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GEOGRAPHIC VOTER TURNOUT DISPARITIES AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Introduction

A black teenager named Michael Brown is shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The inferno of media surrounding the city begins to explain the shooting. At first, they are concerned with specifics of the case, but eventually a consensus is reached that the shooting was a spark that set ablaze a tinderbox of long-simmering racial tension fed by institutional discrimination. One year prior, white Americans were three times more likely to vote than people of color in the 2013 Ferguson municipal election (Schaffner, Erve, & LaRaja, 2014). The result of this voting disparity is that even though Ferguson is 67% black, the mayor and five out of six city council members were white, creating significant underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups (Schaffner, Erve, & LaRaja, 2014). These officials were in charge of creating the leadership of the police force and contributed to a culture that was entirely divorced from their citizenry. The shooting ignited such a controversy because it highlighted racial power inequalities. The people in charge of local power structures did not represent the broader population, an unfortunately normal occurrence.

It is telling that it took the massively high profile shooting of Michael Brown for the issue of local underrepresentation to receive even a modicum of attention. Traditional discussions of voter turnout and voter representation overwhelmingly focus on national politics at the expense of local governance (Hajnal & Trounstein, 2005). The result of this is that academic literature on local politics is surprisingly sparse and that problems with local

government become invisible issues. Most of the time local voter turnout by race is not even tracked, with the last comprehensive database being published in 1986 (Hajnal & Trounstein, 2005). Voter turnout is uniquely declining on the local level, resulting in a significant racial, ageist, and conservative skew. This is due to a common misconception about the importance of local governments, low visibility of local elections, and difficulties voting. Local voter turnout disparities are detrimental because local governments have the biggest influence on daily life and the toxic national political environment. Chronic non-voting also denies major social and health benefits to potential voters. These issues can be solved by promoting electoral concurrency, early or weekend voting, automatic voter registration, and personal contact.

Problem statement

The principal of 'one person, one vote' is fundamental to the proper functioning of democracy, a system where everyone gets to vote, either directly in referendums or initiatives, or indirectly for candidate representation. If government is intended to be a method of group problem-solving, then difficulties participating in government represent a serious issue that has implications on every facet of society. Millions of Americans are unable to vote. Many of these Americans already occupy positions of social disadvantage; they are the ones who need the most change and help, yet cannot mobilize themselves to access the political sphere. This results in the denial of significant social, political, and economic opportunities. Historically, the nonwhite population has trailed significantly behind non-Hispanic whites in voter turnout rates and in measures of political power (Black, 2014). Turnout deficit is a problem that continues to plague communities of color and class. This paper will explore why certain geographies have significant disparities in health and other metrics due to segregation by social advantage.

The lowest life expectant (LLE) zip codes in Kansas City all share a border with at least one other low life expectant zip code, indicating a geographic concentration of inequality. High life expectant (HLE) zip codes tend to be sited near each other, indicating the converse,

a geographic concentration of resources (see Figure 1). There are significant disparities between HLE and LLE zip codes. According to 2012 estimates produced by American Community Survey data, HLE zip codes have a sixth of the nonwhite percentage, triple the per capita income, five times lower poverty rate, and a quarter of the unemployment rate over LLE zip codes. HLE zip codes also have five times the percent with at least a college education, triple the rate of health insurance, a quarter of the vacancy rate, and five times the household percentage of having at least one car over LLE zip codes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).

