The Effect of Election Consolidation on Turnout: Evidence from California[*]

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Abstract

Both the academic literature and popular press have speculated as to why voter turnout in the US is so much lower than in other advanced industrialized democracies. One proposed explanation posits that the division of elections for different offices into separate contests held relatively frequently plays a key role. Leveraging a recent reform in California that required consolidation of some municipal elections with statewide elections through a difference-in-differences framework, this paper investigates this hypothesis, finding that election consolidation appeared to raise turnout of registered voters in midterm contests by around three to five percentage points relative to what it would have been in the absence of consolidation. These results suggest that consolidating local elections with the federal general elections in November of even years may be a feasible strategy to address persistently low turnout in both local and national contests.

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1 Introduction

Both academic and popular commentators have repeatedly bemoaned the relatively low rates of participation in US politics. Voter turnout in presidential elections famously lags behind that of other developed democracies (Powell, 1986), while participation in state and local elections, jurisdictions that make the vast bulk of decisions that affect Americans' daily lives, is often even lower (Lijphart, 1997). While the causes and effects of low voter turnout in national elections have long been a subject of concern (e.g., Schattschneider, 1960), more recently political science has began scrutinizing the policy impact of lower turnout in state and local elections as well (Anzia, 2011; Berry, 2011).

These two turnout gaps—the relatively low turnout in US presidential elections in international context, and the even lower turnout in state and local elections compared with national elections—may be related. Most US officials are not elected on federal Election Day (Anzia, 2011): during a two-year election cycle, a citizen may find herself called to the polling place on separate days for school board elections, municipal elections, presidential primaries, state primaries, a special election or two, and finally the biennial federal election. The cumulative effect of all of these elections may boost participation, as numerous campaigns compete to mobilize and engage citizens, or it may depress participation, as exhausted voters sit out of elections because they are not able to participate in what may be as many as four or more elections every year, often held at inconvenient times, or because they simply cannot keep all the candidates and offices straight.

This paper investigates one aspect of this problem: what effect separating federal elections from elections for other offices has on overall participation. It is well-known that moving local and state elections to coincide with federal elections (a practice known as election consolidation) mechanically boosts turnout in these lower-profile contests (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003), but the extent to which such initiatives help or hurt turnout overall is less clear. Understanding this link would help shed light on mechanisms governing turnout, and point the way both to potential reforms to boost participation and to what the consequences of those reforms will be. Accordingly, I investigate a recent law passed by the state of California that required almost all of its local jurisdictions to

consolidate their elections (hitherto mostly held on dates separate from statewide contests) with either statewide primaries or general elections. Because a court decision restricted the law's applicability to only three-quarters of California cities, and some cities chose to move their election dates sooner than others, there is a great deal of variation in the phase-in of this reform, allowing me to conduct a difference-in-differences comparison to see what effect consolidating local and statewide elections has on participation. I find that jurisdictions that consolidate elections receive a 3 to 5 percentage point boost in midterm turnout as compared to cities that did not, indicating that the effects of shifting election times to coincide with more high-profile contests on net increases participation.

Before arriving at the empirics, I first explore previous results relating to turnout and election timing, deriving several hypotheses related to timing and participation. I then provide background information relating to politics in California and the law in question, before outlining my empirical strategy and providing the results of my analysis. Finally, I consider ways to extend and improve this analysis, as well as potential avenues for future research.

2 Theory

Prior work on election timing has generally found mixed to positive results in the effect of election contests in getting voters to the polls. Presidential elections, unsurprisingly, are the main driver of turnout, with senatorial elections, gubernatorial elections, and statewide ballot measures influencing turnout in midterm years but not in presidential ones (Jackson, 1997, 2002; Smith, 2001). In contrast, studies more explictly focused on election timing have found using validated individual-level survey data that gubernatorial elections boost turnout in presidential years, while presidential primaries lower it (Boyd, 1986, 1989), while a study of the same hypothesis using time series cross-sectional data found no effect (Cohen, 1982). The magnitudes of these effects vary: Boyd finds that presidential primaries reduce propensity to turn out by about 5% and gubernatorial contests raise it by about 6%, Jackson finds double-digit boosts to turnout from high-stimulus gubernatorial

and senatorial contests, and Smith finds that these effects are closer to 2-4 percentage points.

