

MassVOTE's Role in Transforming Local Elections

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Abstract

The fight for equitable voter turnout in Massachusetts is in a compounded crisis. Low turnout and inequitable representation is prominent in national elections and exacerbated in local elections. This issue further removes historically marginalized communities from one of the most powerful civic rights in the Commonwealth. This report seeks to understand how voter engagement levels fall across gender and racial groups in Massachusetts to provide MassVOTE with deeper information and tools to enhance its future outreach campaigns. I analyzed qualitative and quantitative data to craft the subsequent findings and discovered a new metric to address inequities head-on. This analysis yielded strong data supporting what voting rights advocates already know: the historically marginalized communities in Massachusetts experience the worst impacts of low voter turnout. To conclude this report I demonstrate how the policy and education wings of MassVOTE should be employed to combat low turn-out in off-cycle elections, press for greater access to ballots, and enhance the culture of civic engagement. MassVOTE can take meaningful, tangible steps to make a difference in anti-racist voter engagement and building a stronger culture around civic engagement.

Part 1. Two Crises

Voter turnout in the U.S., for both national and local offices, is abysmally low. This is the ‘first’ crisis of our democracy that I will address in this write-up. The national average for voter turnout in presidential general elections among the Voting Eligible Population (VEP) -- those who are 18 years or older and hold citizenship -- has hovered near 60% for the previous four general elections¹. Average national turnout was even lower between 1972-2000 when it stood at or around 55%². Of the VEP in the Commonwealth, turnout in presidential general elections since 2004 is 66.6%³. While higher than the national average, 66% is nothing to celebrate. In 2016 Massachusetts set a state-record with 75% of its registered voters casting a ballot in the presidential election. At our best, 1,569,227 potential Massachusetts voters were left out. It is apparent that even for the highest office in the nation, a large swath of eligible voters are not participating.

In comparison to similar countries, voter turnout in the U.S. is an unnecessary disgrace. Some countries -- like Australia, Belgium, Chile -- have chosen to make voting compulsory. Turnout rates have been near 90% throughout the 2000s⁴. Other countries like Austria, Sweden, and Italy experience turnout rates near 80%⁵. Overall, the U.S. falls behind the average voter turnout of countries with similar economic and political power on the international stage⁶. In the U.S., only two-thirds to three-quarters of registered voters cast ballots for presidential elections⁷.

¹ McDonald, Michael P. “Presidential Turnout Rates 1948-2012.” *United States Election Project*, 2020

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ “Voter Turnout.” *FairVote*, 2018, www.fairvote.org/voter_turnout#voter_turnout_101.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

⁷ Schoenberg, Shira. “Mass. Reports 75 Percent Voter Turnout in 2016 Election.” *Masslive*, Advance Local Media LLC, 28 Nov. 2016,

But, registered voters do not encompass all eligible voters. 46% of the Voting Age Population (VAP) in Massachusetts did not vote in 2016⁸. This demographic is made up of unregistered voters who would be eligible as well as individuals who are ineligible due to a lack of adequate documentation. This rate is identical to the national average⁹. The 2018 midterm elections were celebrated for their record turnout rate, but only half of the VEP voted nation-wide. The Massachusetts average in midterm elections -- going back to 2006 -- is seven percent higher than the national average, but it still remains under half of the VEP at 49.5%¹⁰. Even for legislators in the powerful U.S. Congress, voter enthusiasm and participation has been a long-term and large-scale issue.

American election turnout in lower-level elections has unique barriers to overcome. This is the ‘second’ crisis I address. For MA state elections, the average turnout rate is 68.6% according to the Secretary of the Commonwealth¹¹. Dramatic fluctuation is hidden within this average. The average turnout in state elections held on-cycle with presidential general elections (76.3%) is 15.5% higher than participation in off-cycle state elections over the same time span (60.8%)¹². This disparity clearly shows that the timing of elections directly impacts turnout. Analyzing turnout data for elections at the municipal level also exposes low turnout and stark disparities along racial, socio-economic, and age lines. Of the 392,000 registered voters in Boston, only 22.9% participated in the elections for the at-large seats on the Boston City Council

⁸ “Number of Voters as a Share of the Voter Population, by Age.” *KFF*, Kaiser Family Foundation, 22 May 2019

⁹ DeSilver, Drew. “U.S. Voter Turnout Trails Most Developed Countries.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 30 May 2020

