

Local Democracy in the United States: Institutions, Trust, and Public Policy

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Plan for the workshop

- Part 1: Democracy and local government
- Part 2: Trends in American politics
- Part 3: Trends in local elections
- Part 4: City governance challenges

Part I: Democracy and local government

- What is a democracy (versus a dictatorship)?
- How do we evaluate democracy, government performance?
- Where does local government fit in American democracy?

Different ways of defining and measuring democracy vs. dictatorship

- A minimalist definition: Democracy is a regime in which those who govern are selected through contested elections.
- But there is more to democracy than holding regular elections. Freedom, fair elections, popular participation, respect for human rights, institutions accountable to citizens, adherence to rule of law, independent media, civil society, etc.
- Freedom House scores: more inclusive, subjective

The Human Cost of Democratic Decline

In Europe and Eurasia, governments are failing to uphold the rights and freedoms of citizens. To protect the most vulnerable, governments within and outside the region should shore up democratic institutions.

WRITTEN BY



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Different ways of defining and measuring democracy vs. dictatorship

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- Freedom House scores: more inclusive, subjective
- The Polity Project; V-Dem

Variants of democracy

- Parliamentary, presidential, or mixed (how chief executive / government is chosen)
- Winner-take-all or proportional representation (PR), single- or multi-member districts
- Number of effective political parties
- Unitary or federal

And more....

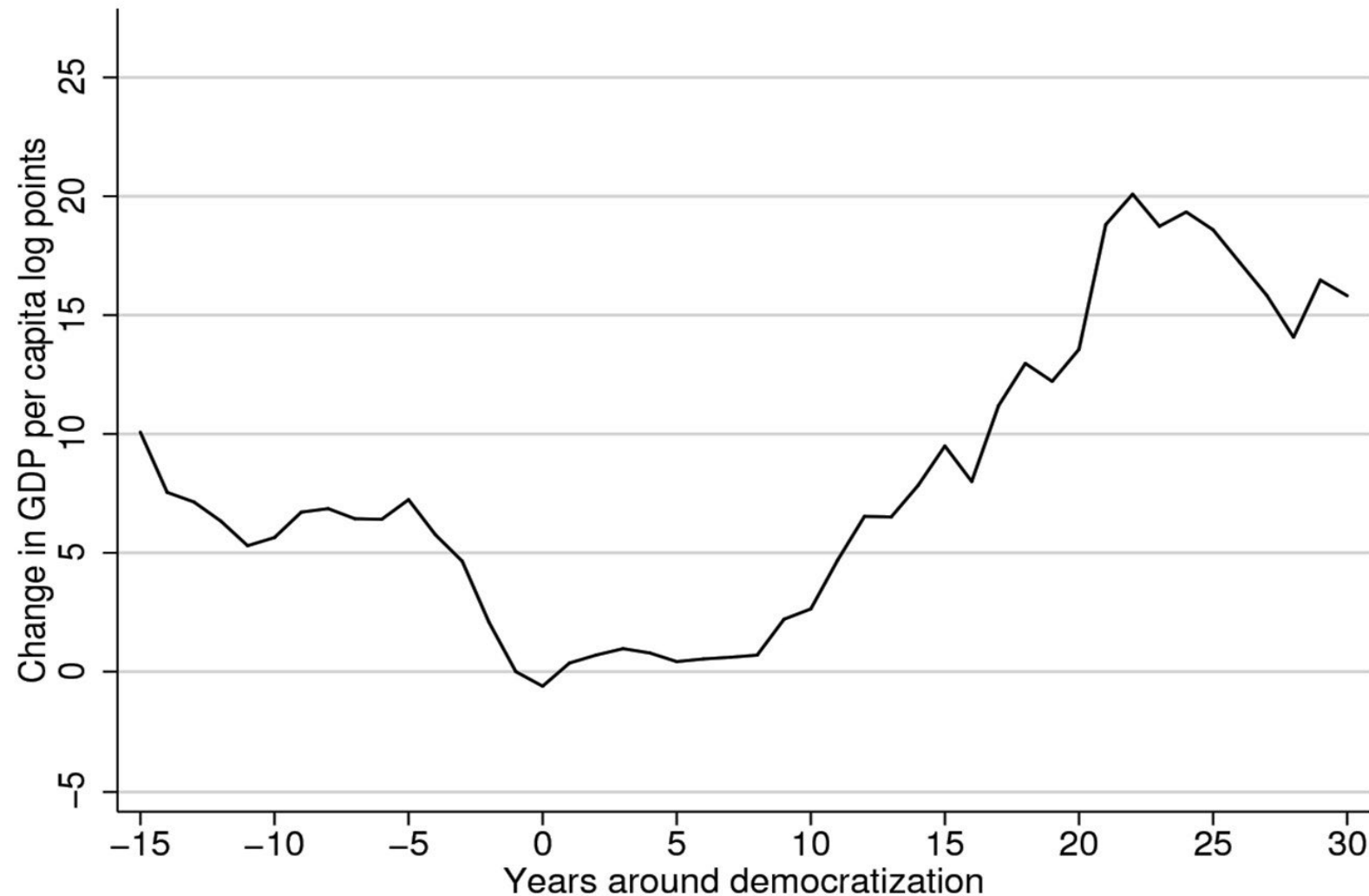
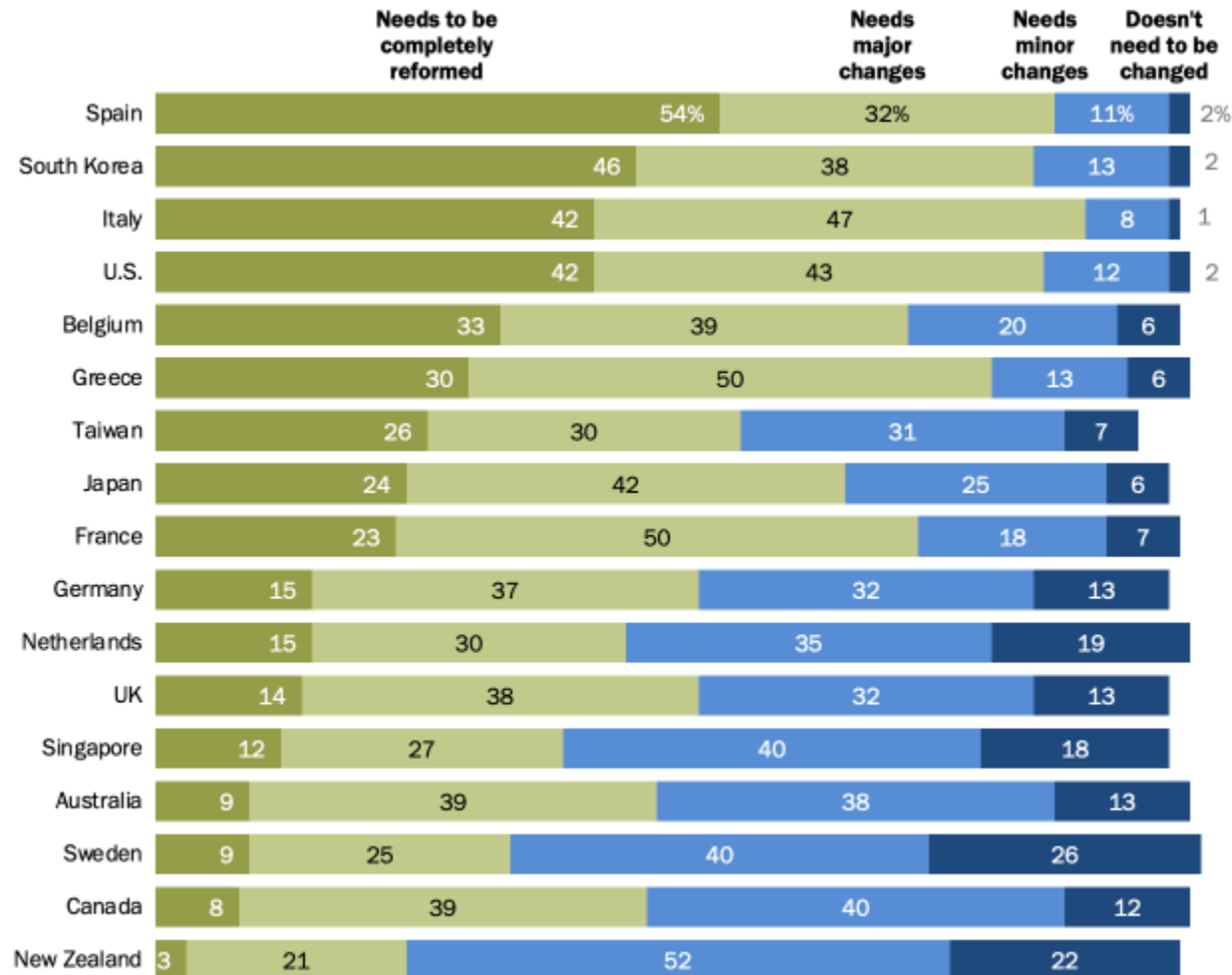


Fig. 1. GDP per capita before and after a democratization. This figure plots GDP per capita in log points around a democratic transition relative to countries remaining nondemocratic in the same year. We normalize log GDP per capita to 0 in the year preceding the democratization. Time (in years) relative to the year of democratization runs on the horizontal axis.

Large shares in many publics say their political system needs reform

% who say the political system in (survey public) ...



Note: Those who did not answer not shown.

Source: Spring 2021 Global Attitudes Survey. Q13c.

Citizens in Advanced Economies Want Significant Changes to Their Political Systems

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Evaluating democratic government

- Democracy: Can citizens/residents/voters do what is expected of them in democratic government?
- Representation: Whose interests are being served by government?
- Governance: Can government effectively address public problems?

“The Submerged State”

– Suzanne Mettler



Democracy and Representation, Federalist #10

- “A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking...”
- “[T]he delegation of the government...to a small number of citizens elected by the rest”: What this does is “to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.”

Many voters use heuristics or cues to make decisions

- Party affiliation
- Incumbent
- Endorsements
- Ballot designation
- Perceived candidate gender
- Perceived candidate race or ethnicity

Evaluating democratic government

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- Governance: Can government effectively address public problems?

Some local government examples

- Timing of elections (on-cycle, off-cycle)
- Who is eligible to vote? E.g., felons? Non-citizens?
- At-large versus single-member districts

CALIFORNIA

Noncitizens banned from voting in federal elections but not some local races

By Hannah Wiley and Hannah Fry

July 19, 2024 3 AM PT

Without the ability to elect local leaders, Rosas says she feels powerless to push for change that might improve her family's quality of life, citing issues like rising housing costs and local taxes.

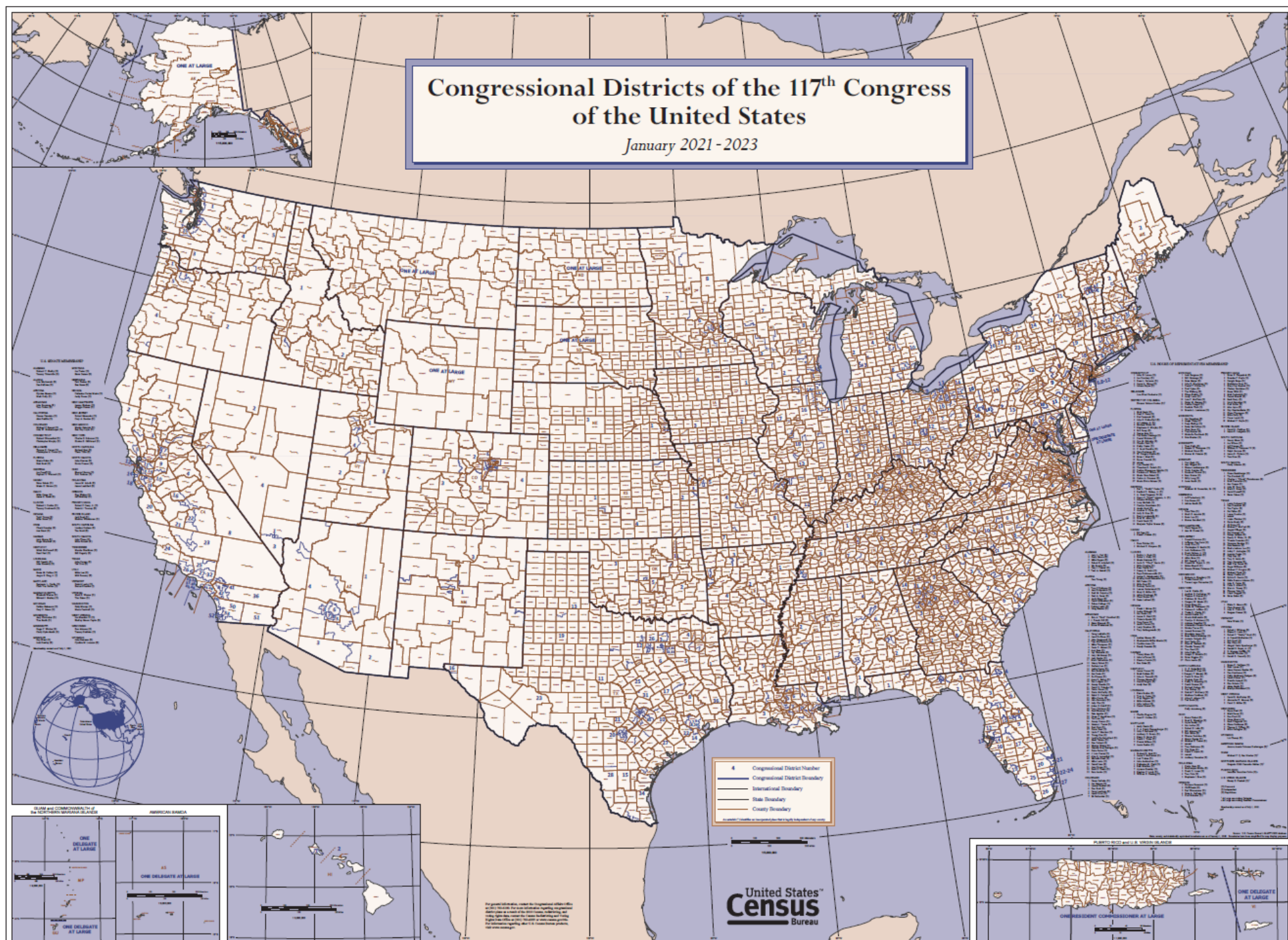
“If I had the opportunity to vote I could choose the people I want to represent me — people who understand my needs and my issues,” she said. “Without the right to vote I feel segregated from my community.”

Rosas is one of thousands living in Santa Ana who could have the chance to vote in local elections by 2028 if city voters in November pass a ballot measure granting noncitizens limited voting power. The measure has drawn intense opposition from locals and organizations who assert that voting is a privilege that should be granted only to citizens.

Some local examples

- Timing of elections (on-cycle, off-cycle)
- Who is eligible to vote? E.g., felons? Non-citizens?
- At-large versus single-member districts

January 2021-2023



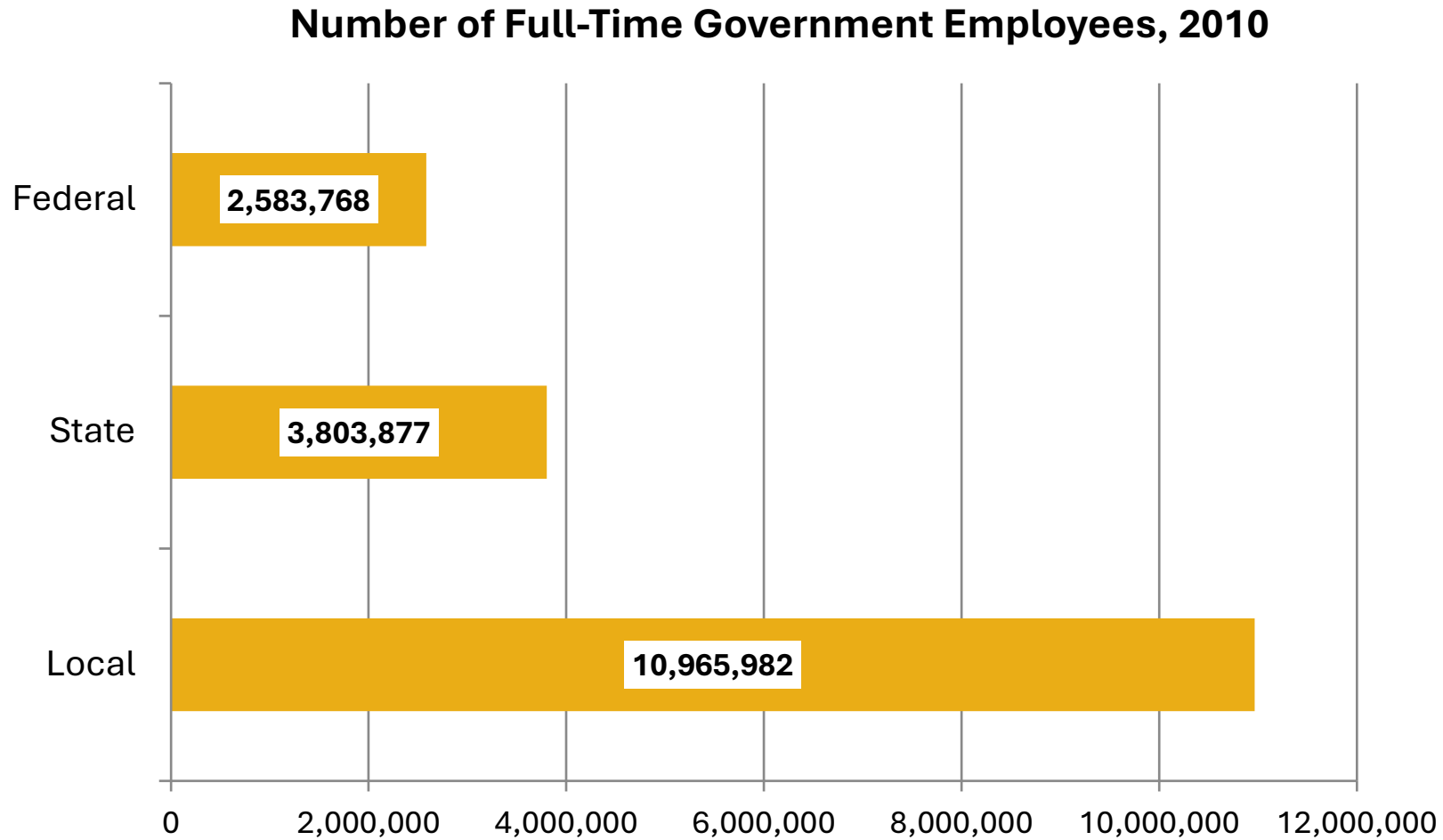
Evaluating democratic government

- Democracy: Can citizens/residents/voters do what is expected of them in democratic government?
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The nation's ~89,000 local governments

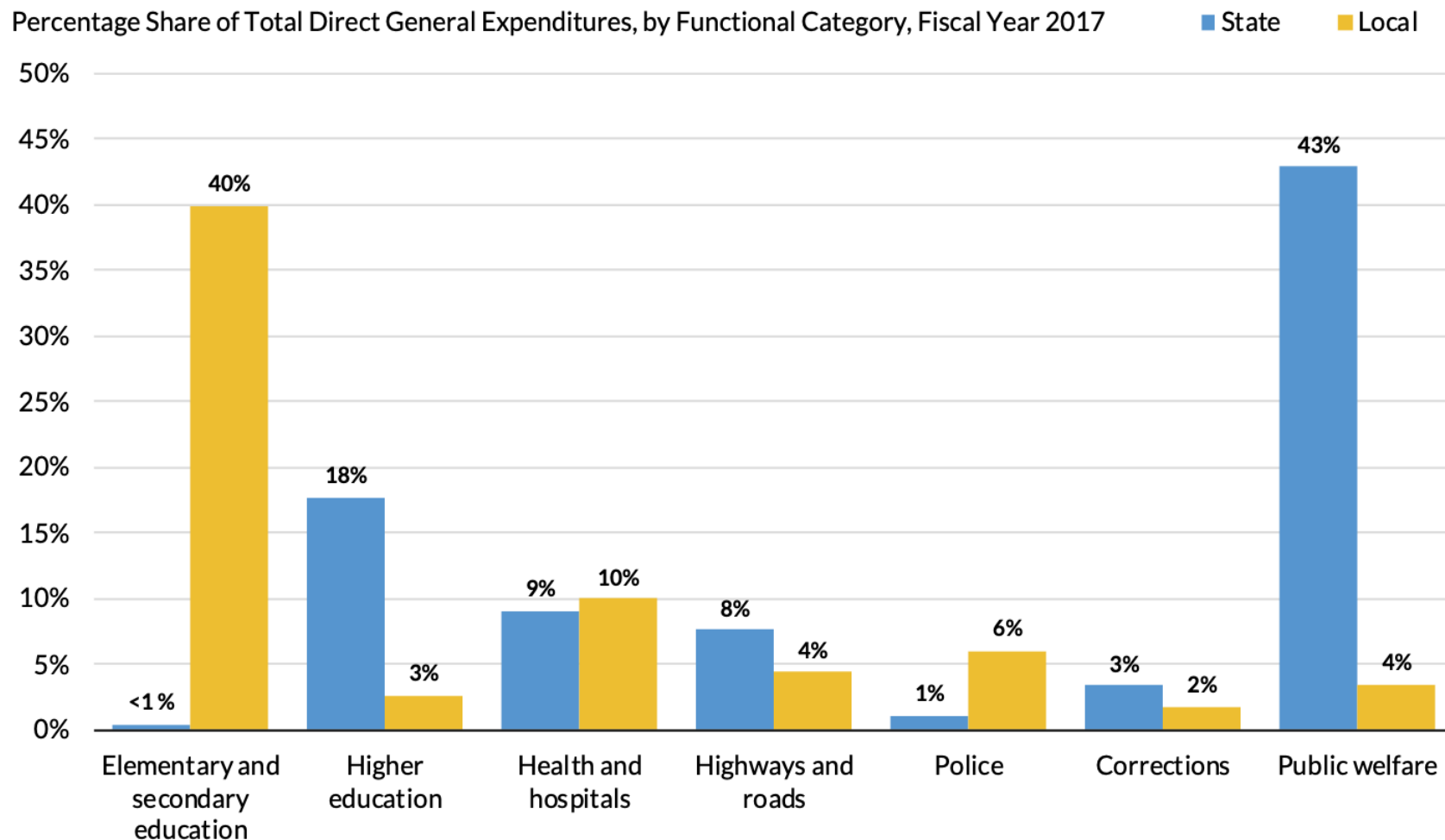
- General purpose: Counties, cities, townships, towns, villages.
 - 3,031 counties
 - 19,522 municipalities
 - 16,364 townships
- Special purpose: Authorized by state law to provide a single or limited number of functions.
 - Special districts: 37,203 of them. Examples are fire protection districts, cemetery districts, library districts, mosquito abatement districts, water authorities
 - Independent school districts: 12,884 across the U.S. Provide public elementary, secondary, or higher education.

