



Chris Vazquez
Political Science

Off-Cycle or On-Cycle?

Effects of Off-Cycle Elections on Descriptive Representation
for Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Mentor: Dr. Adam Dynes
FHSS Research Academy

Introduction

Federalism allows for different municipalities to have different systems of government throughout the United States. Most municipal governments have off-cycle elections – i.e., they do not occur at the same time as national elections in November of even of even numbered year. Political scientists have found that off-cycle elections have significantly lower turnout (Hajnal & Lewis 2003). Turnout among the black population has also been found to be lower in municipalities with off-cycle elections (Hajnal & Troustine 2005). With lower turnout, especially in the black population, do off-cycle elections have an effect on racial representation in local governments? (Descriptive representation is when elected officials share key characteristics with their constituents).

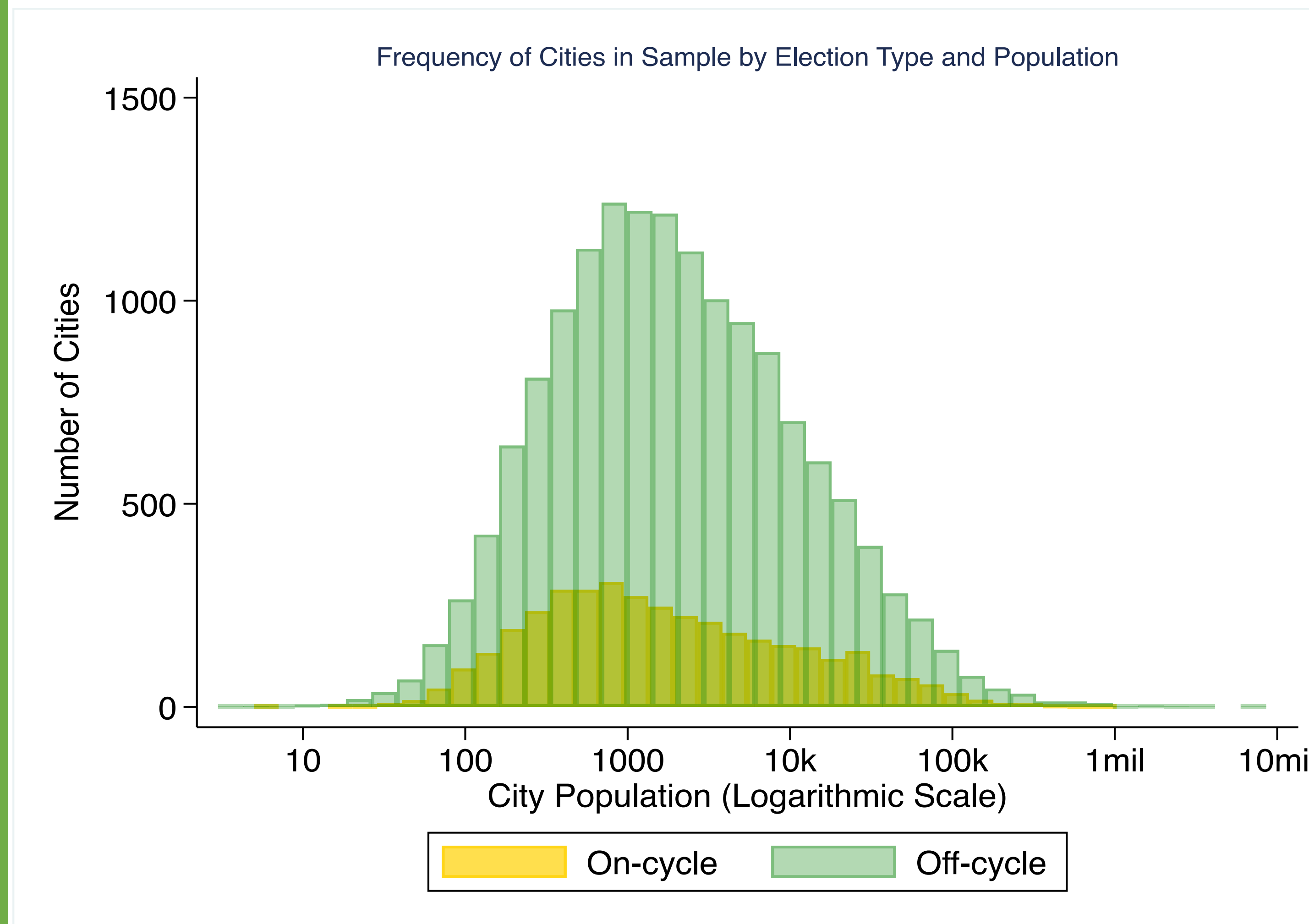
Data Collection

Data on municipal elections, government type, and government size was collected from municipal websites, state publications, and through contacting municipal officials by a team of research assistants. The collected data was merged with a list of elected municipal officials from 2017 and with a nationwide voter file for demographic information. Our sample of 14,287 municipalities is an order of magnitude greater than past work.