¹⁰ McDonald, Michael P. “Voter Turnout Data” *United States Election Project*, 2020

¹¹ Galvin, William F. “Voter Turnout Statistics.” *Secretary of the Commonwealth*, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020

¹² *ibid*

between 2011-2019¹³. In a study published by Portland State University titled “Who Votes for Mayor”, researchers broke down voter participation by Census tract and demographics. The 2016 study found that 30% of the VEP voted during the mayoral contest, but participation varied among key populations. For example, 66.1% of registered voters over the age of 65 voted while only 28.0% of registered voters aged 18 to 34 casted their ballots. The result of this disparity is that older populations of Bostonians hold more “electoral clout”, a term which conveys the weight some groups have over the outcome of the election¹⁴. Additionally, 15% of the voting-eligible population of Boston lives in “voting deserts”, an important term dubbed by the researchers. The term identifies Census tracts within which voter turnout is less than half of the city’s average. This statistic is devastating for any voting rights advocate and believer in the democratic principle of “one-person, one-vote.” When average turnout is so low, voting disparities further enable more privileged groups to hold outsized political influence. This sad state of local elections is painful for advocates who know that local elections impact schools, roads, and laws in ways which most affect the daily lives of residents. The low level of voter participation in state and local elections is actively harmful. MassVOTE’s efforts should prioritize raising turnout in the local elections experiencing a crisis within a crisis.

¹³ “State and City Election Results.” *City of Boston*, 28 June 2016

¹⁴ “Who Votes For Mayor?: Glossary.” *Who Votes For Mayor? | Glossary*, Portland State University, 2016

Part 2. American Government Below the Federal Level

Understanding the acute importance of state and municipal elections requires a broader historical backing in how and why non-federal structures function. When the U.S. government was molded following independence from Britain, the distribution of power between the federal government and local areas was a contentious topic. Naturally averse to autocratic styles of government, the political theorists shaping the U.S. government hoped to avoid the kinds of encroachments on civil liberties they experienced while living under a strong, centralized government in Britain's monarchical system. To do so, these shapers limited the jurisdiction of the federal government and left many responsibilities to local governmental bodies. But, this power structure can leave the federal government hamstrung in responding to state governments that restrict civil liberties. As seen with the push back against federally mandated civil rights protections, the ability of state governments to reject federal mandates has been a major roadblock in anti-racist policies such as school integration and voting rights.

Still, local representatives are the most diverse and municipal structures are the main arena for democratic empowerment of the historically marginalized. Given this fact, this section will speak to the moral position of municipal and state governments as potential anti-racist forces. Unfortunately, these same local elections are the least participated in. Much power can be unlocked by spreading awareness and removing institutional barriers in the local bodies. The constitutional relevance of non-federal governments makes them a core function of American government. The potential for demographic representation also makes them a glimpse into a future, more democratic government.

Non-federal governmental units are constitutionally vital. Embedded in the founding philosophy of our country is the importance of state and local government. The fourth president of the United States James Madison, famously wrote in Federalist No. 45 that “the powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government, are few and defined.”¹⁵ He continued, “Those [powers] which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite.” The responsibilities assigned to the Federal government are intentionally limited, differing the remaining power to the states. This sentiment is echoed by the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”¹⁶ Delivering direct power to the people, free from oppression by a tyrannical and centralized government, is the foundation of our federalist system and of American democracy.

While ostensibly protecting citizens from oppressive government, the Tenth Amendment has also been hijacked by state governments to enforce racist structures and push back against federal civil rights guarantees. This practice has been ideologically disguised as a defense of constitutional rights. For example, in 1964, Barry Goldwater, commonly credited with the resurgence of modern American conservatism and libertarianism, alongside a cohort of 27 US Senators, voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on the grounds that it was an overstep by the Federal government¹⁷. Goldwater said civil rights can be “resolved more safely and soundly on the state or local level” but this belief ignored how, without federal mandate, state governments

¹⁵ Madison, James. “The Federalist Papers: No. 45.” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School

¹⁶ “The 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.” *National Constitution Center – The 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution*, National Constitution Center, 2020

¹⁷ Rudin, Ken. “Flashback Friday: This Day In 1964, Goldwater Says No To Civil Rights Bill.” *NPR*, NPR, 18 June 2010,

were free to stubbornly ignore civil rights mandates¹⁸. Similarly, following the 2013 Supreme Court Case *Shelby vs. Holder*, the federal mandate to protect voting rights in states with histories of racist voting practices was revoked. The decision in *Shelby* led directly to the introduction and reintroduction of racist voting laws such as voter-roll purging and voter ID laws. In short, the federal mandate is vital to maintaining equal access to the polls. This is but one example of how claims of states rights can enable a rejection of civil rights and government-sanctioned voter suppression.