Most government jobs are state and local



State Versus Local Expenditures

Percentage Share of Total Direct General Expenditures, by Functional Category, Fiscal Year 2017

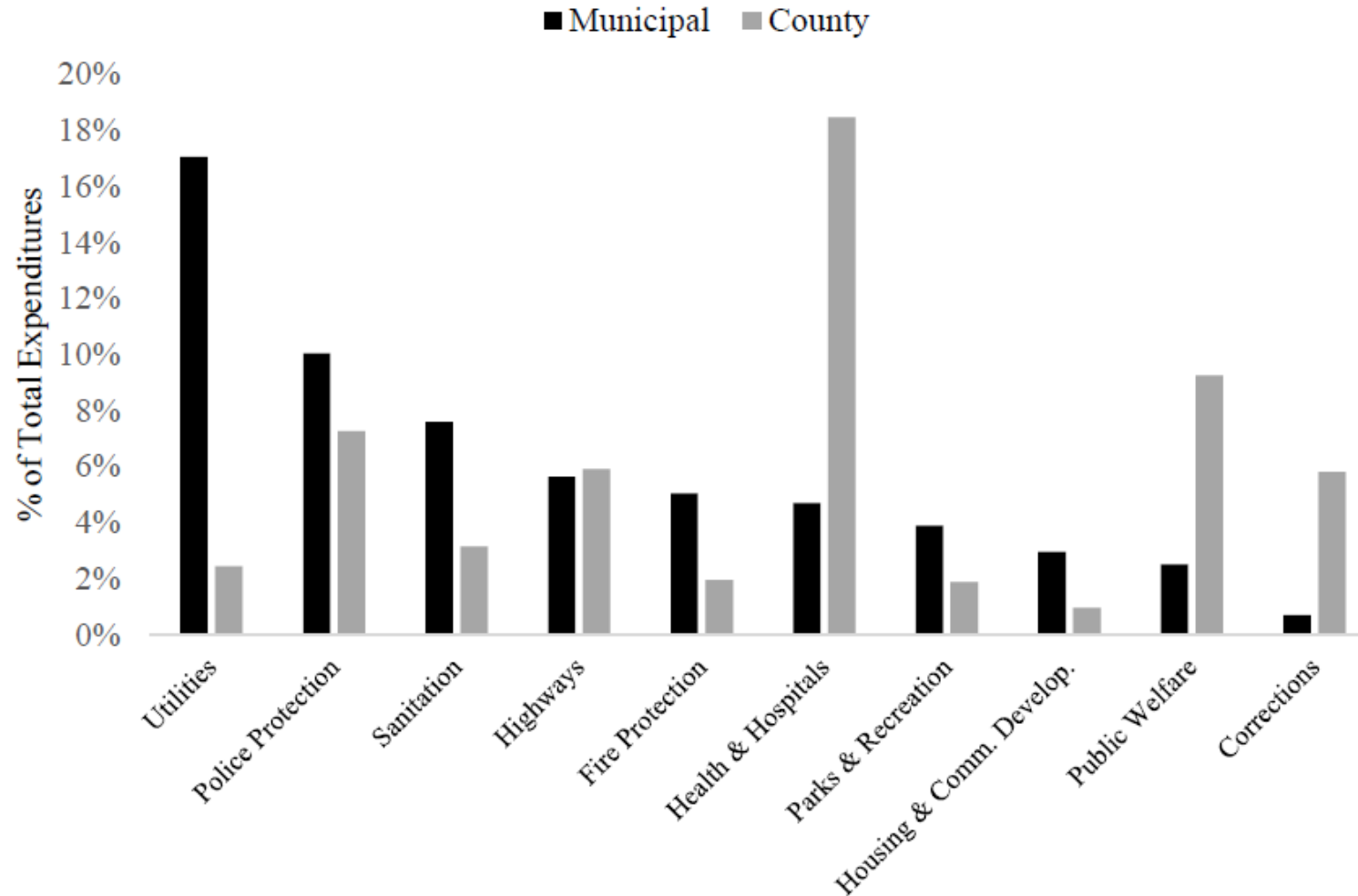


Source: State & Local Government Finance Data Query System. <http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/slf-dqs/pages.cfm>. The Urban Institute-Brookings Institution Tax Policy Center. Data from U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances, Government Finances, Volume 4, and Census of Governments. Date of Access: (04-Feb-2020 2:30 PM).

Note: Excludes spending on government-run liquor stores, utilities, and insurance trusts. Medicaid spending is divided between the public welfare and health and hospitals functional categories, with the majority allocated to the former

URBAN INSTITUTE

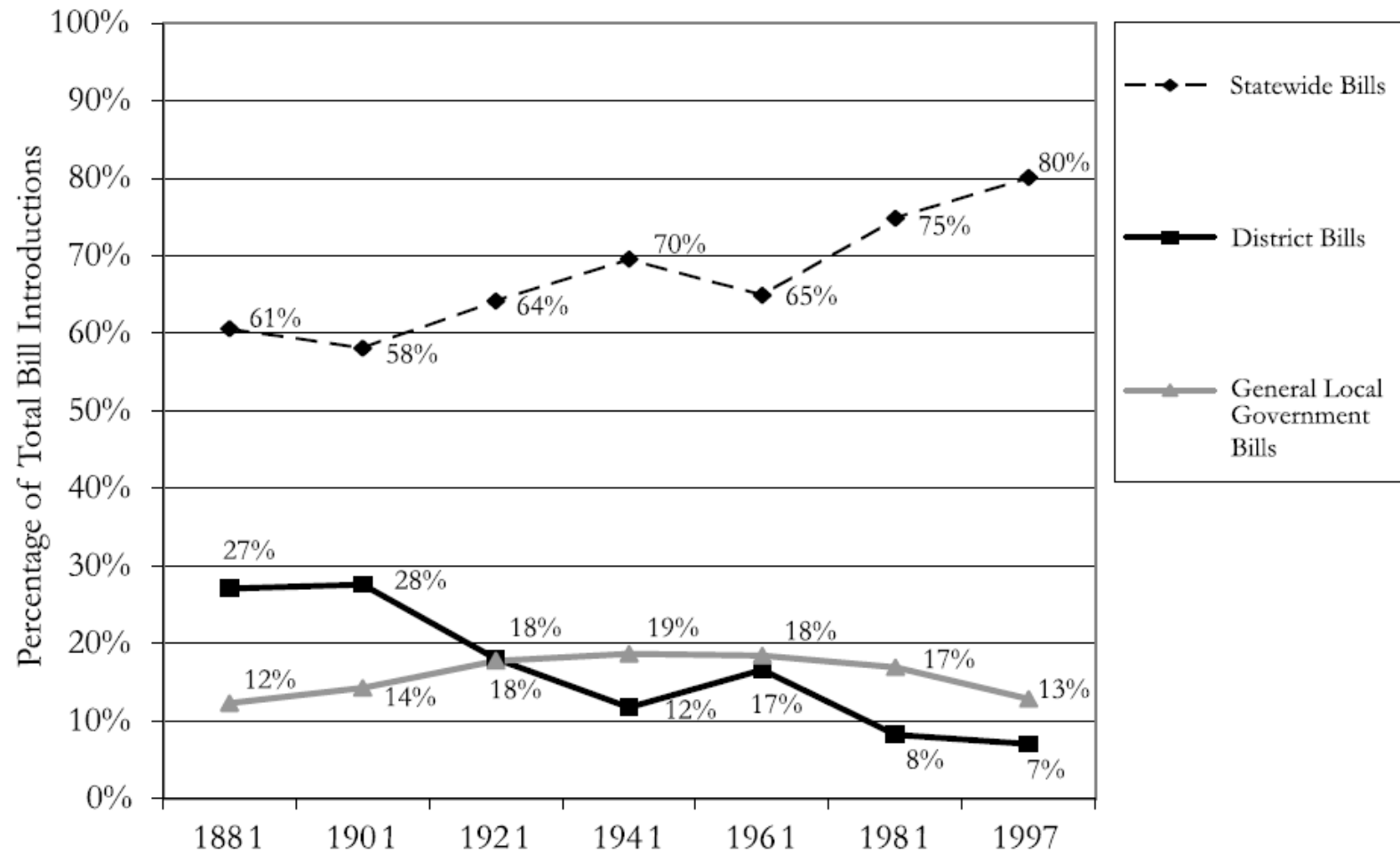
Figure 1.1: Local Government Expenditures, 2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances, 2017 (compiled by the Urban Institute via State and Local Finance Data: Exploring the Census of Governments, <https://state-local-finance-data.taxpolicycenter.org>, accessed June 30, 2020).

For much of American history, local government was most of American government.

- At the turn of the 20th century, local governments raised and spent more than federal and state governments combined (and had more debt).
- As of 1960, most public social welfare spending still came from local and state governments (52.3%).
- State spending on public elementary and secondary education first surpassed local education spending in the 1970s.

FIGURE 1. Variation across Time in Types of Bills Introduced

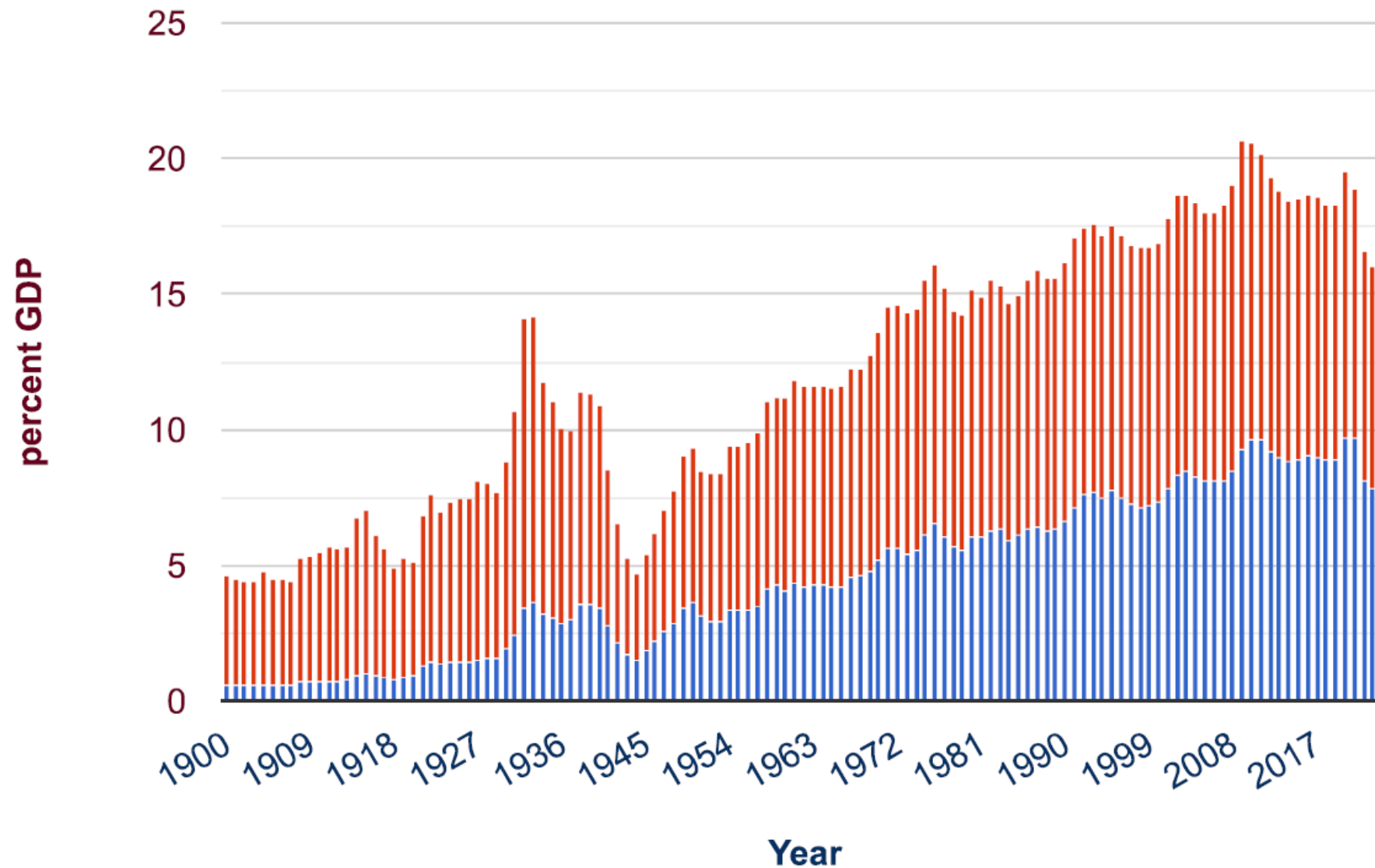


Thomas Nast: "Naturalization Mill" "Naturalization Mill," a cartoon by Thomas Nast for *Harper's Weekly*, October 24, 1868. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tammany-Hall>

Progressive Era municipal reform movement

- Weaken the grip of the major political parties over local elections
- Separate local elections from national and state elections
- Change to at-large elections rather than ward-based
- Change from mayor-council to commission or council-manager city government

US: State and Local Spending In 20th Century





Discussion, Part 1

Part 2: Trends in American politics

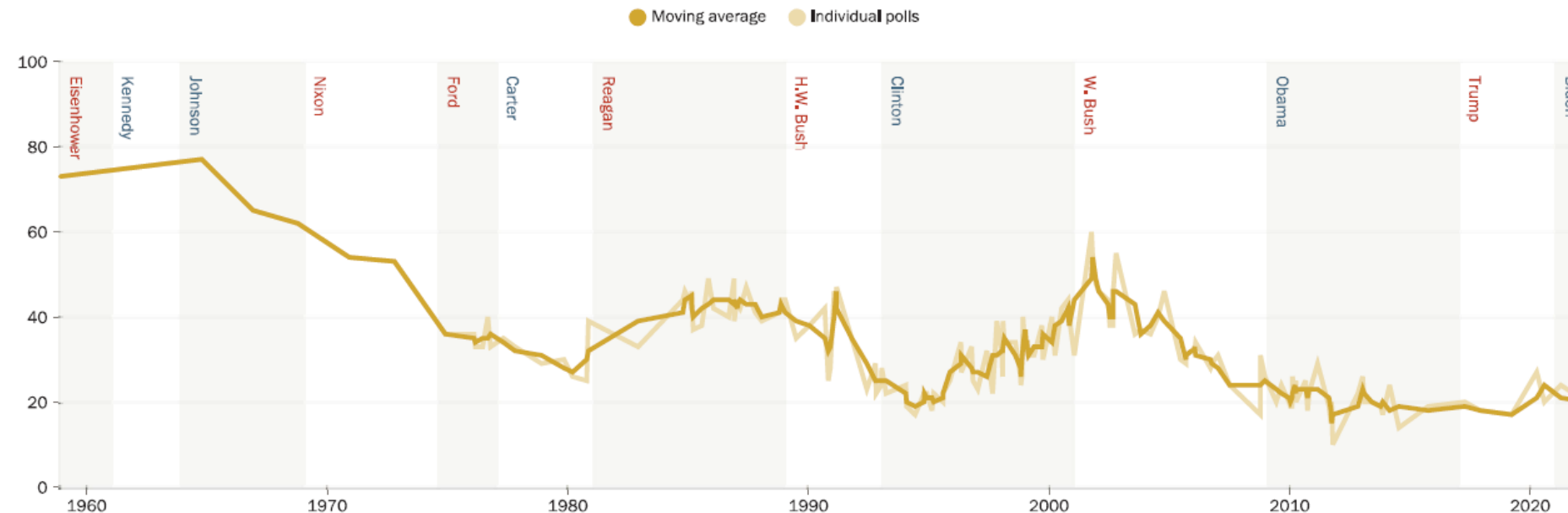
- Decreasing trust in government
- Decreasing voter turnout (since the 1960s)
- Increasing party polarization
- Rise of right-wing populism
- Rise of independent expenditures

Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024

Public trust in the federal government, which has been low for decades, has [increased modestly since 2023](#). As of April 2024, 22% of Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (21%). Last year, 16% said they trusted the government just about always or most of the time, which was among the lowest measures in nearly seven decades of polling.

Public trust in government near historic lows

% who say they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time



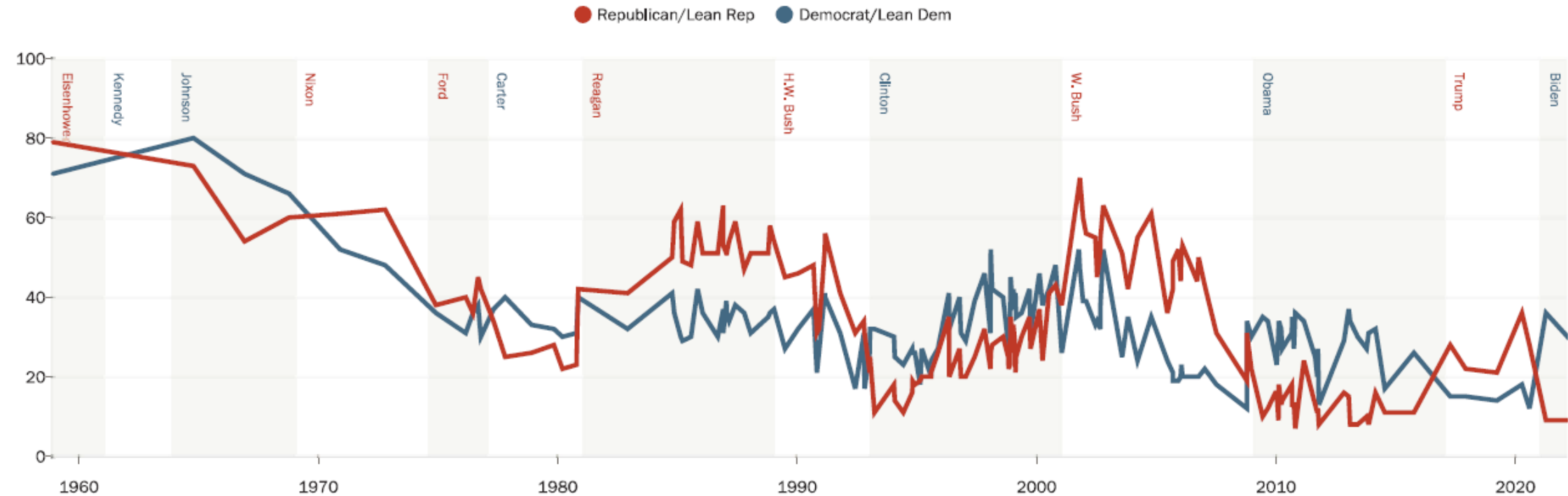
Sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN surveys.

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[Chart](#) [Data](#) [Share](#)

Trust in government higher among members of party that controls presidency

% who say they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time



Sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN surveys.

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Chart Data Share

Americans Trust Local Government Most, Congress Least

BY JEFFREY M. JONES



STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- 67% trust local government to handle local problems
- 32% trust the legislative branch of the federal government

Source:
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/512651/americans-trust-local-government-congress-least.aspx>

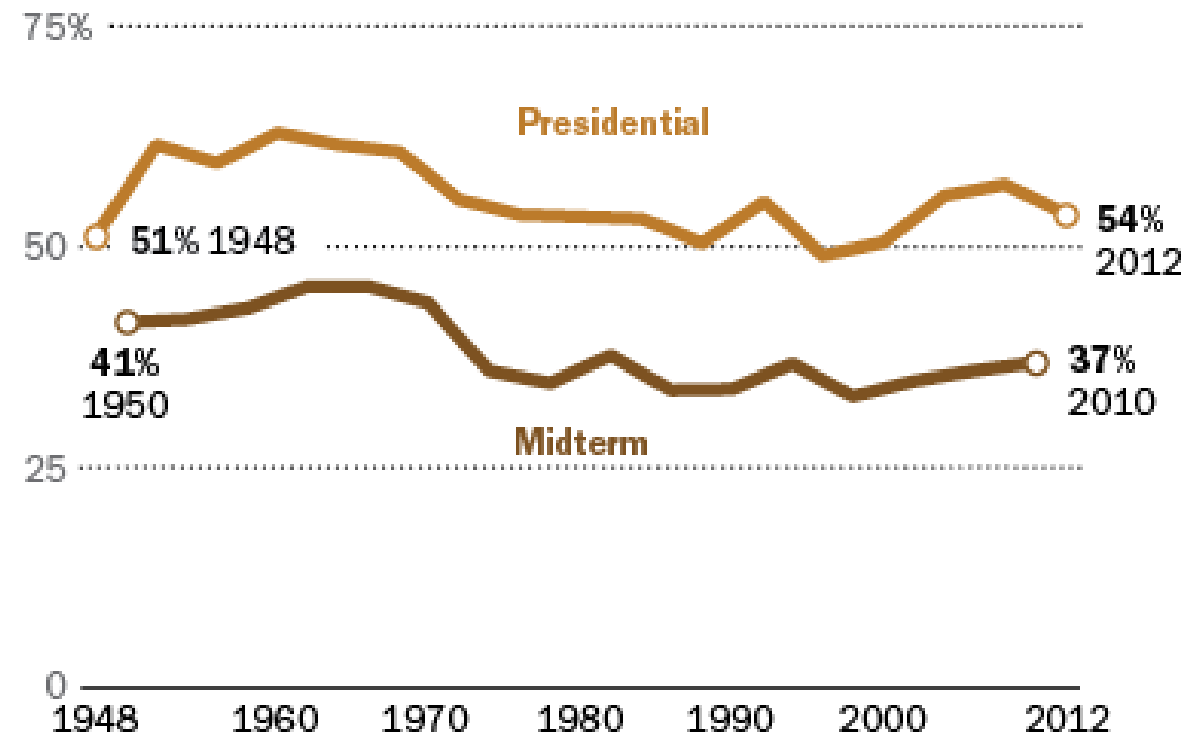
Trust in U.S. Government Institutions and Actors

How much trust and confidence do you have in ... ?

	Great deal	Fair amount	Not very much	None at all	Great deal / Fair amount
	%	%	%	%	%
Local governments in the area where you live when it comes to handling local problems	18	49	22	11	67
The government of the state where you live when it comes to handling state problems	19	40	23	17	59
The American people as a whole when it comes to making judgments under our democratic system about the issues facing our country	10	45	37	8	55

When the Presidency's Not at Stake, Fewer Voters Turn Out

Turnout rate during ... election years

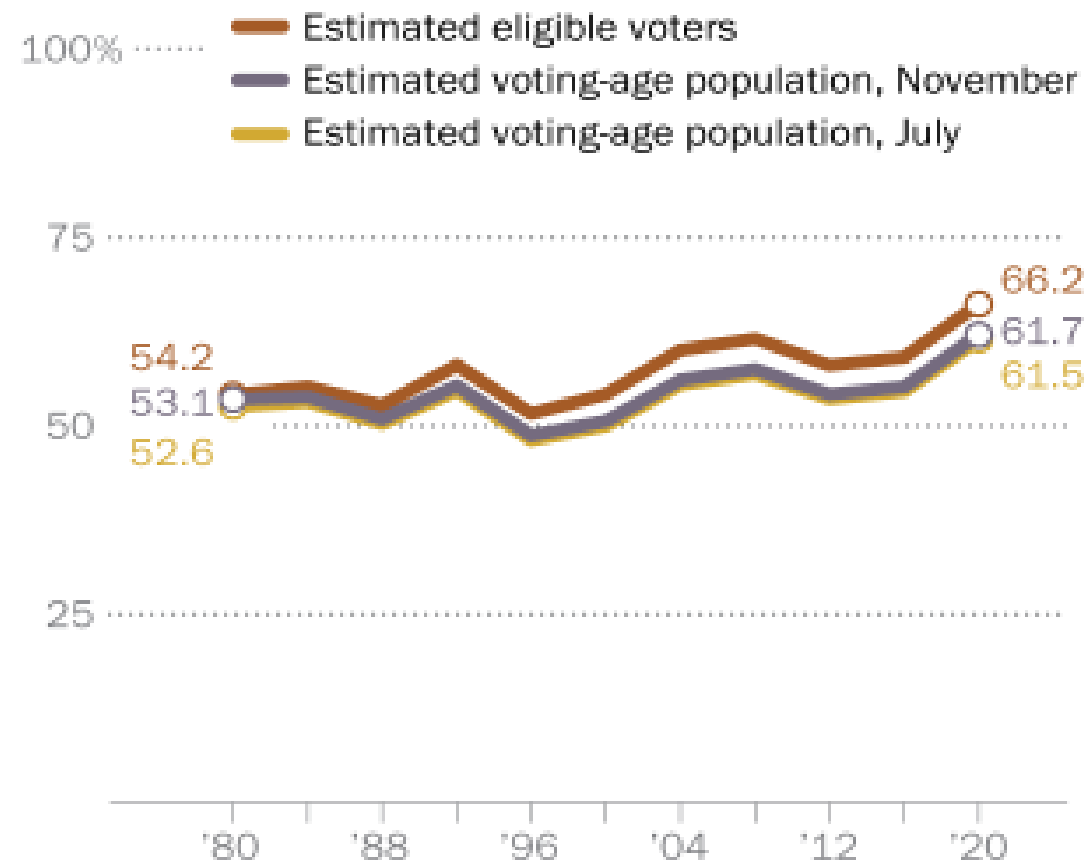


Note: Turnout rates calculated as total votes cast for president (in presidential election years) or House of Representatives (in midterm election years) divided by voting-age population.

