Alford and Lee 1968; Bridges 1997). Nonetheless, studies of municipal turnout show some consistency in the types of variables they use.

For some time now, scholars have relied on a resource model of individual political participation (Verba and Nie 1972). The resources in this model are typically understood in terms of education and income levels. When an individual has a greater amount of these resources they are more likely to vote than those that have less of these resources (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Popkin 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Miller and Shanks 1996; Patterson 2002). There are a variety of ways that one’s level of income and educational attainment will have an effect on their propensity to vote. Individuals with higher income are more likely to be able to withstand the costs (such as time away from work or transportation) associated with voting. Similarly, it may be costly for voters to learn about the candidates and their policy platforms. Wealthier people may also believe that they have more at
stake in an election than someone in a lower income bracket. Finally, people with greater wealth may enjoy a greater social benefit from voting than those that are less well-off (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Empirically speaking, individuals that have higher incomes tend to vote at higher rates (Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Similarly, those with higher education levels are more likely to vote at higher rates (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Teixeira 1992; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Shields and Goidel 1997; Tenn 2007).

Education can lower information costs. Individuals with greater levels of education might be able to process political information better than those with less formal education. Education might also increase the perceived benefits of participating by providing them with a greater sense of civic duty, or by leading an individual to a greater interest in politics (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Popkin 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Miller and Shanks 1996; Patterson 2002).

Racial identity may also impact the rate of voting. Historically, Caucasians have typically voted at higher rates than other racial groups (e.g., Matthews and Prothro 1966; Uhlaner et al. 1989). However, certain factors can play a role in the promotion of black political participation, such as class consciousness (Guterbock and London 1983), or dissatisfaction with their minority status (Orum 1966; Ellison and London 1992). Likewise, the presence of a strong and visible black leadership can spur political involvement (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). However, blacks historically have been at a political disadvantage due to their below average socio-economic status in this country (Bobo and Gilliam 1990). This lower socio-economic status has increased the costs of voting for many African Americans (Tate 1991); even after registration and poll tax requirements were outlawed (Verba et al. 1993). Meanwhile Latinos, regardless of socio-economic status, are also less likely to vote than whites (Shaw et al. 2000; Barreto 2005).
Similarly, Asians of any socioeconomic status turn out to vote at rates lower than whites (Uhlaner et al. 1989; Aoki and Nakanishi 2001). This difference is attributable in part to language barriers as well as differences in registration rates of the various Asian ethnic groups (Lien et al. 2001).

The effects of demographic controls in recent studies on local voter turnout are mixed, although in studies focusing primarily on larger cities, the demographic controls are less important. In his study of the effects of government forms on turnout in moderate to large cities, Wood (2002) uses three demographic variables as controls, none of which had a significant impact on turnout levels: percent black, percent college educated, and per capita income. In their analysis of turnout in California cities, Hajnal and Lewis (2003) use a myriad of demographic controls.\(^{13}\) They find that socio-economic status and percent of the population over 65 years of age both have a positive effect on turnout.\(^{14}\) Conversely, population size (natural log) and the percent of residents that are either Asian or Hispanic have a negative effect. They found no effect from the percent of residents that were black, the percent of residents that were between 18-24 years old, and the percent of residents living in the same house for the last five years.

Meanwhile, the demographic controls in Caren’s (2007) study of mayoral elections in large cities are poor predictors of turnout. None of his demographic controls proved significant: population (natural log); percentage black, Latino, and Asian; population growth rate; and two socio-economic composite variables.\(^{15}\) Finally, Trounstine (2012) uses the 1986 ICMA dataset to look at registered- and eligible-voter turnout. She finds that percent owner-occupied housing and

---

\(^{13}\) The composition of elections in California cities is quite different from a nationwide sample. Per state law, all local elections are nonpartisan. In addition, 97% utilize a council-manager system, and 93% utilize at-large city council structures.

\(^{14}\) Hajnal and Lewis (2003) use a factor score to summarize the median household income, poverty rate, percent college educated, and percent owner-occupancy of housing into a single composite measure.

\(^{15}\) Caren’s (2007) two socio-economic composite variables were modeled after the one used in Hajnal and Lewis (2003). The two summary variables include inflation-adjusted median income, percent of household in poverty, percent college educated, and percent owner-occupied housing.
percent college educated both had positive effects on aggregate turnout. In contrast, median household income, population (logarithm), and population diversity all had negative effects.

**Electoral Competitiveness Theories**

Voter turnout may also depend on the idiosyncrasies of individual election seasons and how campaigns approach those dynamics. Under a rational choice view, campaigns can reduce the cost of voting by lowering information acquisition costs (Dawson and Zinser 1986; Chapman and Palda 1983), and in the case of low-visibility local elections they often notify the electorate that an election is actually occurring. Candidates’ campaigns or interest groups, via get-out-the-vote efforts and advertisements as well as events like debates and rallies, save voters time and provide them with information they might not have sought out (Aldrich 1995). Likewise, mobilization efforts can increase an individual’s benefits from voting by supplying them with policy positions. Campaigns can also invoke the need for individuals to carry out their civic duty to vote by directly encouraging them to do so. Door-to-door canvassing and phone banking can both have a positive effect on turnout (Ashenfelter and Kelley 1975; Cox and Munger 1989; Gerber and Green 2000, 2005; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003; Michelson 2005; Green and Gerber 2004; Imai 2005). At the aggregate level, campaign activity is sometimes operationalized in terms of candidate spending. Higher levels of campaign spending tend to increase aggregate turnout, but in a non-linear fashion (Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Cox and Munger 1989; Jackson 1997; Hogan 1999).

The effects of this campaign activity are typically seen in more competitive contests. More competitive elections are also likely to indirectly promote voter interest and increase turnout. The competitiveness of local elections is typically operationalized by the margin of
victory between the top two candidates, the total number of candidates, the number of 
icumbents running, and incumbent re-election rates (Hajnal 2010).

If an election is expected to be lopsided, fewer voters will find utility in voting for an 
outcome that seems predetermined (Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Matsusaka 1993; Shachar and 
Nalebuff 1999). Conversely, if the result of an election is expected to be close the expected 
utility of casting a vote increases (Matsusaka and Palda 1993; Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 
2003). Others claim that the perception of an election being close will also mobilize political 
elites and campaigns will work to drive turnout amongst their supporters (Cox and Munger 1989; 
Shachar and Nalebuff 1999). Regardless of how competition mechanically impacts turnout, a 
consistent empirical finding is that close elections spur greater levels of turnout at numerous 
levels of government (Cox and Munger 1989; Barzel and Silberberg 1973; Franklin 2004; Lublin 
and Tate 1995; Hill and Leighley 1999; Springer 2012). In their separate studies of American 
mayoral elections, Caren (2007) and Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) show that the margin of 
victory between the top two candidates in an election has a significant negative effect on turnout, 
even while controlling for a variety of demographic and institutional variables.

The number of candidates running in an election may also indirectly impact how many 
voters are drawn to the polls. The presence of more candidates can increase voter mobilization 
efforts and potentially lower information costs about the candidates because each campaign is 
supplying information about their platform and differences with other candidates. However, at 
the same time, more candidates can make a voter’s choice more difficult. Especially in lower-
level elections, information about candidates is still difficult to obtain, regardless of the number 
of candidates on the ballot. With more candidates on the ballot, uninformed voters may lack 
certainty in choosing the best candidate (Matsusaka 1995; Degan and Merlo 2004). Voters may
find it acceptable to abstain from voting if they lack sufficient information about the candidates to make an informed decision (Gerber et al. 2015).

The voter decision-making process is context dependent. That is, the decisions made by voters can only be based on the options placed in front of them (Downs 1957; Key 1966). Campaigns between two candidates allow for an easier binary comparison, especially if one of the candidates is an incumbent (Fiorina 1981). With more candidates on the ballot, the decision making process becomes more burdensome for the voter because they have a larger set of variables and candidate attributes to base their decision upon (Riskey, Parducci and Beauchamp 1979). In turn, an increase in the number of candidates will make it more difficult to determine the expected utility of electing any one of them (Downs 1957).

There has been some limited research – with mixed results – on the effects of the number of candidates on turnout at the local level. Hajnal and Lewis (2003) find a positive relationship between candidates per seat in municipal elections and turnout amongst adult residents. However, this relationship does not exist when they use registered voter turnout as the dependent variable. Caren (2007) finds a small effect between his field vote variable and eligible voter turnout, but it is only significant at the 10% level. ¹⁶ Also at play here is the quality of the candidates running, and when they choose to run. For instance, Jacobson and Kernell (1981) find that high-quality challengers in Congressional races will seek election when their odds of successfully winning are highest. Thus, their entrance into the race is based on the political climate of the district. The presence of more candidates, especially those of higher quality, may

---

¹⁶ The field vote variable is defined as the percentage of votes garnered by each of the candidates that were not either of the top-two finishers in the race.
then be a sign that an incumbent is weak. The relationship between quality of candidates and turnout has not been assessed at the local level.\(^\text{17}\)

Just like at higher levels of office, local elected officials enjoy an incumbency advantage: they are very likely to win reelection once they have been voted into office (Wolman, Page, and Reavley 1990; Krebs 1998; Trounstine 2011, 2012). In fact, incumbent re-election rates are exceptionally high. Seats with no incumbent running tend to produce races that are more competitive, although this is not always the case (Hill 2006). There are competing rationales for whether or not incumbency drives higher turnout or causes lower turnout. For one, incumbent politicians may be able to utilize their personal political machine and the benefits of being an incumbent (e.g., name recognition, fundraising, legislative track record) to spur higher turnout rates when they are up for re-election. Conversely, incumbents may feel relatively safe in their seats until they are challenged by a high-quality candidate (Jacobson and Kernell 1981). If that is the case, voter interest may be low in what is perceived to be an easy re-election bid for the incumbent. Likewise, voters may be satisfied with their incumbent in office and will be less likely to vote should a more appealing option not be on the ballot. There is very little empirical data on the impact of incumbency on turnout in local elections, and the studies that do address it offer mixed results. Hajnal and Lewis (2003) as well as Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) find that the number of incumbents running in a municipal election had no impact on turnout. In contrast, Caren (2007) found that mayoral elections with incumbents running had turnout rates significantly lower (almost three percentage points) than races without an incumbent running. Trounstine (2012) reverses the causality direction and argues instead that low-turnout environments actually dictate the incumbency advantage. Using data from the 1986 ICMA

\(^{17}\) However, Krebs (1998) does find a negative relationship between challenger quality and percent of the vote share accumulated by incumbents in Chicago aldermanic elections.
dataset, she finds that higher turnout leads to fewer incumbents running and lower re-election rates. Finally, as King and Gelman (1991) point out in their work in Congressional studies, the incumbency advantage may have systemic consequences for American democracy. This may hold true for local elections as well if incumbent responsiveness (i.e. policy outcomes) are affected by low turnout and high incumbency rates. In particular, Trounstine (2012, 180) argues that these low turnout environments benefit municipal employees and homeowners over typical city residents because they have a “fiduciary interest in election outcomes”.

**Conclusion**

Scholars have developed numerous theories about what drives individuals to vote. Proponents of institutional theories focus on how institutions structure the electoral arena and in turn, determine the behavior of both groups and individuals. At the municipal level, this research has predominantly focused on reforms instituted during the Progressive Era of the early 20th century: nonpartisan elections, council-manager government forms, elections held off-year from national contests, and at-large city councils.

While institutional scholars are more interested in aggregate turnout, rational choice theorists focus on the individual’s decision to vote. This has traditionally been framed within some form of a cost-benefit analysis associated with casting a ballot. Meanwhile, other scholars highlight the role of individual demographics in framing voter turnout research. Finally, other research highlights the role that campaign and election-specific variables play. Each election is a combination of competitiveness, incumbency, campaign activity, and voter mobilization efforts. These unique combinations may influence whether or not individuals choose to vote in municipal elections.
Even so, institutions are continually thought to be the principal determinant of voter turnout rates at the municipal level. Despite this, one incredibly important institution – the electoral system – has received very little academic attention. The next chapter introduces electoral systems as a concept and differentiates between different types of electoral systems utilized in large American cities. From there, I explore the ways that electoral system designs can contribute to varying levels of voter turnout.
Chapter 3: Electoral System Designs

There is a broad consensus within the scholarly literature that electoral systems serve as the rules of the game for carrying out the elections associated with a representative democracy.\(^1\) For Lijphart (1994, 13), an electoral system is a “set of essentially unchanged election rules under which one or more successive elections are conducted in a particular democracy.” Similarly, Rae (1971, 14) defines electoral laws as “the processes by which electoral preferences are articulated as votes and by which these votes are translated into distributions of governmental authority.” Farrell’s (2001, 4) definition is also quite similar, defining electoral systems as “the means by which votes are translated into seats in the process of electing politicians into office.”

The study of electoral systems is crucial to our understanding of democracy. For one, their uniqueness across localities makes them politically interesting from a comparative perspective. It is also important to study electoral rules because elections serve a variety of functions for any democratic government. For Katz (1997, 101-107), these include legitimation, the installation of officials, a vehicle for popular selection and choice, representation, and popular involvement. Perhaps their most important function is as “the cogs that keep the wheels of democracy properly functioning” (Farrell 2001, 2). But beyond these functions, electoral systems can serve a variety of other purposes and have many other impacts on a political system. Particularly since Maurice Duverger’s (1954) *Political Parties* and Douglas Rae’s (1971) *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws*, scholars have paid close attention to the impacts that election systems can have on parties and candidates, campaigns, and the general functioning of government.

\(^1\) Electoral systems, electoral laws, and electoral rules are all used somewhat interchangeably; however, see Farrell (2001) for a differentiation of each.
Electoral Systems Impacts

An electoral system can have an assortment of consequences on democratic processes. Much of the research in this area focuses on the differences between majoritarian and proportional representation systems (Lijphart 1999; Birch 2003). Electoral systems can impact both political elites and the masses: how a government is structured can determine the number and types of candidates running, the number of political parties, the representativeness of elected officials, policy outputs, how votes are counted, and the overall citizen engagement and participation in the political process. Every electoral system has its own pros and cons. While one system may produce higher turnout, it may also suffer from other issues such as wasted votes, higher campaigning costs, or problems of spoiler candidates. These other considerations are important to keep in mind when a city is determining how to structure its electoral processes. Additionally, some cities may hold certain priorities – such as administrative costs or the representation of racial and ethnic minorities – higher than other considerations.

It has long been established that electoral rules can shape party systems. Duverger (1954) argues that single-member district plurality systems lead to the creation of two-party systems. Cox (1997) too makes this point to an extent but notes that not all plurality systems will lead to a convergence on two parties in every election. Electoral systems can also determine the ratio of votes to seats in election outcomes (Lijphart 1994). In addition, electoral systems may also work to influence the political agenda and can help dictate the types of policy that governments produce (Bowler et al. 2006; Lijphart 1999; Powell 2000).

Electoral rules can also have strategic effects on candidates and voters (Cox 1997). For candidates, the electoral system acts as the “rules of the game [which] define the competition itself” (Trounstine 2008, 42). Because different systems vary in their thresholds for victory, how
an election is structured will ultimately dictate how candidates need to strategize and fundraise (Yonk, Simmons, and Groberg 2014). Different electoral systems may also impact the number of candidates choosing to run (Cox 1997). For voters, voting behavior can be understood as a response to the manner in which elections are conducted. Not only can different electoral systems alter the voting calculi of prospective voters (Cox 1997), they may also promote strategic voting over sincere voting (Blais and Carty 1991; Cox 1997; Farrell 2001; Blais et al. 2007; Singh 2011).

In cross-national electoral studies, it has long been argued that electoral rules can help predict relative levels of voter turnout (Lakeman 1974; Powell 1980, 1986; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995; Singh 2011). Much of this empirical research has focused on higher voter turnout rates in countries using proportional representation systems compared to majoritarian systems (e.g. Blais and Carty 1990; Blais and Dobrynska 1998; Bowler et al. 2001; Norris 2002). Despite the empirical evidence that proportional representation systems foster higher turnout levels, there is little theoretical agreement on why this occurs (Katz 1997). Powell (1986) argues that proportional representation systems reduce the likelihood of wasted votes. Meanwhile, Ladner and Milner (1999) claim that, unlike in majoritarian systems, proportional representation promotes the electoral chances of smaller parties. Because voters have a wider array of parties to choose from, they will be more likely to vote when they can align with a party close to their ideological leanings. Finally, Blais and Carty (1990) argue that proportional districts are more likely to be competitive when compared to single-member districts, which can in turn increase turnout.
Electoral Systems in Large American Cities

Electoral systems are an important component to the understanding of municipal politics. There is a long-established narrative on how Progressive Era reform institutions have impacted voter turnout and minority representation in American cities. Political machines and the Progressive Era reformers that followed both understood the importance of government institutions in city politics. Both groups sought to dictate electoral rules to further their own electoral goals. By altering the rules that governed urban elections, machines and reformers alike were able to influence who voted, who was represented in government, and where political power in the city was concentrated (Bridges 1997; Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Bridges and Kronick 1999; Judd and Swanstrom 2004; Hajnal and Tounstine 2007; Tounstine 2008).

American cities offer fertile ground to test many of the hypotheses about electoral rules that have been generated at other levels of government. Not only are there a plethora of cases to be examined, there is great diversity amongst these cases because municipal electoral systems “tend to be fairly flexible” in their designs (Tounstine 2008, 3). Most of the research that uses municipal electoral institutions as independent variables tends to focus on voter turnout, minority (race and gender) representation, and incumbency rates. Yet at the same time, very little attention has been paid to the electoral systems themselves: the mechanisms for which votes are actually translated into political power at the municipal level. The discussion in this chapter incorporates literature from state and cross-national elections in an attempt to bridge the gap between these levels of government.

Scholars often divide electoral systems based on the threshold required for winning elections. Typically, these are understood as majoritarian, plurality, or proportional election systems. Majoritarian elections typically come to mind when one thinks about democracy.
Majoritarian elections require a candidate to receive over 50% of the votes in order to win an election. In contrast, plurality elections do not require a candidate to win a majority. In plurality elections, the candidate with the most votes wins. Finally, proportional systems allocate seats in a legislative body according to the proportion of votes received by a party.

American Congressional elections are typically based on plurality rules. In contrast, most large American cities rely on majorititarian systems. Proportional election systems are almost nonexistent in the United States today. While some large cities (e.g., New York City, Cleveland, and Cincinnati) utilized proportional representation for their city councils during the early-to-mid parts of the twentieth century, only Cambridge, Massachusetts continues to use a variation of the proportional representation system today.² Using literature from state and cross-national electoral studies, the rest of this chapter outlines the history, mechanical features, advantages, and disadvantages of the main electoral formulas used in large American cities today.

Plurality Systems

The process of conducting plurality (or first-past-the-post) elections is quite straightforward: voters are allowed to cast a single vote, and the candidate receiving the most votes is then elected. In the United States, the plurality voting system was first adopted while America was still a British colony. However, the American plurality voting model has evolved over time into the system that voters recognize today. Following the signing of the Constitution, most states elected their members of Congress at-large, rather than through the single-member districts utilized today. States slowly transitioned toward the use of single member districts on their own; however, the use of single-member districts was not mandated by Congress until the

² Cambridge’s system is unique compared to typical proportional representation systems in that it operates within a nonpartisan at-large city council. Candidates are rank-ordered by voters and are elected once they have obtained a required quota of votes. The quota is calculated by dividing the total ballots by the number of council seats and then adding one (Cambridge Election Commission 2016).
Apportionment Act of 1842 (Amy 2000; Calabrese 2000; Hacker 1964). The elections for Congressional offices serve as a model for many of the cities utilizing plurality rules. Today, plurality elections are used in national elections in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, India, and many countries that were once British colonies (Farrell 2001).

The primary benefit of the plurality election is its ease of use. For voters, plurality rules are easy to understand and allow for a single culminating election on which to focus. In the United States, this ease is also due in part to their frequent usage in state and federal elections. For cities, plurality elections are easy to conduct, and can have less of a financial burden than other electoral designs, such as transferrable vote systems. When used in city council districts, plurality electoral systems can also enhance minority representation in government offices when minority groups are highly concentrated in certain neighborhoods of a city (Reynold, Reilly, and Ellis 2005).

There are also a variety of drawbacks associated with plurality elections. The primary criticism of plurality elections is the fact that a candidate can be elected with less than a majority of the voters’ support (Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000). This would mean that a majority of the voters within a political unit may actually dislike the eventual winner of the election. Similarly, plurality elections are susceptible to electing candidates who would not be Condorcet winners. Another drawback is that the number of candidates in an election can play a role in deciding the eventual winner of a plurality election. As the number of candidates running increases, the percentage of votes the eventual winner needs to earn in order to win the election decreases. In more extreme cases, the eventual winner may be quite disliked by a majority of the population. If

---

3 A Condorcet winner is a candidate that would win every pairwise election amongst the candidates running for an elected position. For further discussion on Condorcet winners and the Condorcet paradox, see Gehrlein (2006), among others.
a winning candidate is elected with less than 50% of the vote, their perceived mandate to govern may be weakened (Key 1949).

Similarly, plurality elections suffer from the possible influence of spoiler candidates. When more than two candidates are running in a plurality election, a candidate that has very little chance of winning can impact the vote differential between the top two candidates (Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000). This phenomenon is repeatedly highlighted in the context of the 2000 Presidential election, where critics have argued that third-party candidate Ralph Nader played the spoiler in George W. Bush’s defeat of Al Gore. Voters supporting minor candidates may also choose to vote strategically – knowing that their preferred candidate has no chance of winning – by voting for one of the candidates with a better chance of winning. The problem of spoilers can work to discourage potential candidates from running. This in turn reduces the selection of candidates that voters may choose from (Richie et al. 2000). Similarly, plurality systems create “wasted votes,” or ballots cast that do not end up contributing to the election of a candidate (Amy 2000; Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005). This can work to reduce voter turnout and may foster individual feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction with the elected government. Because of the potential for casting a wasted vote, many potential voters may choose to stay home on Election Day. Amy (2000) cites this as one of the many reasons that countries using single member districts with plurality voting typically exhibit low turnout levels.

