

# MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS AND VOTER TURNOUT IN LOCAL ELECTIONS

ZOLTAN L. HAJNAL

University of California, San Diego

PAUL G. LEWIS

Public Policy Institute of California

Although low voter turnout in national elections has garnered considerable attention and concern, much lower turnout in municipal elections has often been largely ignored. Using a survey of cities in California, this article examines a series of institutional remedies to low turnout in mayoral and city council elections. Moving local elections to coincide with the dates of national elections would have by far the largest impact on voter turnout, but other institutional changes that tend to raise the stakes of local elections also increase turnout. Specifically, less outsourcing of city services, the use of direct democracy, and more control in the hands of elected rather than appointed officials all tend to increase turnout.

*Keywords:* turnout; institutions; concurrent elections; urban politics; voting

**Observers of American politics** have repeatedly expressed concern about low voter participation in federal elections (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Lijphart 1997; Bennett and Resnick 1990). The fact that almost half of all eligible voters do not vote in presidential elections has been cited repeatedly as evidence of an ongoing crisis in American democracy. Declining voter participation over time in these national elections has also been highlighted by a host of scholars who have raised questions about the health of American politics (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Teixeira 1992).

Yet for all of the attention garnered by national elections, turnout in these elections is comparatively high. Nowhere is the turnout problem worse than at the local level. Although few studies have looked comprehensively at municipal-level turnout in recent decades, the existing evidence suggests that

turnout in city elections may average half that of national elections, with turnout in some cities regularly falling below one-quarter of the voting-age population (Alford and Lee 1968; Morlan 1984; Bridges 1997). Moreover, trends over time suggest that voter turnout in local elections is declining just as rapidly as it is in national elections (Karnig and Walter 1983, 1993). In short, at the local level where policies are most likely to be implemented and where a majority of the nation's civic leaders are being elected, important public policy decisions are being made without the input of most of the affected residents. Despite the relatively high levels of nonparticipation at the local level, few studies have even begun to suggest ways in which the problem might be alleviated.

The exceedingly low participation in local elections raises a number of concerns. One of the most serious is that the voice of the people in municipal elections is likely to be severely distorted. Even at the national level where turnout is relatively high, research indicates that there is a clear bias to participation. Disadvantaged segments of the population—racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, those with a limited education—tend to vote significantly less regularly than others in national contests (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). As turnout falls, this bias is likely to become more severe (Wattenberg 1998). At the local level, then, nonparticipation may play a more critical role in policy making. In an arena in which the actions of local government can affect citizens in profound ways (for example, in public safety, infrastructure, and land-use decisions), there is a very real possibility that elected officials and the policies they enact will tend to serve only a small segment of the population (Hajnal and Hills 2002).

Another concern with nonparticipation at the local level is that citizens lose out on a relatively easy opportunity to learn about and become engaged in democracy. Given the proximity of local governments and their relatively small size, it is in many ways easier for citizens to acquire crucial democratic skills and become familiar with the public realm at the local level. Local politics could and should be the training ground of a democratic citizenry—the realm through which they begin to become engaged and empowered in the larger democratic process and the place where they begin to gain a trust in government and a belief in their own political efficacy (Oliver 2001). The fact that so few citizens participate in local elections is likely to be at least a contributing factor to the decreasing levels of trust in government, political efficacy, and sense of civic duty that have alarmed so many observers of American politics (Bennett and Resnick 1990; Lipset and Schneider 1983).

It is, therefore, critical that we understand more about why people choose not to participate in local elections and what steps might be taken to stem the tide and encourage broader participation. Thus, the goal of this article is to

provide a more systematic account of the factors that influence turnout levels in local elections, looking in particular for turnout-dampening factors that might be subject to change through policy. Therefore, in contrast to the vast majority of research on voting behavior, which has focused on individual demographic characteristics (such as race, education, and age) or the level of competition in a particular election (factors such as the margin of victory, campaign mobilization, and campaign spending), we focus our attention on local electoral and governing institutions.

### **ARE INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS LINKED TO VOTER PARTICIPATION?**

We focus on local institutions for two reasons. First, from a practical standpoint, electoral institutions can be altered. Although examining demographic characteristics and the level of competition may help us to understand why people vote, studies that focus on these two factors generally offer little advice to those interested in addressing the problem of low turnout. For example, knowing that income increases the propensity to vote is notable, but that knowledge leads to few real policy solutions to nonparticipation. By contrast, municipalities generally have the ability to alter their own institutional structure and can in many cases reform the way they conduct elections by passing an ordinance or altering a city charter. Moreover, changes in these institutions and electoral laws are not unprecedented, as municipalities have engaged in numerous rounds of structural reform (Bridges 1997; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Thus, if local institutions can be shown to affect turnout, they offer a viable policy lever to increase participation in local elections.

A second and equally important reason to focus on electoral institutions is the ongoing perception that they are a primary—if not the primary—determinant of voter participation at the local level.<sup>1</sup> For decades, scholars of urban politics have suggested that a particular set of local institutions associated with the urban reform movement has served to dramatically reduce voter turnout. Two institutions in particular—the city manager form of government and nonpartisan elections—have been viewed as critical determinants of local turnout. In the first case, scholars have argued that by weakening the powers of the mayor and shifting more power into the hands of an unelected city manager, this structural change may have reduced the direct influence of voters and decreased the incentive for local residents to vote (Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Bridges 1997). In the case of nonpartisan elections, the theory is that mobilization efforts on the behalf of parties will decline and turnout will fall as a result (Karnig and Walter 1983; Schaffner,

Wright, and Streb 2001). If these scholars are correct—and preliminary evidence suggests that they are—then local institutional structure could hold the key to expanding participation in the local arena.

Unfortunately, existing research into local institutional structure is limited in a number of critical ways. First, existing studies have focused almost exclusively on a small set of institutions and have ignored other potentially critical local institutions that are at least theoretically tied to participation. Beyond form of government and nonpartisanship, we highlight five sets of institutions that have been largely ignored by empirical studies of voter turnout: (1) election timing, (2) service delivery arrangements, (3) direct democracy, (4) term limits, and (5) mayoral authority.

