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Methodology

The primary objective of this project was to investigate who holds the power in New York City to make decisions in communities where voter turnout is low. My initial hypothesis was rooted in the assumption that certain low-income and immigrant communities in NYC might be underrepresented in local governance due to their low electoral participation. To explore this issue, I utilized data from several key sources: the NYC Campaign Finance Board, CUNY Graduate Center, and the New York City Board of Elections.

The dataset from the CUNY Graduate Center was instrumental in identifying council districts with high immigrant populations, which provided a lens through which to view potential disparities in voter engagement. Meanwhile, data from the NYC Campaign Finance Board offered insights into voter registration and turnout, revealing where electoral participation was highest and lowest across the city.

By merging these datasets, I constructed an overview of electoral engagement across NYC’s council districts. This integration of data allowed me to pinpoint specific districts where low-income and immigrant communities are disproportionately underrepresented in local elections.

Methodologically, I made several decisions to ensure the accuracy and relevance of my analysis. First, I chose to focus on council districts rather than community or congressional districts because residents directly elect their local representatives in council districts, making these districts more relevant in terms of voter behavior and its impact on local governance.

Despite having access to turnout data 2017 through 2023, I used data from the 2021 general election for city council members, as it provided the most recent snapshot of voter turnout at the local level.

The analysis of this data guided my fieldwork, directing me to five specific council districts where I conducted street interviews. These interviews were crucial in capturing the voices of residents from diverse backgrounds, ages, and occupations, and understanding their perspectives on local elections. Through these conversations, I explored why individuals choose to vote or abstain, and how they perceive the importance—or lack thereof—of their participation in local governance.

Some of the findings I was able to establish included that many people are unaware of the impact their vote has in local elections and the fact that their vote often matters more in these elections than in higher-profile ones, such as presidential elections. Additionally, in districts like District 16, income levels and poverty significantly influence what people prioritize, which in turn affects their likelihood of voting.

Engaging directly with elected officials proved to be one of the more challenging aspects of this project. Despite several attempts, I found it difficult to secure interviews with representatives from both high and low-turnout districts. However, I was able to speak with the Chief of Staff for the City Councilor of District 16 in the Bronx. This conversation provided valuable insights into the socio-economic factors and historical neglect that contribute to the district’s low voter turnout.

Furthermore, I reached out to organizations dedicated to increasing voter engagement, such as the League of Women Voters and the NYC Campaign Finance Board. These organizations offered critical perspectives on the barriers to voting and the efforts being made to overcome them. Their input not only enriched my understanding of the data but also helped contextualize the broader implications of voter apathy in low-income communities.

In conclusion, this project allowed me to test my initial hypothesis and gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that influence voter participation in NYC. By combining quantitative data with qualitative interviews, I was able to paint a more nuanced picture of the electoral landscape, revealing the challenges and opportunities for improving civic engagement in underrepresented communities.