Texas Public POLICY FOUNDATION

CONSOLIDATING ELECTIONS TO INCREASE TURNOUT AND SAVE TAXPAYER DOLLARS

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KEY POINTS

- Seven states require municipal elections to be consolidated with even-year federal election dates. This increases turnout and saves $29.5-129 million for local government per biennium.
- Should Texas and the other 42 states move to consolidate local elections, other benefits include reduced election worker burnout.
- Consolidating elections means less likelihood of special interests dominating low-turnout elections.
- When local elections are held separately, it leads to a higher chance of passing tax increases, a significantly increased chance of candidates endorsed by teachers' unions winning, and higher pay and benefits for public employees.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Under the Constitution, states have the power to set state and local election dates, while federal law dictates that federal elections occur on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November (Overseas Vote Foundation, 2024).

There are four benefits behind implementing uniform election dates. First, turnout will be increased by consolidating local elections with regularly scheduled primary and general elections. Second, consolidation will save money at the county or other local jurisdiction level. Third, special interests will be less able to dominate an election due to low turnout. And lastly, consolidation will reduce election worker burnout.

OVERVIEW

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), seven states require municipal elections to be consolidated with even-year federal election dates (i.e., on-cycle with the regular November general elections in even years for federal and state offices): Arizona, Arkansas, California, Hawaii, Kentucky, Nevada, and Oregon (NCSL, 2025).

Uniform Election Dates Produce Four Main Benefits:

1) Higher voter turnout
2) Election administration cost savings
3) Decreased likelihood of special interests dominating a low-turnout election
4) Reduced election worker burnout

continued

Per NCSL, "Over the past two decades, over 50 cities have consolidated their elections with general elections, including a majority of the cities in Arizona, California and Nevada."

Another 19 states allow municipalities or counties to set their own dates, with five of those (Maine, Maryland, Rhode Island, Virginia, and West Virginia) plus the District of Columbia mostly opting for on-cycle even-year consolidation.

The remaining 24 states prohibit municipal elections on federal even-year dates, opting instead for off-cycle scheduling (such as odd-year November or non-November dates like May in Texas). Virginia and New Jersey are among the states with off-cycle requirements or practices, as their state elections are held in odd years, so local elections typically align with those rather than even-year federal cycles.

According to the NCSL, local elections were typically scheduled on an ad hoc basis through the 1890s. At that point, states began standardizing local election schedules, often in "off-cycle" years from federal or state elections. There was a practical reason for this: elections with long ballots were not feasible to administer at the time with the available technology. In addition, it was thought that separating local contests from state and federal races would act to keep partisanship out of these elections.

The NCSL reports a gradual trend towards consolidation of elections, initiated mostly by state legislatures. Per NCSL, "Over the past two decades, over 50 cities have consolidated their elections with general elections, including a majority of the cities in Arizona, California and Nevada" (NCSL, 2025).

Again, pulling from NCSL, "About half of the states hold school board elections off-cycle from general elections and only a handful—Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, South Carolina, Utah, Wyoming—hold elections in November of even-numbered years" (NCSL, 2025).

There are important considerations for election timing that tend to favor interest groups or taxpayers, with NCSL noting that while election consolidation may boost turnout, some local political subdivisions prefer a special date for planning purposes or to get "better engagement among their core constituents when other races are not competing for attention" (NCSL, 2025). The fact is that these off-cycle elections result in dismal turnout. As many as 60,000 of America's 90,000 school-board members are elected with a 10%–15% turnout (Hartney, 2021).

What exactly is the benefit of "better engagement" by leaving local elections separate, in other words, not consolidating with lower attendant turnout? NCSL cites three:

- Higher chance of passing tax increases (Kogan et al., 2018).
- Significantly increased chance of candidates endorsed by teachers' unions winning (Hartney, 2021).
- Higher pay and benefits for public employees (Hartney, 2021).

Since studies show that a smaller pool of voters is more likely to vote for tax increases (Kogan, 2018), this leads to an incentive for local governments to choose their voters—in other words, purposefully aim for a low election turnout where a greater proportion of the electorate will likely be voters with a direct stake in the elections' outcome.