Plurality elections for mayoral offices are typically preceded by a partisan primary, as is the case in cities like Baltimore and New York City. Although rare, nonpartisan plurality elections – without any sort of primary – do in fact exist. Nonpartisan plurality elections occurred in the City of Albuquerque in two different iterations during the timeframe of this
study. Albuquerque held nonpartisan plurality elections for mayor in 1997 and 2001.\textsuperscript{4} Prior to holding their elections in 2005 and 2009, Albuquerque amended their charter to a modified plurality-majoritarian election that allowed any candidate garnering over 40\% of the vote in the first round to win outright and avoid a runoff election. By 2013, Albuquerque had transitioned fully to a majoritarian system requiring candidates to earn over 50\% of the votes in the first round to avoid a runoff.

Like mayoral elections, plurality elections for city councils can exist within the confines of both partisan and nonpartisan cities. Additionally, plurality systems work for both single-member district and at-large systems. By way of example, Albuquerque’s city council based on single-member districts held nonpartisan plurality elections for each district up until 2003. Meanwhile, each of the 51 city councilors in New York City is elected from districts in partisan plurality elections. Following a partisan primary, the council candidates run in a plurality general election. It is not uncommon in New York City council races to have multiple parties running in a single district, or for a single candidate to represent multiple parties. The four at-large city council seats on Boston’s nonpartisan mixed-system council are elected under a form of plurality rules known as block voting. Voters are allowed to cast a vote for up to four candidates, and the four candidates garnering the most votes are elected.\textsuperscript{5} Before they expired in 2015, Indianapolis’ four at-large seats were elected under partisan plurality rules as well.\textsuperscript{6} In the case of Indianapolis, each party (typically Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians) would hold a primary to

\textsuperscript{4} Jim Baca received a mere 28.64\% of the votes cast and was victorious amongst seven candidates in 1997, while former Mayor Martin Chavez garnered only 30.56\% of the votes cast and was victorious amongst seven candidates in 2001.

\textsuperscript{5} Boston first holds a preliminary election which first narrows the field of at-large candidates down to eight.

\textsuperscript{6} Indianapolis had a 29 member council with 25 district seats and 4 at-large seats. Following the 2015 election, the City decided to use a pure district system comprised of 25 members.
determine the four candidates to represent their party on the general election ballot. The top four vote-getters in the general election were elected.

Majoritarian Systems

Majoritarian vote systems (also known as two-round, second ballot, and runoff systems) are the most common types of electoral rules in large American cities. Majoritarian elections require that a candidate garner at least 50% of the votes cast in order to win an election (Rae 1967; Powell 2000; Dahl 2002). Typically, majoritarian vote rules allow for multiple rounds of voting, with progressively narrower fields of candidates, until a single candidate earns a majority of the votes. Under standard majoritarian rules, all candidates appear on the first ballot. If no single candidate emerges with at least 50% of the vote, a runoff election occurs, typically between the top two vote-getters. However, in the context of large American cities, this sequential process of elections can occur within the confines of four different systems (further outlined below): 1) nonpartisan majority election with a triggered runoff election; 2) partisan majority election with a triggered runoff election; 3) nonpartisan majority election with a required runoff; and 4) the nonpartisan majority election conducted under the transferable vote system known as instant runoff voting.

The principle of majority rule has a history as long as democracy itself, both in and outside of the political arena (Birch 2003): majoritarian elections have been held within the Roman Catholic Church since the Middle Ages (Katz 1997). Today, majoritarian systems are used in a variety of countries with directly-elected Presidents (Jones 1995, 1997; Blais and Massicotte 1996), but are much less common for the election of national legislative offices.
Within the United States, the idea of majoritarianism took off during the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century, and was further utilized in the South throughout the Jim Crow Era.

Progressive Era reformers sought to weaken the power of urban political parties by instituting majority vote requirements in order to ensure that candidates had a broad range of support from the populace (Fleischmann and Pierannunzi 2007; Kemp 2002). Good government advocates such as Andrew White (1890, 214) called for the election of both the mayor and city council by a “majority of all the votes of all the citizens.” The call for majority vote requirements was not unique to cities. At that time, reformers of state legislative elections also thought that “the nominee of a political party should represent the party principles or policy of the majority of voters of the party” (Lush 1907, 43). The use of majoritarian systems within American cities typically coincides with nonpartisan elections; however both New Orleans and Jacksonville have combined partisan elections with the majoritarian requirement.

Much of the research on runoff elections focuses on partisan primaries for state and federal offices. In the American South, runoffs came to prominence in the early 1900s as parties began to hold direct primaries (Amy 2000). The majority vote requirement was inextricably tied to issues of race and the dominance of the one-party Democratic system (Bullock and Johnson 1985a, 1992; Ewing 1953; McDonald 1985; Wallace 1985). Southern Democrats sought to ensure that party nominees were suitable to the (white) Democratic Party establishment. During much of the twentieth century, the Republican Party of the South was quite weak. In most elections the Democratic nominee would be a shoe-in for whichever office he or she sought. This resulted in heavily contested Democratic primaries and a general election nominee that

---

7 Many countries that were once French colonies currently utilize a majoritarian electoral system (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005); however, it is also used in other parts of Europe (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Portugal, and Ukraine), as well as in South America (Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador) (Farrell 2001).
oftentimes only won a small plurality of the primary vote. Under the plurality rules originally used in the primary, a candidate did not need to receive a majority of the vote. The possibility of an African-American or an unpopular nominee for the Democratic Party frightened many white southerners and the party establishment. To resolve this, state parties across the South adopted the second primary, a type of runoff election. The primary runoff would occur if no candidate received a majority of the vote in the first-round primary. This allowed the party to maintain control over its nomination process, and for white voters to coalesce around a single candidate in a runoff primary if a minority candidate made it past the first ballot (Ewing 1953; Bullock and Johnson 1985a). Runoff requirements have been utilized in the South off-and-on throughout the 20th century, and are still used in many states at multiple levels of governance.

Majoritarian electoral systems are touted for their ability to maintain the simplicity of plurality elections while also correcting their major flaw: the fact that a candidate can win election without a majority of the electorate’s support (Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000; Farrell 2001). Because a candidate needs to garner a majority of votes under the runoff system, they must appeal to a broad section of the electorate. This not only grants the winning candidate a larger mandate and increased legitimacy (Amy 2000), but it can have a moderating effect on campaign platforms as candidates seek to capture the preferences of the largest segment of the electorate (Bullock et al. 2002). This race to the ideological center is even more pronounced going from the general election to the runoff election, where the two remaining candidates attempt to obtain endorsements from eliminated candidates, and in turn gather the support of those that had voted for eliminated candidates (Amy 2000).

Under plurality electoral rules, voters must often vote strategically – rather than sincerely – for one of the candidates expected to win the election instead of “wasting” their vote on a
candidate that has little chance of success (Duverger 1954). This is typically not the case in two-round systems, where voters can support their preferred candidate in the first round of voting without the concern of spoiling the outcome of the election (Duverger 1954; Riker 1982; Cox 1997). Unlike plurality elections, the effects of spoiler candidates in majoritarian systems are mitigated by the potential of a runoff election. Spoiler candidates may impact whether a runoff will occur or not, but will not impact who the ultimate winner will be in a runoff election (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005). If a voter’s true preference is not elected in the first round, they have the ability to return for the runoff election and vote for the candidate who most closely matches their ideology (Bullock and Johnson 1992). When compared to plurality elections, Bullock and Johnson (1992) argue that runoff electoral systems incentivize more candidacies because the problem of spoiler candidates is mitigated by the majority-vote requirement.

Two-round systems are also unique in that they allow voters to obtain more information and to even change their mind about who to support between the first and second ballot (Reynolds, Reilly and Ellis 2005). This exposure to additional information is a direct result of the narrowed field of candidates from the first round to the second. By having only two finalists in the narrowed field, voters are able to make a more-informed choice because they have 1) had more time to gather information, 2) are choosing between only two candidates rather than a handful, and 3) because the media is able to cover a two-person race more in-depth than a multi-candidate field. Sartori (1997, 63) highlights the added information that voters can obtain going from the first round ballot to the runoff: “All other electoral systems are one-shot; the double ballot, and the double ballot only, is a two-shot system. With one shot the voter shoots very much in the dark; with the two shots he or she shoots, the second time, in full daylight.” Despite

---

8 However, voters might still choose to vote strategically for a less-desirable but more-electable candidate with the hope of pushing them to victory or into a runoff.
the theoretical soundness of these arguments, Bouton (2013) argues that the empirical evidence supporting the notion that voters are more informed about candidates and issues heading into a runoff election – as compared to a plurality election – is inconclusive.

Two-round elections also suffer from a variety of shortcomings. The first set of issues stems from the costs associated with a second ballot. The second ballot is not only an added cost to the city administering the second election (Richie et al. 2000; Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005), but also to the campaigns contesting the runoff election. Candidates that have spent a large amount of their campaign funds either to avoid or trigger a runoff election will be forced to raise a large sum of money in a very short period of time. Not all candidates will be able to do this. Some candidates may end up relying on outside assistance to raise the needed funds to continue campaigning. This may increase the sway that donors and moneyed interests have over cash-strapped candidates (Richie et al. 2000)

The double ballot is also a burden to voters because it requires them to pay attention to and vote in two elections in rapid succession. This burden is often demonstrated by the decreased turnout rates between the first and second rounds of balloting, particularly for lower-level elections (Bullock and Johnson 1985a, 1992; Cox 1997; Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000; Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005). Research on voter turnout in state and federal elections that utilize the runoff typically focus on the drop-off in turnout between the first round and the runoff election. In his study of gubernatorial nominations, Key (1949) shows that participation declined from the primary to the runoff in gubernatorial elections. A similar pattern is found by Bullock and Furr (1997) in their research on congressional nominations. Using a sample of Democratic primaries for Congress and governorships held between 1956 and 1984, Wright (1989) also

---

9 In some instances, when the top candidate garners a large plurality of the vote – but quite not a majority – the runner-up in the first round election will withdraw prior to a runoff occurring in order to save the city from spending money on the second election.
shows a fall-off in voter turnout. Finally, Bullock and Johnson (1992) demonstrate the drop-off in turnout for both state legislative and executive elections. However, these patterns are not necessarily found in more localized contests. Bullock and Johnson (1992) found a slight increase in voter participation between primaries and runoffs in the nomination contests for county sheriff. In his study of six convenience-sampled cities, Bullock (1990) also shows that voter turnout increased from the initial election to the runoff in 59% of the elections in his sample.¹⁰ In addition, Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) show that runoff mayoral elections have higher turnout than non-runoffs.

A variety of factors may cause the lower turnout in second-round elections. Both Amy (2000) and Richie et al. (2000) cite voter exhaustion as a key explanation of why second round ballots have lower turnout rates. Amy (2000) and Fisichella (1984, 185) argue that turnout in runoffs are lower because of an “orphaned electorate,” or when much of the electorate no longer has a preferred candidate in the running and choose not to vote. Election timing also plays a role. Because runoffs may not occur every election cycle it is the first round elections, rather than the runoff, that are usually scheduled concurrently with higher level races. Lower turnout in second round elections are problematic in general, but especially for local elections which suffer from comparatively poor turnout levels already. The turnout drop from the first round to the second round may put into question the electoral mandate of the eventual winner and raise questions about whether or not they have garnered the support of a true majority of the electorate (Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000).

Runoff elections are associated with a variety of other seemingly negative impacts. Bullock and Johnson (1985a, 1985b, 1992) outline these issues as four “myths” associated with

¹⁰ Bullock selects six cities with nonpartisan at-large elections: Atlanta, Austin, Jackson (TN), Pomona (CA), Sarasota, and Tallahassee. The cities are not a representative sample as they were selected because Bullock had been involved as a consultant in each of them.
runoff elections which have framed much of the debate around the usefulness of two-round electoral systems. The four myths they outline are the “minority-loses myth,” the “female-loses myth,” the “leader-loses myth,” and the “incumbent-loses myth.”

The first myth Bullock and Johnson highlight is the “minority-loses” myth, which claims that African American candidates who won a plurality of the vote in the first round election are at a disadvantage compared to Caucasian candidates in the same situation (Davidson 1984). To some, the ubiquity of the runoff system in the South has been seen as unfair to black candidates. Southern runoff primaries were the target of 1984 presidential candidate Reverend Jesse Jackson who was quoted as saying “we must end the second primary before it ends us” (Roberts 1984). Jackson argued that a black candidate could win a plurality within a multicandidate Democratic primary, but lose the runoff election because white voters would align behind the runner-up of the first primary, who was oftentimes white (Bullock and Johnson 1985; Theodoulou 1985).

However, Bullock and Johnson (1985a, 1992) do not find evidence of a racial bias in runoff elections. This finding is corroborated by Fleischmann and Stein’s (1987) study of three cities in Texas between 1951 and 1985 and Bullock and Smith’s (1990) study of county elections in Georgia. Meanwhile, Stanley (1985) argues that runoffs may in fact aid black candidates when they are used in minority-majority districts. Bond (1984) also articulates this point, claiming that runoffs only discriminate against a numerical minority, be they whites or blacks.

The second myth is the “female-loses” myth, which argues that women who win first round pluralities are at a disadvantage heading into a runoff election. The logic behind this myth parallels Bullock and Johnson’s “minority-loses” myth. They outline the argument that women may be able to obtain a plurality of the votes in a first round contest with multiple male candidates. However, when heading into a runoff election against a single male candidate the
female is more likely to lose because the male candidates that lost in the first round will unite behind the remaining male candidate. Bullock and Johnson (1985b, 1992) find no empirical evidence to support this claim. Bullock and MacManus (1991) also show that majority vote requirements do not hinder the electability of female city council candidates. In their study of municipal elections in Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio, Fleischmann and Stein (1987) show that women are not at a disadvantage in runoffs. They note that 82% of female candidates that won a plurality of votes in the first round went on to win their respective runoffs.

The third myth outlined by Bullock and Johnson is the “leader-loses” myth, which argues that the front-runner after the first round of balloting is oftentimes at a disadvantage to the runner-up. The rationale behind this myth is that voters will have a negative perception of the favored candidate in the runoff, and in turn will vote for the underdog candidate instead. In their study on runoff elections in Georgia, Bullock and Johnson (1985a) show that the winner of the first round election wins the runoff election twice as often as they lose them, or roughly 70% of the time (Bullock and Johnson 1992). However, this rate varied depending on the type of election: higher level offices, such as governorships and senate seats, had the lowest second-round success rates for first-round winners. This myth also lacks empirical evidence at the municipal level. Fleischmann and Stein’s (1987) dataset shows that front-runners in city council primaries won 72% of the time in at-large races, and 66% of the time in district races.

The fourth and final myth articulated by Bullock and Johnson is the “incumbent-loses” myth, which claims that incumbents are disadvantaged under runoff systems. Candidates challenging incumbents may find that runoff systems enhance their ability to win for a variety of reasons. The triggering of a runoff election extends the election season. This allows the challenger to enhance his or her name recognition amongst the electorate and to campaign
against the incumbent alone, rather than against an entire field of candidates (Bullock and Furr 1997). Theoretically speaking, the incumbent may also appear vulnerable to defeat if he or she are unable to garner a majority of the votes in the first round. If citizens are voting retrospectively, the challenger can benefit from the coalescence of voters who are opposed to the incumbent (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). By forcing a runoff, challengers are also able to demonstrate their electability and possibly signal to voters, contributors, and the media that a sitting incumbent is vulnerable (Westlye 1991; Bullock and Furr 1997). Bullock and Johnson find some empirical support for this myth, arguing that incumbents win roughly half of the runoff elections they are forced into (1985a). In their 1992 study, Bullock and Johnson show that incumbents won roughly 65% of the runoffs they were forced into. Fleischmann and Stein (1987) also find that runoff elections are likely to harm incumbents’ reelection chances in cities.

**Types of Runoff Systems in Large American Cities**

Because of the number of candidates they draw, most nonpartisan municipal elections tend to use runoff elections as a way to ensure that candidates are appealing to the city at-large (Richie et al. 2000). Within this study’s sample of large American cities, we can distinguish between four types of majoritarian electoral systems.

The first and most common type of electoral system in large American cities is the nonpartisan majority election with a triggered runoff if needed. Within this system every candidate is listed without their party affiliation on the first ballot. If a single candidate garners over 50% of the vote then she is elected. If no candidate is able to meet that threshold, a runoff election between the first round’s top two vote-getters will occur, typically no more than a month after the first election. This second round will provide for a single winner that has the support of a majority of the voters.
The nonpartisan runoff system is most often utilized in single-member districts, such as the office of the mayor or for district city councilors. However, if at-large councilors are elected based on positional seats, then the runoff system can still be utilized.\textsuperscript{11} By way of example, the nonpartisan runoff system is used in mayoral elections for Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and San Jose; in the district city council elections conducted in Dallas, Denver, Phoenix, and San Diego; and in the at-large elections in Austin, Houston, and Portland.

The second type of runoff system – the partisan majority election with a triggered runoff – is very similar to the aforementioned nonpartisan runoff system.\textsuperscript{12} The only difference between the two systems is the use of a partisan label. In the partisan runoff system every candidate, regardless of party affiliation, runs on the first ballot. If a single candidate exceeds 50\% of the vote, then she is elected. If this does not occur, a runoff election between the top two vote-getters will be triggered. The partisan identification of the candidates in the runoff election does not matter: two candidates from the same party can contest a runoff election against one another. The partisan runoff rules are utilized in two cities within this sample: New Orleans and Jacksonville. Both cities use this system for their mayoral and city council (both district and at-large positions) elections.

The nonpartisan majority election system with required runoffs is similar to the basic nonpartisan triggered-runoff system but with one key difference. In the triggered-runoff system, a runoff is only conducted if the 50\% vote threshold is not met by one of the candidates. This contrasts with the required-runoff system which mandates that a second round election must always take place, regardless of the percentage of votes that each candidate received in the first

\textsuperscript{11} At-large council seats based on positions are akin to citywide single member districts. Instead of each at-large councilor running in a multi-member district election, each councilor is elected to a single position instead.
\textsuperscript{12} Some cities, such as New York City, have a majority vote requirement for their party nominations. Primary runoffs are not addressed in this study.
round. In essence, the first round is acting as a preliminary election in order to reduce the number of candidates to the two top vote-getters from the first round. The nonpartisan majority election system with required runoffs is utilized for mayoral elections in cities such as Boston, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Seattle; in district city council elections in Boston, and Cleveland; and in at-large city council elections in Columbus and Seattle.

The final majoritarian vote system utilized in large American cities is the nonpartisan instant runoff voting (IRV) system.\textsuperscript{13} Although it has been recommended as an optional electoral system in the 8\textsuperscript{th} Edition of the National Civic League’s Model City Charter, the use of instant runoff voting rules is a relatively new phenomenon for large cities (National Civic League 2003). Only two of the large cities in this study – San Francisco and Minneapolis – currently elect their municipal officers (mayor and district city councilors) using IRV.\textsuperscript{14} This system is unique compared to other majoritarian systems because both the election and runoff occur at the same time. Under IRV rules, voters rank order the candidates on the ballot based on their own preferences. Once the voting period has concluded, all of the first preference votes are tallied. If a candidate receives a majority of those votes, then she is elected. However, if no candidate receives a majority, the runoff procedure is initiated. In most IRV systems, this second round begins by eliminating from contention the candidate with the fewest votes from the first round before moving onto subsequent rounds. Citizens that voted for the last place finisher as their first preference have their votes redistributed based off of their second choice candidate ranking. This process of candidate elimination and vote redistribution continues until one single candidate has obtained at least 50\% of the vote.

\textsuperscript{13} Although some question whether it is truly a majoritarian system, see Burnett and Kogan (2015).
\textsuperscript{14} San Francisco adopted IRV in 2002 and has been in use since 2004, while Minneapolis adopted it in 2006 and has used it since 2009. IRV is used in other moderately sized cities, such as Oakland, Berkeley, and San Leandro, California; Portland, Maine; and Burlington, Vermont. IRV has been approved but not yet implemented in Memphis, Tennessee and Santa Fe, New Mexico.
The sixteen-candidate 2011 mayoral election in San Francisco provides for an example of how this system works. In the first round of balloting, incumbent mayor Ed Lee garnered only a small plurality of the votes (30.75%). Since this was not a majority of the vote, the runoff procedure was conducted. The 16th place finisher in the first round, Paul Currier, only garnered 248 votes (0.13%) and was thus eliminated. The 248 voters who ranked Currier first had their votes redistributed to their second-ranked candidates. This process continued sequentially until incumbent Mayor Ed Lee earned a majority of the votes (59.64%) after 12 rounds of vote redistributions.15

Proponents of instant runoff voting argue that it fixes many of the defects associated with plurality and traditional runoff elections. By ranking candidate preferences, voters no longer need to vote strategically for a candidate with a chance of winning. Instead, they are able to vote their conscience without worrying about the effects of a spoiler candidate. This in turn increases the number of voters who are actively involved in influencing the election outcome (Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000). Additionally, by eliminating possible spoiler effects, cities that have instituted IRV have seen more candidates running for office.

Under IRV, the process of transferring votes with each sequential runoff round allows for “diverse but related interests [to] be combined to win representation” (Reynolds et al. 2005, 49). In order to win, candidates must appeal to people beyond their most loyal first-preference voters. By requiring candidates to seek out second and third choice preferences, IRV facilitates citywide coalition building and may lead to a decline in negative campaign strategies (Richie and Kleppner 2000; Richie et al. 2001; Robb 2011).

15 The second place finisher in the first round, John Avalos (19.26% of the vote), also finished second after 12 rounds of voting (40.36% of the vote).
By holding a single election, IRV can benefit both the city and the voters. It is easier to conduct a single election rather than planning for two separate ones. This will not only save time, but allows the city to budget saved money toward other uses. Holding a single election benefits voters by reducing the voter fatigue associated with holding multiple elections in a narrow time frame (Richie 2003). Because voters only need to participate in a single election, voter turnout rates can rise since the cost of casting a ballot has decreased.

