



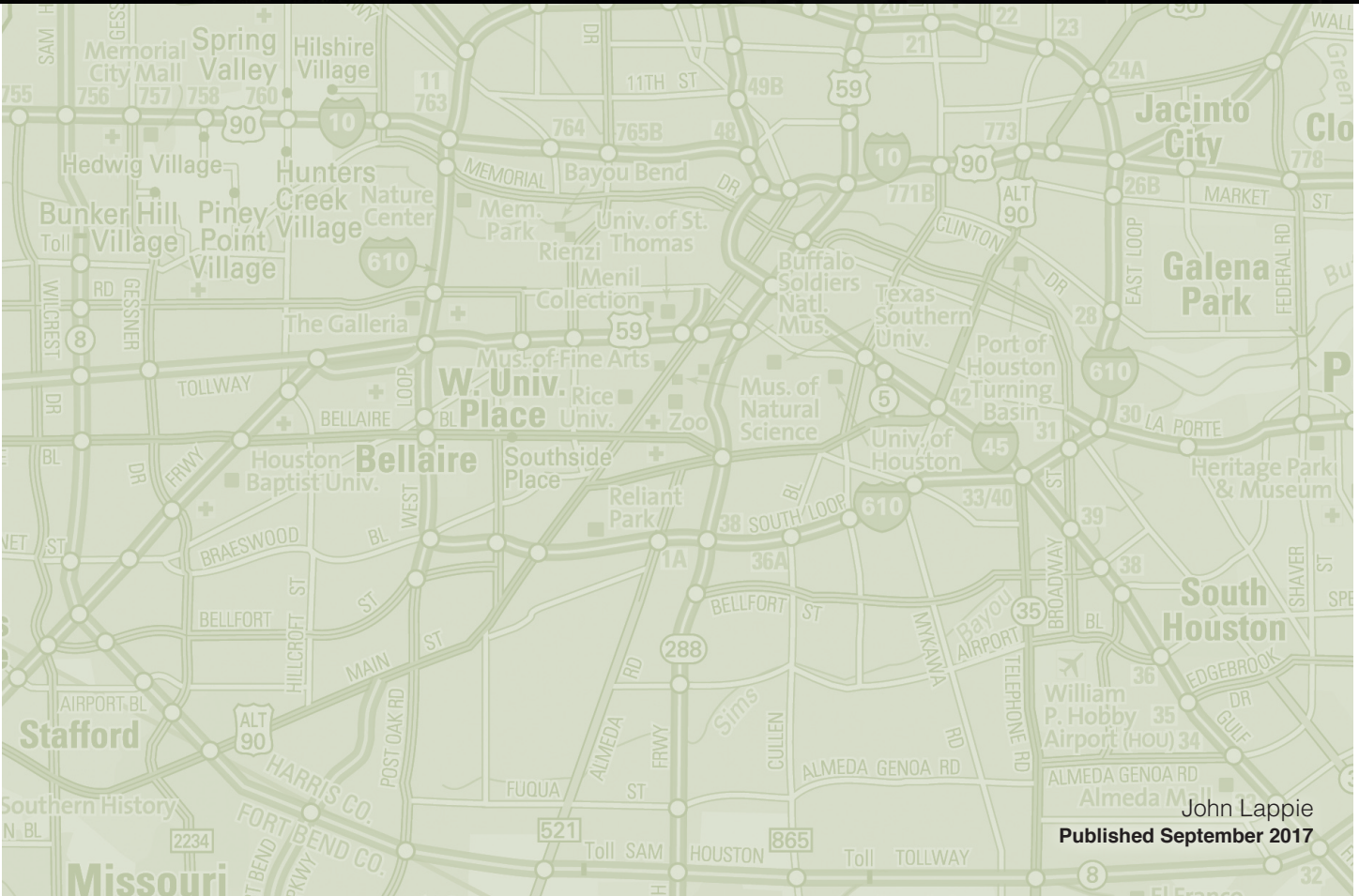
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**LEAP**



# The State of Local Democracy in Houston and Harris County



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# About the Center for Local Elections in American Politics

The Center for Local Elections in American Politics (LEAP) is developing pathbreaking solutions to the problem of collecting, digitizing and disseminating data on local elections. More information is available at [www.leap-elections.org](http://www.leap-elections.org).

The United States is viewed as an archetype of democracy, yet fundamental questions about the nature of our government and its electoral processes and outcomes are often difficult to answer because of a simple problem: a lack of data. Because elections are decentralized in this country, basic information about local contests is difficult to access. To date, there has been no comprehensive source of data on U.S. local elections. The situation has vexed political scientists, journalists and other researchers for decades. As a result, much of what we think we know about local government, particularly trends over time, is based on anecdotes and generalizations — not empirical evidence.

We're helping to change that. With a grant from the National Science Foundation in 2010, principal investigators Melissa Marschall and Paru Shah launched LEAP. Since then, LEAP has developed the most comprehensive database of local election results in existence. In 2015, the Knight Foundation provided funding to turn LEAP into the Center for Local Elections in American Politics within Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

LEAP developed a suite of software application tools to systematically collect, digitize and disseminate data on elections across the U.S. LEAP's innovation was in creating a digital archive of past election results, as well as automating data collection for current and future elections.

At present, the database contains results from 22 states that, in some cases, date as far back as the 1980s. The database contains the names of local candidates, their party affiliations, the number of votes they received, how those votes were cast (e.g., in person, by absentee ballot or by early voting) and whether they ran at-large or by district (and the district name or number). Other fields include government level (county, municipal, school district or special district), office type (executive, legislative, judicial/law enforcement, other) and election type (primary, general, runoff, special or initiative/referendum). In addition, each candidate record is geocoded, making connectivity to other data seamless. We have records of hundreds of thousands of candidates who've run for office in the U.S.

The database is dynamic and continues to be updated as new elections come online, which is a truly pathbreaking feature. And, while we continue to add new election results, we also are expanding data collection to other states and developing new technology that will not only make it possible to expedite the collection of data that's ordinarily difficult to access, but will also allow us to enhance our data by adding new fields that measure other candidate, election and campaign features.

Finally, we are working with the Kinder Institute and a large network of stakeholders to make the database and LEAP sustainable so that it can continue to provide data, research and information to scholars, practitioners and policymakers long into the future. By creating a database that updates automatically — and constantly — we are able to ensure we have the most current information available to help researchers, journalists and others effectively study government. While the presidential politics continue to generate headlines, the heart of democracy is at the local level. We believe LEAP's database will allow us to better understand the process and outcomes of these elections.



Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research is a “think and do” tank that advances understanding of the challenges facing Houston and other urban centers through research, policy analysis and public outreach. By collaborating with civic and political leaders, the Kinder Institute aims to help Houston and other cities. For more, visit [www.kinder.rice.edu](http://www.kinder.rice.edu).

## Future Reports

The “The State of Local Democracy in Houston and Harris County” study is similar to several reports published on municipal elections between 2015–2017 by the Kinder Institute for Urban Research's Center for Local Elections in American Politics. Reports on California, Kentucky, Indiana and national mayoral elections have already been published and are available at [www.kinder.rice.edu/reports](http://www.kinder.rice.edu/reports). Forthcoming reports examine trends in municipal contests in Minnesota and Louisiana.

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# 1. Executive Summary

The governments of Harris County and the City of Houston have many vital powers, but relatively little is known about the nature of local elections in either jurisdiction. This study attempts to fill this gap by examining the nature of participation, looking at both voters and candidates, in Harris County and Houston local elections. The results indicate that local democracies in Harris County and Houston have many challenges. Relatively few people vote in local elections, a high proportion of local elections are uncontested and both the electorate and the candidate pool fail to reflect the area's population.