Table 1

Turnout for Elections in Texas by Type and Year

Election Type	Year	Turnout
Primary	2022	17.6%
Runoff	2022	~7.0%
General	2022	45.9%
Primary	2024	18.4%
Runoff	2024	~7.2%
General	2024	61.2%
Local (May)	2023	4.9–17.8%
Constitutional (November)	2023	14.4%
Local (May)	2025	5.4–12.4%
Constitutional (November)	2025	16.0%

Note. Data from *Turnout and Voter Registration Figures (1970-current),* Texas Secretary of State, n.d. (https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/70-92.shtml); *Summary Results Report 2023 Joint Election*, Dallas County (https://assets01.aws.connect.clarityelections.com/Assets/Connect/RootPublish/dallas-tx.connect.clarityelections.com/ElectionDocuments/2023/May%206,%202023/Unofficial%20Final.pdf).

THE SITUATION IN TEXAS

In Texas, counties choose when to set local elections, with most of them opting for elections out of sync with federal elections (Texas Election Code, Chapter 3, Ordering Election). **Table 1** shows how this leads to low turnout, likely driven by voter confusion, such as an election on a Saturday in May, and apathy (C.S.S.B. 1209, 2025).

Digging deeper into Texas's uniform local elections in May for jurisdictions, including cities, independent school districts (ISDs), municipal utility districts (MUDs), and other special districts, these elections typically feature low turnout compared to statewide or federal races. Typical turnout ranges from 5%-18% of registered voters based on sampling data from 102 jurisdictions across 52 counties, including all top five by population (Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, Bexar, Travis). Samples were drawn from county reports, reconciliation forms, and results pages, covering a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas to capture a range. Contested races (e.g., mayoral or bond propositions) tend to have higher participation, while unopposed or elections lacking statewide contests or local elections with little in the way of active campaigning, known as "low-stakes elections," have lower turnout.

Table 2 summarizes turnout data from the five most populous counties in Texas, including turnout for the May 2023 and 2025 elections.

Further examining the sampling of 102 Texas political subdivisions in 52 counties in May 2023 and 2025, we find the highest observed turnout in the May 2023 elections was the Amarillo City election, jointly held in Potter and Randall Counties, with 17.8% (Gay, 2023). The lowest overall county turnout in May 2023 was seen in Harris County's 4.87% (Harris County, 2023), though the lowest turnout for a specific election with more than 10,000 registered voters was seen in Grimes County for the Navasota Independent School District, which registered a 4.85% turnout (Grimes County, 2023). In May 2025, the lowest observed turnout was in Harris County at 5.44% (Harris County, 2025), while the highest was recorded in Potter and

Table 2

Turnout in Texas's Odd-Year May Elections

County	Jurisdiction/Example	2023 Turnout (May 6)	2025 Turnout (May 3)
Harris (Houston)	Joint Election (inc. City of Houston, HISD, MUDs)	4.87%	5.44%
Dallas	Joint Election (inc. City of Dallas, DISD)	8.85%	8.35%
Tarrant (Fort Worth)	Joint Election (inc. City of Fort Worth, FWISD)	8.9%	7.7%
Bexar (San Antonio)	Joint Election (inc. City of San Antonio, SAISD)	15.34%	9.27%
Travis (Austin)	Joint Election (inc. City of Austin, AISD)	10.45%	8.52%