By ensuring a winning candidate emerges in a single round of voting, political entities that use IRV do not suffer from the drop in turnout associated with more traditional runoff systems: a problem exacerbated when not every office on the ballot requires a runoff (Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000; Richie and Hill 2001). In addition, the transition to IRV has produced higher voter turnout rates in San Francisco, even in years when the city election is held concurrently with a presidential contest (Robb 2011). By requiring electoral decision-making to occur when participation rates are highest, election outcomes will be more reflective of the entire city.

Scholars have highlighted some potential issues with the use of IRV. First, instant runoff voting requires a greater “degree of literacy and numeracy” compared to other electoral systems (Reynolds et al. 2005, 49). Unlike runoff elections, and most (two-party) plurality elections, IRV elections require voters to pick from a wide variety of candidates, with no cues – such as a primary or a first round election – to aid them in their decision-making. The time and energy it takes to rank-order candidate preferences conflicts with the fact that voters typically attempt to reduce the costs associated with making political choices (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991; Tomz and Van Houwling 2003; McDaniel 2015). Therefore, these added information costs have the potential to make IRV a less attractive electoral system for voters: whether it is due to voter
confusion about marking the ballot (Sinclair and Alvarez 2004; Neely and Cook 2008), or the difficulty inherent in choosing the rankings in a multicandidate field (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). The complexity of ballots, and in turn ballot errors, can also bias outcomes when disqualified ballots are concentrated amongst a certain population. Neely and Cook (2008) and Cook and Latterman (2012) show that “overvote” ballot errors in San Francisco IRV elections were concentrated in voting precincts dominated by African American and Latino residents.

Somewhat similar to the “overvote” is the problem presented by “undervotes.” For a variety of reasons, a voter may choose not to rank every candidate on an IRV ballot. This can lead to issues of ballot exhaustion, where a ballot no longer contributes to the outcome of an election if each of that voter’s preferred candidates have been eliminated. Because these ballots become discarded, the eventual winner may actually not win a majority of the total votes cast (Burnett and Kogan 2015).

Richie et al. (2000) argue that elections under instant runoff voting rules tend to select the same winner as an election conducted under plurality or traditional runoff rules (cf. Yonk, Simmons, and Groberg 2014). However, there is the potential for IRV and plurality systems to yield different winners under similar conditions (e.g., simulations done by Bean 1997 and Sanders et al. 2011). Additionally, under IRV a candidate that does not win a plurality of the votes in the first round can eventually win a majority upon subsequent rounds of vote reallocations (Doron and Kronick 1977).

---

16 Voter confusion may lead to a variety of ballot errors. In the context of IRV, confusion can lead to overvotes, or when a voter rank-orders multiple candidates for the same preferential rank, causing the ballot to be disqualified. For more on how ballot structure effects ballot errors, see Tomz and Van Houweling 2003; Kimball, Owens, and Keeney 2004; Kimball and Kropf 2005.

17 However, this is a critique of any runoff system – see for example the mayoral elections in Los Angeles (2005) or Jacksonville (2015).
Conclusion

Americans cities have numerous options to choose from when deciding how to structure their governments and how to conduct elections. While electoral reform is often overlooked at the municipal level, the importance of the decisions as to which electoral systems to utilize cannot be understated (Ahmed et al. 2008; McGrath 2012). Electoral systems help us better understand a wide variety of political phenomena, including party systems (Duverger 1954; Cox 1997), policy outcomes (Bowler et al. 2006; Lijphart 1999; Powell 2000), individual voting behavior (Blais and Carty 1991; Cox 1997; Farrell 2001; Blais et al. 2007; Singh 2011), and of particular interest to this study, voter turnout (Lakeman 1974; Powell 1980, 1986; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995; Singh 2011).

Despite a wealth of research on electoral rules at the national level, little research has been conducted on this matter at a sub-national level, particularly within the context of American cities. This study attempts to fill this void by exploring the impact of electoral system design on voter turnout in large American cities. In the United States there are a range of electoral systems employed at the local level. Large urban areas typically use one of five different types of voting systems to elect their mayors and city councilors: the nonpartisan triggered-runoff, partisan runoff, nonpartisan required-runoff, partisan plurality, and instant runoff voting electoral systems. These categorizations can be delineated based on the required proportion of the votes needed to win the election (plurality or majority), the use of a second round of balloting (triggered or required) and their use of party labels (partisan or nonpartisan). The next chapter applies the electoral system categorizations that have been developed here to an analytic strategy for understanding the effects of local electoral systems on voter turnout. These categorizations
are first used to construct the theoretical underpinnings of my hypotheses. From there, these categories are utilized in my data collection and the design of my statistical models.
Chapter 4: Conceptual Model, Data Collection, and Methodology

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of my argument as well as the hypotheses I have developed. I continue by reviewing the data collection methods and variables I use to test these hypotheses. Finally, I discuss the statistical models I employ in order to explore the effects of municipal institutions, electoral systems, and electoral competitiveness on voter turnout rates.

Throughout American history, governments at all levels of the federal structure have enacted electoral institutions and rules which make the act of voting costlier. Throughout American history, residency restrictions, registration requirements, poll taxes, and literacy tests have all affected the size of the electorate and the costs associated with an individual carrying out the act of voting (Kelley et al. 1967; Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Springer 2012; Ansolabehere and Konisky 2006). At the municipal level, Progressive Era institutional reforms had a similar, albeit more indirect, vote-depressing effect.

While some electoral reformers in recent years have been focused on preventing voter fraud and consequently restricting access to the ballot box, many other reformers have been seeking out ways to improve low voter turnout. These reformers have proposed changes such as same-day registration, early and absentee voting, and publicly financed campaigns. The Los Angeles City Council even discussed monetary prizes for those that voted in its municipal elections in an effort to spur turnout (Zahnsier 2014). Reformers and academics alike have yet to take a serious look at the role that electoral systems at the municipal level can play in reducing the costs associated with voting and thus increasing voter participation. As previously outlined, electoral systems and rules have long been thought to impact political behavior both domestically and abroad as well as nationally and locally (e.g., Rae 1971; Powell 1980, 1986;
Jackman 1987; Welch and Bledsoe 1988; Lijphart 1994; Bridges 1997; Cox 1997; Trounstine 2008). I continue in this line of thought by providing a theory that blends both individual and institutional levels of research on voting turnout.

The primary goal of this study is to examine the varying voter costs associated with different electoral systems and municipal institutions. Much of the research in this area has focused on “reformed institutions” (i.e. council-managers, commissions, nonpartisanship, off-year elections, and at-large elections). However, little attention has been paid to the impacts of the various electoral systems utilized in American cities. When deciding whether to vote or not, individuals make their decision by weighing the costs and benefits associated with voting (e.g., Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Electoral systems, municipal institutions, and the competitiveness all play a role in determining this individual calculus. Specifically, higher voter turnout rates are expected in cities where municipal institutions and electoral systems make the decision to vote less costly to the individual voter.

In American municipal elections, almost all plurality elections also coincide with the use of partisan ballots. Because it would be difficult to disentangle the unique effects of each, a comparison between plurality and majoritarian elections alone would typically coincide with the split between partisan and nonpartisan elections. Instead, this study differentiates between plurality elections and the multiple ways that majoritarian elections are conducted in American cities. In addition to looking at the effects of varying electoral systems, I seek to better understand whether or not other municipal institutions, typically understood as “reformed” institutions, continue to impact turnout as outlined in the literature on municipal elections. Finally, I discuss how the competitiveness of local elections may also impact turnout rates.
Runoff Elections and the Municipal Voting Calculus

Despite being the most common type of election in the United States, very little has been written about nonpartisan elections. The studies that have addressed municipal turnout rates have not accounted for the numerous ways that nonpartisan elections are mechanically conducted. That is, they treat all nonpartisan elections the same when in fact different cities conduct nonpartisan elections in unique ways. Because these elections are conducted using different mechanisms, not every individual participating in a given nonpartisan election will have the same voting calculus. I argue that the primary differences in the calculi can be attributed to when electoral systems hold their decisive election. There is only one decisive election in the partisan plurality system and the required-runoff system: the general election which follows either a partisan primary or a nonpartisan preliminary. In contrast, the decisive election in triggered-runoff and partisan-runoff systems is dictated by the results in the first round of balloting. During the first of balloting, voters in these two systems do not know for certain if they are participating in the decisive election or not.

This distinction in the voting calculi is most clear when comparing the different types of nonpartisan runoff systems. Differences in how runoff elections are conducted can alter both the \( p_i \) (probability of casting the deciding vote) and the \( c_i \) (cost of voting) terms in Downs’ (1957) calculus of voting. I argue that cities using the triggered-runoff procedure have institutionally lowered the probability of casting the deciding vote while simultaneously increasing the costs associated with voting. In turn, cities utilizing the triggered-runoff procedure are expected to have the lowest rates of voter turnout.

---

1 Two recent studies discuss municipal runoffs in the context of voter turnout. Caren (2007) shows that general elections have significantly higher turnout than preliminary elections while Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) demonstrate that runoff elections have higher turnout than non-runoff elections.
The probability of casting the deciding vote in a triggered-runoff system is lower than other electoral systems. In triggered-runoff cities, a runoff is only conducted when no candidate garners at least 50% of the vote on the first ballot. This is a higher threshold than in plurality systems, and a feat that is much more difficult to obtain when there are more candidates on the ballot. Although the nonpartisan required-runoff system also requires a candidate to receive a majority of the vote to be elected, this is only accomplished in the general (required second-round) election between the top two candidates from the preliminary election. Because there are only two candidates on the ballot, a majority is essentially guaranteed for one of them. Additionally, voters in triggered-runoff systems are keenly aware of the fact that their vote in the first round of balloting may not produce a winning candidate, and a second-round of balloting may be required. A voter may be discouraged from casting a ballot because a runoff election will most likely be triggered when a greater number of candidates are running in the first round. Although the probability of casting a deciding ballot in any election is quite low, I argue that it is even lower in nonpartisan triggered-runoff electoral systems.

The costs of voting in nonpartisan triggered-runoff systems are also higher than in other electoral systems for two primary reasons. First, triggered-runoff systems can require voters to cast ballots on two separate occasions, thus increasing the overall cost to vote. In discussing Southern partisan primary runoff elections, Bullock and Johnson (1992, 135) argue that where “the majority-vote system necessitates two elections that occur in close proximity… the need to vote a second time increases the cost of political participation.” In turn, it is expected that voter turnout rates will be lower due to the “dispersal of the [voting] decision” in a triggered-runoff system (Richie et al. 2000, 107).
Second, triggered-runoff systems also produce higher information costs for voters. The costs of acquiring political information in local elections is already much higher than in state and federal elections. However, this cost is not uniform across all municipal electoral systems. The information theory of voter turnout argues that individuals with more knowledge about the candidates in an election are more confident in their vote choice, and thus are more likely to vote (Matsusaka 1995; McMurray 2015). A lack of adequate information can prove to be an obstacle to voters participating in an election (Downs 1957), and may cause voters to abstain altogether (Feddersen and Pesendorfer 1996, 1997; Gerber et al. 2015). In electoral systems where more candidates are on the ballot, voters are faced with higher information costs. At the municipal level, the number of candidates on a ballot in the decisive election is dependent on the electoral system in place. The decisive election in partisan plurality and required-runoff cities is always the general election. In these elections there are fewer candidates than the primary or the preliminary elections that preceded them. In contrast, the decisive election for most triggered-runoff and partisan runoff cities is the multi-candidate first-round ballot, not a runoff election between just two candidates. This is in part due to the overall lack of competition and the strong incumbency advantages at the local level. If voters are forced to choose from a larger group of candidates, more political knowledge is required in order to make an informed decision. If voters feel they are unable to adequately differentiate among a large group of candidates they may decide to skip the election rather than make an uninformed decision (Lineberry and Fowler 1967). Instead of needing to familiarize themselves with the numerous campaigns in a multi-

---

2 Unless a candidate is running unopposed, the nonpartisan required-runoff cities always have two candidates in the decisive election. The partisan plurality cities typically have two candidates (a Democrat and Republican) but will sometimes have a third party candidate running too.

3 In the sample for this study a mere 36% of mayoral elections using a triggered-runoff procedure actually required a runoff to occur (50% of partisan runoff elections and 35% of nonpartisan triggered-runoff cities). Likewise, only 29% of city council races using a triggered-runoff procedure actually required the runoff (28% of partisan runoff elections and 29% of nonpartisan triggered-runoff elections)
candidate field in a triggered-runoff system, voters in the required-runoff systems (as well as the partisan plurality system in two-party cities) must only make a binary choice. While voters in the partisan runoff system are also often faced with a multi-candidate field, they benefit from the added voting cue of the partisan label which is absent in nonpartisan triggered-runoff systems.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Research Objective #1: Electoral Systems

Research Question #1: What is the relationship between electoral systems and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities?

Hypothesis #1: Electoral systems that increase the cost of voting will have lower voter turnout rates.

The primary objective of this study is to better understand the impact that electoral systems have on voter turnout rates for municipal elections. As outlined in the previous section, I theorize that electoral systems with greater costs associated with the act of voting will decrease voter turnout rates. Figure 4.1 depicts the theoretical basis for Hypothesis #1. Figure 4.1 is divided into four quadrants, with each one representing one of the four most common electoral systems currently used in municipal elections. The placement of each electoral system in their respective quadrant is based on their use of partisan or nonpartisan ballots (horizontal axis) and when the decisive election takes place (vertical axis). Electoral costs increase moving horizontally across the figure – from partisan to nonpartisan elections – as well as vertically – based on when the electoral system’s decisive election occurs. The quadrant in the bottom right represents the lowest electoral costs while the quadrant in the top left designates the highest electoral cost.
The nonpartisan triggered-runoff system exacts the greatest cost from voters; therefore, I hypothesize that other electoral systems will induce higher voter participation. In contrast, I expect the electoral system that exacts the smallest cost from voters to have the highest turnout. That is, I hypothesize that cities utilizing the partisan plurality system will have the highest turnout rates due to a few key reasons. First, the partisan plurality system is utilized in most state and federal elections across the country. Because of this, voters will be quite familiar with how it works. Secondly, the partisan plurality system is the least “costly” to voters compared to the other systems. The use of partisan ballots allows for an added voting cue not found in
nonpartisan elections, thus making the vote choice an easier exercise. Additionally, plurality systems have only one decisive election, thus lowering the physical cost associated with voting. Each of the other prominent electoral systems utilized in large American cities are likely to incur costs from either the use of nonpartisanship or uncertainty over when the decisive election will occur (and thus the potential for having to vote multiple times).

**Research Objective #2: Reform Institutions**

*Research Question #2:* What is the relationship between reformed municipal institutions and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities?

How a city arranges its municipal institutions dictates the costs of voting in other ways too. Reformed institutions (council-manager and commission systems, nonpartisanship, off-year elections, and at-large elections) are generally understood to increase voting costs and decrease overall voter participation. The inclusion of these variables will help to explain whether or not these institutions still matter in the context of different electoral systems. Below, I outline my hypotheses associated with partisan elections, municipal government forms, election timing, and city council structure.

**Hypothesis #2:** Cities that allow partisan elections will have higher turnout rates than cities that utilize nonpartisan elections.

It is typically argued that partisan elections help lower information costs associated with voting. After all, the partisan affiliation of candidates is often cited as the most important voting cue in American elections (Campbell et al. 1960; Karnig and Walter 1983; Rahn 1993; Beck 1997; Stokes 1999; Dalton 2007). At the municipal level, numerous studies have shown that nonpartisan elections produce lower turnout rates (Dixon 1966; Alford and Lee 1968; Hawley...
As alluded to above, I hypothesize that partisan elections still cause higher turnout rates than nonpartisan elections. It is possible that this relationship is also dependent upon the electoral system in place.

**Hypothesis #3:** Cities using the unreformed (mayor-council) government structure will have higher turnout rates than cities using the reformed (council-manager or commission) government structures.

Municipalities utilizing the mayor-council form of government tend to exhibit higher turnout rates than the two reformed structures: the council-manager and commission forms of government (Lee 1960; Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Brides 1997; Oliver 2001; Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Trounstine 2010). Mayor-council cities are expected to have higher turnout rates because of the tension inherent to the separation of elected power between the mayor and the city council. Theoretically speaking, council-manager systems produce a greater diffusion of appointed municipal power, which in turn make it difficult for voters to attribute responsibility to political actors (Popkin 1991; Wood 2002). In addition, voters in council-manager cities may perceive that less is at stake in the election because an unelected official – the city manager – makes a majority of the day-to-day decisions in the city (Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Bridges 1997; Oliver and Ha 2007). Reformed government structures are also thought to be more business-like rather than political in nature (Bridges 1997). I hypothesize that both mayoral and councilmanic elections held within the confines of mayor-council systems will have higher turnout rates than in cities using reformed government structures.
Hypothesis #4: Cities that hold their municipal elections concurrently with higher-level offices will have higher turnout rates than cities that do not hold elections concurrently.

Election timing has consistently been shown to affect turnout rates. When held concurrently with higher level offices, municipal elections routinely have greater turnout rates (Lee 1960; Alford and Lee 1968; Hawley 1973; Wood 2002; Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Hajnal 2010; Trounstine 2012; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). I hypothesize that city council elections held concurrently with mayoral or federal elections will have higher turnout rates than when they are held alone. Similarly, I expect mayoral elections to have higher turnout rates when held concurrently with federal elections due to the fact that the electoral cost of voting is dispersed across multiple elections.

Hypothesis #5: Cities with a greater proportion of district council seats will exhibit lower turnout rates than cities with a greater proportion of at-large council seats.

There is currently no theoretical consensus on how district and at-large councils impact voter turnout rates. This is due in part to the fact that most empirical studies have found that how a council is structured has little impact on voter turnout. I hypothesize a negative relationship between the proportion of district seats and turnout rates in city council elections. Echoing Bullock’s (1990) argument, I believe that the at-large elections are more likely to have contested races because many at-large elections utilize multimember districts. At-large councilors, compared to district councilors, are less able to rely on a geographic base of support which could diminish competition. In addition, multimember at-large elections can pit incumbents against one another, which may spur mobilization efforts in a highly contested election. Finally, there is an extensive literature on how proportional representation systems have higher turnout rates than
single-member district systems (e.g., Blais and Carty 1990; Blais and Dobrynska 1998; Bowler et al. 2001; Norris 2002). Because multimember at-large councils are more similar to proportional representation systems than they are single-member district systems, it is possible that they have higher turnout rates.

Research Objective #3: Electoral Competition

Research Question #3: What is the relationship between electoral competition and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities?

Hypothesis #6: Elections with a greater level of competitiveness will produce higher turnout rates.

Most municipal elections tend not to be very competitive. Because of this, I would expect more voter interest and participation on the occasions where a municipal election is particularly competitive. Electoral competitiveness can be defined and measured in multiple ways. One measure is the presence of an incumbent on the ballot. Incumbents tend to win re-election at very high rates, a fact that rings true especially at the local level (Wolman, Page, and Reavley 1990; Krebs 1998; Trounstine 2011, 2012). Given the relative safety of incumbents at the local level, one could argue that the presence of an incumbent on a ballot does little to excite the electorate, causing lower turnout rates. In his study of mayoral elections large cities, Caren (2007) finds that an incumbent mayoral candidate does depress overall voter turnout by almost three percentage points. It is possible that incumbents at the city council level have a similar effect as at the mayoral level. Despite this, Hajnal and Lewis’s (2003) study of local elections in California find that the number of incumbents per council seat running for reelection had no significant effect on voter turnout.
A second common method of determining the competitiveness of an election is the margin of victory between the top two candidates. Elections with a smaller margin of victory are deemed more competitive, and in turn are hypothesized to produce higher turnout rates. Empirical studies have shown that closer elections do in fact produce higher turnout rates (Caren 2007; Lublin and Tate 1995; Hill and Leighley 1999; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014).

A third method for measuring the competitiveness of an election is whether or not a primary or runoff election occurred. This measure has not been tested in the literature. Given that it is not possible to measure a cumulative margin of victory for multiple council elections, this measure can act as a similar measure of competitiveness. Elections that require primary or runoffs are in themselves more competitive than ones that do not. This could be due to a large quantity of candidates contesting the election, or a close race between two candidates in a larger field.

A final way to determine competitiveness is the number of candidates contesting a particular election. For the purposes of this study, the number of candidates as a measure of competitiveness is not used because different electoral systems dictate how many candidates are eligible to be placed on the ballot in the decisive election (Cox 1997). Given my focus on electoral systems, the number of candidates could be an intervening variable for determining relative turnout levels.

I hypothesize that the presence of an incumbent on the ballot will have a negative effect on voter turnout for both mayoral and city council elections. That is, open seats will generate greater political interest and participation. Meanwhile, I anticipate higher turnout rates in mayoral elections with lower margins of victory and in city council contests that require a primary or runoff.
Dataset Creation

In order to better understand the roles that institutions and competition play in municipal elections of large American cities, a dataset was developed from numerous sources spanning the twenty-year period from 1995-2014. Large cities are defined as ones that at some point in their existence exceeded 500,000 inhabitants. This resulted in a population of 40 cities. One difficulty with studying local elections is the lack of a central repository for city election data. Additionally, cities do not uniformly collect data in the same manner, nor are cities the sole aggregator of election data. The sources for election return data in each city were dependent on recordkeeping practices. This data was collected from city clerks, city election departments, city archives, county registrars, county boards of elections, and secretaries of state. Missing information was supplemented via newspapers or further outreach to the city’s record-keeper for election data. Unfortunately, city-level election records are not well stored. Because of this, some of the earlier years in the study lacked available data. Individual city elections that did not have enough useful data had to be excluded. There was insufficient data available to include the cities of Detroit, Oklahoma City, and Buffalo. Additionally, the City of Nashville was excluded from the dataset of city council elections, but is included in the mayoral election dataset. Thus, the final dataset for mayoral elections included 37 cities (N = 191 distinct elections) while the city council dataset contains data from 36 cities (N = 258 distinct elections). The cities I collected data for are geographically dispersed throughout the country. Most of the cities came from the South (n = 14), followed by the West (n = 11), the Midwest (n = 8) and finally the Northeast (n = 4). The 37 cities included in this study are located within 24 different states (including the District of Columbia) and represent roughly 13.16% of the total United States population in 2010 (U.S. Census 2010).