The institutional feature we are most interested in assessing is election timing. The potential importance of timing is obvious (Lijphart 1997). By scheduling local elections that have traditionally had low turnout on the same date with statewide primaries or general elections with their much higher voter turnout, there is reason to believe that the number of local ballots cast could be almost immediately increased to levels nearly on par with national elections.<sup>2</sup> By moving the dates of local elections to coincide with these broader elections, it becomes almost costless for voters who participate in statewide elections to also vote in local elections; they need only check off names further down the ballot. Within the United States, concurrency between gubernatorial and presidential elections already appears to substantially increase turnout in presidential contests (Boyd 1989).

Another important question about election timing is whether mayoral and council elections are held simultaneously with other local contests, including those for other city offices (such as city attorney or treasurer) or for other governing bodies (such as the governing boards of school districts or counties). The presence of these other local elections might also serve to spur turnout.

A second institutional feature of local government that we focus on is service delivery arrangements. One of the more recent and pronounced trends in local governance is a move toward contracting out and other “outsourcing” of city services. In an effort to provide more efficient services, many cities have contracted with private firms to carry out services. Others have turned to special district governments or have contracted with nearby governments, particularly the county, to deliver services (Miller 1981; Foster 1997). Whether such service delivery alternatives ultimately reduce costs and improve city services can be debated. There is little doubt, however, that such service arrangements reduce the influence of municipal officials to some degree; at the very least, they have fewer jobs to control. The reduced role for local bureaucrats and elected officials may have the unintended consequences of reducing interest in local politics and depressing turnout.

Another increasingly important institutional feature of local governance is direct democracy. Although the institution of direct democracy is not new, use of direct democracy at the local level has expanded rapidly in recent decades (Initiative and Referendum Institute 2001). One of the potential by-products of giving more decision-making power to the people in the form of initiatives, referenda, and recall is increased interest and greater turnout. Existing evidence suggests that statewide initiatives have sparked greater participation by at least some sectors of the electorate (Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2000). Whether these gains could also be realized at the local level is as yet unanswered.

A fourth institutional feature of local government potentially related to voter turnout, at least in mayoral elections, is the extent of the formal powers of the mayor's office. Although existing research has tended to focus on the distinction between mayoral and city manager forms of government, growing variation in mayoral authority within the two forms of government suggests that more specific measures of mayoral power may more accurately assess local power relations (Cain, Mullin, and Peele 2001; Wood 2002). If voter participation is a function of the importance of an office, then cities where the mayor has more expansive duties and authority should have higher voter turnout.

One other institutional feature of local government that has received considerable attention by scholars interested in urban politics is the distinction between at-large and district elections for the local council. The bulk of this research has, however, focused on the relationship between districting and racial and ethnic minority representation (Engstrom and McDonald 1982; Welch 1990). Nevertheless, there are reasons to suspect that the method of election to council could also affect turnout (Bullock 1990). One possibility is that the creation of at-large or citywide elections may decrease participation by distancing leaders from their local constituencies. On the other hand, it is also possible that at-large elections draw residents' attention to larger citywide concerns that propel them to vote. One recent empirical test of this issue found that the method of council election had no effect on turnout (Oliver 2001).

Finally, there is also some speculation that the growing use of term limits has affected voter turnout, although the direction of the effect is as of yet unclear. By forcing incumbents out of office, term limits are seen by some as a tool to level the playing field, encourage more candidates to run for office, and ultimately make elections more dynamic (Copeland 1997). Thus, one might suspect that term limits increase turnout. On the other hand, an unintended consequence of term limits at the municipal level may be to decrease turnout by increasing voter confusion and disinterest by introducing a greater

number of “unknown” nonincumbents into electoral contests (Rosales 2000).

Although all of these institutions may not ultimately prove to affect turnout, the fact that they have been slighted in most empirical studies indicates that our knowledge of the effects of local institutional structure on turnout is at best incomplete. To understand the factors that drive turnout and ultimately broaden voter participation at the local level, it is crucial to engage in empirical analysis of each of these potentially relevant institutional features.

If, in the end, these new institutions do matter, a second methodological issue with the existing research emerges. Given that many of the institutions we highlight in this study are likely to be correlated with reform institutions like city manager government and nonpartisanship, any study that does not control for this additional range of institutions may well reach flawed conclusions about the impact of any single institution on turnout. The fact that turnout is lower in city manager and nonpartisan cities may be an indication of a true causal relationship, but it could also be a spurious relationship caused by an underlying correlation with any number of other potentially relevant institutions.

A third issue with the existing research into voter turnout at the local level is that it tends to be somewhat dated. Most of the research focuses on elections in the 1960s and 1970s, largely due to a paucity of suitable data sets for the purpose. Given the dramatic changes in voter turnout in recent decades and the ever-changing institutional structure of American cities, analysis based on more recent elections seems well warranted.

To gauge the impact of a wider range of institutions on voter turnout in recent local elections, we gathered relevant data by sending a questionnaire to all city clerks in the state of California. In the next section, we describe this survey and provide more details on the institutions and measures employed in the statistical analysis that follows. Our analysis reveals a number of important institutional effects on voter turnout and registration. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these results for understanding citizen participation in local elections.

## **DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

To gather the data necessary for our central research questions, we devised and distributed a mail questionnaire to every California municipality in late 2000. The survey was sent to each city clerk because they are designated as the chief municipal elections officials and often have unique, firsthand knowledge about the political life of their communities (Schneider and Teske

1995). Of the 474 California cities in existence at the time of the survey, 397 clerks returned surveys with at least some of the necessary responses; however, complete and usable data for calculating voter turnout rates were supplied by a smaller number—350 cities (79%). Our sample of cities is generally representative of all cities in the state of California. Comparing cities that responded to those that did not revealed few significant differences.<sup>3</sup>

A random sample of questionnaire responses was validated using municipal Web pages and published newspaper accounts. Errors were minimal, and any errors that were found were corrected. In a few cases in which data were publicly available, missing data were filled in to expand the number of cases in the analysis. For more details on the survey, representativeness of the sample, missing data, error correction, and a copy of the questionnaire, see Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch (2002).