Source: Census Bureau (voting-age population), Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives (vote totals)

However you measure it, voter turnout jumped in 2020

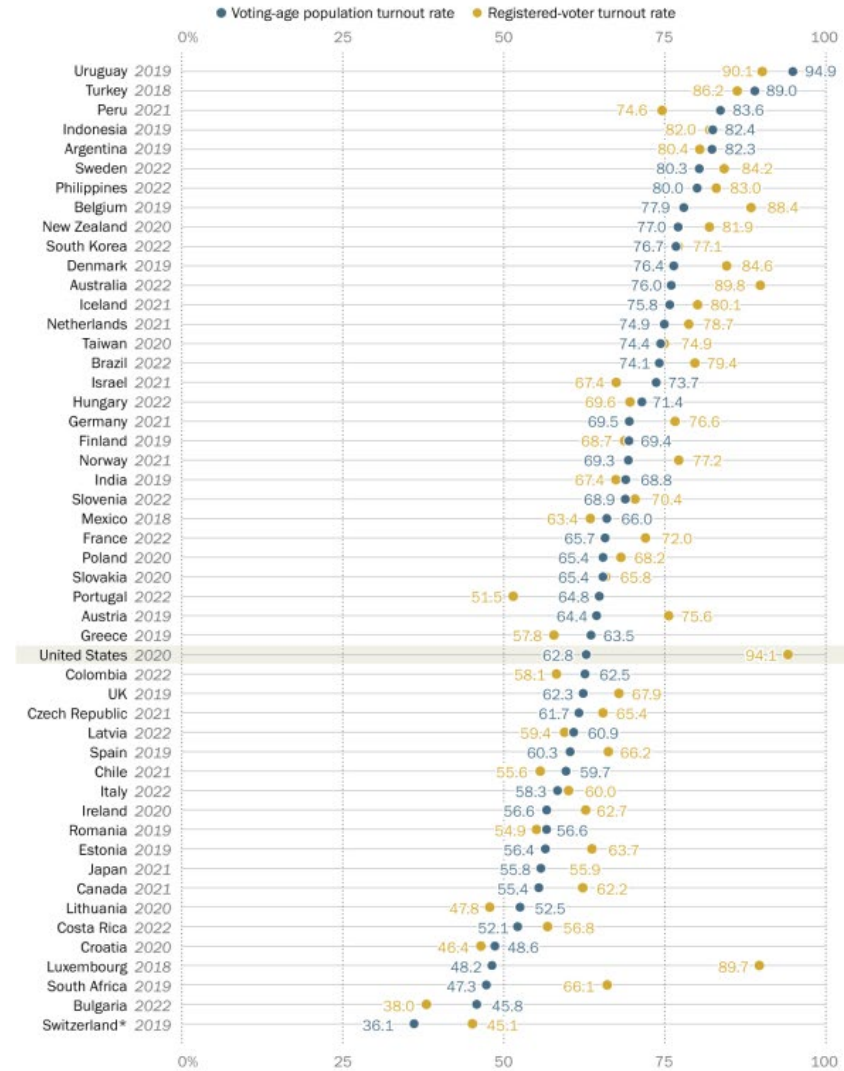
Votes cast in U.S. presidential race as % of indicated population



Source: Pew.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/28/turnout-soared-in-2020-as-nearly-two-thirds-of-eligible-u-s-voters-cast-ballots-for-president/>

U.S. voting-age population turnout is still behind many other countries despite its recent rise, though registered-voter turnout is remarkably higher

Among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries and candidates, and selected other countries



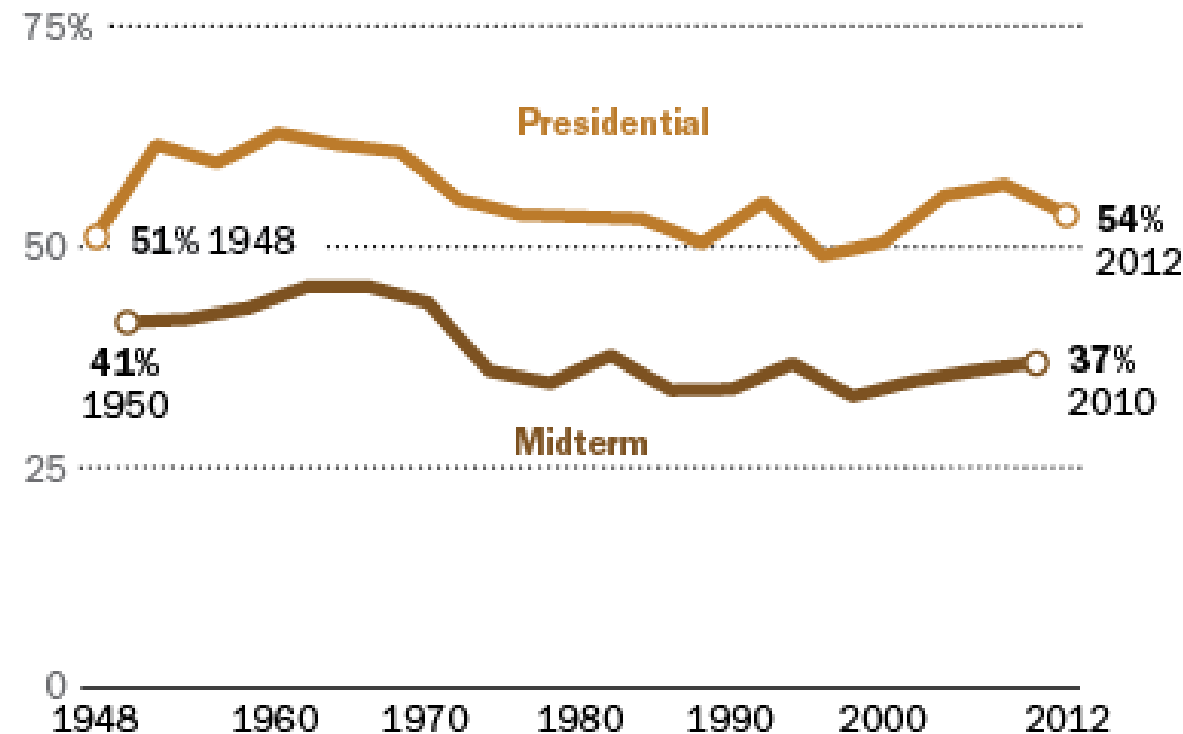
* Compulsory voting in one canton, or member state of the Swiss Confederation, only.

Note: Data as of Oct. 31, 2022. Voting-age population (VAP) turnout is derived from estimates of each country's VAP by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Registered-voter (RV) turnout is derived from each country's reported registration data. Because of methodological differences, in some countries estimated VAP is lower than reported RV. Turnout rates are listed for the most recent national election in each country.

Source: Pew Research Center calculations based on data from International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, European Election Database, United States Election Project, Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, and various national election authorities.

When the Presidency's Not at Stake, Fewer Voters Turn Out

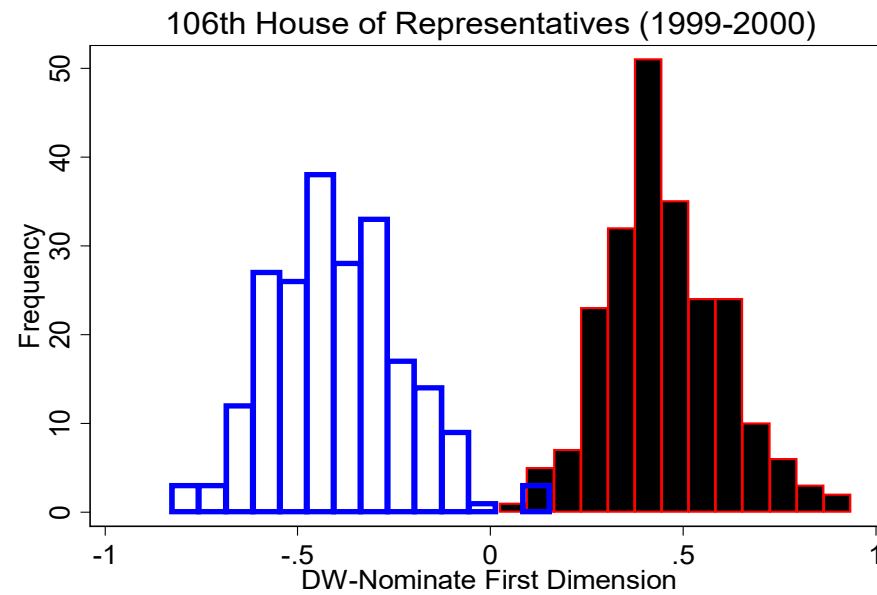
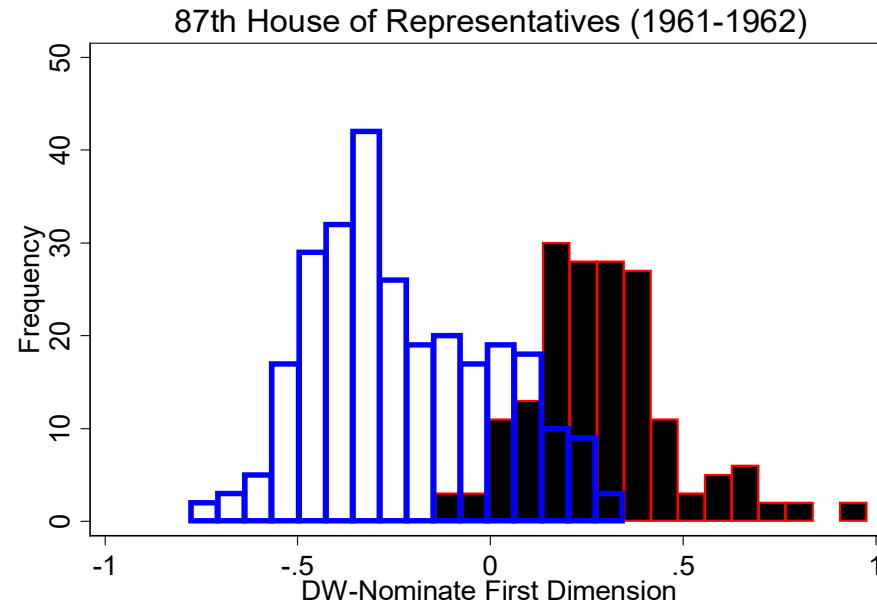
Turnout rate during ... election years



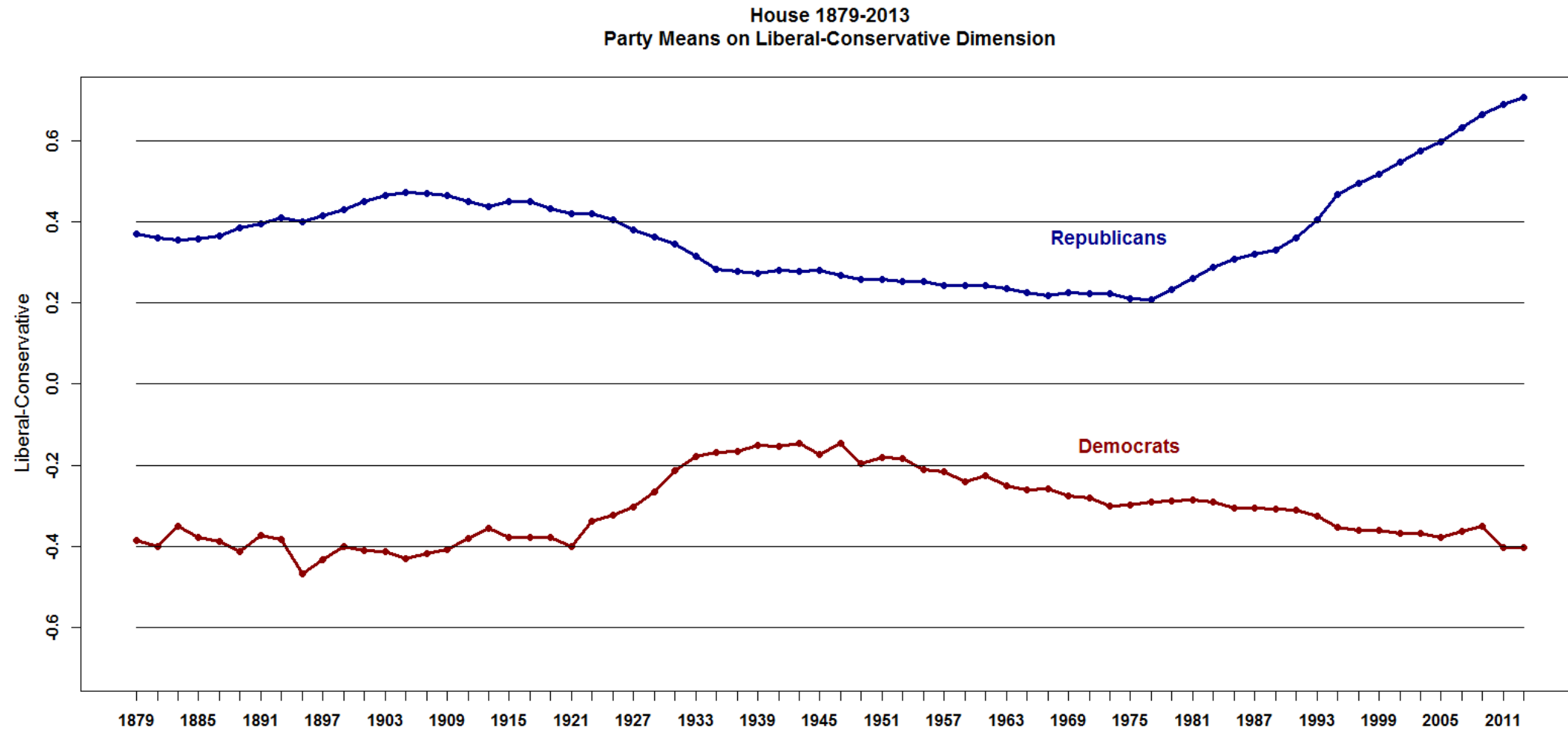
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Source: Census Bureau (voting-age population), Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives (vote totals)

Congress has Polarized since the 1960s



Polarization



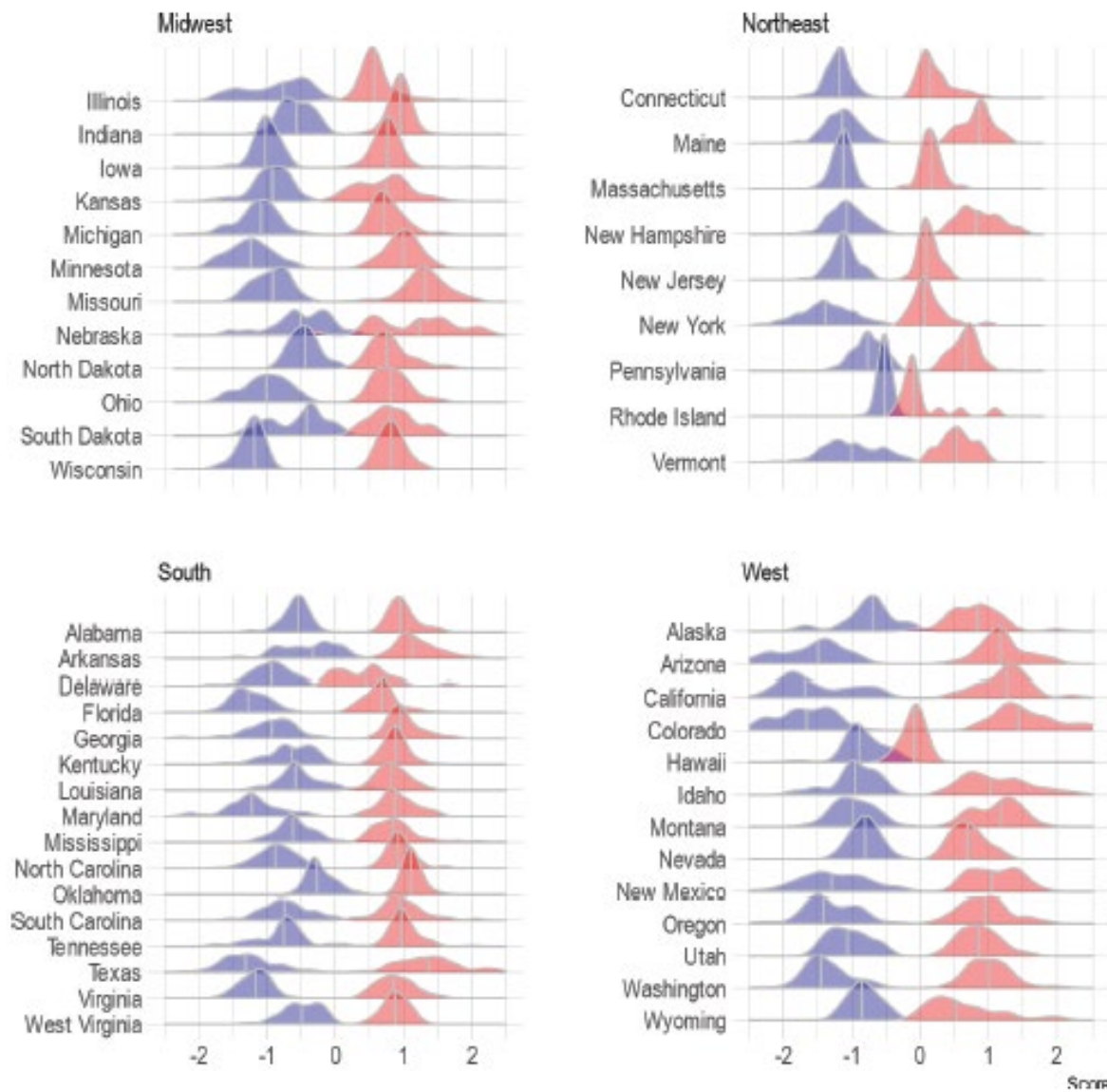
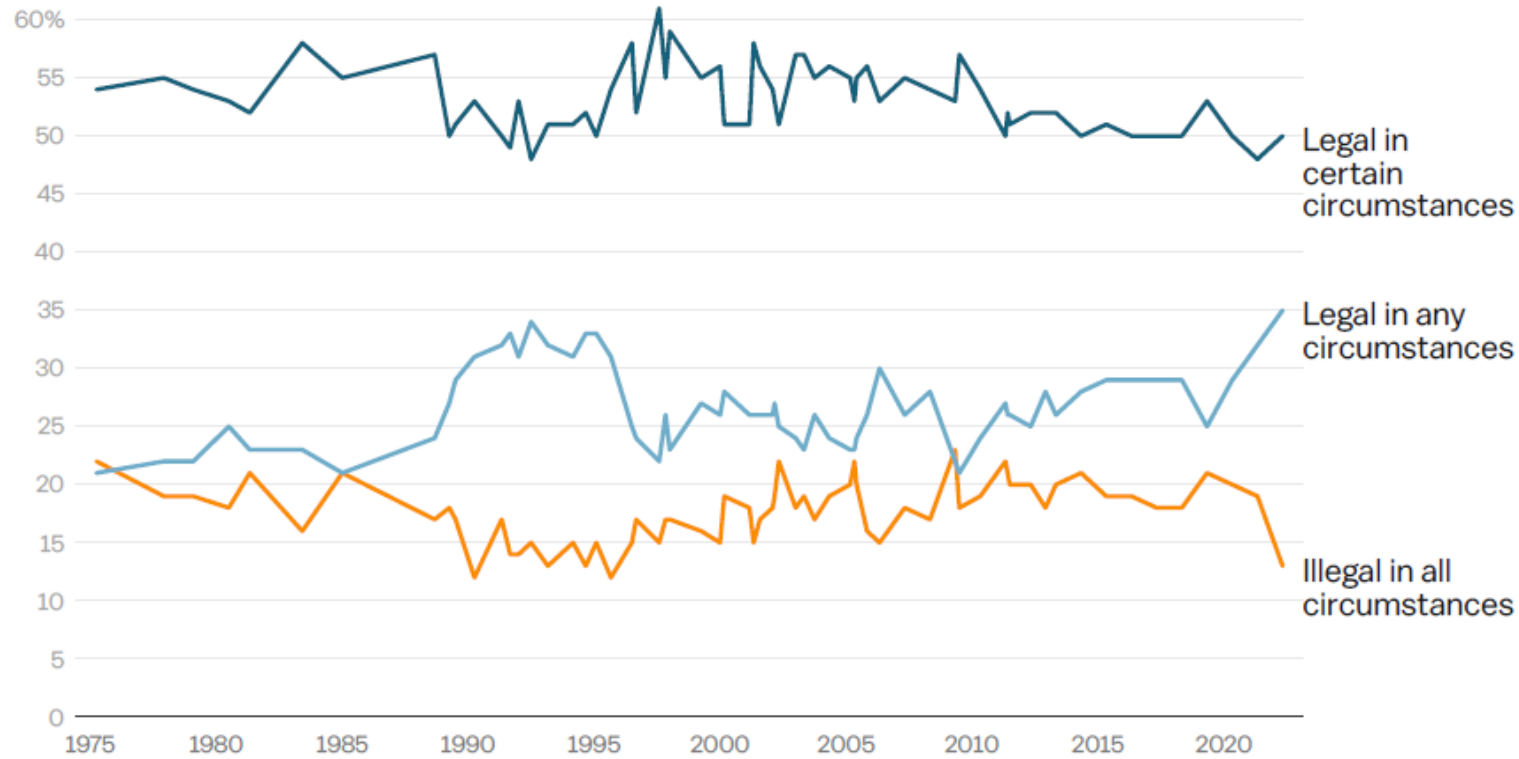


Figure 5: Legislator level ideal point densities aggregated by state within region, 2020 only. Medians indicated by vertical line.

