

# Saturday run-off elections

A review of research and empirical evidence from  
Houston City Elections, 1979-2013

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# The Research Questions

- Should the City of Houston continue conducting municipal runoff elections on Saturday?
- What should be the basis of deciding whether to continue conducting municipal runoff elections on Saturday?
  - What are costs and benefits of conducting a Saturday versus Tuesday runoff election?
  - What other means are available to the city to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs associated with weekday or Saturday runoff elections?

# Brief history of Houston City Elections: 1979-2013

- In 1989 the City of Houston began conducting municipal runoff elections on Saturday.
- In 1987 the City of Houston extended the campaign period between general and runoff municipal elections from two to four weeks.
- In 1991 the City of Houston adopted term limits for elective offices (i.e., Mayor, Controller and City Council).
- Approximately 70% of voter turnout in the 1979 City of Houston municipal election was Anglo. In 2012 the Anglo share of turnout in City of Houston election was approximately 55%.

# Costs of weekend voting

- Administrative costs of elections could be higher on Saturday
  - Polling place location rental fees are higher on days when public facilities are not open e.g., schools closed on weekend.
  - Lack of available poll workers, less willing to work on the weekends
  - Traditional polling places e.g., churches might not be available on weekends.

# Benefits of weekend voting

- Greater convenience for voters i.e., less conflict with work, school and weekday activities.
- Higher voter turnout and great legitimacy for the election results.

# Polling day practices in Texas and other states and cities?

- Since 1989 City of Houston has held runoff elections on Saturday.
- Since 1991 Texas has had weekend (Saturday and Sunday) voting as part of in-person early voting
- Five states including Texas and District of Columbia require local jurisdictions to include at least one Saturday of in-person early voting. Other states give local jurisdictions discretion to include weekend voting

# What does previous research show about weekend voting?

- Evidence from comparative literature i.e., European countries, is that weekend elections increase voter turnout especially for 'second-order' elections i.e., non-national (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Franklin et al 1996; Smith 1999; Mattila 2003).
- Matching electoral contests for other offices and levels of government increases voter turnout, especially for weekend (Sunday) elections (Smith 1999).
- U.S. studies of weekend voting show modest turnout effects. The best evidence is from early voting which shows little turnout effect (Stein 1996; Gronke 2008).

# Early Voting and voter turnout

Research does not suggest a significant turnout effect from in-person early voting

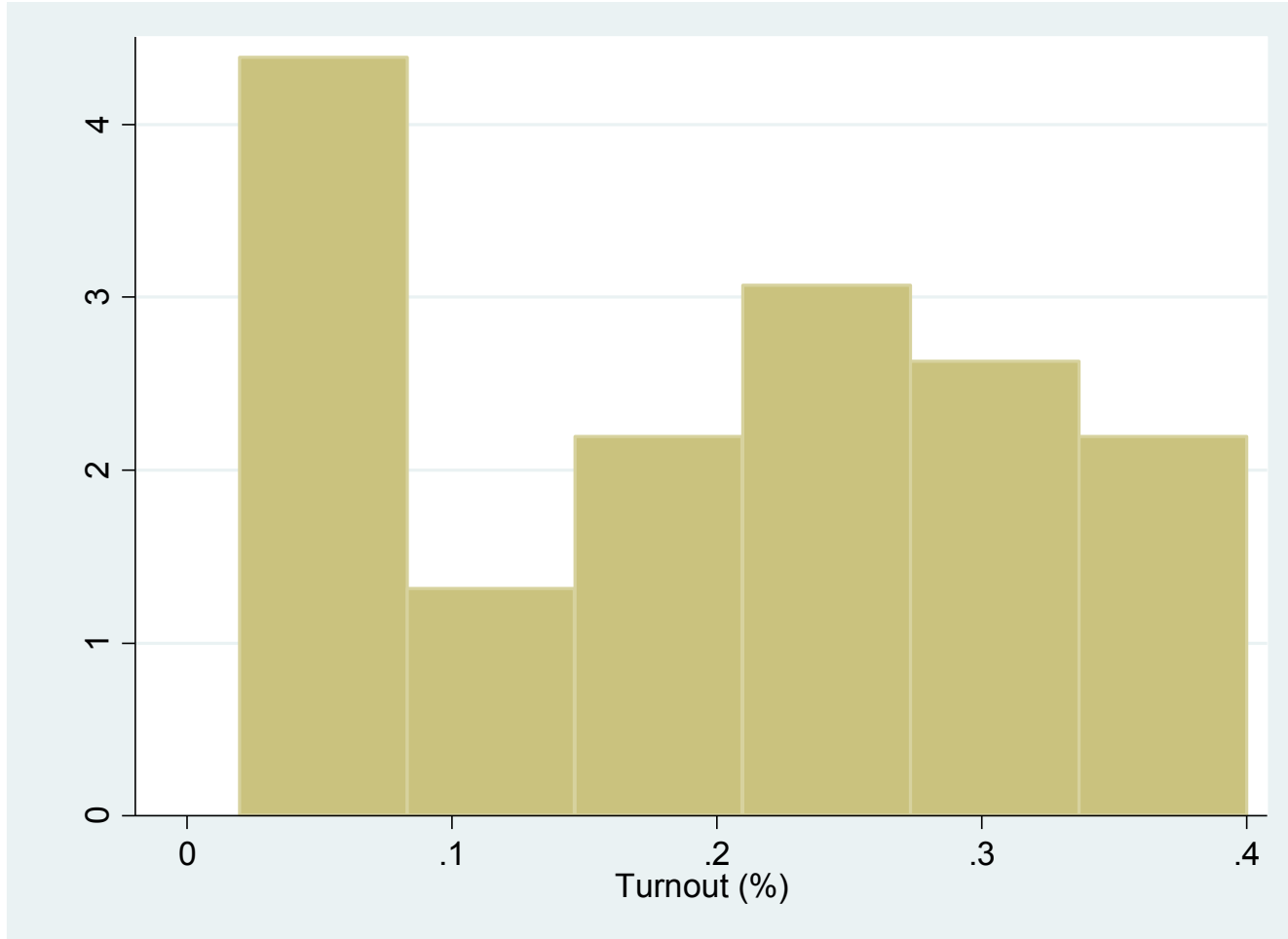
- Voters, do, however, strongly prefer in-person early voting for its convenience.
- In-person early voting has grown as a percent of vote cast from 10% to nearly 40% between 1980 and 2012. In Texas approximately 60% of vote cast in 2012 Presidential election was cast in-person before Election Day.
- Attributes of early voting practices –voting at any polling place and a small number larger polling places– are associated with higher voter turnout, attributes that can be applied to Election Day voting.