Note. Data from *Cumulative Results Report*, Harris County, Texas, 5/6/2023 (https://files.harrisvotes.com/harrisvotes/prd/Reports/May-6-2023-Joint-Election-Cumulative-Results.pdf); *Cumulative Results Report*, Harris County, Texas, 5/3/2025 (https://www.harrisvotes.com/Portals/harrisvotes/Documents/Final%20Official%20Cumulative%20Results-5-12-2025%2011-49-06%20AM.pdf?ver=3DON-RotO2jhVbdQNWECPQ%3d%3d); *Summary Results Report 2023 Joint Election*, Dallas County, Texas, May 6, 2023 (https://assets01.aws.connect.clarityelections.com/Assets/Connect/RootPublish/dallas-tx.connect.clarityelections.com/ElectionDocuments/2023/May%206,%202023/Unofficial%20Final.pdf); *Summary Results Report, Joint and Special Election*, Dallas County, Texas, May 3, 2025 (https://www.dallascountyvotes.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Unofficial-Final-1.pdf); *Cumulative Report, Joint General and Special Elections,* Tarrant County, Texas, 5/6/2023 (https://www.tarrantcountytx.gov/content/dam/main/elections/2023/0523/reports/cumulative.pdf); *Cumulative Report, Joint General and Special Elections,* Tarrant County, Texas, 5/3/2025 (https://www.tarrantcountytx.gov/content/dam/main/elections/2025/0525/reports/cumulative.pdf); *Summary Results Report, Joint General, Special, Charter and Bond Election*, Bexar County, Texas May 6, 2023 (https://www.bexar.org/DocumentCenter/View/38278/May-6-2023-Joint-General---Official-Summary-Results-Report); *Summary Results Report, Joint General Special and Bond Election*, Bexar County, Texas May 3, 2025 (https://www.bexar.org/DocumentCenter/View/48372/May-Summary-Official); *Election Reconciliation, Joint General and Special Elections*, Travis County, Texas, 5/6/2023 (https://votetravis.gov/wp-content/uploads/L23Reconciliation.pdf); *Election Reconciliation, Travis County Joint General and Special Elections*, Travis County, Texas, 5/3/2025 (https://votetravis.gov/wp-content/uploads/12-2f-L25-Election-Reconciliation_SIGNED.pdf).

Randall Counties' joint election for city council and bond approvals at 12.37% (Early, 2025).

The Texas Public Policy Foundation published a detailed analysis of the bonds voted on in Texas in 2025, finding that many multimillion-dollar bond elections had such low voter turnout that "nine school bonds were either carried or defeated by 10 or fewer votes" (Bonura, 2025, p. 9). In a local contest with 100 registered voters, a 5% turnout, as seen in Harris County in 2023, would mean that as few as five voters might decide the outcome of an election. As noted by Bonura, "City propositions can be carried by small margins. For example, Krum City's Proposition B carried an $11 million bond by only a difference of 23 votes. It is problematic that a small proportion of the population is able to take on a large portion of debt for the whole local populace" (Bonura, 2025, p. 2).

In the Texas Legislature, some Republican lawmakers have expressed concerns that election consolidation would help Democrats by driving Democratic voters who participate in local elections but not in the general election to cast ballots in the general, thus increasing the voter turnout for partisan Democratic candidates (federal and state offices in Texas). Others hold the opposing position that election consolidation will not, on balance, shift partisan results in November elections. But a detailed analysis by a veteran Texas campaign consultant suggests a decidedly mixed bag. Derek Ryan examined 18 school board elections in ten Texas counties, comparing partisan turnout in two off-year local elections—November 2023 and May 2025—with two general elections—November 2022 and November 2024 (see **Appendix A**).

Of the data, Ryan noted in an email to the author on December 11, 2025,

> "As you will see, in some districts, Republican Primary voters made up a larger share of the vote in May than they typically do in November elections, while in other districts, the opposite is true."

He concluded his analysis by writing,

> "I'm all for moving May elections to November, not for any partisan gain, but because I think it's easier for voters, it's cheaper for taxpayers, and lastly, from a data collection standpoint, it would make my life easier professionally. I think if anything, some of this data refutes the argument that conservatives want to move the election to get better results." (D. Ryan, personal communication, December 11, 2025)