## Methodology

This study examines turnout, contestation, the incumbency advantage and the presence and election of women and Hispanic candidates to local office in Harris County and Houston. Specifically, it examines elections for mayor of Houston, Houston City Council, Harris County Commissioners Court (including the county judge<sup>1</sup>) and Harris County sheriff. The bulk of the data for this report comes from the Harris County Clerk's office. Information on turnout in Houston city elections, and incumbency for Houston City Council, comes from the Houston City Secretary's office. Other data sources are mentioned where applicable. The data covers 2004 through 2016.

## Findings

- Only one incumbent county commissioner, including county judge, was defeated for re-election over this time period. The incumbent that lost was the first commissioner to lose re-election in 36 years. Gerrymandering seems to be the most likely explanation for the dominance of incumbents.
- Hispanics are underrepresented both in the electorate and in the candidate pool. The average county- or city-level contest in Houston does not feature any Hispanic candidates.
- Turnout in mayoral elections in Houston is particularly low. Typically only about 10–15 percent of the citizen voting-age population casts a ballot.
- A little under a third of city council district elections in Houston are unopposed and about 40 percent of county commissioner elections are unopposed.
- Several policy interventions could address these issues if pursued. Moving city elections on-cycle would likely lead to higher rates of voter participation, meaning that the mayor and council would be chosen by a more representative portion of Houston's population.
- Similarly, redrawing the county commissioners court district boundaries to create more competitive districts would likely lead to fewer uncontested elections and a lower incumbent re-election rate.

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<sup>1</sup>Despite the title, the county judge is not actually a judge; current County Judge Ed Emmett does not even have a legal background. Rather, the county judge is a member of the commissioners court, distinguished by being elected countywide and having the power to chair meetings of the commission. Similarly, the Harris County Commissioners Court is not a judicial body.

## 2. Introduction

Local politics remains understudied by political scientists but the research by scholars that do work in this area is critical in assessing the health of democracy at the local level. Existing research shows that the vast majority of citizens simply do not vote in local elections. This low turnout partially accounts for another trend in local politics: the underrepresentation of minorities and women in local elective office. Additionally, recent studies have indicated that a high proportion of local elections, up to two-thirds in some states, are unopposed.<sup>2</sup> These trends are present in Houston and Harris County elections. This study analyzes turnout, contestation, incumbency, and the election of women and Hispanics to local office in Houston and Harris County elections for mayor, city council, sheriff and county commissioner.

Municipal and county governments in the United States, especially ones as large as Houston and Harris County, possess many vital powers. The decisions made in City Hall, and by the commissioners court, can have a much greater impact on the daily life of the average citizen than the decisions made in Austin or Washington D.C. And yet, between 80 to 90 percent of voting-age citizen Houstonians choose not to vote in mayoral elections, and even fewer actually cast votes for the city council. About two-fifths of county commission elections go uncontested. And despite being one of the most diverse places in the United States, relatively few local offices are won by Hispanics or by women.

## 3. Voter Participation in Houston and Harris County Elections

Turnout for presidential elections in the United States is typically around 60 percent, dropping to about 30 or 40 percent in midterm years. Turnout in local elections across the country is significantly lower.<sup>3</sup> A study of mayoral elections across 144 large cities in the U.S. found that the average turnout rate in these cities was about 25 percent, meaning less than a quarter of the population actually votes in many large cities.<sup>4</sup> Low turnout rates reflect a lack of public interest in local politics and threaten the principles of democratic accountability. Houston is not the only city to struggle with this challenge, but its problems are significant.

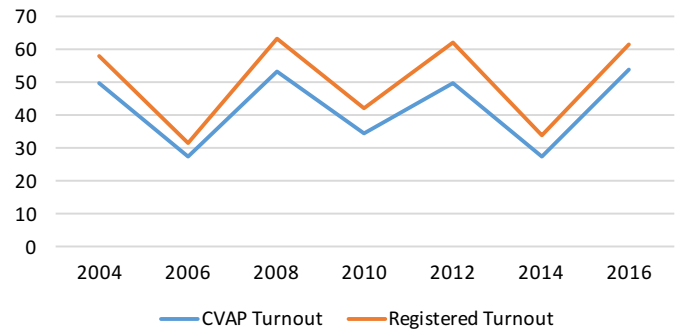


Figure 1. Turnout by Year, Even-Year General Elections

Figure 1 shows voter turnout in Harris County as a whole in even-year general elections (i.e. presidential and gubernatorial elections in November). Voter turnout is measured in two ways. The first, shown with the orange line, is by the percentage of registered voters who actually turned out to vote on Election Day as reported by the Harris County Clerk's office. However, this measure does not incorporate the estimated 19 percent of voting-age citizens who are not registered to vote.<sup>5</sup> They are incorporated in the second measure, indicated by the blue line, which is the percentage of the citizen voting-age population (CVAP) who turned out to vote.<sup>6</sup> Voter turnout, as measured by percentage of registered Harris County residents, is relatively healthy in even-year general elections. However, when calculating turnout for the CVAP, turnout only rises above 50 percent twice in this period: 2008 and 2016. Only about a quarter of Harris County citizens vote in gubernatorial years. Many Harris County residents who could register to vote have chosen not to do so.

Voter turnout tends to be driven by the election type. Elections that coincide with presidential elections tend to draw the most voters to the polls, while midterm races for senator or governor also provide larger draws than local races alone. There are undoubtedly many Houstonians who do not know who fills the county judge or commissioners court seats. When voters are asked to make decisions about offices and candidates they know nothing about, they tend to leave those offices blank.<sup>7</sup> This is called undervoting, capturing the proportion of people who voted in an election but deliberately chose not to mark the ballot for a particular contest. For down-ballot contests, like those

<sup>2</sup>Marschall, Lappie and Williams (2016), "Who Runs for Mayor in America."

<sup>3</sup>See Hajnal, Z. and Lewis, G. (2003), "Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections," *Urban Affairs Review*, 38(5), p. 646–668.

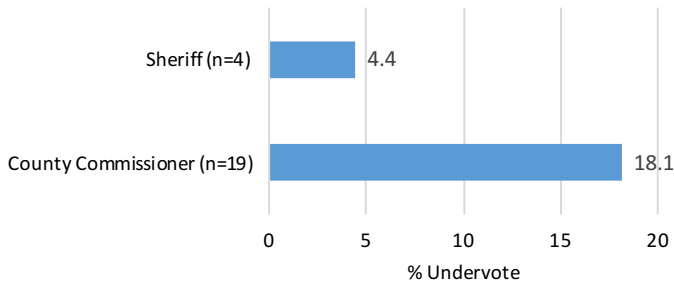
<sup>4</sup>Holbrook, T. and Weinschenck, A. (2013), *Political Research Quarterly*, 20(1), p. 1–14.

<sup>5</sup>This figure is calculated by taking the number of registered Harris County voters, as reported by the Texas secretary of state for the year 2010, and dividing it by Harris County's CVAP that year, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. The actual rate of nonregistration may be higher, depending on how accurate Harris County's voter registration rolls are. According to a 2012 PEW study, about one in eight voter registrations in the U.S. are invalid, usually because the registrant is deceased, has moved to a different jurisdiction or has had their voting rights suspended due to criminal conviction.

