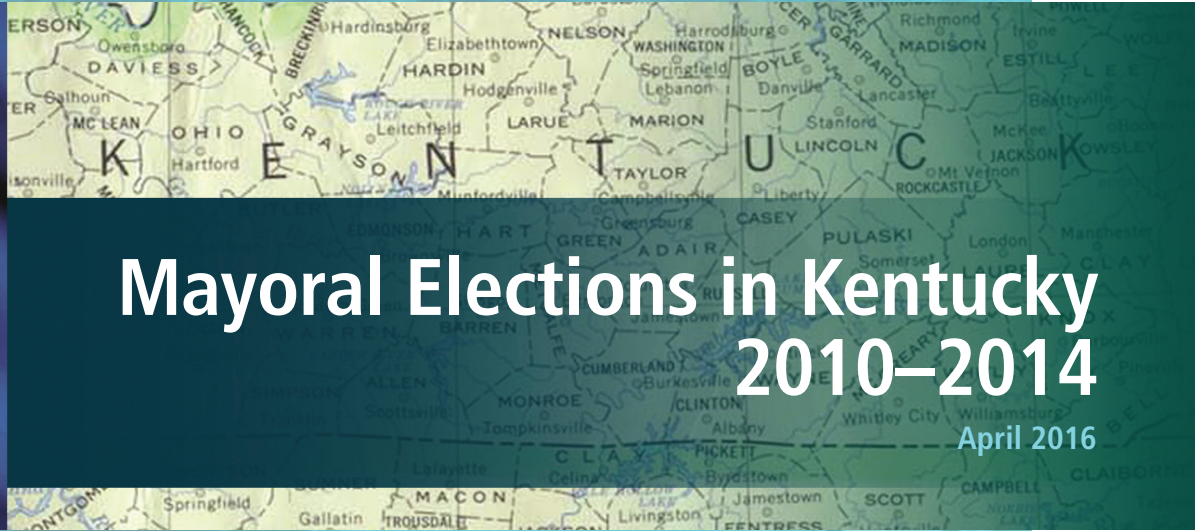




**LEAP**

Center for Local Elections in American Politics



# Mayoral Elections in Kentucky 2010–2014

April 2016

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 Knight Foundation



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INSTITUTE FOR URBAN RESEARCH





## 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 <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 Marshall and Paru Shah launched the Local Elections in America Project (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 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 campaign continues 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).



The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation advances journalism in the digital age and invests in the vitality of communities where the Knight brothers owned newspapers. The Knight Foundation focuses on projects that promote informed and engaged communities and lead to transformational change. The Knight Foundation Community Initiative focuses on 26 communities. Resident program directors oversee grantmaking in eight communities: Akron, Ohio; Charlotte, N.C.; Detroit; Macon, Ga.; Miami; Philadelphia; San Jose, Calif.; and St. Paul, Minn. In the remaining 18 communities, the Knight Foundation partners with other community foundations. The foundation has invested more than \$841 million in community initiatives since its creation in 1950. The Knight Foundation wants its national network of learning to inspire the actions of residents in each of its communities and help build a better democracy and a successful future. For more, visit [www.knightfoundation.org](http://www.knightfoundation.org).

## Future Reports

The Kentucky study is the second of several reports on municipal elections to be released in 2016 by the Kinder Institute for Urban Research's Center for Local Elections in American Politics. A report on California has already been published. Forthcoming reports will examine trends in municipal contests in Indiana, Virginia, Louisiana, Minnesota, South Carolina, North Carolina and Washington.

*Marshall, Melissa and John Lappie. 2016. "Mayoral Elections in Kentucky, 2010–2014". Center for Local Elections in American Politics. Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University, Houston, Texas.*

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# 1. Executive Summary

Political observers' assumptions about local election trends are often based on anecdotes, incomplete observation or simply conventional wisdom. However, the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and its Center for Local Elections in American Politics offer a first-of-its-kind way to analyze elections.

Mayoral elections in Kentucky, perhaps because they are held in Novembers of even-numbered years, tend to have respectable voter turnout rates. However, there is an alarming lack of competition in Kentucky mayoral elections; well over half of mayoral elections were uncontested between 2010 and 2014. Even when there is more than one candidate, mayoral elections tend not to be close. Kentucky policymakers would be well advised to take steps to rectify this situation.

## Background

This study focuses on direct elections of Kentucky mayors. Under Kentucky law, each of the state's 425 cities must have a directly elected mayor. Regularly scheduled general elections are held in November of even-numbered years. Most mayoral elections are held in conjunction with congressional midterm elections, but some coincide with presidential election years.

## Methodology

LEAP software automates the collection of election results, resulting in a database containing, as of this writing, records on municipal elections in 22 states dating back as far as the 1980s. The Kentucky dataset includes 721 mayoral general elections and 43 primary elections held between November 2010 and November 2014.

## Findings

- An extremely high proportion of Kentucky mayoral elections — 57.6 percent — are unopposed, meaning the lone person who sought the office was elected.
- Unopposed elections are especially prevalent in the suburban communities of the Louisville metro, where 85 percent of mayoral elections in that area are unopposed.
- Turnout is higher in suburban Kentucky communities as opposed to rural municipalities (i.e., cities in rural areas).
- Incumbents running for re-election in Kentucky are generally quite safe. This is especially true in suburban communities, where 90 percent of incumbent mayors are re-elected.

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### 3. Kentucky Municipal Elections Overview

The original source of the Kentucky local election data compiled by LEAP comes from the Kentucky secretary of state's office. While this data is mostly complete, 21 cities (out of Kentucky's 425) do not have mayoral election results reported on the secretary of state's website, and as a result they do not appear in our dataset.<sup>1</sup>

#### Election Coverage

May 18, 2010–Nov. 4, 2014

#### Total Number of Elections and Races

- Nine unique election dates (including primaries and special elections)
- 96.07 percent of mayoral general elections were held simultaneously with a midterm election; the remainder were held simultaneously with a presidential election
- 721 mayoral general elections and 43 primaries
- Of the mayoral general elections, 700 were nonpartisan and 21 were partisan
- 1,283 candidates for mayor.<sup>2</sup> The average number of candidates in general elections is 1.58.

#### Other Offices

- All Kentucky cities are required to have either a city commission or a city council. City commissions have five members (including the directly elected mayor). Councils have between six and 12 members, depending on the class of the city. However, special rules govern the councils of Lexington and Louisville, which are consolidated with their county governments.
- The Kentucky Constitution specifies that the only elected offices at the local level are the mayor and the city council/commission. As of 1980, no Kentucky city may create a new elective office. However, cities that elected local officials other than mayor and council/commission before 1980 can continue to do so, until and unless these elections are abolished by local ordinance.<sup>3</sup>

### 4. Basic Information About Mayors and Mayoral Elections in Kentucky

Before 1891, each incorporated city in Kentucky was granted a narrow and individualized city charter. This meant that different cities had different powers, and a city that wanted to take on an additional responsibility would have to petition the state legislature. This led to "special legislation" that favored certain cities. A backlash against this led the framers of the Kentucky Constitution of 1891 to create six different classes of city, based on population. The general assembly was permitted to vote on legislation affecting the powers and responsibilities of a "class" of cities but not on legislation about a specific city. This system lasted until 2014, when the general assembly passed HB331. This law created only two classes of cities: first-class cities (over 100,000 residents, at least in theory) and home-rule cities (all other cities).

The only Kentucky city that has ever been a first-class city is Louisville. However, In 2000, Louisville voted to merge with Jefferson County, becoming a consolidated local government. Because Louisville/Jefferson County Metro Government still uses many of the statutes assigned to cities of the first class, this class remains even though Louisville is technically no longer a city government, but a consolidated local government. That leaves essentially all other cities in Kentucky as home-rule cities (Legislative Research Commission, 2015).