#### WHY CALIFORNIA?

California provides an excellent setting for studying the impact of local institutions on voter turnout, for several reasons. First, on most institutional dimensions, there is considerable institutional variation across cities in California (see Table A1 in the appendix). A second related advantage to California is its size and diversity. Our 350 city observations vary enormously across measures of racial diversity, population size, socioeconomic status, industrial base, urbanization, and most other relevant characteristics. California's cities are not representative of the nation as a whole, but there are cities in California that are comparable to most American cities on most important dimensions. In short, California provides a large sample with enough variation for a wide-ranging analysis of the relationship between institutional context and turnout. Third, California and its cities have been on the forefront of many of the trends in local governance. Relatively recent developments like local term limits and the contracting out of municipal services have been widely adopted in the state and thus can be more closely appraised than elsewhere. The trend toward direct democracy has also been more pronounced in California than in most other states, and as a result California offers a suitable venue to examine the effects of local ballot propositions.

On the other hand, California's trend-setting nature can be considered a potential drawback. The fact that California's local government structure is significantly more reformed than the rest of the country means that it is a less appropriate state to scrutinize some of the institutions that predominated before the onset of urban reform. The effects of nonpartisanship, for example, cannot be evaluated because all cities in the state are required to hold nonpartisan elections. Similarly, because the vast majority (97%) of

California's cities in our sample are council-manager cities, any assessment of the effect of the council-manager form of government on turnout should be viewed with caution. However, other reform institutions were less widely instituted in California, and their effects can be examined more confidently. Finally, examining local voter participation within a single state avoids some problems of unmeasured heterogeneity due to state-level differences such as registration rules and Motor Voter Law implementation. For comparison purposes, Table A1 in the appendix details the institutional structure of California cities and the nation as a whole.

#### MEASURING VOTER TURNOUT

The dependent variable of interest is voter turnout. We asked each city clerk to report on the city's most recent mayoral and city council election.<sup>4</sup> Every city holds council elections, but only one-third of cities that responded directly elect their mayor, yielding a total of 130 mayoral elections. For each election, city clerks reported the total number of residents who cast ballots for council and (if applicable) for mayor, as well as the total number of registered voters at that time in the city (or in the relevant districts if only certain council-district seats were up for election).<sup>5</sup> In addition, we estimated the size of the voting-age population for each city at the time of the election. The Census Bureau reports the voting-age population of every city but only decennially. Thus, the measure we use is an interpolation (for the particular year of the election) between the voting-age population in the city in 1990 and 2000.<sup>6</sup>

In the analysis that follows, we use two dependent variables: the percentage of *registered* voters who cast ballots for local office in a given election and the percentage of *voting-age residents* who cast ballots. We focus heavily on turnout of registered voters because we believe that it is likely to be the measure most directly affected by changes in the local institutional and electoral context. Registered voters have already cleared the major entry barrier to political participation (registration), and thus whether they vote is likely to be closely related to conditions at the time of the election.

At the same time, if we want to know how likely the population at large is to participate in local elections, it is important to examine turnout of the voting-age population as well. Although registration procedures are set by state and federal laws, they are typically administered by county officials, who historically have had a fair amount of latitude in making decisions about registration procedures. Across the cities in our sample, there was a wide degree of variation in the registration rate (mean 63.8%, standard deviation 16.2%). Moreover, given that the intermediary step of voter registration has at times in the past been used to exclude certain segments of the electorate (Davidson



and Grofman 1994), it is possible that the institutional features that drive turnout of registered voters differ from those that expand the participation of the voting-age population. In practice, turnout of registered voters and turnout of the voting-age population are very highly correlated among cities in our sample ( $r = .85$ ), and the factors that lead to increased turnout of registered voters also tend to increase turnout of the adult population.

#### **INSTITUTIONS, DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, AND ELECTION CONTEXT**

To determine what accounts for variations in turnout, we examined as independent variables a variety of institutions that are believed to affect participation rates, while controlling for other relevant local characteristics. To test the effects of election timing, municipal election dates were classified as falling into one of the following five categories: presidential election, presidential primary, midterm congressional election (also gubernatorial, in California), odd-year November election, or completely off-cycle election. This last category is composed of “local-only” contests, generally held in the spring. Each mayoral and council election was also classified on the basis of whether other citywide offices or other local governing bodies were elected on the same day.

To examine the impact of city service arrangements on turnout, we asked city clerks to indicate whether police, fire, library, sewerage, and garbage collection services were “mainly carried out by city government personnel, by county personnel, by a special district government, or by a private company under contract with the city.”<sup>7</sup> Because state law obliges all cities in California to embrace direct democracy, we examined the impact of the active use of initiatives on turnout rather than the existence of the institution. Each city with a citizen initiative on the ballot was coded 1 and 0 otherwise. Given the possibility that turnout could be related to mayoral authority, we included a series of dummy variables to indicate cities where the mayor has veto power, where the mayor has the authority to develop the budget, and where the mayor’s term is four years (instead of two years). In line with previous research, cities were also categorized by city clerks as having either a council-manager or a mayor-council form of government.<sup>8</sup> City council elections were also categorized as either at-large or district elections. The one in five cities that placed term limits on city council members and the one-quarter of cities that placed term limits on mayors were coded as such. For descriptive statistics on each of the independent variables, see Table A2 in the appendix.

To ensure that our analysis of city-level institutions is not biased by differences in demographic characteristics across cities, we include controls for a

number of potentially relevant demographic factors (for accounts of how demographic characteristics affect turnout, see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; and Oliver 2001). In each of the statistical models investigating voter turnout, we include a specially constructed summary variable representing the socioeconomic status of the city population,<sup>9</sup> along with controls for the percentage of the population aged 18 to 24; percentage aged 65 or older; percentages of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians in the population; percentage who lived in the same house for five years (residential stability); percentage institutionalized; and the city population size.<sup>10</sup> However, because our measures of turnout and demographic characteristics are at the aggregate level, we do not attempt to infer any causal relationship about individual behavior. Data on local demographic characteristics are derived from the 2000 U.S. Census or, in the case of population figures, from California Department of Finance estimates, which are generally held to be equal or superior to the census enumeration. For the socioeconomic status variable and population stability measure, we must rely on the 1990 census because city-level data are not yet available from the 2000 census.

