Political Participation in American Large City Mayor Elections

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Abstract

Voter turnout statistics in elections across the United States reveal that political participation is too low. The United States Constitution was designed in a way to give the American people effective, elected representation at multiple levels. This can only be fulfilled if people actually turn out to vote. This study seeks to explain political participation at the city level. In city level politics, turnout numbers are even lower than at the state or federal levels. Studies have shown that the average voter turnout in local elections across the country is only at 27% and is falling every year. Using large cities of over 200,000 people as the unit of analysis, my study explains political turnout in terms of demographics, political culture, and institutions.

The demographic variables I used were race, income, and education. Of these, only income and education were found to have a significant relationship with voter turnout. Interestingly, income had a strong negative relationship, though I hypothesized a positive one and the literature suggested a positive one. For political culture, I found that cities with a more liberal ideology had higher turnout numbers. I also examined the North-South cultural divide and found that cities in the North have higher turnout. None of the institutional variables studied were found significant. This study found that demographics and political culture had some explanatory power when looking at voter turnout variation, which was contrary to previous studies showing no relation between city-wide demographic factors and turnout.

Introduction

In the American political system, a problem has emerged when looking at data concerning voter turnout. Voter turnout is low. This is especially true of mayoral and city council elections. In doing a study of mayoral elections of the largest cities in the United States over the last twenty-five years, it was found that average voter turnout was only 27% and that number was decreasing from year to year (Caren 2007). Even though a vote in a local election has more mathematical weight than in a state or national election and, arguably, local politics has a greater effect on day-to-day life, the public does not turn out to vote in nearly the same numbers.

Why is low turnout in local elections a problem? Political participation is a core principle of democracy. The United States Constitution was designed in a way to give the American people effective, elected representation at multiple levels. The system is also designed to have democracy at the state and local level. State and local governments are in fact designed to give the population more democratic representation than the national government. When only a small portion of the population is bothering to fulfill their civic duty, representation cannot reach a level of effectiveness that is satisfactory to the democratic ideals put forth in the Constitution.

Though participation in local elections is generally low in all cities all over the country, there is much variance from city to city. Cities such as Chicago or Philadelphia have relatively high turnout for local elections, while turnout can be in the single digits in other areas. This paper will seek to explain some of the causal factors that contribute to the variance in voter turnout in local elections.

A term that needs to be defined for this paper is local election. For the purpose of this study, I will look at the mayoral races of American cities. The mayor acts as the executive of a city and local politics. Elections for this office are fairly standardized across the country, whereas

there are great differences in how elections for city councils or assemblies work. For those reasons, only elections in which the office of the mayor was on the ballot will be used for this study.

Another definition needed is the criteria for the size of the city. This paper will examine the voting behavior of voters in cities with a population of greater than 200,000. These cities are chosen for the study because of their diversity and because of their relative importance. Voting records of smaller cities are more spurious, so they are not adequate for this study.

Voter turnout will be examined by looking at the effects of three different kinds of variables. Demographics, institutional, and political culture variables will be used in the study. By looking at the effects on turnout of all three kinds of variables and establishing a causal relationship, this study will look to provide a greater understanding of the variance in voter turnout in American cities.

Demographic Factors

In the literature concerning relationship between blacks and voter turnout, there has not been a consensus reached among the scholars on the direction of the relationship. Many agree that socioeconomic status correlates high with likelihood to vote (e.g. Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosentone and Hansen 1992). It has been shown that at the national level, blacks are more likely to vote at a higher rate than what their socioeconomic status would indicate (Murray and Vedlitz 1977). In the study done by Murray and Vedlitz, they indicated that voting participation in the south showed the impact of race on turnout. In the study, black voters were more likely to vote than their white counterparts of the same economic status. Another study indicated that

differences in the socioeconomic status between blacks and whites were a greater indicator of voting than race in general (Campbell and Kaufman 2006).

This idea of black voters turning out should be seen in local elections. Whereas national politics is dominated by economic and foreign policy issues, local levels are more focused on racial and ethnic issues in the community (Lieske and Hillard 1984). When deciding whether or not to vote, issues affecting their community are shown to be more important to minority groups than other social or economic issues which often influence elections (Murray and Vedlitz 1977).

Prior work has shown that cities more divided by social cleavages tend to have larger turnout (Alford and Lee 1968). The idea behind this is that when there is class conflict or deep divides over race, the populace will be more motivated to participate in order to elect candidates more sympathetic to their own social strata.

