



ILLINOIS MUNICIPALITIES: WHERE HAVE ALL THE VOTERS GONE?

Oliver Walter and Albert Karnig

Politicians often lament the declining importance of local government in the United States. They point to an ever-growing, more inclusive federal government as evidence of the passing of government at the grass-roots level. But judging by statistics from the last twenty years, Illinois municipalities, at least, can hardly be considered dead or even slightly ill. Thanks to the home rule provisions of the new constitution and to increased revenue from sources such as the state income tax and the federal revenue-sharing programs, city governments are more active than ever before. Since 1957, municipal expenditures per capita have increased nearly 300 percent, the number of city employees has increased approximately 40 percent, and municipal taxes have increased from about \$40 per capita to nearly \$139 per capita.

Despite the fact that Illinois municipalities are both taxing and spending at previously unsurpassed rates, there is evidence to suggest that the voters living in these cities are not particularly concerned about which specific politicians direct their local governments. Using Illinois cities with populations greater than 25,000 in the 1970 census as a base, we found that the average voter turnout in the 1975 municipal elections was only 27 percent of those eighteen years and older. Furthermore, judging by data from 1935 and 1961, there has been a rather precipitous decline in electoral participation. Table 1 presents the statistics for the three decades.

Table 1

VOTER TURNOUT IN ILLINOIS MUNICIPALITIES OVER 25,000 IN POPULATION IN 1935, 1961, and 1975

	1935	1961	1975
Percent turnout of those of voting age	59	42	27
N =	(31)	(28)	(55)
Percent turnout of those registered to vote	74	57	37
N =	(19)	(21)	(55)

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Data for all three decades were collected either by or for the editors of the *Municipal Year Book*, and descriptions of the national studies can be found in this annual publication.¹ Table 1 lists the turnout averages for all reporting cities. In 1975, fifty-five of the fifty-eight cities in Illinois over 25,000 returned questionnaires on municipal voting rates and twenty-eight of the forty-one in 1961 did so. The *Year Book* included cities with populations over 10,000 in 1930; these cities were included for the 1935 figures if they had reached 25,000 by 1970.² Two averages are given. The first is the percent of those eighteen and over (twenty-one and over for the two earlier periods) who voted in city elections for mayor, council, and/or commissioners. The second average is the percentage of those registered to vote who in fact did vote. In the remainder of the paper we will be referring to the former percentage.

One of the problems of comparing these initial averages to contemporary figures is that they have been computed using different bases. As stated, the 1975 figures are for fifty-five cities, those in 1961 for twenty-eight cities, and for 1935, thirty-one cities. To overcome this difficulty only those cities for which we had figures for two time periods were compared. Thus, for the 1935 and 1961 elections, eighteen cities could be directly compared. For the 1935 and 1975 elections, we had data for thirty-one cities, and for the 1961 and 1975 elections turnout rates were available for twenty-six municipalities. The averages using either base — all cities or only the comparable cities — are very nearly identical, and for this reason only averages computed using all cities for which we have returns are presented in Table 1.

¹ "Governmental Data on the 960 Cities over 10,000 Population," *The Municipal Year Book, 1936* (Chicago, 1936), 165-88, Eugene Lee, "City Elections A Statistical Profile," *The Municipal Year Book, 1963* (Chicago, 1963), 74-84, Albert Karnig and Oliver Walter, "Municipal Elections: Registration, Incumbent Success, and Voter Participation," *The Municipal Year Book, 1977* (Washington, D C., 1977), 65-74

² Thirteen of the thirty-one cities for which we have data were under 25,000 population in 1930. Turnout did not correlate significantly with size and therefore we felt their inclusion was justified

Illinois and the Nation

The decline in voter turnout has been dramatic. In the mid-1930 election, turnout was nearly 60 percent. Less than thirty years later, turnout had fallen 16 percentage points, and forty years later, the percentage of those going to the polls was less than half of what it had been in the 1930s. Another interesting aspect of the decline can be found in a comparison of the Illinois figures to national municipal averages. Illinois averages were substantially higher than the national in 1935 (Table 2), and continued to be higher than the national average in 1961; but by 1975 the Illinois figures were three percentage points below the national average. Of course, a partial explanation for the low national average was the turnout in the South. Prior to the voting rights legislation of the mid-1960s, both formal legislation and informal social practices served to hold down registration. For instance, in Birmingham, Alabama, only 24 percent of those over twenty-one were registered to vote in 1935. However, when the southern states are excluded from the computations, Illinois municipal voting participation is still 10 percentage points higher than the average in the first time period and remains slightly higher in the second. By 1975, Illinois was 5 percentage points below the non-southern average.