Home-rule cities may choose between mayor/council, mayor/commission and city manager forms of government. It should be noted that regardless of which form of government the city chooses, all Kentucky cities must have a directly elected mayor.<sup>4</sup> The office of mayor is quite strong in the mayor/council system; the mayor holds veto powers over ordinances passed by the council, appoints department heads, and in general holds executive and administrative authority. Mayoral authority is far more limited under the mayor/commission and city manager plans. In both cases, the mayor, while directly elected, is part of the five-person city commission. In this system, the mayor has full voting and deliberative rights in commission meetings. The only power the mayor has over his or her fellow commission members is the power to chair meetings of the commission.

Louisville is designated as a first-class city; however, since Louisville is also consolidated with the government of

<sup>1</sup>Information on these cities is scarce, since they are generally quite small (a few thousand at most; the smallest city has a mere 26 residents). It is possible that some of these elections were canceled due to lack of contestation. However, in at least one case there does seem to have been a contested election whose results are not reported by the secretary of state's office. In Beattyville, Ky., there does seem to have been a contested election in November 2010, based on scattered mentions on forums dealing with Beattyville and Lee County. Why these results do not appear on the secretary of state's website is unknown.

<sup>2</sup>Note: That is, 1,283 observations, not unique candidates. Candidates may appear more than once if they ran in the primary and general elections, and of course if they ran in two different years.

<sup>3</sup>Kentucky Statutes, 83A.080; see subsections 4 and 5. <http://www.lrc.ky.gov/statutes/statute.aspx?id=25174>

<sup>4</sup>All information about the laws regarding municipal government arrangements comes from Informational Bulletin No. 145, a product of the Legislative Research Commission of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. See: <http://www.lrc.ky.gov/lrcpubs/ib145.pdf>

Jefferson County, it is not entirely subject to the provisions governing first-class cities.<sup>5</sup> Lexington should qualify as a first-class city by virtue of its population, however it is instead classified as a home-rule city.

By law, Kentucky mayors serve four-year terms or until they have a qualified successor. Kentuckians seeking the mayoralty must be at least 25 years old, be qualified voters of their city and have no contractual ties to the city. Furthermore, they must reside in the city for the duration of their terms. Mayors of first-class cities are also limited to three terms in office.

Kentucky's two most populous counties, Jefferson and Fayette, have had their county governments consolidated with the governments of their largest cities, Louisville and Lexington, respectively. There is, however, a distinction between the two consolidations under Kentucky law. Lexington/Fayette County has an urban-county government, which merges all city governments and the county government into a single entity. On the other hand, Louisville and Jefferson County have what Kentucky law calls a consolidated local government. This means that the city of Louisville proper had its government merged with Jefferson County to form the Louisville/Jefferson County Metro Government (commonly called the Louisville Metro, or simply the Metro). However, the 83 other incorporated municipalities of Jefferson County were not abolished during the 2003 consolidation. The Metro government has the powers of the former City of Louisville and Jefferson County over Louisville proper (called the Urban Service District). The Metro government has far more limited powers over the other cities of Jefferson County. Residents of these cities can vote (and run for) Metro mayor and Metro council, as well as their own city's offices. Because the Metro council's elected offices are district based, and because the Metro government has only county powers over the suburbs, there is an anomalous situation wherein Metro councilors whose districts lie entirely outside of Louisville proper may propose and vote only on legislation that affects Louisville proper, but not their own constituents.

Before 1992, Kentucky cities could hold local elections off cycle. In 1992, however, the Kentucky Constitution was amended to require local general elections to be held in November of even-numbered years.<sup>6</sup> Most Kentucky cities have chosen to hold their mayoral elections in midterm rather than presidential years (only 4.8 percent of our observations come from a presidential year, 2012). Research suggests that election timing plays a significant role in the level of voter participation in mayoral elections (Anzia, 2014; Hajnal and Lewis 2003). In the most extensive study of California mayoral elections, Marschall and Lappie (2016) found that mayoral elections held concurrently

with presidential elections had the highest turnout (39.6 percent), while those held off cycle had the lowest turnout (17.5 percent). Those that coincide with midterm elections fell in the middle (28.5 percent). Similarly, Wood's 2002 study of 57 U.S. cities with populations between 25,000 and 1 million found that election timing was the largest predictor of voter turnout, with concurrent local elections having 29 percent higher turnout than nonconcurrent local elections.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Kentucky laws fixing local election dates in presidential or midterm cycles should yield higher voter participation.

Kentucky law permits cities to choose between partisan and nonpartisan elections. The ubiquity of nonpartisan elections in Kentucky elections may be consequential. The party label is, for any number of reasons, a meaningful cue to citizens.<sup>8</sup> The absence of the party label increases voter uncertainty about the candidates. Since voters are usually loathe to cast ballots when they feel they are uninformed (Wattenberg et al, 2000), nonpartisan elections tend to lead to lower voter turnout rates and/or voter roll off, whereby voters do not cast votes for lesser known candidates running for offices further down the ballot.<sup>9</sup> While cities do have a choice, the overwhelming majority of local elections in Kentucky are nonpartisan. Of the 721 mayoral elections held between 2010–2014, 700 were nonpartisan.

Finally it is interesting to note that while Kentucky mostly provides for primary elections for local offices, in practice, at least between 2010 and 2014, few cities actually held them. According to Kentucky law, there are two reasons that a primary may not be held: First, if there are only two candidates, there is no primary, and second, if a city was previously of the fourth, fifth or sixth class (the categories with the smallest populations), they could choose not to have a primary.<sup>10</sup> When primaries are held, the two candidates receiving the highest number of votes advance to the general election in November. Note that this occurs regardless of whether one candidate wins with a majority of the vote (see Kentucky Statutes 83A.170, section 13). This electoral rule contrasts with the rule for general elections, which are strictly plurality. Thus there are no runoff elections in Kentucky, and mayoral candidates may be elected without a majority of the ballots cast.

<sup>5</sup>For instance, Louisville has a 26-member metro council, rather than a 12-member board of aldermen, which is required of (entirely hypothetical) nonconsolidated first-class cities.

<sup>6</sup>See section 167, Constitution of Kentucky. Special elections may be held off cycle, however.

<sup>7</sup>Wood does not distinguish between presidential, midterm and primary election cycles. Rather, he compares local elections held concurrently with any state or national election to local elections that are not held concurrently with state or national elections.

<sup>8</sup>There is considerable academic debate on what precisely party means to voters.

<sup>9</sup>It should be noted that most of the literature on nonpartisan elections comes from the judicial elections field. There is relatively little study of nonpartisan elections in the local context.

<sup>10</sup>See: Kentucky Statute 83A.045, "Laws Governing Partisan and Nonpartisan Elections" at <http://www.lrc.ky.gov/Statutes/statute.aspx?id=25167>.



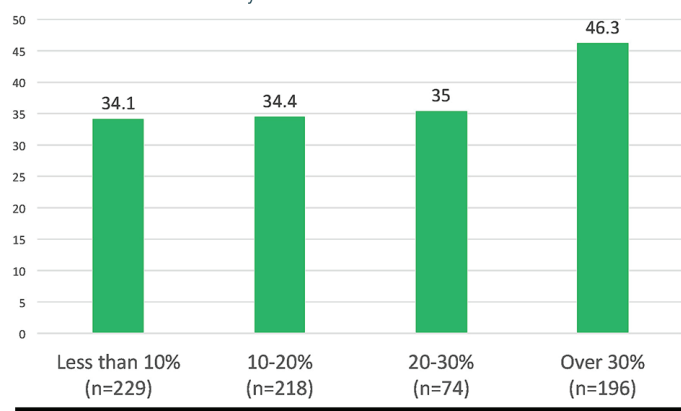
## 5. Mayoral Elections in Kentucky

Our analysis of mayoral elections in Kentucky begins with some general descriptive features, starting with turnout. Studies of voter turnout consistently find that one of the strongest predictors of whether individuals vote is their socioeconomic status. Specifically, individuals who are more educated and who earn more money are significantly more likely to vote than those with less education and income. Does this relationship hold when we consider aggregates? In other words, do municipalities with higher shares of educated and higher-income residents also have higher turnout?

