



# Reinvigorating Our Democracy

Understanding Local Elections  
and How Massachusetts May  
Increase Municipal Voter Turnout

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## INTRODUCTION

Approximately 200 years ago, French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville travelled to America with the goal of studying US prisons. Yet that mission rapidly transformed into something else entirely: an effort to understand what made the unprecedented global phenomenon of American democracy so successful. While touring the country for nearly a year, he spoke to countless individuals and analyzed various democratic institutions. In his many findings, he lent special emphasis to the system of local government.<sup>1</sup> His famous work, *Democracy in America*, reads,

“Local assemblies of citizens constitute the strength of free nations. Town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a system of free government, but without the spirit of municipal institutions it cannot have the spirit of liberty...In the township, as well as everywhere else, the people are the only source of power; but in no stage of government does the body of citizens exercise a more immediate influence.”<sup>2</sup>

De Tocqueville noted, two centuries ago, how crucial local government is to empowering and educating American voters. Since voters are most able to interact with and have their voices heard in local government, they are most invested in seeing it succeed. It is easy to understand why: most decisions related to education, policing, public works, and more have always been made at the municipal level.

200 years later, it feels as though the spirit of de Tocqueville’s thesis has lived on, at least in Massachusetts. On November 2, 2021, dozens of cities across the state held their biennial municipal election. Yet these elections were unlike any in state history. While Boston received much attention for electing the city’s first non-white and female mayor in history, it was not the only city to break from precedent that day. In Holyoke, voters elected a Latino to the office of mayor for the first time. In North Adams, voters also elected their first-ever female mayor. And in Lowell, the city voted under an entirely new system, where city councilors and school committee members were elected on both an at-large and district basis.<sup>1</sup>

These were not the only local elections that received attention. Cities like Brockton, Fall River, Framingham, and Lawrence held competitive mayoral elections. In Worcester, the state’s second-largest city, voters decided who should fill crucial positions including city council and school committee.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2021, Lowell elected city councilors and school committee members only on an at-large basis. However, voting rights advocates deemed this system discriminatory, and challenged it in federal court. There, they reached a settlement with the City of Lowell to reform the local election system. Learn more here: <http://lawyersforcivilrights.org/our-impact/voting-rights/settlement-of-federal-voting-rights-act-case-against-lowell-mass/>.

In each of these cities, it appeared that de Tocqueville's insight proved correct: the people were the only source of power. Across the state, voters elected a diverse array of candidates that reflected the state's changing face. This diversity stretched across the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender. The people showed that they wanted to move beyond the status quo, and that elected officials needed to be held to account.

Yet it is difficult to firmly stand by this belief when one understands who actually voted in these local elections. As Table 1 below shows, only a tiny fraction of voters turned out.

*Table 1: Voter Turnout in the November 2, 2021 Municipal Elections Across Massachusetts<sup>3</sup>*

	<b>Registered Voter Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Rate</b>
Boston	442,049	143,547	32%
Holyoke	27,354	8,212	30%
Lowell	67,867	12,095	18%
North Adams	9,000	3,166	35%
Framingham	39,897	12,259	31%
Brockton	58,151	11,506	20%
Lawrence	42,106	11,694	28%
Worcester	104,595	17,326	17%
Fall River	52,088	12,501	24%

Not one of the nine cities listed in Table 1 saw their voter turnout rate surpass 35% for the November 2021 municipal elections. These cities range in size from thousands to hundreds of thousands of residents. They possess vast racial, socio-economic, and cultural differences. They hold varied histories, interests, and beliefs. Yet, regardless of all these differences, they each witnessed alarmingly low voter turnout rates.

With these results, de Tocqueville's insight proves only partially correct. Instead, it should read: a mere fraction of voters are the true source of power.

These results are not surprising. Local election turnout has proven abysmally low for decades, both in Massachusetts<sup>4</sup> and across the country.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the November 2021 elections, officials and analysts believed turnout would prove low once again.<sup>6</sup> What is surprising, however, is that these results continue to be accepted as the status quo.