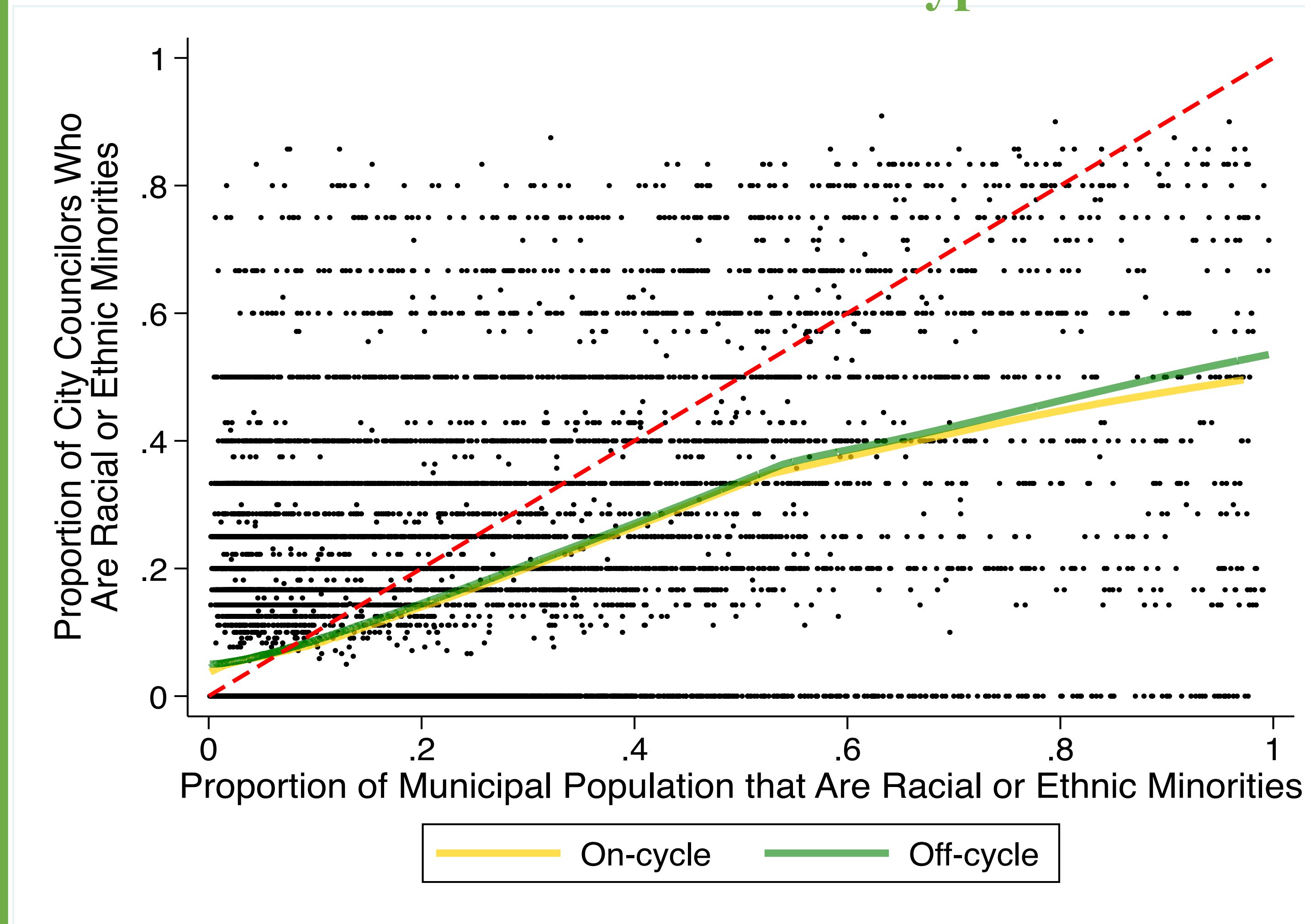
Results

- Off-cycle elections have no effect on descriptive representation ($p > .05$)
- Descriptive representation is mainly dependent on population and the racial composition of the municipality ($p < .01$)
- As the amount of minorities in the population increases, the greater the amount of minorities in municipal governments.

