



Voting Local

Promoting More Equitable
Participation in Local Elections

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| About ideas42



We are a non-profit looking for deep insights into human behavior—why people do what they do—and using that knowledge in ways that help improve lives, build better systems, and drive social change. Working globally, we reinvent the practices of institutions, and create better products and policies that can be scaled for maximum impact.

We have deep expertise in voter-centric design aimed at making voting easier and more meaningful for all eligible voters in the United States. In 2020, the Voter Innovation Lab at ideas42 worked with Secretaries of State, leading civic nonprofits, and community-based organizations to reach over 50 million people with behavioral solutions that lowered the barriers to voting nationwide.

Across domains, we have been at the forefront of applying behavioral science in the real world. And as we've developed our expertise, we've helped to define an entire field. Our efforts have so far extended to 40 countries as we've partnered with governments, foundations, NGOs, private enterprises, and a wide array of public institutions—in short, anyone who wants to make a positive difference in people's lives.

Visit ideas42.org and follow [@ideas42](https://twitter.com/ideas42) on Twitter to learn more about our work. Contact Omar Parbhoo at omar@ideas42.org with questions.

About Democracy Works



Democracy Works is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that builds technology to simplify and modernize the voting process. Through TurboVote, an online tool that helps voters register and request absentee ballots, the organization sends election reminders to over ten million voters. Democracy Works also helps millions of Americans find their election information through the Voting Information Project, helps track millions of ballots via Ballot Scout, adding confidence and transparency to the vote-by-mail process, and empowers voters to determine when and where they'll vote through its tool How to Vote, a comprehensive, state-specific resource for voters nationwide. Through partnerships with corporations, colleges, and nonprofits, Democracy Works expands the reach of their technology, and makes it easier for voters to get to the polls, and participate in our democracy.

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Exploring the barriers to voting in local elections?

Who votes in local elections? Who doesn't? And why does it matter?

Headlines that bemoan low voter turnout have come to be an expected feature of local election news cycles, especially in odd-numbered years like 2021. Despite the fact that elections happen every year across the country, many often call these elections “off years” because of their particularly low salience when compared to both even year presidential and midterm elections. To put the problem into context, 66% of eligible Americans voted in the last presidential election;¹ with local elections, turnout often struggles to break 30%.²

Low voter turnout is a problem in and of itself for a representative democracy, but what makes the current level of participation particularly troubling is recognizing who's not voting. Across almost every demographic category, residents that benefit from the status quo vote at higher rates. Voters are whiter, richer, older, more highly educated, and more likely to be homeowners than those who do not vote.³ In low turnout local elections this means power is concentrated in the hands of a small and non-representative electorate that decides who holds public office and what policies officials prioritize. Perhaps unsurprisingly, research shows that communities of color bear the consequences of this unequal representation most heavily through reduced investment and public spending.⁴ With local governments in charge of some of the most basic functions of American life, like education, sanitation, roads, and policing, the stakes of these elections are extremely high.

Local elections, despite their central role in shaping Americans' day-to-day lives, can be short-changed by advocates, academics, and policy makers. It's no surprise then when they fall off the radar of a typical voter. When local elections do come up, many rely on overly simplistic or condescending tropes to explain low turnout. For example, the belief that young and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) residents simply can't be bothered to turn out. Traditional approaches look at where people are falling short and ask “how can we make people care more?” At ideas42, using the principles of behavioral science, we apply a more holistic perspective. We investigate both the context of local elections and human psychology to help us better understand how residents approach the decisions and actions required to vote. By piecing together these perspectives we can uncover a more nuanced understanding of the barriers to participation in local elections and design better solutions. In some cases, current solutions to low turnout are akin to increasing your volume when speaking to try to overcome a language barrier: exceedingly frustrating and ultimately futile. By better identifying the cause of the miscommunication, or in this case low turnout, we can equip voter outreach organizations with the tools they need to better serve voters.

This report captures insights from ideas42's and Democracy Works' 2021 collaboration to uncover the barriers to voting in local elections. Our work explicitly focuses on the barriers that pose a disproportionate burden to traditionally underserved populations, including communities of color. Together we uncovered common challenges to voting in local elections and designed and tested a set of behaviorally informed text messages to counter these barriers. We tested these messages through TurboVote, a voter registration and election reminder product from Democracy Works that serves over 10 million voters nationwide.

The following sections detail some of our most intriguing findings to further the conversation on local elections, and introduce strategies that groups conducting voter mobilization can implement. We explicitly do not address structural solutions, such as shifting odd year local elections to coincide with federal elections in this report, despite the importance of these reforms. The scope of this endeavor was aimed at supporting voters as they navigate elections in the current electoral environment. This report pays particular attention to the barriers that are distinct to local elections, when compared to federal races. Each section details a set of barriers, why they exist, and their implications for organizations that conduct voter outreach. In addition, where applicable, we highlight our preliminary designs to counter these barriers in the 2021 election cycle.

How did we approach this research?

