Turnout and Trust: Strengthening Democratic Responsiveness Through Local Participation

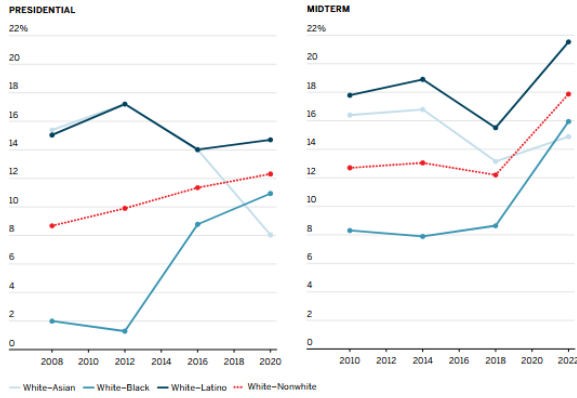Lucas Sneller
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1. Executive Summary

Low and unequal participation in local government threatens American democracy both by negating much of the political arena over which people have control and by skewing policy outcomes toward older, wealthier, and predominantly white voters, eroding trust and responsiveness in governance. Existing approaches, such as national election holidays, mandatory government classes in schools, and mandatory voting, are poorly suited to the unique challenges of off-cycle municipal elections and have failed to address this democratic deficit. To revitalize local participation, this policy brief recommends two innovative reforms: establishing a Local Deliberation Day to foster informed community dialogue before elections, and expanding local direct democracy through citizen initiatives and referenda, paired with ward-based legislative councils to ensure geographically representative governance. These targeted, community-driven solutions aim to boost civic engagement, reduce participatory disparities, and restore faith in local institutions.

## 2. Description of the Problem and Why It Is Important

2.1. Low Voter Turnout

Declining voter turnout and participation in local spheres of governance undermine the legitimacy, responsiveness, and equity of governance at the municipal level. While national elections often dominate public attention, local elections, where critical decisions about zoning, education, public safety, and social services are made, suffer from alarmingly low participation, with turnout frequently falling below 20 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). More troubling is that this low turnout is not evenly distributed across the population. Data consistently show that voters in local elections are disproportionately older, wealthier, and whiter than the communities they represent, skewing policy outcomes toward their preferences and marginalizing the voices of younger, lower-income, and racially diverse residents (Hajnal, 2009). This participatory inequality erodes the democratic principle that government should reflect the will of all citizens, not just a privileged few. Lack of voter turnout overall acts as a hindrance to the government's ability to respond dynamically. Caughey and Warshaw (2019) provide one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of dynamic responsiveness in American state governments. Using a Bayesian dynamic multilevel model to estimate public policy preferences at the state level from 1936 to 2014, they compare these estimates to actual policy outcomes to assess how closely governments respond to changes in constituent opinion over time. Their findings reveal that while responsiveness is far from perfect, it is real and measurable: states with more liberal publics tend to adopt more liberal policies, particularly on salient issues like social rights and economic regulation.

(a) Racial Turnout Gaps in Presidential and Midterm Elections, 2008–2022. Source: Brennan Center for Justice (2023).
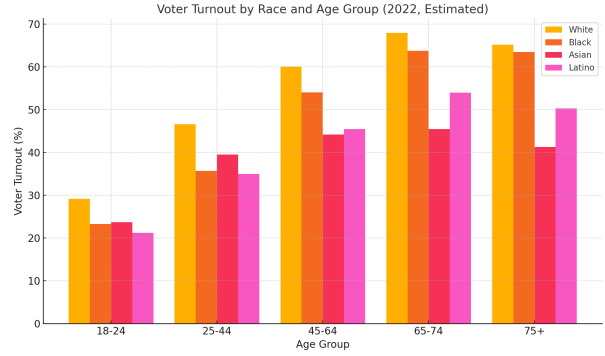
(b) Voter Turnout by Race and Age Group, 2022. White voters consistently turned out at higher rates than Black, Asian, and Latino voters, especially among younger age groups. Turnout also increased with age across all racial categories.