Figure 1: Life expectancy by zip code

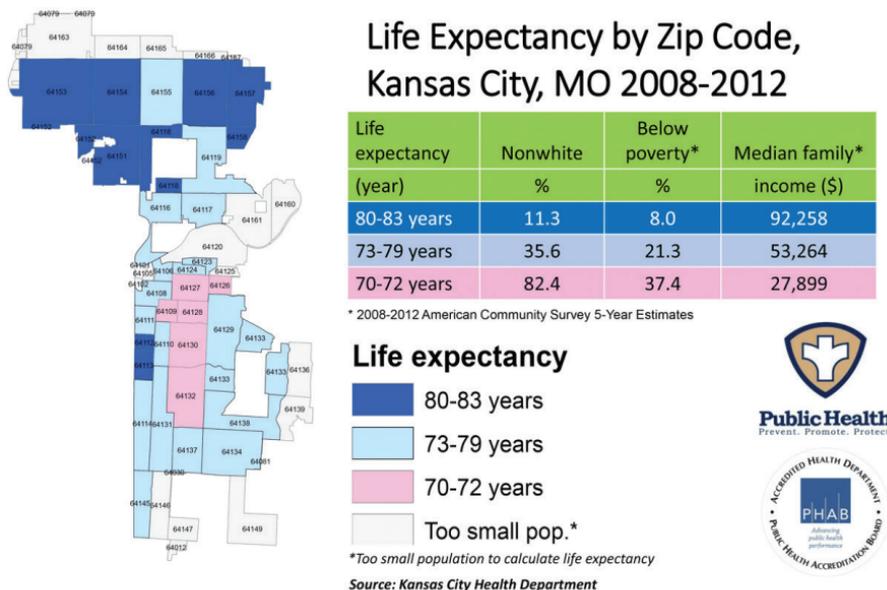


Figure 2: Income by zip code life expectancy

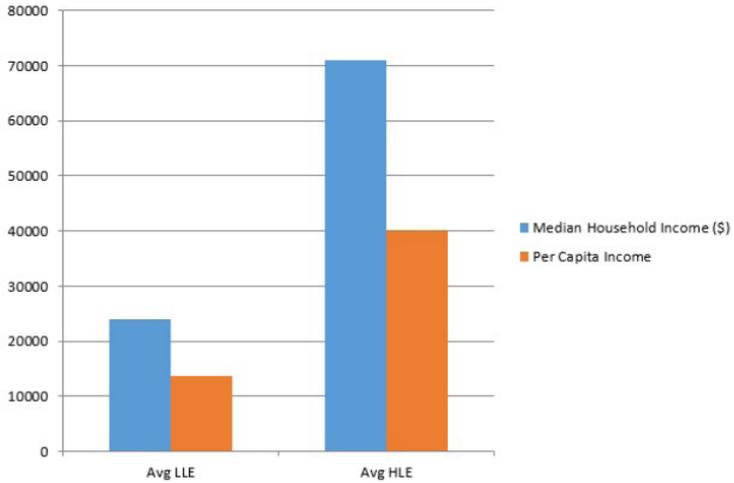


Figure 3: Race by zip code life expectancy

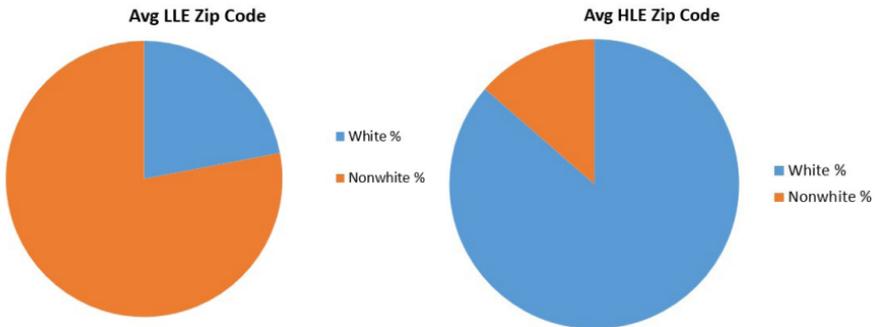
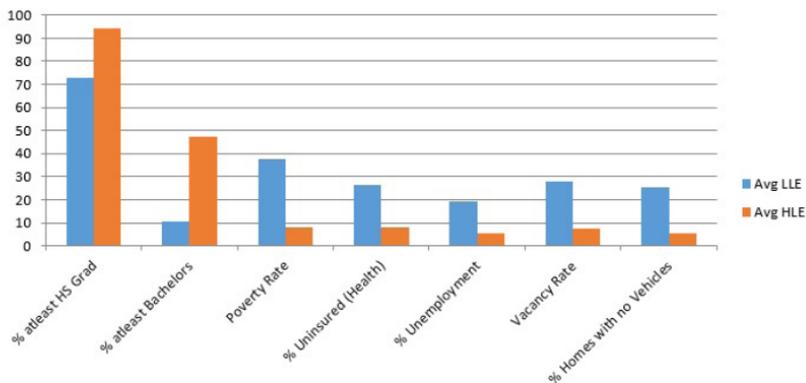