A battleground for the enforcement of civil rights, non-federal governments provide clear insight into what the future of a multi-racial democracy can look like. The U.S. is projected to be majority non-white in the near future¹⁹, but this is already the case in many of the country's largest cities. For example, while Massachusetts is 71.1% "white-alone" (according to the racial categories of the US Census), the city of Boston is already a majority-minority city²⁰. Not only are city populations diverse, but so are their local governments. This diversity is important because state officials pass the legislation which most impacts residents on a daily level. Local legislators also provide direct relationships between constituents and elected officials and thereby put a face to policies. The arena of local politics already serves as the most accessible platform for politicians to represent the demographic make-up of their constituents.

State and local governments at their best can be an inspirational force for voters and voting rights organizations. They are at the forefront of activist change in the political realm.

¹⁸ Nilsson, Jeff, et al. "The Civil Rights Act vs. States' Rights: The Saturday Evening Post." *The Saturday Evening Post The Civil Rights Act vs States Rights Comments*, 2 July 2014

¹⁹ Frey, William H. "The US Will Become 'Minority White' in 2045, Census Projects." *Brookings*, Brookings, 10 Sept. 2018

²⁰ "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Boston City, Massachusetts." *Census Bureau QuickFacts*, The Census Bureau, 2020

Take for example the buzz of community organizing following the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans in the Spring and Summer of 2020. From Western Massachusetts²¹ to New York City²² to Minneapolis²³ and Northern California²⁴, City Councils have faced intense, direct pressure from constituents and decreased police budgets as a result. The issues have remained contentious but in a matter of weeks elected officials were forced to act. This advocacy has changed the status quo regarding policing, due to the quicker nature of action in local government. A positive feedback loop of participation and engagement can occur because of this swift, effective action. When national politics leaves so many unhappy, local government is a powerful alternative; one that is, quite literally, closer to home. Whereas large-scale governmental units (by population) require interest groups, large scale protest, and lobbying to influence lawmakers, local officials answer more directly to constituents on an individual level. This proximity enhances the power of community organizing and advocacy by organizations like MassVOTE.

In order for MassVOTE to prioritize non-Federal government in its work, an understanding of the power structures as they stand now is necessary. While this overview may sound basic, a shocking amount of eligible voters and Americans in general do not know how their local government functions²⁵. Resembling the three branches of the Federal government, there are legislative, judicial, and executive bodies in local politics as well. Especially for the

²¹ Jochem, Greta. "Northampton City Council Votes to Cut Police Budget by 10% ." *Daily Hampshire Gazette, Concord Monitor*, 23 June 2020

²² Rubinstein, Dana, and Jeffery C. Mays. "Nearly \$1 Billion Is Shifted From Police in Budget That Pleases No One." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 June 2020

²³ Searcey, Dionne, and John Eligon. "Minneapolis Will Dismantle Its Police Force, Council Members Pledge." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 8 June 2020

²⁴ Swan, Rachel. "Berkeley City Council Passes a Budget with \$9.2 Million Cuts to Police." *SFChronicle.com*, San Francisco Chronicle, 1 July 2020

²⁵ Rosen, Jill. "Americans Don't Know Much about State Government, Survey Finds." *The Hub*, 14 Dec. 2018

largest cities in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Mayors hold executive powers similar to a Governor and President. As signatories on fiscal year budgets and holders of appointment power, Mayors hold significant sway in lawmaking and the priorities of the city. The City Council most resembles the legislative branch of city government. The council oversees the annual budget, directs public employees, and serves as holders of the city charter and its zoning laws. Due to the variety of responsibilities, councilmembers are attuned to all sorts of the city's needs. Because a vast majority of City Councils are nonpartisan, councilmembers are direct advocates for the constituents. Many City Council's have District and At-Large seats. District (or Ward) members represent a specific area of the city whereas At-Large members are responsible to all of the city. The judicial branch is less synchronous to the corresponding branch at the Federal level. Local District Attorneys are the chief prosecutors of a municipal area, often inclusive of multiple towns. County-elected Sheriffs are chief law enforcement officers for a district, whereas police chiefs head local law enforcement departments. We cannot overlook the specific structures of local and state bodies.