<sup>6</sup>Citizen voting-age population data comes from the various five-year American Community Surveys of the U.S. Census Bureau. These surveys do have a margin of error of about 5,000–7,000 people, which is more than acceptable in a place as populous as Harris County. The values of the survey are applied to the midpoint year; so the 2008–2012 ACS data is used to calculate CVAP for 2010. The oldest available CVAP data is the 2005–2009 ACS, so that data is used for 2006 and 2004. The newest available ACS is the 2011–2015; that data is used for 2014 and 2016.

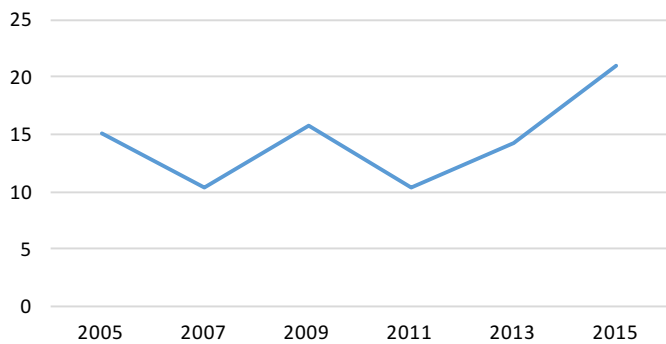
<sup>7</sup>Wattnberg, McAllister and Salvanto (2000), "How Voting Is Like Taking an SAT Test: An Analysis of American Voter Rolloff," 28(2), p. 234–250.

for county commissioner or sheriff, this may be a more appropriate measure of participation than overall turnout.



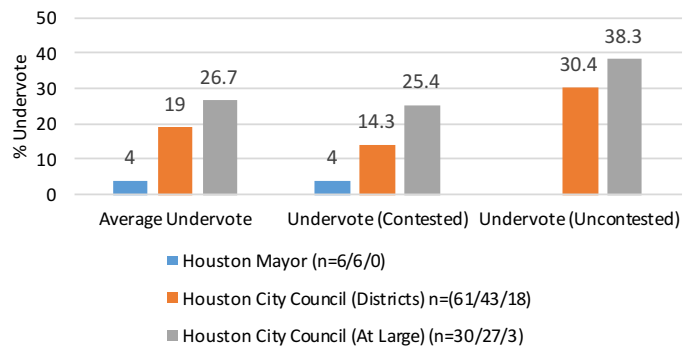
**Figure 2. Undervoting in County Elections (General Only)**  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

Notably, undervoting is much higher in county commissioner elections — about 18 percent — than in elections for the sheriff in Harris County — 4.4 percent. This suggests that Harris County voters are more familiar with the office of sheriff than they are with the commissioners court. It should be noted that though, on average, 82 percent of Harris County voters do mark the ballot in county commissioner elections, this does not necessarily reflect great familiarity with the candidates. Indeed, they may not even be aware that the county commissioner is on the ballot. County commissioner is a partisan office and if voters pull the party lever, they can automatically cast their votes for every member of that party on the ballot. In November 2016, two-thirds of Harris County voters voted straight-ticket in this manner. The Texas legislature recently voted to abolish the party lever, a change that takes effect in 2020. The potential impact of eliminating the party lever is discussed in the appendix.



**Figure 3. Turnout in Houston Municipal, by CVAP**  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

Figure 3 represents the proportion of voting-age citizens<sup>8</sup> in Houston who voted for mayor in both the general and runoff elections from 2005 to 2015.<sup>9</sup> From 2005 to 2013, turnout in mayoral elections fluctuated between 10 to 15 percent of voting-age citizens, only rising above 20 percent in November 2015.<sup>10</sup> This is lower than the average for major U.S. cities, which is closer to 25 percent. This may be a result of Houston elections being off-cycle, or held on odd-numbered years. A report by Rice University’s Center for Local Elections in American Politics (LEAP) on mayoral elections in California, for instance, shows that the average turnout rate in off-cycle mayoral elections in that state is 17.5 percent, as measured by voting age population. We also need to consider that the overall turnout rate in Houston city elections may not be the best measure of participation for every city office. Voters may be most familiar with and concerned about the mayoral election, and know less about the candidates for city council, leading to undervoting. Unlike county elections, municipal elections in Houston are nonpartisan. Candidates are not nominated by political parties and no party label appears on the ballot. In short, there is no party lever available to keep undervoting down for these offices.



**Figure 4. Average Undervote in Municipal Elections (November Only)**  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

<sup>8</sup>Citizen voting-age population is calculated by the five-year American Community Survey, part of the U.S. Census Bureau. CVAP is calculated from the five-year survey with that particular year as the midpoint. For example, data from 2010 is calculated from the 2008–2012 ACS. It should be noted that the ACS is a survey rather than a full count of citizens, and therefore has a margin of error. However, the margin of error in (for example) [x] in 2010 is +/- 6,252; a miniscule number given Houston’s population of 2.1 million that year.

<sup>9</sup>It is unwise to use registered voter data when calculating Houston turnout. Harris County reports registered voter turnout across the entire county; if there happens to be a county-wide referendum at the same time as the Houston elections, then non-Houston Harris County nonvoters are counted against the turnout rate. Furthermore, Harris County does not report the results for the portions of Houston located outside of Harris County.

<sup>10</sup>The source for ballots cast in the 2005–2013 elections is the Houston city secretary, who reports results for all three counties that Houston is part of (Harris county only reports results for the Harris County portion of Houston). In total ballots cast in Houston in 2005 is miscalculated on the city secretary’s website; votes cast for mayor were used instead.

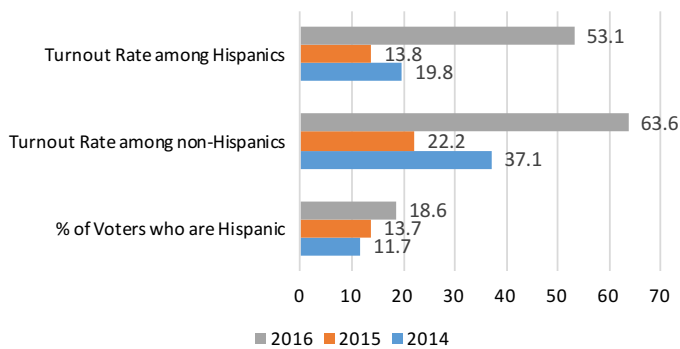
Figure 4 shows the rate of undervoting for mayors and city council members. Council members are broken down by their method of election: districts and at-large (i.e. citywide). The overall rate of undervoting is reported for each office, as well as the rate in contested and uncontested elections, respectively. The Figure 4 results do not include runoff elections, and only incorporate data from the Harris County portion of Houston. The rate of undervoting is particularly pronounced in council elections; about one in five for district-based council seats, and about one in four for at-large council seats. The proportion is considerably higher for both types of city council elections when the election is uncontested; 30 percent and 38 percent, respectively. If the proportion of Houstonians electing the mayor is low, the portion electing the city council is even lower. Among council seats, district-based seats have a lower rate of undervoting than the at-large seats. Unsurprisingly, candidates in district elections appear to be more familiar to their electorate than candidates in at-large elections. Candidates running in a given district must live in the district they are running for and they can concentrate their campaign resources on only a small section of the city. The opposite is true in at-large elections; most voters are not from the same area of town as the candidates and the resources of the campaigns are dispersed across the whole city, diluting their impact.

election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, Hispanics were a lower percentage of voters — about 19 percent — than their share of the citizen voting-age population. Overall, Hispanic voter turnout is far lower than the rate among non-Hispanics in each of these three years. The electorate, then, does not reflect the population of Houston and Harris County. The most recent presidential election affected, but did not eliminate, this discrepancy. It is unclear from this data whether that is the rule with presidential elections, or if the particular rhetoric and platforms of the 2016 campaign brought more Hispanics than usual to the polls. Whatever the case, this mismatch between the electorate and the citizen population’s demographics likely has profound effects on the sort of candidates who run for, and win, office in Houston.