### Turnout and Demographics

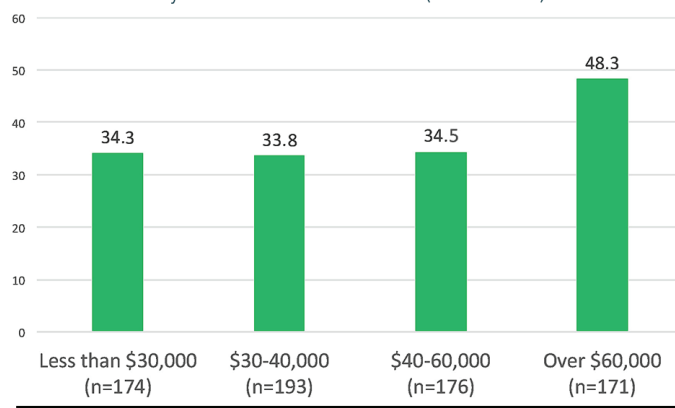
Figure 5.1 shows the relationship between educational attainment (measured as the percentage of municipal residents 25 years and older with at least a bachelor's degree) and turnout (measured as the total votes cast in the mayoral race<sup>11</sup> divided by the voting age population).<sup>12</sup> Generally, cities with higher concentrations of educated people have higher turnout. However, the increases in participation are negligible except in areas where over 30 percent of the adult population has at least a bachelor's degree. Then, participation jumps by almost 11 points. Indeed, in cities where 30 percent or more of the population has a college degree, residents are 12 percent more likely to vote in mayoral elections compared to cities where less than 10 percent of residents have graduated from college. It is worth noting that compared to the U.S. as a whole, Kentucky is less educated, ranking 47th in educational attainment.

**Figure 5.1:** Turnout in Mayoral Elections by Educational Attainment



Turning to Figure 5.2, we see that turnout does not vary much by median household income. Across three of the four categories, turnout is roughly the same — around 34 percent. For the highest income category (above \$60,000) however, turnout increases rather dramatically to 48 percent. This is not unexpected, as residents in higher income households tend to have a greater stake in government policy and thus are more likely to vote than residents in low-income households. While the U.S. median household income was about \$51,000 in 2015, Kentucky's median household income was only \$41,000.

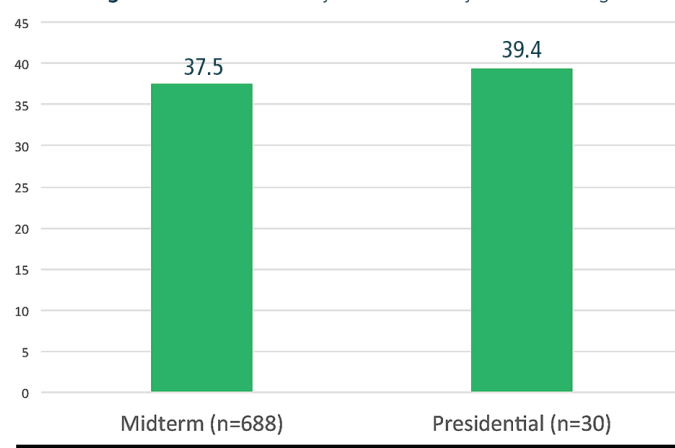
**Figure 5.2:** Turnout in Mayoral Elections by Median Household Income (2013 dollars)



### Effects of Election Timing

In addition to the socioeconomic characteristics of the population, another critical factor influencing turnout is election timing (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003). In Figure 5.3, we compare mayoral turnout across the two categories for

**Figure 5.3:** Turnout in Mayoral Elections by Election Timing



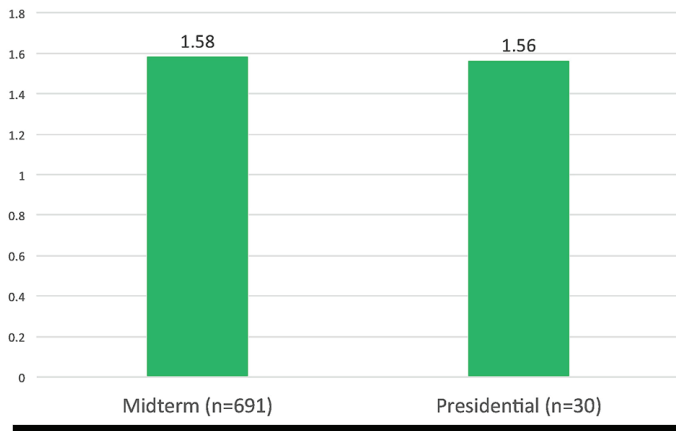
<sup>11</sup>Note that total votes cast includes write-in votes, though only a small percentage of elections featured write-ins and in the majority of cases, these votes were negligible.

<sup>12</sup>We use voting-age population because voter registration data at the municipal level is not available for all cities and years. We use American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates (2008–12 for 2010 and the 2009–13 for 2011–2014) because one- and three-year ACS do not survey all municipalities. In addition, five-year estimates for 2012–2015 and 2013–2016 are not yet available.

election timing in Kentucky: (1) elections that are held on Election Day during presidential election years, and (2) elections that are held on Election Day during midterm elections.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that almost all Kentucky mayoral elections occur during midterm elections (688), with only a small minority occurring during presidential elections (30). However, looking across all Kentucky mayoral elections between 2010 and 2014, turnout does not appear to vary much at all by election timing. Indeed, the difference is less than 2 percentage points.

In addition to turnout, the timing of mayoral elections may affect the number of candidates who decide to run and the competitiveness of elections. As seen in Figure 5.4, we find only negligible differences in the supply of candidates by election timing when we look across all mayoral elections held between 2010 and 2014. Regardless of election timing, mayoral elections in Kentucky average about 1.6 candidates.

**Figure 5.4:** Average Number of Candidates by Election Timing

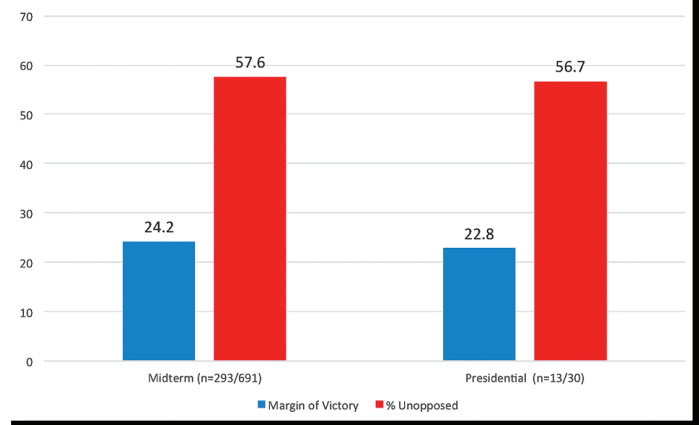


To assess the competitiveness of mayoral elections, we compare the average margin of victory<sup>14</sup> (as a percentage) in mayoral elections and the percentage of uncontested elections across the two categories of election timing. As Figure 5.5 indicates, there is little difference in either the margin of victory or the percentage of uncontested elections across mayoral elections held during midterm as opposed to presidential elections. The average margin of victory is 24.2 percent in mayoral elections held during midterm elections, compared to 22.8 percent for presidential elections. In addition, the rate of unopposed mayoral elections in Kentucky is quite high at about 57 percent, regardless of election timing.

## City Type and Local Democracy

While institutional factors like election timing as well as sociodemographic factors, such as the level of education

**Figure 5.5:** Competitiveness of Mayoral Elections by Election Timing



and wealth in the local community shape political behavior, the social environment in which citizens live can also influence whether or not residents turnout on Election Day. A local community's sense of "place," for instance, can have a major impact on an individual's political engagement (see Huckfeldt, 1979; Verba and Nie, 1972; Lazarsfeld et al, 1968). Grosser and Schram (2006) note that neighbors might ask individuals questions such as "have you voted yet?" generating social pressure to vote. More broadly, local networks are excellent conduits of information about local politics (Oliver, 2001; Grosser and Schram, 2006).