In addition, to ensure that the institutional relationships that emerge from the analysis are not caused by underlying differences in the context of specific elections, we control for a number of important factors related to the closeness and level of competition in each election. Specifically, we include measures of the margin of victory for mayoral elections (Cox and Munger 1989), a dummy variable for the presence of an incumbent for the seat in question (King and Gelman 1991), and the number of candidates competing (Jacobson and Kernell 1981).

#### UNITS OF OBSERVATION

In the next section, we present analysis of a data set that combines council and mayoral elections. We combine the two types of elections because of the small number of mayoral contests for which we have sufficient data and because preliminary analysis showed that the dynamics of turnout are nearly identical for mayoral and council contests. When we examined mayoral and council elections separately, results were generally quite similar to those presented here.<sup>11</sup> However, the small number of mayoral elections did lead to less stable and less robust estimations for these contests. A dummy variable (mayoral = 1, council = 0) is used to differentiate the two types of elections. Note also that the observations are not weighted by city population because we seek to generalize about municipal electoral systems rather than about voters.

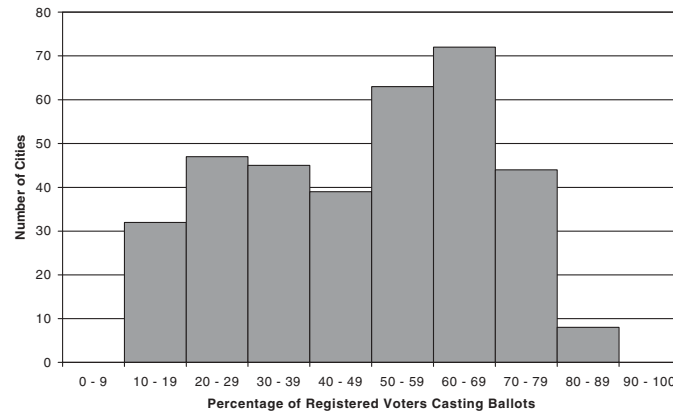


Figure 1: Distribution of Voter Turnout Rates (City Council Elections)

### EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Through the vote, citizens communicate information about their interests, preferences, and needs and make important decisions about who should hold office. Unfortunately, at the local level that voice is exceptionally weak. The clearest finding to emerge from our analysis of California's municipal elections is that most residents do not vote. In mayoral elections, only 44% of registered voters cast ballots. Measured as a percentage of the voting-age population, mayoral turnout drops to 28%. City council elections are marginally better, with a mean turnout of 48% of registered voters and 32% of the voting-age population.

Although we cannot say whether California's local elections generate more or less participation than elections in other states, it is clear that these numbers contrast sharply with turnout in national elections. In the last presidential contest, 68% of registered voters went to the polls across the nation (70% in California) (Federal Elections Commission 2003). In other words, all of the biases and concerns that are associated with low voter turnout at the national level are likely to be that much more severe at the local level. Ultimately, important policy decisions are being made by local officials who are chosen by a relatively small and likely unrepresentative group of citizens.

Despite the generally low levels of turnout, there are enormous differences in voting rates across communities. In council elections, for example, turnout of registered voters ranges from a low of 10% to a high of 89% (see Figure 1). This variation clearly suggests that there are ways to get voters to the polls in local elections.

**ELECTION CONCURRENCY: TIMING IS ALMOST EVERYTHING**

Why do some cities have much higher participation rates than others? The short answer is timing. As the regression analysis in Table 1 indicates, presidential elections are associated with turnouts of registered voters in city elections that are 36% higher than off-cycle elections; midterm congressional elections and presidential primaries are associated with municipal turnouts of 26% and 25% more registered voters, respectively. In fact, about half of the differences in turnout among these cities can be explained by timing alone.<sup>12</sup> By scheduling local elections to occur on the dates of statewide general or primary elections (so-called concurrent or on-cycle elections), localities make it easier for voters participating in the statewide election to vote in local contests as well. In short, participation in local elections depends critically on the timing of those elections.<sup>13</sup>

Timing is not only important in explaining variation in the turnout in California's cities but also could play a key role in local turnout nationwide. National surveys indicate that the vast majority of all municipal elections in the United States are not held concurrently with presidential contests (International City Management Association 1988; Wood 2002). Thus, turnout in most cities could benefit from a change in the timing of local elections.

What makes timing even more appealing as a policy lever is that many cities have actively considered changes to the timing of their elections, and there are strong incentives—aside from increasing participation—to switch to concurrent elections. In fact, the primary motivation for this move has usually been cost savings. In California, for example, municipalities typically pay the entire administrative costs of stand-alone elections but only a fraction of the costs of on-cycle elections. Our survey indicates that in California, more than 40% of cities have changed the timing of municipal elections in recent years, with the vast majority of those switching from stand-alone elections to elections concurrent with statewide contests.<sup>14</sup>

Another important aspect of city election timing that could potentially affect turnout is whether city elections are consolidated with elections for other *local* offices. More than half of all the council and mayoral elections we examined were held alongside elections for local officials such as city treasurer, school board members, or county supervisors. Does this have any effect on turnout? As Table 1 indicates, the answer appears to be no. Furthermore, holding both the mayoral and council election on the same day does not seem to spur significantly higher turnout. In short, consolidating local elections with statewide elections—as opposed to consolidating various categories of local elections—is the step most likely to yield local turnout gains.