Where a relationship between election timing and turnout does exist, it could arise from several sources. In particular, campaign activities and advertising by candidates and parties, whether designed to encourage participation in a particular election or broader political engagement, have generally been found to improve turnout (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Francia and Herrnson, 2004; but see Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995). The idea behind such a relationship seems straightforward: individuals are more likely to participate if they are asked, particularly if a campaign does the hard work of overcoming potential barriers such as registration, obtaining information on the candidates and issues on the ballot, and making arrangements to travel to the polling place. Accordingly, jurisdictions that separate their elections should experience lower turnout in each contest—even in the highest-profile ones like presidential elections—than those that do not.

Particular electoral contests may also be more "attractive" or exciting than others even in the absence of campaign effects (Boyd, 1989). For example, as American politics have nationalized (Hopkins, 2018), it could be the case that federal and especially presidential contests have become more interesting independent of mobilization and state and local contests less so. Conversely, those individuals who are still not interested in federal elections may turn out if there is an important state or local race or issue on the ballot (Boyd, 1986). Either way, separating elections would lead to lower turnout, although if federal elections are the pull then combining them with local elections should not raise turnout in the former, while if state and local elections can still attract some participation on their own, then doing so would increase turnout in federal elections as well.

Further, the closer elections are, the more interesting they will be, and thus the more people they might bring to the polls (Grofman, Collet and Griffin, 1998). Of course, campaign mobilization is likely to be higher in close contests as well. Finally, voters themselves may be fatigued or "satiated" by relatively frequent elections: participating in one election every year or two years may fulfill their political interest or sense of civic obligation, meaning that increasing the number of elections will lower participation in each. Similar to the logic of mobilization, this argument would predict that any consolidation of elections would boost turnout in both contests, while any

separation would lower turnout in both. While the mobilization argument relies on the presence of additional contests on the ballot, however, the voter fatigue argument relies on the dearth of other elections. Therefore, the mobilization logic predicts that a longer ballot will lead to higher turnout (although, of course, longer ballots may suffer greater roll-off), while the fatigue logic implies that ballot length will not affect turnout.

This paper attempts to move this literature forward by testing a difficult case for timing effects on turnout: the timing of municipal elections, typically regarded as a low-salience contest and generally not studied in the cases above. To the extent that local contests can boost turnout in general elections held at the same time, that should be considered fairly strong evidence for the proposition that election timing matters for turnout.

3 Analysis

3.1 Background

Like most other states, the state of California holds elections in November of even-numbered years to elect statewide officials and members of the state senate (four-year staggered terms) and house of representatives (two-year terms), along with federal elections for US Representatives, US Senators, and presidential electors. Many local jurisdictions also elect officials for municipal, county, and special district governments. In contrast to the higher-level elections, which are generally partisan[1], most local elections are nonpartisan. These elections by law must take place on an established election date, which generally refers to the national Election Day in November, the California primary in June, and a municipal election date in April, although various special elections take place throughout the year (and local elections, unlike statewide elections, may be in odd- or even-numbered years). Finally, statewide and municipal ballots in these contests may also include "measures", initiatives, recalls, and referenda voted on by the citizens of a given jurisdiction.

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[1]The state Superintendent of Public Instruction and Insurance Commissioner are elected in nonpartisan contests, and members of the state legislature and Congress are chosen through a "top-two" primary system that allows but does not require candidates to specify party labels.

California has begun transitioning to a vote-by-mail system in the past several years, with several rural counties moving to entirely vote-by-mail elections and all registered California voters having the option of requesting a mail ballot. Accordingly, the percentage of people voting by mail has grown to a majority of all ballots cast in the last four election cycles (reaching 60.5% in 2014 and 65.3% in 2018).

Vote-by-mail legislation is only one of a suite of reforms that California has introduced in recent years to combat low voter turnout, including pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds, election day registration, and more recently automatic voter registration for citizens applying for a drivers' license. Most notably for this paper, in 2015 state senator Ben Hueso (D-San Diego) introduced SB 415 in the California legislature, which was passed and signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown later that year. The bill required that all political subdivisions of the state with unconsolidated elections where turnout was at least 25 percent less than the turnout in the previous four statewide general elections move their elections to a statewide primary or general election by 2022. Practically speaking, this threshold potentially covered the vast majority of jurisdictions in the state. In response to a lawsuit by the city of Redondo Beach, however, a Los Angeles Superior Court judge ruled in September 2018 that the state's charter cities (which constituted 121 out of 482 municipalities in the state) were not bound by the law. Other jurisdictions began to consolidate their elections, only some of which were in time for the 2018 cycle.