There is important variation in local government types within Massachusetts. One of the two main structures of local government is the Mayor-Council system which allocates the distinct roles of Mayor and councilmembers. Large towns and cities with relatively high populations often use the strong-mayor model of the Mayor-Council system, in which mayors serve as an executive. They are traditionally checked-and-balanced by the City Council. For areas with fewer residents, towns and cities employ the weak-mayor system in which Mayors hold more of a ceremonial role as overseer of the City Council. The idea is that, with smaller voting bodies, more direct decisions can be made by the council. The other leading government

structure is the Council-Manager model. Used mostly in small towns, an elected body of councilmembers perform the legislative work of the city while a town/city manager is appointed by the council to oversee administrative functions and act as an advisor. 40% of U.S. cities use this model. The power structures of these two models use different bureaucracies to wield their power over education, public safety, zoning, and much more. MassVOTE must hold in-depth knowledge of these distinct bureaucracies in order to enact lasting, effective change within them.

The most vital function of non-federal governments is its control over the municipal budgets. The Massachusetts state budget, passed by the State Congress and Governor, totaled \$43.321 billion dollars for fiscal year 2020²⁶. The city budgets for the state's five largest cities -- Boston, Worcester, Springfield, Lowell, and Cambridge -- totaled over \$6 billion for the same fiscal year. Needless to say, the aggregate local budgets for the Commonwealth account for additional billions. All of this money goes straight to the state and funds the resources and services most impactful in our communities. Additionally, the signatories of non-federal budgets better represent demographics of the voting body than national elected officials²⁷. The lack of diversity and representation in national politics is well known. The US Congress remains exceedingly white and male. 76% of US Senators and 73% of US Representatives are male, despite being 49.2% of national population²⁸. Similarly, 88% of US Senators and 73% of US representatives are white-alone, despite representing only 60.1% of the U.S. population²⁹. The Massachusetts state legislature is slightly less male but more white. It is 22% more white and

²⁶ "FY 2020 Budget FY 2020 Final Budget." *FY 2020 Final Budget*, 2020

²⁷ Smith, Fatira Russell; Ed. "Who We Elect." *Who We Elect: An Interactive Graphic*, National Conference of State Legislators, 2020

²⁸ "Demographics: Congress by the Numbers." *Council of Graduate Schools*, 2018

²⁹ *ibid*

26.5% more male than the Massachusetts population³⁰. Nationwide, City Councils are not much more representative: according to the National League of Cities, City Councils were 87% white and 72% male at the start of the century³¹. For the councils in the largest cities of Massachusetts, it is considerably different. As of 2020, City Councils in the five largest Massachusetts cities were only 9% more white than their constituencies and 2% less white than the national average. Of these cities, Lowell is an outlier and is significantly whiter than the other four councils. When removing Lowell from the calculation, average whiteness on the councils is 5% *more* diverse than the cities themselves and much better resembles the demographics of the constituents. This marks a serious point: some cities have made serious strides in racial and gender representation among their elected officials, while others like Lowell and Brockton remain overwhelmingly white and pull the state average high.

Executive positions are less diverse. In 2020, 18% of US governors were women despite being 50.8% of the population³², only 6% are non-white and none are black³³. There have been only four black governors in U.S. history. All four were male.

Mayors are also lacking diversity. In 2018, 21% (29.8% more more male than the population) of mayors nationwide were women and 15% were nonwhite (24.6% more white than the population)³⁴. While much more work remains to be done, executive positions in local jurisdictions are still more accessible than at the State and Federal level.

³⁰ *Data Summary*, National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020

³¹ *City Councils*, National League of Cities, 2020

³² “Fast Facts About America's Governors.” *Eagleton Center on the American Governor*, Rutgers University, 30 July 2020

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ “2018 American Mayors Survey.” *Bloomberg Professional Services*, Bloomberg American Cities Initiative, 2018

Non-Federal governments are significant in political theory *and* in creating an equitable system of representation. They hold the keys to powerful annual budgets and are better able to represent the interests of their constituents. In short, the more local the government body, the more representative it is of its constituency. City Councils in some areas of the Commonwealth have been the quickest to start addressing underrepresentation. In annual decision making, local governments wield considerable power. With still much more work to do, such power is already wielded by bodies more representative of the voting-area than federal jurisdictions.