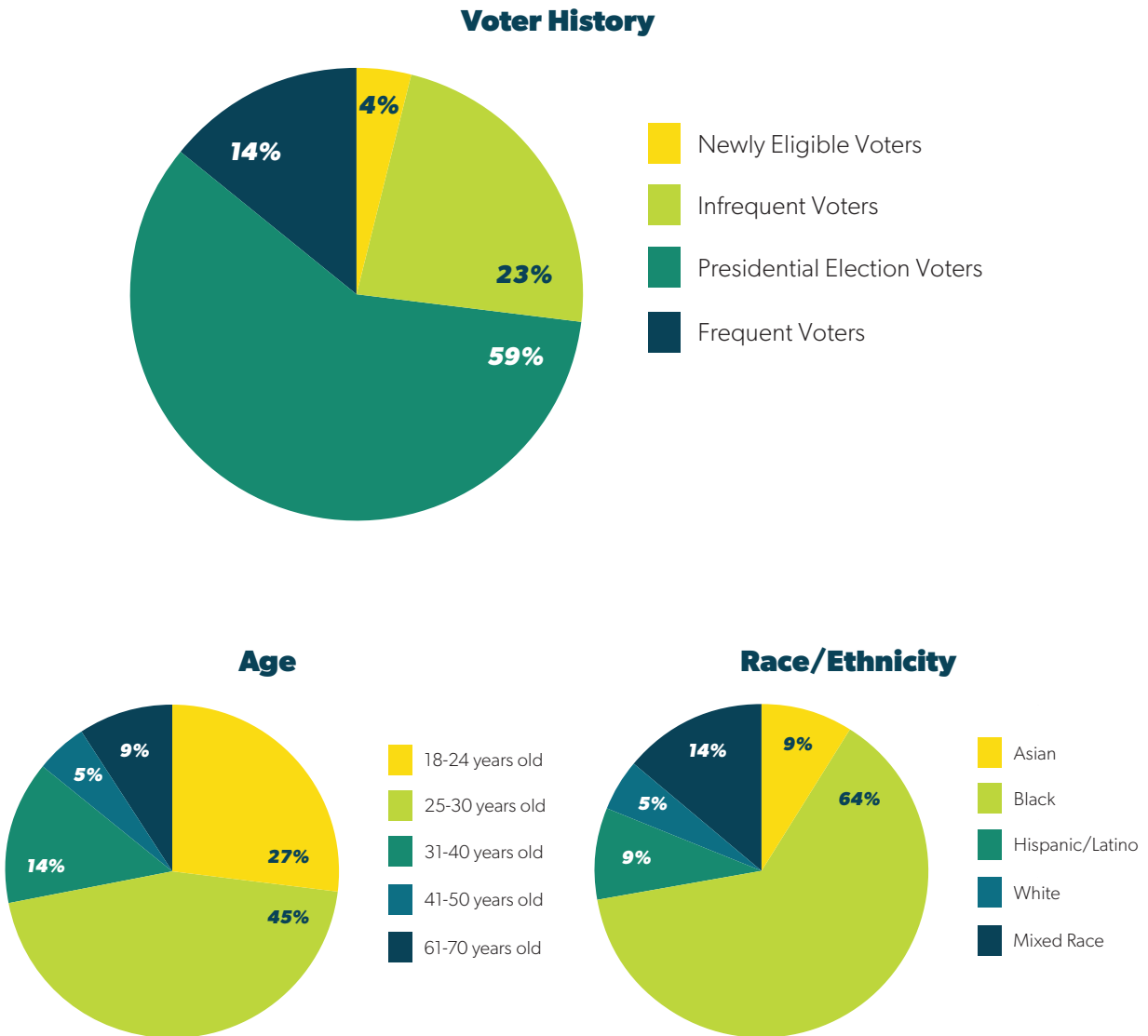
ideas42 and Democracy Works set out to understand how voters across the United States, specifically voters of color, approach and participate in local elections. Given our focus on communities of color, we selected cities for this research based on two main criteria: whether they were conducting a municipal election in 2021 and had a sizable BIPOC population to allow for meaningful research.

Using this rubric, we chose to work in New York, NY, Detroit, MI, Boston, MA, Atlanta, GA, Richmond, VA, and New Orleans, LA.

To better understand the distinct context of local elections, we conducted a thorough analysis of the municipal election ecosystem, drawing on existing literature, our organizations' previous research, and reports produced by our network of partners. We then investigated how the ecosystem could impact voters' decisions and actions in order to identify a set of behavioral barriers and cognitive biases that may prevent people from participating in local elections. These hypothesized barriers and biases guided the research questions we explored in our interviews with voters.

We interviewed 22 participants in total across the six cities. The plurality of our voters identified as Black women in their late twenties who vote only in major federal elections. (See Figure 1) The insights reported in this paper are based on these interviews, our previous work, and secondary research. While the insights reflect recurring themes from our conversations, they are not meant to be wholly representative of every voters' experience or decision-making process. Instead they represent a set of important insights to reframe how we think about local elections and how voters go about preparing to participate in them.

Figure 1: Demographic breakdown of interview participants



Building on these insights, ideas42 and Democracy Works then designed a series of text message reminders based on these findings and sent the messages to TurboVote users across our target cities in the 2021 municipal primary and general elections. In each election users were randomly assigned to receive either TurboVote’s standard election reminders or the standard reminders in addition to a behaviorally informed message. We iterated on message design throughout the election cycle as we interviewed additional voters and gathered preliminary data. When final voter file data becomes available in early 2022, we will assess the impact of these messages on voter behavior. ***In total we sent 85,424 behaviorally informed messages across the cities.***

»» COMMON BARRIERS TO VOTING IN A LOCAL ELECTION

The following sections highlight four common barriers to voting in a local election. The barriers reflect **recurring themes** from our conversations, previous work, and secondary research. They are not meant to be wholly representative of every voters' experience or decision-making process. Instead, they represent a set of **important insights to reframe** how we think about local elections and how voters go about preparing to participate in them.