4 Regions are based off of U.S. Census designations.
Data on individual cities’ electoral institutions was primarily obtained from election records and city charters. In addition, official websites for city councils and mayors provided a wealth of data. Where needed, this data was supplemented by the International City/County Management Association’s (ICMA) Form of Government surveys from the years 1996, 2001, 2006, and 2011. Finally, citywide demographic data was obtained from various U.S. Census Bureau publications: the 1990, 2000, and 2010 decennial censuses; the 1990 Census, General Population Characteristics (CP-1 series); the 1990 Census, Social and Economic Characteristics (CP-2 series); and the 2006-2010 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Estimates.

Although Hajnal et al. (2002, 34-35) argue that “the same factors that influence turnout in council elections tended to affect turnout in mayoral elections,” I have decided to analyze mayoral and city council elections separately. Doing so will allow me to analyze the effects of variables that are unique to each elected office. In the case of mayoral elections, this means I can utilize the margin of victory between the top two candidates – a measure that cannot be calculated for council elections. Similarly, for city council elections I can use council-member composition (district, at-large, or mixed) as an independent variable.

Table 4.1 outlines the 37 cities covered in the mayoral dataset \((n = 191)\) and the 36 cities in the city council dataset \((n = 258)\) starting from the first election available within the 1995-2014 timeframe. The number of election observations from each city was dependent on not only the availability of data, but also the length of a mayoral term within that city. For instance, Charlotte provided 10 individual election observations because the data since 1995 was available and Charlotte mayors only serve two year terms. Meanwhile, Milwaukee only provided two observations because of a lack of data in the earlier years of the study and due to its use of a four year mayoral term.
Table 4.1: Sampled Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>First Mayoral Election</th>
<th>Mayoral Elections</th>
<th>First Council Election</th>
<th>Council Elections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albuquerque</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Worth</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indianapolis</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacksonville</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucson</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dependent Variable: Defining and Measuring Voter Turnout

There are numerous ways one can calculate voter turnout. In its simplest understanding, voter turnout is calculated by dividing the number of ballots cast by the number of possible voters at the time an election was held. However, there is a great deal of debate about what constitutes a cast ballot and how to define a possible voter.

The numerator in most voter turnout calculations is the number of votes cast at an election. However, this number varies by city: some election departments report blank votes, overvotes and undervotes while others do not. Because of the differences across cities, the most accurate numerator in a turnout calculation is often the sum of the votes for each candidate for the highest office on the ballot. Because some cities hold their elections concurrently with statewide or federal elections, it is best to sum the number of votes for each candidate for the highest municipal office on the ballot (Caren 2007). There tends to be a drop off in votes cast going from federal to municipal elections held concurrently on the same ballot. For instance, San Diego’s 2012 mayoral election was held concurrently with the nationwide presidential election. Officially, 516,503 ballots were cast from amongst the 677,310 registered voters for a turnout of 76.3%. However, only 466,962 of the ballots cast actually included a vote for one of the two mayoral candidates on the ballot, producing a slightly lower turnout statistic of 68.9%. As a result, the numerator for my turnout statistic is the sum of the number of votes for each candidate running for the highest municipal office in a given election.

There is much greater debate among scholars over the calculation for the denominator in a turnout statistic. Researchers have historically used the number of registered voters or the voting age population as the denominator in their turnout statistics (Geys 2006). However,
McDonald and Popkin (2001) have shown that both of these can be problematic when using turnout as a dependent variable in a comparative context.

Utilizing the number of registered voters in the denominator of the turnout equation is problematic for a few reasons. First, using registered voter data excludes non-registered but eligible voters while including registered voters that may no longer be eligible to vote. In addition, not every city manages their list of registered voters, and those that do may do so in an inconsistent and untimely manner. For example, the record of the number of registered voters in Portland Oregon is not maintained by the city. Instead, the three different counties that Portland’s borders lay within – Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties – separately maintain registration rolls. Due to varying voter registration practices, the use of registered voters in the denominator of a turnout statistic is likely to introduce error into the turnout calculation (Caren 2007). Many campaigns for elected office will include registration drives as part of their strategy. Thus, the number of registered voters might be due to the campaign effects a researcher might be trying to observe. Finally, electoral institutions can impact the number of registered voters in a city. The regulations and age requirements surrounding voter registration differs across states (McDonald and Popkin 2001). The inclusion of registered voters in the turnout statistic obfuscates the dependent variable, making it difficult to understand whether one is predicting turnout or the ease to which citizens are able to register. Despite its deficiencies, some studies of turnout at both the national (Blais and Carty 1990; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Blais 2000; Franklin 2004) and sub-national levels (Wood 2002; Nalder 2007; Hajnal and Lewis 2003) have relied on registered voter data in their turnout calculations.

Perhaps a more accurate, although still imperfect, account of the number of potential voters at an election is the voting age population (VAP). Produced by the U.S. Census, the VAP
is the sum of all residents in a political unit over the age of 18. Fort (1995) argues that the use of VAP is an improvement over the use of voter registration data because the act of registering to vote is distinct from actually voting. Thus, using registered voters as the denominator incorporates two different actions. Voter registration rules are also different across political units so using this data in the denominator may actually speak to a barrier to turnout – registering to vote – while also trying to explain turnout. Additionally, the VAP estimate includes a large number of residents that are not eligible to vote. This number is particularly problematic for cities because of the high concentration of foreign born non-citizens found in some American cities. In part because of this, the VAP statistic is not an accurate depiction of eligible voters (Andrews 1966; Bruce 1997; Burnham 1985; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; McDonald and Popkin 2001). The VAP turnout statistic has been used in a variety of studies on voter turnout at both the national (Powell 1986; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995; Katz 1997; Norris 2002) and sub-national level (Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Kelleher and Lowery 2004; Gomez, Hansford, and Krause 2007; Althaus and Trautman 2008).

To date, the most accurate account of voter turnout uses the voting eligible population (VEP) as its denominator. Developed by McDonald and Popkin (2001), the VEP is similar to the VAP but with a few alternations. Whereas the VAP includes all residents over the age of 18, the VEP adjusts for non-eligible voters by excluding felons and noncitizens and including eligible residents that are living outside of the jurisdiction (e.g., if they were overseas). Holbrook and Heidbreder (2010) argue that the difference between VAP and VEP calculations is critically important to the accurate account of turnout statistics because the ineligible resident population tends to be dominated by ethnic minorities and those with a lower socio-economic and education status. This is quite important for the study of local elections because these demographics are
often concentrated in urban centers. And because these groups tend to vote less often than the median voter (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Timpone 1998), their exclusion from the denominator will produce a more accurate turnout value, and thus aid in creating a clearer understanding of what drives voter turnout. VEP turnout has recently become more widespread in comparative studies of turnout at the state and federal level (Wattenberg 2005; Bergan et al. 2005; Hill and McKee 2005; Tolbert and Smith 2005; Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009).

Some of the adjustments to the VAP to create the VEP cannot be done at the municipal level due to data collection practices. For instance, there is no single data repository of the felon population listed at the city level. An acceptable alternative to the VEP is the citizen voting age population (CVAP). The CVAP makes all of the possible data adjustments to the estimate of eligible voters that the VEP does with the limited data available at the city level. Thus, the CVAP corrects for non-citizens, but is unable to account for the population that is incarcerated or living abroad. Fortunately for those working with urban data, the estimates for the VEP and the CVAP are very similar and researchers can expect to reach similar conclusions using one or the other (Holbrook and Heidbreder 2010). In his study of urban turnout in American cities, Caren (2007) uses an estimate of the CVAP when calculating the turnout statistic. McDaniel (2015) also utilizes the CVAP when comparing turnout levels before and after San Francisco adopted instant runoff voting.

In order to calculate the CVAP for this study, data on each city’s total population, percent voting age population, and percent of non-citizen population were collected from the U.S. Census. Since the U.S. Census data only provided decennial data for each city, I needed to calculate the missing data for the years between each census. In order to correct for this, I
linearly interpolated missing data points. Through this process, I was able to create estimates of
the CVAP for the years between each decennial census.

The case of Portland, Oregon can be used an example. To obtain the missing voting age
population data point for Portland 2004 election, I began by taking the difference in the total
population for the city between the years 2010 and 2000 (583,776 – 529,121 = 54,655). This
provided me with the change in population over the decade. I then divided this amount by ten –
the number of years between the two censuses – in order to get the annual rate of total population
change (54,655 / 10 = 5,465.5). I then summed my starting data point (2000 population) with the
product of the annual rate of change and the number of years between the census and the target
year ([529,121 + (5,465.5 * 4)] = 550,983). This provided me with an estimate of the city’s total
population for that year. I then needed to adjust this estimate using available data on the percent
of the population that was eligible to vote (voting age population) or ineligible to vote (non-
citizens). First, I multiplied the estimated total population by the percent of the municipality that
is of voting age (for this example, 78.9% of Portland’s total population was over the age of 18) in
order to establish an estimate of the city’s voting age population (550,983 * 0.789 = 434,725).
Secondly, I needed to correct this estimate given the percentage of the population that was not
citizens (for this example, 8% of Portland’s total population were non-citizens). To do this, I
subtracted the number of non-citizens by the estimated voting age population ([434,725 -
(434,725 * 0.08)] = 399,948). At the end of the interpolation process, I established – using data
from 2000 and 2010 – that although the city of Portland’s estimated population in 2004 was
550,983, only 399,948 of the residents were eligible-to-vote citizens (the CVAP statistic). This
estimate is the denominator used in my turnout statistic calculation for each election observation.
There is no perfect measure for estimating the number of eligible voters in a city. However, the use of a linear interpolation provides a better option than relying on decennial census data. City populations – and, in turn, the number of eligible voters – were quite volatile during the time period for this study.\(^5\) Despite its limitations, because population data varied so drastically between censuses, the calculated estimate of the CVAP statistic is more accurate than simply relying on data collected every ten years.

**Independent Variables: Institutions, Context, and Demographics**

**Institutional Variables**

The primary focal point of this study is the role that institutional arrangements have in affecting voter participation at the local level. Cities are an optimal level of analysis for this type of study. Cities across the country exhibit a great deal of variety in their institutional settings: both in terms of the types of officials they elect as well as how and when those elections occur. The diversity of institutions is captured in variables that account for differing election structures, forms of government, partisan ballots, election timing, and council composition.

**Electoral System** – Studies of municipal elections lack a focus on electoral systems. In this study, five electoral system types are coded as a series of dichotomous variables \([0 = \text{no}, 1 = \text{yes}]\): Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff, Nonpartisan Required-Runoff, Partisan Plurality, Partisan Runoff, and Nonpartisan Alternative. Tables 4.2 and 4.3 depict the usage of different election systems across mayoral and city council elections in the sample. Cities that changed their electoral system during the time period of this study are denoted by the term “varies.” For each

---

\(^5\) For instance, Charlotte’s population grew at a rate greater than 35% during both the 1990s and 2000s, Las Vegas saw its population grow an astonishing 85% during the 1990s, and New Orleans’ population declined 29% in the 2000s. Numerous other cities also saw double digit population growth or decline during the period of study.
regression model, the reference category that these dichotomies are coded against is the *Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff* response because that was the most commonly used throughout the sampled cities.

Most of the cities in the sample use the nonpartisan triggered-runoff to elect their mayors \((n = 16 \text{ cities}, \ 43.2\% \text{ of sampled cities})\). The second most common mayoral election system is the partisan plurality \((n = 10, \ 27\%\). This is followed by the third most common mayoral election system: the nonpartisan required-runoff \((n = 6, \ 16.2\%\). The fourth most common election response was the nonpartisan alternative electoral systems. This variable is a catch-all category for infrequently-used electoral systems. This category includes cities that used single-round plurality (Memphis) and instant runoff voting to elect their mayors (Minneapolis and San Francisco). Because there were very few cases in this study using these systems, they were collapsed into a single response. Partisan runoff systems were the least common mayoral election system. Only two cities – New Orleans and Jacksonville – utilize this system.

The majority of cities use the nonpartisan triggered-runoff to conduct their council elections \((n = 16 \text{ cities}, \ 44.4\% \text{ of sampled cities})\). The next most common council election type is the partisan plurality election \((n = 9, \ 25\%\). The nonpartisan with required-runoff is the third most common electoral system \((n = 6, \ 16.7\%\). The fourth election type is a multi-categorical response. This variable includes cities that utilize single-round plurality elections (Albuquerque), instant runoff voting (Minneapolis and San Francisco), and those that utilize both majoritarian elections for district seats and plurality elections for multi-member seats (Memphis). Since there were very few cases for each of these election systems, they were collapsed into a single response. Finally, the least common election system in the sample was the partisan runoff \((n = 2, \ 5.6\%\).
Table 4.2: Mayoral Forms of Government and Electoral Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Form of Government</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albuquerque</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Worth</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indianapolis</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacksonville</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>Commission</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucson</td>
<td>Council-Manager</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.3: City Council Types and Electoral Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Council Type</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albuquerque</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>At-Large</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>At-Large</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Worth</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indianapolis</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacksonville</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>At-Large</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Varies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>At-Large</td>
<td>Nonpartisan Required-Runoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucson</td>
<td>At-Large</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Form of Government – Large cities are typically organized in one of three ways, from most to least common: mayor-council, council-manager, and commission systems. The rate of usage for each of these systems in large cities is different from their use nationwide. The most common form of government in large cities today is the mayor-council system. Twenty-five of the thirty-seven cities in this study (67.5%) currently utilize this form of government. This contrasts to a usage rate of just 33% nationwide (ICMA 2011). The next most popular form of government for large cities is the council-manager system (n = 11; 29.7% of case cities). Council-manager governments are much more common nationally than in large cities, with roughly 59% of all city governments organized in this manner (ICMA 2011). The final form of government, the commission, is only seen in one case city, Portland, Oregon. Although it was once popular in the early 20th century, the commission form of government is no longer as widespread as it once was. Table 4.2 outlines the form of government utilized in each city in the sample. Two other forms of government – the town meeting and the representative town meeting – are not used in large cities and are thus not included in this study. The form of government variable for this study is captured by a dichotomous variable: Mayor-Council [0 = no, 1 = yes]. By measuring form of government as a dichotomy in this way, I am able to differentiate the effects of “reformed” government systems (council-manager and commission) with the “unreformed” mayor-council system.

Partisanship – Most municipal elections today are held without party labels. In their 2011 Form of Government Survey, the ICMA reported that 80% of all city council elections were

---

6 The 2011 ICMA Municipal Form of Government survey was conducted in the Fall of 2011. Surveys were sent to local governments with a population in excess of 2,500. The response rate was 41%. Although the ICMA Form of Government survey covers different cities in their sample every five years, it has shown to be an accurate representation of municipal institutions in the United States (Trebbi et al. 2008).
This compares to a rate of 66.7% of the cities in the dataset for this study. This study treats Partisanship as a dichotomous variable [0 = no, 1 = yes]. Although some scholars (Aldrich 1959; Gilbert 1962, 361) argue that nonpartisanship is “a matter of degree in large cities,” I code my Partisanship variable based on whether or not party labels are allowed on municipal ballots.

**Election Timing** – Most municipal elections are not held concurrently with federal elections. In addition, some cities use staggered council terms, meaning not all city council elections are held concurrently with mayoral elections. Two dichotomous variables [0 = no, 1 = yes] were created to measure the effects on turnout when elections are held concurrently with Mayoral (in the case of city council elections) and Federal (in the case of both mayoral and city council) elections. City council elections were coded based on the highest level of concurrent election. Thus if a council election was held concurrently with both mayoral and federal elections, it was coded as being held concurrently with the federal election. For the purposes of this variable, federal elections included presidential primaries, midterm elections, and presidential elections.

**Council Composition** - In order to measure the composition of city council membership, I calculated a Percent District variable. This variable was calculated by dividing the number of district or ward city council seats by the total number of council seats. A pure district council system would be coded as 1 while an at-large city would be coded 0. This calculation was preferred over an ordinal measure (District – Mixed – At-Large) or multiple dichotomous measures of council composition. Some mixed-council cities only elect one at-large member,
typically a Council President. By calculating the council composition as a percentage, I am able to more accurately portray the methods of electing city councilors.

Although pure at-large councils are the most common type of council election methods nationwide (66% of cities), they are the least common amongst large cities: only 13.9% ($n = 5$) of the cities in my dataset use pure at-large council structures. District city councils are the most common way of structuring city councils in large cities: 50% of the cities in this study ($n = 18$) use a pure district system. This compares to a usage rate of 17% in cities nationwide. Finally, 33% ($n = 12$) of the cities in this study use a mixed system of both district and at-large councilors. This compares to 17% of cities nationwide. Table 4.3 highlights the city council composition for each sampled city.

The coding for the council structures in two cities deserves special attention. Up until 2015, city council seats in Tucson were elected in ward-based primaries and at-large general elections. Because the turnout statistic was taken for the general election, these seats have been coded as at-large. In Memphis, the city council includes both single member districts and multi-member “super districts.” Due to the joint-jurisdiction of the two super-districts with the single member districts, this city council was categorized as mixed. The six councilors representing the two multi-member districts were coded at-large councilors and the seven single-member-district seats were coded as district councilors.

**Election Competition Variables**

In addition to the aforementioned institutional variables, a variety of election-specific variables accounting for electoral competition have been included in this study. Due to the

---

7 A federal appeals court ruled that Tucson’s ward-based nominations and at-large general elections were unconstitutional because they denied residents equal rights (Fischer 2015).
institutional differences between mayoral and council elections, the manner in which election competitiveness is calculated differs between the two election types.

**Mayoral Competitiveness** – The level of competitiveness for the mayoral elections were captured through two variables. The first method was through the *Victory Margin* variable. *Victory Margin* is calculated as the percentage-points difference between the top vote-getter and the second place candidate. For instance, if a winning candidate received 60% of the vote, and the runner up earned 35% of the vote, the victory margin would be 25%. A second variable, *Incumbent*, is a dichotomous measure of whether or not the incumbent was seeking re-election [0 = no, 1 = yes].

**City Council Competitiveness** – Competitiveness in councilmanic elections was defined by two variables. The first was *Primary or Runoff*, or the percentage of council seats that were competitive enough to require a primary or runoff election. For partisan plurality cities this means that a general election had at least one party primary before the general election. For nonpartisan triggered-runoff and partisan runoff cities, this means that no candidate garnered at least 50% of the vote in the first round and a runoff election was conducted. For nonpartisan required-runoff cities, this means that there were enough candidates campaigning to require a preliminary election to be held. Preliminary elections occur when there are more than two candidates running for an office.

Similar to the mayoral election models, an *Incumbent* variable was also included. The council version of this variable was calculated as the percentage of incumbent councilors seeking re-election. Unfortunately, no margin of victory variable can be calculated for council elections.
due to the differing mechanisms for determining winners within councils, and the fact that there was no way to accurately aggregate the margin of victory for multiple council elections into one variable.

Demographic Variables

Much of the research on individual-level determinants of voter turnout relies on demographic predictors. Since this study seeks to understand aggregate turnout levels, no inferences will be made about these variables. Instead, for both the mayoral and council turnout models, several demographic variables were included as controls for differences in the composition of city electorates. College Educated is defined as the percentage of residents over the age of 25 that have received a bachelor’s degree. The variables Black and Latino are the percentage of city residents that identify as each race/ethnicity. Data for each election observation was taken from the most recent preceding U.S. Census.

In addition to the aforementioned demographic variables, three dichotomous variables encapsulating the time span of the elections were included. Each of these variables captures a five year period: 1995-1999, 2000-2004, and 2005-2009. The timespan of 2010-2014 is dropped from the model and is used as a reference category for the three other dichotomies. These variables were included to control for any declining trends in local voter turnout over the past two decades.

Statistical Analysis Methods

A cross-sectional time-series set of election data spanning 37 large cities between the years 1995 and 2014 was collected for use in this study. The data are hierarchical in nature because there are repeated observations of electoral events – level-1 variables – nested within each city, my level-2 variable (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Weiss 2005; Woltman et al. 2002).
Additionally, the dataset is dominated by cases (level-2 variables), meaning I have more city observations than elections within cities (level-1 variables).

Ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression is not capable of adequately handling longitudinal data due to the repeated measures inherent in these types of datasets. When working with hierarchical data, the assumptions of homoscedasticity and independence associated with OLS must be altered (Beck and Katz 1995; Kennedy 2008; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). While elections in different cities can be assumed independent of one another, that assumption cannot be held when looking at repeated observations of elections within a single city. In turn, we cannot assume that the models have homoscedastic error terms. Any assumption made using OLS on longitudinal data are not necessarily accurate due to potentially biased standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995).

Instead of utilizing OLS, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) offers a more accurate way to analyze the longitudinal data I have collected. HLM relaxes the assumptions of independence and allows for group membership, in this case cities, to be a component of the model itself (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Essentially, HLM allows for variables at multiple levels of analysis to be included in a single model, although HLM necessitates a level-1 outcome variable (Norušis 2007; Woltman et al. 2002).

The use of hierarchical linear modeling has numerous benefits. HLM accounts for both within- and between-group relationships (Garson 2012). That is, the variation in turnout within cities and between cities is used to account for the overall variance in the turnout outcome variable. HLM is also useful for my analysis because it does not require a balanced dataset. Due to the idiosyncrasies of individual cities, not every city holds their elections at regular intervals. Additionally, data for each city was not available for every year of this study. HLM is able to
work with small group sizes, unequal group sizes, and uneven intervals between observations (Gill 2003; Osborne 2000; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002).

