Who Votes for America’s Mayors?

A Pilot study to determine who casts ballots—and who doesn’t—in 4 U.S. Cities: Charlotte, Detroit, Portland, and St. Paul

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Context:
Voting in America as a Spectator Sport?

- U.S. Resident Population (2015)¹
- U.S. Registered Voters RV (2014)³
- Ballots Cast: Presidential (2012)²
- Ballots Cast: Midterm Election (2014)²
- Ballots Cast: Primary Election (2013-14 cycle)³

¹ U.S. Census July 1, 2015
² U.S. Elections Project
³ PSU internal study, based on 50 states’ official websites (e.g. Secretaries of State)
### For National Elections:  
**As Turnout Declines, the Electorate Changes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Ballots Cast (USEP*)</th>
<th>Turnout as % of VEP (USEP*)</th>
<th>Voter Median Age (CNN Exit**)</th>
<th>Age: 18-44 as % of Electorate (Washington Post***)</th>
<th>Age: 65+ as % of Electorate (Washington Post***)</th>
<th>Median Household Income (CNN Exit**)</th>
<th>Percent Minority (CNN Exit**)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>130,292,000</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>81,680,000</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48,650,800</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*USEP is *United States Election Project.  
**CNN Exit Polls, 2012 and 2014  
***Washington Post
Far Less is Known

“...To say that a field of study on local elections exists would be a bit of an overstatement. Not only is the literature rather small and not particularly cohesive, but the data collection and methods of analysis are also somewhat primitive, particularly compared to research on state and federal elections.”
Mayoral Elections are Notably Low-Turnout Contests

For Largest 30 U.S. Cities in 2011-14 Election Cycle, Mayoral contests attracted just

27% Turnout of Registered Voters (RV)

22% Turnout (Estimated) of Voting Eligible Population (VEP)*

* PSU Research Team preliminary numbers; Voting Eligible Population is an extrapolation based national statistics showing 227 million “Voting Eligible Population” (U.S. Election Project) and 185 million registered voters (from 50 state Election offices).
Low Turnout Mayoral Races:
Two Common Explanations

3/4 Off Cycle

“Off-Cycle”
(2011, 2013)

Nearly 3/4 of contests are held “Off Cycle”—in odd-numbered years (e.g. 2011, 2013) without other national offices at stake such as U.S. President & Congress*

80% Non-Partisan

(2012, 2014)

Over 80% of Biggest City mayors are elected on a Non-Partisan basis, meaning winners are often decided in first round contests prior to November*

*Top 30 cities in the US
Four Pilot Cities

A diverse set of cities for pilot research.

3 Knight Cities and Portland
(Charlotte, Detroit, St. Paul)

Voter Turnout Rates Varied Significantly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Charlotte Primary Election</th>
<th>St. Paul</th>
<th>Detroit</th>
<th>Portland General Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low of</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High of</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Election types

- **“Instant Run-Off Voting”** (IRV) where voters “rank order” their choices so only one election is needed
- Non-Partisan with Run-Off if no Candidate receives 50%+
- Party Nominees Chosen in primary, followed by General

Charlotte St. Paul Detroit Portland
Primary General General Primary General Primary General Primary General

Voter Turnout Rates Varied Significantly vs

High of 72%
Low of 7%
Methodology

Complete voting records were obtained from all 4 jurisdictions:

Each record contained voter birthdates/ages; Charlotte data contained self-identified race/ethnicity

Across 7 elections, 730,000+ individual records were geocoded and mapped

Voter Turnout rates were determined using 3 different denominators:

RV  VAP  VEP
Registered Voters  Voting Age Population of residents 18+  Voting Eligible Population or VEP-Lite method that deducted non-citizens from VAP

Census 2010 was then overlaid across the electoral information*

Voting records were analyzed through 3 Perspectives:

Geography

Age and Race/Ethnicity (Charlotte only)

3 other Socio-Demographic Factors

* 2015 registration data combined with 2012/13 ballot history data does account for some “temporal distortion” – i.e. registered voters who may have voted in one location and then moved to another.
The Big Picture:
What we found in our Pilot Cities – that’s likely true across the U.S.

Abysmal Voter Turnout
Registered Voter turnout rates in the single digits are common throughout Charlotte, Detroit, and St. Paul. Wide variances within each city are also significant—in some cases as high as 35:1 (Charlotte primary).

“Voting Deserts”
“Voting Deserts”—census tracts where voter turnout rates are less than 50% of an already meager citywide average—now constitute large swaths of the urban landscape.

Clout of Seniors
Older voters 65+ typically are 10–20 times more likely to cast ballots than 18–34 year old residents—and even 5–6 times more likely than 35–49 year olds.

Age and SES
While age is far and away the biggest predictor of voting behavior, key SES factors—household income, educational attainment, homeownership/rental status—correlate in significant ways for understanding who (and who won’t) cast ballots in mayoral elections.
Key Finding #1

Dramatic Variances Exist in Registered Voter Turnout

Within each city voter turnout rates as a percentage of registered voters (RV) vary dramatically by census tracts.