One way to measure "place" is by looking at the size of the city. Many believe that local democracy is healthier in small cities as opposed to medium or large ones. Since residents are more likely to know and interact with one another in small towns, developing a sense of community and an attachment to "place" is presumably easier in smaller towns. Of course, this is not always the case. As Oliver (2001) also noted, many small municipalities are suburban bedroom communities that are often distinguished by their relative homogeneity, lack of sidewalks, emphasis on privacy and automobiles. In these types of small, suburban municipalities, residents may not only have shorter histories in the community, but may also spend more time commuting, leaving less time for socializing with neighbors and thus develop weaker attachments to "place."

Since, the vast majority of Kentucky cities are very small — the median population size is 1,035 — we might expect turnout in municipal elections to be higher here than in other states where there are more medium and large-sized municipalities. Of course, it is difficult to assess this since there is no national-level data on which to compare. However, statewide, average turnout in mayoral elections in our database was 38 percent. When we compare turnout within Kentucky, we do find a decline as population size increases, however, the differences are slight. Specifically, in municipalities with populations under 1,000, average turnout in mayoral elections is 39.7 percent. This decreases

<sup>13</sup>We categorize the six mayoral elections held in November 2011 as midterm cycle, since they were held simultaneously with the gubernatorial election.

<sup>14</sup>Measured as the raw margin of victory (distance between the winner and the runner-up) divided by the total number of votes.

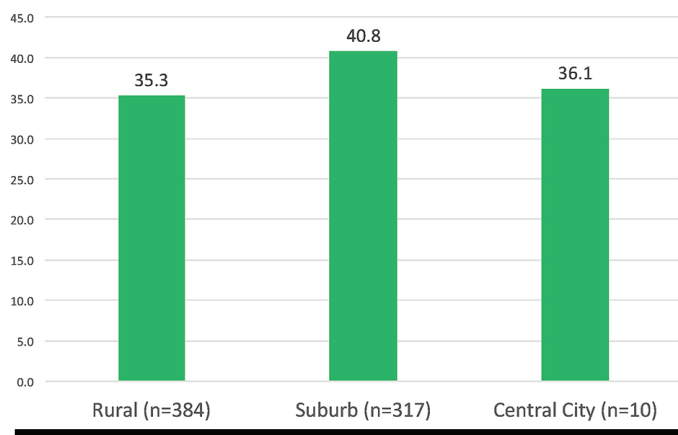
to 36 percent for municipalities between 1,000 and 2,500 residents and to 35 percent for municipalities with populations over 2,500.

Given the relative lack of variation in the size of Kentucky's cities (80 percent have fewer than 5,000 residents), it is important to consider other indicators that might capture distinctive features of "place." To do this, we categorized Kentucky municipalities according to the following types: central city, suburb or rural cities.

Central cities consist of larger municipalities in metropolitan areas that represent the economic center of their respective regions. Suburbs are municipalities within metropolitan areas that are not considered central cities and are thus outside the central city's legal jurisdiction. They are, however, likely to be economically dependent on the central city. Finally, rural municipalities are cities located outside a metropolitan region. Residents of such cities likely live faraway from big cities, are surrounded by rural areas and tend to work within their own communities rather than commuting to another city. As a result, these cities tend also to be more important to the area than a similarly sized suburb.

In Figure 5.6, we report turnout across these three city types.<sup>15</sup> The data here show that suburban municipalities have the highest turnout rate in Kentucky mayoral elections (40.8 percent), followed by rural municipalities (35.3 percent) and central cities (36.1 percent). On average, turnout is about 5 percentage points higher in suburbs compared to other types of municipalities.

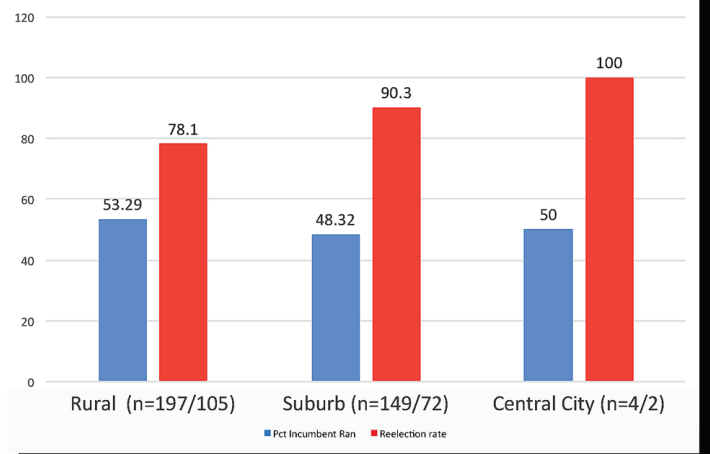
**Figure 5.6: Turnout by City Type**



In addition to turnout, we also examine the incumbency rates in mayoral elections across city types. Incumbents tend to discourage challengers from running, which in turn tends to reduce the competitiveness of elections. Figure 5.7 reports the percentage of mayoral races with incumbents on the ballot and the re-election rate of incumbents, by city type, for all Kentucky mayoral elections

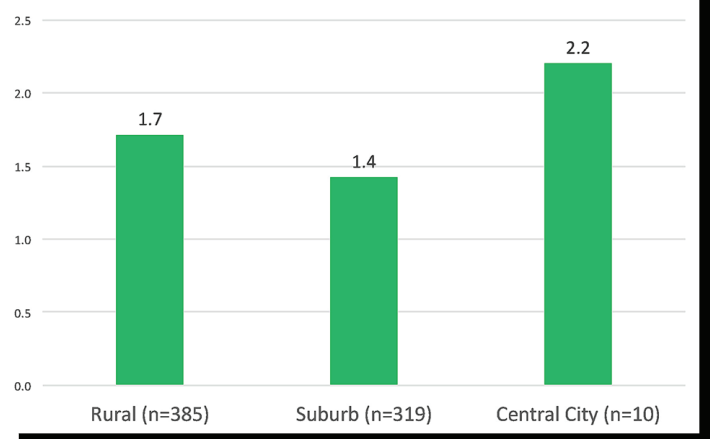
in 2014.<sup>16</sup> The data show a slightly higher percentage of incumbents in rural municipalities (53.3 percent) compared to suburban municipalities (48.3 percent) and central cities (50 percent). However, there appears to be a large gap in terms of re-election rates, as central cities and suburbs have substantially higher rates at 100 and 90.3 percent, compared to 78.1 percent in rural municipalities.<sup>17</sup> Lewis (2011) speculated that residents of suburbs may not consider local officeholders responsible for the economic success (or lack thereof) of the city, because they understand that their city is economically dependent on the central city. On the other hand, people who live in central cities and rural municipalities may be more likely to blame incumbents for the state of the economy. This could serve as an explanation for why the incumbency re-election rate is higher in suburban cities than rural municipalities.

**Figure 5.7: Incumbents in Mayoral Elections**



In Figure 5.8, we report the average number of mayoral candidates by city type. Generally, central cities have the largest candidate supply, with an average of 2.2 candidates per mayoral election. Rural municipalities have an average

**Figure 5.8: Average Number of Candidates by City Type**



<sup>15</sup>Note that the majority of Kentucky cities fall into the categories of nonmetro and suburban, thus there are usually relatively few observations of central cities elections.

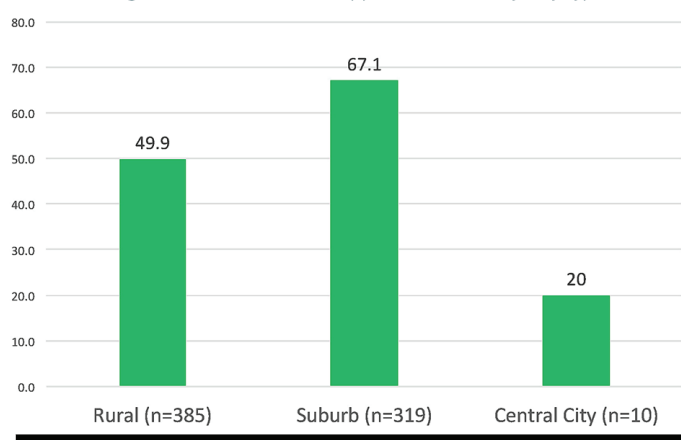
<sup>16</sup>Since Kentucky does not label incumbents on the ballot, we coded incumbents by identifying winners in 2010 and confirming their presence on the ballot in 2014. Because we do not have data prior to 2010, we could not code incumbents for the 2010 election, thus resulting in incumbency data for only the year of 2014.