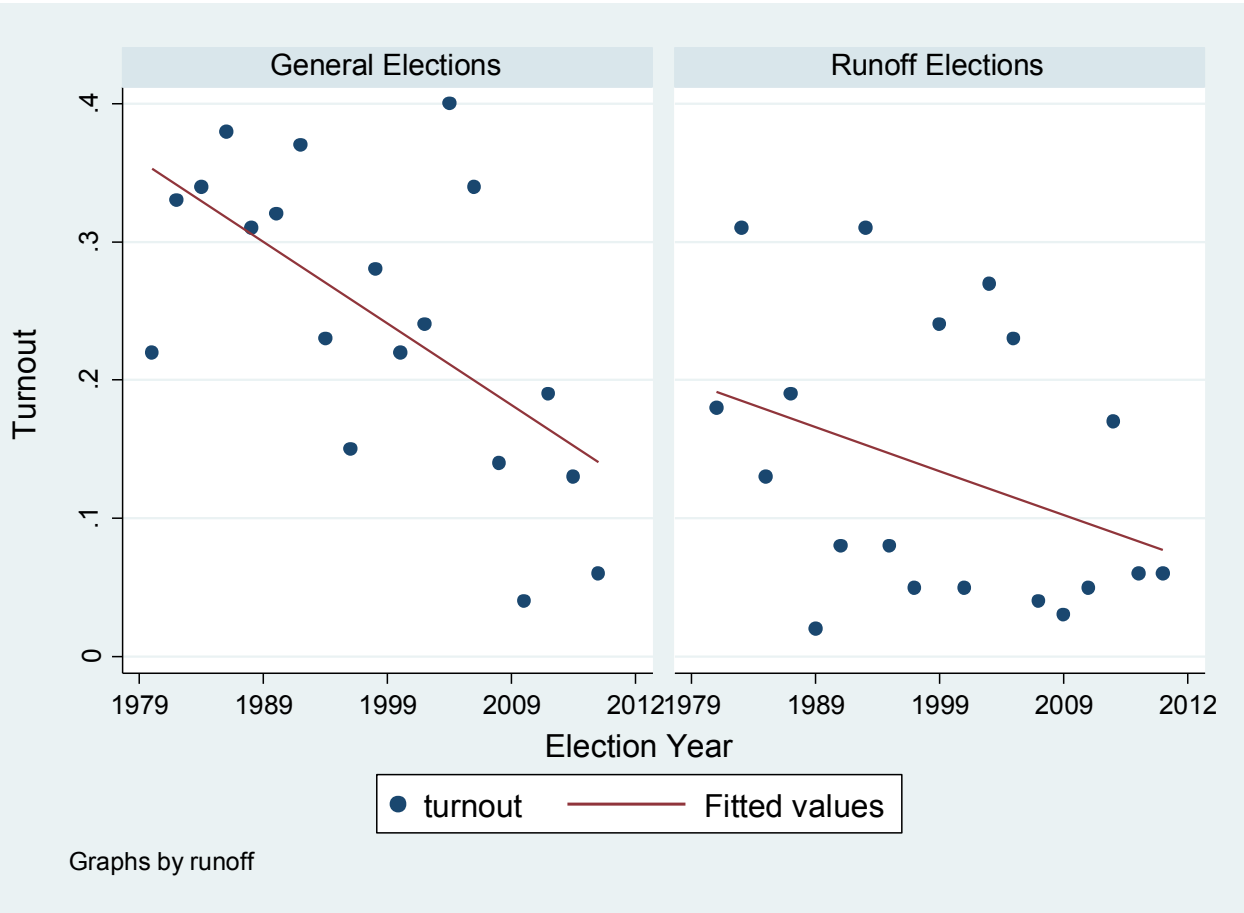
# Research Design

- Analysis of all City of Houston elections between 1979-2012 (N=36)
- Dependent variable:
  - Voter turnout
- Independent variables:
  - Type of election: general/runoff
  - Day of week: Tuesday/Saturday
  - Number of candidate contests
  - Number of non-candidate contests
  - Saturday runoff election (adopted in 1987)
  - Length of runoff campaign (changed in 1989)
  - Time and the change in the COH electorate