Ratios of the “highest to lowest” Census Tracts in each city, by Registered Voter Turnout

Charlotte
- Primary Election: 35:1
- General Election: 27:1

Detroit
- Primary Election: 17.5:1
- General Election: 10:1

Portland
- Primary Election: 3.2:1
- General Election: 2:1

St. Paul
- General Election: 3.5:1
Key Finding #2

“Voting Deserts” characterize large swaths of the Urban Civic Landscape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban Landscape</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>General</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>21 tracts</td>
<td>15 tracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.5% of population</td>
<td>7% of population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>33 tracts</td>
<td>30 tracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12% of population</td>
<td>10.5% of population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul</td>
<td>20 tracts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23.5% of population</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Portland had just 5 “Voting Desert” tracts in the primary (4%) and none in the general.
Nearly a full generation separates those who cast ballots in mayoral contests—from those old enough to do so.

6 of the 7 elections median voter age was 13–17 years higher than the citywide median age of its adult population.

Key Finding #3

**Charlotte**
- Median Age of Voting Age Population: 41.8
- Median Age of Primary Election Voters: 59
- Median Age of General Election Voters: 56

**Detroit**
- Median Age of Voting Age Population: 45.7
- Median Age of Primary Election Voters: 62
- Median Age of General Election Voters: 59

**Portland**
- Median Age of Voting Age Population: 42.3
- Median Age of Primary Election Voters: 59
- Median Age of General Election Voters: 49

**St Paul**
- Median Age of Voting Age Population: 40.8
- Median Age of Primary Election Voters: 59
- Median Age of General Election Voters: 57
Key Finding #4

Seniors’ Electoral Clout Relative to Younger Registered Voters is Nearly 10:1

Seniors’ Electoral Clout Relative to Younger VAP is Nearly 20:1

An “Odds Ratio” compares the probability that a member of a particular age cohort is a voter, or a “non-voter.” The odds of registered voters 65 years and older casting ballots relative to 18-34 year old voters is as follows:

- Charlotte: 19:1 (Primary) & 13.8:1 (General)
- Detroit: 12.9 (Primary) & 9.5 (General)
- Portland: 14.3 (Primary) & 7.9 (General)
- St. Paul: 7.7 (General)

Since so many Generation Y members aren’t even registered to vote—from an estimated 15% in Detroit to 42% in St. Paul—these ratios are even higher when measured against the Voting Age Population in each age cohort. In some city census tracts, Senior/Millennial Odds Ratios vary up to 100:1.
Example: Charlotte Primary—By Age Cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Cohort</th>
<th>VAP %</th>
<th>Votes Cast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-34 years</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-49 years</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64 years</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+ years</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Finding #5
Race/Ethnicity and Voting Turnout in Charlotte

**Primary**

Black Voter Turnout

9.3% of Registered Voters

1.5x Higher than White Voter Turnout

6.1% of Registered Voters

**General**

Black RV: 18% + White RV: 22%

Cast Ballots at Significantly Higher Rates

Asian RV: 8% + Hispanic/Latino RV: 5%
Key Finding #5 (cont.)

Race/Ethnicity and Voting Turnout in Charlotte

When age and race factors are examined relative to the entire Voting Age Population, the results are even more dramatic.

- Voter Turnout Rate of 65+ Black/African American residents is roughly 250x Higher than Voter Turnout Rate of 18-34 Hispanic/Latino residents.
- Voter Turnout Rate of Black/African American residents when measured against Voting Age Population (VAP) is 20x Higher in the Primary than White residents.
- Voter Turnout Rate of Asian residents is 10x Higher in the General than Hispanic/Latino residents.
Key Finding #6

While Key Socioeconomic (SES) Factors Clearly Correlate with Voting Propensity, Age (and sometimes Race/Ethnicity) Matters A Lot More

The primary election registered voter turnout rates of Seniors living in the lowest income tracts in all cities was about 5 times higher than the registered voter turnout rates of 18-34 year olds living in the same tracts—and remained at about 5 times as census tracts increased in household income. In general elections, the differences were smaller but still evident: about 3 times in Charlotte, Detroit, and St. Paul, and about 2 times in Portland.

Even in the most affluent and elite city neighborhoods, 18-34 year olds cast mayoral ballots at significantly lower rates than 65 year olds; 50-64 year olds; and even 35-49 year olds living in the poorest neighborhoods.

Commonly accepted conventional wisdom—that voting rates rise dramatically when marriage and homeownership rates go up significantly—doesn’t appear true in mayoral elections.

“Generation X” residents 35-49 years old cast ballots at only ¾ to ½ the rate of their 65 and older counterparts.
Key Finding #7

Notable SES-related findings show intriguing differences between cities

Higher household income and higher homeownership rates correlated more strongly with higher registered voter turnout in tracts in Detroit and Charlotte (General only) compared to Portland and St. Paul.

In St. Paul, registered voter turnout rates were most strongly correlated with educational attainment rather than household income or homeownership: 50% voter turnout in tracts with the highest levels of educational attainment compared to 25% in tracts with low levels of educational attainment.

In Portland’s relatively low turnout primary election (34% turnout of RV), seniors living in tracts with lower-than average household income, high rental occupancy, and lower levels of educational attainment voted at 2-3 times the rate of their counterparts in other cities—perhaps due to Oregon’s system of abolishing polling places in favor of mailing ballots to every voter 2 weeks before the election.

In Charlotte’s primary election, higher rental and lower household income and educational attainment census tracts showed slightly higher voting rates—likely attributable to higher Black/African American voter turnout relative to White residents.