<sup>17</sup>Note that only two of the four central city mayoral elections in 2014 featured an incumbent. The small number of cases here means we should interpret with care.

of 1.7 candidates, while suburbs have a substantially lower average of 1.4 candidates. This drop in the average number of candidates can be explained by the relatively higher percentage of unopposed elections in suburbs, as we report later in Figure 5.9.

Another way to look at competitiveness is by examining the percent of elections that are uncontested. In Figure 5.9, we report this by city type. Uncontested elections occur most often in suburban cities (67 percent) and least often in central cities (20 percent). The incidence of unopposed elections is almost 18 percentage points higher in suburbs than in rural municipalities. To put it another way, voters in rural municipalities don't have a choice in mayoral candidates nearly half the time, while suburban voters don't have a choice in more than two out of three elections. These figures demonstrate an alarming lack of competition in mayoral races both in the suburbs and in rural municipalities. While it could be that potential candidates in these communities are discouraged from running due to the costs of campaigning or because they perceive they cannot win, the absence of candidates in mayoral elections outside central cities could also point to a lack of interest among Kentucky residents in suburban and rural municipalities.

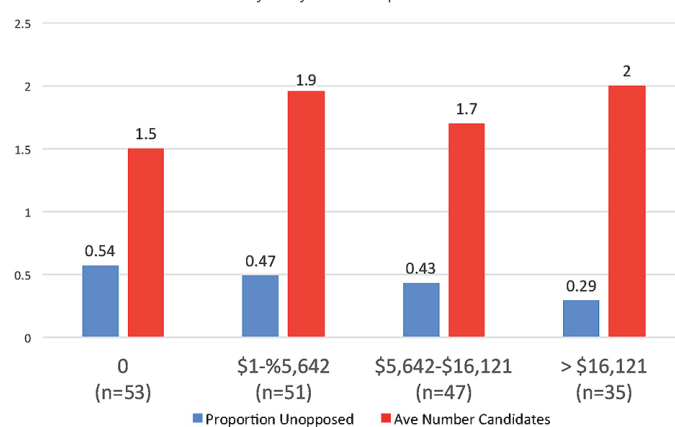
**Figure 5.9: Percent of Unopposed Contests by City Type**



While this report cannot definitively ascertain the reason for this lack of interest, one plausible explanation we investigate is the extent of mayoral compensation. In particular, to what extent are cities that better compensate their mayors characterized by more highly contested elections? In Figure 5.10, we compare the proportion of uncontested elections and the average number of mayoral candidates by level of mayoral compensation.<sup>18</sup>

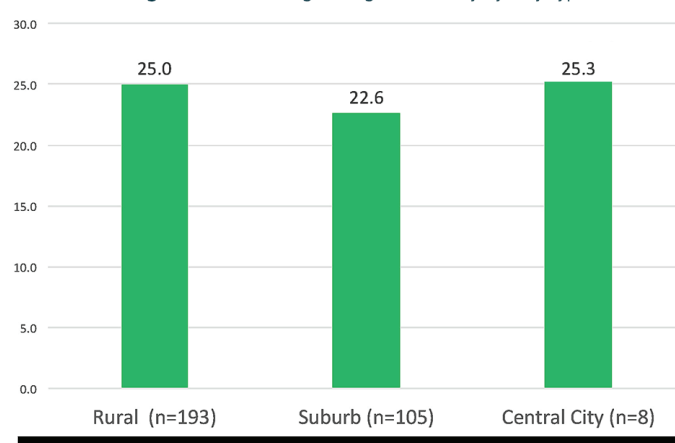
As the data show, there is a linear relationship between mayoral compensation and candidate supply. Kentucky cities that provide no compensation at all have, on

**Figure 5.10: Proportion Unopposed and Number of Candidates by Mayoral Compensation**



average, 1.5 mayoral candidates, whereas those providing more than \$16,121 in compensation have on average two mayoral candidates. In between, we find cities with less than \$5,642 in compensation averaging 1.9 candidates and those between \$5,642 and \$16,121 averaging 1.7 mayoral candidates. The pattern looks similar for the proportion of uncontested races. Slightly more than a quarter of mayoral elections in cities with the highest level of mayoral compensation are uncontested, compared to more than half of elections for cities with no compensation. These data suggest that providing more compensation may make the mayor's office more attractive to prospective candidates, thereby increasing the competitiveness of mayoral elections.

**Figure 5.11: Average Margin of Victory by City Type**



Finally, we also look at the average margin of victory by city type.<sup>19</sup> The average margin of victory varies only slightly between city types and does not appear to show any major trends. Rural municipalities have an average

<sup>18</sup>Data for mayoral compensation comes from a 1993 report on local government compensation commissioned by the state of Kentucky (Franklin and Wiley, 1993). We adjusted these data to reflect 2013 dollars. The Kentucky Research Commission surveyed all municipalities of the first through third classes, but selected a representative sample of cities from the fourth through six classes. In total, their report included compensation data for 120 cities. While we would prefer more recent data on mayoral compensation, to date, we have not been able to compile such data.

<sup>19</sup>Note: Margin of victory figures exclude unopposed elections.

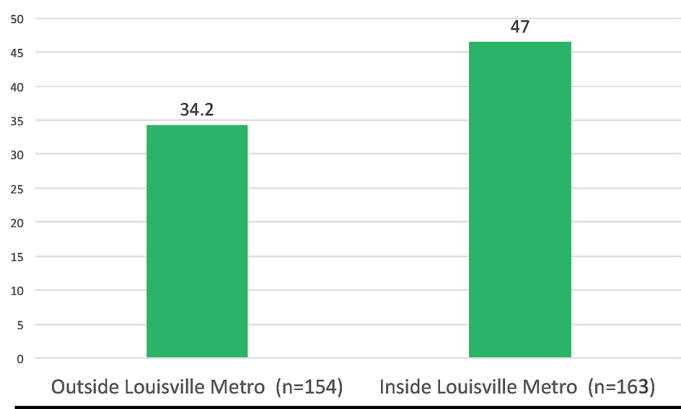


margin of victory of 25 percent, while mayoral elections in suburbs average a margin of 22.6 percent. Central cities have a slightly higher average margin of victory at 25.3 percent. Overall, the picture portrayed here is one of relatively uncompetitive elections.

## The Louisville Metro

Kentucky has two consolidated city-county governments: Lexington (with Fayette County) and Louisville (with Jefferson County). However, these consolidated governments operate very differently. Lexington and Fayette County are truly consolidated; there is only one local government in the area — the government of Lexington-Fayette. However, the consolidation of Louisville and Jefferson County into the Louisville Metro did not result in the disincorporation of any of the existing municipalities in Jefferson County. Within Louisville proper, the Metro government has assumed the powers of the former city government; outside Louisville proper, the Metro government has more limited power. Importantly, this means that the 83 municipalities in Jefferson County that are not Louisville remain incorporated places and continue to elect their own local government officials (though they also vote in Metro elections).

**Figure 5.12:** Average Turnout in Mayoral Elections by Metro Government Status



What effects does this arrangement have on the state of local democracy in the Louisville suburbs? One possibility is that the existence of the Metro government lowers the importance of municipal offices in the suburbs, leading to lower turnout rates in suburban mayoral elections held within the Metro versus those outside of it. But as Figure 5.12 shows, this does not appear to be the case. Instead, turnout for mayoral elections held inside the Metro is actually 12 percentage points higher than for elections held outside the Metro.<sup>20</sup>

Several factors could explain this. For example, residents in suburban municipalities within the Metro are

more educated than those living in suburbs in other parts of Kentucky. Specifically, over 50 percent of residents over age 25 in the Louisville suburbs have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 15 percent of those living outside the Metro. Similarly, on average the median household income in Louisville suburbs is substantially higher (\$83,000) compared to suburbs outside the Louisville Metro government (\$38,000). In other words, residents of the Louisville suburbs tend to be relatively wealthy and well-educated, factors that are known to generate high turnout rates. It is also possible that the elections for Louisville Metro offices, typically held at the same time as municipal elections in the Louisville suburbs, drive up turnout and also voting for mayoral candidates running for office in suburb municipalities.