## 4. Diversity

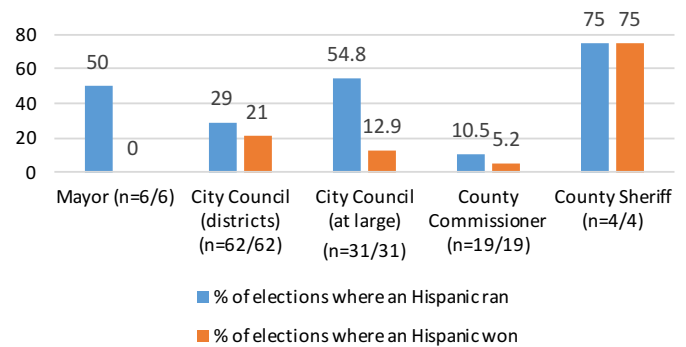
Houston is a majority-minority city, with the nation’s second-largest population of Hispanics. Harris County is also a majority-minority county. Ideally, the diversity of the area’s population would be reflected in its candidate pool and in elected officials; however, this is often not the reality. As Figure 5 shows, Hispanics are underrepresented in the Harris County electorate. A common feature among potential candidates for public office is that they fear defeat; potential Hispanic candidates may be unwilling to run for office if they know that turnout among Hispanic voters is low.

This section focuses on the proportion of contests featuring any Hispanic candidate and the proportion of contests won<sup>13</sup> by a Hispanic candidate. Hispanic candidates are examined because Hispanics are the largest racial/ethnic



**Figure 5.** Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Voter Participation  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

Figure 5 shows both Hispanic and non-Hispanic participation in the November elections in 2014, 2015 and 2016.<sup>11</sup> While about 42 percent of residents in Harris County, and 44 percent in Houston, are Hispanic,<sup>12</sup> the percentage of voters who are Hispanic is far lower. Even in 2016, with Hispanic turnout boosted by the presidential



**Figure 6.** Hispanic Candidacy and Victory, by Office Type  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

<sup>11</sup>Compiled from data sent by the Harris County Clerk’s office. The clerk’s office identifies Hispanic voters and registrants based on a list of 12,000 Hispanic surnames compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau. There will therefore be some rate of error, as some Hispanics have nonindicative last names (for example, former Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico, or a spouse who has taken a partner’s non-Hispanic surname).

<sup>12</sup>Per the 2011–2015 American Community Survey, a product of the U.S. Census Bureau.

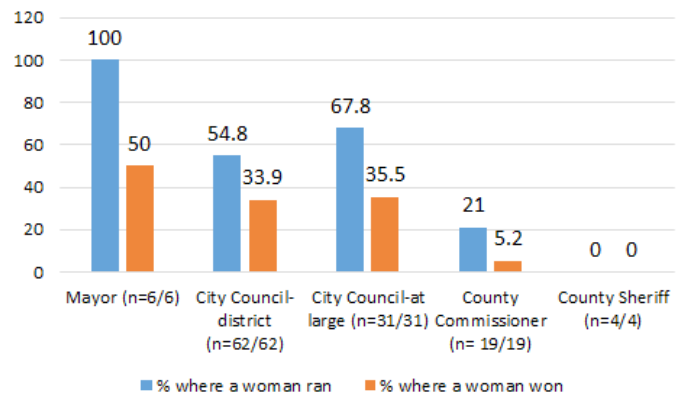
<sup>13</sup>For municipal elections: The first round is examined when determining whether or not a Hispanic ran. When determining whether or not a Hispanic won the runoff is examined if there was one, and the first (and only) round if there was no runoff.

group in Houston and Harris County, and because Hispanic candidates can be, with relatively little error, identified based upon their surnames.<sup>14</sup> This is not the proportion of candidates who are Hispanic, which this study does not examine, merely the proportion of contests that have at least one Hispanic candidate. This is a minimal measure of demographic representation in the candidate pool, but one that Harris County and Houston elections routinely fail to meet.

Figure 6 shows the proportion of elections for each office type that feature any Hispanic candidate, and the proportion of elections actually won by a Hispanic candidate. There is a profound disconnect between Hispanic population and Hispanic candidacy. Despite forming nearly half of the city's population, only 29 percent of district-based city council elections featured any Hispanic candidate. At-large elections have also been found to harm minority representation on city councils,<sup>15</sup> and the results here seem to bear that out. While over half of at-large council elections feature at least one Hispanic candidate, Hispanics only win about 13 percent of at-large council elections, compared to 21 percent of district seats. Currently, non-Hispanic whites (Anglos) hold a majority of seats on the city council — nine of 16. It is suggestive that this majority rests on the at-large seats; while six of the 11 districts are held by non-white council members, only one of the five at-large seats is held by someone non-white (Amanda Edwards, who is African-American, holds position 4). Overall, Hispanics are underrepresented in Houston's municipal government.

The evidence for county offices is somewhat mixed. Adrian Garcia defeated incumbent Tommy Thomas as Harris County sheriff in 2008, and both Garcia and his successor, Ed Gonzalez, are Hispanic. From 2008 to the present, except for a brief interlude under Ron Hickman, Harris County has had a Hispanic Sheriff. Conversely, the county's legislative branch sees far lower rates of Hispanic candidacy. Only 11 percent — or two of 19 — of commissioner elections (including for county judge) from 2004 to 2016 featured a Hispanic candidate in the general election, and only 5.2 percent — or one of 19 — of these elections were won by a Hispanic candidate: Sylvia Garcia in Precinct 2's 2006 commissioner election. In fact, now-State Senator Garcia is the first, and so far the only, Hispanic and woman to have been elected in their own right<sup>16</sup> to the Harris County Commissioners Court.<sup>17</sup>

While running for office is not an easy task to undertake for anyone, women tend to face more challenges than men when it comes to entering the candidate pool. Women are considerably less likely than men to receive external encouragement to run for office, and are more likely to be decruited; that is, encouraged to drop out of a race they have already entered.<sup>18</sup> External encouragement to run for office may be particularly important for women, since they are substantially less likely than men to believe that they can actually win elective office.<sup>19</sup> This is based on a perception of the electorate as sexist and unwilling to elect a woman. Female candidates certainly have to endure gendered stereotypes and outright misogyny while campaigning, but studies have shown that female candidates tend to do just as well as male candidates, both in terms of vote share and fundraising.<sup>20</sup> The main hindrance to women winning elective office, then, is at the candidate entry stage.



**Figure 7.** Female Candidacy and Victory, by Office Type  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

Houston bears out this finding; although women form about 50 percent of the population, elections without any women are quite common in Harris County and Houston. From 2005 to 2015, there was always a woman on the mayoral ballot, and Annise Parker served three terms as mayor. However, the picture is different for city council elections. Only half of all elections for district-based city council feature a female candidate, and just over a third of all district-based elections were actually won by women. Women perform a little better in the at-large seats; about two-thirds of these elections featured a female candidate,

<sup>14</sup>Candidates are coded as Hispanic if their surname, or their middle name, appears on the 2010 Census' list of Hispanic surnames. The use of middle names helps to capture married Hispanic women who have taken the non-Hispanic surname of their husband. Candidates can also be coded as Hispanic if their first name is common among Hispanics, but uncommon among non-Hispanics (for instance, Jose or Jimena). It should be noted that this coding will not capture Hispanics whose first name, middle name and surname are all nonindicative. For example, former New Mexico Gov. William Blaine Richardson would be missed by this coding.