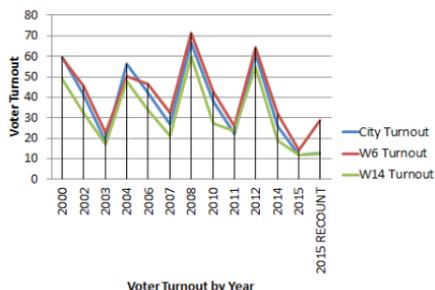
Figure 4: Various metrics by life-expectant zip code



There are significant geographic disparities in voter turnout in the Kansas City area. There was not a single election in the past fifteen years when voter turnout in LLE areas was higher than HLE areas (see Figures 8, 9, 10, and 11).

Figure 8:

Voter Turnout by Year



Turnout calculated by percent of registered voters that voted

Figure 9:

Presidential Turnout Over Time

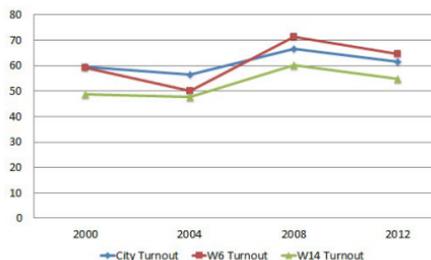


Figure 10:

Midterm Turnout Over Time

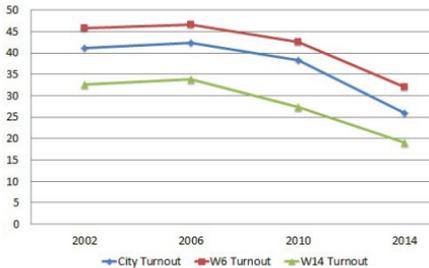
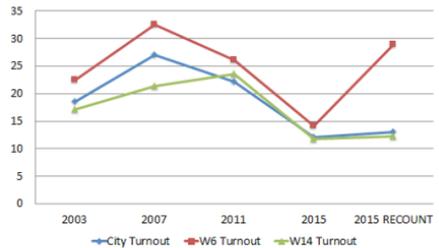


Figure 11:

Municipal Turnout Over Time



There is also a distinction between different types of elections. Presidential elections attracted the highest average turnout of 61% of registered voters; this has remained relatively stable over the past decade on both the city and national level (See Figure 9). However, midterm elections on average receive half the turnout of presidential elections and turnout has declined 12% over the past decade (See Figure 10). Participation in municipal elections is dismally low, on average attracting half the turnout of midterm elections and turnout has declined 5% over the past decade (see Figure 11). Municipal elections also suffer from the greatest increase in turnout deficit between LLE and HLE zip codes over the past decade. In presidential and midterm elections, there was only a one-point difference between decadal average and most recent turnout deficit (“Past Election Results,” 2015). But for municipal elections, turnout deficit between LLE and HLE zip codes was 16% in the most recent election, far exceeding the 7% average over the past twelve years (“Past Election Results,” 2015). This is also reflected in general demographics. In the April 7 municipal elections, sixteen times more people over sixty years old voted than those under thirty years of age (Horsely, 2015). The median age of LLE areas is 28.8 years, which significantly trails the 36.2 years of HLE areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Using age as a proxy would

indicate that voter turnout in lower life expectant zip codes is significantly lower than in high expectant zip codes, at least for municipal elections. The only studied municipal elections were mayoral campaigns; it's likely that even smaller profile elections, like those for school boards and special issues, suffer even smaller turnout and greater geographic disparity.

Kansas City is not alone in facing a turnout problem. In 2001, 26.6% of the residents of the top 144 US cities cast ballots in elections. In 2011, turnout shrank to 21% (Maciag, 2014). Moreover, it is well established that turnout in local elections is highly skewed to favor white voters. A study of municipal elections examined the makeup of our institutions in a world in which voter turnout rates were equal among all racial groups. The study found that elections would experience an average of a 7% swing in votes. The effect equitable turnout would have on local governments is that one third of cities would have different mayors and one quarter of city council members would be different (Hajnal, 2015). A sea change in elected officials on the local level translates directly into greater citizen representation in important policy decisions. *The New York Times* asked various minorities about their participation in local elections. Nonwhite citizens frequently responded that they were unaware of even the existence of recent local elections (Fausset, 2014). Many said that local elections were hard to keep track of, with one person even saying "It's not broadcast ... It's not like a presidential election" (Fausset, 2014). When further prompted they frequently also stated that they only voted in "important" elections, like the presidential election (Fausset, 2014).