The 18 jurisdictions across four elections (two general elections and two local elections) provide 36 turnout comparisons. On average, the data show that local elections are dominated by partisan voters, with voters having most recently voted in a Democratic or Republican primary making up 80.4% of the vote in November 2023 and 72.2% of the vote in May 2025, compared to 61.0% in November 2022 and 46.6% in November 2024. This simply shows that voters who appear for local elections are more likely to also appear for primary elections. Of the 18 local ISD jurisdictions, for the 2022 and 2024 November elections, four saw a plurality of Democrats, and 14 saw a plurality of Republicans (with three of those seeing a majority of Republicans voting in the November 2022 election). Of the four Democratic districts, Democrats saw their partisan turnout advantage increase in six of eight local elections, meaning that the local election turnout was stronger for Democrats than in the general election. In the 14 Republican districts, Republican turnout was higher in 27 of 28 local elections. In both cases, this was due to voters who had not participated in a prior primary voting in the general election, thus diluting the share of the vote of the dominant party to a greater extent than for the minority party. This pattern likely reflects mathematical distribution effects: the majority party in a jurisdiction has more of a share to lose than does the minority, though this isn't to suggest that the majority party's partisan candidates are at greater risk, as we could only measure those voters who voted in a general election who did not vote in the primary.

Election consolidation would also save political subdivisions money. A detailed report on the annual cost for administering U.S. elections ranges from $2 to $10 billion (Stewart, 2022), and "the cost of individual elections is about half of overall spending on election administration in a state." What are these costs? According to the report referenced above, "Operational costs that surge around an election can be divided into four major categories: printing of ballots and related documents, salaries of poll workers and other temporary staff, rental of polling places, and postage for informational materials and mail ballots." Naturally, the proportion of these costs differs from state to state depending on how elections are conducted. A study published by the Sightline Institute estimated that "Idaho, Montana, and Washington could save 57 to 88 percent of what authorities spend on these elections" (Durning, 2023). This study estimates savings in the range of $18 million to almost $47 million, with a mid-range estimate of $30 million per biennium. Separate methodologies from the same report look at the cost to hold local elections per registered voter, with one average of two cities yielding $5.92 for each voter. The study also cited an estimated cost in Texas and Louisiana of $7 per ballot cast in primary and runoff elections in 2018 and 2020 (de la Fuente & Otis, 2021).

Applying the two different methodologies for estimating election administration costs above, scaling up the estimated election costs for Idaho, Montana, and Washington State to Texas, and applying the estimated per voter costs in Texas and Louisiana, yields a high and a low range estimate for Texas.

Applying the findings for Idaho, Montana, and Washington State to Texas suggests savings for local government of up to $129 million per biennium.

A low-range estimate of election administration costs can be derived by applying the per ballot cast costs in Texas and Louisiana, per the study above. The Texas Secretary of State reported 18,488,166 voters for the 2025 constitutional election, casting 2,964,635 ballots (Texas Secretary of State, n.d.). Striking a mid-range value between the estimated costs to hold an election in Louisiana ($5.92) and Texas ($7) per voter yields $6.46 per ballot with the potential biennial savings in consolidating the odd-year election of about $19 million. Then, going back to Table 2 and taking the average of the ten Saturdays in May local elections over two cycles, 8.77%, and applying that to the 18,488,166 registered Texas voters in 2025 at a cost of $6.46 per ballot, sums up to $10.5 million. Thus, a low-end estimate for local government savings per biennium would be about $29.5 million.

UNIFORM ELECTION DATE IMPLEMENTATION

In Texas, Sen. Bryan Hughes introduced SB 1209, "An Act relating to election dates," in 2025 to mandate uniform election dates, aiming to eliminate some of the voter confusion attendant with Saturday elections in May and odd-year November elections (C.S.S.B. 1209, 2025).

Other states, like those that have been expanding early voting since 2000, provide templates for integration (The Center for Election Innovation & Research, 2023). Federal reforms, such as updates to the Electoral Count Act, could be complemented by standardizing timelines.

Texas's current primary, runoff, and general election cycle offers a clear path towards the implementation of a uniform election date. Local off-cycle elections in Texas often include a requirement for runoffs if the top vote-getter does not achieve 50% +1 of the votes. Whether a local jurisdiction requires a runoff election depends on the type of entity and whether its elections mandate a majority vote rather than just a plurality. Under Chapter 2 of the Texas Election Code, the default for most public offices is plurality unless otherwise specified by law, the constitution, or local policy. If a majority is required and no candidate achieves it, a runoff between the top two vote-getters is held. City elections are nonpartisan and typically held on a Saturday in May or November. The vote requirement is governed by the Texas Constitution, Article XI, Section 11, and Section 41.001 of the Texas Election Code.