Through this report, “Reinvigorating Our Democracy: Understanding Local Elections and How Massachusetts May Increase Municipal Voter Turnout,” we will analyze how the state may understand and overcome this status quo. Section I will explore, as a potential reason for low turnout, whether or not local elections really matter to the average voter. Section II will analyze the history of local election turnout, and how it differs so substantially from today’s turnout rates. Section III will study perhaps the greatest reason why local election turnout has plummeted. Section IV will propose one reform municipalities across Massachusetts should implement to rapidly and dramatically boost local election turnout. The report will conclude by reiterating these points, emphasizing how and why Massachusetts communities may bolster local election turnout.

Ultimately, this paper will provide us a path to fulfilling the vision presented by Alexis de Tocqueville 200 years ago. Then, the people may come one step closer to serving as the only source of power.

## ***SECTION I: Do Local Elections Matter? Most Definitely.***

Before we explore the history of local election turnout, it is important to ask: do local elections matter? Perhaps turnout is so low because these elections have little to no impact on our daily lives. Maybe local elected officials, like mayors and city councilors, make few decisions that we actually see and feel. As a result, most voters may believe they have little reason to turn out.

While voters may not believe that local elections matter all that much, the opposite is actually true. Of all elections, local have by far the greatest impact on the day-to-day lives of residents. Local officials, like mayors, city councilors, and school committee members, decide the types of policies that residents live with every day, such as policing, affordable housing, and education. These officials do not offer vague platitudes on these subjects, but make decisions that actually impact residents. They consider how much funding the police department should receive, how many public housing units should be built, and what direction schools should move in. These officials do more than fill potholes and repair streetlights. They shape the lives of each resident, from young students to retirees to everyone in between.

While this is true across all of Massachusetts, it is arguably most apparent in Boston, where the mayor wields immense power. Boston’s mayor, for example, has the power to approve or veto virtually all decisions made by the city council. This can range from the renaming of a street to constructing a massive building. The city council can override a mayoral veto with a two-thirds vote, similarly to the president or governor, but only if it meets that high standard.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the mayor of Boston has the power to appoint department heads without city council approval.<sup>8</sup> This means that, for the dozens of city agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services, Environment Department, and Department of Economic Development, the mayor has sole power on setting the policy agenda. Departments like these receive millions – if not tens or hundreds of millions – of dollars in funding,<sup>9</sup> and staff nearly 22,000 employees.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, city departments not only provide the mayor a major tool to fulfill their policy agenda, but an immense avenue through which residents interact with and are impacted by local government.

Finally, the mayor of Boston has the unique power of nominating school committee members.<sup>11</sup> While a 13-member nominating panel must approve the mayor's appointments, the mayor is able to nominate four of the panel members. As a result, the mayor has immense influence over not only what is taught in each Boston classroom, but the funds and resources that are invested into those classrooms.<sup>11</sup> With nearly 50,000 students attending Boston Public Schools,<sup>12</sup> the depth and breadth of the mayor's power regarding education cannot be overstated.

While the power of local government is perhaps most striking in the case of Boston, all Massachusetts municipalities hold immense authority over policy areas that influence residents, such as education. In every municipality (except Boston), voters elect school committee members. These officials, which serve two-year terms, make decisions that impact all public-school students and their families. Broadly, the committee establishes educational goals and policies for the district. More specifically, the school committee appoints a wide array of positions, including the superintendent, special education administrators, school physicians, and legal counsel. Furthermore, the school committee reviews and approves budgets for the district.<sup>13</sup> Through all of these powers (and more) it is clear how much authority school committees wield within their communities. They shape the educational experience of each student, and lay the foundation for their future.

Municipalities also have immense power in the area of affordable housing. Municipalities across the state possess their individual Housing Authority. These authorities are meant to manage public housing, overseeing properties that serve as reliable, secure places for families to call home. Throughout this work, housing authorities must prioritize quality, respect, and accountability in their units. Voters play a crucial role in this process. The mayor (or the municipality's executive equivalent) appoints and the council confirms four of the Authority's five Commissioners (the Governor appoints the fifth). Cities like

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<sup>11</sup> Boston is the only municipality in Massachusetts that does not allow voters to directly elect school committee members. This system was implemented in 1992 following the passage of a nonbinding referendum to make the committee appointed. On November 2, 2021, Boston voters overwhelmingly voted in support of a nonbinding measure to revert the school committee back to an elected system. Since this was nonbinding, it remains to be seen what route the city will take. Learn more here: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/11/03/metro/boston-voters-supported-an-elected-school-committee-now-what/>.

