



POLITICS

## Another town poised to join others moving local elections to November

Nonpartisan spring races dwindle as towns seek to boost turnout, cut election costs

BY: NIKITA BIRYUKOV - AUGUST 11, 2021 7:00 AM



Gov. Phil Murphy and all 120 legislative seats are on the November ballot as well. (Photo by David Dee Delgado/Getty Images)

When a 2011 law went into effect allowing certain New Jersey towns to move their May local elections to November, 86 municipalities held their nonpartisan races in the spring.

That number has fallen to just 41, and the outlook for May races has improved little in recent years. Jersey City voters moved their elections to November after a 2016 vote, Newton voters followed suit in 2018, and Ridgewood voters did the same last year.

Now, organizers in Teaneck appear to have succeeded in getting a question on November's ballot asking voters to move the township's local races to the fall.

The shift away from off-cycle local elections has largely been defined as an effort to boost voter interest in races that often see turnout that is far lower than in June primaries and November general elections.

"You definitely gain a larger electorate because more voters are going to show up when the governor's at the top of the ticket than when town council's at the top of the ticket," said Micah Rasmussen, director of Rider University's Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics.

The gap between turnout levels can be chasmic. Only 1,932 voters in Ridgefield Park's cast ballots in the village's May 2020 local elections. That's less than a third of the 6,302 ballots cast in that year's November election.

Though the jump in turnout isn't always so large, its existence is near universal. Just 1,020 Bordentown voters turned out in the city's May 2017 commission elections, compared to the 1,403 that voted in that year's general election. The difference in turnout accounts for roughly 13% of the city's registered voters.

Organizers behind the push to move Teaneck's local races are hoping the referendum will lead to a similar turnout bump there.

"People are programmed around that Election Day is in the beginning of November," said former Teaneck Councilman Alan Sohn. "People are not programmed to realize that there are elections in May. It's harder to take off. Businesses don't give off or have vacation. Schools don't have vacation. It's harder for child care purposes, and turnout is significantly lower in May versus November."

Turnout in Jersey City's November 2017 election increased by nearly 17% over its May 2013 race, a difference of more than 6,000 votes. Raw turnout – the percentage of registered voters who came out to vote – rose by 5%, from about 28% to roughly 33%.

### Extra costs for taxpayers

Cost is another factor cited by supporters of shifting election dates. While there is some cost-sharing with state and county governments for May elections, municipalities pay the lion's share of expenses that typically run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Teaneck organizers estimate moving local elections could save the township as much as \$50,000 every two years, but that number is higher elsewhere.

In Trenton, where the City Council moved local races to November last year, the cost of May elections was estimated to be as high as \$181,000. But there are also some expenses involved in the shift.

"There will be added costs because, I think, the government is going to have to issue notices that the election is changing," Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora said.

He added the city would likely have to foot the bill for a December runoff election in case no candidate won a majority during the nonpartisan November vote, though that's nothing new. Trenton already paid for runoff elections held in June before.

A new development makes November elections more attractive: In-person voting will be available starting this fall. The bill Gov. Phil Murphy signed into law earlier this year provides up to nine days of early voting before a general election, but made no similar accommodations for May races.

### Rising partisanship

Though turnout and cost pose barriers to holding local elections in the spring, the off-cycle contests also align with a core tenet of the state's 1947 constitution.

New Jersey runs legislative and gubernatorial elections in odd years to minimize the impact of national issues on state elections. The principle extends to the few remaining May races, which largely focus on local issues and are often free of the partisan bickering that defines many November races.

There's a worry among some that moving local races to coincide with ones for higher office could harden partisanship at a local level and move campaigns away from municipal issues.

"In a lot of towns I've worked in with May elections, including my own, there's legitimate antipathy to bringing those types of things in, and a lot of the resistance that I've seen when people try to move these to November has been the argument that it will lose the uniquely local feel that people like in those elections," said Mickey Quinn, a Democratic strategist involved in every competitive legislative race.

Some towns have indeed opposed moving their elections. Officials in Bordentown, where Quinn resides, voted to move their election to November in 2016, but the ordinance was vacated after facing opposition from residents who wanted to keep the city's elections focused on local issues.

"That was it, there was no appetite," Quinn said.

The mechanics of how election dates get changed are also a factor in these decisions.

Gusciora supported a referendum to move Trenton's elections to November that also would have allowed residents to choose whether elections in the capital became partisan, but he balked when the council nixed the ballot question and moved the election on their own, later overriding the mayor's veto.

"They decided to forgo the original ordinance and do the switcheroo and move the election to November, and that also gave them – without voter approval – a six-month extension on their term," he said. "I thought that was inappropriate."

Governing bodies have attempted to move their elections in the other direction to avoid being dragged down by national politics.

Fearing the effect Donald Trump would have on their races, Republican officials in Mount Laurel in 2019 approved a referendum to move local elections to May and make them nonpartisan.

That effort was stymied by a bill sponsored by Assemblywoman Carol Murphy (D-Burlington), a Mount Laurel resident, which required a supermajority vote to introduce such a referendum and raised the number of petition signatures needed to place such questions on the ballot.

Moves in the other direction have also been blocked by local elected officials. Medford Lakes' borough council last year shot down an ordinance to shift its local races to November despite voter support for a nonbinding resolution calling for them to do just that.

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**NIKITA BIRYUKOV**  

Nikita Biryukov most recently covered state government and politics for the New Jersey Globe. His tenure there included revelatory stories on marijuana legalization, voting reform and Rep. Jeff Van Drew's decamp to the Republican Party. Earlier, he worked as a freelancer for The Home News Tribune and The Press of Atlantic City.

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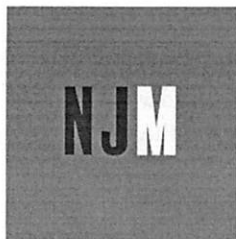


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