Unfortunately, local governments are often looked down upon as being unimportant and incapable. This is especially problematic given that local governments often have the widest jurisdiction and influence on community life. The legal mandate of local governments is to promote "peace, order and good governance" ("Functions of a Local Government," n.d.). This gives local governments an almost unlimited jurisdiction. Not only do they have broad authority to act on a wide array of issues, but state and local budgets rival the size of federal expenditures, meaning that

this authority is matched with a capacity to act (Littlefield, 2015). As Jim Dean, chair of Democracy for America, says “It’s not about who gets elected president. It’s about who gets elected to school board and city council” (Williams, 2015). Local and state governments also have the capacity to wield massive influence on the federal government, but declining participation in local government harms their ability to lobby Washington (Wogan, 2014).

Low local turnout also tends to magnify the effect of bias in elections. In national races where many people are voting the chance for bias or distortion is comparatively much smaller than in local elections (Hajnal, 2015). This is why our current national Congress is the most diverse in history, with racial compositions roughly reflecting demographics of the nation (“Most Diverse Congress Sworn In,” 2013). Yet, over 130 of our cities underrepresent blacks in city councils (Gordon, 2014). In 2007, 20% of Missouri’s congress people were black, yet just 2% of Missouri municipal officials are nonwhite (“Missouri,” 2007).

Low local turnout even potentially explains rising polarization, dissatisfaction with government, and political partisanship. Low levels of turnout and disparities among who votes in local elections have resulted in local governments being skewed towards conservative voters. This is why the vast majority of state governments are dominated by Republicans and why many local governments are viewed as ‘out of touch’ (Williams, 2015). Because minority and youth turnout is significantly underrepresented in local elections, these Republicans are used to running virtually unopposed and without need to cater to minority groups. These smaller governments serve as incubators for future national political leaders. This explains why major political leaders are unused to compromise or citizen engagement (Williams, 2015). And why states like “Kansas, Texas and Louisiana are famously being used as real-time test labs for ... the most extreme Republican policies. That includes tough new restrictions on access to abortion and distribution of safety-net benefits like food stamps as well as wide-ranging tax cuts for businesses and broad public-school reforms” (Williams, 2015). It is clear that local politics play a focal

role in all political issues and is a primary factor in the direction of our nation.

Regardless, increased geographic political participation is likely to aid in the combatting of nonpolitical inequalities. Turnout disparities on the local level are associated with negative outcomes for minorities, typically represented in uneven spending priorities (Maciag, 2014). There are enormous health, social, and political advantages to voting. Votes are the primary metric of public opinion used by government figures. Voting directly impacts electoral outcomes and many races are closer than believed. Even if an individual ballot doesn't swing an election, that doesn't make the vote useless. Greater margins of victory create stronger political mandates for newly elected candidates. Empirical evidence seems to support the notion that non-voters support different issues than voters, with non-voters being more likely to support expansion of social protection and services ("Who Votes Matters," 2014).

Voting empowers more than the political sphere, it also gives credence to nonprofits that represent traditionally downtrodden demographics ("Who Votes Matters," 2014). Voting has an established positive relationship with the economic and health well-being of voters. In a study by the National Conference on Citizenship, the top eight metrics of economic growth in 2006 predicted 38% of unemployment variation through 2010. Surprisingly, five metrics of civic engagement: volunteering, attending public meetings, working with neighbors to address community problems, registering to vote, and voting predicted 26% of unemployment variation ("Civic Health and Unemployment," 2011). This implies that measures of participating in civil society are almost as important in predicting economics as actual economic indicators. Other studies reaffirm the importance of political engagement relative to economics: "civic culture is a necessary prerequisite for positive institutional performance, of which an indicator is voter turnout. Civic culture is a predictor of institutional success ($r=0.80$), even more than economic development" (Ferrini, 2012).