  - *Future research will examine the cost of conducting elections and its effect on turnout.*

# Voter turnout in COH elections: 1979-2012



# Distribution of COH Elections by Voter Turnout: 1979-2013



Mean Turnout in City of Houston Elections:  
1979-2012  
(Std. Dev.)

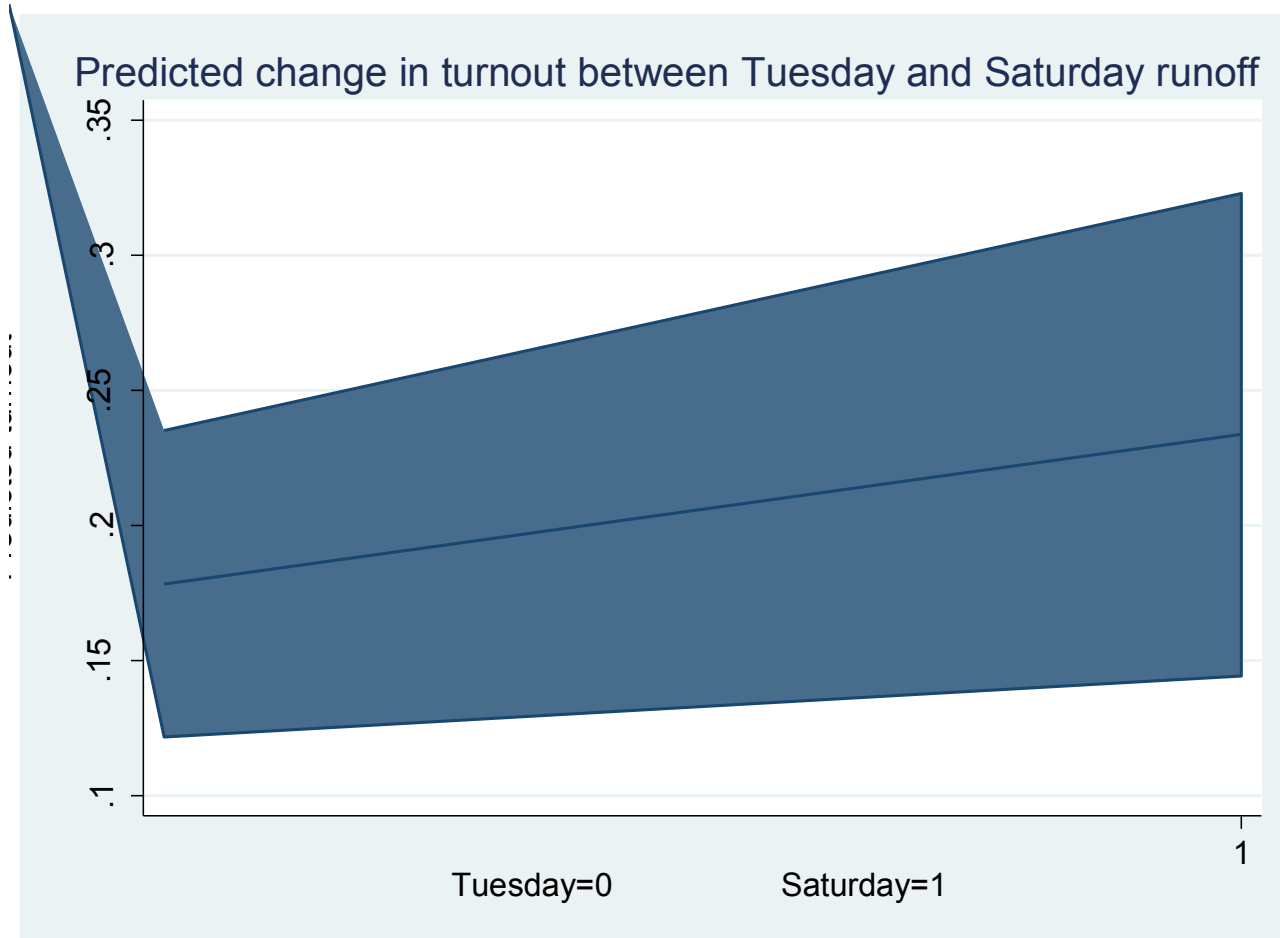
All Elections	General Elections	Runoff Elections		
		All	Tuesday	Saturday
(N=36)	(N=18)	(N=18)	(N=5)	(N=13)
19.0%	24.6%	13.4%	16.6%	12.3%
(11.7)	(10.7)	(9.9)	(10.5)	(9.8)