**TABLE 1: The Determinants of Voter Turnout in Municipal Elections**

	<i>Turnout of Registered Voters</i>		<i>Turnout of Adult Residents</i>	
Timing				
Presidential (compared to off cycle)	36.4	(2.65)***	24.0	(1.94)***
Presidential primary (compared to off cycle)	25.1	(3.32)***	13.9	(2.43)***
Midterm congressional (compared to off cycle)	26.4	(1.93)***	15.8	(1.42)***
Odd-year November (compared to off cycle)	2.64	(2.17)	-.555	(1.6)
Mayor and council election were held same day	2.79	(1.90)	2.45	(1.41)*
Other local elections were held same day	.612	(1.34)	.607	(.999)
Council institutions				
District (compared to at-large) council election	.933	(4.61)	-13.4	(2.93)***
Term limits	1.76	(1.98)	.731	(1.46)
Mayoral institutions				
Mayor/council form of government (versus council/manager)	8.11	(4.75)*	6.37	(3.53)*
Term limits	1.49	(2.99)	.418	(2.21)
Budgeting authority	-7.04	(8.40)	-4.35	(6.22)
Veto power	.070	(5.00)	-.461	(3.70)
Term length	-.746	(.799)	-1.03	(.592)*
Service delivery				
Number of services provided by city staff	1.14	(.496)**	.579	(.367)
Direct democracy				
Initiative on the ballot	4.22	(1.91)**	3.08	(1.41)**
Electoral context				
Election was uncontested	-4.38	(4.41)	-3.11	(3.27)
Candidates per seat	.751	(.538)	.733	(.399)*
Incumbents per seat	.713	(1.78)	-.058	(1.32)
Mayoral election (vs. council election)	.938	(3.66)	1.67	(2.71)
Percentage of voting-age residents registered	-.076	(.077)		NI
City demographic characteristics				
City population (natural log)	-2.72	(.660)***	-2.10	(.485)***
Socioeconomic status (factor score)	3.30	(1.22)***	4.15	(.857)***
Percentage black	-.184	(.141)	-.066	(.107)
Percentage Hispanic	-.034	(.051)	-.182	(.031)***
Percentage Asian	-.183	(.081)**	-.309	(.055)***
Percentage aged 18 to 24	-.087	(.229)	-.047	(.170)
Percentage aged 65 or older	.338	(.161)**	.273	(.119)**
Percentage lived in same house for 5 years	-.037	(.089)	.096	(.064)
Percentage institutionalized		NI	-.231	(.118)*
Constant	58.5	(10.2)***	40.5	(6.06)***
Observations	386		386	
Adjusted $R^2$		.60		.66

NOTE: NI indicates variable is not included in regression. Standard errors are in parentheses. Ordinary least squares regression.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**OTHER INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS:  
MAKING ELECTIONS MATTER**

Although election timing is clearly the most important factor in explaining local voter turnout, four other aspects of institutional structure do have some effect on participation.<sup>15</sup> One is the delivery of city services. Cities that provide more services with their own staff (as opposed to contracting out to firms or making service arrangements with other local governments) tend to draw a larger share of voters to the polls. Each additional service provided by city staff—of the five services asked about in the survey (fire, police, library, sewerage, and garbage)—is associated with approximately 1% higher turnout among registered voters.<sup>16</sup> We surmise that turnout increases in these cities because citizens are more inclined to vote when the officials up for election have more direct control over some of the basic issues that affect city residents' quality of life. An alternate explanation is that city service provision gives incentives for public employees—one of the most well-organized segments of the local electorate—to participate in municipal elections.

Another institution that matters in local elections is direct democracy. Cities with local ballot questions placed before the voters tended to have higher turnout. This is true both for turnout of the registered and turnout of all adults. Where there are one or more voter initiatives on the municipal ballot, cities tend to draw about 4% more registered voters to the polls.

Our results also provide some corroboration of earlier research assessing the dampening effect of the city-manager form of government on voter turnout (Wood 2002; Alford and Lee 1968; Dixon 1964; Karnig and Walter 1983, 1993). In cities where an unelected official (the city manager) attends to the daily operations of the city rather than an elected official (the mayor), voter turnout is lower. The small number of mayor-council cities in California and the fact that the relationship is only marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ) means that this relationship should be viewed with caution, but it does seem to lend further credence to the notion that the move to the council-manager form of government may have contributed to declining participation in local elections.

Beyond the distinction between mayor-council and council-manager cities, little else about mayoral authority appeared to affect residents' decisions on whether to vote. A mayoral veto and authority to develop the city budget did not significantly increase turnout. The effect of the length of the mayor's term was also weak and inconsistent.<sup>17</sup>

Table 1 also indicates that term limits appear to have no direct effect on turnout. Term limits at either the council level or the mayoral level were not tied to citywide participation rates. Given the lack of a clear or compelling

theoretical connection between term limits and voter turnout, this is perhaps not surprising. It is possible, though, that term limits indirectly affect turnout by influencing the degree of competition for office, measured separately here.

Each of these institutional relationships suggests that voters are in many ways rational. When more is at stake in the election, participation tends to increase. Elections with candidates who have direct rather than indirect control over city services, elections in which voters can use direct democracy to decide issues themselves, and elections where the position of mayor has some measure of control over the daily operations of the city are all cases in which more is at stake, and they are all cases in which turnout rises measurably. Not every institution that, at least theoretically, increases the importance of local elections leads to increased turnout, but many do. Thus, if reformers seek the means to bring voters back to the local polls, changes to electoral laws and institutional structure that increase the stakes of local elections must be considered one possible approach.

The one potential anomaly in Table 1 concerns district elections. For turnout of voting-age population (but not registered voters), cities with district elections (as opposed to at-large elections) have significantly lower turnout. This finding accords with some recent work on municipal turnout (Espino 2001; but see Oliver 2001), although it is not easily explainable. District elections, according to their advocates, increase voter efficacy and help to bring important neighborhood concerns to the forefront (Welch and Bledsoe 1988). If true, district elections should increase turnout. We suspect that the negative relationship found in California is at least partially tied to the fact that district elections have often been instituted in cities where there has been a history of disenfranchisement of minorities and immigrant groups. Thus district elections are a response to low turnout rather than a cause of low turnout.

#### **AN ALTERNATE TEST: THE EFFECT OF INSTITUTIONS IN OFF-PEAK ELECTIONS**

The results so far tend to highlight the importance of election timing while mostly downplaying the significance of other local institutional features. It is possible, however, that the non-timing local institutions do play a key role under certain circumstances. One could argue that local institutional structure should really be important only when local elections are not overshadowed by national or state contests. It could be that when local elections coincide with more visible contests for higher office, turnout is largely unrelated to anything associated with the local election. In contrast, in stand-alone local

elections, when the only thing that drives voters to the polls is the local contests themselves, local institutions should play a more critical role.