The fact that turnout is higher in suburban municipalities within the Louisville Metro government does not mean that being part of the Louisville Metro has no negative effects on local democracy in the suburbs of Louisville. The existence of the Metro government means that potential candidates from the suburbs have more options when it comes to seeking political office. Specifically, residents can seek office within the Metro government or within their home municipalities. Since the Metro government is more powerful and provides better compensation to its elected officials, it seems logical that potential candidates would prefer to seek office in the Metro government to municipal office.

**Figure 5.13:** Percent of Unopposed Mayoral Elections by Metro Government Status

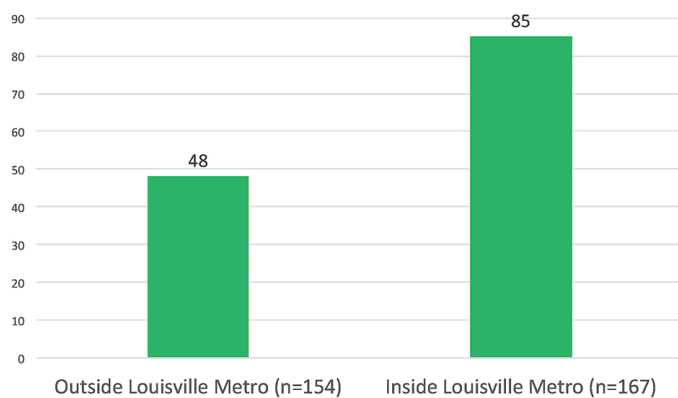


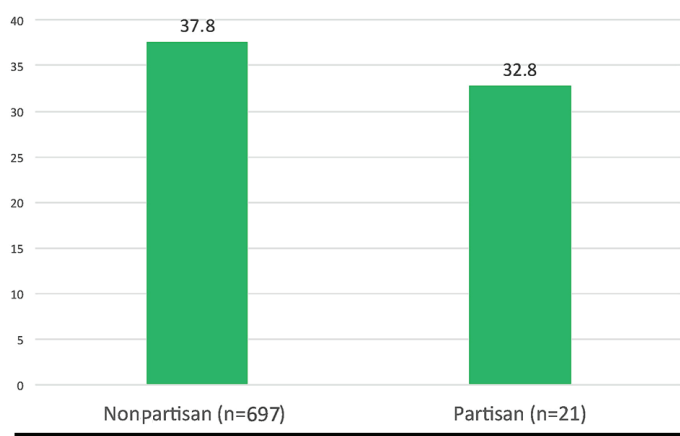
Figure 5.13 provides some evidence for that hypothesis. Nearly half of all mayoral elections held in suburban municipalities outside the Louisville Metro are unopposed. However, for suburban municipalities within the Metro, an astonishing 85 percent of all mayoral elections are unopposed. In light of this extremely high rate of unopposed races, it is worth asking: how could local democracy be considered healthy when local residents have no actual choice over who their mayor will be in the vast majority of elections?

<sup>20</sup>This does not include the turnout rate for the office of mayor of the Louisville metro.

## Partisan Elections and Kentucky Mayoral Elections

As mentioned previously, Kentucky municipalities have the option to hold either partisan or nonpartisan mayoral elections. In practice, most Kentucky cities choose to hold nonpartisan elections. Only 12 cities (representing 21 out of 721 mayoral elections) held partisan elections between 2010 and 2014. Partisan labels provide a great deal of meaningful information to voters (though “why” is a subject of intense academic debate). Since voters tend to be more reluctant to vote as their level of information about the candidates decreases (Wattenberg et al, 2000), we would expect nonpartisan elections to have deleterious effects on voter participation. This however, does not appear to be the case. As the results reported in Figure 5.14 indicate, average turnout in nonpartisan elections is actually about 5 percentage points higher than in partisan elections (37.8 vs. 32.8 percent). Thus, it appears that voters are no less willing to cast votes for mayoral candidates for whom less may be known.

**Figure 5.14:** Average Turnout by Partisan Election Status

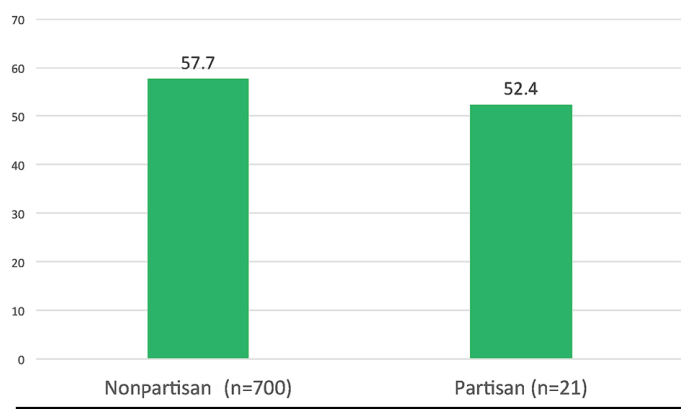


Party is not just a meaningful cue to voters; parties also have organizations, and these organizations can have a major effect on local politics. In terms of elections, local party organizations are apt to recruit candidates to run for local political office. In nonpartisan cities, local party organizations either (a) do not exist, or (b) do not actually engage in municipal politics. In either case, nonpartisan cities will not have a local party organization recruiting candidates for office, potentially leading to a higher rate of noncontestation.

In Figure 5.15, we compare the percentage of uncontested races for partisan and nonpartisan mayoral elections. We find a modest effect, with partisan elections being slightly less likely to be uncontested (52.4 percent) than nonpartisan elections (57.7 percent).

Two words of caution are warranted in regards to this analysis of partisan versus nonpartisan elections. The first is that there are very few observations from partisan elections. The second is that cities that use partisan elections differ from nonpartisan cities on other important factors. For

**Figure 5.15:** Percent of Unopposed Races by Partisan Election Status



instance, the average percentage of the population over 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher is 31.5 percent in nonpartisan cities, but 14.7 percent in partisan cities. Given this, more sophisticated multivariate models will be necessary to parse out the independent effect of partisan elections on mayoral elections in Kentucky.

## 6. Knight Community City: Lexington, Ky.

In this section of the report, we shine the spotlight on a Knight Foundation Resident Community City: Lexington, Ky. In Lexington, and the 25 other cities where John S. and James L. Knight owned newspapers, the Knight Foundation has invested more than \$841 million in community initiatives since its creation in 1950. Based on the premise that cities will only succeed when people feel responsible for actively shaping the future of their communities, Knight invests in ideas that create a culture of civic engagement. Together with its national network, the Knight Foundation seeks to inspire the actions of residents in each of its communities towards the goal of building a better democracy.

Lexington is located in Fayette County and has a population of nearly 300,000. Lexington is the second-largest city in Kentucky, and the 65th-largest city in the U.S. As of 2011, 40.1 percent of Lexington residents over age 25 have a bachelor's degree, compared to a Kentucky rate of 21.5 percent and a U.S. rate of 28.8 percent. By contrast, median household income (in 2013 dollars) in Lexington was \$48,391. While below the national average (\$53,046), this is slightly above the Kentucky average (\$43,036).

Lexington is best known as the major center of horse breeding in the U.S. Lexington, with some justification, and markets itself as the Horse Capital of the World. There are over 400 horse farms in Lexington, and more money is spent on the purchase of horses in Lexington

<sup>21</sup>Lexington Visitors Center: <http://www.visitlex.com/>

than anywhere else in the world.<sup>21</sup> Lexington also is home to the corporate headquarters of several notable corporations, including Lexmark International, a leading producer of laser printers; Rhino Resource Partners, a coal company; and Tempur-Sealy, a producer of mattresses and pillows.<sup>22</sup> Lexington is also the home of Kentucky's flagship public university, the University of Kentucky, which has approximately 30,000 students (undergraduate and graduate students).

