

Low Voter Turn Out at Local Elections

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Note: Although this article refers to Maynard, Massachusetts specifically, this issue is typical among other towns in Massachusetts, and in many other places.)

Historically, turn out at Maynard's town elections has been very low. Last year's town [election report, \(May 2022\)](#), for Maynard is available here:

<https://www.townofmaynard-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1060/Annual-Town-Election-May-3-2022-PDF?bidId=>

This report shows that there were over 8,000 registered voters in Maynard at the time, but just over 600 voted. At the bottom, it shows "Voter Turnout 7.4%"

Compare that to the state election the following November, that same year (2022), [here](#):

<https://www.townofmaynard-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1079/State-Election-November-8-2022-PDF?bidId=>

The vote totals are near the top of this page. It shows that 60% of voters came to the polls. The contrast is even more stark when comparing the [results from November 2020](#), when there was a presidential election as well:

<https://www.townofmaynard-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1072/State-Election-November-3-2020-PDF?bidId=>

At the bottom of that page it shows a turn out of 83%

So why is there such a big disparity? 83% in Nov. 2020, 60% in Nov. 2022, but only 7% locally? Why would so few voters come to the polls for local

elections? After all, with many fewer voters than there are in state or national elections, it would seem that an individual vote would be more likely to influence the result.

I hear people say it's due to "voter apathy" or "people just don't care anymore" and so forth. But *I don't buy that*; I don't think it's right to blame the voters themselves. I think there are some very important reasons that voters are discouraged. Here are a few:

1. Scheduling. In Massachusetts, there are essentially two kinds of municipalities, cities and towns. Federal, state, and local city elections all take place in November, on the first Tuesday. Only towns have their elections in the spring instead. To make matters worse, each town sets its own election day, so there is no state wide heads-up or regional news coverage for these elections. Unless you're paying close attention, they're easy to miss.

2. Separate ballot. Races for offices in cities appear on the same ballot as the federal and state ones do (in November). As voters are already going to the polls, it's natural to vote for everything at once. But for towns, there is nothing in November to alert voters about elections in the Spring.

3. Voter Information Lacking. In order to feel confident when voting, voters want to know as much as they can about the candidates running. Most of us get our information from news media, whether it be on TV, radio, newspapers, or online sources. Those sources have frequent reports about races and candidates for state and federal offices. But when it comes to individual towns in Massachusetts, there are almost no news media left available to provide information (see "No News?" a separate article on the Town Wide Mall Articles page).

4. Paucity of candidates. The sample ballot for this election in Maynard (May 2023) shows six races. In five of them, the number of candidates exactly matches the number of seats open, so candidates are running uncontested. In *only one race*, a one year open position for the Select Board (no incumbent), are there two candidates vying for one seat. So, essentially, voters are being asked to go to the polls to elect one of two people for just one seat on the 5 seat Select Board. The rest will "win" whether voters vote

for them or not; it's highly unlikely that a write-in candidate will win instead.

5. Complexity of Government. Although Maynard is a small town, when compared with others nearby (5 square miles and 11,000 population), it still has to provide all the services of any town, many of which are mandated by state law. We have a public school system as well as departments of fire, police, roads, buildings, water, sewer, recreation and parks, cemeteries, and libraries. Almost all employees are union members, for which contracts must be negotiated, based on state and federal laws. Therefore, even the officials we elect have very limited power over many of the town's operations and functions, as most of what they do must conform to all these laws, regulations, and contracts.

6. Our legislative branch. When this election is over, we're still not done. The officials we elect do not determine the town's budget, (and the basis for the tax rate), nor do they have the power to enact or amend the town's bylaws or zoning bylaws. All that is decided at [Town Meeting, 12 days later](#), (< – – see link), where registered voters are invited to show up to vote on all those things. For those new to town, Town Meeting is formally known as a "unicameral legislature." That's like a "House" without a "Senate." In this case, unlike at the state and federal level, the "representatives" in our "congress" are not elected by the voters, they *are the voters* (well, ... the ones who attend, at least). (I won't go into further detail about how Town Meeting works here; I plan to provide a separate article on that soon.)

7. If it works, don't fix it. When considering local government, many citizens hesitate before they even get started. It's easy to end up with a feeling of fatigue before even getting started. First, many have lives filled with obligations, such as working (sometimes more than one job), caring for children or elderly relatives, keeping house, managing finances, and trying to get enough sleep! Second, as I mentioned in item 5, above, local government is very complex. Understanding the issues takes time and patience. One must wade through documents with obtuse terminology, understand government finances and budgeting, and likely attend or watch coverage of lengthy meetings where people hash out various aspects of the issues at hand.

One way to handle all this is to boil it down to two things: One, local government still functions, at least acceptably overall; it hasn't devolved into abject chaos or run away corruption. "I guess I'll have to live with what we have, more or less." Two, their thinking goes something like this, "There must be other people who are better at this than I am, so I'll defer to their efforts and wisdom. I just don't have the time and energy to really do it justice. I don't want to walk into the voting booth without any idea of what I'm voting for or who these people really are (a post card in the mail and a few lawn signs don't tell me nearly enough)."

Conclusion: What I do want to emphasize, is that *I don't blame anyone* or any political party for all these factors! Democracy, on the local level, has a lot of challenges to consider, challenges that I think are seldom discussed openly.