Figure 1: Racial disparities in voter turnout patterns.

Their findings suggest that responsiveness is significantly stronger in states with higher voter participation, more competitive elections, and a more engaged electorate. This reinforces the broader claim that democratic responsiveness depends on institutional design and political actual involvement, especially turnout. In low-turnout contexts, governments have fewer signals from the public, and policy is more likely to reflect the preferences of engaged elites rather than the general population. To test this relationship, I compared the dynamic responsiveness score from Caughey and Warshaw with voter turnout data. This data is, of course, quite noisy, as many external factors go into both voter turnout and dynamic responsiveness. For example, a state with a population that holds generally homogeneous beliefs would not necessarily suffer from low voter turnout. Twenty percent of a homogeneous population is much more likely to be representative of the entire population. The appendix presents a graphical representation of these findings. However, the key findings can be stated here: Although there is much variance due to the various levels of noise in the data, a noticeable relationship exists between the two variables in that higher voter turnout is a better safeguard against unrepresentative governments.

2.2. Local Issue Salience

Americans are increasingly feeling they have less and less influence over the government. Especially after the passing of *Citizens United v. F.E.C* in 2010, people have increasingly believed that economic elites and, more specifically, the managerial class of business elites, exercised disproportionate influence over policy. These ideas are supported in *Quiet Politics and Business Power* by Pepper D. Culpepper. Culpepper summarizes the main idea of his findings into a sentence in the final chapter: "the more the public cares about an issue, the less managerial organizations will be able to exercise disproportionate influence over the rules governing that issue." This powerful claim, when contrasted with the aforementioned decline in attention to local issues, paints a clear image of why Americans are feeling increasingly helpless in government: The issues they *can* affect, exist almost entirely in their local sphere, however less and less importance is placed on the local aspect of American governance as urbanization and globalization have removed salience from these local issues. Culpepper notes that when a politician believes an issue is not salient to his constituents,

it is often deferred to informal political arenas such as lobbying/interest groups. Thus, one of the key aspects of reclaiming influence over government lies in recognizing the importance of local issues. By paying more attention to and engaging with local governance, citizens can ensure that their concerns are addressed directly, rather than being overshadowed by broader, less accessible national debates. This re-engagement not only empowers individuals but also strengthens the democratic process at its most fundamental level, where the impact of civic participation is most tangible.

3.   Policy Alternatives

Several policies have been employed to address low voter turnout and unequal participation in local elections, though none have fully resolved the underlying issues of civic disengagement and representational inequity. Common approaches include voter education campaigns, early and mail-in voting, and consolidating local elections with national cycles. While these measures have had some success, they often fail to address the structural and motivational barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups.

Voter education and outreach initiatives, such as public service announcements and community events, aim to inform citizens about elections and the importance of voting. However, these efforts frequently fall short because they do not tackle the logistical challenges—such as time constraints, transportation issues, or distrust in the political system—that prevent many from participating (**Hajnal**; **2009**). Moreover, these campaigns tend to reach those already inclined to vote, doing little to engage disenfranchised or apathetic citizens.

Early voting and mail-in voting have been introduced in many jurisdictions to make participation more convenient. While these policies have increased turnout in some cases, they do not address the root causes of disengagement, such as the perceived irrelevance of local elections or the lack of meaningful civic dialogue (**Census2020**). Additionally, these measures do not mitigate the demographic skew in participation, as older, wealthier, and white voters remain more likely to take advantage of these options.

Another approach is consolidating local elections with national or state elections ("on-cycle" elections) to boost turnout by capitalizing on higher voter engagement during presidential or midterm years. Research indicates that on-cycle elections can increase local turnout significantly (**Anzia2013**). However, this strategy risks overshadowing local issues with national political narratives, reducing voters' focus on municipal concerns. Furthermore, it does not foster sustained civic engagement between election cycles, leaving the deeper problem of local democratic disconnection unaddressed.