To test for this possibility, we ran separate regressions for peak-cycle elections (presidential primary and general elections and midterm congressional elections) and off-peak local elections (odd-year November and completely off cycle). The results are displayed in Table 2. As predicted, local institutional structure is generally only important in off-peak elections. When local elections coincide with major statewide and national contests, the impact of local institutions basically disappears. Institutional structure (aside from timing) essentially explains none of the variation in local turnout in peak-cycle elections.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, in off-peak elections, local institutional structure does play a more prominent role. For instance, mayor-council cities (as opposed to council-manager cities) and cities that maintain direct control over more public services tend to draw greater voter turnout. In the case of mayor-council cities, the effect is substantively quite large (16 percentage points), although the limited use of the mayor-council structure in cities with off-peak elections (3% of cities) qualifies the inferences that can be drawn.<sup>19</sup> The coefficient on the number of services provided by city staff is also larger than in the regressions in Table 1.

At the same time, these results tend to reconfirm the importance of election timing. The magnitude of these local institutional effects is still small when compared to our earlier findings on timing. Even in off-peak elections, local institutions explain only 5% of the variation in turnout. Moreover, most institutional features of local government remain insignificant even in off-cycle elections. Direct democracy, districting, term limits, and mayoral authority all play no significant role in off-peak elections, in this formulation.

### BOOSTING LOCAL TURNOUT

The right to vote is one of the most fundamental and cherished aspects of democracy. Yet in local elections, well more than half of all residents fail to participate. Given that most of the elected officials in the nation are elected locally and that many of the most important public policies are implemented at the local level, this lack of participation raises serious concerns.

Our research suggests that local institutions could play a critical role in affecting voter participation. Analysis of variation in turnout across California municipalities indicates that election timing especially and to a lesser degree municipal institutional arrangements are important predictors of turnout. In general, institutional features that tend to increase the stakes of city



**TABLE 2: Institutional Determinants of Turnout in Peak-Cycle and Off-Peak Elections**

	<i>Peak-Cycle Election Turnout</i>	<i>Off-Peak Election Turnout</i>
Timing		
Presidential primary (compared to presidential)	-9.90 (3.75)***	N/I
Midterm congressional (compared to presidential)	-9.66 (2.34)***	N/I
Odd-year November (compared to off cycle)	N/I	3.46 (2.41)
Mayor and council election were held same day	2.51 (2.42)	1.69 (3.30)
Other local elections were held same day	-.355 (1.71)	2.96 (2.36)
Council institutions		
District (compared to at-large) council election	.302 (5.49)	7.32 (9.64)
Term limits	1.97 (2.63)	-2.19 (3.18)
Mayoral institutions		
Mayor/council form of government (versus council/manager)	3.24 (5.87)	15.7 (9.47)*
Term limits	-2.00 (4.39)	1.50 (4.54)
Budget authority	-10.7 (10.7)	8.88 (15.5)
Veto	6.73 (8.96)	-7.57 (7.07)
Term length	-1.25 (.987)	.637 (1.50)
Service delivery		
Number of services provided by city staff	.586 (.722)	1.72 (.708)**
Direct democracy		
Initiative on the ballot	4.07 (2.43)*	4.32 (3.24)
Constant	82.5 (13.9)***	78.8 (16.3)***
Observations	242	144
Adjusted $R^2$	.19	.31

NOTE: Controls for election context and city demographic characteristics are included in the model but not displayed here. N/I indicates variable is not included in regression. Standard errors are in parentheses. Ordinary least squares regression.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

elections also tend to increase turnout. Thus, cities that elect rather than appoint their chief executive, that directly control their own public services, and that regularly give citizens authority to enact policy through direct democracy tend to draw a larger share of voters to the polls.

By far the biggest factor in increasing voter turnout is election timing. Holding city elections on the same day as national or statewide contests could essentially double voter turnout over existing rates in off-cycle city elections. Thus, if expanded participation is the primary goal, the best tool for the job is peak-cycle elections. In addition, such a change may not be highly difficult to attain. In many states, all that is needed to implement on-cycle elections is for city councils to pass an ordinance. On-cycle elections are even more

appealing as a policy lever because they would probably produce some modest financial savings for cities.

Our research is not without some caveats. First, although we have little reason to suspect that the relationships we observe in California differ markedly in the rest of the country, it is clear that more research needs to be done in other state contexts before drawing more definitive conclusions. Second, although peak-cycle local elections would surely lead to greater voter turnout, they would not necessarily ensure greater civic engagement along such important dimensions as joining neighborhood groups or participating in local civic meetings and campaigns. Although voting tends to be coupled with increased political knowledge, trust in government, and political efficacy, it is not yet clear how aligning local elections with statewide elections would affect basic attitudes toward public life. Third, despite the dramatic effect that concurrent elections should have on turnout, local voter participation is unlikely to exceed the fairly disappointing levels currently experienced in statewide and national contests. Ultimately, broader reforms like extended voting hours, 100% mail-in elections, or Internet voting might be more fundamental to voter participation.

Fourth, historically there have been real objections to holding local elections concurrently with national contests, and many of these normative concerns remain today. In particular, a move to concurrent elections raises, for some observers, several concerns about voter attentiveness and knowledge. On-cycle local elections might mean that more citizens with only limited knowledge of and interest in local elections would vote in local contests. The coupling of local elections with national or statewide contests would also lead to longer, more complex ballots that might increase voter confusion. Yet another worry is that on-cycle elections would draw attention away from local politics. Finally, by coupling local elections with national contests, political parties might begin to play a larger role in local elections—a potential change that would likely draw both strongly positive and negative reactions, depending on the observer.

Overall, these concerns are solid arguments for civic education, voter outreach campaigns, higher quality media coverage of local races, and intensive campaigning by candidates for mayor and council. They are, in our view, not good arguments for scheduling local elections so as to knowingly reduce public participation.