Worcester,<sup>14</sup> Lowell,<sup>15</sup> and Lawrence<sup>16</sup> each manage thousands of affordable housing units, emphasizing how closely this issue impacts residents.

As this section makes clear, local elections are of immense importance to voters. They directly impact services that residents depend on, like education and housing. They also place immense authority into the hands of small groups of people, so each election must serve as a check on those in power. So why are these elections such low turnout affairs? Has it always been this way? What causes this? What can be done about it? The following sections explore these questions.

## ***SECTION II: Understanding the History of Voter Turnout in Local Elections***

Local elections have not always experienced such abysmal voter turnout. In fact, for decades – if not longer – they experienced voter turnout rates that surpassed what we see in presidential races today.

This section will highlight this by studying local election voter turnout rates in four years: 1925, 1941, 1959, and 1975. These years were chosen because they each reflect different eras of history, and are spread out over time. By closely analyzing multiple elections over the course of decades, it becomes less likely that high voter turnout was simply a one-off instance. Instead, by occurring decade after decade, the trend of high local election turnout becomes more apparent. This analysis focuses on seven Massachusetts cities. Those are Boston, Brockton, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Worcester, and Fall River. These communities were chosen because of their geographic, ethnic, and historical differences.

*Table 2: Election information for 1925 municipal elections in Massachusetts<sup>17</sup>*

	<b>Registered Voter Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Rate</b>
<b>Boston</b>	233,057	183,568	79%
<b>Brockton</b>	26,606	22,309	84%
<b>Holyoke</b>	20,200	15,498	77%
<b>Lawrence</b>	25,872	22,650	88%
<b>Lowell</b>	34,807	24,594	71%
<b>Worcester</b>	63,972	38,751	61%
<b>Fall River</b>	38,185	31,100	81%

Table 2 analyzes local election turnout from the 1925 municipal elections, held nearly 100 years ago. The voter turnout in these elections, when compared to 2021 turnout levels, is nearly incomprehensible. Rates in 1925 were dozens of points higher than they were in 2021. Nowhere was it a coincidence. Instead, across Massachusetts, the vast majority of voters cast ballots in local elections.

*Table 3: Election information for 1941 municipal elections in Massachusetts<sup>18</sup>*

	<b>Registered Voter Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Rate</b>
<b>Boston</b>	370,777	270,681	73%
<b>Brockton</b>	35,041	28,139	80%
<b>Holyoke</b>	30,060	21,802	73%
<b>Lawrence</b>	43,064	35,687	83%
<b>Lowell</b>	50,201	37,165	74%
<b>Worcester</b>	97,186	68,212	70%
<b>Fall River</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 3 supports the analysis of Table 2. The number of registered voters and ballots cast in each city grew, reflecting the state's overall population growth. As more voters enrolled, turnout rates, on average, did not decline. Worcester's rate actually increased. New voters turned out in local elections, like voters did in 1925. Once again, these rates put 2021's to shame.<sup>iii</sup>

*Table 4: Election information for 1959 municipal elections in Massachusetts<sup>19</sup>*

	<b>Registered Voter Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Rate</b>
<b>Boston</b>	329,498	209,281	64%
<b>Brockton</b>	33,848	21,121	63%
<b>Holyoke</b>	28,255	20,233	72%
<b>Lawrence</b>	39,912	31,372	79%
<b>Lowell</b>	50,678	36,021	71%
<b>Worcester</b>	93,406	67,112	72%
<b>Fall River</b>	52,180	42,154	81%

<sup>iii</sup> Note: Data for Fall River is not included in Table 3 because the city held local elections on even-numbered years for a time. 1941 was one of the years in which they did so.

As Table 4 reveals, we begin to see some change in 1959, but overall turnout remains extremely impressive when compared to 2021. Every city except Lowell witnessed a decline in the overall number of registered voters and the number of people that voted. Yet in every city except Boston and Brockton, turnout rates remained fairly stable, changing by only a few points when compared to 1941. Boston witnessed their turnout rate decrease by 9% and Brockton saw theirs shrink by 17%. But even with such sharp declines, Boston and Brockton witnessed local election turnout rates in 1959 that proved dozens of points higher than those in 2021.

