



08/28/2023

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
Executive Chamber
State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Via Email

Re: Signing into law S3505B/A4282A, moving certain elections to even-numbered years

Dear Governor Hochul,

We write this letter to urge you to sign into law S3505B/A4282A, which would move certain county and town elections in New York to November of even-numbered years.

We believe this legislation will strengthen local democracy in the state by bringing more people to vote for local offices, leading to a more representative voting population and a stronger mandate for elected officials. The benefits of holding local elections during even-numbered (“on-cycle”) years have been thoroughly documented in research, and dozens of towns, cities, and states have successfully made that transition in the previous decade. Good government groups and election advocates support this reform, as does the public.

In general, more voters go out to vote to elect the U.S. President or the State Governor than to elect local officeholders. Since regular elections for those higher offices (and federal midterm elections) occur in November of even-numbered years, voter turnout is higher during these “on-cycle” periods than in odd-numbered, “off-cycle” years. In New York and across the U.S., local elections held “off-cycle” consistently and discouragingly suffer from significantly lower turnouts than in localities that have their elections “on-cycle.”

Low voter turnout poses a real challenge to the democratic legitimacy of our local governments. Campaigns and elected officials can (and often do) ignore large swaths of the population, choosing instead to focus on those whose votes they need to get elected. The uneven nature of voter turnout compounds the problem: low turnout skews the electorate, and there is strong evidence that non-voters are demographically different in terms of age, race, and class.

S3505B/A4282A would help to address these problems by requiring counties and towns to hold elections for their local elected offices in November of even-numbered years, with some exceptions, starting in 2026.¹

This legislation will have several positive implications. Firstly, **it will increase voter turnout in counties and towns** by capitalizing on the higher voter participation that typically occurs during statewide and national elections. Studies on election timing show that “on-cycle November elections generally double local voter turnout compared to stand-alone local contests,” and scholars suggest that consolidating elections is the most important policy change a jurisdiction can undertake to increase voter turnout.

¹ Exceptions include elections for sheriff, county clerk, district attorney, family court judge, county court judge, surrogate court judge, offices with a three-year term, and towns completely coterminous with a village.

Importantly, vote gains are seen in races for high-profile local offices and in contests further down the ballot, even when accounting for the voters who do not fill out their entire ballots (“ballot drop off”).²

Moreover, S3505B/A4282A could **increase participation rates for young people and underrepresented groups in local elections** because on-cycle elections draw voters who are more representative of a jurisdiction’s demographics. Studies have shown that election timing has one of the most significant impacts on the average age of the electorate in local elections.³ When cities in California switched to on-cycle elections, the turnout rate for younger Americans nearly doubled, the share of older adult voters dropped up to 22 points, and the underrepresentation of Hispanic and Asian votes moved closer to their actual demographic makeup in those localities. Working-class voters also saw substantial turnout gains.⁴

Furthermore, consolidating local elections to align with on-cycle statewide and national races will **enhance voter awareness**. With a larger pool of candidates and issues on the ballot, voters will have increased exposure to local candidates and their respective platforms, and more funding will be available for civic engagement and GOTV programs.

Available research shows that **voter knowledge is not negatively affected by having local elections in even-numbered years**. Studies on school board elections found that voters had similar levels of knowledge about local policy issues regardless of the timing of the election, with no difference in media attention for those elections between on and off-cycle elections.⁵

New York will not be the first state to move its local elections on-cycle. **State legislatures controlled by both parties have passed bills like S3505B/A4282A**, which standardized the local election calendar to even-numbered years. Arizona’s legislature passed two measures, in 2012 and 2018, meant to move local elections on-cycle for all political subdivisions.⁶ California approved its own statewide on-cycle election law in 2015.⁷ In 2019, Nevada passed legislation that required all municipalities to hold elections in November of even-numbered years.⁸ Many localities have passed their own on-cycle measures, including Austin, TX; Baltimore, MD; Boulder, CO; El Paso, TX; Las Vegas, NV; Los Angeles, CA; Phoenix, AZ; San Francisco, CA, and countless other towns, villages, and local jurisdictions.⁹

² Research includes: Hajnal, Z., Kogan, V., & Markarian, G. 2022. “Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition”. *American Political Science Review*, 116(1), 374-383; Hajnal, Zoltan L. 2010. *America’s Uneven Democracy: Turnout, Race, and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Anzia, Sarah. 2014. *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Marschall, Melissa, and John Lappie. 2018. “Turnout in Local Elections: Is Timing Really Everything?” *Election Law Journal* 17:3; Berry, Christopher R., and Jacob E. Gersen. 2011. “Election Timing and Public Policy.” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9: 103-35

³ Kogan, V., Lavertu, S. and Peskowitz, Z. (2018), *Election Timing, Electorate Composition, and Policy Outcomes: Evidence from School Districts*. *American Journal of Political Science*, 62: 637-651; Portland University: *Who Votes for Mayor?*

⁴ Hajnal, Z., Kogan, V., & Markarian, G. 2022. “Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition”. *American Political Science Review*, 116(1), 374-383.; *Who Votes for Mayor? A project of Portland State University*

⁵ Michael T. Hartney and David M. Houston, “School Board Election Timing and Voter Information Levels: Comparing On-Cycle and Off-Cycle Electorates,” forthcoming. Payson, Julia. *When Are Local Incumbents Held Accountable for Government Performance? Evidence from US School Districts*.

⁶ Arizona Law Ch. 353 of 2012, Arizona Law Ch. 257 of 2018

⁷ California Law Ch. 235 of 2015

⁸ Nevada Law Ch. 558 of 2019

⁹ More information found at Citizens Union, *Moving Municipal Elections to Even-Numbered Years*, December 2022 https://citizensunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Moving-Municipal-Elections-to-Even-Numbered-Years-Citizens-Union-report_final.pdf

In those localities that have transitioned from off-cycle to on-cycle elections, turnout immediately increased – in some cases, it more than quadrupled – and remained high in the following election cycles.¹⁰ In addition, those transitions have been seamless, with **election officials reporting in surveys that they found the move to on-cycle elections to be easy with no administrative problems involved.**¹¹

Moving local elections to even-numbered years is a **popular policy among people of all backgrounds**. It grants voters a year off from learning when the election is, where it is, and who the candidates are. It also gives them a break from campaign ads and mailers and a reprieve from carving out the time to go to the polls.

A recent Siena College poll found that a better than two-to-one ratio of voters say that moving elections to even-numbered years will be good for New York, with support among all groups surveyed irrespective of partisan affiliation, race, gender, or region. In fact, the policy received the highest approval rate of all policies polled by Siena and passed in the last days of the legislative session.¹²

Therefore, we respectfully request that you sign S3505B/A4282A into law. Your support will demonstrate your commitment to improving the democratic foundations of our state and empowering the voices of all New Yorkers. We are confident that this change will have a profound and positive impact on local communities across the state.

Sincerely,

Betsy Gotbaum,
Executive Director
Citizens Union

Susan Lerner,
Executive Director
Common Cause/NY

John Kaehny,
Executive Director
Reinvent Albany

cc:

State Senator James Skoufis
Assembly Member Amy Paulin

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Hajnal, Zoltan. 2021. Assessing the Move to Concurrent Elections: A Survey of Local City Clerks.

¹² Results from the June 2023 Siena College Research Institute poll <https://scri.siena.edu/2023/06/28/nyers-oppose-using-suny-dorms-to-temporarily-house-new-migrants-to-new-york-54-33-oppose-relocating-migrants-from-nyc-to-housing-in-other-counties-that-is-paid-for-by-nyc-46-40/>