85 percent of American voters think abortion should be legal in some or all circumstances



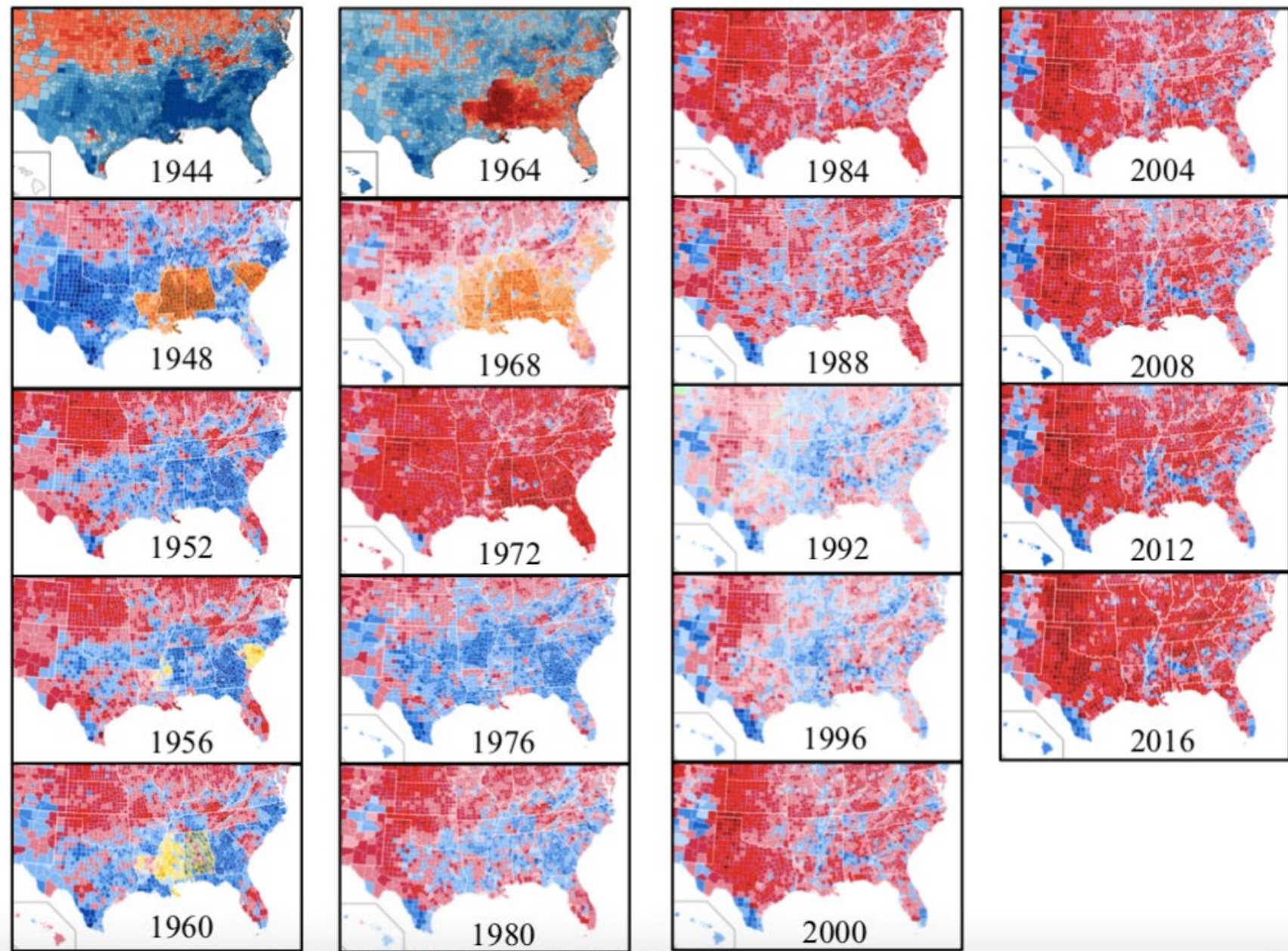
Source: Gallup

recode BY Vox

<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23167397/abortion-public-opinion-polls-americans>

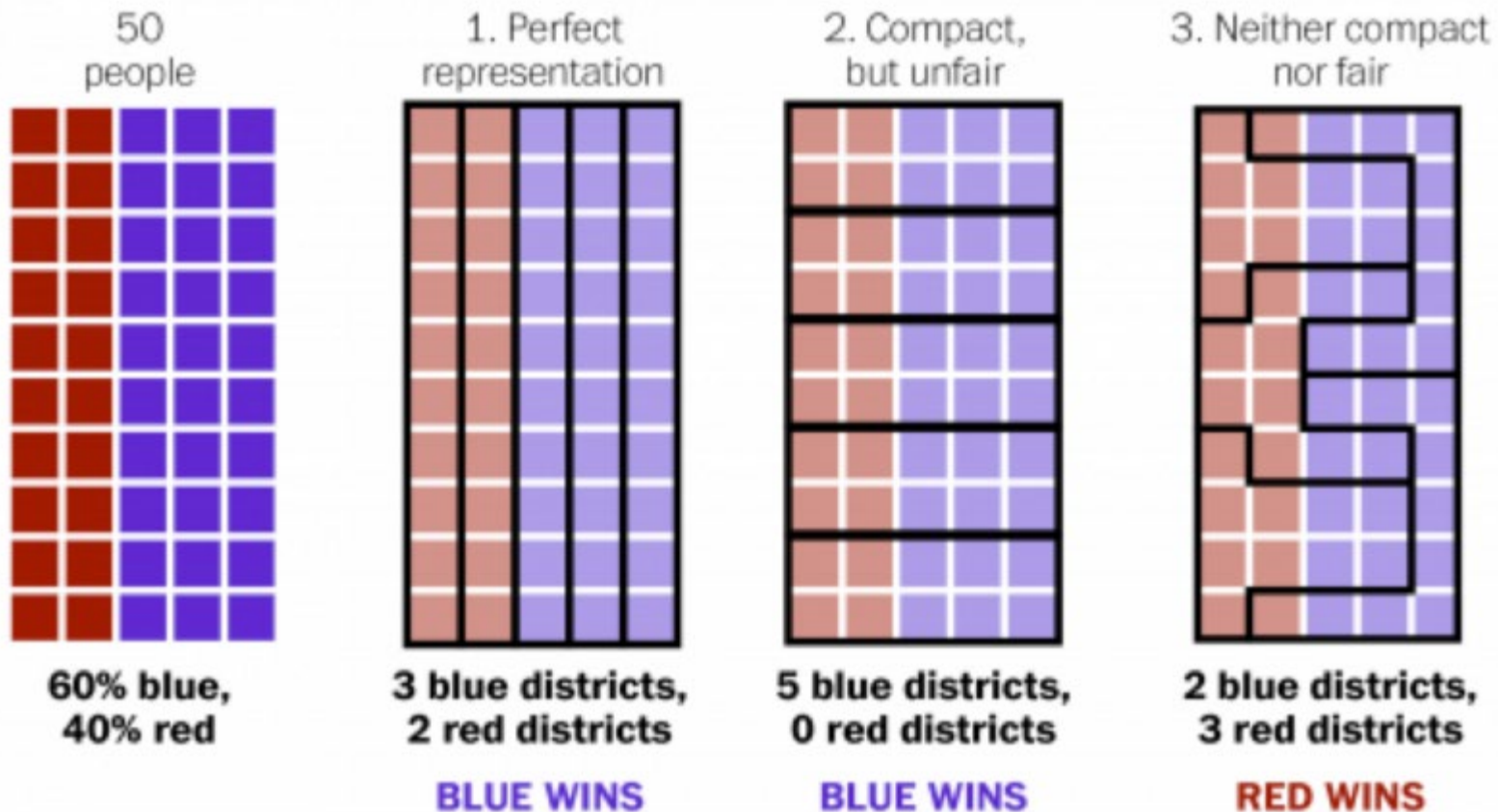
Party sorting

	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
Time 1	50 libs 25 mods 25 conservs	50 moderates	25 libs 25 mods 50 conservs
Time 2	75 libs 25 mods	50 moderates	75 conservs 25 mods



Gerrymandering, explained

Three different ways to divide 50 people into five districts

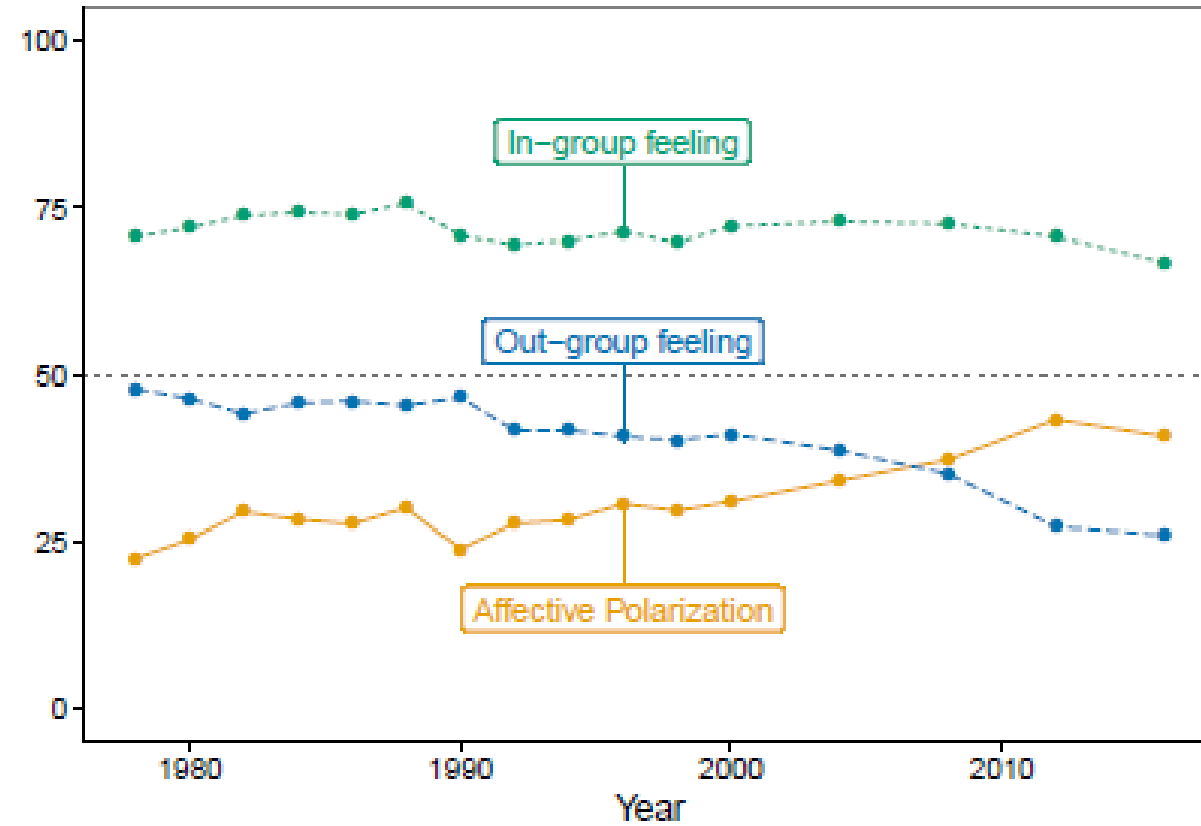


WASHINGTONPOST.COM/**WONKBLOG**

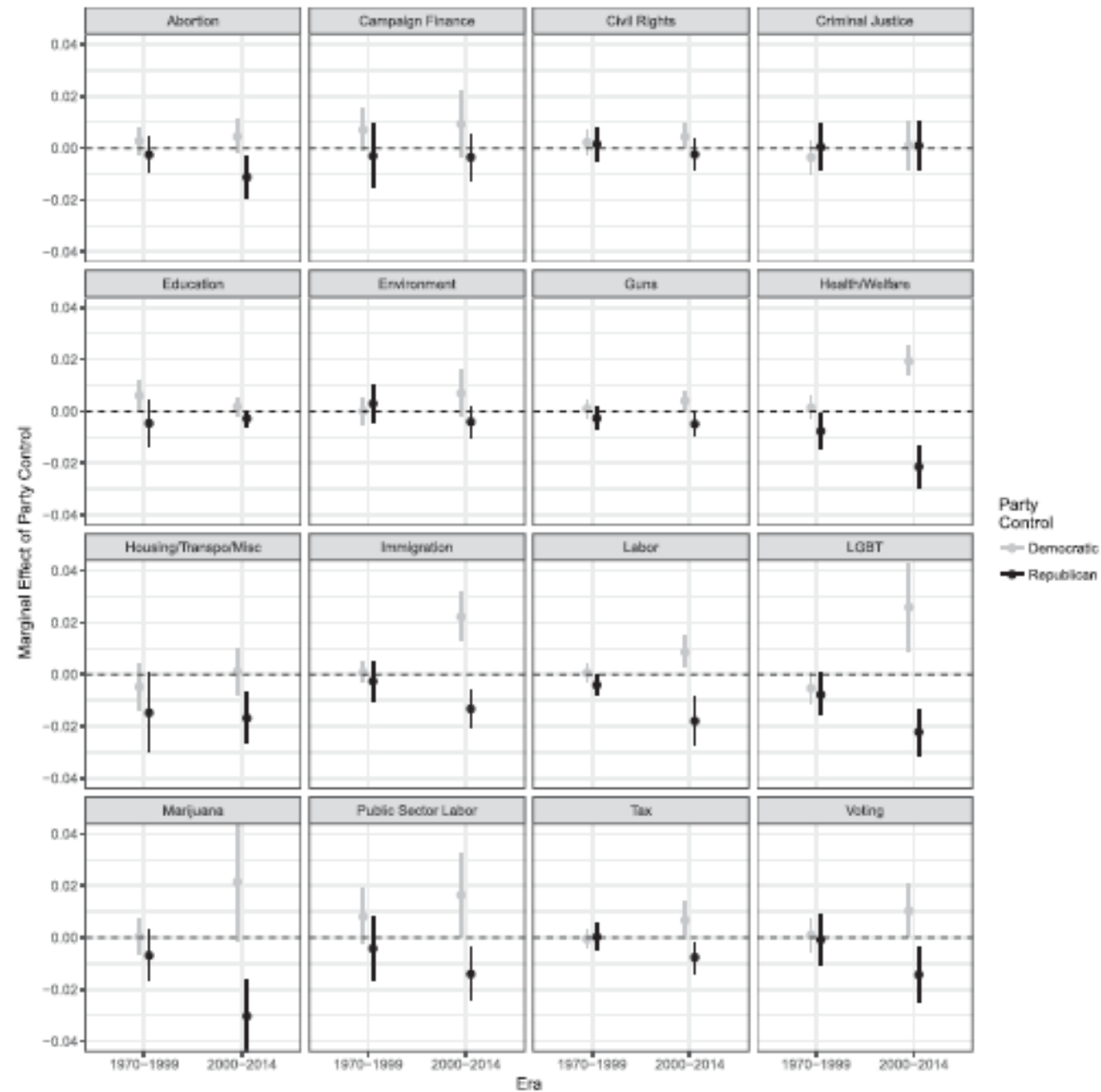
Adapted from Stephen Nass



Figure 1: Partisan Feeling and Affective Polarization Overtime (ANES)



Party effect on issue area scales



“In important respects, the nationalization of American political behavior parallels the nationalization of retail. Just as an Egg McMuffin is the same in every McDonald’s, America’s two major political parties are increasingly perceived to offer the same choices throughout the country.” (from Daniel Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States*, 2018, p.3)



After recall flop, struggling California Republicans once again fighting over future

BY MELANIE MASON, SEEMA MEHTA

SEPT. 16, 2021 **UPDATED** 6:40 PM PT



California Republicans thought they found a unifying rallying cry in the recall attempt against Gov. Gavin Newsom. Instead, the campaign exposed — and even worsened — some of the long-standing clashes between the establishment and grass-roots base, while leaving unsettled the question of how the party can stop its losing streak in the state.

In 2007, then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger famously warned his party that “in movie terms, we are dying at the box office.” On Wednesday, his assessment was even worse: “It’s now direct-to-video.”

Schwarzenegger was largely reviled by the Republican base by the time he left office for failing to hew to the party’s orthodoxies. But he said the GOP’s refusal to adapt its stances on climate change, healthcare, women’s issues and the pandemic is precisely why they lost the latest recall election.



Populism

- Themes of anti-elitism, anti-expertise, pro-nationalism, nativism, economic insecurity
- The people against the self-serving elites
- Restore power to the people
- Suspicion of established institutions, remember the ordinary people

NEWS ANALYSIS

How Educational Differences Are Widening America's Political Rift

College graduates are now a firmly Democratic bloc, and they are shaping the party's future. Those without degrees, by contrast, have flocked to Republicans.



By Nate Cohn

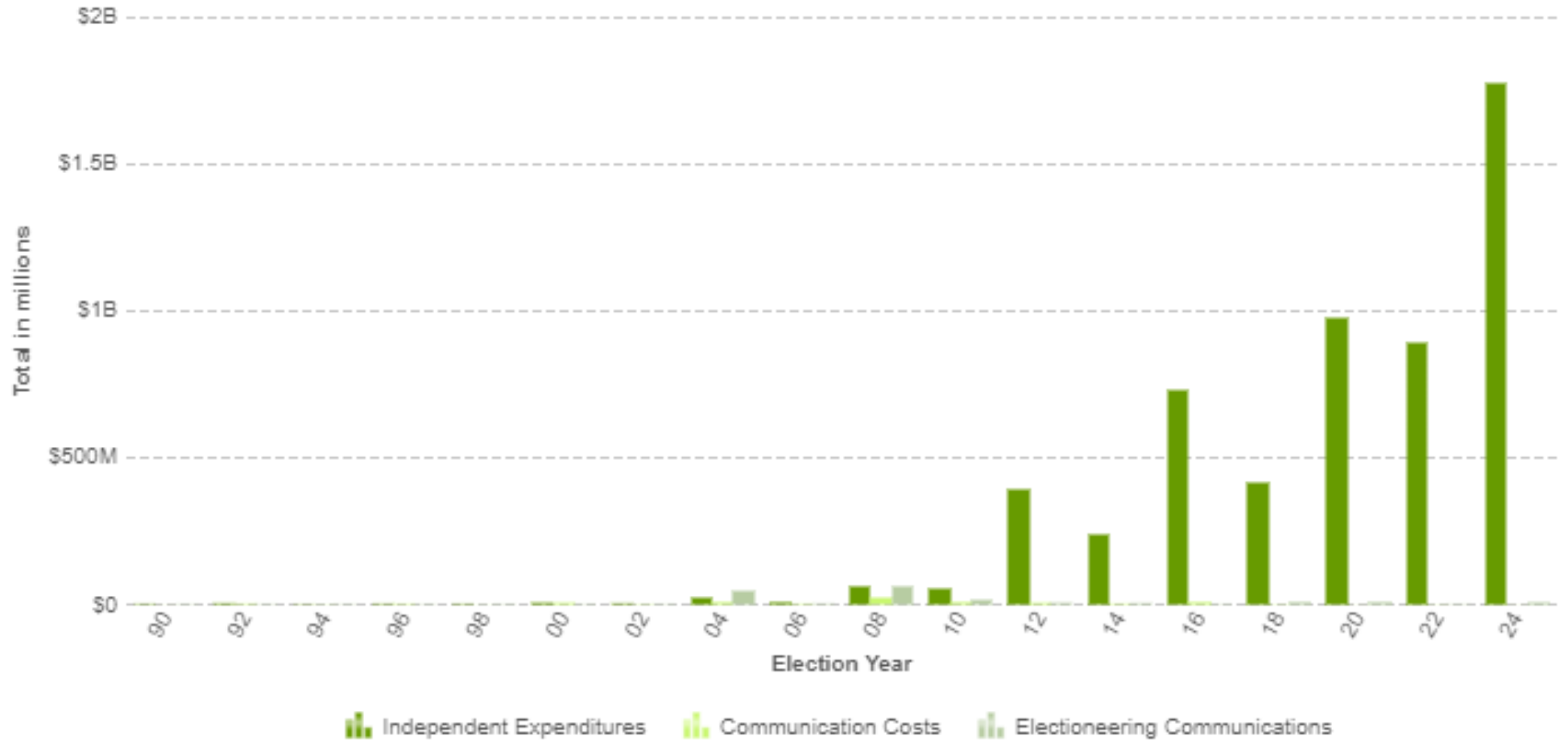
Published Sept. 8, 2021 Updated Oct. 8, 2021

The front lines of America's cultural clashes have shifted in recent years. A vigorous wave of progressive activism has helped push the country's culture to the left, inspiring a conservative backlash against everything from "critical race theory" to the supposed cancellation of Dr. Seuss.

These skirmishes may be different in substance from those that preceded them, but in the broadest sense they are only the latest manifestation of a half-century trend: the realignment of American politics along cultural and educational lines, and away from the class and income divisions that defined the two parties for much of the 20th century.

As they've grown in numbers, college graduates have instilled increasingly liberal cultural norms while gaining the power to nudge the Democratic Party to the left. Partly as a result, large portions of the party's traditional working-class base have defected to the Republicans.

Total Outside Spending by Election Cycle, Excluding Party Committees



Citizens United v. FEC

- Majority opinion struck down limits on independent expenditures from corporate treasuries. Kept in place limits on direct contributions from corporations and other organizations to candidates.
- First amendment, protected speech
- So money can go to outside groups for independent expenditures (not formally connected to candidates), not subject to limits
- Other relevant cases: *Wisconsin Right to Life, Inc. v. FEC*, *SpeechNow.org v. FEC*

Super PACs

- Only engage in independent expenditures (not formally connected to candidates), so they can raise contributions without restrictions. Can also raise money from treasuries of corporations, unions, banks, etc.
- Can engage in express advocacy (unlike 527s)
- Are subject to disclosure laws

501(c)(4)s

- Tax exempt social welfare organizations
- Not created to primarily influence elections, so they don't register as "political committees" with the FEC
- Don't disclose contributors and contributions
- Can't be "primarily engaged" in political campaigning to support or oppose candidates
- But they do electioneering

Discussion, Part 2

Part 3: Election trends

- Voter suppression? Preventing fraud? Democratic backsliding?
- The difficulty of determining the effects of election rule changes: the case of voter ID laws
- Changes in California: District versus at-large elections, on-cycle versus off-cycle elections
- The experience of local election officials

RESOURCE

Voting Laws Roundup: September 2024

This fall, voters in more than half of the states will face obstacles to voting that they have never encountered in a presidential election before.