*Table 5: Election information for 1975 municipal elections in Massachusetts<sup>20</sup>*

	<b>Registered Voter Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Total</b>	<b>Voter Turnout Rate</b>
<b>Boston</b>	256,951	159,363	62%
<b>Brockton</b>	38,030	24,529	64%
<b>Holyoke</b>	24,643	17,262	70%
<b>Lawrence</b>	30,376	23,489	77%
<b>Lowell</b>	42,744	26,543	62%
<b>Worcester</b>	83,757	45,418	54%
<b>Fall River</b>	45,795	35,434	77%

Table 5 continues the trends of Table 4. Every city except Brockton experienced a decline in population. Though with these declines, the local election turnout rates of 1975 seriously surpass those of 2021. The cities that saw the sharpest decline between Table 3 and Table 4, Boston and Brockton, saw their voter turnout rates stabilize around 60%. Worcester, however, witnessed their turnout rate decrease by 18% when comparing Tables 4 and 5. Lowell saw theirs decrease by 9%.

*Table 6: Voter turnout rates in Massachusetts municipal elections throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

	<b>1925</b>	<b>1941</b>	<b>1959</b>	<b>1975</b>
<b>Boston</b>	79%	73%	64%	62%
<b>Brockton</b>	84%	80%	63%	64%
<b>Holyoke</b>	77%	73%	72%	70%
<b>Lawrence</b>	88%	83%	79%	77%
<b>Lowell</b>	71%	74%	71%	62%
<b>Worcester</b>	61%	70%	72%	54%
<b>Fall River</b>	81%	N/A	81%	77%



Table 6 compares these turnout rates over the 50-year period. Overall, all cities included here experienced a decline in voter turnout. For some cities, like Brockton and Worcester, that decline proved fairly substantial. But for others, like Holyoke and Fall River, it proved far lower. Nevertheless, even if all turnout rates were at their lowest in 1975, they were still substantially higher than each city's respective turnout rate in 2021. In 2021, none of these cities saw their voter turnout rate pass 32%. In 1975, however, none of these cities saw their voter turnout rates fall below 54%.

In the decades that followed, the low turnout rates that we have come to know began to emerge. For example, when Boston held a mayoral election in 1991, only 32% of voters turned out.<sup>21</sup> That rate jumped to 51% when another mayoral election was held in 1993 (when Thomas Menino won his first term),<sup>22</sup> but plummeted to 28% in 1997,<sup>23</sup> 37% in 2001,<sup>24</sup> and 36% in 2005.<sup>25</sup>

So what happened? Section III explores this question.

### ***SECTION III: The Decline of Local Media (and Local Democracy)***

If you lived in Boston 100 years ago, probably 75 years ago, and maybe even 50 years ago, the number of local news options presented to you were staggering. Depending on which neighborhood you lived in, you could choose between multiple papers. South Boston residents, for example, could choose between the *South Boston Gazette, Tribune, News, or Inquirer*. The people of Charlestown, meanwhile, could choose between the *Charlestown Citizen, Enterprise, or News*. If you were an immigrant, there were regional papers written in dozens of languages, including Greek, German, and Latvian. If you wanted to read a paper centered around the Black community, you could delve into the *Boston Guardian*. If you wanted to learn more about what was happening across the city, you could read the *Boston Telegram, Times, Traveler, Chronicle, Advocate, or Globe*.<sup>26</sup>

These newspapers did more than detail political or economic developments. They discussed subjects like community events, sports, and local businesses. Through working in such a localized, nuanced manner, they made a neighborhood feel like a neighborhood. They created an environment that people could easily learn about and become a part of. So when readers wanted to learn about who was running for city council or mayor, they had local, accessible, informative outlets to turn to. They had tons of tools to prepare for their trip to the ballot box.

Now, the media landscape has changed dramatically. How people get their news has changed. What sort of news people get has changed too. As a result, our attachment to and knowledge of our local communities has waned. With that, inevitably, has come the fall in local election turnout.