Though implemented in some countries, mandatory voting has been largely rejected in the U.S. due to cultural resistance and concerns about coercing uninformed participation (**Birch2016**). Even where enforced, mandatory voting does not guarantee higher-quality democratic outcomes, as it may lead to protest voting or random ballot choices rather than thoughtful engagement.

These existing policies, while valuable, have not fully succeeded because they treat turnout as a technical problem rather than a symptom of deeper civic alienation. They fail to rebuild the communal and deliberative foundations of local democracy, which are essential for fostering trust, legitimacy, and sustained participation.

In contrast, the policies proposed in this brief (Local Deliberation Day and the expansion of local direct democracy with a ward-based legislative council) directly target these foundational issues. Local Deliberation Day provides a structured, community-based forum for citizens to discuss local issues, reducing informational barriers and fostering a sense of shared responsibility. Embedding deliberation into the electoral calendar encourages participation as a communal act rather than an individual chore. Similarly, expanding direct

democracy and establishing ward-based councils empower citizens to influence policy directly and ensure that all neighborhoods have a voice in governance. These reforms, grounded in local context and supported by historical and contemporary research (**Tocqueville1835**; **Matsusaka2004**), offer a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to revitalizing democratic responsiveness at the municipal level.

III. Policy Proposals

A. Local Deliberation Day

To address low and unequal turnout in municipal elections, I propose a locally tailored adaptation of Ackerman and Fishkin's "Deliberation Day" (2004). Their original concept envisioned a national paid holiday dedicated to civic dialogue before federal elections. This brief reimagines the idea at the municipal level: *Local Deliberation Days*, designated by city governments and held leading up to off-cycle elections. These deliberation events would be held in public places (community centers or schools) and would foster conversations about the candidates, their policies, and the issues persistent in the community. Ideally, this policy would incentivize residents to attend and participate in these events, such as childcare, food, games, and monetary rewards, encouraging attendance at neighborhood forums, school-based discussions, or community assemblies.

The goal is to reduce logistical barriers to voting and reestablish democratic engagement as a participatory civic norm. In municipalities where elections occur in odd-numbered years, often detached from national political narratives, a Local Deliberation Day would increase issue salience and offer structured opportunities for dialogue. Unlike national holidays, which rarely align with off-cycle voting, this reform synchronizes civic engagement with the electoral calendar. As a locally administered and recurring event, it promotes consistent participation and helps rebuild local political culture.

This proposal addresses two major problems identified earlier: the logistical isolation of municipal elections and the information disadvantage lower-turnout groups face. By providing time, space, and incentives for community-based discussion, Local Deliberation Day reduces participation's cognitive and social costs. It also directly engages populations least likely to vote—renters, young people, and working-class residents, often disconnected from traditional civic networks (Hajnal, 2009). As a voluntary, city-coordinated initiative, it avoids federal overreach while encouraging localized democratic innovation.

Importantly, the benefits of deliberation extend beyond information-sharing. Research from other civic institutions suggests that structured interpersonal engagement fosters empathy and inclusive attitudes. Frymer and Grumbach (2021) find that white workers in labor unions show lower levels of racial resentment and greater support for policies benefiting African Americans than their nonunion counterparts. Their panel analysis suggests this shift is likely causal: shared organizational settings that promote dialogue and cooperation can reshape political outlooks. While their study focuses on racial attitudes, the broader takeaway is clear: sustained, local engagement helps individuals better understand the challenges others in their community face. A Local Deliberation Day aims to recreate this civic exposure municipally, deepening community bonds and encouraging inclusive participation.

Moreover, deliberation helps participants broaden their understanding of local needs. Most voters tend to focus on issues directly affecting them; community discussion exposes them to housing instability, school underfunding, or neighborhood-specific safety. And the mere introduction of these issues can make them politically salient. However, these perspectives are often inaccessible without structured civic contact. By embedding such engagement into the electoral calendar, deliberation makes governance more relational,

encouraging voters to see participation not as a solitary act but as part of a shared democratic project. When citizens vote with a deeper awareness of one another's circumstances, policymaking becomes more responsive and equitable.