Community Profile

Communities Creating Opportunity (CCO) upholds a religious and moral obligation towards social justice. As part of their mission to achieve social justice, they highly value diversity and stakeholder involvement. The variety of different backgrounds of people contribute and are fundamental to urban life. CCO also attempts to promote civic engagement, arguing that citizens and local organizations must hold influence in government, enabling accountability of public institutions. CCO develops strong leaders from local communities, specifically congregations, to effect social change and quality of life. These volunteers contact neighbors, discuss issues, research potential solutions, and then work with “key decision-makers” for implementation. The overarching objectives are housing and community development, safe neighborhoods, healthcare, economic empowerment, and youth development. CCO empowers citizens to improve their community’s quality of life.

CCO is structured like an ordinary nonprofit corporation, with a board of directors and executive positions, but they are anything but ordinary. They are staffed with a few leaders and volunteers. Collaborating with over 100 congregations, these communities do not belong to hierarchical leadership structure, they are peers with CCO. CCO empowers citizens in these communities to embrace the responsibilities of leadership and provides resources for independence. Congregational outreach functions as CCO’s primary medium of communication and agency. CCO uses their Organizational Model, a cohesive feedback mechanism, to track their goals and explore new priorities. This model involves constantly working with members of the local community to identify problems, brainstorm solutions, and acquire feedback on progress.

Founded in 1977, Communities Creating Opportunity has worked for decades to improve the quality of life in the Kansas City area. Past programs include the provision of basic city services, heating, drug policy, youth programs, livable neighborhoods, economic empowerment, fair lending, youth campaign, and

healthy communities. These policies are focused on serving societies most vulnerable and marginalized populations. Poor and minority communities often have poor access to goods and services and are often overlooked by state assistance programs. CCO has identified several current issues they seek to make progress on. As part of achieving economic dignity, CCO advocates a cap on payday loan annual rates to mitigate predatory lending policies. They also strongly push for an increase in the minimum wage to allow the destitute to provide for themselves. To improve health conditions, CCO advocates universal insurance coverage and expansion of Medicaid. They accomplish this by going door-to-door or congregation-to-congregation to generate awareness about healthcare exchange enrollments and Medicaid policies. To improve neighborhoods, CCO advocates creating healthier low-income neighborhoods through sanitation enforcement and park revitalization. More specifically, they have worked to create multiple soccer fields around Kansas City and have founded a soccer league that receives over \$35,000 from the mayor's office. On the issue of immigration, CCO works to share narratives and experiences of immigrants to humanize them to the broader public. More broadly, CCO advocates strong protections for immigrants. For education, CCO advocates strengthening parental and community involvement in public schools. CCO's effective work and unyielding commitment to social justice has positioned them to participate and lead in the Regional Equity Network. In a personal conversation with Seft Hunter, the Chief Operating Officer of CCO, he said that CCO is seeking to incorporate more community-level data to target their outreach initiatives more effectively. All five of CCO's core values are central to this research: social justice, the enrichment of diversity, community self-determination, individual empowerment, and citizen participation in government. CCO has and continues to play a large role in improving the social conditions in the Kansas City region.

Program description

One of Communities Creating Opportunity's current campaigns is the expansion of civic and voter engagement. This involves

the training of grassroots civic leaders and campaign teams. It also involves organizing community interests to accomplish change or to lobby others. More specifically, CCO operates the Dignity Votes Action Center which states, “The more of us who vote, the more they will listen.” CCO has also been involved in efforts to combat voter intimidation and has worked to inform local citizens about the exact processes of voting. Increasing voter participation is extremely relevant to the empowerment of the diverse marginalized cultures of Kansas City. These cultures are the ones exposed to significant disparities, disparities that should be solved by government. The scope of recommended actions primarily concerns the lives of thousands of residents in the six LLE zip codes in Kansas City, four of which belong to the Ivanhoe neighborhood.

Opportunity Identification

What CCO wants to do is to identify the areas with the greatest need. Programs targeted in these areas are likely to pay the highest dividends. Geographies with lower voter turnout present an opportunity for greater community organization and involvement with CCO. The core question we sought to answer was how can we create greater political participation among marginalized groups? An examination of the literature on turnout campaigns reveals a deficit that can be filled by CCO.