PUBLISHED: September 26, 2024

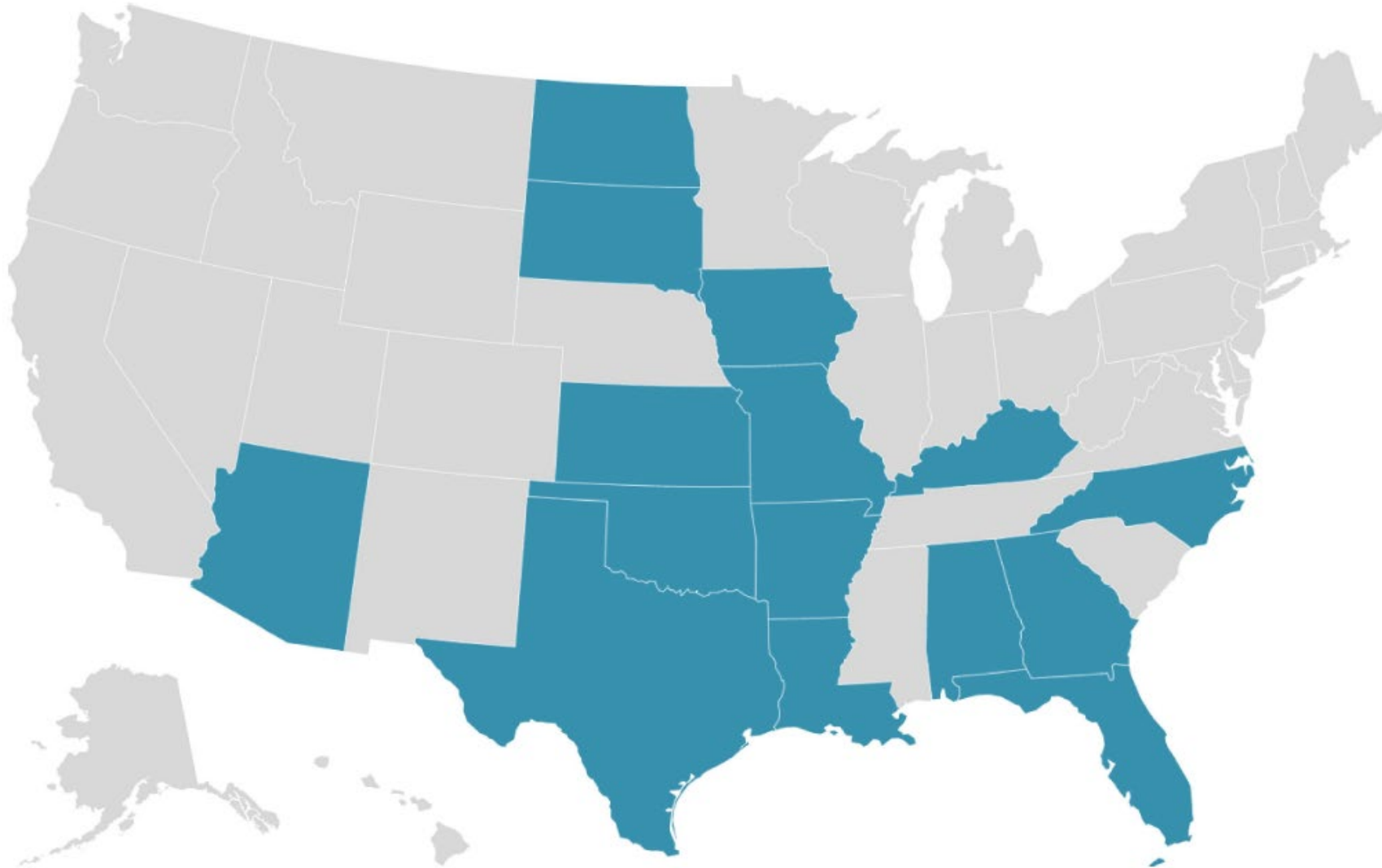


Lynne Sladky/AP

Restrictive Voting Laws Enacted Since 2020 in Effect for the 2024 Election

EFFECT	BILL NUMBERS
Shorten window to apply for a mail ballot	AL H.B. 538, AR S.B. 643, FL S.B. 7050, GA S.B. 202, IA S.F. 413, KY H.B. 574, NM S.B. 180, NY S.B. 264, OH H.B. 458, OK H.B. 2663, SC S.B. 108
Restrict assistance in returning a voter's mail ballot application or mail ballot	AL S.B. 1, AR H.B. 1411, AR H.B. 1715, FL S.B. 7050, FL S.B. 90, IA S.F. 413, IA S.F. 568, ID H.B. 599, KS H.B. 2183, KY H.B. 574, LA H.B. 476, LA S.B. 155, NC S.B. 747, OH H.B. 458, SC S.B. 108, TX S.B. 1
Limit the number, location, or availability of mail ballot drop boxes	FL S.B. 90, GA S.B. 202, IA S.F. 413, IA S.F. 568, IN S.B. 398, MO H.B. 1878, NC S.B. 747, OH H.B. 458, SC S.B. 108, SD H.B. 1165, TX S.B. 1
Eliminate or limit sending mail ballot applications or mail ballots to voters who do not specifically request them	AR H.B. 1411, AR H.B. 1715, FL S.B. 90, GA S.B. 202, IA S.F. 413, IN H.B. 1334, KS S.B. 106, OH H.B. 458, TX S.B. 1
Impose stricter signature requirements for mail ballots/shorten cure period for signature mismatch	AR H.B. 1715, AZ H.B. 2785, AZ S.B. 1003, ID H.B. 290, KS H.B. 2183, LA S.B. 226, OH H.B. 458, TX S.B. 1
Shorten window to return mail ballot	AR S.B. 643, IA S.F. 413, KS H.B. 2183, NC S.B. 747, OH H.B. 458, WY S.F. 153
Make it harder to remain on absentee voting lists	FL S.B. 90, NJ A.B. 3819, NJ A.B. 3820
Impose harsher ID requirements for in-person or mail voting	AR H.B. 1112, AR H.B. 1244, FL S.B. 90, GA S.B. 202, ID H.B. 124, IN H.B. 1334, MO H.B. 1878, ND H.B. 1431, NE L.B. 514, NH H.B. 523, NH S.B. 418, OH H.B. 458, OK H.B. 3364, SC S.B. 108, TX S.B. 1, UT S.B. 17, WY H.B. 279
Make voter registration more difficult or restrict voter registration drives	AZ H.B. 2492, FL S.B. 7050, FL S.B. 90, IA S.F. 413, ID H.B. 340, IN H.B. 1264, KS H.B. 2332, LA H.B. 506, MS H.B. 1510, NH H.B. 523, OK H.B. 3365, TN S.B. 2586

States That Have Enacted Election Interference Laws, 2021–24



Source: Brennan Center analysis of publicly available data.

Obstacles to Estimating Voter ID Laws' Effect on Turnout

Justin Grimmer, University of Chicago

Eitan Hersh, Tufts University

Marc Meredith, University of Pennsylvania

Jonathan Mummolo, Princeton University

Clayton Nall, Stanford University

Widespread concern that voter identification laws suppress turnout among racial and ethnic minorities has made empirical evaluations of these laws crucial. But problems with administrative records and survey data impede such evaluations. We replicate and extend Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson's 2017 article, which concludes that voter ID laws decrease turnout among minorities, using validated turnout data from five national surveys conducted between 2006 and 2014. We show that the results of their article are a product of data inaccuracies, the presented evidence does not support the stated conclusion, and alternative model specifications produce highly variable results. When errors are corrected, one can recover positive, negative, or null estimates of the effect of voter ID laws on turnout, precluding firm conclusions. We highlight more general problems with available data for research on election administration, and we identify more appropriate data sources for research on state voting laws' effects.

How Election Rules Affect Who Wins

Justin Grimmer* and Eitan Hersh†

ABSTRACT

Contemporary election reforms that are purported to increase or decrease turnout tend to have negligible effects on election outcomes. We offer an analytical framework to explain why. Contrary to heated political rhetoric, election policies have small effects on outcomes because they tend to target small shares of the electorate, have a small effect on turnout, and/or affect voters who are relatively balanced in their partisanship. After developing this framework, we address how the findings bear on minority voting rights. We then show that countermobilization from political parties cannot explain the small effects of election laws. We explain that even when a state passes multiple policies at the same time, the reforms will still only have a marginal effect on turnout and an ambiguous effect on who wins. Finally, we explain what policies should raise alarm about affecting outcomes.

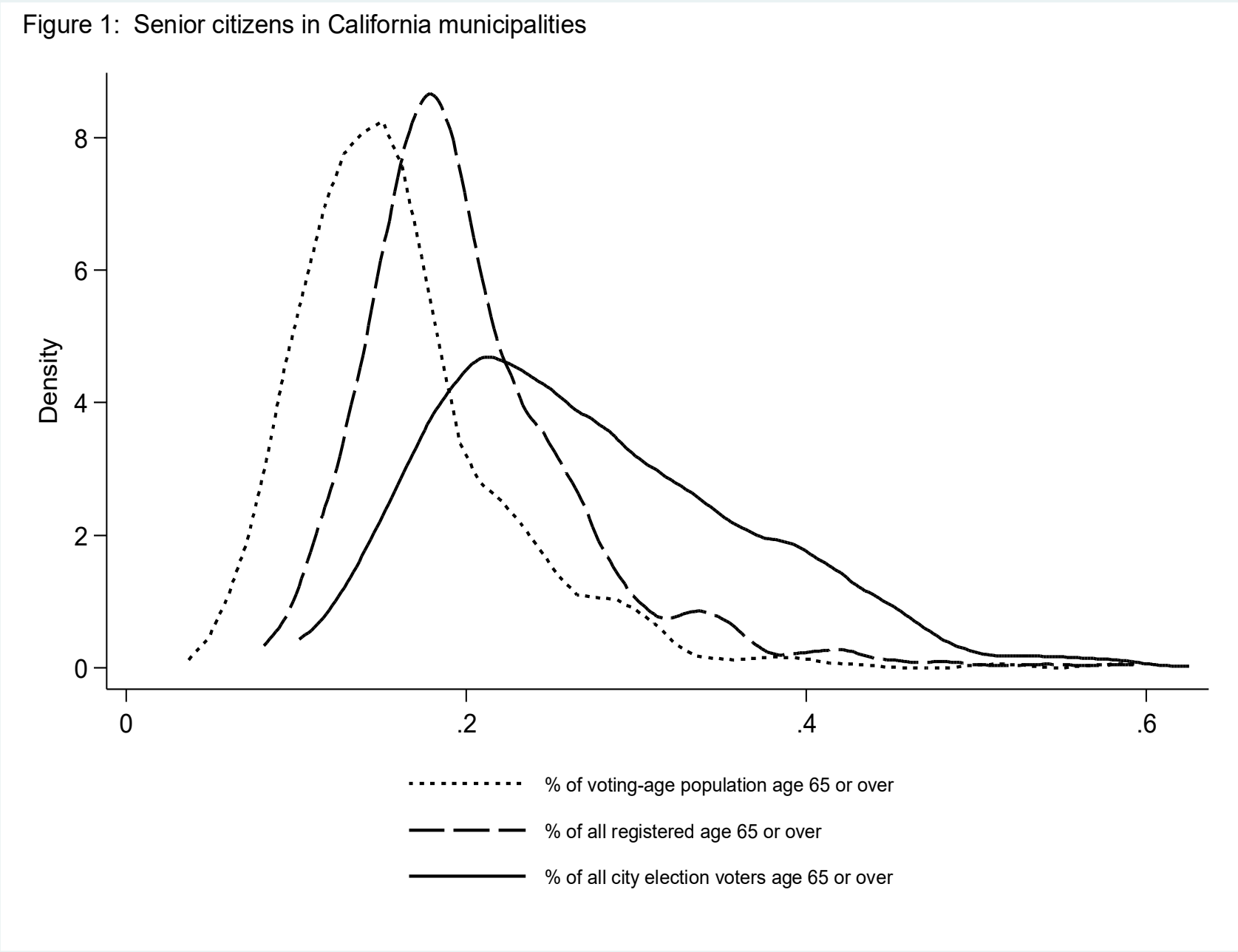


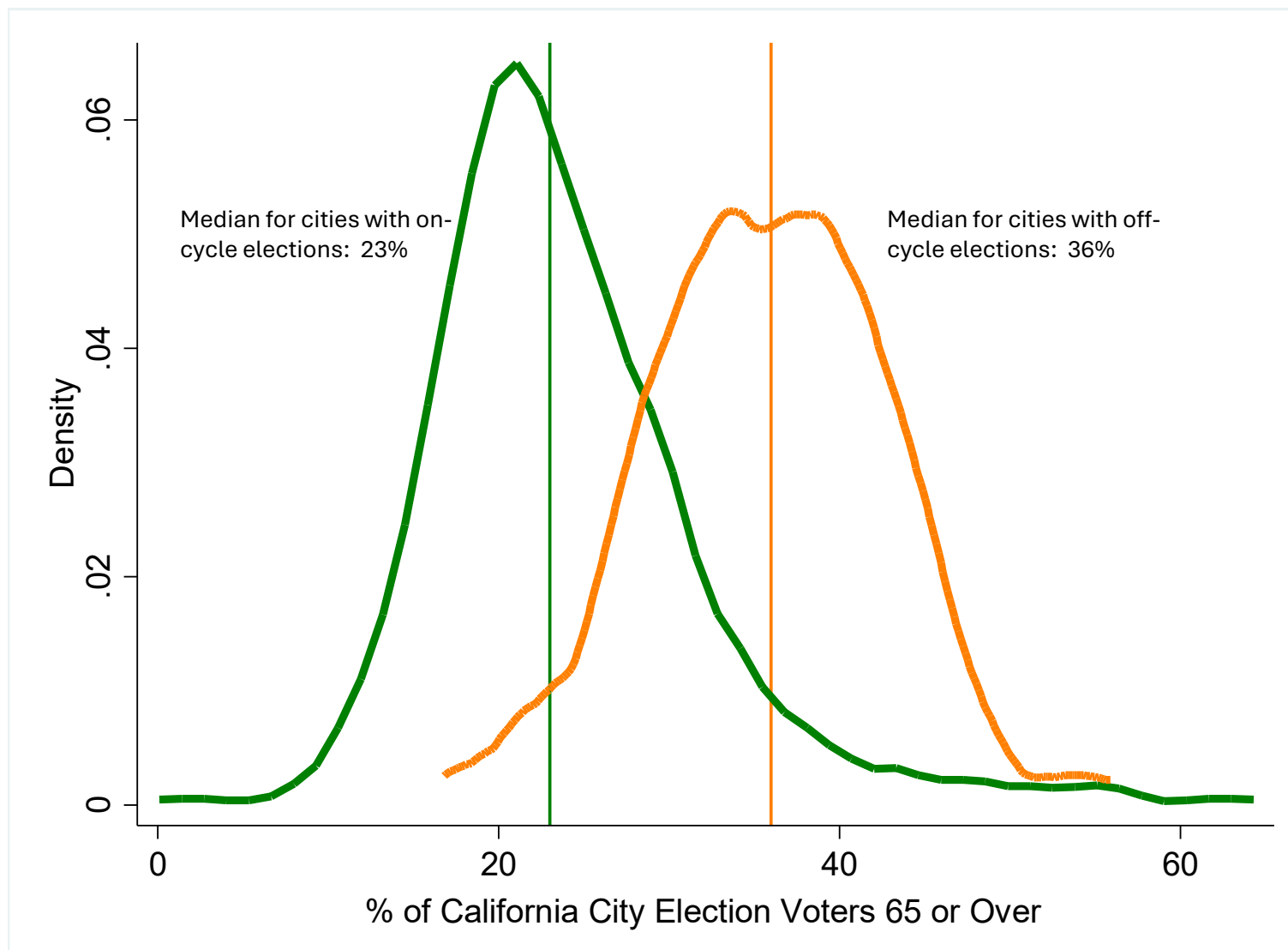
Figure 1. Calculating the vote shift from a hypothetical law change.

The effect of election timing on turnout in California city elections

- Average turnout in off-cycle city elections was 26% of registered voters
- 9 points higher in city elections held during statewide primaries in midterm/gubernatorial years
- 16 points higher in city elections held during presidential primaries
- 18 points higher in city elections held during midterm/gubernatorial general elections
- 35 points higher in city elections held during presidential general elections

Figure 1: Senior citizens in California municipalities





FEATURED

From the Daily Journal archives

Foster City gets district elections

City leaders say their hand is being forced over dubious claims of racial polarization

By Alyse DiNapoli, Daily Journal staff

Aug 22, 2024



Foster City leadership is moving away from at-large and toward [district elections](#) after an intention to file a California Voting Rights Act lawsuit was brought forward by a resident this summer.

Source:
https://www.smdailyjournal.com/news/local/foster-city-gets-district-elections/article_2f1c5c26-6031-11ef-9617-6f2c1b9ba02c.html



FINDINGS FROM THE
2023 LEO SURVEY



Today's Election Administration Landscape

Findings from the Reed College Elections & Voting Information Center
2023 Survey of Local Election Officials

Paul Gronke, PhD | Paul Manson, PhD

November 16, 2023



1



Topline Findings from the 2023 EVIC LEO Survey

- **Job satisfaction** remains high, but misinformation, stress, and a toxic political environment are high level concerns.
- **Turnover** is twice as high as found in prior LEO surveys, but loss of institutional knowledge may be tempered by lateral movement. We need to know much more about who replaces a LEO when they depart.
- **Workloads** continue to rise across all task categories. LEOs are notably impacted by a rapid increase in public records requests and citizen inquiries.



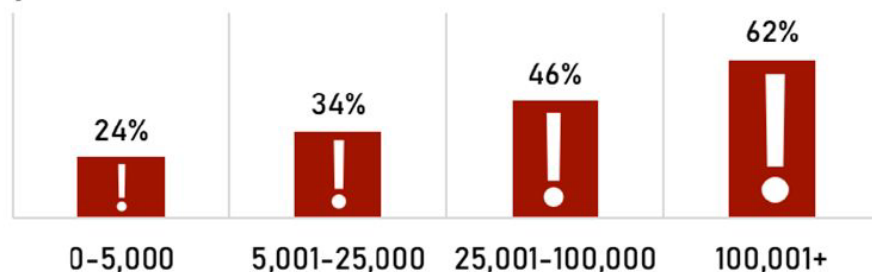
Topline Findings from the 2023 EVIC LEO Survey

- The **labor time it takes to administer elections** is high and stretches the capacity of elections offices regardless of size. LEOs report increases in workload across most task categories, and the peak workload stretches well over a month.
- **Staffing and hiring** continue to be a challenge for many elections offices. Barriers to hiring include lack of appropriate skill sets and pay levels. LEOs are divided as to whether the political environment is a barrier.
- **Misinformation is a concern** among most LEOs. LEOs in smaller jurisdictions rely on face to face communication to counter misinformation, while LEOs in larger jurisdictions rely on a broad suite of communications channels.

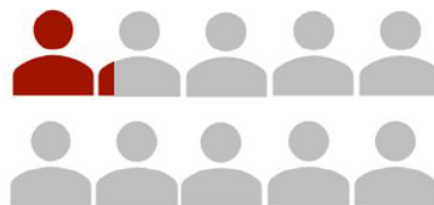
How Threats and Harassment May Hasten Departures

✓ **31%** Know any LEOs Who Left Their Job
In Part Because of Fear for Safety

by Jurisdiction Size



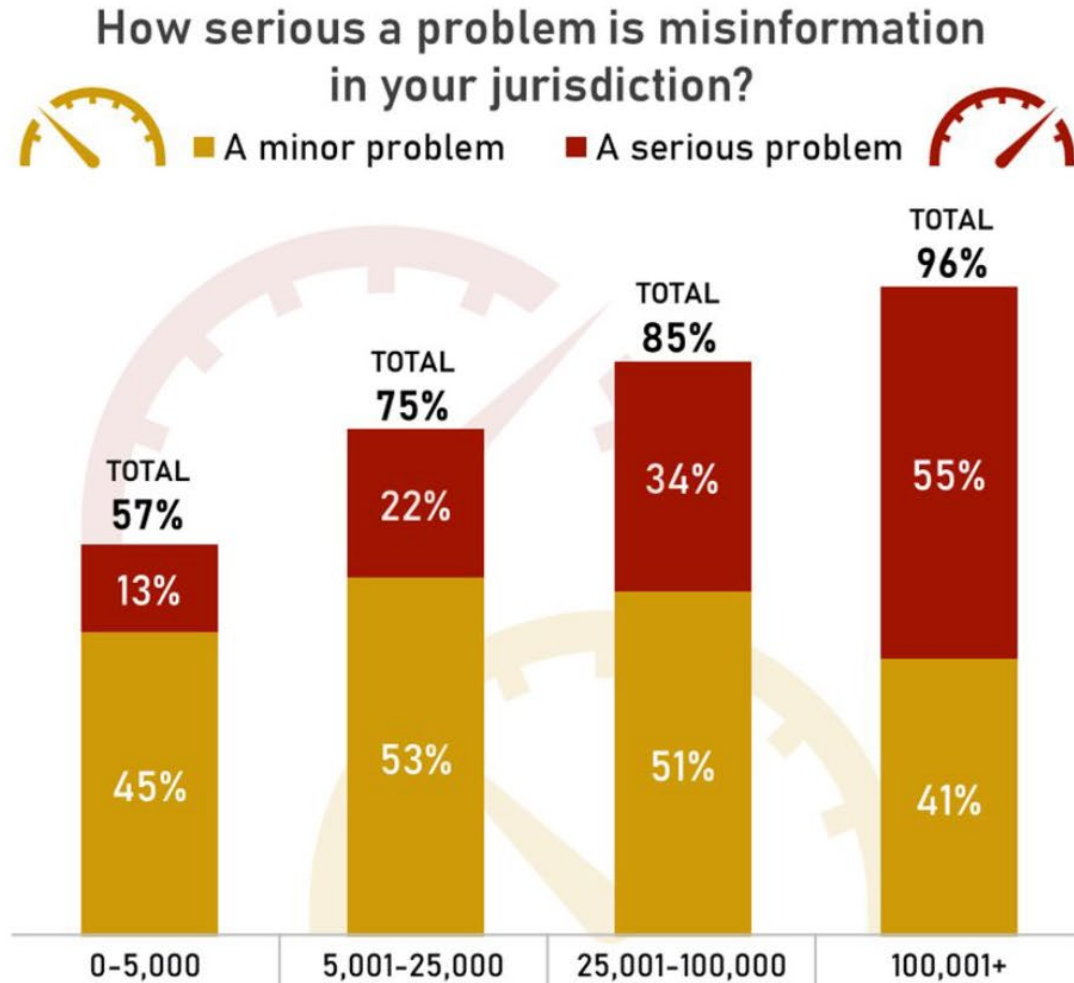
11%
of LEOs Have Considered
Leaving their Job Due to
Safety Concerns



- **1 out of 10 LEOs** have considered leaving their job due to safety concerns.
- **Threats and harassment are all too common** with many reporting fears for safety as a motivation to leave service.
- Impacts of threats and harassment are **focused on larger jurisdictions**.

Misinformation is a problem everywhere, but especially in large jurisdictions

- Challenge of misinformation is **most prevalent in the medium sized and largest jurisdictions.**
 - Less than 4% of 100,000+ jurisdictions say that misinformation is “not a problem”.
- Smaller jurisdictions are much less likely to tell us that misinformation is a problem.
 - 30% of 0-5,000 say that misinformation is “not a problem.”



Discussion, Part 3

Part 4: City governance challenges

- Fiscal pressure and structural deficits
 - Why is this happening?
 - What are the consequences?
- Housing affordability, housing development
 - Why is this happening?
 - What are the consequences?

'It's gut wrenching': City of Beaverton could lay off librarians, reduce branch hours

Author: Katherine Cook

Published: 5:07 PM PDT May 13, 2023

Updated: 5:07 PM PDT May 13, 2023

BEAVERTON, Oregon — The City of [Beaverton](#) is considering reducing [library](#) staff and hours in response to recent budget challenges.

'It's gut wrenching': City of Beaverton could lay off librarians, reduce branch hours

Author: Katherine Cook

Published: 5:07 PM PDT May 13, 2023

Updated: 5:07 PM PDT May 13, 2023

“It feels like a slap in the face for [librarians],” said Adam Korst, library union president.

“It's gut wrenching,” said Korst. “This is people's livelihood and librarians — it's a very niche job and it's very hard to find jobs within that field. This is something people have worked a very long time for.”