Because Chicago is by far the largest city in the state, turnout averages are presented separately in Table 2. Just as with the remainder of the state, municipal voter participation has declined in Chicago, and although the figures are not presented separately, turnout for the 1975 mayoral election was at its lowest point in fifty years.

The fall in urban voting participation has gone on despite factors which would seemingly lead to greater participation. Voting studies have consistently shown that participation is quite highly related to education. For instance, in the 1976 national presidential election, 90 percent of those with a college education said they voted, while 60 percent of those with less

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Table 2

PERCENT OF VOTER TURNOUT IN MUNICIPALITIES

	United States*	Non-South	Illinois**	Chicago†
1935	42 (309)	49 (254)	59 (31)	56
1961	35 (414)	40 (281)	42 (28)	52
1975	30 (618)	32 (324)	27 (55)	42

* Average excludes Illinois

** Illinois average includes thirteen cities under 25,000 population in 1935

† Chicago figures are averages for the particular decade

The figures in parentheses represent the number of municipalities included.

than a high school degree went to the polls. If anything, this tendency is more pronounced in local elections. Yet, although the median education level in Illinois has risen from under eight years in the 1930s to more than twelve years, voting in local elections has fallen. This means quite simply that while the educated may vote more often than the less well educated, both groups are voting less often than in previous years.

Adding to the puzzling drop in the percentage of voters is the fact that legally it is easier to vote in the 1970s than it was either in the 1930s or 1960s. The most profound change has come in the reduction of residency requirements. Even in the 1960s, the law required that an individual be a resident of the state for at least a year prior to registration. Today, one need only be a resident for thirty days before voting registration is allowed. Further, precinct registration is more common than in previous years and provisions for absentee voting have been liberalized somewhat. But obviously ease of registration does not guarantee that citizens will go to the polls.

Some Reasons for Declining Interest

Several reasons for the decline in urban voting participation between the 1930s and the 1970s appear plausible. Some, such as governmental structure and the development of suburbs, are of local origin and local concern. Others, such as general apathy, a shift in spending patterns, changes in the mass media, constitutional amendments, and federal laws increasing the number of persons eligible to vote have occurred at the national level and cannot be controlled at the local level. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the first type occurred primarily in the earlier period between 1930 and 1950, while the second occurred mainly since 1960.

FORMAL GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE

Cities with partisan elections and the mayor-council form of government have substantially higher turnout rates than do those with nonpartisan elections and the city manager form of government. These relationships

shown that television has replaced newspapers as the basic source of information about politics. For instance, in the University of Michigan's biennial national survey, two-thirds of the 1976 sample said they relied most on television for news about politics and current events. Less than one-fifth said they relied most on newspapers.

The impact of television has been twofold. First, although both newspapers and television provide entertainment for their readers and viewers, entertainment nearly excludes all else on television. Even national news shows are seldom if ever in prime time, and on local news shows, municipal politics only infrequently receives the attention given to the weather or the tribulations of some child's pet. Exacerbating the problems is that television is very frequently not specific to the community. For instance, the amount of coverage given by the Chicago stations to political matters in Harvey or Oak Park is miniscule. This means that most individuals rely for political information on a medium which is nearly devoid of information concerning the operation of local government. Second, television has had a nationalizing influence. Of course, both newspapers and television give primary play to happenings at the national level, but whereas newspapers may carry stories of local politics on the second and third page, television news seldom goes beyond the first page. Politically relevant news on national television, then, tends to be of a national variety.

Interestingly, television, while helping to nationalize the political focus of the American people, certainly contributed to the increased cynicism and alienation shown in the public opinion polls cited earlier. The Vietnam War and Watergate scandal were vividly presented on national television and doubtless had a strong impact on political thinking.