A central strength of this model is its grounding in local geography. Deliberation occurs among neighbors who share infrastructure, services, and representation. This commonality builds comfort, legitimacy, and trust in the process. The paired effects of increased community interaction and focus on local elections could bring back the power Americans once felt they wielded over their government.

B. Local Direct Democracy and Local Legislative Reform

To strengthen democratic responsiveness at the municipal level, I propose a two-part institutional reform: (1) expanding local direct democracy through citizen initiative and referendum mechanisms; and (2) mandating the establishment of ward-based legislative councils, modeled after the St. Louis Board of Aldermen. These twin reforms aim to both empower citizens directly and ensure structured, geographically representative oversight within local government.

Codifying Local Direct Democracy

Municipalities would be required to adopt initiative and referendum procedures within their charters, enabling residents to propose, vote on, or repeal local laws. To ensure accessibility and legitimacy, enabling legislation should:

- Set reasonable signature thresholds (e.g., 5–7% of registered voters) for placing measures on the ballot.

- Provide for both statutory initiatives (proposing ordinances) and referenda (voting on existing ordinances).

- Mandate neutral ballot language and legal summaries written by independent nonpartisan staff.

- Allow for a challenge period and judicial review of measures before certification.

These tools will allow citizens to directly shape policy and serve as a corrective to legislative inaction or capture by narrow interests. Research shows that the availability of these processes increases legislative responsiveness even when rarely used, and tends to produce policies that reflect median voter preferences on issues like taxation, spending, and public services (Matsusaka 2006; Lupia & Matsusaka 2004).

Establishing Elected Local Legislative Councils

Alongside citizen lawmaking, towns and cities should be required to create a formal legislative council divided by geographic representation. Drawing inspiration from the St. Louis Board of Aldermen, each locality would be divided into *wards* of approximately equal population, each electing one representative. The council would also include a president who would be elected citywide.

This legislative body would have the authority to: (1) Draft and approve local ordinances; (2) Provide oversight and budgetary review of municipal departments;(3)Hold public hearings and represent neighborhood concerns; (4) Serve as a forum for legislative deliberation, amendment, and negotiation.

Ward-based representation addresses the accountability vacuum common in council-manager systems and reinforces democratic equity by ensuring all neighborhoods—not just those with political or economic

clout—have a voice in municipal governance. This structure complements direct democracy by ensuring that elected neighborhood representatives can conduct legislative business between elections or ballot campaigns, respond to crises, and institutionalize community feedback loops.

Integrated Democratic Design

Together, these reforms create a more participatory and representative model of local democracy. Citizen initiatives provide a direct outlet for policy change, especially when councils are gridlocked or unresponsive. Meanwhile, ward-based aldermanic councils ensure continuous, neighborhood-level representation in decision-making processes. This design boosts civic engagement and can reduce policy bias toward elite interests by redistributing institutional power more equitably across a locality's geography and demography.

IV. Fostering Engagement and Reform through Deliberation and Direct Democracy

Local Deliberation Days are designed to foster civic engagement by providing a structured opportunity for residents to come together and discuss local issues, candidates, and policies. These events, held in accessible community spaces and incentivized with amenities like childcare and food, encourage participation from a broad cross-section of the community, including those who might not typically engage in political discourse. Given the smaller scale of local governance, where issues are often more immediate and tangible to residents' daily lives, these deliberations can be particularly effective in building a sense of shared responsibility and collective problem-solving.

Through these deliberations, participants gain a deeper understanding of their community's challenges. By hearing from neighbors with different experiences and perspectives, individuals become more aware of issues that may not directly affect them but are nonetheless critical to the well-being of the community as a whole. For instance, homeowners might learn about the struggles of renters in securing affordable housing, while those without school-aged children might gain insight into the funding challenges facing local education systems. This increased awareness not only broadens individual perspectives but also heightens the salience of local issues, making them more central to public discourse.

Moreover, the process of deliberation itself can inspire a desire for reform. As participants engage in thoughtful discussion, they are more likely to identify areas where current policies fall short and to brainstorm potential solutions. The collaborative nature of these conversations can lead to innovative ideas that might not emerge in more isolated or adversarial settings. In this way, deliberation days serve as incubators for civic action, empowering residents to think critically about how to improve their community.