If it is indeed true that social cleavages will draw in more voters, then ethnic diversity in an area should draw voters. Building on the prior works of Lieske and Hillard (1984) and Alford and Lee (1968), I formulate the following hypothesis concerning black population and voter turnout:

H1: Cities with greater black population will have higher voter turnout

This hypothesis will be the most contentious as there are previous studies that indicate black people (or any other minority group) vote less than whites (e.g. Hajnal and Baldassare 2001; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Whether or not this is true, I hypothesize that a higher black population stimulates higher turnout. I do not believe that high turnout in areas with more black people is contrary to studies like Hajnal and Baldassare (2001). However, unlike that study, this study does not use the individual as the level of analysis, but rather the population of the city as a whole. High black population is shown to be a motivating factor for white voters to

get out and vote (Alford and Lee 1968), thus leading to the higher turnout being hypothesized here.

Another issue apart from race that has shown to be salient when it comes to voter turnout is socioeconomic status. Prior research indicates that those of a higher economic status are more likely to vote than those of a lower status. A study has shown that in the American political system, the median socioeconomic status of people who vote has skewed to be higher than the median of the populace as a whole (Freeman 2004). Similarly, the work of Rosenstone and Hansen has shown that the majority of voters are from a relatively high socioeconomic class (1992). Past work has shown that places with higher income voters can expect to see higher turnout numbers in presidential elections (Leighley and Nagler 1992) as well as in congressional mid-term elections (Goidel and Shields 1997). As stated before, many studies have shown that the average voter is of a higher socioeconomic class than the average citizen (e.g. Freeman 2004). These previous studies form the foundation of the second hypothesis being tested:

H2: Cities with higher per capita income will have higher voter turnout.

Most previous studies have shown that private wealth and resources increases likelihood to vote at the individual level, this study will look at the effects at a broader level. Cities with more wealth will have more access to information on candidates and their campaigns which will lead to an increase in participation.

The last demographic variable being tested is level of education in the city. Many studies have been done regarding the effects of education on voter turnout. Studies show that more educated voters are more likely to vote (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Nagler 2001). Robert A. Jackson finds that the reasons for this can be broken down into four prominent explanations:

education increases a person's sense of civic duty, education increases sense of political efficacy, education makes registration easier, and education enhances political awareness (Jackson 1995).

These studies build a comprehensive theory that higher education levels in individuals make them more likely to vote. This leads to my third hypothesis:

H3: Cities with higher education levels will have higher voter turnout.

If individuals are more likely to vote if they are highly educated, I hypothesize that this can be transposed onto the general population. This leads to cities with higher levels of education having higher levels of political participation.

Institutional Factors

The second type of variables that I will examine are institutional factors. These include the form of government and method of elections. The three different institutional variables I will look at are incumbency, ballot form, and form of government.

Much work has been done on the incumbency advantage in national and state politics. The incumbency advantage makes it difficult for majorities in state legislatures to shift because the voters are less likely to mobilize when there are strong incumbents in the seats (Ansolabahere and Gerber 1997). The incumbency advantage is a well established phenomenon and has shown to grow over time (Cox and Morgenstern 1993).

It does not appear that local elections are able to set themselves apart from the incumbency advantage. Unless some sort of scandal or city-wide crisis (economic, natural disaster, etc.) happens to lower public opinion of a mayor, mayors tend to face less opposition as time goes on. The longer a mayor is in office, the lower the turnout for mayoral elections becomes (Morlan 1984). In a comparative basis across cities, we can expect that incumbent

mayors decrease participation in mayoral elections. This could also be an extension of the feeling that voters are more likely to vote in close races and less likely to vote in landslides (e.g. Berch 1993). Because of the incumbency advantage, races with incumbents are not viewed as being as close or the voters are satisfied with the status quo and do not seek change. Combining the idea of the incumbency advantage with the idea that closeness of race leads to high turnout, it seems to follow that incumbents, particularly popular ones, would lower turnout because the races are not expected to be as close (Berch 1993). This leads to the fourth hypotheses:

H4: Incumbent candidates in mayoral elections lower voter turnout.

Much attention in the literature has been given to the progressive era reform of non-partisan ballots being used and its effect on the voting public. Earlier studies have shown that non-partisan ballots tend to decrease voter turnout (Lee 1960). The reasons for this vary. Some have theorized that non-partisan elections are simply less exciting than partisan battles (Lee 1960). Parties seem to be less willing to mobilize the electorate when the election is on a non-partisan ballot (Schaffner et al 2001). This may lead to a big decrease in turnout because parties are important when it comes to campaigning and getting their members to vote.