People **do not feel prepared enough** to participate in local elections.



The **consequences** of making the wrong decision feel worse than not voting.



People **lack a strong connection** to the place where they currently live.



People **are skeptical** that candidates will represent their needs or follow through on their promises.



People do not feel prepared enough to participate in local elections

What's the problem?

At the most basic level, to participate in a local election a voter typically has to 1) know an election is happening, 2) have a general sense of what's on their ballot, 3) decide what choices to make, and 4) vote. While voters may navigate the steps in various order and depth (if at all), across our cities of focus a shared sentiment emerged among the people we interviewed: few feel prepared enough to vote.

This perceived preparedness gap leads voters to get stuck or drop-off completely on the path to casting a ballot. As one New Yorker confirmed, "I wouldn't vote at all if I was unsure." When voters are not confident in their sense of readiness, they fail to proceed past their own internal checkpoints, and ultimately do not vote. While preparedness may be a barrier to voting in many elections, our research indicates the gap feels particularly prominent in this context. Many voters we spoke with reported feeling comparatively less prepared for a local race, noting that it was harder and more involved to reach their own standard for preparedness than it would be in a federal election.

“ Ironically, I have to dedicate more time to local representation than presidential. The media is so repetitive about the presidential, it's not necessary for me to look it up. But when it comes to the local, not only do I not have information on the date, I have no idea who the people are, so I have to do more research to find out who they are.”

— Boston resident

“ [For] President it's much more long term and less specific. I am always getting information about it, whereas the local elections in Richmond, it would be much more specific in the moment “let me sit down to check out what's happening and what decisions are being made.”

— Richmond resident

Why do so many feel so unprepared?

To understand the gap in voters' sense of preparedness we can look at how voters typically gather information for elections and the limitations of the local election information ecosystem. Research shows that consistent voters are more likely to actively seek out news and information about politics when compared with less frequent or nonvoters, who often “bump into” the information over the course of their days.⁵ Among the voters interviewed for this study, the plurality of whom

vote regularly only in presidential races, many noted how, despite their habitual news consumption, few heard about local candidates or elections in the media. A New Orleans voter noted that “the local [elections] are under the radar, but with national news you get a sense of who is doing the right thing just by what you hear on the news.”



Reference dependent preference

shaped by comparisons to an established reference point, such a past state, social comparison, or the status quo.

While few voters articulated a concrete or measurable benchmark for what it means to be prepared, it is likely that many are using personal experience, such as how informed they felt voting in the most recent presidential election, as a benchmark. We refer to this as a **reference dependent preference**. Instead of defining the amount of preparation or knowledge in absolute terms, voters’ evaluation of their current preparedness instead rests on how prepared they felt in a recent similar situation—their reference point.⁶ Voters feel underprepared in comparison to how prepared they feel in a typical presidential election. In local races they are less likely to absorb information about the election through traditional news and social media they are already accessing. In contrast, during a presidential race, messages about the candidates and election are much more likely to be integrated in people’s day to day lives without them even realizing it. Even before voters actively decide to look for information about an election, they are starting out much more informed about a presidential race, and thus the remaining information gap often feels smaller and more manageable compared to a local race.

“**The local [elections] are under the radar, but with national news you get a sense of who is doing the right thing just by what you hear on the news. You are going to hear about what’s going on with the House or president, but you don’t hear about what council members are doing. ... With the [local races] I felt like I can’t go there and just pick someone, I had to do my research. I feel like I am a novice, I have to go out and find information to feel like I am being responsible.**”

— New Orleans resident

The relative ease with which voters passively gather information for federal elections stands in sharp contrast with the active effort involved in preparing for a local election. When voters do decide to seek out information for local races, they can struggle to find useful and reliable information. A voter from Boston notes that “with presidential and state elections, the news kind of comes to me. So much information from so many different sources...With local elections I don’t have [sources] who can easily tell me what Michelle Wu’s policies are.”

Digging deeper into typical news consumption habits across the country helps to explain these feelings. According to Pew, only 31% of Americans follow local news “very closely,” driven largely by older consumers who are almost three times as likely to follow local news closely compared to

those age 18-29.⁷ These trends correlate with a broader decline in local news' availability across the country—roughly 1,800 local papers have disappeared in the last two decades⁸ and newsroom staffs have shrunk by more than a quarter in the last decade.⁹ Researchers note that in the absence of local news sources, residents turn to increasingly national sources that simply do not attend to local issues or races, which can negatively impact resident engagement and voter turnout.¹⁰ Behavioral science research shows us that even seemingly small hurdles, like having to try multiple different search terms before landing on helpful results, can be enough to deter people from following through on their intention to learn about a local election.



Hassle factors

seemingly minor inconveniences that can have a disproportionate impact on our likelihood of following through with our intentions.

What are the implications and opportunities?