Analyzing trends like newspaper circulation help us understand this. For example, in 1940, the total circulation of US daily newspapers averaged more than 41 million. That rate climbed until around 1970, when daily newspaper circulation hit just over 62 million. This rate stood steady until about 1990, when it began to decline, at first slowly, then rapidly. As of 2020, the total circulation of US daily newspapers averaged just over 24 million.<sup>27</sup>

This may not seem significant. Due to technological advances, we generally read and do more online than we do in print. With that, perhaps news outlets simply weathered this change by moving online. Surface-level analysis seems to support that idea. For instance, even though fewer than 35% of Americans consume print news, more than 80% consume news digitally. Of those, more than 60% consume news via websites or apps.<sup>28</sup>

However, even though most individuals are still reading the news, what that news looks like differs substantially from decades past. Instead of focusing on local community issues, most news focuses on national issues. This trend began to emerge in the 1990s, just as newspaper circulation started to decline. As opposed to following local news, more adults turned to national television outlets like Fox News and MSNBC.<sup>29</sup> This trend has carried over to newspapers that have gone digital too. For example, as of 2020, the *New York Times* – a go-to national newspaper – had more digital subscribers in Dallas than the *Dallas Morning News*, more in Seattle than the *Seattle Times*, and more in California than the *LA Times* or *San Francisco Chronicle*.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, more than 20% of US newsroom employees live in the New York City, Los Angeles, or Washington, DC metro areas: the economic, cultural, and political capitals of the country.<sup>31</sup>

Yet as the national news scene has thrived, the local news scene has suffered. Papers once considered staples are smaller in size, scope, and reputation. Between 2004 and 2018, the largest daily newspapers covering metropolitan areas saw both their circulation and newsroom staffing cut in half. Additionally, the small, local, community-driven newspapers in urban, suburban, and rural communities have undergone mergers, substantially altering their name, reputation, and capability.<sup>32</sup> For example, in 2014, Massachusetts' own *North Adams Transcript*, a 171-year-old paper, merged with another paper. As a result, the *Transcript's* name was lost to history, as was the personal, local coverage that had been based in the community for nearly 200 years.<sup>33</sup>

However, many newspapers did not make it this far. During the same 14-year period, 2004 to 2018, the number US newspapers decreased by 20%: from nearly 9,000 to just above 7,000. These losses were felt in Massachusetts. The *Dorchester Reporter's* Bill Forry solemnly pointed this out in 2012, when he wrote about the closing of the *Argus-Citizen*, a neighborhood newspaper,

“While it’s true that the *Argus-Citizen* has not been a widely read paper in recent years, at one time it was the paper of record in this part of the city...Generations of Dorchester people relied on the *Argus* for news about their community, their kids’ schools, the local sports teams and church activities. In its heyday, it employed top-notch journalists and editors like the legendary Bill Pedersen, the *Boston Globe*’s Charlie Radin, and BNN-TV newsman Chris Lovett.”<sup>34</sup>

Without outlets like the *Argus-Citizen* or *North Adams Transcript*, residents’ interest in and attachment to their community has waned. Their knowledge of community events, local sports teams, and the business sector has plummeted with the plummeting of daily newspaper circulation. Their understanding of and dedication to local politics and government has fallen as well. When newspaper circulation was sky-high, so too was local election turnout. Yet when circulation fell, local election turnout rates fell with it. Furthermore, with fewer state and local media outlets covering state and local politics and government, there is a greater chance for corruption to flourish. Without a bevy of local, knowledgeable, connected journalists, corruption in cities and towns is more likely to go unnoticed.<sup>35</sup>

Amid these circumstances, how can we reinvigorate our local democracy? How can local election voter turnout realistically see a boost? As Section IV makes clear, there is one straightforward step municipalities across Massachusetts can take to help address this problem.

## ***SECTION IV: How to Reinvigorate Our Democracy***

When Baltimore, Maryland held their 2011 mayoral election, the results were all too similar to those we see in Massachusetts. Only 24% of voters cast ballots in the city’s primary,<sup>36</sup> and 13% did so in the general, where the Democratic candidate won handedly.<sup>37</sup> If nothing changed, Baltimore’s next local election – scheduled for 2015 – likely would have produced similarly abysmal results. But something did change. Something massive.