In order to analyze my dataset, the hierarchical linear model I employ is a generalized least squares (GLS) regression with random effects and robust standard errors clustered on individual cities by using Stata’s xtreg function. The use of the xtreg function in this study is beneficial for two primary reasons. First, xtreg reports within-city variance, between-city variance, and a combined overall variance. This allows for a more comprehensive depiction of how institutional and contextual variables impact turnout not only within individual cities (across time), but also amongst all the cities in the dataset (cross sectional). Secondly, the interpretation of the xtreg output is almost identical to that for ordinary least squares regression, making it more accessible for readers not trained in advanced statistics and econometrics.

In this model, each individual city is a random effect. The nesting of election observations within cities dictates the covariance structure of the level-1 variables. By allowing each city to be a random effect, we allow for each of the within-city (level-1) variables to be correlated (Garson 2012). Thus random effects models, unlike fixed effects models, allow for both time-varying and time-invariant variables. This is critical to my study because many of the municipal institutions I am observing at the city level do not vary across time.

To confirm that a random effects model was the preferred model for my dataset, I ran the Hausman Specification test for each model I created (Hausman 1978). To do this I ran both fixed and random effects models for my data. The Hausman Specification test then compares the two models in order to determine whether a random effects or fixed effects model should be used for the longitudinal data in my dataset. The null hypothesis for this test is that the individual effects
are not correlated with any of the other regressors in the model. Since I failed to reject this hypothesis, the random effects model is preferred over a fixed effects model.

Next, I conducted the Breusch-Pagan Lagrange multiplier test on each model to confirm that the random effects model was preferred to a pooled-OLS model (Breusch and Pagan 1980). The Breusch-Pagan Lagrange multiplier test’s null hypothesis is that the variance across units is zero, that is, that there is no panel effect to the data. If we reject the null hypothesis, the random effects model is preferred over an OLS model. The Breusch-Pagan Lagrange multiplier test for each model confirmed that panel effects existed, and that the random effects model was the more accurate model.

Stata’s vce(cluster) function reports robust standard errors for the model. Robust standard errors are used to correct for model misspecifications due to autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity problems common in the analysis of cross-sectional time series datasets. The use of robust standard errors will affect the standard errors in the regression output, but not the individual coefficients. In choosing robust standard errors, each individual election observation is clustered by their respective city. By doing this, I acknowledge that within-city observations are not independent. Clustering by cities allows for intra-city variables to be correlated.

Each random effects model takes the form shown in Equation 4.1:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_i X_i + u_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$  
(Equation 4.1)

Where:

$Y_{it} = \text{voter turnout for city } i \text{ at time } t$

$\alpha = \text{constant}$

$\beta_i = \text{independent variable}$
\[ u_i = \text{between-city error term} \]
\[ \varepsilon_{it} = \text{within-city error term} \]

The equations for four separate models – two mayoral and two city council – are listed below. Each of these equations focuses on the municipal institutions and electoral systems variables. The first mayoral and city council models include a term for the \textit{Partisanship} variable. The second mayoral and city council models expand on this by sub-dividing partisanship into dummy variables representing the different electoral systems used in cities.

**Mayoral Voter Turnout #1: Partisanship**

\[
Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1\text{VictoryMargin} + \beta_2\text{Incumbent} + \beta_3\text{MayorCouncil} + \beta_4\text{Federal} + \beta_5\text{Partisanship} + \\
\beta_6\text{LogBlack} + \beta_7\text{LogLatino} + \beta_8\text{LogCollegeEducated} + \beta_9\text{Year9599} + \beta_{10}\text{Year0004} + \\
\beta_{11}\text{Year0509} + u_i + \varepsilon_{it}
\]

**Mayoral Voter Turnout #2: Electoral Systems**

\[
Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1\text{VictoryMargin} + \beta_2\text{Incumbent} + \beta_3\text{MayorCouncil} + \beta_4\text{Federal} + \\
\beta_5\text{NonpartisanRequiredRunoff} + \beta_6\text{PartisanPlurality} + \beta_7\text{PartisanRunoff} + \\
\beta_8\text{NonpartisanAlternative} + \beta_9\text{LogBlack} + \beta_{10}\text{LogLatino} + \beta_{11}\text{LogCollegeEducated} + \\
\beta_{12}\text{Year9599} + \beta_{13}\text{Year0004} + \beta_{14}\text{Year0509} + u_i + \varepsilon_{it}
\]
City Council Voter Turnout #1: Partisanship

\[ Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{PrimaryOrRunoff} + \beta_2 \text{Incumbent} + \beta_3 \text{MayorCouncil} + \beta_4 \text{PercentDistrict} + \beta_5 \text{Mayoral} + \beta_6 \text{Federal} + \beta_7 \text{Partisanship} + \beta_8 \text{LogBlack} + \beta_9 \text{LogLatino} + \beta_{10} \text{LogCollegeEducated} + \beta_{11} \text{Year9599} + \beta_{12} \text{Year0004} + \beta_{13} \text{Year0509} + u_t + \epsilon_{it} \]

City Council Voter Turnout #2: Electoral Systems

\[ Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{PrimaryOrRunoff} + \beta_2 \text{Incumbent} + \beta_3 \text{MayorCouncil} + \beta_4 \text{PercentDistrict} + \beta_5 \text{Mayoral} + \beta_6 \text{Federal} + \beta_7 \text{NonpartisanRequiredRunoff} + \beta_8 \text{PartisanPlurality} + \beta_9 \text{PartisanRunoff} + \beta_{10} \text{NonpartisanAlternative} + \beta_{11} \text{LogBlack} + \beta_{12} \text{LogLatino} + \beta_{13} \text{LogCollegeEducated} + \beta_{14} \text{Year9599} + \beta_{15} \text{Year0004} + \beta_{16} \text{Year0509} + u_t + \epsilon_{it} \]

**Conclusion**

This study examines the role that electoral systems, municipal institutions, and campaign competitiveness play in impacting voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities over the past twenty years. I have hypothesized that the varying electoral costs associated with different electoral systems has a significant impact on municipal-level turnout in my sample. I also believe that a handful of other municipal institutions as well as electoral competition will influence voter turnout. Data for this study was collected from a myriad of municipal, county, and state level sources. Due to the hierarchical and longitudinal nature of my dataset – election observations clustered within cities – GLS random effects models were selected as the most appropriate method for analyzing my hypotheses about voter turnout in mayoral and city council elections. The next chapter presents the statistical results of the random effects models outlined in this chapter.
Chapter 5: Descriptive Findings and Regression Results

The goal of this dissertation is to demonstrate that municipal institutions – electoral systems in particular – and electoral competition impact voter turnout levels in municipal elections. This chapter begins by providing descriptive analyses for the municipal institutions measures of electoral competition that were hypothesized to impact voter turnout. Descriptions and hypotheses for both mayoral and city council elections are addressed separately. I also provide descriptive statistics for the control variables in the models. From there, I proceed to the multivariate analyses that were outlined in the previous chapter. I present the results of eight random effects generalized least squares (GLS) regression models used to explain variation in voter turnout rates. Four mayoral models and four city council models are reported. The findings presented in this chapter show that a city’s choice of municipal institutions significantly affects voter turnout. The results offer a mixed picture about the hypothesized role of municipal institutions and electoral competition on voter turnout.

Descriptive Findings: Mayoral Elections

Voter turnout rates in mayoral elections fluctuate considerably across the 37 cities sampled in this study. Out of the 191 distinct elections covered in the sample, mayoral elections averaged a turnout rate of 23.14% of the citizen voting age population (See Table 5.2). However, there was great variation in turnout levels, which ranged from a low of 2.13% to a high of 57.46% (See Table 5.2). Mayoral turnout rates had a standard deviation of 10.74% and hovered between 15% and 35%; much lower than turnout rates seen in state and federal elections. A histogram of the mayoral turnout rates in the sample depicts a slight skew to the right (See Figure 5.1).
Table 5.1: Median Voter Turnout Rate by City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Median Mayoral Turnout</th>
<th>Median Council Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albuquerque</td>
<td>24.50%</td>
<td>16.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>12.42%</td>
<td>11.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>15.36%</td>
<td>10.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>23.95%</td>
<td>14.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>22.33%</td>
<td>22.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>26.88%</td>
<td>26.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>31.79%</td>
<td>32.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>22.87%</td>
<td>22.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>10.30%</td>
<td>10.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>27.02%</td>
<td>27.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso</td>
<td>11.80%</td>
<td>11.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Worth</td>
<td>4.70%</td>
<td>4.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>15.34%</td>
<td>15.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indianapolis</td>
<td>29.78%</td>
<td>29.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacksonville</td>
<td>25.40%</td>
<td>25.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City</td>
<td>17.73%</td>
<td>17.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>11.42%</td>
<td>9.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>21.01%</td>
<td>14.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>46.30%</td>
<td>47.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memphis</td>
<td>27.64%</td>
<td>27.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>21.19%</td>
<td>21.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>27.67%</td>
<td>27.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville</td>
<td>17.51%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>34.01%</td>
<td>34.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>23.78%</td>
<td>23.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>28.67%</td>
<td>28.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>11.58%</td>
<td>9.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
<td>21.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>33.38%</td>
<td>28.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>27.05%</td>
<td>25.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>42.85%</td>
<td>44.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>23.51%</td>
<td>25.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>43.11%</td>
<td>42.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>13.55%</td>
<td>13.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucson</td>
<td>23.24%</td>
<td>21.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>31.72%</td>
<td>39.08%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.1 provides the median mayoral turnout for each individual city in the study. There was substantial variation from election to election and city to city. The city of Fort Worth, TX had the lowest median turnout rates while Louisville, KY had the highest. Figure 5.2 graphically depicts the variation in within-city median voter turnout. The median mayoral turnout in most of the cities fell between 20% and 30%. This variation in turnout is largely dependent on the complex web of institutional arrangements found in each city and the level of electoral competition in a given election, as discussed later in this chapter.

Figure 5.1: Mayoral Election Turnout Histogram
In addition to having low turnout, most mayoral elections are not very competitive: the average margin of victory between the winner and runner up in a given election was just over 33 percentage points (See Table 5.2). The competitiveness of mayoral elections varied extensively, with the margin of victory variable having a standard deviation of 26.30%. The closest mayoral election had a margin of victory of just 0.14% while six of the elections in this study were uncontested.
Table 5.2 presents the rest of the descriptive statistics for each of the demographic and time-period control variables as well as the dichotomous institutional variables included in the mayoral regression models. These variables will each be discussed in-depth later in the chapter.

Table 5.2: Descriptive Statistics for Mayoral Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>23.14</td>
<td>10.74</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>57.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victory Margin</td>
<td>33.20</td>
<td>26.30</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Running</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Election</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Federal Election</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1999</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2009</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Institutions

Table 5.3 shows the effects of electoral systems on mayoral turnout. Across the different electoral systems, turnout rates varied considerably. Nonpartisan triggered-runoff systems have a mean turnout of 18.21%, the lowest turnout rate in the sample. Partisan plurality systems have the second lowest mean turnout rate (26.82%). This is closely followed by the nonpartisan required-runoff system with a mean turnout rate of 27.73%. The eleven elections that fall within the multi-categorical nonpartisan alternative category (representing one-round plurality and
instant runoff voting systems) exhibit the next highest turnout rate at 29.17%. Finally, the partisan runoff electoral system has the highest turnout rates on average with 30.40%.

The data in Table 5.3 offers some support for Hypothesis #1, that electoral system designs have an impact on municipal turnout rates. The cities using the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system, which is theorized to be the costliest for voters, have by far the lowest turnout rates (18.21% on average). The average voter turnout in cities utilizing partisan plurality systems and the nonpartisan required-runoff system were quite similar, at 26.82% and 27.73% respectively. Turnout for cities coded within the multi-categorical nonpartisan alternative variable (which includes observations for cities using one-round plurality and instant runoff voting) averaged 29.17%. Finally, the cities using the partisan runoff system had the highest average turnout rates at 30.40%.

The data in Table 5.3 shows that the effects of partisanship differ by electoral system in interesting ways. It is typically thought that partisan races reduce voting costs; however, the nonpartisan required-runoff system has higher turnout rates on average than partisan plurality elections. Additionally, we can see that not all nonpartisan systems are alike. The two most prominent nonpartisan systems – the triggered-runoff and required-runoff systems – have substantially different turnout rates.

Table 5.3: Mayoral Turnout by Election System Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>18.21%</td>
<td>9.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27.73%</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30.40%</td>
<td>7.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26.82%</td>
<td>9.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29.17%</td>
<td>11.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>191</td>
<td><strong>23.14%</strong></td>
<td><strong>10.74%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.4 depicts the effects of partisan and nonpartisan elections on mayoral turnout rates. The vast majority of mayoral elections within the sample are nonpartisan. On average, nonpartisan mayoral elections had a turnout rate roughly 6 percentage points lower than partisan elections (27.43% compared to 21.27%). Turnout in nonpartisan elections varied slightly more than in partisan contests. These bivariate results lend support to Hypothesis 2, that partisan elections have higher turnout rates than nonpartisan elections.

Table 5.4: Mayoral Turnout by Partisanship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partisan</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>27.43%</td>
<td>9.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>21.27%</td>
<td>10.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>23.14%</td>
<td>10.74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The effects of different forms of government on voter turnout rates are shown in Table 5.5. Mayoral turnout is higher in cities utilizing unreformed (mayor-council) structures than in cities using the reformed (either the council-manager or commission) systems. Individually, turnout rates varied across the three different forms of government. Portland, OR, the one city in the sample that utilizes the commission form of government, had the highest turnout rates on average. Cities using the mayor-council system had the second highest average turnout rates at 26.87%. Finally, council-manager cities had by far the lowest turnout rates, with a mean of just 15.67% of the citizen voting age population casting a ballot. The results presented here provide support for Hypothesis 3, that the unreformed mayor-council system will have higher turnout than the other reformed government structures.
Table 5.5: Mayoral Turnout by Form of Government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>26.87%</td>
<td>9.77%</td>
<td>Unreformed</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>26.87%</td>
<td>9.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Manager</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>15.67%</td>
<td>8.13%</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>16.97%</td>
<td>9.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34.46%</td>
<td>8.36%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>191</td>
<td>23.14%</td>
<td>10.74%</td>
<td></td>
<td>191</td>
<td>23.14%</td>
<td>10.74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.6 shows the impact of election timing on turnout rates. Very few cities align their mayoral elections with a federal election. Mayoral elections that were held concurrently with a federal election had much higher turnout rates (34.35%) than when they were held with other local elections or by themselves (21.83%). These results strongly support the hypothesis that holding elections concurrently with higher offices will boost turnout (Hypothesis 4).

Table 5.6: Mayoral Turnout by Concurrent Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Election</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>21.83%</td>
<td>10.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Election</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34.35%</td>
<td>8.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>191</td>
<td>23.14%</td>
<td>10.74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Electoral Competitiveness**

Electoral competition in mayoral races is measured in two ways: whether the incumbent is running for re-election and the margin of victory between the top two candidates. Table 5.7 shows the variation in turnout when an incumbent mayor is running for re-election and when she is not. On average, open-seat mayoral elections have slightly higher voter turnout (25.81%) than when an incumbent is running for re-election (21.56%). The margin of victory between the top two candidates in a given election also impacts voter turnout rates. The correlation matrix in
Table 5.9 shows a moderately strong and significant negative relationship ($r = -0.387, p < 0.001$) between the margin of victory and mayoral turnout. The descriptive results for both Incumbent and Margin of Victory lend support to Hypothesis 6, that elections with greater levels of competitiveness have higher turnout rates.

Table 5.7: Mayoral Turnout by Incumbency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent running</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>21.56%</td>
<td>10.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent not running</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>25.81%</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>23.14%</td>
<td>10.74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographics**

Three demographic variables were included in the regression models: Black, Latino, and College Educated. The demographics of cities within the sample vary dramatically (Table 5.8). The percent of residents aged 25 and over with a Bachelor’s Degree (College Educated) ranged from 8.1% to 74.2% with an average of 27.89%. The racial demographics of the sampled cities varied even more. The percent of black residents ranged from 2.69% to 67.3% with an average of 23.74%. The percent of Latinos ranged from 0.76% to 80.7% with an average of 20.95%.

Each of the three demographic variables had a positive skew. In order to address concerns about normality, each was logarithmically transformed. Figures 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 depict the frequency distributions for the original and transformed Black, Latino, and College Educated variables respectively. Table 5.8 provides a comparison of the descriptive statistics for each of the original and transformed variables.

Given that the demographic data is collected at the aggregate level, no hypotheses were derived about their effects on citywide voter turnout. Nonetheless, Table 5.9 provides the
Pearson correlation coefficients for each of the transformed demographic variables and voter turnout. The transformed percentage Black variable had a weak relationship with turnout ($r = 0.176$, $p < 0.05$). The transformed percentage Latino variable had a relatively strong and negative relationship with turnout ($r = -0.428$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, the transformed variable representing the percentage of College Educated had a moderately weak relationship with turnout ($r = 0.249$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5.8: Comparison of Original and Transformed Variables – Mayoral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Educated</td>
<td>27.89</td>
<td>9.86</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>1.778</td>
<td>6.258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>23.74</td>
<td>17.32</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>20.95</td>
<td>18.80</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>0.744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
<td>1.388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>-0.419</td>
<td>-0.892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>-0.523</td>
<td>-0.678</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.3: Frequency Distribution of Mayoral Black Variable
Figure 5.4: Frequency Distribution of Mayoral *Latino* Variable

Figure 5.5: Frequency Distribution of Mayoral *College Educated* Variable
Table 5.9: Correlation Matrix of Mayoral Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>0.249</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>-0.227**</td>
<td>-0.595**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>-0.428***</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>-0.595**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>0.448***</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.413***</td>
<td>-0.338**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victory Margin</td>
<td>-0.387***</td>
<td>-0.174*</td>
<td>0.192***</td>
<td>-0.124</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Running</td>
<td>-0.192**</td>
<td>-0.140</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>-0.022</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>0.401***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Election</td>
<td>0.265***</td>
<td>-0.130</td>
<td>0.442***</td>
<td>-0.423**</td>
<td>0.161</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff</td>
<td>-0.443***</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>-0.534**</td>
<td>0.641***</td>
<td>-0.374**</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>-0.061</td>
<td>-0.637***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td>0.159*</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td>0.238</td>
<td>-0.228**</td>
<td>0.183*</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.062</td>
<td>0.356***</td>
<td>-0.227**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</td>
<td>0.185**</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.160</td>
<td>-0.260**</td>
<td>0.187**</td>
<td>-0.064</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>-0.285***</td>
<td>-0.416***</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td>0.199**</td>
<td>-0.094</td>
<td>0.346</td>
<td>-0.331***</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.877***</td>
<td>-0.559***</td>
<td>-0.136</td>
<td>-0.250</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td>0.139*</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>0.192**</td>
<td>-0.073</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>-0.163**</td>
<td>-0.238**</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>-0.107</td>
<td>-0.143**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Election 1995-1999</td>
<td>0.358***</td>
<td>0.132</td>
<td>-0.055</td>
<td>-0.121</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>-0.162*</td>
<td>0.146*</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>-0.080</td>
<td>-0.148*</td>
<td>0.196**</td>
<td>-0.085</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>0.111</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>-0.067</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>-0.307***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2009</td>
<td>-0.097</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.154*</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.066</td>
<td>-0.374***</td>
<td>-0.332***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.
Descriptive Findings: City Council Elections

Like mayoral elections, city council elections have low turnout compared to state and federal elections. Also similar is the fact that turnout rates for council elections fluctuated considerably across the sampled cities. Overall, voter turnout in the 258 city council elections averaged 23.01% (See Table 5.10). This is slightly lower than voter turnout in mayoral elections. Across the sample, council turnout ranged from a low of 2.13% to a high of 65.52%. Figure 5.6 shows that the distribution of voter turnout in city council elections has a slight positive skew. City Council turnout rates also fluctuated by city. Table 5.1 and Figure 5.7 provide numerical and graphic data on the median city council turnout for each city during the period of the study. Cities that consistently hold their mayoral and council elections concurrently will have the same median turnout (e.g., Charlotte or San Antonio). Although it might seem counterintuitive at first glance, the median voter turnout for city council elections in some cities was higher than that of mayoral elections. This is due in part to election timing. By way of example, San Francisco’s median voter turnout for mayoral and Board of Supervisors (city council) elections were 42.85% and 44.16% respectively. San Francisco mayoral elections are currently held quadrennially in November of odd-numbered years. Meanwhile, the Board of Supervisors elections utilize staggered terms and are held biennially in November of even-numbered years. Thus, the San Francisco mayoral election is typically the highest race on the ballot every four years. In contrast, the elections for the Board of Supervisors are held concurrently with federal midterm and Presidential elections, producing the higher turnout on average. This pattern is similar to Washington D.C. as well, where the median voter turnout was 31.72% for mayoral races and 39.08% for city council races. Mayoral races in Washington D.C. are held concurrently with federal midterm elections, while city council races are staggered every two years, and thus held
concurrently with both midterm and Presidential elections. This will be developed further later in this chapter when the role of election timing is highlighted.

Table 5.10 also provides information about the competitiveness of council elections. Most council elections were not particularly competitive. On average, roughly 40% of the city council elections were competitive enough to require a primary or runoff election. However, this fluctuated a great deal across cities (std. dev. = 30.01%). In addition, the average council election in a city also saw a majority of the incumbents running for re-election (68.08%). Due in part to the use of term limits, the percent of incumbents running for re-election notably differed from city-to-city (std. dev. = 24.68%).

Table 5.10: Descriptive Statistics for City Council Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>23.01</td>
<td>13.14</td>
<td>2.130</td>
<td>65.520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>1.447</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>1.060</td>
<td>1.870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>1.174</td>
<td>0.384</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>1.830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>1.136</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td>-0.120</td>
<td>1.910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>0.574</td>
<td>0.496</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary or Runoff</td>
<td>40.27</td>
<td>30.01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Running</td>
<td>68.08</td>
<td>24.68</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent District Seats</td>
<td>69.78</td>
<td>38.70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Election</td>
<td>0.280</td>
<td>0.449</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>0.193</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>0.193</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</td>
<td>0.159</td>
<td>0.366</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td>0.240</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.211</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Mayoral Election</td>
<td>0.589</td>
<td>0.493</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Federal Election</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>0.384</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1999</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.413</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>0.225</td>
<td>0.418</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2009</td>
<td>0.302</td>
<td>0.460</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5.6: City Council Election Turnout Histogram
Figure 5.7: Median City Council Voter Turnout by Cities
The composition of council membership also differed across the cities in this study. The average city council had roughly 70% of its seats represented by district city councilors, and 30% represented by at-large councilors (Table 5.10). Council compositions varied substantially from city to city (std. dev. = 38.70%), with multiple cities using only district or only at-large seats. Table 5.10 also includes the descriptive statistics for each of the variables included in the city council turnout regression models.