Voter's lack of preparedness is a barrier not only to increasing turnout *in general*, but specifically for increasing the representativeness of those who vote. Preliminary evidence suggests that individuals from traditionally marginalized groups may feel particularly unprepared to vote as a conscious or subconscious reaction to general societal prejudices. Our research in the leadup to the 2020 election found that under-preparedness looms particularly large for many members of the Latinx community,¹¹ and the Knight Foundation reports that women are more likely than men to report not having enough information to decide who to vote for.¹² This “high bar” for preparedness is similar to the viral anecdote that men are more likely to apply to jobs they may not be wholly qualified for, while women only apply if they meet 100% of qualifications.¹³ Without a shared understanding of what it means to be “prepared” or “qualified,” inequities are amplified. Traditionally oppressed groups may be more likely to hold themselves to ill-defined or higher standard of preparedness and preemptively abstain from voting, resulting in additional distortions in power that benefit white, wealthy communities. Together, ***we must establish a common framework for what it means to be prepared to vote*** that focuses on easy to accomplish benchmarks, such as spending five minutes reviewing a sample ballot, and then make it easy for people to meet those standards.

In tandem, ***we must amplify information about local elections through channels that people already consume.*** While simply inundating individuals with more information, like dense voter guides, may be helpful for some, it risks confirming people's preconceptions that they do not know enough, sets the knowledge bar unattainable high, and implies that it would take significant work to reach a satisfactory level of preparedness. By integrating local election information into channels voters already consume, voters can absorb more information passively and feel more prepared at a baseline than they currently do.



INSIGHTS IN ACTION:

Closing the preparedness gap

Our message testing with TurboVote in Boston's primary election is just one example of work that can be done to close this preparedness gap. Our messages highlighted voters' hesitations about their own knowledge and corrected misperceptions that they are alone in these feelings. We followed up this norming language with an accessible link to a succinct summary of the choices voters would face on their ballot and encouraged voters to share it with their social networks.

Hey Charles! This is Esha with TurboVote. Still not sure who you'll vote for in Boston's elections next Tues? You're not alone! Here's a refresher on where the candidates stand on the issues. Check it out and share it with your friends and family to help them feel confident about their choices too!
<https://tvote.org/3A4hUHA> Find where to vote on Tuesday at <https://tvote.org/GTTP>

¡Hola Gaby! Soy Esha de TurboVote. ¿Todavía no estas seguro de por quien votar en las elecciones de Boston el proximo martes? ¡No estas solo! Aqui hay un repaso sobre la posicion de los candidatos en los diferentes temas. ¡Revisalo y compartelo con tus amigos y familiares para ayudarlos a sentirse seguros de sus opciones tambien!
<https://tvote.org/3A4hUHA>

Encuentra donde votar el martes en <https://tvote.org/GTTP>



The consequences of making the wrong decision feel worse than not voting

What's the problem?

Typical narratives about local elections are quick to ascribe low turnout to voter apathy. Many believe people simply cannot be bothered to go out to vote for the “less important” local races. In our work with voters, however, we found that contrary to popular belief, many have a strong intuitive sense that local elections do matter and can have a direct impact on their daily lives. Almost all of interviewees mentioned at least one issue that they felt passionate about that could be influenced by city officials, including housing, police reform, education access, road maintenance, gentrification, community development, and more.

Despite their baseline understanding of the stakes of local elections for issues they are passionate about, voters reported still deciding not to vote regularly in these races. Interviewees across the cities we targeted reported that it was **because the stakes of elections were so high** that they chose not to vote. For many, the risk of making the wrong choice for their community at the ballot box felt greater than the consequences of abstaining from voting altogether. One Atlanta voter summed it when saying, “it has a more direct impact [than federal elections], and you don’t know if you’ve led the snake into the garden. You like the wrong politician, and suddenly your waters are polluted.”

Why does the problem exist?

For many across the country, the right to vote is held in particularly high esteem. This is especially true among those from marginalized communities who have had to fight against exclusionary laws and practices. According to Pew Research, Americans that identify as Black, Hispanic, and Asian are all significantly more likely than white Americans to cite voting as a “fundamental right.”¹⁴ Given the reverence many have towards the right to vote, it can feel daunting to live up the responsibility it entails.

“ I’d have to do more research. It’s definitely not something you want to walk into halfcocked so I’d need a lot more research in that regard. Lots of people in the city vote based on name recognition and I don’t ever want to be one of those people so I’d have to be a little bit more informed before I vote...I definitely wouldn’t go on name recognition as that’s never worked in this city. I’d want to vote for someone who has done some grassroots work, has experience in politics, and a track record of trying to fix things.”

— Detroit resident

As discussed above, local elections can make the preparation process particularly onerous, amplifying peoples’ feelings that they are falling short on their duty. What’s more, local races can lack the cues many traditionally turn to to understand which candidates better reflect their views. According to the National League of Cities, a majority of municipalities in the US conduct nonpartisan elections, meaning candidates’ party affiliations are not listed on the ballot.¹⁵ Nonpartisan races may have certain advantages, such as increasing the competitiveness of general elections in cities where one party dominates at the ballot box.¹⁶ In practice, however, the lack of party labels can lead to confusion among voters and although more research is needed, evidence suggests that these nonpartisan races may also lead to a decline in voter turnout.¹⁷

“ You can get caught up in the grandeur of the federal elections, you can hop on any app or news channel and it’ll be there. The local elections are more important, but you really need to look for information more directly. I don’t think people take the time to get that deep into local elections, because it takes too much time. You don’t notice the snake getting into the garden because you’re too busy looking up at the sky.”