<sup>15</sup>Trounstein, J. and Valdin, M. (2008), "The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Members Versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity," *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(3), p. 554–569.

<sup>16</sup>As opposed to interim appointments.

<sup>17</sup>Office of Senator Sylvia R. Garcia. <http://www.senate.state.tx.us/member.php?d=6>.

<sup>18</sup>Niven, David (2006), "Throwing Your Hat Out of the Ring: Negative Recruitment and the Gender Imbalance in State Legislative Candidacy," *Politics and Gender*, 2, p. 473–489.

<sup>19</sup>Lawless, Jennifer (2009), "Sexism and Gender Bias in Election 2008: A More Complex Path for Women in Politics," *Politics and Gender*, 5(1), p. 70–80.

<sup>20</sup>Lawless, 2009.



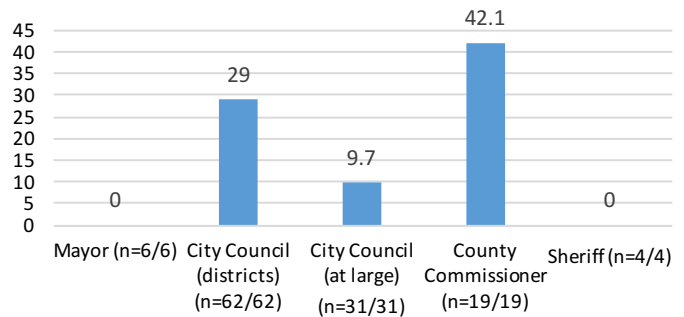
and a little over a third were actually won by a woman.<sup>21</sup> Women who do run for city council seem to be reasonably successful; just over half of all city council elections that do feature a female candidate are actually won by a woman.<sup>22</sup>

Women are considerably less successful, however, in county offices. From 2004 to 2016, not a single woman ran for the office of sheriff in the general election. This does not improve very much if the scope is broadened to include the Republican and Democratic primaries for sheriff over that period; only one woman ran in a primary election for sheriff. The number of elections for sheriff over this period is small, but it is telling that of the 28 Republican and Democratic primary candidates over this period, only one was a woman. This may be because the sheriff is primarily concerned with law enforcement, an area stereotyped as masculine.

The situation is only somewhat better when examining county commissioner elections; of the 19 general elections held over this time period, only 21 percent (or four of 19), featured a woman, and only 5.2 percent — representing just a single election — were won by a woman. In fact, only three women actually ran in the general election for county commissioner over this time period: Sylvia Garcia (also the only winner), Glorice McPherson, and Jennifer Pool, who unsuccessfully challenged incumbent Steve Radack in 2012 and 2016, respectively.

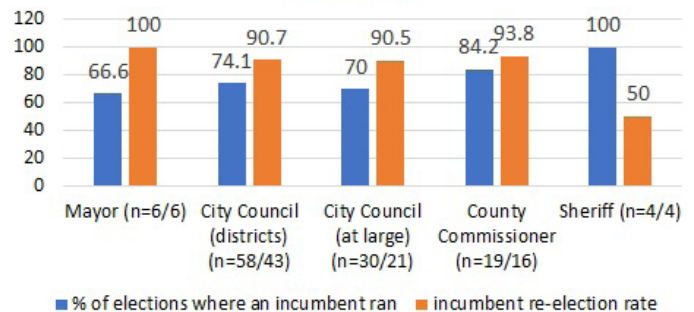
## 5. Competition

While a healthy democracy requires a large number of citizens to participate as voters, that is not enough to make a democracy healthy. Those voters have to be able to make a choice on Election Day. Recent reports by LEAP indicate that many local elections in the United States are unopposed. Across a six-state sample, LEAP found that just over half of mayoral elections are unopposed. These reports are limited to the office of mayor, and do suggest that the noncontestation problem is particularly acute in small cities. The unopposed election patterns observed in small cities, however, persist in Houston and Harris County. Similar to unopposed elections, the role of incumbency in local competition also looms large. Incumbents are usually on the ballot for every type of office. In those situations, the defeat of incumbents is rare. When incumbents run for re-election to Houston municipal office or county office, they almost always win. The fact that many elections in Houston and Harris County are unopposed and that incumbency is almost an automatic victory means that the electoral connection that is supposed to keep elected officials responsive to the public is strained, to say the least.



**Figure 8.** Proportion of Elections that are Unopposed, by Office Type  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of elections that are unopposed for each office type. For municipal offices, the first stages (and in the case of an unopposed election, the only stage) of the election are examined. For the county offices, these results are from the general election only, not the primaries.



**Figure 9.** Incumbent Candidacy and Victory, by Office Type  
n = the number of elections. When multiple columns, the number of observations for each column is separated by a /.

Figure 9 shows the proportion of elections for each office over this time period that had an incumbent on the ballot, as well as the incumbency re-election rate. The results of Figures 8 and 9 are interpreted for each office in the following sections.

<sup>21</sup>Women are identified based upon their first name.

<sup>22</sup>65 percent of district-based council elections where a woman ran are won by a woman. This rate is 55 percent in at-large seats.

## Mayor

No mayoral elections in this time period were unopposed, which is unsurprising. The office of mayor in a city like Houston is very desirable. No incumbent mayor was defeated during this time period. In fact, the last incumbent mayor to be defeated was Kathy Whitmire in 1991, who lost to Bob Lanier. Indeed, from 2005 to 2015, incumbent mayors always won overwhelming victories. On average, incumbent mayors won 71.3 percent of the vote in this time period.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the two open-seat elections (i.e. elections without an incumbent) were quite close, particularly 2015.

## City Council

Interestingly, while the undervote is much higher in at-large city council elections than district council elections, at-large seats are much less likely to be unopposed. Only 10 percent of all at-large council elections were unopposed, compared to 29 percent in district seats. There are two reasons that this may be the case. The first is that the pool of potential candidates is naturally larger in an at-large election, which covers the entire city, than it is in a district election, which covers only a fraction of the city, depending on the year. This means an unopposed election is less likely. The second reason is that ambitious, would-be council members really have six options to join the council; their one local district and any of the five at-large seats. The strategic candidate would choose whichever one they thought was easiest to win, which, with six possibilities, would typically be one of the at-large seats.

Though Houstonians usually have meaningful choices to make in council elections, the rate of noncontestation is still high. While each council district contains only a fraction of the city's total population, they are nonetheless quite large in absolute terms, containing between 180,000 and 200,000 residents each as of 2010.<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that, out of such a large pool of potential candidates, just under a third of council district elections feature only one candidate.

When it comes to incumbency, the re-election rate for city council members in Houston was about 90 percent, regardless of whether it is a district or at-large seat. In raw terms, only six incumbents lost re-election in Houston between 2005 and 2015. Four of these incumbents lost in district-based elections, but only two of the city's districts have failed to re-elect an incumbent in the last decade: District A and District F. In 2011, Brenda Stardig of District A

was narrowly defeated by Helena Brown. Stardig regained her seat two years later in a rematch with Brown. The other two incumbent defeats in a district election occurred in District F. In 2013, Al Hoang lost re-election to Richard Nguyen. Nguyen's own tenure did not last long; he was defeated in 2015 by Steve Le. In the at-large seats, only two incumbents were defeated: Jolanda Jones in 2011 and Andrew Burks in 2013.