However, engagement and awareness alone are insufficient to effect change; there must also be mechanisms through which citizens can act on their newfound knowledge and ideas. This is where the proposed expansion of local direct democracy becomes crucial. By codifying citizen initiative and referendum processes, municipalities provide a direct avenue for residents to translate their deliberations into tangible policy outcomes. Armed with the insights gained from deliberation days, citizens can propose new ordinances, challenge existing laws, or bring pressing issues to a public vote. This ensures that the people's will is more directly reflected in local governance and reinforces the value of civic participation by demonstrating that engagement can lead to real, meaningful change.

Additionally, these reforms are designed to work in concert with the proposed ward-based legislative councils. The deliberations can inform the work of these councils by highlighting community concerns and

priorities. In contrast, the councils, in turn, can help facilitate deliberation days or respond legislatively to the issues raised. This creates a feedback loop where citizen engagement and representative governance reinforce each other, fostering a more dynamic and responsive local democracy.

Local Deliberation Days and expanded direct democracy create a virtuous cycle of engagement and action. Deliberation fosters informed, empathetic citizens who are attuned to their community's needs, while direct democracy provides the tools necessary to turn that awareness into policy. This integrated approach addresses the immediate challenges of low turnout and unequal participation and lays the groundwork for a more vibrant, responsive, and inclusive local democracy.

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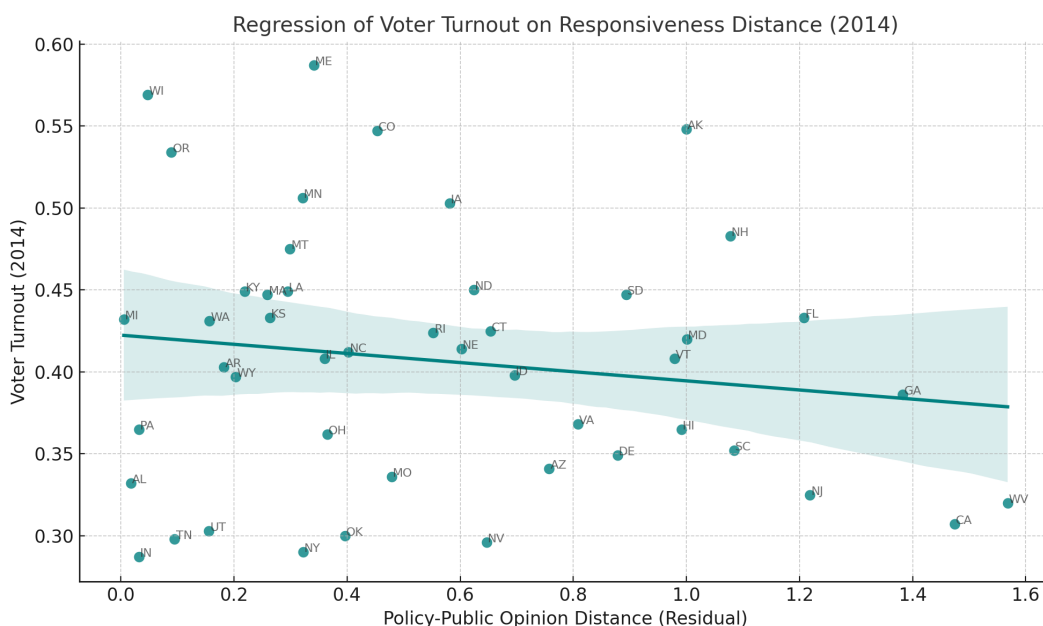
4. Appendix

Figure 2: State-Level Voter Turnout and Policy Responsiveness Distance, 2014. Responsiveness is measured as the vertical residual from the regression of policy liberalism on mass opinion estimates (higher = less responsive) in Caughey and Warshaw (2019). While the relationship is not perfectly linear, a negative trend is visible: states with lower turnout tend to exhibit greater policy misalignment.