— Atlanta resident

Regardless of the type of election, voters across the cities we researched nonetheless report a difficult time distinguishing between candidates that are running for local office. For local races in particular this inability to differentiate between candidates can increase the risk of choosing “incorrectly.” Voters may be less familiar with local candidates and as a result may perceive them to be less thoroughly vetted than candidates for major federal offices. Building off of his earlier comment, the Atlanta voter quoted above mentioned that while “local elections are more important,” it’s the federal races that capture his attention, leaving gaps in his understanding. He expressed the sentiment poetically, saying “you don’t notice the snake getting into the garden because you’re too busy looking up at the sky.”

Behavioral science can help us understand how voters weigh the relative risk of deciding who to vote for or whether to vote at all. In this case, many voters are displaying **zero risk bias**, or the preference to choose the absolute certainty of not supporting a “bad” candidate by not voting at all, over accepting some risk by voting for any candidate, even if voting can help diminish overall risk of a negative outcome for their community, such as decreased representation.¹⁸ This decision-making bias is tied closely to **regret aversion**, where we make a decision now (to not vote) to avoid future regret over an alternate decision (voting incorrectly).¹⁹ In this case there is no parallel regret for having not supported a winning candidate to balance out the decision-making calculus.



Zero risk bias

Our tendency to look for situations where we can completely eliminate risk, even if there are other options that may actually reduce overall risk



Regret aversion

when we decide based on our desire to avoid regret in the future

For some, the consequences of these incorrect choices are particularly fraught. Vulnerable communities in particular often bear the consequences of poor municipal leadership more immediately and severely than higher income residents. Low- and moderate-income residents tend to rely most heavily on functioning city services, like public transit and clean public green space, and do not often have the luxury of turning to private backyards or vehicles when provisions of these services falter under new leadership. A young New Yorker reported, “if we vote for them, we get the blame. I’d feel taken advantage of or embarrassed for voting for someone who didn’t take care of their community.” For many, especially in cities with a history of corruption or dysfunctional city leadership, like in Atlanta, Detroit, and countless other cities, it may feel safest just to stay home rather than have a part in electing the next infamous “bad guy” politician.

What are the implications and opportunities?

This “do no harm” apprehension among voters is a particularly challenging barrier to overcome, especially through light-touch channels, like text message outreach. However, this barrier reveals the potential unintended consequences of current approaches. For example, the National Civic League suggests “making the case for the impact of local elections” as one strategy to improve turnout.²⁰ While an important strategy, program designers must be cognizant of **the potential backfire effect of making the stakes of local elections seem too high** without giving voters the tools to effectively vet candidates. Emphasizing the consequences has the potential to prompt these concerns of making the incorrect decision and can inadvertently demotivate some participants. Instead, by making easy-to-digest information more widely available and accessible, we can help more potential voters feel confident in their decision of who to vote for to further their interests.



INSIGHTS IN ACTION:

Vetting the candidates

In the New York City primary, where voters were asked to choose between more than ten candidates in the Democratic primary, we tested messages that linked voters to easy to digest endorsements. Endorsements from trusted organizations can help voters vet candidates and gather signals about their quality from trusted sources.

Hi Jenny it's TurboVote. Tuesday 6/22 is the last day to vote in NYC's election. Still deciding who to vote for? Did you know many candidates are 'endorsed' by well-known orgs? This means the candidate is their top pick. Visit Ballotpedia to see who endorsed the mayoral candidates here: <https://tvote.org/3wzEcPI> and find out what other offices are on your ballot here: <https://tvote.org/2Gtm0kC>

Find where to vote: <https://tvote.org/GTTP>
Questions? Reply to this text.

Hola {recipient_first_name}, soy TurboVote. El martes 22 de junio es el ultimo dia para votar en las elecciones de Nueva York. ¿Aun no ha decidido por quien votar? ¿Sabia que muchos candidatos estan 'respaldados' por organizaciones conocidas? Esto significa que dicho candidato es su principal eleccion. Visite 'Ballotpedia' para ver quien respaldo al candidato a la alcaldia aqui: <https://tvote.org/3wzEcPI> y descubra que otros puestos publicos estan en su boleta aqui: <https://tvote.org/2Gtm0kC>

Encuentra tu lugar de votacion:
<https://tvote.org/GTTP>
¿Preguntas? Solo responde.



People lack a strong connection to the place where they currently live

What's the problem?

At first glance, local elections look quite similar to federal or state elections, only smaller in scale. However, for many voters they require a fundamentally different calculus. Our research suggests that people's sense of community and connection to where they live can have an outsized impact on how they approach local elections. Those who lack a sense of connection may question whether they belong or deserve to participate in local elections, despite being regular presidential voters. For some, including many of the voters we spoke with, these feelings are strong enough to stop them from voting.

Why does the problem exist?