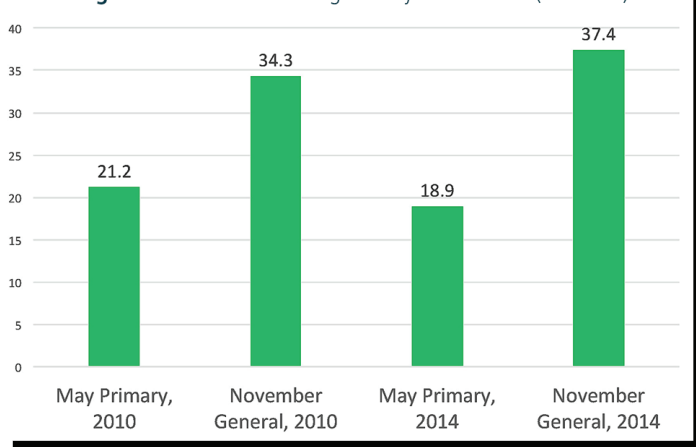
Lexington has been consolidated with Fayette County since 1974. Unlike the Louisville-Jefferson County consolidation, this was a full consolidation; no municipal governments exist under the Lexington/Fayette Urban-County Government. County and city functions are all handled by the consolidated government, which has a directly elected mayor (currently Jim Gray) and a 15-member urban county council. Twelve of the council's members are elected by districts and three are elected at-large. District-based councilors serve for two-year terms and may only be re-elected six times. At-large councilors serve for four-year terms and may only be re-elected three times. In addition, the at-large councilor who receives the most votes becomes vice mayor and presides over the council if the mayor is absent.

Lexington uses nonpartisan elections for city/county offices. Primary elections are held in May and general elections in November of midterm years. Any number of candidates may file for the nonpartisan primary; the top-two vote-earners go to the general election. It should be noted, however, that citizens can write-in votes for another candidate in the general election if they wish. As in all Kentucky mayoral elections, but unlike in many other states, a candidate cannot win the office itself by securing a majority of the vote in the primary. No matter the results of the primary, Lexington will hold a general election for mayor. In addition, mayoral elections are based on plurality rules, so there are no runoff elections. The candidate with the largest number of votes is the winner, regardless of whether this represents a majority of the votes.

Turnout in the 2010 and 2014 primary elections was 21.2 percent and 18.9 percent, respectively. By comparison, the average turnout in nonpartisan mayoral primaries between 2010 and 2014 was 24.4 percent. Turnout in the 2010 and 2014 general elections was 34.3 percent and 37.4 percent, respectively, compared to a statewide average of 37.6 percent for nonpartisan general elections. On the whole, we can say that turnout in Lexington is slightly below the state average.

On the positive side, neither the 2010 nor 2014 Lexington mayoral election was uncontested. Four candidates ran in the primary election of 2010 and three candidates ran in 2014. In addition, the 2010 mayoral election was highly contested by Kentucky standards. Vice Mayor Jim Gray won 53.3 percent to 46.7 percent over his rival, incumbent Mayor Jim Newberry. This marked only the second time in the history of the urban county government that an incumbent mayor had been defeated (perhaps ironically, the first such occasion was in 2006, when Newberry ousted Teresa Isaac). Gray's 6.5 percent margin of victory compares favorably with the average margin of victory in nonpartisan mayoral elections statewide from 2010–2014, 24.3 percent.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, Gray's margin of victory was much higher in 2014, defeating former police chief Anthony Beatty by 30.5 percent.

**Figure 6.1:** Turnout in Lexington Mayoral Elections (2010–14)



<sup>22</sup>From the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development. See: <https://www.thinkkentucky.com/kyedc/pdfs/Top25PubliclyTradedHQs.pdf>

<sup>23</sup>This number was calculated after excluding unopposed elections.

## 7. Appendices

### Kentucky Cities in the LEAP Dataset

#### City name

Adairville, Ky.	Camargo, Ky.	Elkton, Ky.	Harlan, Ky.
Albany, Ky.	Cambridge, Ky.	Elsmere, Ky.	Harrodsburg, Ky.
Alexandria, Ky.	Campbellsburg, Ky.	Eminence, Ky.	Hartford, Ky.
Allen, Ky.	Campbellsville, Ky.	Erlanger, Ky.	Hawesville, Ky.
Anchorage, Ky.	Caneyville, Ky.	Eubank, Ky.	Hazard, Ky.
Arlington, Ky.	Carrollton, Ky.	Evarts, Ky.	Hazel, Ky.
Ashland, Ky.	Carrsville, Ky.	Ewing, Ky.	Hebron Estates, Ky.
Auburn, Ky.	Catlettsburg, Ky.	Fairfield, Ky.	Henderson, Ky.
Audubon Park, Ky.	Cave City, Ky.	Fairview, Ky.	Heritage Creek, Ky.
Augusta, Ky.	Centertown, Ky.	Falmouth, Ky.	Hickman, Ky.
Bancroft, Ky.	Central City, Ky.	Ferguson, Ky.	Hickory Hill, Ky.
Barbourmeade, Ky.	Clarkson, Ky.	Fincastle, Kentucky	Highland Heights, Ky.
Bardstown, Ky.	Clay, Ky.	Flatwoods city, Ky.	Hills and Dales, Ky.
Bardwell, Ky.	Clinton, Ky.	Fleming-Neon, Ky.	Hillview, Ky.
Barlow, Ky.	Cloverport, Ky.	Flemingsburg, Ky.	Hindman, Ky.
Beaver Dam, Ky.	Coal Run Village, Ky.	Florence, Ky.	Hodgenville, Ky.
Bedford, Ky.	Cold Spring, Ky.	Fordsville, Ky.	Hollow Creek, Ky.
Beechwood Village, Ky.	Coldstream, Ky.	Forest Hills, Ky.	Hollyvilla, Ky.
Bellefonte, Ky.	Columbia, Ky.	Fort Mitchell, Ky.	Hopkinsville, Ky.
Bellemeade, Ky.	Columbus, Ky.	Fort Thomas, Ky.	Horse Cave, Ky.
Bellevue, Ky.	Corbin, Ky.	Fort Wright, Ky.	Houston Acres, Ky.
Bellewood, Ky..	Corinth, Ky.	Fountain Run, Ky.	Hunters Hollow city, Ky.
Benham, Ky.	Corydon, Ky.	Fox Chase, Ky.	Hurstbourne Acres, Ky.
Benton, Ky.	Covington, Ky.	Frankfort, Ky.	Hurstbourne, Ky.
Berea, Ky.	Crab Orchard, Ky.	Franklin, Ky.	Hustonville, Ky.
Berry, Ky.	Creekside, Ky.	Fredonia, Ky.	Hyden, Ky.
Blaine, Ky.	Crescent Springs, Ky.	Frenchburg, Ky.	Independence, Ky.
Bloomfield, Ky.	Crestview Hills, Ky.	Fulton, Ky.	Indian Hills, Ky.
Blue Ridge Manor, Ky.	Crestview, Ky.	Gamaliel, Ky.	Inez, Ky.
Bonnieville, Ky.	Crestwood, Ky.	Georgetown, Ky.	Irvine, Ky.
Bowling Green, Ky.	Crittenden, Ky.	Germantown, Ky.	Irvington, Ky.
Bradfordsville, Ky.	Crofton, Ky.	Ghent, Ky.	Island, Ky.
Brandenburg, Ky.	Crossgate, Ky.	Glasgow, Ky.	Jackson, Ky.
Bremen, Ky.	Cumberland, Ky.	Glencoe, Ky.	Jamestown, Ky.
Briarwood, Ky.	Cynthiana, Ky.	Glenview Hills, Ky.	Jeffersontown, Ky.
Brodhead, Ky.	Danville, Ky.	Glenview Manor, Ky.	Jeffersonville, Ky.
Broeck Pointe, Ky.	Dawson Springs, Ky.	Glenview, Ky.	Jenkins, Ky.
Bromley, Ky.	Dayton, Ky.	Goose Creek, Ky.	Junction City, Ky.
Brooksville, Ky.	Dixon, Ky.	Goshen, Ky.	Kenton Vale, Ky.
Brownsboro Farm, Ky.	Douglass Hills, Ky.	Grand Rivers, Ky.	Kevil, Ky.
Brownsboro Village, Ky.	Dover, Ky.	Gratz, Ky.	Kingsley, Ky.
Brownsville, Ky.	Drakesboro, Ky.	Graymoor-Devondale, Ky.	Kuttawa, Ky.
Buckhorn, Ky.	Druid Hills, Ky.	Grayson, Ky.	La Center, Ky.
Burgin, Ky.	Dry Ridge, Ky.	Green Spring, Ky.	La Grange, Ky.
Burkesville, Ky.	Earlington, Ky.	Greensburg, Ky.	LaFayette, Ky.
Burnside, Ky.	Eddyville, Ky.	Greenup, Ky.	Lakeside Park, Ky.
Butler, Ky.	Edgewood, Ky.	Greenville, Ky.	Lakeview Heights, Ky.
Cadiz, Ky.	Edmonton, Ky.	Guthrie, Ky.	Lancaster, Ky.
Calhoun, Ky.	Ekron, Ky.	Hanson, Ky.	Langdon Place, Ky.
California, Ky.	Elizabethtown, Ky.	Hardin, Ky.	Lawrenceburg, Ky.
Calvert City, Ky.	Elkhorn City, Ky.	Hardinsburg, Ky.	Lebanon Junction, Ky.