**Institutions**

Table 5.11 depicts the turnout rates across the different municipal electoral systems. Overall, turnout rates varied considerably. Similar to mayoral elections, the cities using the nonpartisan triggered-runoff systems had the lowest average turnout rate with just 17.93% of the citizen voting age population voting. Although substantially higher than the triggered-runoff system, the nonpartisan required-runoff system had the second lowest average turnout rate, with an average turnout of 25.91%. Next, the partisan plurality system (29.19%) had the third highest turnout rate, while the partisan runoff system (30.39%) had the second highest. The multi-categorical nonpartisan alternative variable (consisting of observations for cities using one-round plurality and instant runoff voting) had the highest turnout rates on average at 31.30%. Overall, the descriptive results in Table 5.11 support Hypothesis #1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>17.93%</td>
<td>11.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25.91%</td>
<td>10.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30.39%</td>
<td>7.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>29.19%</td>
<td>14.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31.30%</td>
<td>14.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>258</td>
<td>23.01%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Compared to mayoral elections, council elections show a greater split in turnout rates between the partisan and nonpartisan electoral systems. The two nonpartisan runoff systems both had turnout rates lower than the two partisan electoral systems. The data in Table 5.12 also supports this by looking simply at partisan and nonpartisan cities. Partisan cities had turnout rates (29.36%) roughly 9 percentage points higher than nonpartisan cities (20.55%). These results support Hypothesis #2. Since city council elections are particularly low-information affairs, it makes sense that the partisan elections (and their built-in voting cues) have higher rates of turnout than the nonpartisan elections.

Table 5.12: City Council Turnout by Partisanship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partisan</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>29.36%</td>
<td>13.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>20.55%</td>
<td>12.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>23.01%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.13 distinguishes the councilmanic turnout rates by form of government. The commission form of government has the highest average turnout rates at 30.77%. Mayor-council cities have the second highest turnout rates with 27.92%. Council-manager cities have substantially lower turnout rates (14.97%) compared to the other two government forms. The data here provide mixed support for Hypothesis #3. Cities using the mayor-council form of government have higher turnout than one “reformed” government style – the council-manager – but not the commission form of government. The higher rates of turnout for the commission form could be due in part to the fact that only one city – Portland, OR – uses that government structure. However, overall, city council turnout is higher in cities that utilize the unreformed government system.
Table 5.13: City Council Turnout by Form of Government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>27.92%</td>
<td>13.42%</td>
<td>Unreformed</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>27.92%</td>
<td>13.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Manager</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>14.97%</td>
<td>8.30%</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>16.41%</td>
<td>9.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30.77%</td>
<td>7.38%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>23.01%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
<td></td>
<td>258</td>
<td>23.01%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.14 depicts how city council turnout rates vary by election timing. Like mayoral elections, turnout rates for city council elections are greater when held concurrently with higher offices. City council elections held on their own averaged a turnout of 15.13%. This is lower than council elections held concurrently with mayoral races (21.15%) and substantially lower than those held concurrently with federal elections (39.45%). The data in Table 5.14 supports the hypothesis (#4) that electoral timing matters in terms of turnout rates.

Table 5.14: City Council Turnout by Concurrent Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Concurrent Election</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15.13%</td>
<td>8.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayoral Election</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>21.15%</td>
<td>9.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Election</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39.45%</td>
<td>13.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>23.01%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final institutional variable of interest is the percent of council seats represented by district city councilors. The correlation matrix in Table 5.16 provides the Pearson correlation coefficient between the percent of district seats and voter turnout \( r = -0.153, p < 0.05 \).

Although significant, the relationship is quite weak. This provides little support for Hypothesis #5 which posited that cities with a greater percent of at-large seats would have higher turnout rates. The relationship between the percent of district seats and voter turnout is negative as expected.
Electoral Competitiveness

Two measures are used to estimate the electoral competitiveness of city council elections. It was hypothesized that greater electoral competitiveness would result in higher turnout (Hypothesis #6). The correlation coefficients in Table 5.16 show that our two electoral context variables provide mixed support for this hypothesis. First, the percentage of incumbents seeking re-election was expected to have a negative relationship with voter turnout. While the relationship was in fact negative, it is particularly weak and very close to zero (r = -0.015). The second variable, Primary or Runoff provided more support for Hypothesis #6. It was expected that the greater percentage of elections requiring a primary or runoff would signal greater competitiveness, and thus higher turnout. In fact, the positive relationship between Primary or Runoff and voter turnout was statistically significant and moderately strong (r = 0.338, p < 0.001).

Demographics

The demographics (Black, Latino, and College Educated) for each city differed tremendously (See Table 5.15). The percent of college educated residents ranged from 11.4% to 74.2%, with an average of 29.51%. The racial make-up of cities also varied greatly. The percent of black residents ranged from 3.1% up to 67.3% with an average of 21.27%. The percent of Latino residents ranged from 0.8% to 80.7% with an average of 21.89%.

Similar to the mayoral regression models, each of the three demographic variables – Black, Latino, and College Educated – had to be logarithmically transformed to correct for positive skew. Figures 5.8, 5.9, and 5.10 depict frequency distributions for the original and transformed demographic variables included in the study. Additionally, Table 5.15 compares the descriptive statistics for each of the original and transformed variables.
Table 5.15: Comparison of Original and Transformed Variables – City Council

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Educated</td>
<td>29.51</td>
<td>10.32</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>1.736</td>
<td>5.192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>21.27</td>
<td>17.11</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>1.056</td>
<td>0.318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>21.89</td>
<td>18.21</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>1.028</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>1.447</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>1.060</td>
<td>1.870</td>
<td>0.295</td>
<td>0.779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>1.174</td>
<td>0.384</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>1.830</td>
<td>-0.129</td>
<td>-1.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>1.136</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td>-0.120</td>
<td>1.910</td>
<td>-0.613</td>
<td>-0.567</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.8: Frequency Distribution of City Council Black Variable
Figure 5.9: Frequency Distribution of City Council *Latino* Variable

![Histogram of Percent Latino](image1)

![Histogram of Percent Latino (Log)](image2)

Figure 5.10: Frequency Distribution of City Council *College Educated* Variable

![Histogram of Percent College Educated](image3)

![Histogram of College Educated (Log)](image4)
### Table 5.16: Correlation Matrix of City Council Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>College Educated (Log)</th>
<th>Black (Log)</th>
<th>Latino (Log)</th>
<th>Mayor-Council Incumbent</th>
<th>Primary or Runoff</th>
<th>Percent District</th>
<th>Partisan Election</th>
<th>Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff</th>
<th>Partisan Runoff</th>
<th>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</th>
<th>Partisan Plurality</th>
<th>Nonpartisan Alternative</th>
<th>Mayoral Election</th>
<th>Federal Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>0.302***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>0.191**</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>-0.449***</td>
<td>-0.026</td>
<td>-0.584***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council Incumbent</td>
<td>0.433***</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.425***</td>
<td>-0.354***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.181**</td>
<td>-0.059</td>
<td>0.147**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary or Runoff</td>
<td>0.538***</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.189**</td>
<td>-0.284***</td>
<td>0.161**</td>
<td>-0.267***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent District</td>
<td>-0.153</td>
<td>-0.313**</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>0.263***</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>-0.085</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Election</td>
<td>0.301***</td>
<td>-0.176**</td>
<td>0.448***</td>
<td>-0.431***</td>
<td>0.187**</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.371***</td>
<td>-0.024</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Triggered Runoff</td>
<td>-0.435***</td>
<td>-0.050</td>
<td>-0.535***</td>
<td>0.686***</td>
<td>-0.457***</td>
<td>-0.112</td>
<td>-0.370***</td>
<td>0.268***</td>
<td>-0.632***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>-0.111</td>
<td>0.234***</td>
<td>-0.227***</td>
<td>0.173**</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>-0.099</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.323***</td>
<td>-0.204***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</td>
<td>0.096</td>
<td>0.223***</td>
<td>0.162**</td>
<td>-0.322***</td>
<td>0.268***</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>-0.335***</td>
<td>-0.270***</td>
<td>-0.441***</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td>0.265***</td>
<td>-0.134**</td>
<td>0.365***</td>
<td>-0.350***</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.435***</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>0.904***</td>
<td>-0.571***</td>
<td>-0.113</td>
<td>-0.244***</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td>0.140**</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>0.049**</td>
<td>-0.150**</td>
<td>0.190***</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>-0.096</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>-0.137*</td>
<td>-0.224***</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
<td>-0.096</td>
<td>-0.124**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayoral Election</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td>-0.259**</td>
<td>0.234***</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>-0.050</td>
<td>0.111</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>-0.050</td>
<td>0.168**</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Election</td>
<td>0.584***</td>
<td>0.266***</td>
<td>-0.106</td>
<td>-0.149**</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>-0.078</td>
<td>0.212***</td>
<td>-0.051</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>-0.094</td>
<td>-0.202***</td>
<td>0.141**</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>-0.558***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1999</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>-0.253***</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>-0.188**</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>-0.141*</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>-0.054</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td>0.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>-0.024</td>
<td>-0.102</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2009</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because the demographic variables are used as controls, I have not generated any hypotheses about their effects on voter turnout. Regardless, the correlation matrix in Table 5.16 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients for voter turnout and the three transformed demographic variables. The logarithmic transformation of the percent of black residents was positively and weakly associated with turnout ($r = 0.191$, $p < 0.01$). The transformed percentage Latino variable had a strong negative association with turnout ($r = -0.449$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, the transformed College Educated variable was positive, moderately strong relationship with turnout ($r = 0.302$, $p < 0.001$).

**Regression Results: Mayoral Turnout Models**

Table 5.17 presents the four mayoral regression models. Model 1 includes demographic and time period variables. The inclusion of these variables alone offers a significant yet poor fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 18.30$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.01$), with only 25.2% of the overall variation in mayoral turnout accounted for. Within-city changes in municipal demographics accounts for only 7.6% of the change in overall mayoral turnout. This is understandable because the demographic composition of cities typically does not change rapidly; therefore, we would expect any change in demographics over the short time period of this study to be quite small. Differences in demographics across individual cities account for 27% of the variation in mayoral turnout. Only one variable in Model 1 is significant: Latino (log) ($p < 0.01$). However, since the demographic data are city-level and not individual-level measures, no inferences can be made about them.

Model 2 ($\chi^2 = 247.28$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.001$) adds the two campaign-specific measures for electoral competitiveness. The addition of these two variables greatly improves the overall fit compared to Model 1: 41.6% of the overall variation in mayoral turnout is now accounted for.
Model 2 explains 29% of the within-city variation and 43.2% of the between-city variation. This means that the addition of electoral competitiveness variables helps to explain further some of the changes in turnout over time within individual cities but also between the different cities in the dataset. Despite accounting for electoral competition, much of the variation in turnout remains unexplained.

Of the two electoral competitiveness variables added, only Victory Margin has a significant ($p < 0.001$), albeit small, effect. For every one percentage point increase in the margin of victory between the top two candidates, holding all else constant, voter turnout decreases 0.121 percentage points. Put another way, for every 10 percentage point difference between the top two candidates, voter turnout decreased 1.21 percentage points on average. Uncontested mayoral elections would, on average, have turnout rates roughly 12.1 percentage points higher than contests where the top two candidates were tied. This is a robust finding that appears across the next three models. Finally, the dichotomous Incumbent variable had a negative but non-significant effect in each of the models. This indicates that voter turnout in open-seat elections was not substantially different than contests where incumbents sought re-election. Of note, Incumbent and voter turnout had a significant, albeit weak, bivariate correlation ($r = -0.192$, $p < 0.01$). The effects of an incumbent running seem to be explained away by the addition of the Victory Margin variable to the model. Both Incumbent and Victory Margin exhibited a strong bivariate correlation ($r = 0.401$, $p < 0.001$).

Model 3 introduces three institutional variables, which dramatically improve the overall fit of the model ($\text{Wald } \chi^2 = 281.18$, $df = 11$, $p < 0.001$). The model now accounts for roughly 44.7% of the within-city variation, 64% of the between-city variation, and 61.2% of the overall variation in mayoral turnout rates. The within-city variation that Model 3 accounts for is similar
to Model 2. Conversely, Model 3 is better able to account for the between-city variation than Model 2. This can be explained by the time-invariant nature of the institutional variables added in Model 3. By and large, cities typically do not change their governing institutions very often. The slight increase in the within-city variation in Model 3 accounts for the few instances where cities changed their institutional structure. The larger increase in the between-city variation that is now accounted for shows that the unique collection of municipal institutions utilized by individual cities is able to account for differences in voter turnout across cities.

Like Model 2, the *Victory Margin* measure of competitiveness in Model 3 is still a significant predictor of voter turnout ($p < 0.001$) while *Incumbent* is not. Furthermore, Model 3 provides insight into the individual effects of reformed municipal institutions on voter turnout. The *Mayor-Council* variable in this model was a significant predictor of turnout ($p < 0.01$). All else being equal, cities with a mayor-council form of government have turnout rates roughly 8 percentage points higher than cities using the reformed council-manager and commission forms of government. Election timing also had a strong impact on voter turnout rates. Holding mayoral elections concurrently with federal elections significantly increased voter turnout ($p < 0.001$). Mayoral elections held simultaneously with federal elections had turnout rates that were roughly 15.5 percentage points higher on average than when they were held off-year or off-cycle. Finally, the *Partisanship* variable had a small and insignificant effect on mayoral turnout. Turnout in cities that utilize nonpartisan ballots did not vary significantly from cities using partisan ballots. This finding goes against most of the common assumptions about the role of partisanship in local elections and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Model 4 accounts for the differing electoral systems within cities. By adding dichotomous variables that differentiate between electoral systems, Model 4 provides a small
improvement in the overall fit of the model in terms of the $R^2$ measures. The model now accounts for roughly 45.9% of the within-city variation, 66.8% of the between-city variation, and 63.4% of the overall variation in mayoral turnout rates. Compared to Model 3 (Wald $\chi^2 = 281.18$, $df = 11$), the addition of 3 degrees of freedom results in a moderately higher Wald $\chi^2$ of 309.6 ($df = 14$, $p < 0.001$). The effects of Victory Margin ($p < 0.01$), Mayor Council ($p < 0.01$), and Concurrent Federal ($p < 0.001$) that were seen in Model 3 are all maintained in Model 4: elections that are more competitive, held under the mayor-council forms of government, and held concurrently with federal elections have higher turnout rates on average.

The results of the electoral systems variables support the hypothesis that electoral system designs can impact voter turnout rates. The reference category for the four electoral system variables was the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system. Cities using the nonpartisan required-runoff ($p < 0.01$) and partisan plurality ($p < 0.05$) electoral systems had significantly higher turnout than those using the nonpartisan triggered-runoff. On average, the nonpartisan required-runoff and partisan plurality systems exhibited turnout rates that were 6.27 and 3.88 percentage points higher respectively. Cities using the partisan runoff system did not exhibit significantly higher turnout rates than those using the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system. The Nonpartisan Alternative category also had significantly higher turnout rates ($p < 0.05$); however, given that this was a combination of multiple, infrequently-used electoral systems no true inferences can be made. The results suggest that simply looking at whether a city uses partisan or nonpartisan ballots does not provide the most comprehensive depiction of municipal election turnout. Instead, the electoral system design is a better predictor of municipal turnout. These findings will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.
Table 5.17: Random Effects Models of Mayoral Turnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>(1) Turnout</th>
<th>(2) Turnout</th>
<th>(3) Turnout</th>
<th>(4) Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>-5.04 (4.70)</td>
<td>-2.81 (4.73)</td>
<td>-1.91 (3.49)</td>
<td>-3.04 (3.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>-8.90 (2.96)**</td>
<td>-9.00 (2.88)**</td>
<td>-4.84 (2.00)*</td>
<td>-3.29 (2.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>12.09 (7.52)</td>
<td>13.08 (6.92)†</td>
<td>10.29 (7.46)</td>
<td>9.48 (6.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victory Margin</td>
<td>-0.121 (0.01)***</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.014)***</td>
<td>-0.113 (0.015)**</td>
<td>-0.113 (0.015)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.603 (0.68)</td>
<td>-0.69 (0.67)</td>
<td>-0.913 (0.66)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>7.97 (2.58)**</td>
<td>7.42 (2.61)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Federal</td>
<td>15.54 (3.37)***</td>
<td>16.6 (3.40)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td>3.88 (1.83)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td>5.38 (4.56)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td>3.03 (1.34)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1999</td>
<td>0.07 (1.80)</td>
<td>1.01 (1.71)</td>
<td>2.80 (1.52)†</td>
<td>3.20 (1.51)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>2.55 (1.72)</td>
<td>2.63 (1.40)†</td>
<td>3.21 (1.35)*</td>
<td>3.35 (1.31)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2009</td>
<td>-0.69 (1.31)</td>
<td>-0.05 (1.18)</td>
<td>0.976 (1.13)</td>
<td>1.18 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>22.03 (13.85)</td>
<td>21.93 (12.69)†</td>
<td>11.93 (12.66)</td>
<td>10.63 (12.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Cities</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald ( \chi^2 )</td>
<td>18.30**</td>
<td>247.28***</td>
<td>281.18***</td>
<td>309.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 ) within</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.4467</td>
<td>0.4586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 ) between</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0.432</td>
<td>0.6399</td>
<td>0.6678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 ) overall</td>
<td>0.252</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>0.6139</td>
<td>0.6340</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

† Significant at 10%; * Significant at 5%; ** Significant at 1%; *** Significant at 0.1%
Regression Results: City Council Models

Table 5.18 presents the four city council regression models. The progression of city council regression results mirrors that employed in the discussion on mayoral turnout. Model 1 (Wald $\chi^2 = 22.56$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$) includes demographic and time period variables, accounting for only 1.88% of the within-city turnout variation, 27.32% of the between-city variation, and 26.93% of the overall variation in council turnout. Changes in the within-city demographics account for basically no change in turnout, but do account for just over a quarter of the between-city turnout variation. Both Latino (log) and College Educated (log) were significant ($p < 0.05$) predictors in Models 1 and 2. However, their effects disappear with the addition of municipal institution variables in Model 3.

Model 2 introduces two measures of electoral competitiveness. Although the overall fit of the model has improved, it is still a poor fit (Wald $\chi^2 = 39.51$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.001$). Model 2 accounts for 31.85% of the between-city turnout and 30.92% of the overall turnout. Only 2.86% of the within-city variation is accounted for, suggesting that an aggregate account of electoral competitiveness does little to change the overall turnout in city council elections within a given city. The regression coefficients for both measures of electoral competition are near zero and have no significant effect on turnout. The percentage of council seats requiring a primary election or a runoff election did not impact the number of voters participating in the election. Similar to the mayoral models of turnout, the presence of more incumbents running for re-election does not impact relative turnout levels. Given that these two electoral competitiveness variables are aggregate accounts of competition at the sub-city level, it is also possible that they are not the best measures of electoral competition at the council level. This could also play a role in the model’s inability to explain most of the within-city variation in turnout.
Model 3 provides a substantially better fit to the data by adding five variables accounting for different municipal institutions (Wald $\chi^2 = 103.91$, $df = 13$, $p < 0.001$). Model 3 explains 11.93% of the variation within cities, 71.15% of the variation between cities, and 62.99% of the overall variation in council turnout rates. The between-city turnout variation accounted for in Model 3 (71.15%) jumped almost 40 percentage points from Model 2 (31.85%). This suggests that much of the between-city (as well as the overall) variation in voter turnout can be attributed to differences in the municipal institutions employed by a city. The addition of each of these institutions to the model had varying effects. The Mayor-Council form of government variable had a positive and significant effect on city council turnout rates ($p < 0.05$). Holding all else constant, city council elections within mayor-council systems had turnout rates roughly 7 percentage points higher than those held in “reformed” council-manager and commission systems. Both of the election timing variables also had a significant effect on turnout. Council elections held concurrently with mayoral races had turnout rates roughly 5 percentage points higher than when they were held alone ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, council elections that coincided with federal elections saw turnout rates jump roughly 20 percentage points compared to when they were held alone ($p < 0.001$). Two other municipal institution variables were not significant predictors of council turnout. Similar to mayoral elections, the use of partisan ballots did not have a significant effect on council turnout. It is traditionally thought that partisan elections have higher turnout rates on average than nonpartisan contests; however, this was not supported by the data. In addition, the composition of the city council did not impact turnout. The regression coefficient for the Percent District Seats variable was negative but close to zero.

By differentiating between electoral systems, Model 4 ($df = 16$, $p < 0.001$) provides an even better fit than Model 3, with a roughly 50% increase in the Wald $\chi^2$ statistic (up to 153.75
from 103.91). Model 4 explains slightly more of the variance in turnout than Model 3. With the addition of electoral system variables, Model 4 accounts for 12.98% of the variation in council turnout rates within cities, 73.56% between cities, and 63.87% overall. Like Model 3, Mayor Council ($p < 0.05$), Concurrent Mayoral ($p < 0.001$), and Concurrent Federal ($p < 0.001$) each have a positive and significant effect on turnout; meanwhile, the two measures of electoral competition, Primary or Runoff and Incumbent, as well as Percent District Seats do not significantly impact turnout rates.