H5: Cities with partisan ballots will have higher turnout.
This study will seek to find whether or not non-partisan ballots will lower turnout in big city elections.

The last institutional variable examines the effects on turnout by form of government. Though all of the cities in the study have the office of the mayor as the head of local government, there is a key difference in institutional design that changes the role and power of the office. Some cities use a mayor-council form where the mayor is the executive of local government and

some cities use the council-manager form of government where the mayor serves as head of the city council and much power is turned over to the city manager.

H6: Cities with the mayor-council form of government will have higher turnout.

A previous study done on cities in California indicated that cities with mayor-council forms tend to have higher turnout than those with another form of government (Hajnal and Lewis 2003). This study built off of a previous one that suggested the mayor-council distinction was the only significant institutional variable when looking at turnout (Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch 2002). The authors of these studies theorized that this was most likely do to a psychological effect of the voters. They believe that since mayors in a mayor-council form have more executive power than those in a council-manager system, the voters are more likely to perceive the races for mayors in mayor-council systems as important. Apart from these works done about the state of California, there is a dearth of literature or previous studies about the effect of the mayor-council form on voter turnout. My hypothesis presupposes that these same effects will be seen in other areas of the country and not just California.

Political Culture Factors

Finally, the effect of political ideology on voter turnout will be examined in this paper. Does liberalism or conservatism positively affect turnout? Theories on the effects of the two major political ideologies are conflicting. While some studies indicate that conservatives are more likely to vote in elections, others indicate that higher turnout correlates with liberalism. Data indicates that races with higher turnout favor democratic candidates in national elections (Denardo 1980 ; Nagel and McNulty 1996).

On the national scene, studies "tell us that Democratic candidates for national office usually win when there are large turnouts and Republicans are likely to win when the turnout is small" (Fenton 1979). This could possibly be due to the long held belief that the Republican Party has greater party discipline and in elections where turnout is small there ability to avoid crossover voting prevails (Linn 1949). This leads me to the hypothesis stated above that a liberal population (i.e. more democrats) is more likely to have a high turnout.

This leads into the first hypothesis concerning political culture:

H7: As liberalism increases in a city, so will voter turnout in local elections.

The other area of political culture that this study will test is how the split in culture of northerners and southerners in the United States effects voter turnout. In his book The Idea of a Southern Nation, John McCardell hypothesizes that people in southern states look at themselves as southerners before they think of themselves as American. This is similar to what is seen in regions of France where regional identities take prevalence over national ones (McCardell 1979).

Other scholars have noted that there are differences amongst all the regions of the country, but the most prevalent ones are those between the North and South (Ladd 1998). After determining a clear split in the political cultures of the North and the South, I formulated my final hypothesis:

H8: Cities in the north will experience higher voter turnout than cities in the south.

In the book Governing States and Localities, the authors observe this exact effect in state wide elections. It says that closer to the Canadian border a state is, the more likely they are to have high turnout in elections (Smith 2005). I expect to find this will also hold true at the local level and that northern cities will see more turnout than southern ones.

Data and Variables

This analysis will use one dependent variable, political participation in local elections. This will be measured in terms of the percentage of the voting eligible population that casts a vote in a mayoral election. The mayoral elections looked at in this study are the ones that take place after the 2003 US Census population estimates were released. This included elections in 2004, 2005, and 2006. The range of turnout in the cities in this sample was quite dramatic as Garland, Texas was the lowest with 3.94% and Portland, Oregon was the highest with 64.95%.

Another possible way would be to measure turnout in terms of percentage of registered voters. The reason I am not using the latter measure is because there are disparities among voter registration numbers in some areas. This could lead to the question becoming more about why are the parties in some cities more active in voter registration drives as opposed to the question of political participation that this paper examines.

There is one independent variable for each hypothesis. The variables can be divided into the same categories as the hypotheses: demographic, institutional, and political culture variables.

The first demographic variable is black population. This will be measured in terms of percentage of the population that identifies as black. Per capita income will be used as the measure of socioeconomic status of the citizens of the city. Also, I decided to put the per capita income data in thousands to make the model more easily interpretable. The final demographic variable is percentage of the population over the age of 25 that has a high school degree. This is used as the measure of the education level of the city. All of this data can be found in the 2003 US Census population estimates.

