

VIEWPOINT

HEALTH AND THE 2024 US ELECTION

Elevating the Importance of Local Elections

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It is nearly impossible to escape headlines focused on national races atop the 2024 election ballot. There is constant media attention on national politics, but relatively little coverage on the race for metropolitan water reclamation commissioner, county auditor, or town supervisor. Although the national stage is certainly important, the effect of local politics on health can be overlooked.

Many policies, such as firearm safety, education, and assistance for food and housing, factor centrally into the 2024 election up and down the ballot. As an example, firearm injuries are the leading cause of death in children in the US. The city council in Naperville, Illinois, voted to ban high-powered rifles in August 2022 and the Illinois General Assembly passed the Protect Illinois Communities Act, which regulates assault weapons, in January 2023. But there is no federal assault weapons ban.

All powers not specifically granted to the federal government are reserved for the states and the people.¹ Despite this, people tend to vote for what they perceive as important—races on the top of the ballot. Many people who vote in national elections choose to vote for a specific political party through the entire ballot. Many more people leave the lower parts of the ballot blank because there is a drop-off in voter engagement as races

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go down the ballot from the national election to the state and local races. Engagement and voter turnout also decrease during nonpresidential election years. Increased engagement both across the ballot and across the election calendar strengthens towns, cities, and communities, bolstering democracy and improving health outcomes. Health professionals can play a critical role in promoting such engagement.

In Cincinnati, Ohio, like many cities, life expectancy varies by 25 years between neighborhoods separated by mere miles.² Social determinants of health, or nonmedical drivers, are at the root of such inequities. Social determinants of health, which are the "conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age,"³ are thought to account for more than 80% of the variation in health outcomes. Local conditions influence local health outcomes. The minimum wage, property taxes, education, affordable housing, and COVID-19 pandemic recovery influence the social determinants of health and are determined in large part by the outcomes of local elections.

Why Are Local Ballots Important?

The US has almost 90 000 local governments with hundreds of thousands of locally elected officials.⁴ And yet estimates suggest that although roughly two-thirds of eligible voters vote in presidential elections, just half vote in midterm elections, 15% in municipal elections, and 5% to 10% in hyperlocal jurisdictional elections (eg, school board elections).⁵ These numbers are startling in and of themselves, but they do not tell the whole story. Down-ballot roll-off, a phenomenon in which voters select candidates for high-level, often national, offices and leave the rest of their ballot blank, means that true participation in local elections is even less than the already low numbers officially reported.

There is regional variation in elected positions and their functions, but local leaders and governing boards have enormous influence overall in the conditions of daily life. School boards, sheriffs, prosecutors, coroners, trial judges, city councilors, mayors, county supervisors, planning and zoning commissioners, public works commissioners, and comptrollers control \$2 trillion annually.⁶ The result of poor voter turnout is that fewer people have chosen the officials who decide how these dollars are spent and who determine which issues to focus on, including the issues that directly affect the lives and health of the constituents.

Consider school boards. They shape hyperlocal budgets, curricula, and resource allocation.⁶ School boards recently have become a battleground for social change, often to the detriment of students. Across the country, agitators have disrupted school board meetings and promoted school board candidates with policy agendas that include rolling back COVID-19-related protocols, prohibiting teaching of critical race theory, erasing education about racism and slavery, banning books, and promoting policies that marginalize lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), asexual (or allied), intersex youth. These policies directly harm students who are often mandated to continue their education in unsafe, occasionally hostile environments. In many cases, agitators do not live in or have students in the school district; they gain influence by showing up when others stay home, taking advantage of historically low participation at school board meetings and in local elections.

Other elected offices may be more relevant to health than their titles suggest. For example, the Texas agriculture commissioner plays a critical role in the oversight of health education for the state. The Texas railroad commissioner has little to do with trains, but does play an important role in policy decisions affecting climate change, another topic critically relevant to health. Races for such

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positions have an undeniable effect on the health and well-being of communities, yet they are frequently ignored. Beyond such seemingly obscure positions, consider the legal philosophy of locally elected judges, the strategic direction of prosecutors, and the votes on school levies or funding for a community library.

The 2024, 2028, and 2032 elections, and the quadrennial elections to come, will continue to be of vital importance. But individuals must not leave the lower section of ballots blank. The 2025, 2026, and 2027 elections (sometimes referred to as midterm and off-year elections) and the opportunities to vote that arise at odd times throughout each year (including runoff elections, ballot measures, and levies) must not be ignored. There is nothing off about the importance of these elections. Elections are won or lost by who chooses to vote and who chooses to stay home.

Beyond the Ballot

It is critical that individuals go to the polls and make informed choices about all policies and initiatives that are on the ballot and that they encourage others to do the same. Evidence-based approaches should be used to directly engage with locally elected officials and guide policies that affect the health of communities (eg, housing, immigration, crime and policing, and health care access).

Furthermore, health professionals should consider running for office in federal, state, and local races. Physicians and nurses have

run for and won elections at all levels, bringing critical perspective with them into office. In 2018, Kimberly Schrier, MD, became the first pediatrician elected to the US House of Representatives. Local elections are just as important. Health professionals should consider running not just for national positions, but also for state and local offices. Doing so could help shape health-relevant policy.

Conclusions

A ballot has more than 1 page for a reason. The decisions made in municipal buildings and at city halls across the county may have just as many direct effects on the health of communities as the decisions made in the White House, at the capitol, or in the US Supreme Court. As health professionals, we have a role to play to prioritize health and well-being through engagement in every election and across the ballot.

Moreover, health professionals should ensure that candidates and voters are educated about the health-relevant issues on the ballots. Although only some health professionals may choose to run for office, all health professionals can ensure that the local nature of health is never forgotten by promoting patient-, family-, and community-centered policies in all elections and at all levels of government. It is time to buck historical trends and become more active in the decisions shaping localities by showing up and standing up at every opportunity—not just every 4 years.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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