In 2012, Baltimore, in partnership with the Maryland state government, moved the city’s local elections to line up with the presidential election schedule. So, instead of holding the next local election in 2015, the city would hold it in 2016. This meant that officials like the mayor would serve one extra year. However, advocates believed this alteration would have numerous, substantive benefits. Not only would this reform save the city money, they believed, but it would lead to increased voter turnout.<sup>38</sup> It did: 62% of voters turned out in the 2016 general election,<sup>39</sup> and 61% of voters turned out in 2020.<sup>40</sup>

Baltimore is not the only city to hold its local elections on even-numbered years. For example, San Diego, California has held their local elections alongside state elections since the 1980s. Similarly to Baltimore,

the mayoral elections line up with presidential elections.<sup>41</sup> In 2020, the results of this policy proved extremely successful, as voter turnout reached 83%.<sup>42</sup> 83%. That is more than twice the rate cities like Boston and Holyoke experienced in 2021, and more than three times the rate cities like Worcester and Lowell experienced that year.

Additionally, due to a state law that mandates municipalities line up local elections with state elections if voter turnout falls below a certain threshold, dozens of California communities hold local elections on even-numbered years. There, the results are just as striking. Communities on average experienced a 300% increase in local election turnout. This reform has especially empowered cities with traditionally marginalized communities, like Latino and low-income populations.<sup>43</sup>

The city of Austin, Texas is following the trend set by Baltimore and California. Currently, local elections take place on even-numbered years. However, the city's mayoral election does not take place on the same years as the presidential election. In 2021, Austin voted to amend this process so the mayoral race will line up with the nation's presidential race.<sup>44</sup> As a result, voter turnout in mayoral races will almost certainly rise.

These local election voter turnout levels are unlike anything Massachusetts witnessed in 2021, or in the past few decades. Yet they are easily achievable. By shifting the schedule of local elections to line up with state elections, communities across Massachusetts can take a simple but massive step to help increase democratic participation. To maximize impact, the mayoral election schedule should line up with the presidential election schedule. Positions that are elected every two years, like city councilor and school committee, can be elected every even-numbered year. In doing so, cities in towns would not only boost voter turnout. They would also save the sizable funds they currently spend when holding their own preliminary and general municipal elections.

Logistically, the process of implementing this reform is straightforward. Any municipality in Massachusetts may pass a Home Rule Petition moving their local elections to take place on even-numbered years. The legislative body of a municipal government, like the city council, would introduce and pass the measure. The municipality's chief executive, like the mayor, would then have to sign it. Following this, the state legislature would have to pass the measure. Finally, the governor would sign it. If the governor vetoes the proposal, then the legislature could override the veto by a two-thirds vote. Following either the governor's signature or a veto override, the policy would become law in the municipality. This process must be completed during a single legislative session, which usually spans an 18-month period. However, this process could theoretically be completed in days if the municipality and state wish it to be so.<sup>45</sup>

It is also possible for a municipality to implement this policy without the need for state authorization. Independently, municipalities may revise their charter. A charter is essentially a municipality's version of a constitution. It details the makeup of local government, outlining, for example, when local elections take place. The charter reform process is similar to that of an initiative petition at the state level, where a certain number of registered voter signatures must be gathered to get the issue on the ballot. If enough signatures are gathered, then voters will decide whether or not the municipality should create a charter commission to consider reforms. If that passes and charter commissioners are elected, then the commission has 18 months to hold public hearings, draft and publish proposed charter changes, and receive the state Attorney General's legal analysis. Finally, voters will decide whether or not to accept the proposed charter changes in the next election. The vote on whether or not to accept the changes usually takes place two years after the charter commission is accepted and election. Consequently, the process of reforming the election timeline can take around three years.<sup>46</sup>

There are pros and cons to both routes. The Home Rule Petition process is much faster, but it depends on state approval. The charter change process does not require state approval, but it can take much longer. Additionally, once a charter commission begins considering revisions to the charter, any element of the charter is open for revision. As a result, ensuring that the charter revision process ends in one's favor can be complicated. Nevertheless, both options are available for municipalities, and both should be considered moving forward.