Current outreach programs are primarily organized by political parties. A consequence of this approach is that parties seek to increase turnout among their supporters and those likely to vote. Current voter outreach campaigns are flawed in that they target likely voters, yet ignore people who haven’t voted in prior elections (Kousser, 2014). This creates a cycle, where most turnout initiatives are aimed at people that are already projected to vote. The source also cites studies that conclude that unlikely voters targeted by these campaigns subsequently become likely habitual voters. This means that a change in focus can pay significant dividends in turnout promotion among historically low turnout communities. The reason so many youth, minority, and low income people don’t vote is that they either face difficulties voting or are simply not asked to vote. Conversely, the reason they are not asked to vote is

because they are viewed as unlikely to vote and so ‘efficient’ turnout campaigns will ignore them. This leads to a catch-22 situation. The spike in minority turnout in 2008 was due to Obama’s message of hope for America’s downtrodden (Fulwood, 2014). Voting is an expression of hope and confidence in the system. People will only vote if they believe that they have impact. This also means that low turnout rates reflect a lack of confidence in the American experiment.

Aside from politics, the social act of voting spills over into other forms of civic participation and prosocial activity, “when you feel part of a group, you’re more likely to contribute to it” (Uggen & Manza, 2002). Voting creates a sense of investment in the future of a community and, regardless of electoral outcome, promotes a stewardship over surroundings. This is possibly why voting former felons have a significantly reduced rate of criminal recidivism, with voting felons one-third as likely as disenfranchised felons to recommit crime (Greenbaum, 2014). In the same way that voting creates a sense of investment in shared futures, being granted the right to vote creates a sense of society investing in you. Voting is the most treasured part of American life, being foundational to our national origin and identity. If people are denied their voice, that implies that they have nothing worthwhile to say.

Voting strengthens our social connections and communities, resulting in improvements in life quality and longevity. Registered voters are more likely to discuss issues with families and do favors for neighbors (Henderson, 2011). Voting also increases our perception of agency, resulting in psychological empowerment that pays significant dividends in reduced stress and mental health (Kasser, 2010). This especially applies to the historically disadvantaged, “people who are on the wrong sides of the disadvantage divide, measured according to anything—health, income, quality of community, or job status—... stand to benefit most” (Kasser, 2010). These reasons could contribute to voters reporting better health outcomes. Residents of low turnout communities are 62% more likely to self-report lower health (Rich, 2013).

These relationships don't have established lines of causality, there is a strong possibility that being healthy increases the likelihood of voting instead of vice versa. Several studies have made attempts to establish causal relationships, "The positive effect of political activity on health was found significant in several models, mostly those performed in the subset analysis of the OECD countries. In general, social participation was the main significant factor determining [self-reported health] in the analysis of the 44 countries, and unconventional political participation was the main significant factor in the analysis of the OECD countries" (Kim, Kim, & You, 2015) and "Socioeconomic inequality in political participation (as measured by voter turnout) is associated with poor self-rated health, independently of both income inequality and state median household income" (Blakely, Kennedy, & Kawachi, 2001).

Policy Response

The solution to this issue is personal contact. Personal contacts are calls or home visits involving interpersonal communication about voting. Personal contacts create a feeling of investment in normally apathetic / forgotten citizens (Michelson, 2014). People deep down want to vote but are socially disengaged. Personal contacts offer the potential to socially re-engage non-voters. CCO can conduct direct outreach campaigns and encourage congregations to disseminate political information (election dates, issues, etc). While home visits are more effective, they are labor and time intensive. An easier alternative would be to work with congregations to utilize telephone trees and other established neighborhood media to communicate political information and enable civic discussion. Randomized field tests indicate that the most effective way to get someone to vote is for a peer to visit them at their home, the second most effective way is for a peer to call them ("Young Voter," 2006). Furthering the hypothesis of social engagement is that those same field tests indicate that the content of the messaging had little measurable effect on turnout—all that mattered was that a conversation was happening ("Young Voter," 2006).

Community-based voter turnout campaigns offer a change to create strong and persistent civic culture. There is a substantial amount of literature that supports the notion that once people vote, they become habitual voters. Half of the turnout gains from a 1998 New Haven turnout program spilled over into 1999: “voting in one election substantially increases the likelihood of voting in the future. Indeed, the influence of past voting exceeds the effects of age and education reported in previous studies” (Gerber, Green, & Shacar, 2003). Another study indicates that getting an individual to vote in an election makes them 29% more likely to vote in a subsequent election (“Young Voter,” 2006). What this means is that turnout campaigns are likely to truly foster an ethic of voting. Outreach is a self-sustaining venture, where programs reinforce future campaigns.