EXTENSION OF VOTING RIGHTS

Finally, it should be noted that the ratification of the 24th and 26th amendments to the United States Constitution and the passage of the 1965 and 1975 Voting Rights Acts had the effect of increasing the number of persons eligible to vote. Although the greatest impact of these measures was in the South (i.e., the anti-poll tax amendment, the abolition of the literacy test, and provisions of the Voting Rights Acts calling for federal registrars), the adoption of the 26th amendment which enfranchised those from eighteen to twenty years of age had an impact on Illinois. Young adults are not as apt to register to vote and, once registered, they are not as likely to actually go to the polls on election day. The reasons underlying the poor turnout among the young — failure to meet registration deadlines, weak political party identification, and so forth — need not concern us here. But it is worthy of mention that enlarging the electorate to eighteen-year-olds has had an unfavorable influence on the percent of eligible citizens who vote in elections. For instance, data from the Univer-

sity of Michigan's national election survey show that the turnout rate for those over twenty-one was almost 40 percentage points higher than for those under twenty-one. The young may be the most idealistic about and committed to various issues of public policy. Regrettably, they are also the least prone to cast ballots in public elections.

Though the eighteen-year-old vote may have been one of the reasons for a general decline in voter turnout, it should not be overemphasized. The eighteen- through twenty-year-old group is a small minority of the total electorate, and even if they had not been eligible to vote in 1976, voting turnout would only have increased by about 1 percent.

Conclusions

In sum, we suggest that the decline in voter participation has come in two waves. Between 1930 and 1950 there was a significant shift away from a perceived dependence on the federal government. In part, this was due to changes in relative spending patterns at the two levels of government. At the same time, developments in the mass media shifted the American citizen's interest away from the local news in his local newspaper to national events on nationwide television. The second wave in declining voter participation came in the 1960s with the national increase in political apathy and distrust, much of it due, no doubt, to Vietnam and Watergate. Further changes in national law brought into the potential electorate persons who were not likely to vote. If we are correct, the reason that only one in three potential voters cares to participate has little to do with the performance of urban governments. Forces beyond municipal government changed the political environment and made the decline inevitable.

ILLINOIS GOVERNMENT RESEARCH ISSUES STILL AVAILABLE

The following *Illinois Government Research* newsletters are still in print and are available from the Institute of Government and Public Affairs.

- No. 1 "Legislative Hearings on County Problems," January 1959
- No. 2 "Legislative Study of Urban Affairs," April 1959
- No. 3 "Lake Michigan Water Diversion," June 1959
- No. 4 "The 1958 County Elections," September 1959
- No. 5 "First Manager, First Month: An Illinois City's Experience," November 1959
- No. 7 "The Employment Systems of the State of Illinois," May 1960
- No. 9 "The 1960 County Primaries," January 1961
- No. 10 "The Illinois Congressional Representatives and Agricultural Legislation, 1954-59," June 1961
- No. 11 "Administrative Reorganization in Chicago," September 1961

Table 4

**PERCENT OF ILLINOIS VOTER TURNOUT
FOR SELECTED PRESIDENTIAL, CONGRESSIONAL,
AND MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS**

	Mid- [*] 1930s	Early [*] 1960s	Decline from mid-1930s to early 1960s	Mid- [*] 1970	Decline from mid-1960s to mid-1970
Presidential	82	77	5	64	13
Congressional	60	59	1	40	19
Municipal	59	42	17	27	15

* Specific dates for presidential elections were 1936, 1960, 1970; for congressional elections, 1934, 1962, 1974, for municipal elections, 1935, 1961, 1975.

Table 5

**RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS CONCERNING
CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT***

	Percentage agreeing with statement	
	1964	1975
Government is for the benefit of a few	30	67
You cannot trust the government to do the right thing	22	66
There are a lot of crooks in government	30	57

* Percentages are based on nationwide surveys conducted by the University of Michigan Inter-University Consortium for Political Research.

increasingly disgusted with and alienated from governments and politicians. Public opinion polls have amply demonstrated this change in attitude. Table 5 presents responses of a national sample to statements designed to measure confidence in government.³ Seldom are changes of this order of magnitude found in public opinion. In one decade those showing a lack of confidence in government have increased their numbers from a rather small minority to a rather substantial majority. Research suggests that evaluations of the political system are associated with low levels of participation.⁴ It seems fair to assume, then, that the recent decline in municipal voting has little to do with the actions of city government. Unfortunately, we do not have public opinion data for the 1930s, and therefore a totally adequate explanation may never be possible.

GOVERNMENT SPENDING PATTERNS

Generalized disgust, however, cannot wholly account

³ Figures were taken from Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 278. It might be argued that Illinois is different from the remainder of the nation but the evidence would seem to support the conclusion that Illinois is very similar to the United States as a whole. See James Przybylski, "As Goes Illinois . . . The State as a Political Microcosm of the Nation," *Illinois Government Research*, no. 43, August 1976.