3.2 Data Collection

To observe the effect of SB415 implementation, I constructed a dataset containing the municipal election date for the 2014 and 2018 election cycles along with registered voters and turnout in these elections for municipalities in California. Most county election offices publish registration and turnout breakdowns for all political units within the county, including cities and towns, as part of their official Statement of Votes Cast; when this information was not available, I obtained these numbers by aggregating precinct-level registration and turnout figures or by contacting the

elections office to ask for them.[2]

A few counties made election calendars or candidate lists available that indicated when munic-ipalities held their elections; for most counties, however, this information was obtained from the election results posted after the fact. This led to a missing data problem, since many municipal elections suffer from a lack of competition. If no more candidates file than positions are available, it is common for the city council to cancel the election and appoint the candidates to the council instead, in which case these races are not listed among the election results provided by counties. In these cases, I obtained records of the scheduled election date from news coverage, published records of city council meetings, the city municipal code, or contacting the county elections de-partment. The results are displayed in Table 1 below; the clearest trend is that many, but not all, jurisdictions that did not hold elections on the federal Election Day (November of even-numbered years) in 2013-14 switched to that date for the 2017-2018 cycle.

Table 1: Election Timing Changes from 2014 to 2018

Date	Cities 2014	Cities 2018
March-April of Odd Year	39	35
June of Odd Year	3	4
November of Odd Year	48	12
March-April of Even Year	16	9
June of Even Year	13	12
November of Even Year	274	323
Other	3	1

Both of these data-collection efforts are still ongoing, and since the results from thirteen of California's 58 counties are incomplete, these counties are not included in the analysis (see Figure 1). The dataset used for this analysis includes 396 out of California's 482 municipalities.

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[2]Although citizen voting-age population might be preferable to registered voters as a denominator for turnout, the Census Bureau has not yet published reliable figures on the municipal level for 2018. In any event, running the analysis with the raw number of registered voters as the dependent variable returns a strong null result, suggesting that the effect is not working through reduced registration.
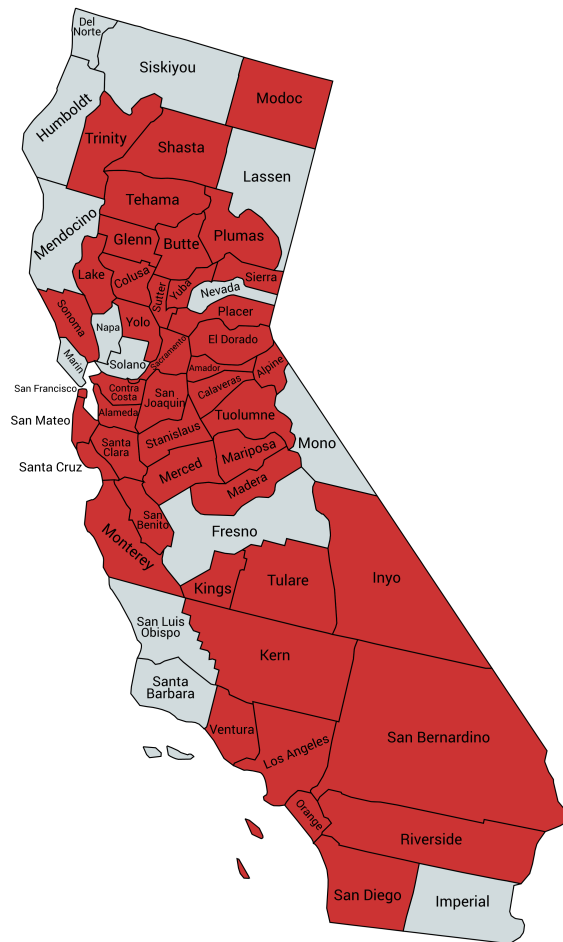
Figure 1: Counties included in dataset are highlighted in red. Created using mapchart.net.

3.3 Empirical Strategy

The main empirical analysis of this paper leverages the shock provided by SB 415, comparing cities that consolidated their elections by 2018 to those that still held separate municipal elections in that election cycle (the two-year period 2017-18, since nearly every city in the county appears to hold one regular municipal election every two years). The theory outlined above predicts that relative to the overall change in turnout from the previous midterm election due to statewide and national factors, those cities that consolidated elections should experience a turnout boost over those cities that did not. This can be expressed in terms of the following first-differences model:

$$Y_{i2} - Y_{i1} = \gamma + \delta(X_{i2} - X_{i1}) + \varepsilon_i$$

where Y_{it} indicates the turnout level in jurisdiction i at time t and X_{it} is a dummy variable for the presence of a non-consolidated election at time t. Thus, the independent variable will equal 0 for cities that did not change their election timing over this period, while cities that moved their elections to coincide with a statewide election will see the independent variable equal -1. (The variable is coded this way so that δ, the turnout difference between cities that moved and did not move their elections, will represent the drop in turnout associated with holding a local election separately from a statewide election). The intercept γ can be interpreted as the baseline difference in turnout between the 2014 and 2018 midterms, due to both differences in overall electoral environment and any changes in the electoral environment that applied uniformly county- or state-wide.