School board elections per Texas Education Code §11.057 default to a plurality vote (no runoff unless tie), but the board can adopt resolutions requiring numbered positions or a single-member district to require a majority vote, meaning a runoff would be required if no candidate achieves a majority.

Lastly, there has been concern over the matter of voter "rolloff," also known as "drop-off" or "undervoting," where voters, when confronted with long ballots, tend to leave the end of the ballot untouched. This could be an issue if the resultant votes at the end of the ballot end up being the same or fewer than would be the case if the local election remained unconsolidated. This proposition can be tested in a state with a consolidated ballot. In this case, the author selected Orange County, California, due to his familiarity with that jurisdiction as a former state legislator from that area. In the 2024 general election, Orange County saw 76.1% turnout with 1,861,450 registered voters casting 1,417,397 votes (OC Vote, 2024). **Table 3** details turnout down the ballot for the November 2024 General Election in Orange County, California. While voter rolloff does occur, there is only a weak correlation between rolloff and ballot position, with city proposition FF in the City of Santa Ana, placed about 26 deep on the ballot, only seeing a 7% rolloff. The measure drew some attention, as it was a proposal to increase city council pay from $12,000 a year to $78,698 annually. It was rejected, with 34% voting "yes" to 66% voting "no."

Table 3

Rolloff in Consolidated Elections for Local Contests vs. Federal and State Elections

Contest	Registered Voters	Jurisdiction Turnout	Votes	Turnout %	Rolloff %	Ballot Position
Presidential	1,861,450	76.1%	1,391,307*	74.7%	1.4%	1
40th Cong. District	456,133	80.6%	353,112	77.4%	3.2%	4
70th Assembly Dist.	266,653	70.3%	187,570	65.9%	4.4%	5
Irvine Council Dist. 1	28,039	75.4%	18,250	65.1%	10.3%	7
Irvine Ranch Water District, District 4	52,204	77.1%	33,256	63.7%	13.4%	8
Prop. JJ, City of Yorba Linda	48,927	83.0%	38,404	78.5%	4.5%	19
Prop. FF, City of Santa Ana	133,477	61.5%	72,921	54.5%	7.0%	26

Note. Data from *Certified Statement of the Votes Cast at the Presidential General Election,* Orange County, California, November 5, 2024 (https://ocvote.gov/fileadmin/live/GEN2024/sov.pdf).
*The discrepancy between the total votes cast of 1,417,397 and 1,391,307 votes cast in the presidential election represents 26,090 voters who did not cast a vote for president.

CONCLUSION

Studies show that consolidating elections, by expanding the pool of voters to become more representative of the broader public, leads to a reduced chance of passing tax increases at the local level, a significantly reduced chance of candidates endorsed by teachers' unions winning school board elections, and lower pay and benefits for local public employees, as well as local government cost savings. Though, regarding the latter, studies offer a wide range of estimates that, when applied to Texas, suggest local government savings in the range of $29.5 million to $129 million per biennium.■