Lebanon, Ky.  
 Leitchfield, Ky.  
 Lewisburg, Ky.  
 Lewisport, Ky.  
 Lexington-Fayette  
     Urban County, Ky.  
 Lincolnshire, Ky.  
 Livermore, Ky.  
 Livingston, Ky.  
 London, Ky.  
 Loretto, Ky.  
 Louisa, Ky.  
 Louisville/Jefferson County  
     Metro, Ky.  
 Loyall, Ky.  
 Ludlow, Ky.  
 Lynch, Ky.  
 Lyndon, Ky.  
 Lynnview, Ky.  
 Mackville, Ky.  
 Madisonville, Ky.  
 Manchester, Ky.  
 Manor Creek, Ky.  
 Marion, Ky.  
 Martin, Ky.  
 Maryhill Estates, Ky.  
 Mayfield, Ky.  
 Maysville, Ky.  
 McHenry, Ky.  
 McKee, Ky.  
 Meadow Vale, Ky.  
 Meadowbrook Farm, Ky.  
 Meadowview Estates, Ky.  
 Melbourne, Ky.  
 Mentor, Ky.  
 Middletown, Ky.  
 Midway, Ky.  
 Millersburg, Ky.  
 Milton, Ky.  
 Mockingbird Valley, Ky.  
 Monterey, Ky.  
 Monticello, Ky.  
 Moorland, Ky.  
 Morehead, Ky.  
 Morganfield, Ky.  
 Morgantown, Ky.  
 Mortons Gap, Ky.  
 Mount Sterling, Ky.  
 Mount Vernon, Ky.  
 Mount Washington, Ky.  
 Muldraugh, Ky.

Munfordville, Ky.  
 Murray Hill, Ky.  
 Murray, Ky.  
 Nebo, Ky.  
 New Castle, Ky.  
 New Haven, Ky.  
 Newport, Ky.  
 Nicholasville, Ky.  
 Norbourne Estates, Ky.  
 North Middletown, Ky.  
 Northfield, Ky.  
 Nortonville, Ky.  
 Norwood, Ky.  
 Oak Grove, Ky.  
 Oakland, Ky.  
 Old Brownsboro Place, Ky.  
 Olive Hill, Ky.  
 Orchard Grass Hills, Ky.  
 Owensboro, Ky.  
 Owenton, Ky.  
 Owingsville, Ky.  
 Paducah, Ky.  
 Paintsville, Ky.  
 Paris city, Kentucky  
 Park City, Ky.  
 Park Hills, Ky.  
 Parkway Village, Ky.  
 Pembroke, Ky.  
 Perryville, Ky.  
 Pewee Valley, Ky.  
 Pikeville, Ky.  
 Pioneer Village, Ky.  
 Pippa Passes city, Kentucky  
 Plantation, Ky.  
 Pleasureville, Ky.  
 Plum Springs, Ky.  
 Poplar Hills, Ky.  
 Powderly, Ky.  
 Prestonsburg, Ky.  
 Prestonville, Ky.  
 Princeton, Ky.  
 Prospect, Ky.  
 Providence, Ky.  
 Raceland, Ky.  
 Radcliff, Ky.  
 Ravenna, Ky.  
 Raywick, Ky.  
 Richlawn, Ky.  
 Richmond, Ky.  
 River Bluff , Ky.  
 Riverwood, Ky.

Robards, Ky.  
 Rochester, Ky.  
 Rockport, Ky.  
 Rolling Fields, Ky.  
 Rolling Hills, Ky.  
 Russell Springs, Ky.  
 Russell, Ky.  
 Russellville, Ky.  
 Ryland Heights, Ky.  
 Sacramento, Ky.  
 Sadieville, Ky.  
 Salem, Ky.  
 Salt Lick, Ky.  
 Salyersville, Ky.  
 Sanders, Ky.  
 Sandy Hook, Ky.  
 Sardis, Ky.  
 Science Hill, Ky.  
 Scottsville, Ky.  
 Sebree, Ky.  
 Seneca Gardens, Ky.  
 Sharpsburg, Ky.  
 Shelbyville, Ky.  
 Shepherdsville, Ky.  
 Shively, Ky.  
 Silver Grove, Ky.  
 Simpsonville, Ky.  
 Slaughters, Ky.  
 Smithfield, Ky.  
 Smithland, Ky.  
 Smiths Grove, Ky.  
 Somerset, Ky.  
 Sonora, Ky.  
 South Carrollton, Ky.  
 South Park View, Ky.  
 South Shore, Ky.  
 Southgate, Ky.  
 Sparta, Ky.  
 Spring Mill, Ky.  
 Spring Valley, Ky.  
 Springfield, Ky.  
 St. Charles, Ky.  
 St. Matthews, Ky.  
 St. Regis Park, Ky.  
 Stamping Ground, Ky.  
 Stanford, Ky.  
 Strathmoor Manor, Ky.  
 Strathmoor Village, Ky.  
 Sturgis, Ky.  
 Sycamore, Ky.  
 Taylor Mill, Ky.

Taylorsville, Ky.  
 Ten Broeck, Ky.  
 Thornhill, Ky.  
 Tompkinsville, Ky.  
 Trenton, Ky.  
 Union, Ky.  
 Uniontown, Ky.  
 Upton, Ky.  
 Versailles, Ky.  
 Vicco, Ky.  
 Villa Hills, Ky.  
 Vine Grove, Ky.  
 Walton, Ky.  
 Warfield, Ky.  
 Warsaw, Ky.  
 Water Valley, Ky.  
 Watterson Park, Ky.  
 Waverly, Ky.  
 Wayland, Ky.  
 Wellington, Ky.  
 West Buechel, Ky.  
 West Point, Ky.  
 Westwood, Ky.  
 Wheatcroft, Ky.  
 Wheelwright, Ky.  
 White Plains, Ky.  
 Whitesburg, Ky.  
 Whitesville, Ky.  
 Wickliffe, Ky.  
 Wilder, Ky.  
 Wildwood, Ky.  
 Williamsburg, Ky.  
 Williamstown, Ky.  
 Willisburg, Ky.  
 Wilmore, Ky.  
 Winchester, Ky.  
 Windy Hills, Ky.  
 Wingo, Ky.  
 Woodburn, Ky.  
 Woodbury, Ky.  
 Woodland Hills, Ky.  
 Woodlawn Park, Ky.  
 Woodlawn, Ky.  
 Worthington Hills, Ky.  
 Worthington, Ky.  
 Worthville, Ky.  
 Wurtland, Ky.

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