For institutional variables, the first one is incumbent candidates. This will measured as a dichotomous variable with "0" meaning an election without an incumbent and "1" meaning an

election with an incumbent. Another institutional variable is the form of the ballot. This is also dichotomous with "0" being an election which employs a non-partisan ballot and "1" being an election that uses a partisan ballot. The final institutional variable is form of government. In this case, I will code cities that use a mayor-council form of government as a "1" and cities that use council-manager systems as a "0". This data on individual city government forms and officials was taken from the official city clerk web sites.

Finally, for political culture variables I will use a variable for liberalism. Liberalism for a city will be measured as the percentage of the population that voted for the democratic candidate (John Kerry) in the 2004 presidential election. Though this is not an exact measure of liberalism in the population, it is commonly used in the literature.

Another measure of political culture in the city is the distinction of being either a northern city or a southern city. Southern cities will be defined as cities that are in states that were members of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Since this study hypothesizes that northern cities will have higher turnout, cities in the north will be coded as "1" and cities in the south will be coded as "0".

A discussion of the sample size of this study is needed here. This paper defines big city as those with over 200,000 residents. According to the 2003 US Census population estimates which were the source of all the demographic variables, this would give an n-size of 98. Not all of these cities had a mayoral election in the time frame I was looking at, and that lowered the n-size. Also, I removed the cities of Shreveport and Baton Rouge, Louisiana were removed because they held mayoral elections after the events of Hurricane Katrina, so the population estimates of 2003 were not completely accurate of the population at the time of the elections. Removing these cities lowered my n-size to 83.

Methods and Findings

For this study an OLS regression was used to determine the model. OLS was used because the dependent variable (turnout) was measured as a percentage and was therefore a continuous variable. There were some concerns about multi-collinearity among the independent variables. Therefore, before I ran the final OLS regression model, I ran a correlation procedure on the variables. After finding that none of the variables had a Pearson correlation of over .7, I found that I could leave them all in the model. The results of the OLS regression are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Voter Turnout in Big City Mayor Elections

	Voter Turnout (std error)
Black Population	.08 (.075)
Income	-.766** (.333)
Education	.476*** (.175)
North/South	4.973** (2.491)
Presidential Vote	.222** (.102)
Incumbent Candidate	-1.181 (2.401)
Partisan Ballot	1.357 (2.368)

Mayor-Council Government	.403 (2.457)
Constant	-16.689 (11.839)
Adjusted R^2	.207
Number of Observations	83

Notes: The dependent variable is percentage of voting age population that cast a vote in the mayor election. Coefficients are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis.
*P≤ .10; **P≤ .05; ***P≤.01 **** P≤.001

Using the values shown in the above table, the equation for this regression model becomes:

Voter Turnout = .08(Black Population) + -.766(Income) + .476(Education) + 4.973 (North/South) + .222 (Presidential Vote) + -1.181 (Incumbent Candidate) + 1.357 (Partisan Ballot) + .403 (Mayor-Council) + -16.689. This regression equation is useful for predicting the expected turnout of elections. The final model shows an R^2 value of .207. Substantively, this means that the independent variables used in the study account for approximately 21% of the measured variance of voter turnout.

Discussion of Findings and Hypotheses

H1: Cities withy higher black populations will have higher voter turnout.

The coefficient for this variable turned out to be .08. This variable turned out to be insignificant. Therefore, I am unable to reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between black population and voter turnout. Neither the prior research that indicates a positive

relationship (Campbell and Kaufman 2006; Murray and Vedlitz 1997) nor the research that suggests a negative relationship (Hajnal and Baldassare 2001; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001) can be confirmed or disconfirmed by the results of this study.

H2: Cities with higher per capita income will have higher voter turnout.

The results for this variable are particularly interesting. The literature suggested (e.g. Freeman 2004; Goidel and Shields 1997; Leighley and Nagler 1992) and I hypothesized a positive relationship between a cities per capita income and their voter turnout. This prior research was done on elections at the state and national level. The results of this study suggest a difference between those levels and the local level.

The coefficient came out to be -.766. This means that for every increase of a thousand dollars in a cities per capita income, we can expect a decrease in turnout in mayoral elections of .766 of a percent. With significance at the .05 level we may reject the null hypothesis.

H3: Cities with higher levels of education will have higher voter turnout.