⁴ Lester Milbrath and M. L. Goel, *Political Participation* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1977), p. 64.

Table 6

**LOCAL AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTAL
EXPENDITURES, 1932-70**

	1922	1932	1940	1950	1960	1970	1975
Local	4,567*	6,375	7,685	17,041	39,056	92,522	162,320
Federal	3,289	4,659	9,055	39,544	92,223	196,589	340,732
Ratio of local to federal expenditure	1.39	1.37	.84	.43	.42	.47	.48

* Figures are millions of dollars spent.

for the decreased voter turnout at the municipal level. A further reason may be found in governmental spending patterns. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, there was a virtual revolution in the relationship between local government and the federal government. Table 6 reveals the changes that took place. In 1922 and 1932 the ratio of local to federal expenditures was 1.39 and 1.37. By 1940, the ratio had dropped to .84, and in 1950 it had fallen to .43. Since 1950, the ratio has remained virtually stable although local governments have been slowly increasing their share of governmental spending. The reversal in ratios came about, of course, because the federal government became much more deeply involved in the social welfare needs of the American people and because the United States assumed a position as the dominant world power. Although local governments may have been just as active as in prior years, the federal government had become the dominant actor. By the 1960s the urban voter may have simply perceived voting in local elections as relatively less important than in earlier years. The national government had taken center stage and it was natural that more attention would be focused upon it to the detriment of lower levels of government.

ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

However, the shift in emphasis might not have occurred even in the face of changing spending patterns if it had not been for a coincident change in the mass media. In the early 1930s, newspapers had no formal competitor, and more often than not newspapers were specific to the community. Since the 1930s, the number of newspapers, particularly weekly papers, has decreased. Regional newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* have become relatively more important, and by their very nature regional newspapers do not concentrate on the local politics of other than the core city.

More important, though, has been the growth of television.⁵ Public opinion surveys have consistently

⁵ It would be difficult to argue that radio has filled the gap. In the University of Michigan studies less than 1 in 20 persons said that radio was their most important source of political information.

remain even when other characteristics such as region and socioeconomic status are controlled. In the 1975 survey, the national average turnout for nonpartisan cities was 29 percent and for the partisan cities 37 percent. The manager cities had an average of 26 percent, the commission cities 33 percent, and the mayoral cities 39 percent. The commonly accepted explanation for these differences is that reform characteristics (nonpartisan elections and the manager form of government) tend to reduce political competition by at least making it more difficult for political parties to compete and by reducing the sphere of politics through the introduction of a professional manager. Regardless of the explanation's substance, voting turnout does vary with the characteristics.

In Illinois a substantial number of cities have adopted reform characteristics since the 1930s. Sixty-five percent had the mayoral form in 1935, while today less than 40 percent use this method of city government. There has also been a 16 percent decline in the number of commission cities. In 1935 only one of the municipalities studied here had a city manager. Today, fourteen of the thirty-one for which we have comparable data have adopted the manager plan. The number of cities with partisan elections has also decreased from 39 to 19 percent.

If structural changes have led to a diminution of voter turnout, we would expect to find that the relationships between structure and turnout discussed above were valid in the 1930s, and, moreover, ought to be present in the current decade. Table 3 shows that the presence or absence of national party designations on the municipal ballot was not and is not related to voter turnout in Illinois. Of course, political parties can be active in nonpartisan cities and inactive in partisan. Unfortunately, we have no way of determining the extent of party activity during the 1930s, and therefore all we can conclude is that formal designation is of no discernible import as

far as turnout is concerned and the increasing number of nonpartisan cities is not a likely cause of decreased turnout.

Nor do we find strong evidence that the increased number of manager cities is related to the fall in voting averages. Because only one city used a manager in 1935, it is impossible to determine the impact of this characteristic during the 1930s. For the 1970s, Table 3 reveals that in the matched cities those with managers do have the lowest turnout; but the difference is not large, and if all fifty-five cities are included there is no difference between manager and mayoral cities. Interestingly, the commission cities had the highest turnout in both periods. Although only five cities switched from the commission to another type of city government, the change may have contributed, at least in part, to the overall decrease in participation rates.