Part 3. The state of local election turnout

Local elections face a deep, compounded crisis. Nationwide, a staggering decline in local elections has taken place since the 1950s. Historically marginalized communities face daunting systemic barriers which have rendered them the most underrepresented and least participatory in the systems which impact their daily lives the most. While conducting this research, I discovered the need for a follow-up project focusing on finding all ‘voting deserts’ in the state. I believe with the background and material produced by this report, and the data to be compiled subsequently -- what I call ‘stage two’ -- MassVOTE will have the strategy and materials to meet the needs of urban and rural voting deserts. This will dramatically change the landscape of voter participation in Massachusetts.

There is a paradox in the way many voters view local government: they trust it most but participate in it the least. Voter turnout in local elections makes turnout in Federal elections seem high. On average, “across the US, only 15-27% of eligible voters cast a ballot in their local election”³⁵. That statistic is concerning considering how the U.S. already trails similar countries in national voter participation. Turnout in city elections “may average half that of national elections”³⁶. This is counterintuitive. Policies are most impacted by constituents at the local level. Despite this, “public policy decisions are being made without the input of most of the affected residents”³⁷. Major disparities exist within this low average turnout. In a National Civic League study, researchers found that affluent voters have 30-50% higher turnout³⁸, white people vote 20% more than non-white citizens, and those 65 years or older voted at seven times the rate as

³⁵ “Spring 2020: Volume 109, Number 1.” *National Civic League*, National Civic League, 2020

³⁶ Hajnal, Zoltan, and Paul G Lewis. “MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS AND VOTER TURNOUT IN LOCAL ELECTIONS.” *University of San Diego*, *Urban Affairs Review*, 2003

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ “Spring 2020: Volume 109, Number 1.” *National Civic League*, National Civic League, 2020

those between the ages of 18-34³⁹. The “Who Votes for Mayor?” study found that ten of the thirty largest U.S. cities have less than 15% overall turnout for mayoral races, and the median turnout of all thirty was 20.74% as of 2016. City Council, School Board, and local Sheriff elections have even lower rates. This is nothing new. *Governing* published a report outlining how turnout has steadily plummeted in major cities such as New York, Philadelphia, L.A., and Chicago since 1950⁴⁰. The overall impact of this trend is clear: policymakers are disproportionately influenced and elected by older, whiter, and more affluent voters. The consequences are serious. The Brookings Institute wrote that local elections are ‘life or death’: “Local governments oversee hiring and pay for public school teachers. They determine how much new housing gets built in which neighborhoods. They make sure the trash is picked up and the snow plowed. And they decide whether to invest in sidewalk construction and maintenance, traffic signal placement, and speed limit enforcement—actions that affect the safety of anyone who walks, jogs, bikes, or scoots around their neighborhood”⁴¹. Turnout in local elections across the country has been in a downward spiral for the last 50-70 years, amplifying historical disparities. Local election voter turnout is a crisis within a crisis.

This national trend is prevalent in Massachusetts, too. 15.2% of Boston residents live in voting deserts: areas where turnout is less than half of the city average⁴². Of the 32 largest cities in America, Boston has the 6th highest percentage of residents living in such voting deserts. The average age of Boston voters in mayoral contest is 14.4 years older than the average age of

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ Maciag, Mike. “Voter Turnout Plummeting in Local Elections.” *Governing*, E.Republic, Oct. 2014

⁴¹ Schuetz, Jenny. “Voting in Local Elections Impacts Life and Death: A Case Study in Washington, DC.” *Brookings*, Brookings, 1 Nov. 2018

⁴² “Who Votes For Mayor?: Boston.” *Who Votes For Mayor? | Boston*, Portland State University, 2016

Boston voting age citizens⁴³. At 29.7%, participation has fallen to less than half of the 65.6% who cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election⁴⁴. At MassVOTE we know that due to disillusionment, mistrust of the government, language disparities, and access to the polls, there is often overlap between the communities which participate the least in the electoral system and hard-to-count Census communities. Using the Census Hard-to-Count map we can see that this is not just a Boston problem. The map exposes how there's more hidden in voter turnout than just the city average. Census tracts in the center of Worcester, as of July 24th, 2020, had Census self-response rates 10-30% lower than the surrounding suburban areas of the city⁴⁵. The same was true in Fitchburg, Lowell, Framingham, Haverhill, Springfield, Holyoke, Pittsfield. Rural areas in Western Massachusetts also need attention, such as the town of Charlemont and Berkshire county. Nuanced strategies are required to meet the needs of these urban *and* rural communities in our state with dwindling voter turnout numbers.