Many Americans have strong preconceived notions of who the “typical” voter is. The first image most people conjure is of an older, white, and wealthy individual. In local elections in particular this characterization is unfortunately partially grounded in fact—according to Portland State University researchers, older voters were **fifteen times more likely** to vote than those under 35 years old.²¹ Research across contexts confirms that when we aren't sure how to act we look to what others like us are doing, called descriptive social norms. In this case so many young voters and voters of color do not see people like themselves out and voting in local elections, so they follow the example and stay home.

Although stereotypes about who votes are common in all elections, they can be particularly pernicious in the context of local races. Many residents lack lived experience with some of the most common issues central to local races (e.g., public schooling, zoning, property taxes, etc.) and may not feel it is their place to weigh in. Residents who are new to the area or who aren't homeowners or parents may feel like they haven't earned a say or struggle to weigh the consequences of their vote in local races. A New Orleans resident we spoke with mentioned, “people who have lived here their whole lives, they have a better feel for [local politics] and what they are looking for.”

These sentiments reflect the nature of local government. A fiscal analysis from the Urban Institute reports that property taxes account for 30% of local revenue²² (the most common source outside of transfers from other levels of government), and the plurality of spending is concentrated in education (over 40%).²³ In contrast to these dominating issues, the stakes of federal elections often feel more diffuse, a feeling that is backed by data that shows no single spending category accounts for more than a quarter of the federal budget.²⁴ Because no single issue dominates

“**Definitely people who have been here a long time, more suburban types- parents who might see a more direct impact or have a better understanding of the direct impact on children or education. I’m picturing long term residents that are usually older.**”
— Richmond resident

“**People who serve the community: teachers, sanitary workers, have more exposure to people and the inner workings of the city and community. Their votes should be heavier than mine. The way I think, the way I interact with the community, is not like parents do.**”
— Atlanta resident

“**I mean theoretically everyone’s vote should count the same, but I feel like people who have lived here longer than I have and are more involved in the community should have... I don’t know...That would be [who] I would give more weight to.**”
— New Orleans resident

budgets or debates in federal races year after year, it is easier for a more diverse set of voters to find a way in through issues they have a personal stake in. In local races, however, some voters end up abstaining because they are hesitant to add their two cents to issues that others’ have a stronger claim over or because vocal gatekeepers make them feel as if they do not belong or deserve to participate. The voters we spoke with shared these feelings across cities, however, it is difficult to assess the causal impact. It’s possible some are simply using these feelings to license or justify their lack of participation.

Patterns in mobility can also help explain increased apprehension about participating in local elections. According to the US Census, the average person moves an estimated 11.7 times in their lifetime.²⁵ While most moves are within 50 miles, moving can nonetheless disrupt civic participation. Movers not only have to contend with getting themselves registered at their new address, but may also have to familiarize themselves with a new set of local issues or elected officials, barriers that do not exist when voting for president. The problem is particularly pronounced for young people: adults 18-24 are 3.75 times as likely to move in any given year compared with those over 40,²⁶ and half of all movers are in their twenties.²⁷ New residents are often less connected to their community, have fewer lived experiences of local services, and have had less time to pick up on local issues. Some may even feel like home is somewhere other than where they live. A young Atlanta voter we spoke with mentioned feeling disconnected from the city’s politics, “I like Augusta politics more than Atlanta politics because it’s easier for me to engage. I’m way more plugged into Augusta politics. My family has been living there for 50+ years.”

Mobility is also key to understanding the development of social networks and how people define their community. Although geography is still a critical factor in social network formation, the influence of technology and social media has made it increasingly likely that our friends do not live nearby in the same town or city. When combined with the nationalization of political news, it is less

likely that people are discussing and participating in local elections with their friends and family, even if they do regularly discuss politics in general. One Richmond voter summed it up when she reported, “I regularly talk to my friends and family about politics. [I don’t talk] so much about Richmond-specific things, but we talk about Virginia things.” This geographic isolation contributes to the low salience of local elections, making it much easier for these elections to fall off residents’ radars completely. While the 2020 election saw a boom in friend-to-friend voter mobilization, a highly effective turnout tactic that keeps elections top of mind and socially relevant, the same level of activity is unlikely in local elections when voters’ social networks are less likely to overlap neatly with the pool of eligible voters.

What are the implications and opportunities?

The idiosyncrasies of local elections make it hard for everyone to feel comfortable participating. At first glance the smaller scale and “local-ness” of these races make them feel like a better introduction to civic engagement than “high stakes” federal elections. However, our research upends this assumption and shows that despite their proximity, local elections feel more difficult to engage in for many residents. The people we spoke with reported greater barriers to entry to engaging with local elections when compared to presidential elections, despite the processes being similar on paper. When they try to engage, residents absorb messages that they do not belong or are not welcome to participate. This happens subconsciously when they struggle to find materials that discuss the stakes of elections in their vocabulary or do not see people like themselves participating and consciously through efforts to pass restrictive voting laws or privilege the voices of certain residents over others.

These feelings create a self-perpetuating cycle. Voters don’t see people like them voting or featured in local coverage, so they choose not to participate, leading to further distortions in turnout statistics. To solve this problem, **voter outreach messages should affirm people’s belonging in local spaces and welcome their participation in local elections.** In addition, **we can make the social norm of participating in local elections more salient** and prompt residents to turn to micro influencers within their social networks that may be particularly tapped into the issues.