Since the model differences out any fixed disparities between jurisdictions that changed election times sooner and those that waited, differences in time-varying trends constitute the main potential threat to identification. Intuitively, it is implausible that cities that chose to move up their municipal elections sooner would be those that were likely to experience a greater increase in turnout than those that chose to wait until 2020 or 2022 (rational incumbents would be even less likely to switch from low-turnout off-cycle elections to higher-turnout on-cycle elections if

the upcoming election was anticipated to feature greater than usual turnout, due to the heightened uncertainty). An additional robustness check, employed in the analysis below, would subset to just general-law cities. Not only are these a more homogenous group of cities (the outliers in terms of population, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego, are all charter cities with different forms of government), but since charter cities were exempt from complying with the law, the incidence of strategic compliance or noncompliance should be reduced when examining only general-law cities.

4   Results

The results are presented in Table 1 below, using the first-differences model specified above and clustering standard errors by county. The first and third columns give results for both general-law and charter cities; the second and fourth are limited to general-law cities, those that were subject to SB 415. (The third and fourth columns are subsetted to Los Angeles County, for which the dataset also includes data on pretreatment trends.) Based on the model above, the intercept implies that the baseline increase in turnout between 2014 and 2018 was about 23 percentage points in California as a whole (and 26 percentage points in LA County). However, cities that consolidated elections experienced a greater increase in turnout, about 3 percentage points in the whole sample and 5 percentage points when subsetting to just general-law cities, a range of magnitudes in line with previous results that find an effect of election timing on turnout. This figure is marginally significant at the 0.05 level when subsetting to non-charter cities, where the effect is less likely to be confounded, and clearly significant within the LA County subset.[3]

For this analysis to be valid, it is important to establish that the baseline turnout trend in the cities that consolidated their elections would be the same in the absence of consolidation. One check would be establishing that pretreatment trends are parallel among the cities that did and did

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[3]Although this analysis does not indicate the mechanism at work, in a separate analysis of the LA County data, cities that held special elections during regularly scheduled general elections receiving a turnout boost similar in magnitude to that of cities that moved their regularly scheduled municipal elections to the general election, which suggests campaign mobilization might play a role.

Table 2: Turnout Changes in Cities with Consolidated Elections

	All Cities	Non-Charter Cities	LA Co. All Cities	LA Co. Non-Charter
(Intercept)	0.226	0.228	0.262	0.268
	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Δ Consolidation	-0.030	-0.048	-0.030	-0.024
	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.009)	(0.009)
N	396	289	88	63
adj. R^2	0.01	0.03	0.10	0.09

Standard errors in parentheses

not consolidate elections. Although I have not yet collected data from the 2010 midterm election in most counties, it is available for Los Angeles County, where the overall results are similar to those in California as a whole (see Table 2). As can be seen from Figure 2, among the 88 cities in LA County, turnout moved in a similar direction between the 2010 and 2014 elections in the cities that later consolidated their elections and the cities that did not. Although this does not prove that the 2014-2018 trend would have been similar, or that the same holds across the state of California, it does provide some some assurance that, for at least a subgroup of cities, those that consolidated their elections in time for the 2018 cycle do not behave very differently in terms of turnout changes from those that did not.