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APPENDIX A

		NOV 2022 ELECTION			NOV 2023 ELECTION			NOV 2024 ELECTION			MAY 2025 ELECTION		
COUNTY	SCHOOL DISTRICT	REP	DEM	NO PRI	REP	DEM	NO PRI	REP	DEM	NO PRI	REP	DEM	NO PRI
CAMERON	LA FERIA ISD	21.9%	39.3%	38.7%	31.6%	47.7%	20.7%	18.7%	25.9%	55.4%	31.4%	41.4%	27.3%
COLLIN	MELISSA ISD	38.5%	14.1%	47.5%	56.5%	17.2%	26.3%	26.5%	10.1%	63.4%	45.5%	13.3%	41.3%
COLLIN	CELINA ISD	43.9%	10.2%	46.0%	60.6%	14.3%	25.1%	30.8%	7.9%	61.3%	52.1%	9.7%	38.3%
COLLIN	BLUE RIDGE ISD	52.4%	6.1%	41.5%	70.9%	8.5%	20.6%	42.7%	4.1%	53.2%	63.1%	6.2%	30.7%
COLLIN	LOVEJOY ISD	51.7%	13.6%	34.7%	68.6%	16.3%	15.1%	43.1%	10.8%	46.1%	53.8%	12.1%	34.1%
DALLAS	DESOTO ISD	8.1%	60.9%	30.9%	11.5%	77.7%	10.8%	5.8%	47.1%	47.1%	7.6%	81.5%	10.9%
DALLAS	MESQUITE ISD	24.4%	33.6%	42.0%	37.6%	43.1%	19.3%	16.3%	24.3%	59.4%	37.4%	46.8%	15.8%
DENTON	ARGYLE ISD	44.8%	10.1%	45.1%	62.3%	13.5%	24.2%	36.4%	7.9%	55.7%	50.1%	8.6%	41.3%
ELLIS	RED OAK ISD	33.9%	26.9%	39.2%	47.3%	34.6%	18.1%	24.7%	22.2%	53.1%	45.7%	27.4%	27.0%
ELLIS	FERRIS ISD	38.5%	19.5%	42.0%	56.4%	23.2%	20.4%	26.8%	15.3%	57.9%	39.9%	18.1%	42.1%
HARRIS	TOMBALL ISD	42.0%	13.7%	44.4%	56.5%	18.0%	25.5%	29.4%	10.5%	60.2%	51.5%	15.5%	32.9%
HAYS	HAYS CONS ISD	24.3%	30.5%	45.1%	34.3%	40.7%	25.0%	17.8%	23.3%	58.9%	34.0%	44.5%	21.5%
HAYS	DRIPPING SPRINGS ISD	35.7%	24.8%	39.5%	47.1%	31.1%	21.8%	30.5%	19.8%	49.7%	41.6%	25.1%	33.3%
HAYS	WIMBERLEY ISD	44.0%	28.9%	27.2%	49.5%	35.6%	14.9%	38.6%	24.5%	36.9%	47.7%	32.9%	19.4%
KAUFMAN	TERRELL ISD	48.5%	17.7%	33.8%	64.5%	18.5%	17.0%	37.0%	13.2%	49.9%	56.5%	18.6%	24.9%
KAUFMAN	KEMP ISD	60.9%	8.0%	31.1%	76.9%	8.8%	14.3%	48.8%	5.7%	45.5%	74.4%	6.7%	18.9%
LUBBOCK	LUBBOCK ISD	45.5%	19.8%	34.7%	63.2%	22.1%	14.7%	32.4%	14.0%	53.6%	56.8%	24.7%	18.5%
TARRANT	KENNEDALE ISD	35.1%	26.4%	38.6%	47.4%	33.7%	19.0%	25.7%	19.4%	54.9%	48.7%	29.0%	22.3%

REP = Share of votes which were cast by voters who have most recently voted in a Republican Primary
DEM = Share of votes which were cast by voters who have most recently voted in a Democratic Primary
NO PRI = Share of votes which were cast by voters who had no previous Republican or Democratic Primary history

Data provided by Derek Ryan, Dec. 11, 2025.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuck DeVore is the Chief National Initiatives Officer at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. He writes about the economy, energy, and national security. During session, the Texas Legislature frequently invites him to testify on election integrity and other topics. He guides the Foundation's national work in border security, election integrity, energy, and conservative criminal justice reform. He authored three books: *Crisis of the House Never United – A Novel of Early America, The Texas Model: Prosperity in the Lone Star State and Lessons for America*, and *China Attacks*. He regularly appears on Fox News and is a senior contributor at *The Federalist*.

For six years until he termed out in 2010, DeVore represented almost 500,000 people in the California State Assembly where he was vice chairman of the Committee on Revenue and Taxation as well as a member of the Budget Committee. DeVore was a senior assistant to a U.S. congressman from 1988 to 1990, and in the Reagan-era Pentagon, DeVore was a special assistant for foreign affairs.

Prior to his election, DeVore was an executive in the aerospace industry for 13 years analyzing technology and corporate capabilities and working in business development.

DeVore retired from the U.S. Army as a lieutenant colonel, having served in both the National Guard and the Reserves as an intelligence officer.

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