## APPENDIX

**Table A1: Municipal Government Structure in California Versus the United States (in percentages)**

	<i>California</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>United States</i> <sup>b</sup>
Form of government		
Council/city-manager form	97	52
Mayor/council form	3	32
Election timing		
Presidential	10	—
Presidential primary	5	—
Midterm congressional	49	—
Odd-year November	18	—
Off-cycle	19	—
Concurrent	—	21
Nonconcurrent	—	79
Other local elections held the same day	54	—
Contracting		
Provide none of five city services with own staff	14	—
Provide all five	8	—
Direct democracy		
Cities with initiative on ballot	11	—
Cities with initiative	100	58
District type		
At-large council elections	93	64
District method	5	18
Combination	2	18
Term limits		
Term limits—council members	18	9
Term limits—mayor <sup>c</sup>	27	10
Mayoral authority <sup>c</sup>		
Mayor develops (or jointly develops) the budget	3	13
Mayor has veto power	6	28
Mayor term two years	51	37
Mayor term four years	49	56
Nonpartisan elections	100	76

NOTE: Dash indicates data not available.

a. California data are from authors' 2000 survey of city clerks.

b. National data derived from the 2001 Municipal Form of Government Survey conducted by the International City/County Management Association except for election timing, which is from Wood (2002).

c. For directly elected mayors only.

**Table A2: Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables and Control Variables**

	<i>Mean Value</i>	<i>Low Value</i>	<i>High Value</i>
Dependent variables			
Turnout of registered voters	47.2	7.3	88.6
Turnout of adult residents	30.0	4.5	78.8
Electoral context variables			
Uncontested election	0.07	0	1
Candidates per seat	2.6	1	14
Incumbents per seat	0.69	0	1
Percentage voting-age residents registered (estimated)	63.0	12.5	97.6
City population characteristics			
City population (natural log)	10.3	5.3	15.1
Socioeconomic status (factor score)	0.01	-2.0	4.6
Percentage black	4.2	0	46.4
Percentage Hispanic	30.6	2.2	98.3
Percentage Asian	9.1	0	61.5
Percentage age 18 to 24	9.3	2.4	33.6
Percentage age 65 or older	11.6	3.7	45.1
Percentage lived in same house for 5 years	43.7	11.4	70.8
Percentage institutionalized	1.5	0	40.0

## NOTES

1. This mirrors perceptions and findings at the cross-national level. Institutional context explains more of the variation in turnout across nations than any other factor (Powell 1986).

2. There is, however, likely to be some voter roll-off for voting in local contests.

3. The sample was representative in terms of racial demographics, percentage of residents unemployed, median household income, homeownership rates, regional location, and suburb/central city/rural location. There were statistically significant but substantively marginal differences between cities in and out of the sample in the average size of the population, average household size, and poverty rate.

4. The survey questions queried city clerks about the general mayoral election, not a runoff election. However, runoffs are quite rare, with only 8 cities (6%) holding runoffs of the 130 that directly elect the mayor.

5. Because we are asking specifically about the number of votes cast for mayor or council positions, we avoid problems with voter roll-off from the vote totals in statewide or national contests.

6. The largest number of local elections in our data set (47% of council elections) took place in 1998 and another 27% in 1999, compared to 22% who reported on 2000 elections and 4% reporting on various pre-1998 elections.

7. Cities varied widely in terms of the number and type of services that they contracted out to other governments or private companies. The mean number of city-provided services was 2.4—roughly half of the five we asked about—indicating that contracting and alternative service arrangements are quite common among California’s municipalities. Police, fire, and sewerage were the functions most likely to be carried out by city government personnel. At the other extreme, trash collection was rarely performed by city staff (see the appendix for more details).

8. In additional analysis (not shown), we also tested for differences between charter cities, which have slightly greater autonomy, and general-law cities. This distinction had no noticeable effect on turnout.

9. Measuring socioeconomic status creates difficult statistical modeling issues because the various measures of status (income, educational attainment, home ownership, etc.) are very closely correlated at the city level. Thus, we decided to use factor analysis to reduce four important variables that are highly related to one another—median household income, poverty rate, percentage of college graduates among adult residents, and percentage owner-occupancy of housing—into a single summary measure. The resulting factor score is the city’s principal factor loading for these four variables, with higher scores representing higher status. The socioeconomic status score is highly correlated with each of its component measures: income (0.98), education (0.84), poverty (−0.79), and home ownership (0.68).

10. Due to extremely high collinearity (with percentage Asian and percentage Hispanic), we could not simultaneously include a measure of percentage immigrant in the model.

11. Also we corrected our standard errors to allow for the nonindependence of the mayoral and council elections in same city and ran other fixed models but found that they made no substantive difference.

12. A regression explaining turnout rates, and using *only* the timing dummy variables, explains 51% of variation for turnout of registrants and 32% for turnout of adults.

13. When we examined mayoral and council elections separately, these relationships held true for both types of elections, although the association was somewhat stronger for council contests.

14. Specifically, of the 308 clerks answering this question, 94 (30.5%) indicated a change from nonconcurrent to concurrent elections, 3 (1%) switched from concurrent to nonconcurrent dates, 37 (12%) indicated a change from one nonconcurrent date to another, and 137 (56.5%) indicated no change.

15. Findings regarding city demographic characteristics and election context also tend to match expectations. Cities with smaller populations, a higher average socioeconomic status, a greater proportion of elderly residents, less geographically mobile populations, and fewer institutionalized residents experienced greater voter turnout. The proportions Hispanic and Asian were negatively related to turnout among adult residents, largely a reflection of citizenship barriers to registration. Interestingly, after controls for socioeconomic status and registration, the only ethno-racial composition variable that was significant for turnout among the registered was a negative relationship between the Asian-American share and voter turnout—a finding echoed elsewhere and largely unexplained in the literature (Lien 1994). In terms of context, the more candidates that competed for a position, the higher voter turnout. However, other measures of context that might be considered to increase the importance of voting had little effect here. Uncontested elections, the margin of victory in mayoral elections, and the presence of incumbents all lacked significant relationships with voter turnout.

16. This relationship is weaker and statistically insignificant for turnout of adult residents. However, when we substituted a binary variable indicating whether the city provides *any* of the five services, it was positive and statistically significant for turnout among adult residents as well as registered voters. This indicates that there is a particular “turnout penalty” for

minimal-service cities whose in-house employees provide none of the five services. Additional analysis (not shown) suggests that when the impact of each of the five types of services is assessed separately, direct city control of the police force increases turnout more than direct city control over other services.

