

## **Testimony of John Ketcham on HB 1339**

January 21, 2025

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify on HB 1339. My name is John Ketcham, and I am a legal policy fellow and director of Cities at the Manhattan Institute. The views I express today are solely my own, not my employer's.

The timing of local elections plays a critical role in shaping democratic participation, representativeness, and the effectiveness of local government. Odd-year local elections consistently see far lower turnout than those held alongside federal contests, reducing political competition and increasing the influence of special interests, particularly public-sector unions. Low-turnout local races allow small but highly motivated groups of voters like public employees to determine outcomes that affect the entire population.

Research shows that moving local general elections to even numbered years is the single most impactful way to raise voter participation. Cities such as Phoenix, Arizona; Austin, Texas; El Paso, Texas; and Baltimore, Maryland experienced turnout increases of between 240% and 460% after adopting this reform for mayoral elections. Such sharp increases generally exceed the effects of ballot roll-off.

Higher turnout can dilute the influence of special-interest groups by raising the cost of reaching a sufficient number of voters to win an election. Moreover, evidence suggests that this reform does not consistently advantage one party over another. Instead, it requires that candidates from all parties engage with the needs and preferences of a broader and more representative electorate.

By allowing localities to move their general elections to even numbered years, HB 1339 offers a straightforward way to enhance political competition, increase democratic participation, and reduce special-interest influence.

Thank you.

### **Follow up email to members of the Washington House Appropriations Committee:**

Dear Rep. [Name],

My name is John Ketcham, and I am the director of cities at the Manhattan Institute, where my research includes the timing of local elections. I am reaching out to you in your capacity as a member of the House Appropriations Committee as you consider HB 1339, relating to shifting general elections for local governments to even-numbered years to increase voter participation. The purpose of my email is to provide additional information to assist in your deliberations on this matter.

Across the U.S., local elections held on odd-numbered years consistently generate far lower turnout than those held concurrently with federal elections on even-numbered years. This dampens political competition, increases the influence of special interests, and raises administrative costs, producing less representative and effective governance.

Special interests like public-sector unions routinely leverage low turnout in off-cycle elections to help elect their preferred candidates. For example, Professor Sarah Anzia of UC Berkeley has found that teachers and firefighters receive higher compensation in localities that hold their municipal and school board elections on dates that do not coincide with state and federal elections.<sup>1</sup> Local elected officials weighing decisions in the public interest shouldn't fear being unseated in a low-turnout election disproportionately influenced by such interest groups.

Allowing local governments to move their elections to even-numbered years is the single most effective way to increase local voter participation. In Austin, Texas, Baltimore, Maryland, and Phoenix, Arizona, turnout in mayoral elections increased between 240% and 361% after moving to even-numbered years.<sup>2</sup>

Higher turnout yields important second-order benefits. It dilutes the influence of special-interest groups by raising the cost of reaching a sufficient number of voters to win an election. A larger electorate is more likely to evaluate candidates on a broader array of considerations, rather than the narrow interests of groups like homeowners, real estate developers, and public-sector unions. As a result, even-year elections incentivize elected leaders to make decisions that better reflect the preferences of a majority of constituents.<sup>3</sup>

This closer representativeness does not come at the expense of one political party over another—it is not a pro-Republican or pro-Democratic reform. Studies have found that moving to even-year elections has no discernible partisan impact.<sup>4</sup> Candidates from all parties must instead be more responsive to the preferences of an expanded and more representative electorate.

Finally, aligning local elections with state and federal elections could save on total administrative costs by having fewer election days across the state. Under Washington State law, when political subdivisions hold their elections on “an isolated date, all costs of such elections must be borne by the county, city, town, or district concerned,”<sup>5</sup> whereas the state assumes a prorated share of the costs of administering state and federal elections.<sup>6</sup> Election consolidation can thus conserve local resources.

In short, as MI senior fellow Michael Hartney has written, “Consolidating to on-cycle elections offers a rare opportunity to forge bipartisan support for election reform that ‘does no harm.’”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Anzia, “Election Timing and the Electoral Influence of Interest Groups,” *Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (2011): 412–27; Sarah Anzia, *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Citizens Union, “Moving Municipal Elections to Even-Numbered Years,” (2022): 22.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hartney, “Revitalizing Local Democracy: The Case for On-Cycle Local Elections,” *Manhattan Institute* (2021): 5.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Justin de Benedictis-Kessner & Christopher Warshaw, “The Electoral and Policy Effects of Election Timing in City and County Governments,” (2024); Zoltan Hajnal, “Too Many Elections,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2025), <https://ssir.org/articles/entry/election-consolidation-voting-reform>.

<sup>5</sup> RCW 29A.04.410.

<sup>6</sup> RCW 29A.04.420.

<sup>7</sup> Hartney, “Revitalizing Local Democracy,” at 8.

I hope that this information is useful and helpful, and I welcome any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

John Ketcham