SUBURBANIZATION

The tremendous growth of suburban cities during the past forty years may be another explanation for declining voter participation. Because a large percentage of a suburban city's population leaves the city during the work day, citizens may not be as concerned with local government policy as if they both lived and worked in the municipality. Further, suburbs are frequently very homogeneous and social and economic homogeneity are not particularly conducive to political conflict. If increased suburbanization were responsible for the decline in voting participation, one would certainly expect suburban cities to have lower participation rates than the non-suburban. But, since suburbs have turnout rates very similar to nonsuburbs, it is not possible to attribute the decline to this suburbanization process.

The decline in municipal electoral participation may, of course, have little relationship to any characteristic or policy of city government but may be part of a more general trend in voting averages. If the belief is widespread that voting is unimportant, one should find a decline in participation at all levels of government. To test this hypothesis, presidential and off-year congressional election turnout figures are presented for the years roughly analogous to the municipal elections cited in this paper (see Table 4). The table reveals that between the 1930s and 1960s there was a sharp drop in municipal turnout, while there was only a slight drop for the presidential and congressional elections. However, between the early 1960s and the middle 1970s, the decline for all three types of elections was fairly great and highly similar — 13, 19, and 15 percent. Thus, in the latter period municipal participation rates seem to be following a national pattern, a trend which is not present in the earlier period.

GENERAL APATHY

One plausible explanation for the recent generalized decline in voter participation is that Americans are

Table 3

VOTING TURNOUT BY GOVERNMENTAL AND ELECTORAL CHARACTERISTICS, 1935-75

	1935 percent	Matched percent* 1975	All cities 1975
<i>Government Form</i>			
Mayor-Council	56	30	26
Manager-Council	40	24	26
Commission	61	41	41
<i>Election Type</i>			
Partisan	59	31	24
Nonpartisan	58	29	28
N =	(31)	(31)	(55)

* Only cities for which we have data in both time periods are included in this column.

- No. 12 "Tenure and Turnover in Illinois City Managers," October 1961
- No. 14 "Some Budgetary Aspects of the Illinois Fiscal Crisis," August 1962
- No. 17 "Political Representation and Interstate Urban Agencies," June 1963
- No. 18 "Legislative Power Blocs," October 1963
- No. 19 "Illinois Votes 1960-62," March 1964
- No. 20 "Illinois Assembly on Political Representation," June 1964
- No. 21 "Illinois Congressional Delegation," August 1964
- No. 22 "Estimated Burden of State and Local Taxes in Illinois," October 1964
- No. 23 "The Politics of Selection: Township Supervisors in Two Illinois Counties," March 1965
- No. 24 "Illinois Party Platforms: An Analysis," October 1966
- No. 25 "Effects of Budgeting by Local Governments in Illinois," January 1967
- No. 26 "The 1966 County Primaries," March 1967
- No. 27 "Constitutional Amendments and the Voter, 1952-66," July 1967
- No. 28 "The Education of Illinois State Officials," September 1967
- No. 29 "Local Government Indebtedness," November 1967
- No. 30 "The 1966 County Elections," April 1968
- No. 31 "Public Attitudes on the Kerner Commission Findings: The Case of Illinois," March 1969
- No. 32 "Twentieth Century Voting Patterns for President in Illinois," January 1970
- No. 33 "The Model Cities Program in East St. Louis, Illinois: The Planning Experience," July 1970
- No. 34 "Analysis of the Vote at the Election for the 1970 Illinois Constitution," February 1971
- No. 35 "Intergovernmental Revenues and Illinois State Finance, 1965-72," July 1972
- No. 36 "Federal Funds and Illinois State Finance, 1958-72," February 1973
- No. 37 "Federal Grants and Local Governments in Illinois, 1965-71," September 1973
- No. 38 "The Department of Local Government Affairs, 1968-72," January 1975
- No. 39 "The Smaller Metropolitan Areas of Illinois Revisited," April 1975
- No. 40 "Home Rule Use by Illinois Municipalities: The First Three Years," June 1975
- No. 41 "Illinois Energy Problems: A National Perspective," December 1975
- No. 42 "Illinois and the United States: Some Economic Parallels," March 1976
- No. 43 "As Goes Illinois . . . The State as a Political Microcosm of the Nation," August 1976
- No. 44 "Variations in Expenditure Levels by Illinois Local Governments, 1942-72," May 1977
- No. 45 "Case Load Pressure and Felony Trial Courts: Cook County," September 1977
- No. 46 "Local Roads and Bridges in Illinois: Problems and Alternatives," January 1978



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