INSIGHTS IN ACTION:

Belonging in local elections

In New Orleans' primary election, we confronted new residents' hesitations around voting in local elections directly. We welcomed message recipients to participate, regardless of how long they'd lived in New Orleans and directed them to a resource to prepare themselves.

Hi Tom this is Ciru with TurboVote!
Whether you have lived in New Orleans a short time or a lifetime, this is your city. It's time to vote for who represents it. Take a few minutes to review your sample ballot and then go vote on Saturday: <https://voterportal.sos.la.gov/Home/VoterLogin>

Hola, Rosa soy Ciru de TurboVote. Ya sea que hayas vivido en Nueva Orleans por poco tiempo o toda tu vida, esta es tu ciudad. Es hora de votar por quien la representara. Tomate unos minutos para revisar tu boleta de muestra y luego ve a votar el sabado: <https://voterportal.sos.la.gov/Home/VoterLogin>

In Detroit's primary election, we hoped to leverage positive social pressure. The message prompted recipients to reach out to their friends and family and encourage them to vote together as a show of solidarity for the community.

Hi Beth, it's Esha from TurboVote. Detroit primary elections for Mayor and City Council are happening this Tuesday! When we vote, we vote for our friends, family, and community. Why vote alone? Text a friend to make a plan to vote together for your community! Find where to vote on Tuesday at <https://tvote.org/GTTP>

Hola Eva, soy Esha de TurboVote. ¡Las elecciones primarias de Detroit para alcalde y Concejo Municipal seran este martes! Cuando votamos, votamos por nuestros amigos, familia y comunidad. ¿Por qué votar solo? Envía un mensaje de texto a un amigo para hacer un plan y votar juntos por tu comunidad. Encuentra donde votar el martes en <https://tvote.org/GTTP>

In the general election we reached back out to voters across a number of our cities and prompted them to reach out to the micro-influencers in their lives. Everyone has a friend that seems to be in the know, and we encouraged recipients to start a conversation about the upcoming election with that person.

Hi Sean! This is Ciru with TurboVote. Do you have friends or family that really ***KNOW*** <city>? What are they saying about the candidates running to represent your community on Nov 2nd? You can always search the candidates' names to hear directly from them or check out your sample ballot here: <link>

¡Hola, Daniela! Soy Ciru de TurboVote. ¿Tienes amigos o familiares que realmente ***CONOCEN*** Richmond ¿Qué están diciendo sobre los candidatos que se postulan para representar a tu comunidad el 2 de noviembre? Siempre puedes buscar los nombres de los candidatos para escuchar directamente de ellos o consultar tu boleta de muestra aquí: <link>

Voters in Georgia had an eventful year in 2021. To encourage residents to participate in the November city elections, our messages called back the excitement and collective action of the Senate Runoffs earlier in the year. The messages prompted folks to focus on the prominent social norm of high turnout and carry similar energy into the local election.

Hi Alex! This is Ciru with TurboVote. The whole world watched Georgia make history this year. It's time for Atlanta voters to flex that power again on Tues, Nov. 2 in local elections for Mayor and City Council. Check out your sample ballot here as you make your plan to vote:
<https://tvote.org/3BpEASD>

Hola Anna! Soy Ciru de TurboVote. El mundo entero vio a Georgia hacer historia este año. Es hora de que los votantes de Atlanta ejerzan ese poder nuevamente el martes 2 de noviembre en las elecciones locales para alcalde y concejo municipal. Consulta tu boleta de muestra aquí conforme realizas un plan para votar:
<https://tvote.org/3BpEASD>



People are skeptical that candidates will represent their needs or follow through on their promises

What's the problem?

Voters do not make decisions about whether or not to vote in a vacuum come election time. Instead, their choice is influenced heavily by what they have seen, heard, and experienced over the course of a longer time horizon when it comes to assessing how the current local government is performing. Despite Americans' growing distrust of Congress and frustration with national political figures, local officials continue to benefit from high public trust. According to Gallup, almost three quarters of Americans have a great deal or fair amount of trust in their local government, significantly more than the trust they have for state or federal officials.²⁸

Despite these high levels of trust in local officials, the voters we spoke with had a natural skepticism towards candidates for local office. Many voters did not see themselves represented by the candidates and questioned whether elected officials would adequately follow through on their campaign promises. These doubts, reinforced by previous disappointments, led some to conclude that voting wouldn't be worth their time.

“ If people are making any changes it's because of grassroots efforts. City hall doesn't care what happens in the neighborhoods. They just care about downtown and fixing up downtown and trying to get the tourists in.”

— Detroit resident

“ I feel like a lot of candidates will sell you a story but when they actually get in the office, they don't do what they say they're going to do. I want to have somebody in office that's going to create change, but in the back of my mind [I know that] they sell you the dream.”

— Atlanta resident

Why does the problem exist?