17. As we show later, mayoral term length is unrelated to turnout in either off- or on-peak elections.

18. This is in part why the adjusted  $R^2$  is higher for off-peak elections. Dropping all of the local institutional variables from the peak-cycle elections actually marginally increases the adjusted  $R^2$  for these cities.

19. An alternate regression that combined on- and off-cycle elections but used a series of interaction terms between institutions and election timing also indicated that the effect of form of government does differ significantly between the two types of elections.

## REFERENCES

- Alford, R. R., and E. C. Lee. 1968. Voting turnout in American cities. *American Political Science Review* 62:796-813.
- Bennett, S. E., and D. Resnick. 1990. The implications of nonvoting for democracy in the United States. *American Journal of Political Science* 34:771-802.
- Boyd, R. W. 1989. The effects of primaries and statewide races on voter turnout. *Journal of Politics* 51:730-39.
- Bridges, A. 1997. *Morning glories: Municipal reform in the southwest*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Bullock, C. S. 1990. Turnout in municipal elections. *Policy Studies Review* 9:539-49.
- Cain, B. E., M. Mullin, and G. Peele. 2001. City Caesars? An examination of mayoral power in California. Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August.
- Copeland, G. W. 1997. Term limits for urban settings: One size fits all? *Urban News* 11:1-10.
- Cox, G., and M. C. Munger. 1989. Closeness, expenditures and turnout in the 1982 House elections. *American Political Science Review* 83:217-31.
- Davidson, C., and B. Grofman, eds. 1994. *Quiet revolution in the South: The impact of the Voting Rights Act*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Dixon, R. 1964. Predicting voter turnout in city elections. Master's thesis, sociology, University of California, Berkeley.
- Engstrom, R. L., and M. D. McDonald. 1982. The underrepresentation of blacks on city councils: Comparing structural and socioeconomic explanations for south/non-south differences. *Journal of Politics* 44:1088-99.
- Espino, R. 2001. The political legacy of municipal reform. Paper read at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Political Science Association, Chicago, 19-22 April.
- Federal Elections Commission. 2003. About elections and voting 2003. Available from <http://www.fec.gov/elections.html>.
- Foster, K. A. 1997. *The political economy of special-purpose government*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press.
- Hajnal, Z. L., and J. T. Hills. 2002. Why turnout does matter: The effects of a skewed electorate on minority representation in local politics. Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, August.

- Hajnal, Z. L., P. G. Lewis, and H. Louch. 2002. *Municipal elections in California: Turnout, timing, and competition*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.
- International City Management Association. 1988. *The municipal year book*. Washington, DC: International City Management Association.
- Initiative and Referendum Institute. 2001. Historical database. [www.iandrinstitute.org](http://www.iandrinstitute.org).
- Jacobson, G. C., and S. Kernell. 1981. *Strategy and choice in congressional elections*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press.
- Karnig, A. K., and B. O. Walter. 1983. Decline in municipal voter turnout: A function of changing structure. *American Politics Quarterly* 11:491-505.
- . 1993. Municipal voter turnout during the 1980s: The case of continued decline. In *State and local government and politics: Essential readings*, edited by H. A. Bailey and J. M. Shafritz. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.
- King, G., and A. Gelman. 1991. Systemic consequences of incumbency advantage in U.S. House elections. *American Journal of Political Science* 35:110-38.
- Lien, P.-T. 1994. Ethnicity and political participation: A comparison between Asian and Mexican Americans. *Political Behavior* 16:237-64.
- Lijphart, A. 1997. Unequal participation: Democracy's unresolved dilemma. *American Political Science Review* 91:1-14.
- Lispet, S. M., and W. Schneider. 1983. The decline of confidence in American institutions. *Political Science Quarterly* 98:379-402.
- Miller, G. J. 1981. *Cities by contract: The politics of municipal incorporation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Morlan, R. L. 1984. Municipal versus national election voter turnout: Europe and the United States. *Political Science Quarterly* 99:457-70.
- Oliver, J. E. 2001. *Democracy in suburbia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Powell, G. B. 1986. American voter turnout in comparative perspective. *American Political Science Review* 81:45-65.
- Rosales, R. 2000. *The illusion of inclusion: The untold political story of San Antonio*. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press.
- Rosenstone, S. J., and J. M. Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan.
- Schaffner, B. F., G. Wright, and M. Streb. 2001. Teams without uniforms: The nonpartisan ballot in state and local elections. *Political Research Quarterly* 54:7-30.
- Schneider, M., and P. Teske. 1995. *Public entrepreneurs: Agents for change in American government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Teixeira, R. A. 1992. *The disappearing American voter*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Tolbert, C., J. Grummel, and D. A. Smith. 2000. The effects of ballot initiatives on voter turnout in the American states. *American Politics Research* 29:625-48.
- Verba, S., K. L. Schlozman, and H. E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Wattenberg, M. P. 1998. *Turnout decline in the U.S. and other advanced industrial democracies*. Irvine, CA: Center for the Study of Democracy.
- Welch, S. 1990. The impact of at-large elections on the representation of blacks and Hispanics. *Journal of Politics* 52:1050-76.
- Welch, S., and T. Bledsoe. 1988. *Urban reform and its consequences*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Wolfinger, R. E., and S. J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press.
- Wood, C. 2002. Voter turnout in city elections. *Urban Affairs Review* 38:209-31.

*Zoltan L. Hajnal is an assistant professor in the political science department at the University of California, San Diego, and a former research fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California. His research interests include minority representation, urban governance, inequality, political participation, and direct democracy. His recent publications include "Minorities and Direct Legislation: Evidence from California Ballot Proposition Elections" published in The Journal of Politics (2002); "White Residents, Black Incumbents, and a Declining Racial Divide" published in American Political Science Review (2001); and "The Local Interest Group System: Who Governs and Why?" published in Social Science Quarterly (1998). He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago.*

*Paul G. Lewis is a research fellow and director of the Governance and Public Finance Program at the Public Policy Institute of California. His recent journal publications on local government and urban policy have appeared in Economic Development Quarterly, Journal of Urban Affairs, Political Research Quarterly, Polity, State and Local Government Review, and Urban Affairs Review. He holds a Ph.D. in politics from Princeton University.*