## Sheriff

The office of sheriff is always contested. Like mayor, this is unsurprising, given the high profile and desirability of that office. Each of these four elections featured an incumbent, though it should be noted that Sheriff Ron Hickman, who ran for a full term in 2016, was appointed to his position by the commissioners court after Adrian Garcia resigned in order to run for mayor of Houston. As an appointed incumbent, Hickman did not have the name recognition advantage enjoyed by most incumbents, which may explain why he was defeated in 2016 by now-Sheriff Ed Gonzalez. Hickman was not the only incumbent sheriff to be defeated in this time period; then-council member Adrian Garcia defeated Sheriff Tommy Thomas in 2008.<sup>25</sup> While technically half of all elections for sheriff end in an incumbent defeat, with only four observations it would be a mistake to make any definitive claims.

## Commissioners Court

Harris County Commissioners Court elections garner surprisingly few candidates; about 42 percent of these elections are unopposed, or eight of 19 from 2004 to 2016.<sup>26</sup> With each of the county's four precincts covering more than one million inhabitants, this rate is high.<sup>27</sup> Because the Harris County Republican and Democratic parties presumably have a vested interest in these partisan races, this rate, again, seems low.

The website of County Commissioner Jack Morman, of Precinct 2, describes his 2010 election victory as "historic." This is no idle boast. In the study period, he was the only county commissioner candidate to successfully challenge an incumbent. It was the only time in the last 43 years that an incumbent lost re-election.<sup>28</sup> Morman's victory was hard fought; slightly more than 2,000 votes, out of nearly 130,000 cast, separated him and his opponent, Sylvia Garcia.

Harris County has seen a partisan shift in the past several decades, from a county that narrowly favored Bob Dole over Bill Clinton in 1996, to one that narrowly favored

<sup>23</sup>Mayor Annise Parker's margins of victory were smaller than Mayor Bill White's; 50.8 percent and 56.8 percent in 2011 and 2013, respectively. However, even in 2011 she was never in any serious danger; her closest competitor, Jack O'Connor, won only 14.7 percent of the vote.

<sup>24</sup>City of Houston Planning and Development Department, 2012. [http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/docs\\_pdfs/CD/council\\_dist\\_total\\_pop.pdf](http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/docs_pdfs/CD/council_dist_total_pop.pdf).

<sup>25</sup>Stiles, M. and Moreno, J. (2008), "Houston Voters Hand Garcia Victory in Historic Sheriff Race," Houston Chronicle.

<sup>26</sup>When calculating this rate, I counted the 2014 commissioner election in Precinct 4 as contested. This is because there were two candidates on the ballot, incumbent Jack Cagle and M.I. Badat. However, Badat was ineligible to actually hold a seat on the commission due to a criminal conviction, and dropped out of the contest one month before Election Day. However, by then it was too late to actually remove his name from the ballot, and Badat won a little under a third of the vote. <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Cagle-s-long-shot-election-foe-drops-out-of-race-5807876.php>.

<sup>27</sup>Harris County Budget Management Department (2015). "Population Study." <http://www.harriscountytexas.gov/CmpDocuments/74/Budget/FY16%20Population%20Study.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup>Rivas, Elissa (2010), "County Commish Garcia Loses to Political Unknown." ABC 13. <http://abc13.com/archive/7762280/>.

Barack Obama in 2008, to voting overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Given that commissioners court is a partisan office, the ability of so many incumbents to retain their seats amid such shifts is notable and points, in part, to the failure of Harris County Republican and Democratic parties to nominate candidates.

## 6. Potential Reforms

This report does not assess the performance of elected officials. Rather, it examines the health of Houston and Harris County's local democracy as measured by voter turnout, contestation, incumbency and demographic representation. Regardless of how hard-working or conscientious elected officials are, the high rate of non-contestation for both city council and county commissioners court, the low rates of voter turnout (particularly in municipal contests), and the relative lack of diversity in the candidate pool point to significant problems. The question, then, is what policy options exist that the city and county could consider in order to try and improve the state of local democracy? This section presents a menu of potential reforms and policy options that officials and citizens could consider pursuing to address some of these localized issues. These possibilities could be pursued in concert or on their own. For each potential reform, the potential positives and negatives of adopting them are laid out.

### Move Municipal Elections On-Cycle

Most municipal elections in Texas are held off-cycle; that is, not concurrent with presidential or midterm elections. Most municipal elections in Texas are actually held in May. Houston is somewhat unusual in having municipal elections in November, albeit in odd-numbered years. However, while it is customary for municipalities to hold their elections off-cycle, neither the state constitution nor statutes require it. It is unclear whether, under Texas law, Houston would need the permission of the legislature in order to reschedule city elections.

As it stands, typically only about 10 percent of voting age citizen Houstonians actually turn out in mayoral elections. Moving Houston city elections on-cycle would almost certainly result in a higher rate of voter participation. Political science scholarship has paid regrettably little attention to local politics, but what studies do exist suggest that turnout in local elections is far higher in on-cycle elections than in off-cycle elections. A recent report by LEAP found that turnout in California mayoral elections is about 22 percent higher when the election is held simultaneously with the presidential election, as opposed to off-cycle, and about 11 percent higher in midterms compared to off-cycle elections. This report also identified 16 California cities that switched from off-cycle to on-cycle

elections from 1994 to 2014. On average, the turnout rate in these cities was 15 percent higher in elections held after the switch than in those held before. There is every reason to believe that participation in Houston mayoral elections would be much higher if the elections were held on-cycle. Moving local elections on-cycle may also influence the diversity of the candidate pool. Political science research indicates that low turnout in municipal elections harms minority candidates, particularly Hispanics. This is most likely because potential candidates are risk averse; they fear defeat and will not run unless they have a good chance of winning. Potential Hispanic candidates may not seek office because, with Hispanic<sup>29</sup> turnout so low, they do not believe they have a good chance to win. If municipal elections were moved on-cycle, the increased size of the Hispanic electorate should make potential Hispanic candidates more confident that they can win. It would also tend to decrease the odds of an unopposed election.

However, moving local elections on-cycle is not necessarily a panacea. In presidential and even midterm years, most voters are brought out to the polls by the federal and state contests on the ballot, not the municipal contests. It is probable that many of these voters are not familiar with municipal politics, potentially calling into question the quality of the decisions that would be made at the ballot box. Furthermore, the ballot in even-year general elections is already very long in Harris County; making the ballot even longer might lead to increased undervoting.

### Adopt Partisan Municipal Elections

Texas Statute 143 only requires nonpartisan elections for municipal office for so-called General Law cities that lack a Home Rule Charter. Texas law says that Home Rule cities, on the other hand, can choose to allow party organizations to nominate candidates for office.<sup>30</sup> Since Houston is a Home Rule city, it can adopt partisan local elections if it so chooses. This would have a profound impact on local politics, with a likely mix of consequences.

Partisan elections would almost certainly increase turnout in Houston city elections, and reduce undervoting. Why party matters to voters is a question hotly debated by political scientists, but the observation that party is meaningful to most voters is broadly accepted by scholars. One of the most common reasons that citizens don't turn out to vote, or undervote even if they do show up on Election Day, is a lack of information. Voters who feel uninformed tend not to mark the ballot for that office, leaving the election up to more informed voters.<sup>31</sup>

Party affiliation would provide some of that information to voters. Indeed, scholars have found that turnout is far higher in cities with partisan as opposed to nonpartisan elections.<sup>32</sup> The same would no doubt be true in Houston

<sup>29</sup>Hajnal, Z. and Trounstine, J. (2005), "Where Turnout Matters: The Consequences of Uneven Turnout in City Politics," *Journal of Politics*, 67(2), p. 515–535.

<sup>30</sup>Texas Statutes. Sec. 143.003(a).

<sup>31</sup>Wattenberg et al., 2001.