Skepticism towards elected officials is as American as apple pie, even at the local election where trust in government remains high. **Negativity bias** can help us understand why the bad outcomes or scandal-prone politicians are more prominent in our minds and easier to recall than political victories or positive changes we've seen in our community. As part of our survival skills, our brains are hardwired to recognize, imprint, and remember these



Negativity bias

Our tendency to recognize and dwell on negative occurrences more easily than positive ones.

negative experiences more easily than positive ones.²⁹ It helped our pre-historic ancestors avoid a run in with a dangerous predator, but in modern times it means we're much more likely to fixate on the broken water fountain in the park instead of the new playground that was just unveiled. This tendency to overlook positive changes in favor of the negative does not mean that residents do not also have legitimate criticisms to levy at local government officials. Communities of color, in particular, are often neglected by politicians and fail to see similar levels of investment or attention as white neighborhoods.³⁰ This can lead to a pattern of further disenchantment and ultimately lead some to disengage entirely.



Descriptive vs. substantive representation

Descriptive representation refers to lawmakers' identities, such as their gender or race. Substantive representation refers to lawmakers' actions and beliefs.

Many feel that those in power simply do not represent them or their needs. Officials at all levels remain older, whiter, richer, and more male than the country as a whole. While data tracking at the local level is difficult, looking across the country, the National Council on State Legislatures reports that only 28.9% of state lawmakers are women, 8.8% are Black, 6.2% Hispanic/Latinx, and 1.8% Asian.³¹ However, in many cities women and BIPOC candidates have won historic victories, including in this most recent local election cycle. Boston elected Michelle Wu its first woman and Asian-American as mayor, and New York City elected Alvin Bragg, its first Black person as District Attorney, among other historic wins.³² Despite these gains in descriptive representation, many residents still feel like their local governments do not represent their substantive interests. One Atlanta voter affirmed that, “[politicians] can be Black but if they don’t do anything to facilitate resources to folks of color then they don’t represent my best interest.” Because voters do not feel that the candidates running for office represent their needs, they express a desire to impose a higher degree of scrutiny of candidates’ platforms and positions. Many reported wanting to see a track record of action in addition to candidates’ campaign pledges. The voter from Atlanta continued, “you got to see what the candidates do. They can talk that good talk, sell you those sweet nothings.” Because high quality information on local elections can be difficult to track down, as discussed earlier, some voters may never reach the point of feeling ready to vote.

What are the implications and opportunities?

If unchecked, healthy skepticism of politicians can easily become toxic cynicism that leads residents towards a self-perpetuating cycle of disengagement. If people fail to see their interests or values represented in the candidates running and actions taken by local officials, they will not vote, all but ensuring that future candidates do not cater to or represent their needs. Truly addressing this problem requires multifaceted solutions, many of which are outside of the scope of light touch voter outreach platforms like TurboVote, such as diversifying the pipeline of candidates that are recruited to run for local office. However, **voter outreach organizations can shine a light on**

the important victories won by residents as a result of recent elections, such as construction on a new public building or investment in a new social program. Making these victories more salient can help counteract our negativity bias and break the cycle of disengagement. Where public victories are less available, messages can highlight positive trends in representation among voters and elected officials.



INSIGHTS IN ACTION:


Representation among candidates

Despite the limitations of representation-in-name-only, our messages in the Detroit primary election highlighted the diverse slate of candidates running for mayor. Our message increased the salience of the mayoral primary and connected recipients to have quality information to prepare for the election.

Hi Liana it's Esha from TurboVote. Did you know candidates running for mayor of Detroit range in age from their 20s to 70s? Diverse perspectives are on the ballot. Find (and help elect) the candidate that best represents you at <https://tvote.org/31la7k6> And find where to vote on Tuesday at <https://tvote.org/GTTP>

Hola Julia soy Esha de TurboVote. ¿Sabias que los candidatos a la alcaldia de Detroit tienen entre veinte y setenta años? Hay diversas perspectivas en la boleta ¡Encuentra (y ayuda a elegir) al candidato que mejor te represente! <https://tvote.org/31la7k6> Y encuentra donde votar el martes en <https://tvote.org/GTTP>

What's next for local elections?

 ur democracy is a precarious state. The rights of voters are being dismantled by state legislators at an alarming rate in response to false claims of election insecurity. The restrictive laws being introduced around the country do little to actually protect our elections. Instead, they effectively make voting more onerous and less accessible, especially for voters of color – exacerbating many of the issues we surfaced in our interviews over the past year.

Furthermore, the political environment is becoming increasingly hostile and unproductive, leaving many voters with a sense of hopelessness. While these fissures are most acute at the federal level, national politics are quickly seeping into local races, obscuring the policies that should be the focus of municipal elections. This disconnect with local needs and communities will only further the sense of alienation voters feel with politics in their area.

These issues deepen the need for reimagining how we understand and approach voters during local elections. The insights we generated through our work in 2021 provide a useful foundation toward that goal. However, we should continue to identify ways to effectively overcome the barriers that disproportionately impact voters' engagement with local races.

We offered a few approaches to addressing those barriers through light-touch communications, but we only scratched the surface. We encourage organizations that work closely with communities on voter turnout to examine how the tools at their disposal could be used to mitigate the impact of the barriers we've highlighted. A consistent and concerted effort to lower these obstacles is the best way to sustainably increase turnout in local elections.

ideas42 and Democracy Works will continue to research participation at the local level so we can better support voters and increase representation in these low salience races. Perhaps more than ever, greater participation in *all* elections is what our country needs. A vibrant electorate will be a vote against those trying to suppress the voice of the people and a much needed vote of confidence in our democracy.



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