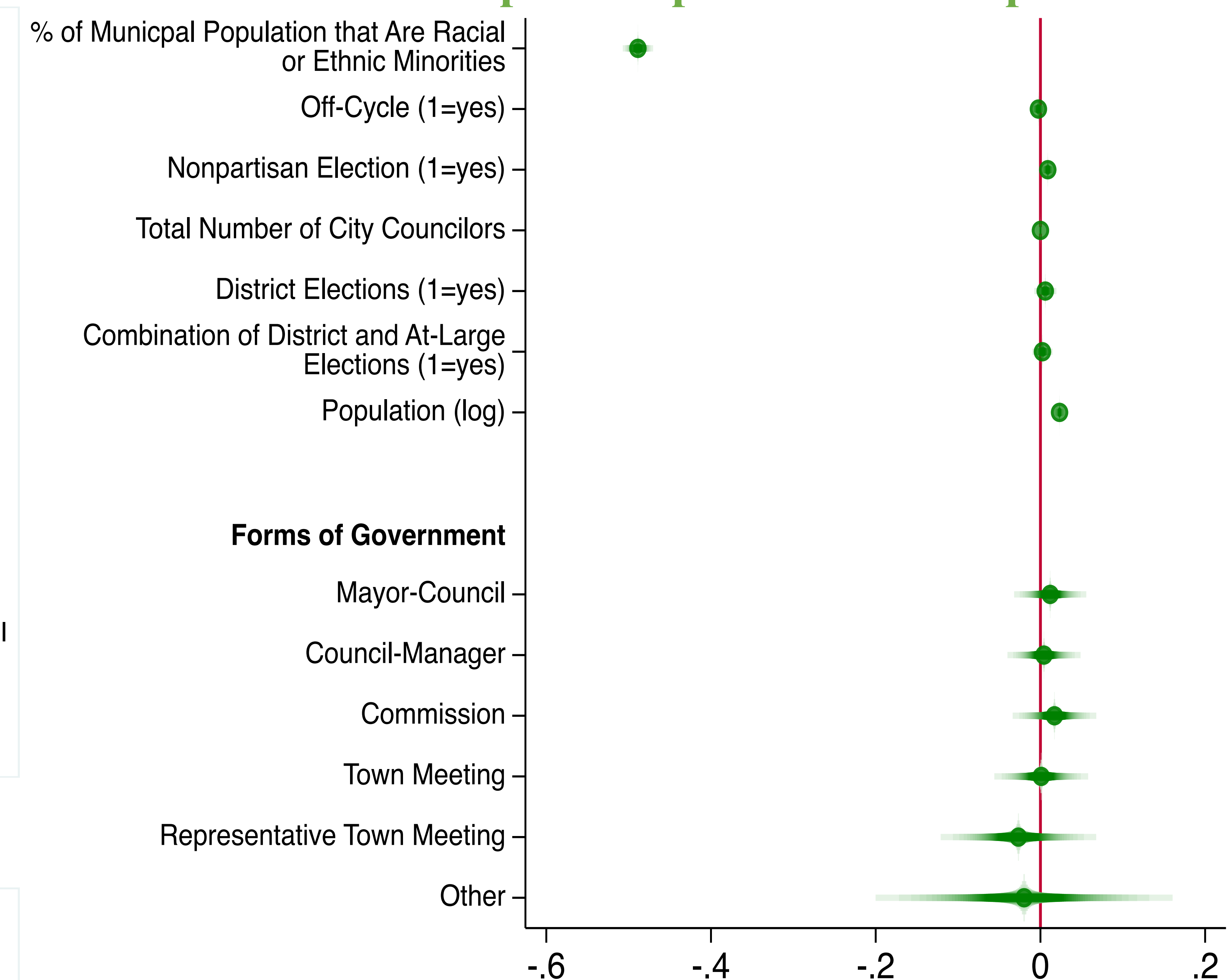
Large Number of Cities with Off-Cycle Elections in the U.S.



Small Difference in Representation Between Cities with Different Election Types



Population and Racial Composition Affect Descriptive Representation Gap



Note: Figure above shows a coefficient plot from an OLS regression where the dependent variable is the difference between % of minorities on the city council and % of minorities in the population. Positive coefficients mean that the variable is related to overrepresentation for minorities (i.e., greater proportion of minorities on city council than in population).

Note: Figure to the left is a scatter plot that displays different municipalities with Lowess lines for cities with off-cycle (green) and on-cycle (yellow) elections. 45-degree line included for reference for perfect descriptive representation for racial and ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

Surprisingly, off-cycle elections have virtually no effect on descriptive representation in municipal governments. This finding strays from results found in previous research done on this topic and that could be because of the much smaller datasets used in past work. More research should be done to examine the effects of other institutions on turnout and representation.