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*; Sutherland, James, and Lawrence S. DiCara. "Boston's Presidential Election Numbers." *CommonWealth Magazine*, CommonWealth Magazine, 29 Nov. 2016

⁴⁵ *Census 2020 Hard to Count Map*, 2020

Part 4. Proscriptions for MassVOTE

It is clear that raising turnout in non-Federal elections goes hand in hand with MassVOTE's mission as a "non-partisan, non-profit organization that seeks to increase voter participation in our state." The next section of the mission statement is equally applicable: "we advocate for electoral justice for the sake of building a government truly representative of the people." MassVOTE already pours time and resources into get-out-the-vote campaigns, Census outreach, vote-by-mail accessibility, New Voter Engagement programming, and more. All of this is vital, but my research will allow the organization to target its efforts with more specificity to the communities most in need. To do this, MassVOTE can use the data found in this paper to phrase and frame future outreach. Also, I have created infographics tailored to MA cities which describe the roles held by state and municipal officials as well as their exact sphere of influence. I envision MassVOTE deploying its policy wing as well. As a trusted voice and advocate in the state, MassVOTE has the privilege of translating community needs into law. As I will outline in this section, low turnout in local elections can be addressed through simple policy changes. A serious focus on state and municipal election turnout in Massachusetts aligns with every word of the organization's mission and MassVOTE has the ability to seriously, and quickly, make a difference.

Important to include is the way in which U.S. demographics are changing. In a study published by professors from Rice University, Macalester College, and Ohio University titled "The Study of Local Elections: A Looking Glass into the Future", the authors point to how as of 2000, non-hispanic whites already comprise less than 50% of the population in one-quarter of the

largest U.S. cities (62 of 245)⁴⁶. While the racial categories used in the Census have problematic features -- one of which in fact includes “exaggerating white decline and the imminence of a majority-minority United States” -- changing demographic trends in the U.S. and the decline of the white population is a noted fact⁴⁷. A 2008 projection by the Pew Research Center predicted that the white population would decrease from 67% in 2005 to 47% in 2050⁴⁸. Along these lines, the non-hispanic white population is expected to decrease by 5% per Census cycle until 2050⁴⁹. The Voter Participation Center measures what it calls the ‘Rising American Electorate: “people of color, young people of all races and unmarried women of all races”’⁵⁰. In 2003, the Rising American Electorate made up 44.6% of the Voting Eligible population. But, in 2018 this grew to 62%. The Rising American Electorate directly corresponds to populations historically marginalized from the electoral process, but currently represent a majority of the U.S. Voting Eligible Population⁵¹. With participation of the so-called Rising American Electorate, local elections could be transformed. Since 96% of the elected officials represent non-federal jurisdictions, the interests of the RAE could be represented in unprecedented ways⁵². The “Study of Local Elections” report continued that “as the nation continues moving toward a multi-racial/ethnic reality, the lessons learned from local politics and elections today will pave the road for a better understanding of state and national politics”⁵³. Local politics is the cutting edge of multi-racial democracy in America. This is evident in the fact that 80% of elected

⁴⁶ Marschall, Melissa, et al. “The Study of Local Elections: A Looking Glass into the Future.” *Symposium*

⁴⁷ Alba, Richard. “Analysis | There's a Big Problem with How the Census Measures Race.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 6 Feb. 2018

⁴⁸ Passel, Jeffrey S., and D’Vera Cohn. “U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050.” *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 30 May 2020

⁴⁹ Marschall, Melissa, et al. “The Study of Local Elections: A Looking Glass into the Future.” *Symposium*

⁵⁰ “The Rising American Electorate.” Voter Participation Center, Voter Participation Center, 2020

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² Marschall, Melissa, et al. “The Study of Local Elections: A Looking Glass into the Future.” *Symposium*

⁵³ *ibid*

officials of color served on municipal councils or school boards in 2006⁵⁴. And, as is the case in Massachusetts, urban areas are already majority-minority populations. Due to this, “Cities remain the nation’s foremost venues for the study of political behavior in the context of significant racial and ethnic diversity”⁵⁵. What is already the reality in many of the largest cities will be the future of American national politics due to changing demographics. With MassVOTE’s proximity in Boston, it has the ability to engage with deeply anti-racist work and invest in the future of American democracy as a representative, multi-racial entity.