'It's gut wrenching': City of Beaverton could lay off librarians, reduce branch hours

Author: Katherine Cook

Published: 5:07 PM PDT May 13, 2023

Updated: 5:07 PM PDT May 13, 2023

The pending cuts come as the city of Beaverton responds to what they call “unprecedented” funding challenges.

“Economic conditions like rising inflation and expenses outpacing revenues have exacerbated the financial strains brought on by the pandemic,” said Dianna Ballash, spokesperson for Beaverton. “As a result, fiscal year 2023-24 budget development includes recommendations that are being considered to address a \$10 million general fund shortfall, a \$1 million library fund deficit and immediate steps toward a path of long-term fiscal sustainability.”

4/17/24, 9:37 AM

Facing \$45M Shortfall, City Begins Posturing To Take On More Debt In FY24 - The Lexington Times

Facing \$45M Shortfall, City Begins Posturing To Take On More Debt In FY24

 Mon, March 20, 2023

 COMMENTARY, FEATURED, LEXINGTON META, LOCAL GOVERNMENT

BY LEXINGTON TIMES WEB EDITOR

Stranglehold

Sarah F. Anzia

California's local governments face a crisis of structural deficits. In cities and school districts across the state, spending growth outpaces revenue, forcing tax hikes and reduced services—from shortened library hours to fewer programs for students to slimmer public-safety workforces.

These reductions affect all residents, but especially those most in need of public services. One might expect that this fact would

Stranglehold

Eighty miles west, in Oakland, new mayor Sheng Thao campaigned on a promise of a hiring blitz but now leads a city with a general-fund deficit of more than \$200 million over the next two years. Documenting the city's needs, from 911 dispatchers to homelessness services, Ed Gerber, former chairman of the city's budget advisory commission, describes the situation as "a terrible conundrum" and notes that making "priority decisions in a world of necessary services and inadequate resources . . . will be incredibly difficult."



California State Auditor

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Local High-Risk Dashboard

The California State Auditor's Office (State Auditor) removed the local government high-risk dashboard from its website in October 2023. Although we recognize and appreciate that the dashboard offered a valuable glimpse into the health and viability of California cities, the State Auditor has prioritized staff resources to focus on completing the audit of the State of California's Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR). Be sure to subscribe to receive the latest audit reports issued by the State Auditor on our subscription sign-up page.



A More Accountable California



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[Work in Progress](#)[Testimony](#)[High-Risk Programs](#)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

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City fiscal health scores, 2018

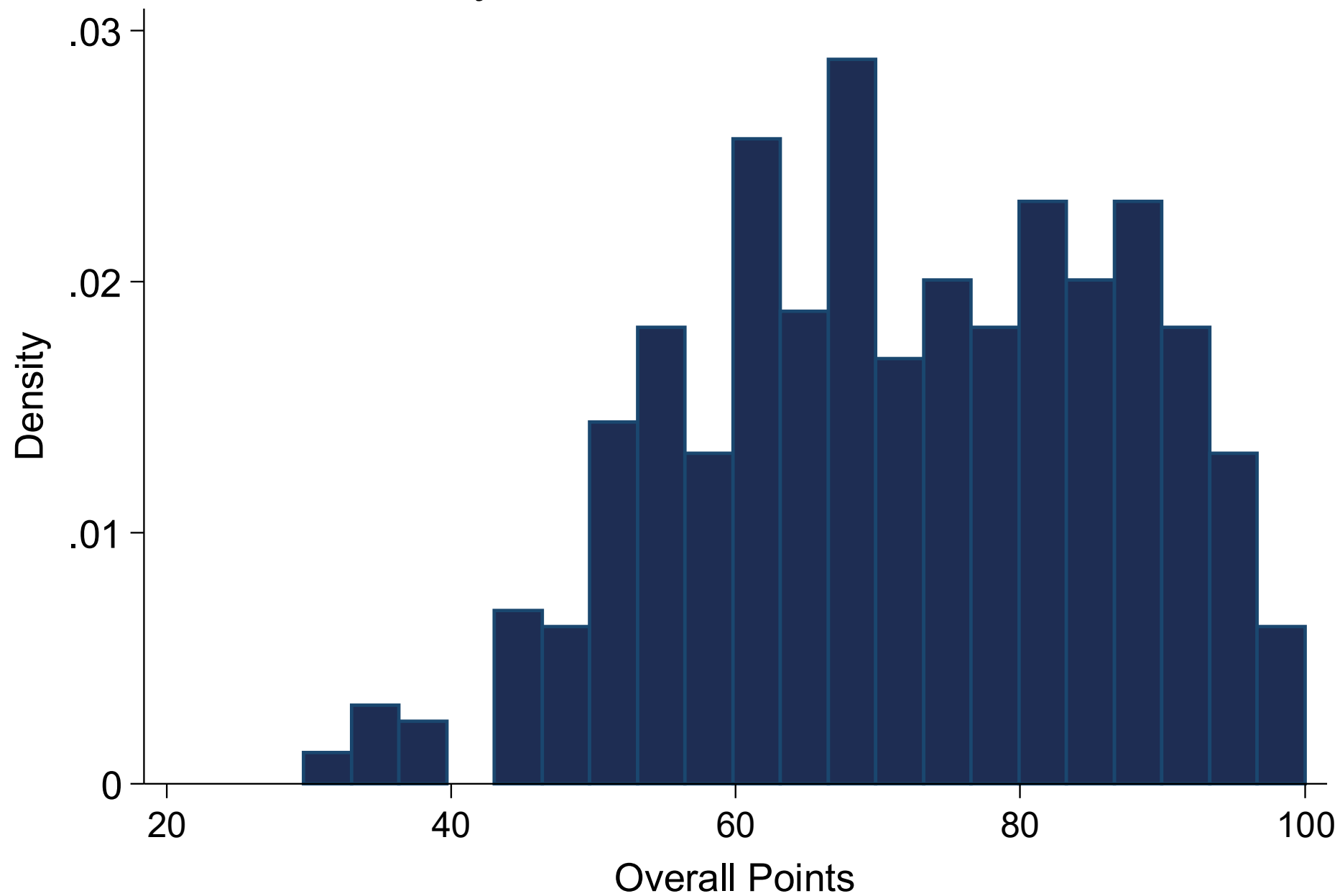
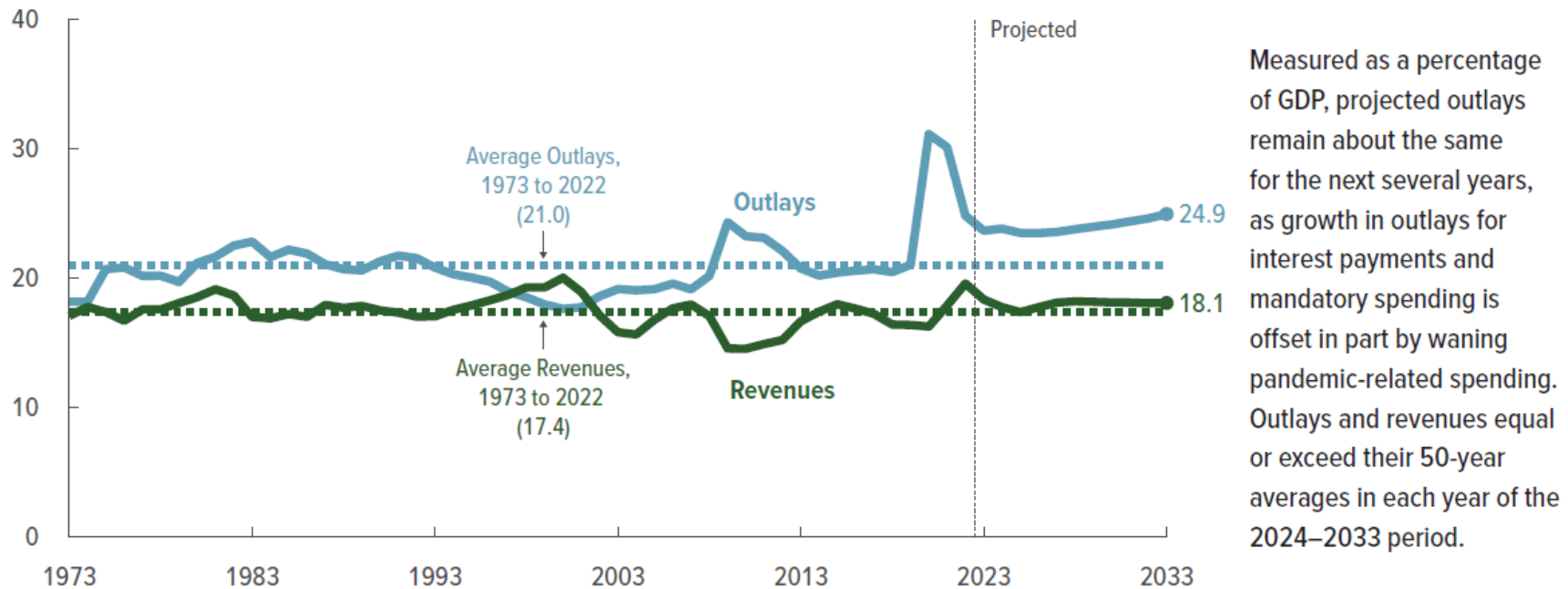


Figure 1-3.

Total Outlays and Revenues

Percentage of GDP



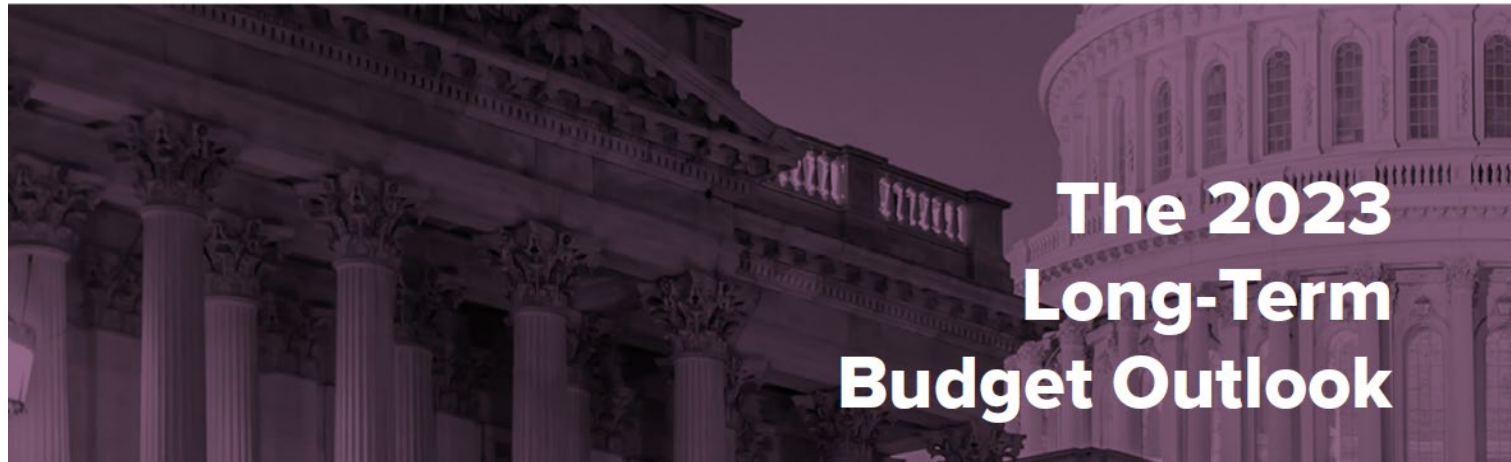
Data source: Congressional Budget Office. See www.cbo.gov/publication/58848#data.

When October 1 (the first day of the fiscal year) falls on a weekend, certain payments that would have ordinarily been made on that day are instead made at the end of September and thus are shifted into the previous fiscal year. All projections presented here have been adjusted to exclude the effects of those timing shifts. Historical amounts have been adjusted as far back as the available data will allow.

GDP = gross domestic product.

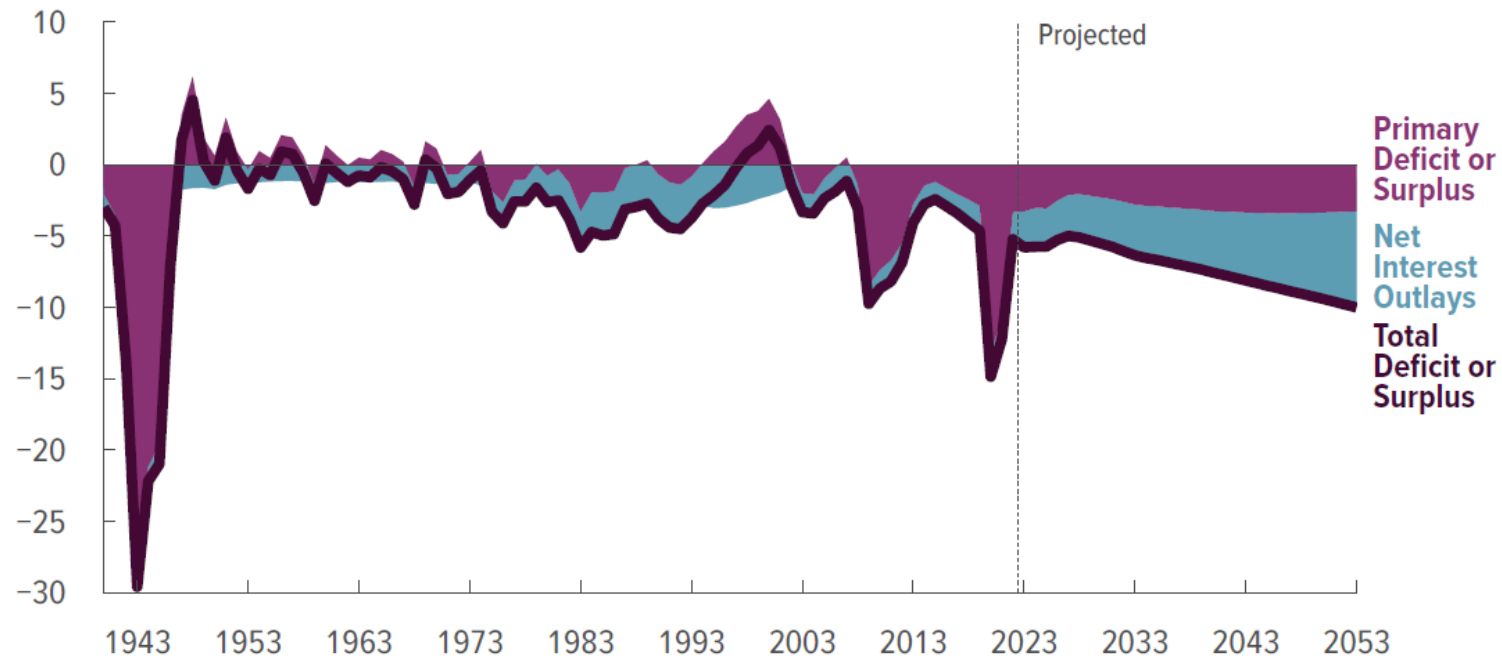


The 2023 Long-Term Budget Outlook



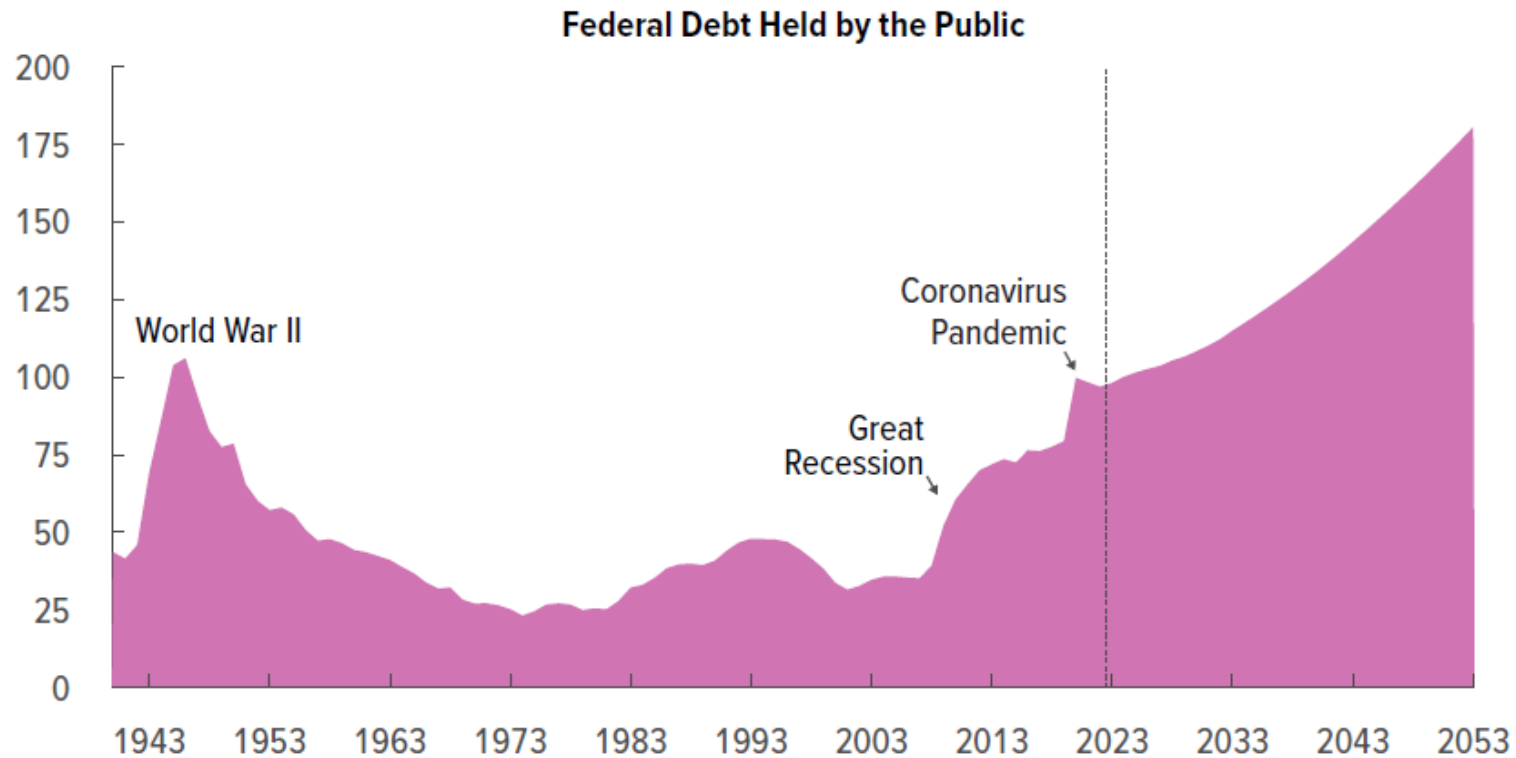
Deficits

Percentage of GDP



See Figure 1-1 on page 6.

Primary deficits, which exclude interest costs, equal 3.3 percent of GDP in both 2023 and 2053. Combined with rising interest rates, those large and sustained primary deficits cause net outlays for interest to almost triple in relation to GDP.



Growing deficits push federal debt held by the public, which is already high, further up throughout the 30-year period. Such debt reaches 181 percent of GDP in 2053—and would continue to rise thereafter.

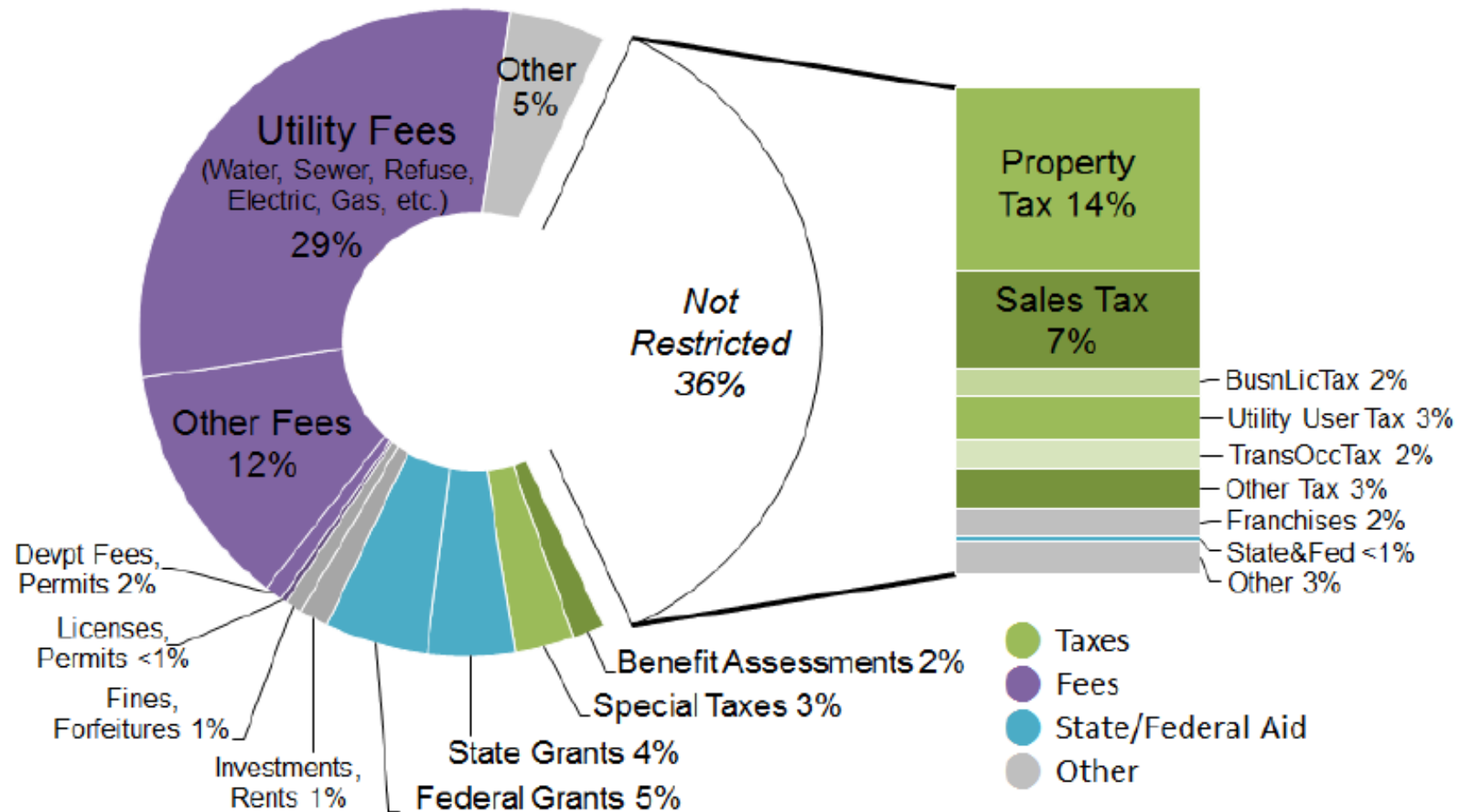


Beaverton Valley Times

Beaverton City Council looks to new taxes, budget cuts to right the fiscal ship

By Lauren Bishop, 2023-04-28

California City Revenues



This is a statewide mash-up of city revenues. Individual cities vary.