In terms of targeting specific communities for these programs, the Ivanhoe neighborhood is comprised of four of six LLE zip codes. This makes Ivanhoe a prime opportunity for improvement. In line with CCO’s organizational model, working with established neighborhood organizations in Ivanhoe to identify common concerns and brainstorm potential solutions is critically important. Imposing a policy prescription upon this neighborhood would likely fail, regardless of its merit. Just as individuals must be socially engaged, existing local organizations must be present in the process of collaboration. In terms of resolving voter disparity, a top-down approach would only replicate the problems facing these communities. A primary local institution to approach would be the Ivanhoe Neighborhood Council, which has been recognized by the Kansas City Council as “the only official ‘agent’ ... for the residents” (“Ivanhoe Neighborhood Plan,” 2005). Exploring voter turnout campaigns with local community partners offers a significant opportunity for nonprofits to bootstrap political engagement.

There are several simple policies that governments can pursue to improve turnout. One of the easiest reforms is to synchronize the dates of local elections with state and national elections. Because this would close the gap between local and national turnout, it would boost voter turnout in local elections by as much as 30% (Hajnal, 2015). This would just require the approval of the

local city council or election authority, making it relatively easy to implement (Hajnal, 2015). Many states even allow school boards to schedule their own elections (Hajnal & Trounstein, 2005). In fact, election concurrency is already becoming a salient issue among US cities, primarily because it would save municipalities millions of dollars, since the same election infrastructure could be used for multiple elections (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003). 40% of California cities have recently moved to schedule their local elections to coincide with statewide races (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003).

Another solution related to the timing of elections would be to make weekend voting easier. This could be accomplished by either moving Election Day to the weekend or expanding absentee ballot measures. Many people feel too busy on Election Day to vote, a problem compounded by long lines (Black, 2014). The burden of time constraints is disproportionately borne by young, poor, and minority citizens (Black, 2014). Moving the day people vote to when people have more free time would nullify this concern.

A large-scale solution on the state level that can be sought is automating the process of voter registration. In doing so, we make voting a two-step process; registering to vote and voting. The process of voter registration is excessively complex and is used to disenfranchise voters. In 2008, nearly one-third of voter registration requests were denied (Black, 2014). Depending on where someone lives, there are 14,000 different procedures for American election administration (Kim, 2012). Increased complexity of electoral law expands the risk of bureaucratic error and subjective interpretation, making voting a hassle and enabling abuse of power. In the 2008 election it was reported that approximately five million people attempted to register to vote, but failed to do so due to complex administrative procedure. An additional four million already registered voters did not vote due to administrative problems (Ansolabehere, 2009). Automatically registering eligible citizens shifts this burden onto the state and reaffirms voting as a right, not a privilege. Automatic voter registration would alleviate most concerns related to voter ID laws and would greatly reduce the risk for further disenfranchisement. Automatic voter registration

was implemented in Oregon and California this year and similar bills are being presented in front of eighteen different state legislatures. Results from Oregon and California are likely to be highly influential in future developments on this issue.

There are many programs to improve voter turnout rates that can be advocated by individuals, nonprofits, and governments. If turnout deficit is a serious issue that threatens various metrics of public good, then these programs must be a public policy priority. Boosting turnout on the community level can motivate a very influential sphere of agency, local government, to assist everyday people with everyday problems. This would be a major sea change towards equitable development.

Conclusion

These solutions are necessary to address the decay of local voter turnout and demographic disparities in both turnout and political representation. They would raise the visibility of our local elections and resolve difficulties getting to the polls. This change is very possible. Concerted effort and energy in the wake of the Michael Brown shooting resulted in two more black city council members being elected (Steward & Reilly, 2015). This should be celebrated, but this work should also be replicated nationwide to affect real substantive change. Local governments are in charge of much of the decisions that affect our daily lives and society. These decisions range from the curricula in our schools to the training that police officers receive. The importance of local governance must be contrasted with the demographic makeup of local governments. If our elected officials don't know what it's like to grow up in a world hostile to them, then our resources and attention will continue to be misappropriated. Our cynical apathetic view of politics and government will continue to be perpetuated. Our Michael Browns, Eric Garners, and Tamir Rices will continue to face violence and silence. We must articulate a new normal. City hall should not be a stuffy chamber of white men, but rather it should be a vibrant part of the community.