How exactly can MassVOTE engage in this anti-racist work? There are tangible, quick, and effective ways to address the compounded crisis that is American local elections. First, the turnout deficit between on-cycle and off-cycle elections must be addressed. The National Civic League wrote this spring that “election timing is the number one predictor of voter turnout”⁵⁶. This deficit is seen both nationally and in Massachusetts. State elections held on-cycle with presidential general elections yield 15.5% higher participation than off-cycle state elections (60.8%)⁵⁷. Off-cycle elections provide unnecessary challenges and have created more problems than they have solved. Progressive-era reforms of the early 1900 hoped to introduce off-cycle elections for state and local officials, because, in theory, it would force voters to “consider their vote for city officials independently of their vote for president or governor”⁵⁸. Instead, off-cycle elections have introduced another demographic with outsized electoral clout: older, more affluent, white voters. Luckily for MassVOTE, addressing this deficit is straightforward. Each

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ *ibid*

⁵⁶ “Spring 2020: Volume 109, Number 1.” *National Civic League*, National Civic League, 2020

⁵⁷ Galvin, William F. “Voter Turnout Statistics.” *Secretary of the Commonwealth*, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020

⁵⁸ Anzia, Sarah F. *Partisan Power Play: The Origins of Local Election Timing as an American Political Institution*. Stanford University, May 2011, 32

city has the timing of their municipal elections written into their city charter. MassVOTE should introduce a campaign to change local city charters. The immediate benefit from mandating on-cycle elections has been witnessed across the country. In Baltimore, after mandating on-cycle elections, “Registered voter turnout went from just 13 percent in the last election before the switch to 60 percent in the first on-cycle election”⁵⁹. In San Diego, on-cycle elections have yielded double the turnout rate as off-cycle elections. And, on-cycle elections are not bitterly partisan: 73% of Democrats and 61% of Republicans favored the change as of 2018⁶⁰.

Democratic and Republican leadership in California and Arizona, respectively, have set precedent on how to make these reforms. They have passed legislation which mandates on-cycle elections if turnout declines to a certain threshold⁶¹. Article LXXXIX 2 Section 2 of the Massachusetts Constitution allows for this necessary change:

“Any city or town shall have the power to adopt or revise a charter or to amend its existing charter through the procedures set forth in sections three and four. The provisions of any adopted or revised charter or any charter amendment shall not be inconsistent with the constitution or any laws enacted by the general court in conformity with the powers reserved to the general court by section eight.”⁶²

Expanded on-cycle voting will raise turnout more effectively in conjunction with other institutional reforms. Towns should not reduce polling locations, election day registration should be championed, mail-in and absentee ballots should be accessible, and turnout will inevitably rise if election day is made a national holiday. Through policy campaigns across state localities,

⁵⁹ Hajnal, Zoltan L. “Why Does No One Vote in Local Elections?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 Oct. 2018

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² Adams, John. *Massachusetts Constitution*, Massachusetts Legislature, 1780

MassVOTE should advocate for on-cycle elections: a straight-forward, bi-partisan and proven way to immediately elevate turnout in local elections to the turnout levels to federal levels.

While amendments to city charters would raise local turnout to the current level of federal elections, there remains the root crisis which plagues voter turnout in America. The national culture of disengagement from the electoral system must be addressed. MassVOTE needs to continue proactively campaigning against this culture by fostering a deeper environment of civic engagement. The “Study of Local Elections” report wrote that the culture of voting needs to change based on “civic education, voter outreach campaigns, higher quality media coverage of local races, and intensive campaigning by candidates for mayor and council”⁶³. MassVOTE already prioritizes this work well. What MassVOTE also knows is that this culture of disengagement and disillusionment about the electoral system falls unevenly across communities in the Commonwealth. To ground MassVOTE’s efforts in this fact, accompanying this paper I have produced City Voting Guides outlining the responsibilities of all elected officials in non-federal jurisdictions and the amount of power they hold. These graphics can be distributed throughout Voting Deserts in conjunction with community outreach and media efforts to raise election awareness. This strategy is set up to succeed because local and state governments are the best place to address lack of voter enthusiasm. After using institutional powers to consolidate turnout in local and federal elections, MassVOTE can move to address the root democratic crisis in Massachusetts and create a stronger culture of civic mindedness and civic engagement.