The coefficient for this variable was .476. For every increase of 10% in a city's number of people who graduated high school, we can expect and increase of 5% in voter turnout. It was also significant at the .05 level. These results indicate that we may reject the null hypothesis of no relationship. The prior research done by Nagler (2007) and others (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Jackson 1995) on the effects of education levels on voter turnout are suggested to also be applicable in mayor elections by this study.

H4: Incumbent candidates in mayoral elections lower voter turnout.

H5: Cities with partisan ballots will have higher turnout.

H6: Cities with the mayor-council form of government will have higher turnout.

None of the institutional variables suggested by the literature and that I hypothesized came up as significant in this study. This is particularly interesting in the case of non-partisan vs. partisan ballots since there is such an extensive body of literature that suggests a significant relationship (Lee 1960 and Schaffner 2001). The mayor-council relationship shown to have significance in California cities (Hajnal and Lewis 2003) can not be shown to translate nationally by this study. The results of this study seem to indicate that that is not the case in this particular group of cities. For the purposes of this study, I cannot reject the null hypothesis for any of these hypotheses.

H7: Cities with a more liberal population will have have higher voter turnout. .

The coefficient of .222 came up as significant at the .05 level. These numbers mean that we can reject the null hypothesis. Substantively, this means that for every percentage point increase in voting John Kerry got in a city, we could expect turnout to increase .222 percent.

H8: Cities in the north will experience higher voter turnout than cities in the south.

The coefficient for this variable was 4.973 and was significant at the .05 level. For this variable, we can reject the null hypothesis. For cities identified as being northern cities, that distinction is good enough for a 5% increase in voter turnout by itself.

The R^2 figure of .207 tells us that we can explain about 21% of the variation in the dependent variable of voter turnout is explainable by the independent variables tested. This number may not seem high. But, when we are dealing with turnout that is as low 3.9% in Garland, Texas any information on how to increase turnout is beneficial. In a previous study looking at municipal elections over the last 25 years, Neal Caren found that demographic factors were weakly correlated to turnout figures when compared to individual campaign factors (Caren 2007). That study shows that in individual elections, campaign factors are the most explanatory,

but they do us little good when trying to do a broad study of the determinants of outcome. Because individual campaign factors are always changing it is hard to tell what effect they have on outcome over time, whereas race and other socioeconomic factors are always prevalent in a society.

In general, this study found that a number of demographic and political culture variables were significant in explaining the variance of voter turnout. Institutional variables were not found to be significant. Though this study is able to give a good general view of the determinants of voter turnout there are some limitations. For instance, the point of this study was to examine political participation in local politics. Though voter turnout in local elections is a good indication of participation, it is not entirely indicative. There are other ways of participating in local politics that this does not account for. For instance, other possible measures of political participation that could be used are amount of time or money that individuals contribute to local campaigns. Also, there may be other demographic, institutional, and political culture variables not part of this study that could have some explanatory power.

Conclusion

In my study of voter turnout in big city mayor elections, I found that my hypotheses concerning education, liberalism, and north/south distinction were confirmed and significant. I also found that the relationship of per capita income to turnout was significant, but in the opposite direction that I hypothesized. I found that black population, having incumbents in the race, partisan ballots, and a mayor-council system of government were not significant in explaining the variance of turnout.

One of the big questions raised after my analysis is why none of the institutional variables came up as significant when the literature suggested they would. Perhaps this indicates some sort of fundamental difference in how local politics works as opposed to the other levels of government or a difference in people's attitudes towards it. Or, this could indicate that when looking at local politics, there are different institutional variables that need to be examined.

Since not as much work has been done in the field of local politics as has been done at the state and federal levels, this study could be used as the groundwork for future studies. One future study could be to use similar methods, but change the focus from big cities to a more inclusive study of cities in general. Also, a whole set of campaign variables could be added to a future model. For instance, research could be done on the effects of campaign dollars spent or television time spent devoted to local campaigns and their effect on participation. Another way to improve the model is to perhaps include more years and be able to do a time series analysis to examine the variation within individual cities over the year.

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Data Appendix: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Voter Turnout	21.65	10.77	3.94	64.95
Black Population	22.2	19.35	.40	81.6
Income Per Capita (in Thousands)	20.77	5.03	11.08	39.16
Education	78.13	9.35	43.2	93.9
Incumbent	.67	.47	0	1
Partisan Ballot	.52	.5	0	1
Mayor-Council	.65	.48	0	1
Liberalism	54.2	14.02	24	90
North/South	.63	.49	0	1