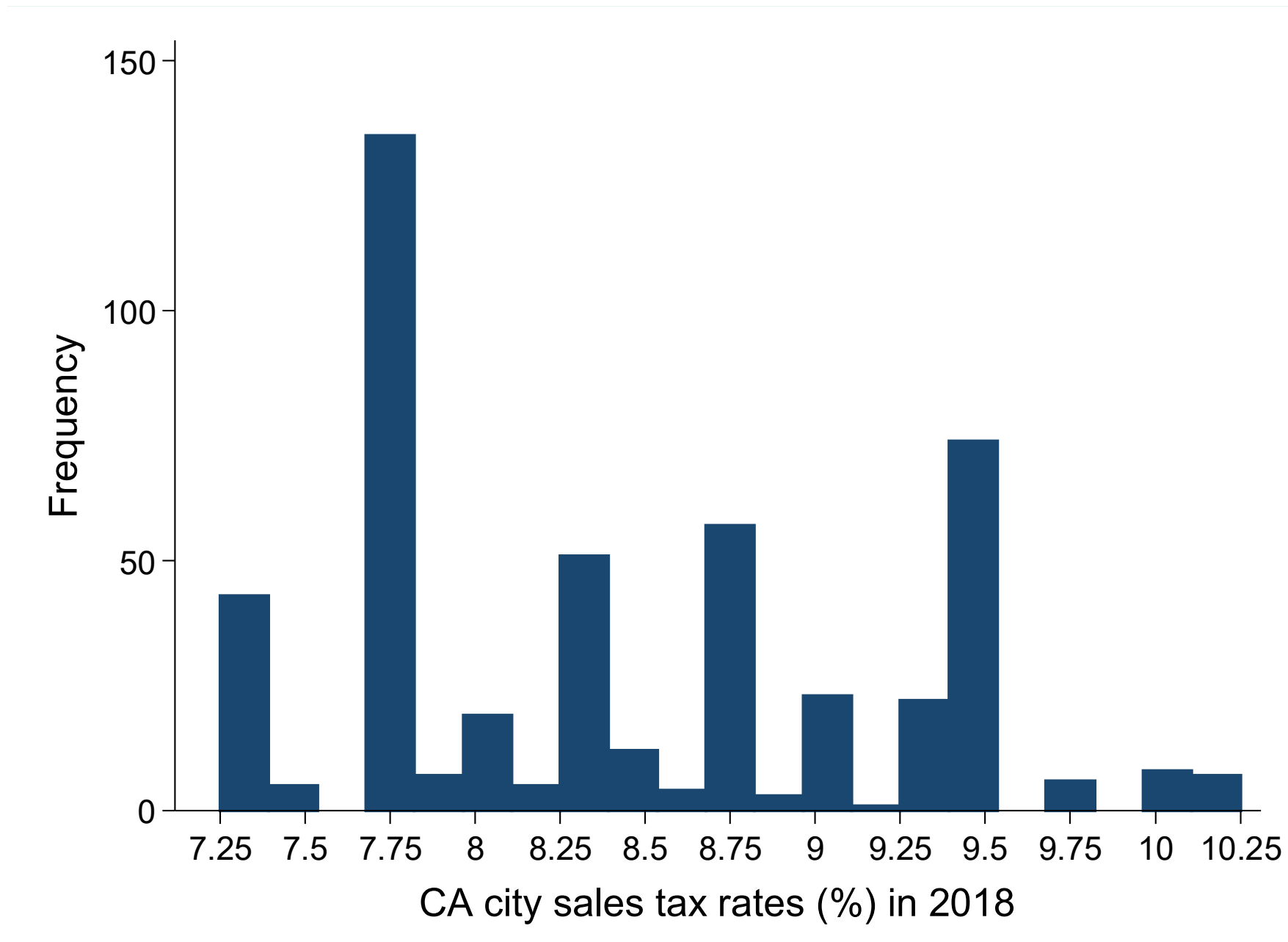
Source: Author's computations from data from California State Controller 2014-15.

Does not include the City/County of San Francisco.

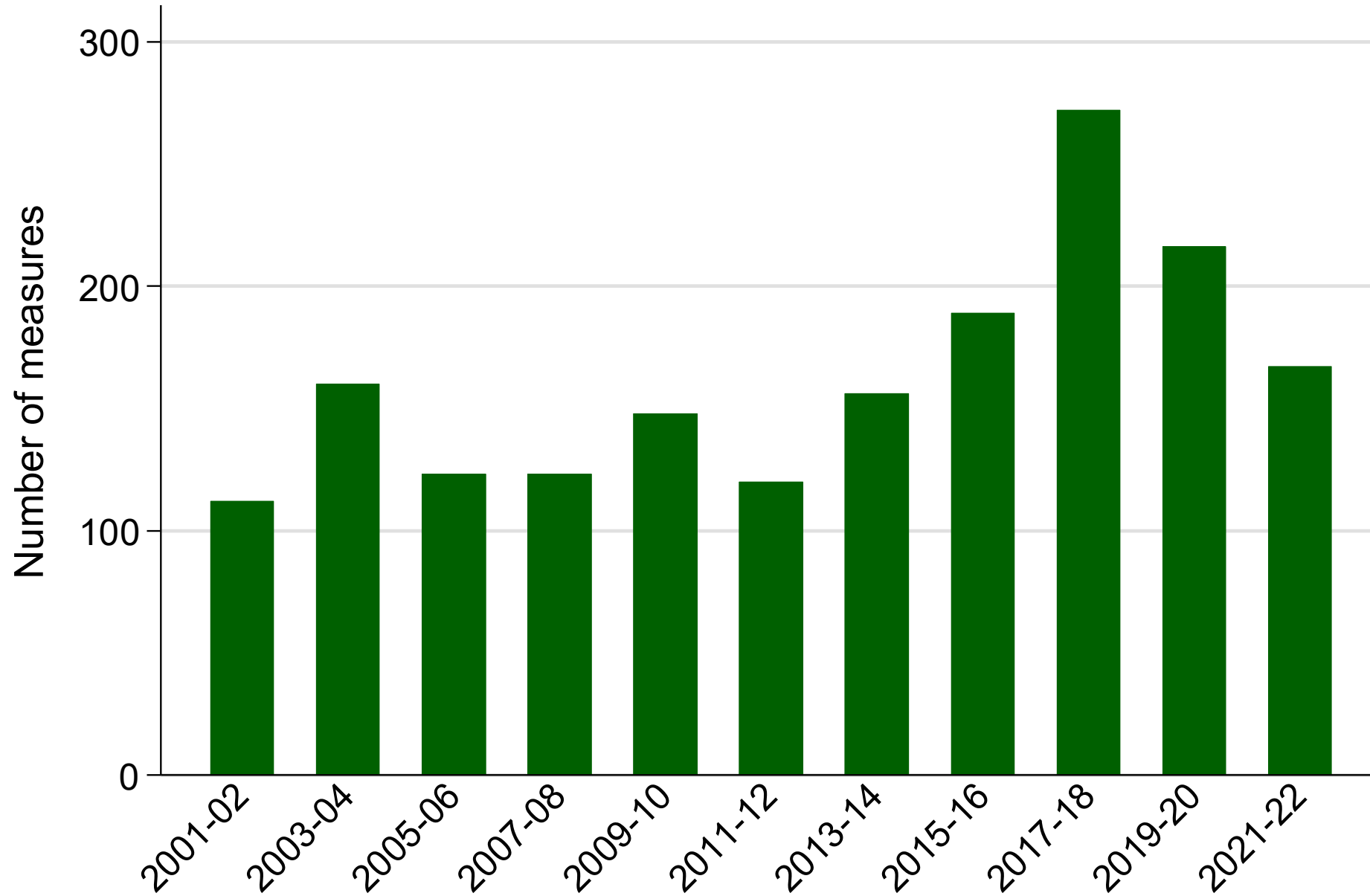
Table 1: California local ballot measures, 2018-2020			
	Cities	Counties	School districts
Total ballot measures	802	203	489
Total tax and bond measures	454	136	471
Sales tax	191	26	0
Business tax	111	38	0
Transient occupancy tax	65	10	0
Property tax	46	42	82
GO bond	7	6	387
Utility tax	24	1	0
Other tax or bond	10	13	2

Sales and business tax ballot measures, 2018-2020

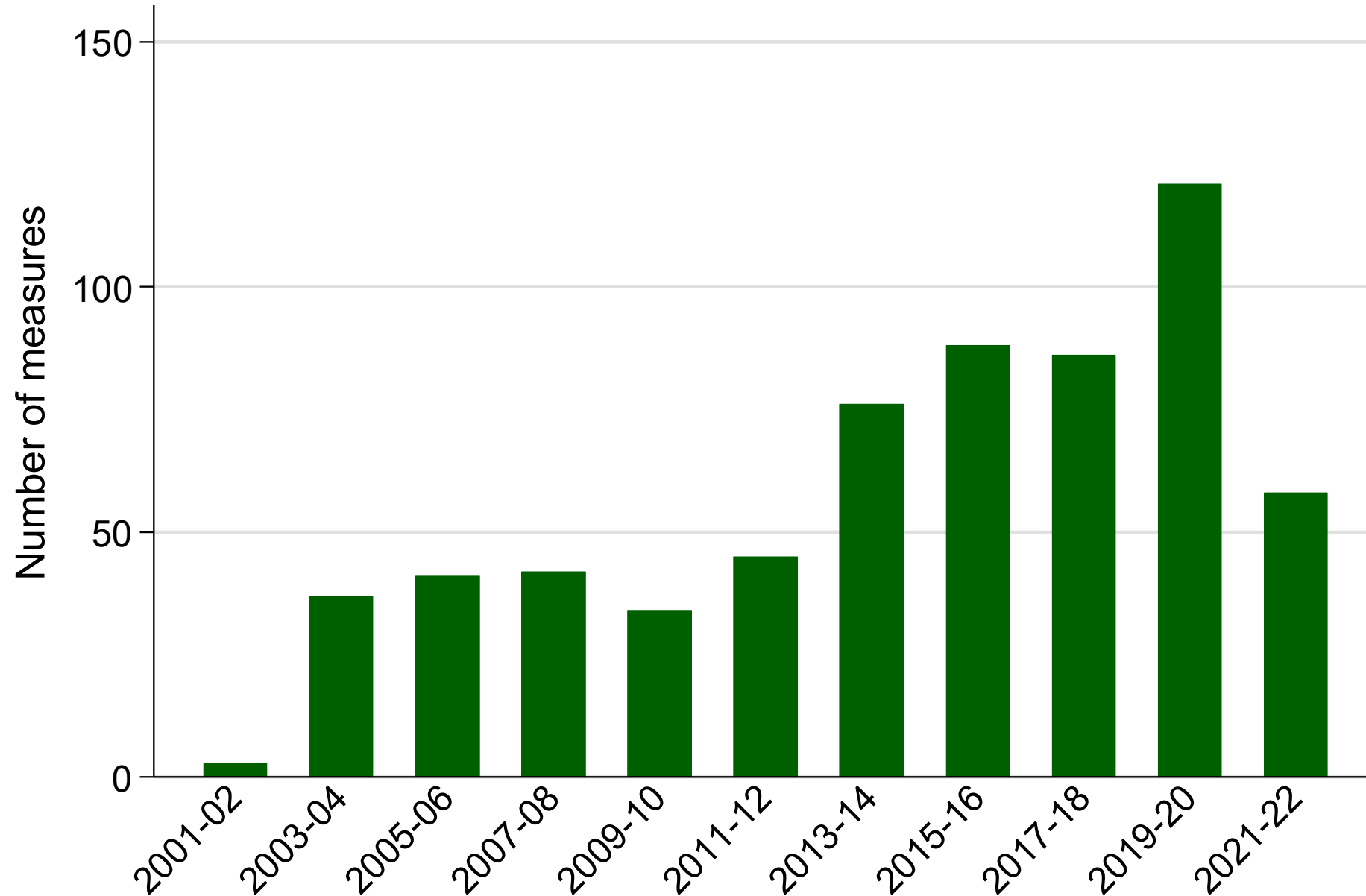
	Sales tax	Business tax
Passed	152	103
Failed	39	8



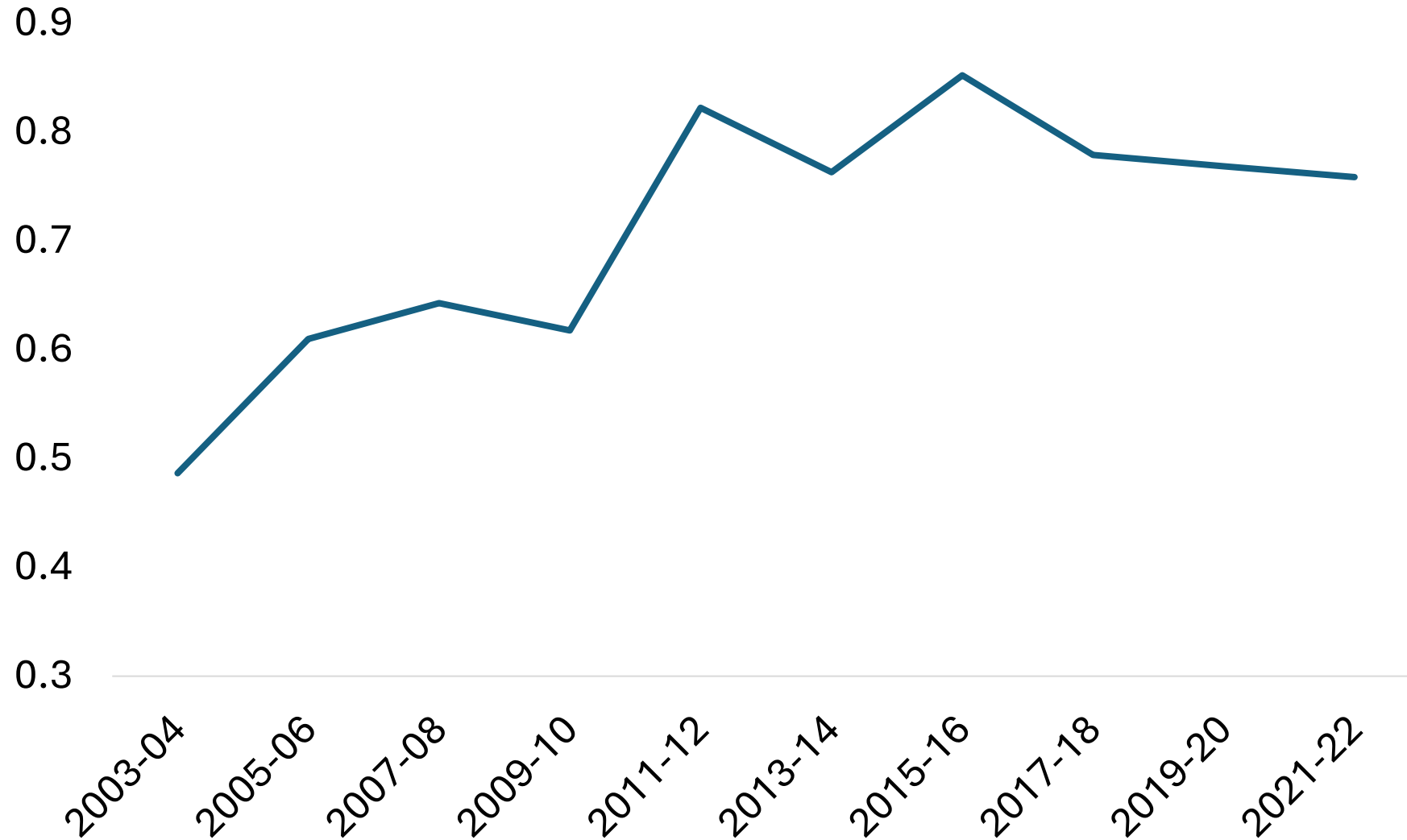
Number of city tax increase ballot measures



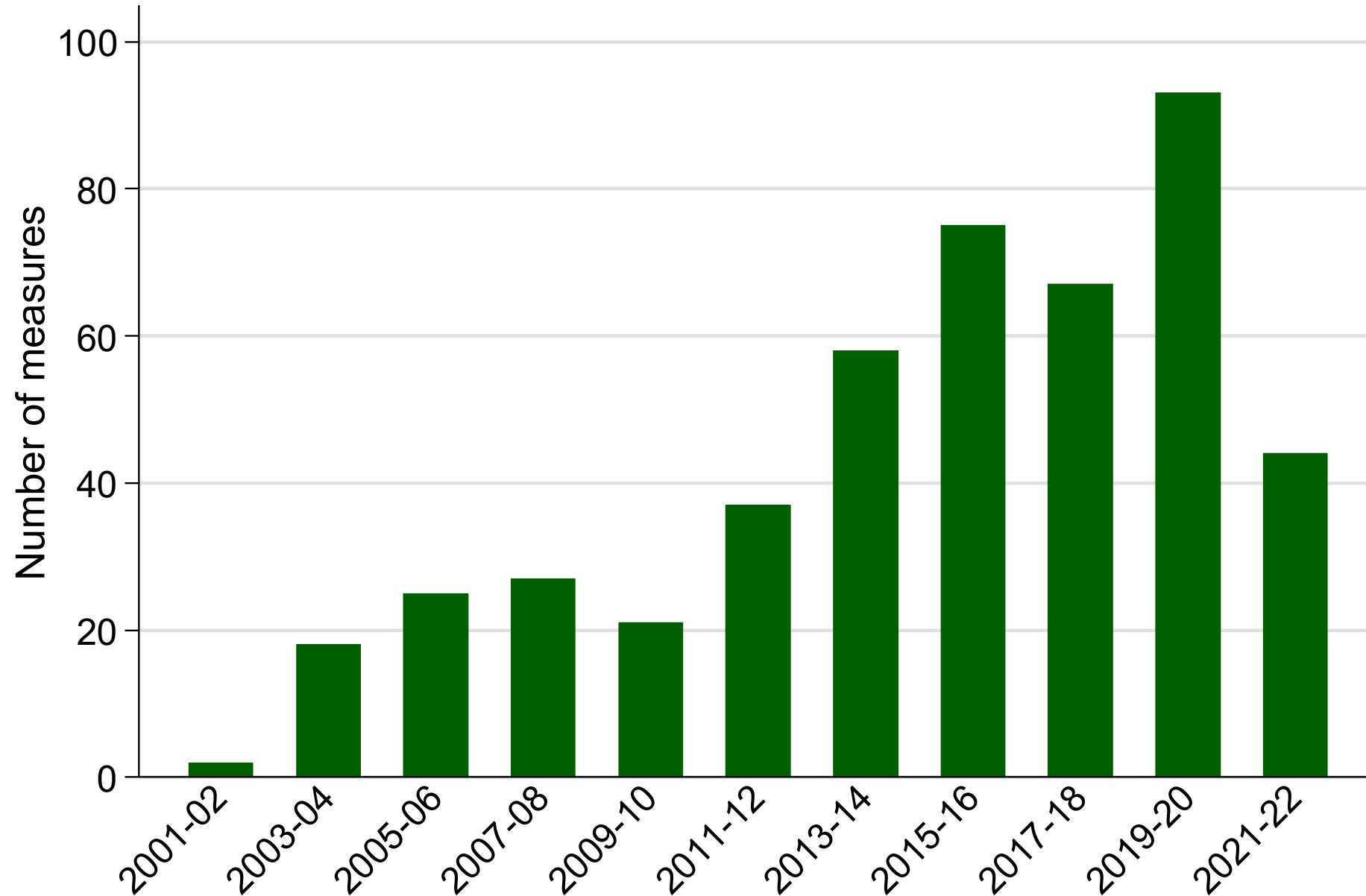
Number of city sales tax increase ballot measures



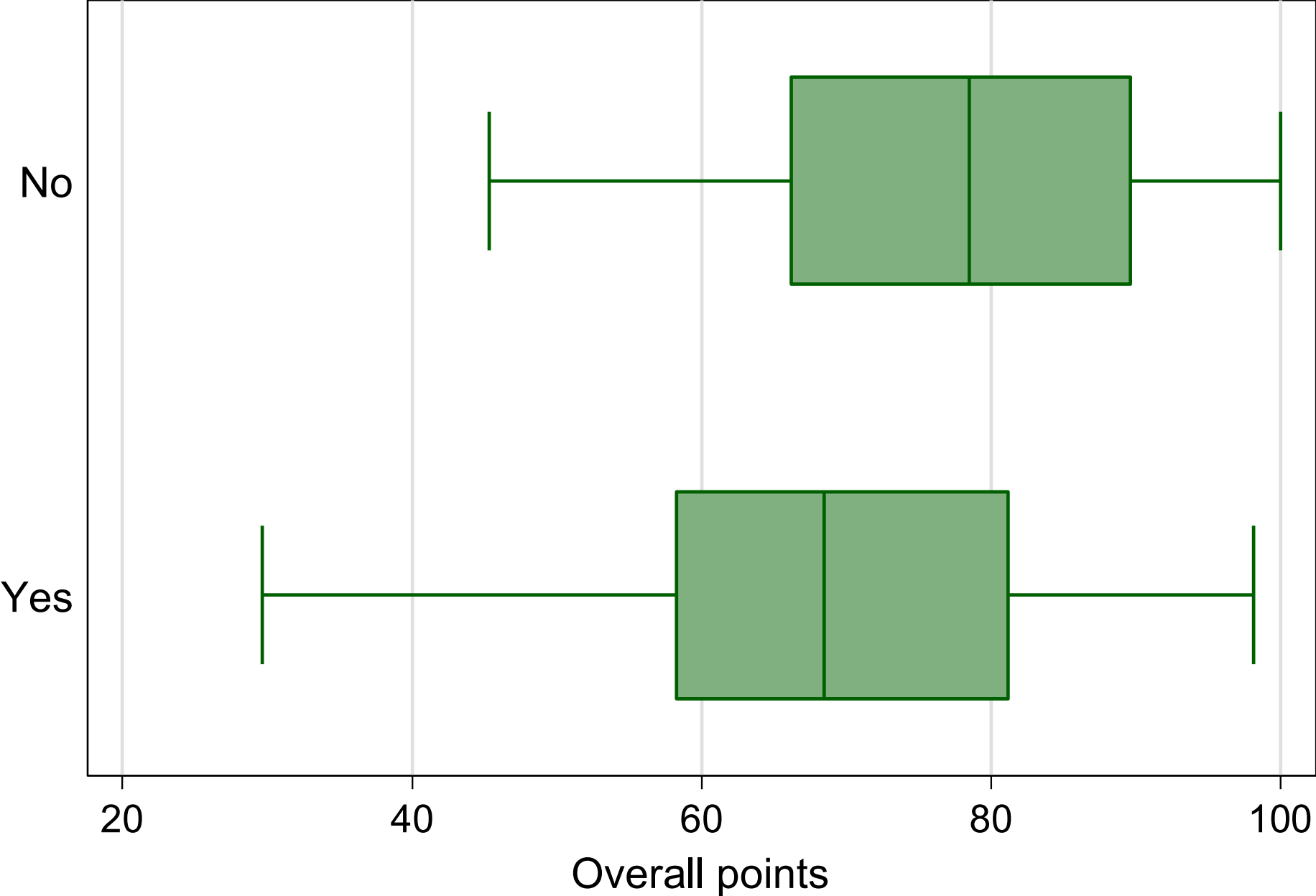
City sales tax passage rate



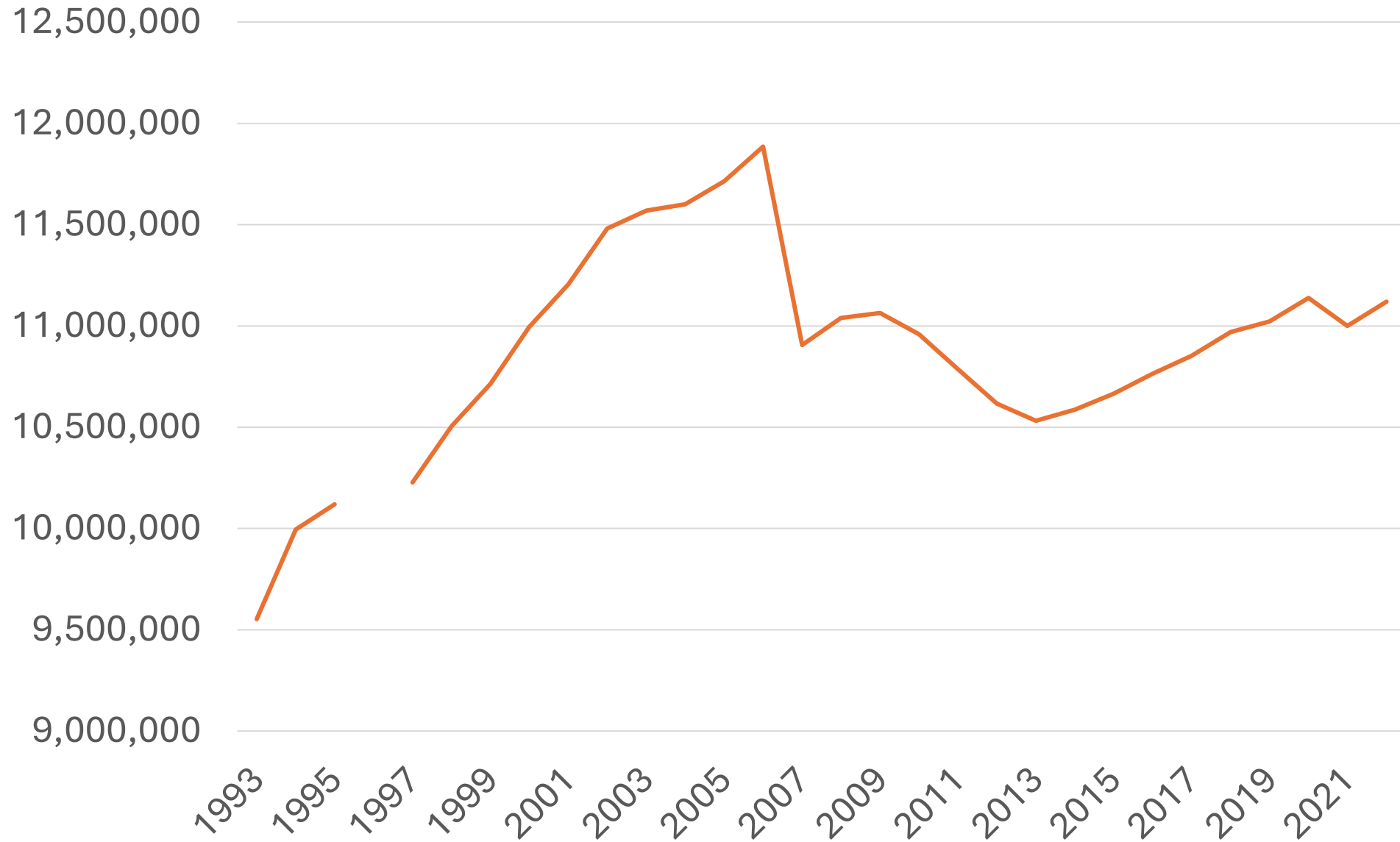
Number of passing city sales tax increase ballot measures