⁶³ Marschall, Melissa, et al. “The Study of Local Elections: A Looking Glass into the Future.” *Symposium*

MassVOTE's campaign to confront the culture of disengagement must be tailored to the historically marginalized. My follow-up to this research will provide data and materials to address the subsections of our towns and cities most marginalized from the electoral system. I became interested in the term "voting deserts" in the Portland State University study. After coming across the term, I attempted basic searches and asked MassVOTE staff about the prevalence of the 'voting desert' metric. I could not find any other data and wrote to the researchers of the study to learn more about how they compiled voting desert information. Unfortunately, I have not received a response and am still learning how to analyze voter turnout by Census tract. Because of this, I am dedicating stage-two of this report to compiling a comprehensive list of voting deserts in the Commonwealth. Stage two will immediately enhance the strategy and outreach to those cities and towns. Stage-two will transform MassVOTE's current outreach to young people, new voters, and people of color. The voting desert project will provide up-to-date information targeted to the specific needs of neighborhoods within cities and towns.

Unfortunately, there is no single strategy that can increase turnout in all areas of the Commonwealth. A "mix of strategies would need to be pursued" specifically tailored to the needs of individual communities⁶⁴. The data and materials I have created can be used, however, as a part of any strategy used in the state. Using data on town government, budget allocation, education systems, and more, I have already created an infographic campaign for the largest cities in the Commonwealth. They're tailored to each city with specific info on its yearly budget and bureaucratic structure. To be distributed with those city-specific graphics is a "What Do

⁶⁴ Born, Kelly. "Increasing Voter Turnout: What, If Anything, Can Be Done? (SSIR)." *Stanford Social Innovation Review: Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change*, Stanford University, 2020

Your Local Officials Do?” flier which illuminates the roles and responsibilities held by local office holders. Both materials are important because “fewer than 20 percent of survey respondents could name their state legislators and one-third were unable to name their governor”⁶⁵. Many also reported not knowing whether being a state lawmaker was a full-time job, or if states have their own constitution”⁶⁶. This report gives MassVOTE the tools to immediately address the acute need of consolidating federal and non-federal turnout, and provides the organization with the research vocabulary and background to dive deeper into the state of voter disparities here in Massachusetts.

⁶⁵ McCoy, Mary Kate. “Report: Americans Don’t Know Much About How State Government Works.” *Wisconsin Public Radio*, Wisconsin Educational Communications Board, 22 Jan. 2019

⁶⁶ McCoy, Mary Kate. “Report: Americans Don’t Know Much About How State Government Works.” *Wisconsin Public Radio*, 22 Jan. 2019

Conclusion/Summary

Voter turnout in federal elections is lower in the U.S. than in similar countries. Turnout in non-federal elections has decreased over the last century and continues to lag significantly behind. This diminishing participation is a shame because of the unique power local governments hold embedded within the structure of American government. These bodies make the decisions most impactful for the daily life of their citizens. Beyond that, they are symbolically powerful. They are directly responsible to individual concerns and give a face to policy. In some areas they are also the arena at the cutting edge of delivering a more representative multi-racial democracy.

MassVOTE has the positionality and resources to make a difference. A two-pronged approach is necessary. First, turnout rates between federal and non-federal races must be consolidated. MassVOTE should lobby townships to alter town charters in favor of holding all elections in sync with the presidential election. The second prong requires more systemic change. A culture of civic engagement and participation must be created. This culture must address needs and nuanced antipathy historically marginalized communities feel toward voting. To assist in this, subsequent research charting Massachusetts voting deserts will provide MassVOTE with the ability to zero in on the neighborhoods most turned away from voting. A serious focus on state and municipal election turnout in Massachusetts aligns with every word of the organization's mission and MassVOTE has the ability to quickly and effectively make a difference.