- Difference in voter turnout between Tuesday and Saturday runoff elections is statistically significant i.e.,  $P < .005$
- All Tuesday runoff elections occurred before 1989, all Saturday runoff elections occurred after 1989.

## Regression estimates of voter turnout in COH elections: 1979-2013

Variables	Turnout (%)
Runoff election	<b>-0.177**</b>
	(0.084)
Sat. runoff election	0.055
	(0.067)
# Candidates	-0.000
	(0.001)
# non-candidate contests	-0.000
	(0.002)
Time	<b>-0.005**</b>
	(0.002)
Constant	0.376***
	(0.089)
Observations	36
R-squared	0.420

# Predicted effect of Tuesday and Saturday runoff elections on voter turnout controlling for other correlates of voter participation: 1979-2013



Shaded area is 95% confidence interval

# Findings and conclusions

- On average, voter turnout for runoff elections has been significantly ( $P < .05$ ) higher when these elections are conducted on Tuesdays than on Saturdays.
- When controlling for other factors that influence voter turnout, Saturday runoff elections have a slightly but *not* statistically significant higher turnout rate than Tuesday runoff elections.
- Since 1979 voter participation has declined in both general and runoff city elections.
  - The decline in turnout over time may be attributed to the change in the composition of COH electorate or other changes in the administration of city elections e.g., the number, location and staffing of polling places.
- Change in the length of time between general and runoff elections, number of candidate and non-candidate contests on the runoff ballot and the adoption of term limits are unrelated to voter turnout for either general or runoff elections.

# Polling place location and operations: An alternative explanation of voter turnout

- There is increasing evidence that where voters ballot has an independent effect on the likelihood a voter will vote (Stein and Vonnahme 2008).
- A smaller number of larger voting places with ample parking, roadway accessibility, larger number of machines and poll workers and close to where voters work, shop, and travel increases voter turnout (Stein and Vonnahme 2012).
- Saturday runoff voting place locations may mitigate some of the observed negative effect of Saturday runoff elections on turnout.



## Election Day vote centers:

### Non-precinct based Election Day voting places

- Election day non-precinct voting (i.e., early voting on Election Day)
- Smaller number of larger polling places
- Polling places more centrally located to which individuals work, shop, travel during the day
- More efficient use of polling equipment and personnel

# Recommendations

- Analyze cost of conducting elections to identify whether costs of weekday and weekend elections are different and why.
- Study polling place locations and operations to identify turnout effects between Tuesday and Saturday runoff elections.
  - Compare current/past polling place locations and operations with voter turnout.
  - Conduct an exit poll of November 2013 voters about their preferences for a Saturday versus weekday runoff election and their preferences for polling place location.
  - Consider adoption of Election Day vote centers as currently practiced in Travis, Collin, Lubbock counties and several counties in Indiana and Colorado.