Finally, Model 4 shows that the choice of electoral system can have a significant impact on voter turnout in city council elections. The reference category for each of the electoral systems variables is the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system. Nonpartisan required-runoff, partisan plurality, and partisan runoff systems have turnout rates 7.11, 5.88, and 10.15 percentage points higher compared to the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system when holding other variables constant. Each of these variables is significant at the 0.05 level. The multi-categorical Nonpartisan Alternative variable is significant, but only at the 0.10 level. Since this variable represents a handful of different electoral systems that are not frequently used, no inferences can be made about this finding. Overall, the results in Model 4 demonstrate the importance of both municipal institutions and electoral system designs in explaining voter turnout rates for city council elections.
Table 5.18: Random Effects Models of City Council Turnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>(1) Turnout</th>
<th>(2) Turnout</th>
<th>(3) Turnout</th>
<th>(4) Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black (Log)</td>
<td>2.56 (3.25)</td>
<td>1.59 (3.56)</td>
<td>0.15 (3.03)</td>
<td>-0.88 (2.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (Log)</td>
<td>-7.14 (3.4)*</td>
<td>-7.89 (3.28)*</td>
<td>-3.20 (2.44)</td>
<td>-1.28 (2.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Educated (Log)</td>
<td>12.60 (6.38)*</td>
<td>14.74 (6.89)*</td>
<td>7.25 (6.70)</td>
<td>6.71 (6.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary or Runoff</td>
<td>0.032 (0.032)</td>
<td>0.015 (0.028)</td>
<td>0.011 (0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.014 (0.033)</td>
<td>-0.007 (0.027)</td>
<td>-0.007 (0.027)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayor-Council</td>
<td>7.03 (3.18)*</td>
<td>5.87 (3.00)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent District Seats</td>
<td>-0.019 (0.038)</td>
<td>-0.004 (0.03)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Mayoral</td>
<td>5.04 (0.914)***</td>
<td>5.02 (0.95)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Federal</td>
<td>19.91 (4.81)***</td>
<td>20.85 (5.14)***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>2.91 (2.48)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Required Runoff</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.11 (3.2)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Plurality</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.88 (2.95)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Runoff</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.15 (4.63)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpartisan Alternative</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.30 (1.37)†</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-1999</td>
<td>1.52 (2.31)</td>
<td>0.855 (2.04)</td>
<td>2.70 (1.64)</td>
<td>3.24 (1.71)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>2.77 (1.39)*</td>
<td>2.27 (1.46)</td>
<td>3.25 (1.23)**</td>
<td>3.42 (1.28)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2009</td>
<td>0.915 (1.22)</td>
<td>0.814 (1.17)</td>
<td>1.69 (0.97)†</td>
<td>1.96 (1.02)†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constant                  | 8.62 (12.6) | 7.37 (12.45) | 3.97 (11.57) | 0.741 (11.01) |
Observations              | 258         | 250          | 250          | 250          |
Number of Cities          | 36          | 36           | 36           | 36           |
df                        | 6           | 8            | 13           | 16           |
Wald $\chi^2$            | 22.56***    | 39.51***     | 103.91***    | 153.75***    |
$R^2$ within              | 0.0188      | 0.0286       | 0.1193       | 0.1298       |
$R^2$ between             | 0.2732      | 0.3185       | 0.7115       | 0.7356       |
$R^2$ overall             | 0.2693      | 0.3092       | 0.6299       | 0.6387       |

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
† Significant at 10%; * Significant at 5%; ** Significant at 1%; *** Significant at 0.1%
Conclusion

This purpose of this chapter was to test several hypotheses about impact of electoral systems, municipal institutions, and election competitiveness on voter turnout in municipal elections. The descriptive analysis presented at the beginning of this chapter shows that voter turnout rates vary from election to election and city to city. On average, 23% of citizens within the voting age population turn out for mayoral and city council elections in large cities. A great deal of the variation in citywide voter turnout rates can be attributed to the assortment of municipal institutions utilized in a city.

The regression analyses presented in this chapter support my hypotheses to varying degrees. The results of the generalized least squares (GLS) random effects models of mayoral and city council voter turnout supported the hypothesis that the electoral system employed by a city can impact voter turnout. Most cities use a nonpartisan triggered-runoff electoral system to elect their mayors and city councilors; however, the results show that cities utilizing this system have substantially lower turnout rates than most other electoral systems. Both the nonpartisan required-runoff and partisan plurality systems had significantly higher turnout rates than the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system for both mayoral and city council elections. Meanwhile, the partisan runoff system had higher turnout than the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system for city council elections but not mayoral contests.

The regression results also confirm the hypothesized effects of election timing and the form of government used by a city. Election timing had the greatest overall effect on municipal turnout rates. By holding multiple electoral contests simultaneously, the physical cost of voting in any single race on the ballot is reduced. This effect is demonstrated in both mayoral and city council regression models. Cities that hold their mayoral elections concurrently with a federal
election have much higher greater turnout rates than when they do not. Similarly, city council elections held simultaneously with either a mayoral or federal election have higher turnout than when held alone. The form of government a city uses also impacts turnout. Voters in mayor-council cities have a direct say in who is ultimately responsible for running their city. This contrasts with reformed cities where considerable governing power resides with an appointed city manager. Because of this difference in elected versus appointed power, the incentive to vote is greater in mayor-council cities because election results have a direct effect on the day-to-day administration of municipal affairs. This effect was demonstrated in the regression results: cities with an unreformed mayor-council governing structure had higher mayoral and city council turnout rates on average than those cities using reformed structures.

A third Progressive reform, nonpartisan elections, did not impact voter turnout as expected. Most American cities currently use nonpartisan elections to select their mayor and city council (Wood 2002; Trounstine 2010; ICMA 2011). Nonpartisan ballots list candidates without a party affiliation. Because partisan affiliation is one of the most important voting cues in American elections (Campbell et al. 1960; Karnig and Walter 1983; Rahn 1993; Beck 1997; Stokes 1999; Dalton 2007), its absence on local ballots is thought to increase the informational costs associated with voting. As such, most studies of voter turnout hypothesize that partisan elections produce higher turnout rates than nonpartisan contests. However, the regression results presented in this chapter show no differences in local turnout rates between partisan and nonpartisan elections.

The regression models addressed one final institutional variable: city council composition. During the Progressive Era, many cities transitioned from district to at-large city councils. Since then, scholars have developed a variety of theories about the effects of city
council composition on turnout. It was hypothesized that a greater percentage of district councilmembers would negatively impact voter participation; however, the council composition variable had no significant effect on turnout.

The results of the random effects models offered different conclusions about the role of electoral competitiveness in determining voter turnout rates. There is some support to show that electoral competiveness spurs turnout at the mayoral level, but not necessarily at the city council level. More competitive mayoral contests – in terms of margin of victory – were a significant predictor of turnout. This is notable given the fact that most mayoral elections were not very competitive. The average margin of victory for a winning mayoral candidate was 33 percentage points. For both mayoral and city council elections, the presence of an incumbent on the ballot did not impact the proportion of the electorate turning out. In addition, the proportion of city council seats requiring a primary or runoff election had no effect on turnout.

The results presented in this chapter provide new insight into the unique effects that electoral systems can have on voter turnout. The results also confirm some, but not all, of the long-standing theories about the turnout-depressing effects of “reformed” municipal institutions. By and large, the findings here strengthen the general argument that institutional variables are strong predictors of voter turnout in municipal elections. The subsequent chapter continues by providing an in-depth discussion of the statistical analysis presented in this chapter.
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

At the onset of this dissertation, three research questions were posed: 1) What is the relationship between electoral systems and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities? 2) What is the relationship between reformed municipal institutions and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities? and 3) What is the relationship between electoral competition and voter turnout in municipal elections held in large American cities? In order to answer each of these questions, this study has applied hierarchical linear regression models to a dataset of 37 cities over a twenty-year time span. The primary findings were 1) the electoral system utilized by a city significantly impacts the turnout rate in elections for both mayors and city councilors, 2) some Progressive Era municipal reforms still impact turnout rates (form of government and election timing) while others do not (partisan elections and council structure), 3) electoral competitiveness has a slight impact on turnout levels in mayoral but not city council elections, and 4) municipal and electoral institutions are better predictors of municipal voter turnout than the competitiveness of a given election in a city. This chapter begins by reviewing the findings associated with each of the six hypotheses posited in Chapter Four. These findings are then incorporated into a discussion on existing and new theories about municipal electoral systems. From there, I continue with an overview of the limitations of this study. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of this research, including considerations for future research in this area of study. Finally, I contextualize the results of this study in a broader conversation about the state of urban politics.
Discussion of Hypotheses and Findings

Hypothesis #1: Electoral systems that increase the cost of voting will have lower voter turnout rates.

The analysis offers strong support for Hypothesis #1: electoral system designs impact municipal voter turnout in significant and important ways. This finding substantiates the broader theory that political institutions can impact electoral behavior in general (e.g., Duverger 1954; March and Olsen 1984; Blais and Carty 1991; Cox 1997; Farrell 2001; Blais et al. 2007), but especially voter turnout (Lakeman 1974; Powell 1980, 1986; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995; Teixeira 1987; Blais and Dobryzynska 1998; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Wood 2002; Johnson, Shively, and Stein 2002; Piven and Cloward 1989). The overall premise of this study was that electoral system designs can vary in their electoral costs to voters, which in turn conditions the individual vote decision. It was theorized that nonpartisan triggered-runoff systems had the highest electoral costs for voters due to the fact that a) they were nonpartisan contests, and b) the decisiveness of the election round was not determined until after the votes had been tallied. In turn, it was expected that electoral systems that were less costly to voters – nonpartisan required-runoff, partisan plurality, and partisan runoff systems - would have higher turnout rates. The random effects models showed that this was largely the case for both mayoral and city council elections.\(^1\) I also hypothesized that the partisan plurality system would produce the highest turnout rates given that it possesses the lowest theoretical electoral costs. Ultimately, the findings showed that this was not the case: the partisan plurality system had the second lowest turnout rates in both mayoral and council elections. All else equal, the nonpartisan

\(^1\) The exception was the use of partisan runoff systems in mayoral elections, where turnout rates did not significantly differ from nonpartisan triggered-runoff systems.
required-runoff system produced the highest turnout rates in mayoral elections, and the partisan runoff system produced the highest turnout rates in council elections.

**Electoral Costs**

There are many different theories that attempt to explain voter turnout. Perhaps the most ubiquitously cited are the ‘calculus of voting’ theories developed by Downs (1957) and Riker and Ordeshook (1968). Rational choice theories like the ‘calculus of voting’ are parsimonious and hold a great deal of predictive power but a strict adherence to this type of theory is unable to fully explain political behavior (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1995; Van Winden 2003; Frey and Meier 2004). Regardless, this cost-benefit theory can be used to frame other arguments, as has been done here. This study blended the micro approach with institutional theory to argue that electoral systems impact voter turnout rates vis-à-vis the individual costs of voting associated with an electoral system. The significant associations between electoral systems and voter turnout lends some support to Downs’ (1957) and Riker and Ordeshook’s (1968) general premise that turnout is dependent on the costs associated with the act of voting. The findings presented here showed that theorized higher electoral costs did in fact produce lower turnout rates, yet the system perceived to have the lowest costs (partisan plurality) did not produce highest turnout rates. Perhaps this should not come as a total surprise due to the lack of two-party competition in many large cities. Even if partisan plurality systems theoretically possess the lowest electoral costs to voters, they also may have an adverse effect on electoral competition. In cities where a member of a certain political party does not stand a chance at becoming elected in a partisan context, it may prove beneficial to electoral competitiveness if a nonpartisan vote system were in place instead.
Access to information proves to be another cost to voters. The information theory of voter turnout theorizes that prospective voters with more knowledge about the candidates or issues in an election will be more likely to vote due to increased confidence in their vote decision (Matsusaka 1995; McMurray 2015). Not all electoral systems require the same amount of information in order to make an informed decision. The amount of information required in a nonpartisan triggered-runoff system is greater than other electoral systems typically employed at the municipal level. Part of this is due to the lack of a partisan voting cue. The number of candidates on a ballot is also important. In the first round of a triggered-runoff system, an unlimited number of qualifying candidates can appear on the ballot. This contrasts with the nonpartisan required-runoff systems which always have two candidates and the partisan plurality systems which typically have two candidates. Voters do not have the benefit of a binary choice in most triggered-runoff elections unless a runoff election actually occurs. In most elections, this is not the case. If voters are unable to discern their preferable candidate from a large field of candidates, they may choose to skip the election altogether (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Feddersen and Pesendorfer 1996, 1997; Gerber et al. 2015). Nonpartisan required-runoff systems offer voters a binary vote decision in the general election, making the vote choice much simpler. In partisan plurality systems, this typically occurs unless third party candidates emerge.

*Majority-Vote Requirements*

Previous scholarly work has suggested that majority vote requirements lower turnout rates due to the need to vote in two separate electoral contests occurring in close proximity (Bullock and Johnson 1992; Richie et al. 2000). However, this analysis shows that it is not necessarily the majority-vote requirement which is the ultimate culprit for lower turnout rates: it is the timing of the decisive election. Consider the two main nonpartisan majoritarian election
designs included in this study: the nonpartisan triggered-runoff and the nonpartisan required-runoff systems. The nonpartisan required-runoff system is a unique type of majoritarian electoral design because the first round of balloting acts as a preliminary election which leads into a general election contest between the top two vote-earners from the first-round. In contrast, the decisive election in the nonpartisan triggered-runoff is dependent on the outcome of the first round election. When the decisive election is known, citizens only need to vote in a single election to influence the final outcome; however, when it is not known, citizens are potentially required to vote in two separate elections if they want to have a voice in the final outcome. For many citizens this will drive up the costs associated with voting.

Majority-vote requirements were designed to ensure that candidates have broad support from the electorate prior to assuming office (Fleischmann and Pierannunzi 2007; Kemp 2002). Oftentimes this notion is called into question when scholars look at the decreased rates of turnout between first-round and runoff elections (Bullock and Johnson 1985a, 1992; Cox 1997; Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000; Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005). Politicians winning office may not have a strong mandate in a lower-turnout second-round election, despite winning a majority of the votes in the runoff. A similar contention can be made when looking at the different types of majoritarian systems utilized in cities. Not all majoritarian systems are created equal. If one majoritarian system – in this case the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system – consistently produces lower turnout rates than another, it defeats the purpose of the majoritarian system in the first place: that it is able to elect a candidate with wide support from across the city.
Runoff Elections

The results of this study also offer additional commentary on our understanding of runoff elections in the United States. Runoff electoral systems are often associated with a handful of seemingly negative impacts. Bullock and Johnson (1985a, 1985b, 1992) address the results of the use of runoff elections in a series of four “myths” which they term the minority-loses, the female-loses, the leader-loses, and the incumbent-loses myths. With the exception of the incumbent-loses myth, these have largely been disproved. However, runoff electoral systems have been associated with decreased voter turnout. This is no myth. On numerous occasions scholars have shown that the second-ballot in a runoff electoral system produces lower turnout than the first-round election (Key 1949; Bullock and Johnson 1985a, 1992; Cox 1997; Amy 2000; Richie et al. 2000; Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005; Wright 1989; although see Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). The findings presented here add to this understanding by showing that the use of a traditional nonpartisan triggered-runoff system itself can cause lower turnout rates when compared to other electoral systems. Not only can turnout decrease within the runoff system itself (from the first to the second round), turnout is, on average, substantially lower to begin with when compared to other voting systems.

Hypothesis #2: Cities that allow partisan elections will have higher turnout rates than cities that utilize nonpartisan elections.

The findings offered little support of Hypothesis #2 for both mayoral and city council elections. Turnout in both mayoral and city council elections was higher in partisan elections than nonpartisan elections. However, in the context of the other variables in the random effects models, the effects of partisanship on voter turnout were not significant. This finding runs
counter to much of the research on municipal turnout and the use of nonpartisan elections (Dixon 1966; Alford and Lee 1968; Hawley 1973; Karnig and Walter 1983; Squire and Smith 1988; Schaffner et al. 2001; Hajnal 2010; Trounstine 2012; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014).

However, this finding corroborates some of the more recent scholarship. Lublin and Tate (1995), Wood (2002), and Caren (2007) all find that the use of partisan or nonpartisan elections does not significantly impact voter turnout levels. Kaufman’s (2004) study analyzing public opinion data on partisanship at the local level presents similar findings.

There are a variety of reasons for why partisan elections may no longer produce higher turnout rates than nonpartisan elections. The majority of the studies cited above that showed higher turnout rates in partisan cities were either conducted earlier in time or utilized older datasets (e.g., Trounstine 2012). Half of the more recent studies showed that there was no effect between the use of partisan elections and turnout. It is possible that the effect of partisanship on local turnout has deteriorated – a prospect that deserves further study. Another reason that partisan elections do not significantly impact turnout could be due to the fact that many cities lack two-party competition. Since most partisan cities utilize plurality elections, oftentimes the more-competitive match-up may be the primary election. Because this study was focused on general election turnout, data on primary turnout was not collected or analyzed.

Hypothesis #3: Cities using the unreformed (mayor-council) government structure will have higher turnout rates than cities using the reformed (council-manager or commission) government structures.

Hypothesis #3 is largely supported by the analysis. Cities utilizing reformed city government structures (council-manager or commission) have lower turnout rates than
unreformed structures (mayor-council). The affirmation of Hypothesis #3 confirms the widespread conclusion that elections held in cities with reformed government structures have lower voter turnout than unreformed governments (Lee 1960; Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Brides 1997; Oliver 2001; Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Trounstine 2010). Scholars attribute lower turnout in reformed cities to the “diffusion of power” inherent in these systems (Wood 2002, 215). Decision-making in reformed council-manager systems is typically done by the unelected city manager. In the commission form, multiple actors play the role of both legislator and executive, making it more difficult to hold these positions accountable to the electorate. Oftentimes, voters may feel that local elections are less important when they do not elect the principal policy administrator in their city, as is the case in council-manager systems (Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Karnig 1976; Lyons 1978; Liebert 1974; Morgan and Pelissero 1980; Karnig and Walter 1983; Oliver and Ha 2007).

Hypothesis #4: Cities that hold their municipal elections concurrently with higher-level offices will have higher turnout rates than cities that do not hold elections concurrently.

Hypothesis #4 is strongly supported by both the bivariate and multivariate analyses. Mayoral elections had higher turnout levels when held concurrently with a federal election. Similarly, city council elections exhibited higher turnout when held concurrently with a mayoral or federal election. These findings are in agreement with the consensus opinion that municipal elections held concurrently with higher offices will exhibit greater turnout rates (Lee 1960; Alford and Lee 1968; Hawley 1973; Wood 2002; Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Caren 2007; Hajnal 2010; Trounstine 2012; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). However, when making this conclusion, most studies combine mayoral and city council into a
single “municipal election” variable and then compare “municipal election” turnout in the context of state and federal turnout. By observing mayoral and city council elections separately, this study shows that city council elections held off-cycle from mayoral elections have a significantly lower turnout rate than when they are held concurrently with mayoral elections.

The effects of election concurrency in my study seem slightly lower than other recent studies. For instance, Hajnal and Lewis (2003) show that turnout in local elections is 36 percentage points higher when held concurrently with a Presidential election. Similarly, Wood (2002) shows that local election turnout is 29 percentage points higher when held concurrently with a Presidential election. Caren’s (2007) analysis notes that local election turnout is 27 percentage points higher when held concurrently with a Presidential election. Meanwhile, my analysis shows that mayoral and city council elections held concurrently with federal elections are 16 percentage points and 20 percentage points higher respectively. This difference can be explained by how I coded my dichotomous Concurrent Federal Election variable. In my study, I combine all types of federal elections – primary and general elections for Presidential and midterm years – as a single “Concurrent Federal Election” variable. Hajnal and Lewis (2003), Wood (2002) and Caren (2007) only code for a concurrent Presidential election.

Hypothesis #5: Cities with a greater proportion of district council seats will exhibit lower turnout rates than cities with a greater proportion of at-large council seats.

The analysis produced little support for Hypothesis #5. Although there was a weak and significant bivariate relationship between the proportion of district council seats and voter turnout, the effects of council structure in the random effects models were not significant. The lack of evidence that a relationship exists between council structure and voter turnout mirrors the
findings of Wood (2002) and Oliver (2001). Two other studies addressing the effects of council structure on voter turnout produced mixed results. Trounstine’s (2012) study also shows no relationship between council structure and voting eligible turnout; yet, finds a significant negative relationship between the proportion of district council seats and registered voter turnout. Moreover, Hajnal and Lewis’s (2003) study finds that district city council elections negatively affect turnout amongst adult residents, but not amongst registered voter turnout. However, it is important to keep in context that Trounstine’s (2012) study utilizes data collected by the ICMA in 1986, while Hajnal and Lewis (2003) only make inferences about local elections in California, all of which are nonpartisan.

The lack of relationship between council structure and voter turnout questions the notion that at-large elections may create barriers to political participation (Karlan 1989; Bridges 1997). Cities with a greater proportion of district council seats were hypothesized to have higher turnout because they allow for smaller jurisdictions and constituencies. Due to their smaller jurisdictions, district elections allow for candidates and elected officials to have more contact and closer connections with the voters in their constituency (Bullock 1990). Additionally, voters in smaller jurisdictions like council districts are probabilistically more likely to impact the final outcome of the election when compared to an at-large election (Karlan 1989). Moreover, this lack of relationship also brings uncertainty to the opposing argument, that it is actually at-large elections, rather than district elections, which generate higher turnout. For instance, Bullock (1990) predicts that at-large elections are more likely to be contested and competitive which in turn would incentivize residents to vote. If at-large elections do in fact promote more contested and competitive elections, there does not seem to be a corresponding uptick in turnout.
Hypothesis #6: Elections with a greater level of competitiveness will produce higher turnout rates.