5 Discussion

Overall, these results provide support for the hypothesis that spreading out elections diminishes turnout. The magnitude of the effect (three to five percentage points) is only slightly less than previous estimates of the magnitude of the effect of gubernatorial elections, senatorial elections, and statewide ballot measures. This is perhaps unexpected given the relatively low prominence of local campaigns, although since the potential electorate for these contests is much smaller than that for statewide ones, it is much less costly to mobilize enough voters to be decisive. Further, although it is impossible to fully disentangle all of the mechanisms that could be responsible for boosting turnout when elections are consolidated, the evidence seems to imply that the mere presence of an additional contest on the ballot is enough to boost turnout, indicating that some sort of campaign
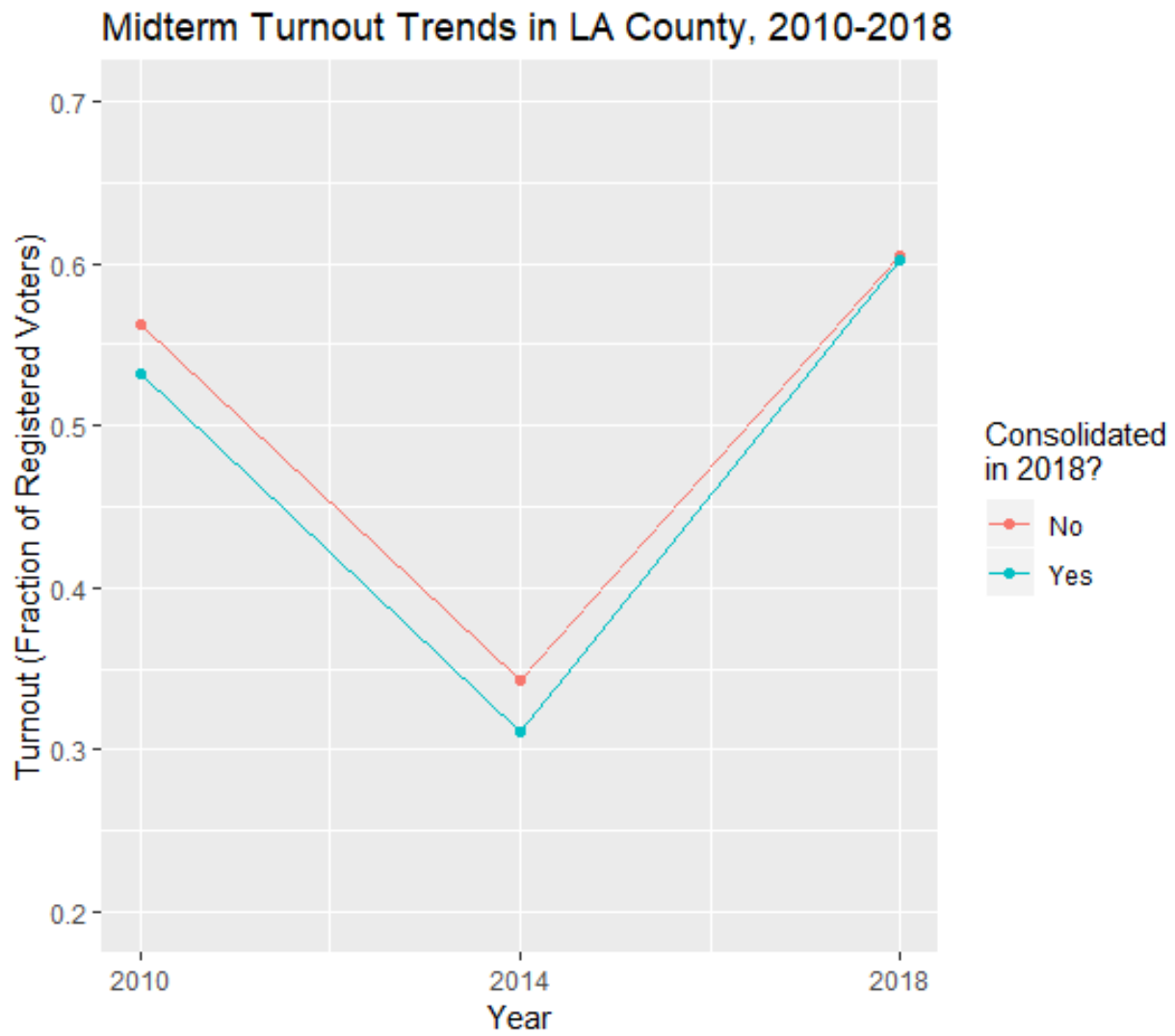
Figure 2: Overtime turnout trends in Los Angeles County

effects may be involved. Nevertheless, the results are still tentative, given the marginal level of significance, missing data problem, and need to test different theoretical mechanisms.

Several further steps also present themselves: first, conducting additional robustness checks, such as weighting by city size and controlling for covariates such as the level of competition in a given race. This analysis should also be replicated for similar reforms in other states to see if the same effects are present. The idea that local contests drive turnout also suggests that more attention could be paid to the process of campaigning in these elections: if this turnout effect proves persistent, current research on the effectiveness of direct mail, door-to-door canvassing, etc., could be paired with qualitative study of campaigns to uncover where it is coming from. As other states and cities consider changing their electoral calendar to boost turnout and for other reasons, these sorts of investigations will play a crucial role in assessing what the impact of these proposed reforms will be.

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