Figure 5: Ward Boundaries vs Zip Code Boundaries

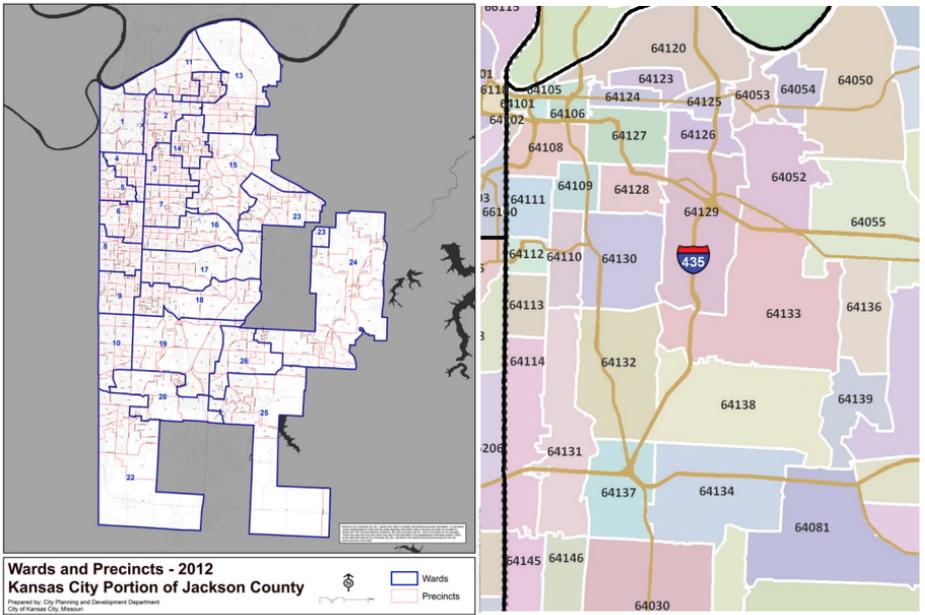


Figure 6: Ward 6 Boundaries* vs Zip Code Boundaries

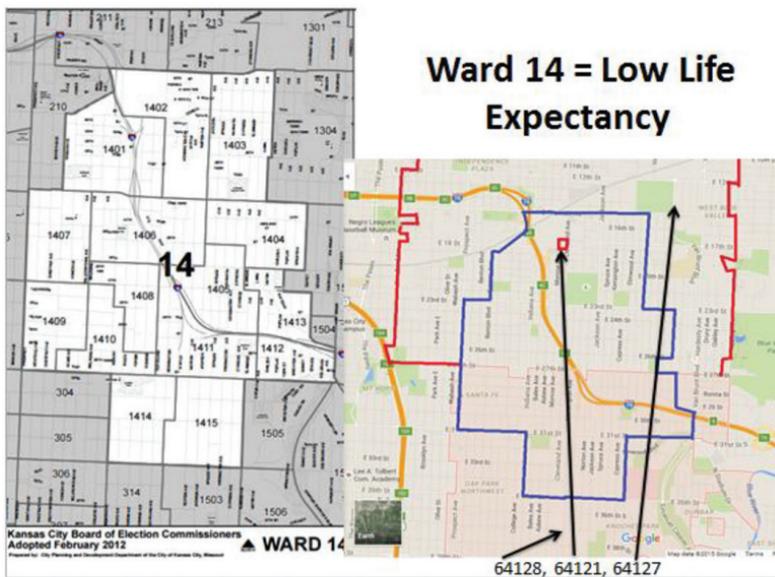
*Ward 6 is actually likely more representative of average life-expectant zip codes, considering most of it is composed of 64111 and 64110, which are average zip codes. 64112 is the high life-expectant zip code and only makes up a small geographic part of Ward 6 and only one-third of Ward 6's precincts. This mistake was only discovered after data was collected and analyzed.



Ward 6 = High Life Expectancy



Figure 7: Ward 14 Boundaries vs Zip Code Boundaries



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