<sup>32</sup>Alford, R. and Lee, E. (1968), "Voting Turnout in American Cities," *American Political Science Review*, 62(1), p. 796–813; Karnig, A. and Walter, B. (1983), "Decline in Municipal Voter Turnout: A Function of Changing Structure," *American Politics Quarterly*, 11(4), p. 491–505; Wood, Curtis (2002), "Voter Turnout in City Elections," *Urban Affairs Review*, 38(Nov.), p. 209–231.

as well. Turnout in municipal elections is not the sole measure of voter participation; undervoting is quite high in Houston's City Council elections, particularly in the at-large seats. Including the party label would give voters something to vote on even when they do not know who the candidates are. While there are no studies on the effects of partisan elections on undervoting in municipal elections, scholars have found that undervoting in partisan judicial elections is substantially lower than in nonpartisan judicial elections.<sup>33</sup>

Proponents of nonpartisan elections argue that partisan politics are irrelevant to local government issues. They echo the comment of Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, that "... there is no Republican or Democratic way of filling a pothole."<sup>34</sup> To some extent, this is true, but as a major city with limited funds, Houston's city government is involved in a wide multitude of issue areas, where there may be serious ideological differences. For instance, Houstonians are clearly divided over banning overt discrimination against LGBT persons, as evidenced by the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) referendum. However, the average Houstonian would be hard-pressed to name city council candidates who favored HERO versus those who opposed it. If candidates were identified on the ballot as Republican or Democratic, voters might be able to make a reasonable inference about where the candidates stand on that and other salient issues.

A risk of adopting partisan elections, however, is that citizens may vote based on the performance of the parties in national politics rather than in municipal politics. For instance, the Republican party lost ground in state legislatures throughout the U.S. in the latter years of George W. Bush's presidency, even though state legislators were not responsible for some of his least popular policy decisions and headlines, like the Iraq War or the federal government's mismanagement of relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina. There has been little to no examination of the coattail effect at the local level, but if voters are willing to punish state legislators for the actions of their co-partisans at the federal level, it seems likely they would do so at the local level as well.

## Abolish At-Large Seats on the Houston City Council

When designing a legislative branch, there is a natural tension between representation for different communities within a city and the need for a more general, city-wide

perspective. Generally speaking, council members elected from districts will support the interests of their district, not necessarily the city as a whole. Advocates for at-large elections argue that at-large council members take a citywide view of policy, since they are elected by the entire city. This may be so, but at-large elections do have several downsides.

The consensus in political science is that at-large elections lead to underrepresentation of that city's minorities on the city council.<sup>35</sup> The results presented in Figure 6 provide some evidence for this, but given the number of observations, it would be unwise to make any definite claims. The results presented here also show that undervoting is quite high in at-large council elections. Indeed, undervoting is almost as high in a contested at-large election as it is in an uncontested district election — 25 percent compared to 30 percent. This is most likely because voters are less informed about candidates for the at-large seats than they are for district seats, where the candidates tend to be visible.

Abolishing the at-large seats would naturally mean less undervoting overall for city council seats, meaning that a larger proportion of the city's electorate would actually be participating. Furthermore, creating five new districts for the Houston City Council would result in smaller districts overall. More numerous and smaller districts would increase the likelihood that districts would have, for example, a majority-black, majority-Hispanic, majority-Asian, etc. population. This would in all likelihood lead to a more diverse city council that is more reflective of the city's overall population. This is what occurred in Austin, Texas, when that city abolished its at-large seats<sup>36</sup> and replaced them with districts. In 2013, only one of the council's six members<sup>37</sup> was Hispanic; today, three of Austin City Council's 10 members are Hispanic.<sup>38</sup>

## Redraw County Commission Districts

The competitiveness of commissioners court elections is decidedly low. Only a single county commissioner lost reelection in this time period, and at the time she was the first incumbent to lose in 36 years. Similarly, the rate of unopposed county commissioner elections is high; eight of the 19 county commissioner elections — or 42 percent — were unopposed from 2004 to 2016.

One possible reason for this lack of competitiveness is that the county commissioner precincts are gerrymandered; that is to say, the boundaries of the districts have been

<sup>33</sup>Hall, Melinda (2007), "Voting in State Supreme Court Elections: Competition and Context as Democratic Incentives," *Journal of Politics*, 69(4), p. 1,147–1,159.

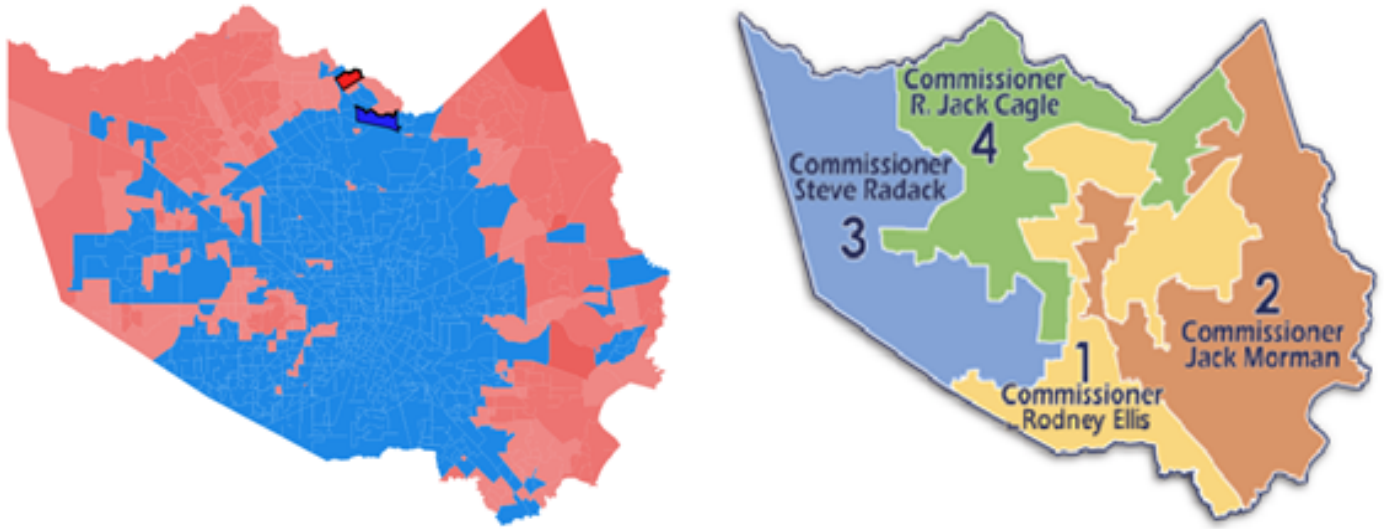
<sup>34</sup>Lillis, Mike (2011), "Dems Weigh Job Creation, Cutting Deficit." *The Hill*.

<sup>35</sup>For an overview, see: Trounstein, J. and Valdini, M. (2008), "The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member Versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity," *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(3), p. 554–569.

<sup>36</sup>Unlike Houston, the entire Austin City Council was elected at-large.

<sup>37</sup>The Austin City Council actually had seven members (and today, 11) because the mayor is an ex officio member of the council. However, the mayor is not included when calculating the proportion of council members who are Hispanic.

<sup>38</sup>It would not be useful to examine the effect of this switch on the undervote in Austin, because Austin simultaneously transitioned from May elections to November elections. It would be impossible to parse out the effects of moving to district elections from the effects of moving to a November date.