In terms of mayoral elections, the analysis offers a moderate amount of support for Hypothesis #6. Electoral competitiveness for mayoral elections was measured in terms of whether an incumbent was running, as well as the margin of victory between the top two vote-getters. It was theorized that, due in part to high incumbent re-election rates, the presence of an incumbent on the ballot would discourage turnout (Hajnal 2010). Elected seats that have no incumbent running are generally thought to be more competitive (Hill 2006). In the bivariate analysis, open-seat mayoral elections had slightly higher voter turnout; however, the presence of an incumbent on the ballot had no significant effect on voter turnout in the full random effects models. Thus, I cannot conclude that the presence of an incumbent on the ballot has any effect on voter turnout. While this agrees with Holbrook and Weinschenk’s (2014) finding, it is contrary to Caren’s (2007) results that show turnout declines slightly in mayoral elections with incumbents running. The margin of victory between the top two vote-getters in a given mayoral election was significantly linked to turnout levels in both the bivariate and multivariate analyses presented in the previous chapter. This result supports the theory that, regardless of the level of governance, electoral contests that are expected to be close will have much higher turnout than ones that are expected to be lopsided (Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Cox and Munger 1989; Matsusaka 1993; Shachar and Nalebuff 1999; Matsusaka and Palda 1993; Wood 2002; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Lublin and Tate 1995; Hill and Leighley 1999; Caren 2007; Barzel and Silberberg 1973; Franklin 2004; Springer 2012; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014).

The analysis on city council elections offers little support for Hypothesis #6. City council competitiveness was measured using the proportion of incumbents running for re-election and
the proportion of races requiring a primary or runoff election. It was hypothesized that a higher proportion of incumbents running would negatively affect turnout, while a greater number of races requiring a primary or runoff would positively impact turnout. Akin to mayoral elections, there was no relationship between the proportion of incumbents running and voter turnout. This reinforces Hajnal and Lewis’ (2003) assertion that the number of incumbents per seat up for election does not impact voter turnout rates. The analysis shows that the proportion of council races requiring a runoff or primary election has a moderately strong and significant bivariate correlation with voter turnout; however, in the context of other variables in the regression models, this measure of competitiveness had no effect on voter turnout rates. It was expected that a positive relationship between these variables would exist because, in theory, the necessity of multiple elections can signify numerous candidates running or the inability of a candidate to garner a majority of the votes on a first-round ballot. The variable had not been tested in the context of municipal elections before and its value as an accurate measure of electoral competition deserves further study.

In the context of municipal elections, this study shows that institutions generally play a greater role in predicting voter turnout rates than measures of electoral competitiveness. This was particularly the case for city council elections. For mayoral elections, going from a regression model with only demographic and time-period control variables to one with measures of electoral competition saw considerable increases in the within-, between-, and overall $R^2$ measures. Though electoral competition explained a considerable amount of the variance in mayoral voter turnout both within individual cities as well as across the cities in this study, the regression model was a much better fit with the addition of municipal and electoral institutions. In contrast, the addition of electoral competition variables to the city council regression model

---

2 See Model 1 and Model 2 of Table 5.17.
had a negligible effect on the ability to explain within-city, between-city, and overall variance in voter turnout rates. Like the mayoral regression models, institutional variables offered a much better fit for the city council election data. Electoral competition is a short-term factor and varies from election to election; therefore, it is understandable that its power in explaining turnout over time was not as robust as institutional factors (Engstrom 2012).

The fact that institutions are the driving force in determining turnout at the local level does not mean that we should completely disregard the competitiveness of municipal elections. Most local elections are not competitive. Oftentimes, incumbents at the local level do not even face a challenger. When they do, the outcome is typically not very close; for instance, the average margin of victory for a mayoral candidate in this study was just over 33 percentage points (See Table 5.2). The lack of competition can have a variety of effects on a city’s political health and the representativeness of elected officials. Lower levels of electoral competitiveness may also promote an incumbency advantage greater than the one already enjoyed by candidates running for re-election (Wolman, Page, and Reavley 1990; Krebs 1998; Trounstine 2011, 2012).

Study Limitations

There were a number of limitations associated with this study, most of which were related to data collection and variable coding. This study ended up covering elections over a twenty-year timespan in 37 cities. However, data was oftentimes not readily available. I had originally set out to study all American cities that had at least 500,000 residents at one point in time. However, I was unable to obtain reliable data for four cities: Detroit, Oklahoma City, Buffalo, and Cincinnati. Additionally, the data that was most likely to be available were from

---

3 See Model 1 and Model 2 of Table 5.18.
elections that occurred more recently. Both of these data collection limitations are minor threats to the generalizability of my results.

The dependent variable for this study was a calculated turnout statistic based on the “citizen voting age population” or CVAP. A more preferable turnout statistic would be based on the “voting eligible population” (VEP) as derived in McDonald and Popkin (2001). The VEP turnout calculation differs from the CVAP calculation because it accounts for the non-eligible felon population as well as any eligible residents not residing in the political jurisdiction. These differences are due to the fact that the necessary data for calculating a VEP turnout statistic are not aggregated at the municipal level. Although other scholars have used a CVAP statistic in urban turnout studies (Caren 2007; McDaniel 2015), and is considered similar enough to the VEP turnout calculation (Holbrook and Heidbreder 2010), it is still not the most accurate measure of voter turnout.

Variable coding was another limitation to this study. Two independent variables deserve discussion here. First, this study does not differentiate between the different types of at-large city council systems. There are a variety of ways that cities using at-large councils are structured. For instance, some at-large city councils are essentially citywide multimember districts. In other cities, positional at-large seats are based off of a series of citywide single member districts.

Determining a variable to accurately depict the competitiveness of city council elections was also difficult. This stemmed from the fact that I was interested in aggregate citywide turnout as a dependent variable. As such, a single measure of competitiveness was derived from multiple city council elections held simultaneously across a city. While measuring competitiveness in a single district can be fairly simple and precise, doing so across multiple districts may not provide the most accurate depiction of how competitive a city’s elections are in a given election year.
A final limitation to this study is the focus on general election turnout. Turnout data was not collected for primary or preliminary elections. In partisan cities, general elections can become dull affairs if a single party dominates the electoral arena. Instead, the higher turnout elections may in fact be the partisan primary. However, it is much more difficult to study variations in citywide turnout for primary elections because not every seat will always require a primary election. For similar reasons, I did not collect data on turnout in special elections.

Study Implications and Directions for Future Research

Compared to other levels of government, municipal elections remain largely understudied phenomena. Echoing the calls of Key (1958), Marschall, Shah, and Ruhil (2011), and Trounstine (2009) it is clear that further study on local elections in general is needed. The present study has attempted to fill a small portion of this gap in the field as it relates to electoral systems and voter turnout, but there is more work to be done. The findings and limitations outlined in this chapter have a variety of implications for researchers, election administrators, politicians, and advocacy groups.

Electoral System Designs

The primary theoretical implication of this study is related to our understanding of electoral systems within a municipal context. Every electoral system functions in a unique way. Our general understanding of electoral systems is based on two categorizations: plurality vs. majoritarian and partisan vs. nonpartisan. This study further delineates the majoritarian election category based on the necessity of a second-round ballot.

Electoral systems are traditionally split into plurality and majoritarian categories (e.g., Lijphart 1999; Birch 2003). However, within the category of majoritarian elections there is a broad range of electoral systems for governments to choose from. For some cities, the runoff
election only occurs if a candidate does not receive a majority of first-round ballots. In other cities, the runoff election is required, and poses the top two candidates from the first-round ballot against each other. This small operational difference drastically alters the character of the electoral system.

Government institutions, such as electoral systems, are typically thought of as stable, long-lasting entities. Among local officials and electoral administrators, this mindset may result in a perception that electoral institutions are unalterable, or that they have minimal effect on phenomena such as political participation. This perception is misguided. In the context of local democracy, electoral institutions are much easier to alter than other variables thought to impact voter participation, such as social context, political culture, and demographics (Ross 1997). Many different electoral rules are employed at the local level and electoral administrators are able to alter a variety of them.

One avenue for promoting the use of new electoral system designs is the National Civic League’s Model City Charter, a periodic publication highlighting the best practices in urban government structures. The National Civic League (2003, 69) notes that their Model City Charter “has been distinguished from other local government reform efforts by the conviction that structure matters...” and that “legal arrangements for cities and the features included in a charter can, at the margins, make it more likely that preferred values will be actualized in the governmental process.” If higher voter turnout is in fact a “preferred value” in democratic systems, then greater attention to electoral system design is warranted.

As alluded to in their most recent edition (8th) of the Model City Charter, a majority of the municipal electoral regulations are derived from state statute. Because of this, the National Civic League is somewhat, and understandably, reserved in their recommendations about the
electoral systems prescribed in city charters (although oftentimes state governments give cities a series of electoral rules and municipal institutions to choose from). While the Model City Charter advocates for nonpartisan municipal elections, the method for conducting those elections is only discussed briefly. For city council elections, a system of proportional representation using the single transferable vote method is recommended. They note that historically this system had been utilized by 22 different cities, but is now only used in Cambridge, MA (National Civic League 2003, 59). They also offer two semi-proportional systems – the limited and cumulative vote methods – as well as the instant runoff voting method as alternatives to proportional representation (National Civic League 2003, 60). This version of the Model City Charter does not make reference to a preferred election method for the office of the mayor.

While it is appropriate for the National Civic League to defer to state laws about the electoral system designs used at the municipal level, they also miss out on a chance to be advocates for impactful institutional change. Some of this advocacy work has been conducted by FairVote, a nonpartisan non-profit that advocates for a variety of institutional changes to American elections. FairVote is an advocate of the instant runoff voting electoral system, and has successfully brought it to Memphis, Oakland, and Minneapolis. More recently, FairVote successfully championed a 2016 ballot initiative that will bring IRV to state and congressional elections in the state of Maine. Part of their recommendation for the use of IRV over other systems is the elimination of the second-ballot runoff (as part of the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system) which has proved electorally costly to voters.

Large cities currently utilizing the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system could benefit from a change of electoral system. It had been traditionally thought that cities would need to transition to a partisan ballot to see higher turnout rates in their municipal elections. However, that is not
necessarily the case anymore. Cities may choose to maintain their nonpartisan elections while altering the design of their electoral system. This study has shown that the adoption of a nonpartisan required-runoff system can increase turnout rates by 6-7% on average over a nonpartisan triggered-runoff system. Cities may also look into adopting instant runoff voting. While this vote system is categorized within the *Nonpartisan Alternative* variable in this study (thus no inferences were made), Robb (2011) has shown that municipal turnout in San Francisco increased after its introduction in 2004.

In a friendly state environment, it may be relatively easy for some cities to change their voting system. During the time span of this study alone the City of San Francisco changed the vote system for their Board of Supervisors three times: from a plurality at-large system, to a district-based nonpartisan triggered-runoff system, to its current instant runoff voting design. Armed with research on the effects of electoral systems at the municipal level, organizations like the National Civic League and FairVote can make local elections more inclusive, representative, and democratic.

If electoral costs are higher within some electoral systems compared to others as this study argues, it is possible that voter turnout within cities will be highest amongst residents who can burden these higher costs and in turn, lower amongst those who cannot. If that is the case, the demographics of the constituency that tends to vote in local elections may be much different than the population of the city itself. Moreover, the demographic composition of the electorate in a city using high-cost electoral institutions may be drastically different than a city utilizing low-cost electoral institutions.

A recent study by Jurjevich et al. (2015) offers a look into how these patterns could develop. In their *Who Votes for Mayor* research report, Jurjevich et al. (2015) analyze the
geographic dispersion of individual vote patterns in seven elections across four cities: Detroit MI, Charlotte NC, St. Paul MN, and Portland, OR. What is unique about their case selection, as it relates to this dissertation, is the variation in electoral system design. Both Detroit and Portland utilize what I have termed the nonpartisan triggered-runoff system, while Charlotte uses a partisan plurality system, and St. Paul uses the instant runoff voting system.

Among many of the study’s conclusions is that census tract-level turnout in Charlotte did not substantially vary based on median household income. Meanwhile in Detroit, census tracts with a median household income of $60,000 or greater had turnout rates twice as high as those census tracts with a median household income of $30,000. Jurjevich et al. (2015) also find that in Charlotte blacks were 1.6 times more likely to vote in municipal primaries than whites, while the odds were roughly the same for general elections.4

These findings are interesting given that it is typically thought that lower turnout elections, like those held in cities, disadvantage racial minorities and those with a lower socio-economic status (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Lijphart 1997; Wattenberg 1998; Hajnal 2010). However, their findings suggest that within-city turnout variation is potentially a result of a city’s choice of electoral system. Using the theoretical arguments developed earlier in this dissertation, Detroit’s nonpartisan triggered-runoff vote system has a higher electoral cost than Charlotte’s partisan primary system. It seems, based on Jurjevich et al.’s (2015) findings, that turnout in the higher-electoral-cost Detroit system was skewed in favor of the higher socio-economic census tracts. While in Charlotte’s lower-cost system, turnout was dispersed fairly evenly across socio-economic status as well as black and white racial groups. Expanding the number of cities utilized and lengthening the time-span of Jurjevich et al.’s (2015) study would offer an even clearer picture of the effects of electoral system design on variations in within-city turnout.

4 Out of the cities in their study, only Charlotte collected data on race and ethnicity of registered voters.
Partisanship

This study also furthers our understanding of nonpartisan elections. Nonpartisan elections are the most numerous type of election in the United States. Despite this, scholars still know very little about how they operate. The categories of majoritarian elections I have outlined further impact our understanding of nonpartisan elections. Previous research on local democracy has treated the nonpartisan election as a catch-all category. Nonetheless, there are some subtle and not-so-subtle differences amongst them, particularly when considering the type of majoritarian election utilized. By recognizing that the effects of municipal electoral systems cannot be overlooked, this study has provided a foundation for future inquiries into not only municipal elections, but other entities that often utilize majoritarian elections or nonpartisan ballots.

As alluded to earlier in this chapter, the use of the partisan ballot significantly affected voter turnout rates in earlier studies; however, this was not the case in about half of the more recent studies, including this one. This suggests that the effects of partisanship on voter turnout at the local level may have deteriorated over time. For a variety of reasons, the party label at the local level may no longer have the effect it once did. Perhaps the growth in internet access over the past two decades has supplanted the party’s role in providing information to voters. With the advent of social media especially, voters have greater access to information about local elections and oftentimes can interact with candidates directly.

Also deserving attention here is the potential that the party polarization seen at the state and federal level has begun to creep into local politics. Given that urban areas have become bastions for the Democratic Party, Republican candidates often have no chance at winning an election. This lack of competition may be the cause low voter interest and participation. When the local branch of the Republican Party does not even field a candidate, the most competitive
election becomes the Democratic Primary, where party labels are not helpful informational cues for voters.

_Election Timing and Staggered Terms_

Many cities are also realizing the benefits associated with aligning their municipal elections with higher-level electoral cycles. For instance, the state of Maryland postponed Baltimore’s 2015 municipal elections until 2016 to not only save money (an estimated $3.7 million dollars) but also to benefit from the higher turnout seen in Presidential elections (Maciag 2014). Other city officials would also benefit from looking at the timing of their elections. For both mayoral and city council contests in this study, electoral timing had a consistently strong effect on municipal turnout rates. The strength of the relationship between municipal electoral timing and turnout is well-documented, with some scholars arguing that “timing is almost everything” when it comes to municipal turnout levels (Hajnal and Lewis 2003, 656; Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002). Despite this, most American cities still hold their elections off-cycle from state and federal elections (ICMA 2011; See also, Tables 5.16 and 5.14). This study shows that by simply changing the electoral timing to align municipal elections with state or federal elections, turnout rates would drastically increase.

Local officials may be apprehensive about making changes to the timing of their elections. Aligning municipal elections with state and federal elections may result in ballot roll-off, where voters will vote in the high-profile races at the top of the ballot but abstain from local races at the bottom of the ballot. For election administrators fearful of ballot roll-off, aligning all city council and mayoral elections into a single event will modestly increase turnout rates without risking the potential for ballot fatigue that would occur by aligning with state or federal
elections. This can be accomplished by two easily-adopted institutional changes: eliminating staggered terms and making the terms of office for mayors and councilors the same.

The ICMA (2011) reports that nationwide 85% of city councils use staggered terms, meaning only half of a city’s councilors are elected at a given municipal election. This strategy was developed to prevent drastic turnover at a given election, but it also drags down turnout levels. For example, the City of Phoenix’s eight-member city council is elected to four year terms using the staggered election method. Half of the seats are aligned with the mayoral election every four years while the other half are held without a concurrent election on a separate four year cycle. Turnout is substantially higher in Phoenix’s mayoral election years. This means that these councilors must appeal to a broader swath of the population because turnout is higher. Eliminating the staggered term would require all eight city councilors to campaign simultaneously, alongside the mayoral election. Eliminating the staggered term would not only increase turnout rates, it would also eliminate the cost of conducting one election cycle.

Where staggered terms are not utilized, City’s may also choose to align the term lengths of mayors and city councilors. For instance, in the City of Boston, each of the thirteen city councilors is elected every two years and the mayor is elected every four years. Every four years when city councilors are alone at the top of the municipal ballot, turnout suffers. Put another way, when turnout is lower, councilors are held accountable to a much smaller portion of the voting public: one that may be less diverse and not reflective of the city’s population. Aligning the term lengths of city councilors with the mayor is a slight institutional change that can have notable effects on voter turnout. For the example of Boston, turnout rates would almost double for city council elections by granting councilors four year terms and aligning them with mayoral elections.
Electoral Competition

Electoral competition in cities also deserves greater attention for a few reasons. Most local elections are not competitive. In turn, variation in local turnout is primarily dependent on the municipal institutions used by a given city. How does this compare to other levels of governance? Are local elections any less competitive than state and federal elections? Are variations in turnout for state and federal elections more dependent on institutional differences or competitiveness?

Secondly, the field of local elections would benefit from a more refined variable for determining citywide electoral competitiveness. This study’s victory margin variable offered a fairly accurate portrayal of electoral competition in mayoral elections; however, determining the electoral competitiveness of a collection of city council districts is a much more difficult feat. Further experimentation with a variable that accurately indicates competition is needed.

Special Elections

Although special elections were not within the scope of the study per se, it was necessary to look at the results of special elections to determine which incumbents were running for re-election in the regularly scheduled elections. Anecdotally speaking, a great deal of electoral activity occurred in special elections: both in terms of their frequency and the number of candidates contesting them. Local offices are seen as a springboard to higher-level elected positions. Because most local elections are scheduled off-cycle from state and federal elections, a great deal of turnover in mayoral and city council offices happens outside of the regularly scheduled elections because of local officials that decided to run for higher office. This means that a great number of elected representatives at the local level are elected in extremely low-
turnout special elections. This is an area of research that is drastically understudied: both theoretically and empirically.

Conclusion

Famed urbanist Jane Jacobs (1961, 238) once expressed the idea that “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” Though Jacobs was discussing the physical construction cities, her reflection holds true to the democratic construction of cities as well. As the United States increasingly develops into a more urban nation, the democratic institutions that maintain the bedrock of our cities require greater consideration by researchers and practitioners alike.

A major component of insuring that cities are “created by everybody” is voter turnout. Yet low voter turnout plagues most major cities and will be an ongoing challenge for urban policymakers. Over the past two decades, turnout in large cities has averaged about 23% of the citizens that fall within the voting age population. This rate is much lower than turnout in midterm (35%-40% of the voting eligible population) and presidential (55%-60%) elections over that time same period (McDonald 2016). Low turnout is in municipal elections is a nationwide problem: it is not unique to a single region of the country, or to cities dominated by particular demographic characteristics. By and large, low turnout can be attributed to two factors addressed in this study: institutional arrangements and electoral competition.

American cities possess a unique assortment of governing institutions not seen at other levels of government. This study has shown that it is the arrangements of governing and electoral institutions that serve as the primary driving force in determining variations in urban voter turnout. The regression results in Chapter 5 show that cities can benefit from utilizing mayor-council government forms and changing the timing of local elections to coincide with elections
for higher offices. The results of the study also show that cities should pay greater attention to
the effects of the electoral system they use. Electoral systems function in unique ways. As this
study shows, small variations in electoral system designs can significantly impact voter turnout
rates. In choosing how to conduct their elections, cities would be better off moving away from
the nonpartisan triggered-runoff electoral system that has become so common. Cities wishing to
keep their nonpartisan elections could implement the nonpartisan required-runoff system which,
on average, had turnout rates that were 6 percentage points higher in mayoral elections and 7
percentage points higher in city council elections.

Electoral competitiveness was also linked to voter turnout in this study. More competitive
mayoral contests were shown to spur higher turnout rates. Yet most local elections are not
competitive affairs. The average margin of victory for mayoral elections in this study was 33%. 
Meanwhile, almost a quarter of the city council seats in the dataset for this study saw incumbents
win reelection in uncontested elections. Encouraging more competitive elections is not an easy
task for any policymaker; however, individual candidates and their campaigns can play a role in
generating more competitive elections. In particular, increasing campaign expenditures,
especially for candidates challenging incumbents, has been shown to foster more competitive
elections at the local level (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). One way to encourage this would
be for cities and states to revisit campaign finance laws such as individual contribution limits.
That being said, it may be difficult to convince current elected officials – who benefit from less-
competitive elections – to amend campaign finance legislation that could aid challengers.

The well-being of local democracy directly hinges upon the success of municipal
elections. But voter turnout and governing institutions, and electoral competition are only a few
pieces of the puzzle that determines what makes local democracy flourish. The
representativeness and responsiveness of elected officials, popular involvement, and voter-elite policy linkages are all critical to a thriving local democracy.

American cities are complex and diverse. This results in a countless number of issues – immigration, climate change, terrorism, and housing affordability – that cities are forced to confront. Some of these issues are more challenging than others. Similarly, a number of these policy matters are more prominent in some regions of the country compared to others. Despite their differences in policy demands, cities have in common the underlying need of an inclusive and representative elected government. And similar to issues of housing affordability or climate change, the construction of a successful local democracy is an ongoing process, something for successive generations to continuously build upon. In the century since the Progressive Era reforms were first discussed, cities have drastically changed; and a century from now, cities are likely to be quite different from today. Residents need to be prepared to address the changing nature of urban governance and that begins with a discussion of the municipal and electoral institutions that will ultimately determine the policymakers that are participating in those discussions and confronting these issues.
References


Taebel Delbert. 1978. “Minority representation on city councils: The impact of structure on Blacks and Hispanics.” *Social Science Quarterly* 59(1): 142-152