The policy of moving local elections to line up with state elections has not received much attention in Massachusetts. However, in September 2021, then-City Councilor and mayoral candidate Michelle Wu expressed her opposition to moving local elections to line up with state elections.<sup>47</sup> She did not elaborate on why she opposes this reform.<sup>48</sup> This is very disappointing, especially because Mayor Wu is considered a strong progressive. Overall, low turnout elections disproportionately favor white, wealthy voters, as well as interest groups. However, supporting the reform of moving local elections to line up with state elections is an incredibly progressive policy, as it would empower voters across Boston by easing voting accessibility. As a result, far more voters would have their voices heard in the elections that matter most. This would especially embolden those that traditionally face the greatest barriers to the ballot box, such as Black and Latino voters.<sup>49</sup>

One reason that city and town officials may be opposing moving local elections to even-numbered years is the belief that it allows communities to focus on community elections. While everyone may get distracted by the presidential and senatorial races in even-numbered years, voters can focus on getting to know their city council and mayoral candidates in odd-numbered years. As well-intentioned as this policy may seem, it clearly does not work. In fact, some scholars argue that local elections were moved to odd-numbered years to potentially bolster the electability of specific political parties. The will of the voters, they believed, came second to the will of the party.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of whether or not this is true,

one fact is. Local election turnout is shameful, and it will remain shameful unless Massachusetts cities and towns take action.

To correct the decades-long trend of horrid local election turnout, cities and towns across Massachusetts must move their local elections to take place on even-numbered years alongside state elections. Mayoral elections must take place at the same time as presidential elections. In doing so, municipalities may bolster voter turnout, civic participation, and the life blood of their very community.

## **CONCLUSION**

When the initially objective Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about American democracy 200 years ago, his affection for and optimism towards local government quickly became palpable. Through this institution, he believed, residents could speak out and actually see the benefits of speaking out. Residents could see their rights in action. He treasured how, in their own community, “the people are the only source of power; but in no stage of government does the body of citizens exercise a more immediate influence.”

However, centuries later, many look on local elections with disappointment. As 2021 voter turnout rates across Massachusetts made clear, a small fraction of voters decide mayors, city councilors, and school committee members. While low voter turnout in a democracy is almost always considered disappointing, it is especially disappointing in local elections, as these offices have the greatest impact on resident’s daily lives. Even though voter turnout used to be far higher in local elections, the decline of local media has contributed heavily the low turnout we see today.

Yet by moving local elections to line up with state elections, Massachusetts cities and towns may dramatically boost voter turnout rates. Following the likes of Baltimore, San Diego, and Austin, Massachusetts communities should move to hold mayoral elections alongside presidential elections. Elections for offices like city council and school committee, which take place biennially, should take place every even-numbered year. Municipalities may do so either through the Home Rule Petition process, or by reforming their charter. Such a move would not only increase local election turnout, but reduce costs for municipalities, who pay sizable sums for the local elections that take place every odd-numbered year.

Local government can and should be the place where the people are the only source of power. Instead of continuing to allow predominantly white and wealthy voters, as well as special interest groups, to decide local elections, we must reform the process to empower all voters. By moving local elections to even-numbered years, Massachusetts cities and towns would have a real shot at seeing their own people serve as the only source of power. In this democracy, we should strive for nothing less.

## ***ABOUT MASSVOTE***

MassVOTE is a non-partisan non-profit (501©3) issue advocacy organization dedicated to voting rights, voter education, and social justice. The organization was formed in 1999 with the goal of bridging the state's voter turnout gap between its predominantly white, suburban communities and more diverse urban communities. It does so with the ultimate hope of creating a more socially, politically, and economically just Massachusetts.

## ***ABOUT THE AUTHORS***

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**Vanessa Snow** is the Policy and Organizing Director at MassVOTE. Vanessa is a long-time activist from Boston. She brings decades of experience in labor, community, and youth organizing and advocacy. A UMass Amherst alum, Ms. Snow has previously served at organizations including SEIU Local 509, the Greater Boston Labor Council, and the Hyde Square Task Force. Additionally, Ms. Snow is the board chair of Zero Debt MA, a board member of Student Immigrant Movement, a member of the Mijente National Leadership Circle, and a member of Right to the City Vote's steering committee.

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