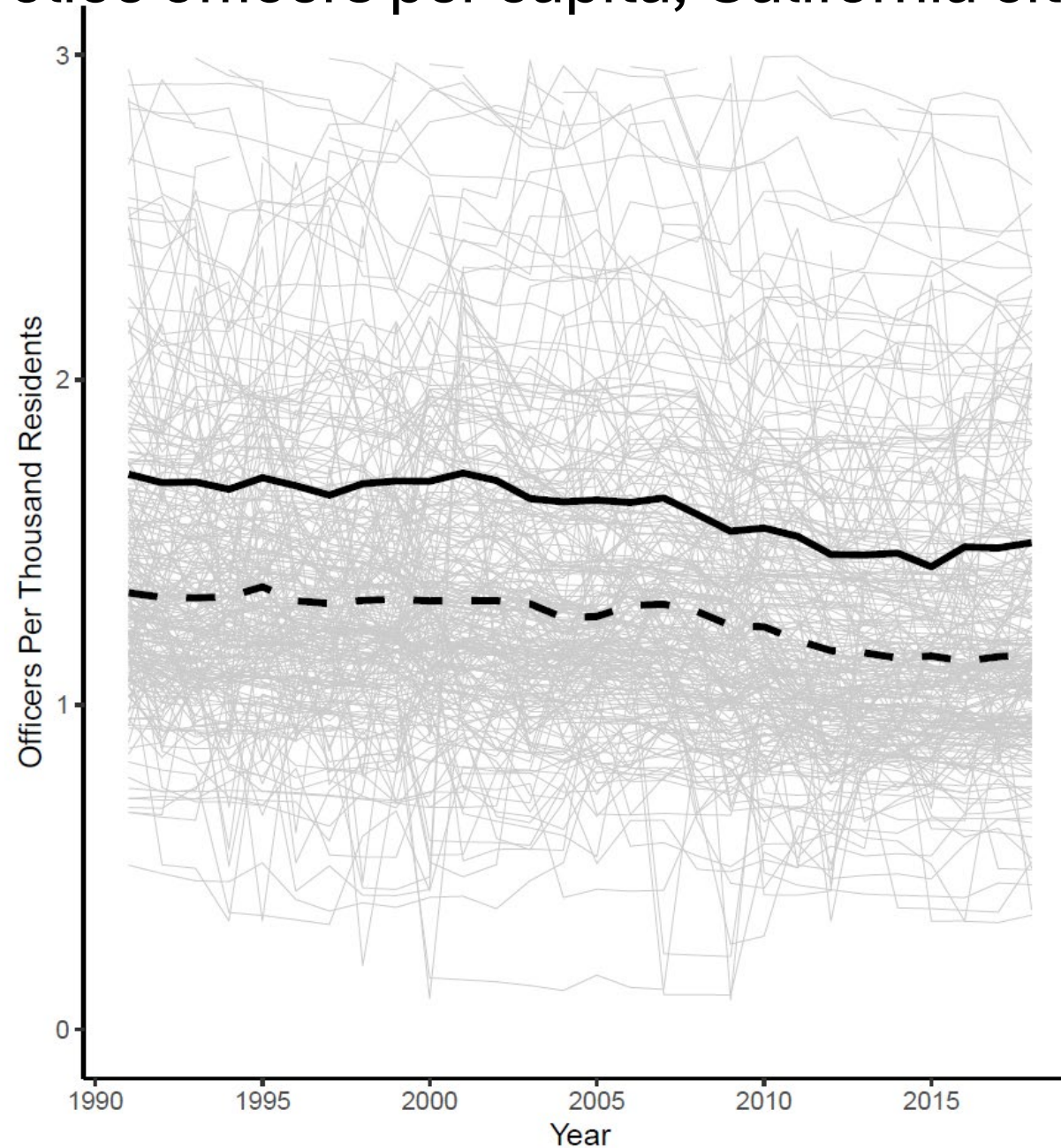
Fiscal health scores, cities with and without tax ballot measures 2018-2020



U.S. Local Government Employment



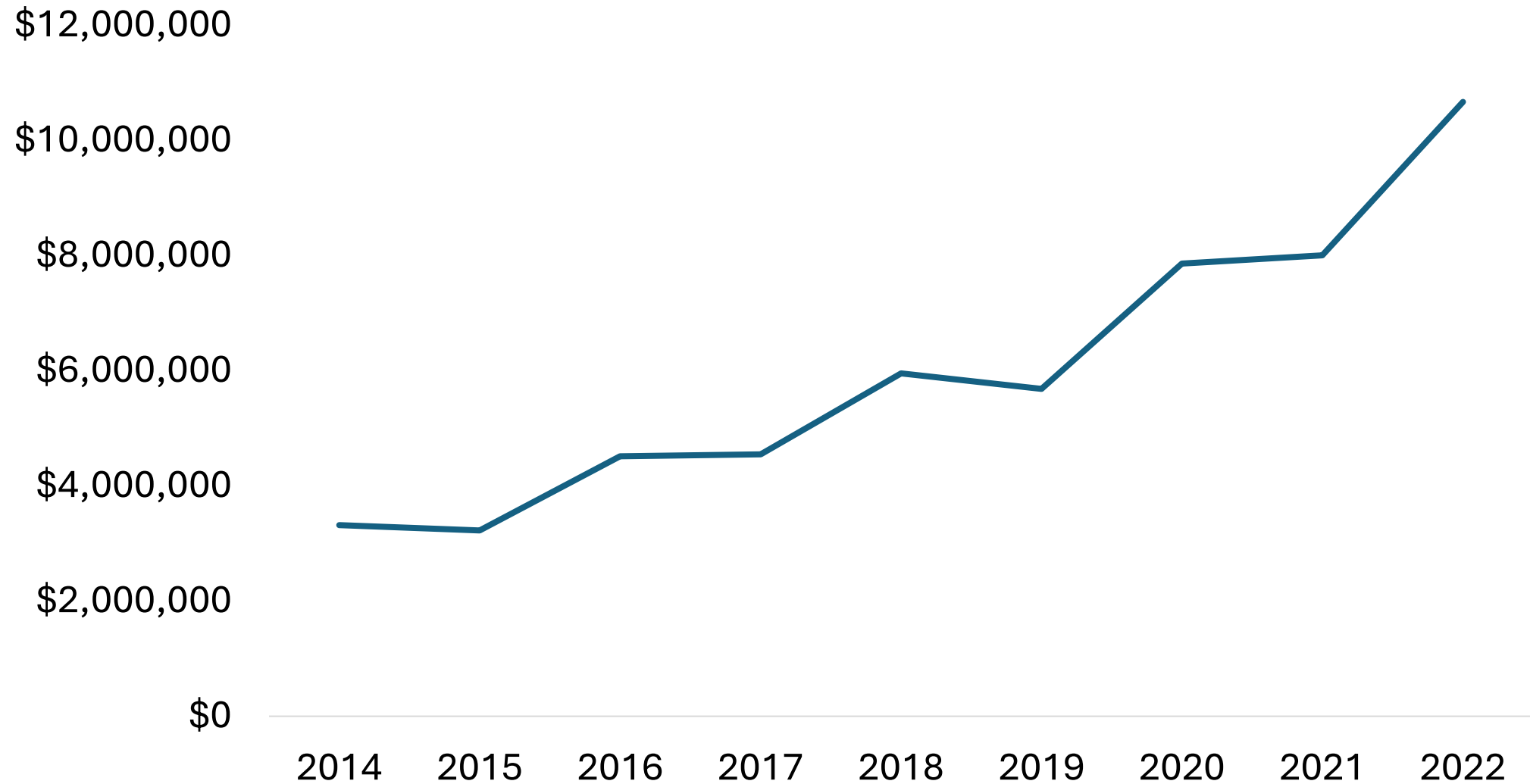
Police officers per capita, California cities



The longer story?

- Tax revolt: Pressure to keep taxes down
- Unions and collective bargaining: Pressure to push costs up
- Escape hatch (for a long time): Health and pension benefits
- Great Recession and subsequent reforms: Increase in local governments' pension contributions
- Reduction in local government employment

Beaverton, Oregon Pension Contributions



Harris and Trump Have Housing Ideas. Economists Have Doubts.

The two presidential nominees are talking about their approaches for solving America's affordability crisis. But would their plans work?



By Jeanna Smialek and Linda Qiu

Aug. 30, 2024

America's gaping shortage of affordable housing has rocketed to the top of voter worry lists and to the forefront of campaign promises, as both the Democratic nominee, Kamala Harris, and the Republican candidate, Donald J. Trump, promise to fix the problem if they are elected.

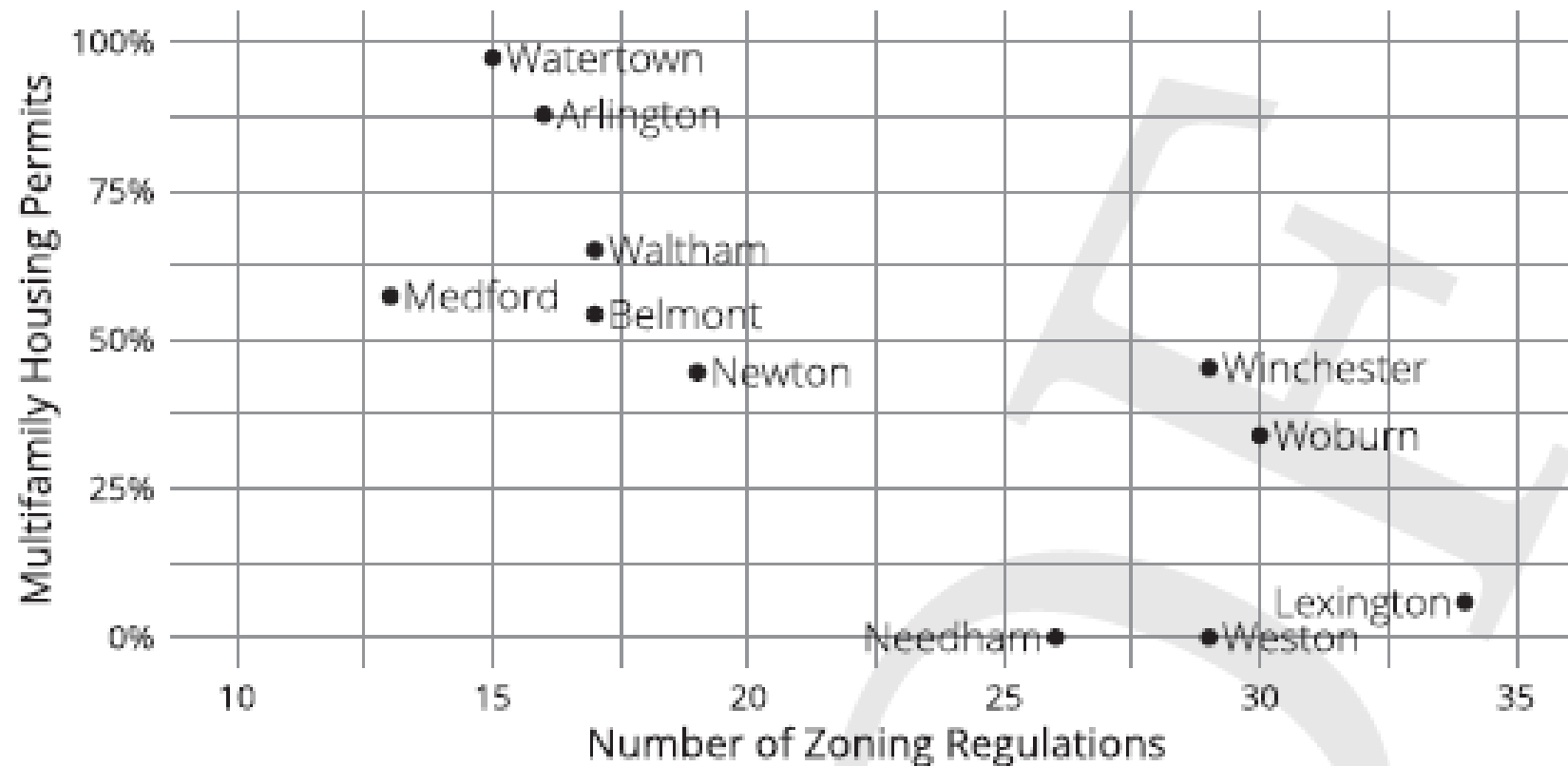


FIGURE 3.4: Proportion of multifamily housing permits, 2000–2015, for selected towns

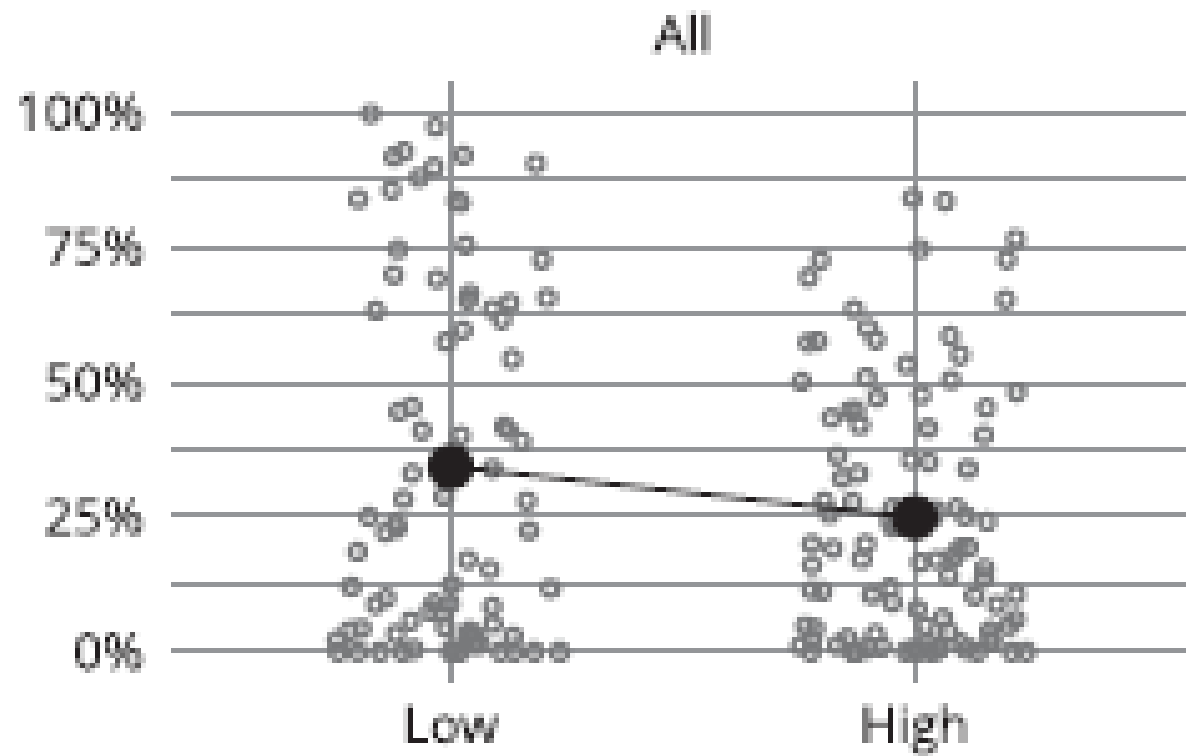


FIGURE 3.5: Multifamily housing permit share by number of housing regulations

TABLE 5.1 *Demographic differences between commenters and all voters*

Demographic	% of Commenters	% of Voters	Difference
Women	43.3	51.3	-8.0
Democrats	32.0	31.7	0.2
Whites	95.0	86.7	8.2
Age > 50	75.0	52.6	22.4
Homeowners	73.4	45.6	27.8

Differences on gender, race, and homeownership are statistically significant; there is no difference for Democrats (or any other party).

Is policy in this area dominated by...

112

Who Are the Neighborhood Defenders?

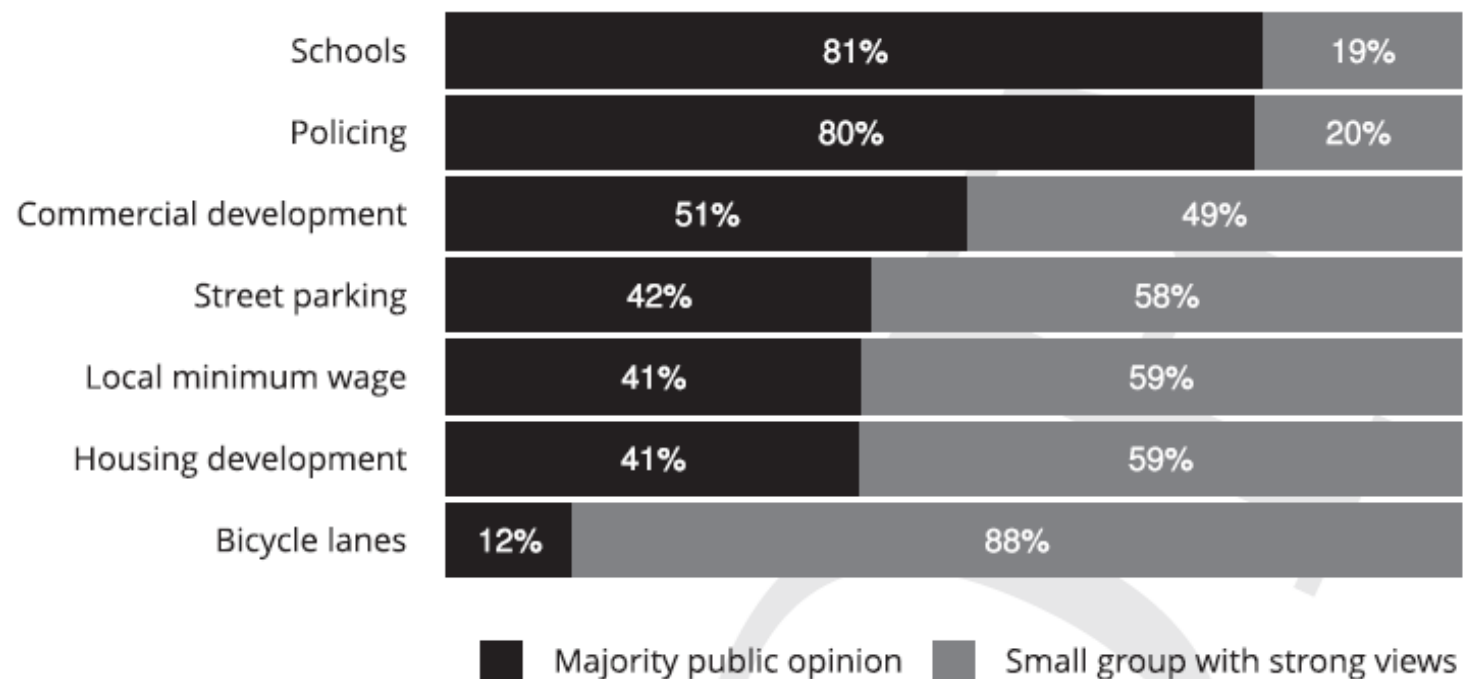


FIGURE 5.8: Survey of mayors: Majority public opinion or small group politics

ARTICLE

Public comment and public policy

Alexander Sahn

Assistant Professor, Department of Political
Science, University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

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Abstract

Is public policy responsive to demographically and ideologically unrepresentative comments given at public meetings? I investigate this possibility using a novel data set of over 40,000 comments made at the San Francisco Planning Commission between 1998 and 2021, matched to information about proposed developments discussed in hearings and administrative data on commenters. I document four stylized facts: First, commenters at public meetings are unrepresentative of the public along racial, gender, age, and homeownership lines; second, distance to the proposed development predicts commenting behavior, but only among those in opposition; third, commission votes are correlated with commenters' preferences; finally, the alignment of White commenters (vs. other racial groups) and neighborhood group representatives and the general public (vs. other interest groups) better predict project approvals.

BROOKINGS

COMMENTARY

In California, statewide housing reforms brush against local resistance

Julia Gill and Jenny Schuetz

June 28, 2023

Discussion, Part 4