**Figure 10.** Harris County Presidential Results and Commissioner Districts  
 Election results map from Isensee, L. and Schneider, A. (2017). "Neighboring Precincts, Similarly Diverse but Political Divergent."  
 Houston Public Media. Commissioner precinct map from the Office of County Judge Ed Emmett

manipulated to achieve a political end. Harris County has a land area of approximately 1,800 square miles, about 33 percent larger than the state of Rhode Island. Nonetheless, a person leaving for Minute Maid Park from the Kinder Institute's offices at the south end of the Rice University campus would travel through all four commissioner precincts,<sup>39</sup> despite travelling only seven miles.

The extent of the gerrymandering can easily be seen in Figure 10. The left shows the results of the 2016 presidential election in Harris County. Red areas were won by Donald Trump, while blue areas were won by Hillary Clinton. The right side shows the various commissioner precincts: yellow is Precinct 1, filled by Rodney Ellis, the only Democrat; brown is Precinct 2, held by Jack Morman; blue is Precinct 3, represented by Steve Radack; and green is Precinct 4, filled by Jack Cagle. While a clear majority of the county voted for Hillary Clinton, most of these Democratic voters are clustered in the central parts of the county. The framers of the precinct boundaries drew the lines in such a way as to pack these heavily Democratic voters into a single district, Precinct 1. The remaining three precincts contain primarily Republican areas, with a few slices into Houston proper in order to ensure that the precinct populations are approximately equal. The way these precincts are drawn also affects Hispanic representation. In fact, the Harris County Commissioners Court was sued in 2011 by Hispanic advocates, including Houston City Council members James Rodriguez and Ed Gonzalez. The plaintiffs alleged that the

plan illegally diluted Hispanic voting strength by lowering the proportion of Hispanic residents in Precinct 2.<sup>40</sup> However, the boundaries were ultimately upheld by a U.S. District Court in 2013.<sup>41</sup>

The Democrats may not run candidates in Precincts 2, 3 or 4, and Republicans, likewise, may not field candidates in Precinct 1, because they know victory is out of reach. However, redrawing the precincts with a more even partisan balance would likely encourage more candidates to run for office. This would lead to fewer unopposed elections, and perhaps to more incumbent defeats. Adopting precincts that more accurately reflected the county's population would likely produce more Hispanic candidates and winners as well.

## 7. Appendix

### *A Note on Term Limits, Term Length and the Party Lever*

In 2015 Houstonians approved Proposition 2, which lengthened mayoral and council terms from two years to four. At the same time, Houstonians reduced the number of terms these officials could serve from three to two. However, since the terms are longer, the mayor and council members can serve for a maximum of eight years if re-elected, instead of the previous six.

<sup>39</sup>Admittedly, this hypothetical driver would have to take a somewhat unnatural route, utilizing Richmond Avenue instead of U.S. 69.

<sup>40</sup>Morris, Michael (2012), "County Redistricting Case Goes to Court Tuesday," Houston Chronicle, Nov. 13, 2012, <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/County-redistricting-case-goes-to-court-tuesday-4030998.php>.

<sup>41</sup>Rodriguez vs. Harris County, TX (2013), Case 4:11-cv-02907, U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, Houston Division. See: [http://www.tx.uscourts.gov/sites/txs/files/Rodriguez\\_v.\\_Harris\\_County.pdf](http://www.tx.uscourts.gov/sites/txs/files/Rodriguez_v._Harris_County.pdf).

The longer terms may well impact the performance of the city council; short terms in office encourage elected officials to focus on very short-term goals. Policies with short-term costs and long-term benefits to the city are politically dangerous if you serve a short term. Lengthening the term to four years may encourage Houston's mayor and council to take a longer-term view of the city's situation.

The switch to longer terms may also have an electoral impact. As previously noted, potential candidates tend to be risk averse, waiting for favorable opportunities. Prior to 2015, a potential candidate who passed on running only had to wait two years before they could reassess the situation. Now potential candidates must wait four years before their next opportunity. Faced with such a long wait, potential candidates may be more willing to take a risk and run immediately, leading to fewer uncontested elections.

The party lever, which allowed for straight-ticket voting, will be abolished in Texas in 2020. Opponents of abolishing the party lever argue that it will lead to an increase in undervoting — that voters will become fatigued and not complete the ballot, leading to fewer citizens deciding the winners of down-ticket contests. These fears were not realized in North Carolina when it abolished the party lever in 2014. However, the ballot in Harris County is notoriously long, thanks in part to the 60 district court judges, which, despite the name, are elected countywide, so ballot fatigue may lead to greater undervoting. Regardless, eliminating the party lever will no doubt make voting a slower process in Harris County, increasing the length of lines on Election Day. The problem will be more acute in precincts that have a larger number of registered voters assigned to them.

### *Description of Offices*

This report concentrates on the most important offices in the government of the City of Houston and Harris County. Namely, the mayor of Houston, the Houston City Council, the county commissioners and the county sheriff. The mayor is the city's chief executive officer, charged with enforcing the law and direction of the city's bureaucracy. The mayor also chairs meetings of the city council, and has full voting rights on the council. However, unlike many mayors in the United States, the mayor of Houston cannot veto legislation passed by the city council. The city council is the city's legislative branch. It consists of 16 members, not including the mayor, 11 of whom are elected by districts and five of whom are elected to at-large seats. Council members must reside in the district they represent and each district must have roughly equal population. The five at-large positions hold an enumerated position on the council and are elected citywide. Therefore, it is possible for one position to have three candidates

for office, while another has only one, etc. Houston has recently adopted four-year terms for the mayor and council members, but during the time period studied for this report (2004 to 2016) the mayor and council each had two-year terms. These terms were unusually short for a major U.S. city.

Like 70 percent of American cities<sup>42</sup>, Houston's elections are nonpartisan. While the candidates may well have personal partisan loyalties, they are not nominated by any political party, and their party does not appear on the ballot. City elections are also held off-cycle, in November of odd-numbered years. This is somewhat unusual; most local elections in Texas are held in May of odd-numbered years. However, like most Texas cities, Houston city elections are stand-alone elections; barring a special election, there are no state or federal offices up for election when Houstonians vote for mayor and council.

In contrast, elections for Harris County offices are partisan, meaning that the candidates are nominated by the political parties in a primary, and that party's labels do appear on the ballot. This also means that voters who pull the party lever on Election Day can cast votes for county offices along party lines, without going through each race individually. There are many elected officials in Harris county for the executive branch, the legislative branch and even the judicial branch. However, this report concentrates on the county commissioners and the county sheriff.

The formal name of the county commission is the commissioners court, and it is headed by County Judge Edward Emmett. Despite the name, the commissioners Court is not a court, but rather the county's legislative branch. Similarly, County Judge Emmett's powers are not judicial, and Emmett's background is in public administration, not law.<sup>43</sup> The four commissioners are elected from geographic districts, called precincts. The county judge is elected on a countywide vote. The commissioners and the county judge all have four-year terms. These elections are staggered, so that the entire commission is never up for election at the same time. Because of this four-year staggering, two commission seats (Precincts 1 and 3 as they are currently numbered) are always elected at the same time as the presidential election, while the other two commissioners (2 and 4) and the county judge are always elected during the midterm election (i.e. November of an even year in which the president is not up for election).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup>MacManus, S. and Bullock, C. (2003), "The Form, Structure, and Composition of America's Municipalities in the New Millennium," *Municipal Yearbook*.

<sup>43</sup>Office of County Judge Ed Emmett

<sup>44</sup>Information about city powers of Houston officials from the Houston City Charter. Information about powers of County Commissioners from Allison, J. (N.D.). "Constitutional Basis of County Government." *County Judges and Commissioners Association of Texas*.

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