

TIMING OF CITY AND COUNTY ELECTIONS IN FLORIDA

Orlando – November	Miami – November
Orange County – November	Hialeah – November
Tampa – March	Miami Gardens - August
Hillsborough County – November	Miami-Dade County – November
Sarasota – November	St. Petersburg – November
Sarasota County - November	Clearwater - March
Fort Lauderdale – November	Pinellas County – November
Broward County – November	Tallahassee – November
West Palm Beach – March	Leon County – November
Palm Beach County – November	Daytona Beach – November
Gainesville – August	Volusia County – November
Alachua County – November	Pensacola – November
Fort Myers - November	Escambia County – November
Lee County – November	

Jeff Clements – Council Research Division
November 2021

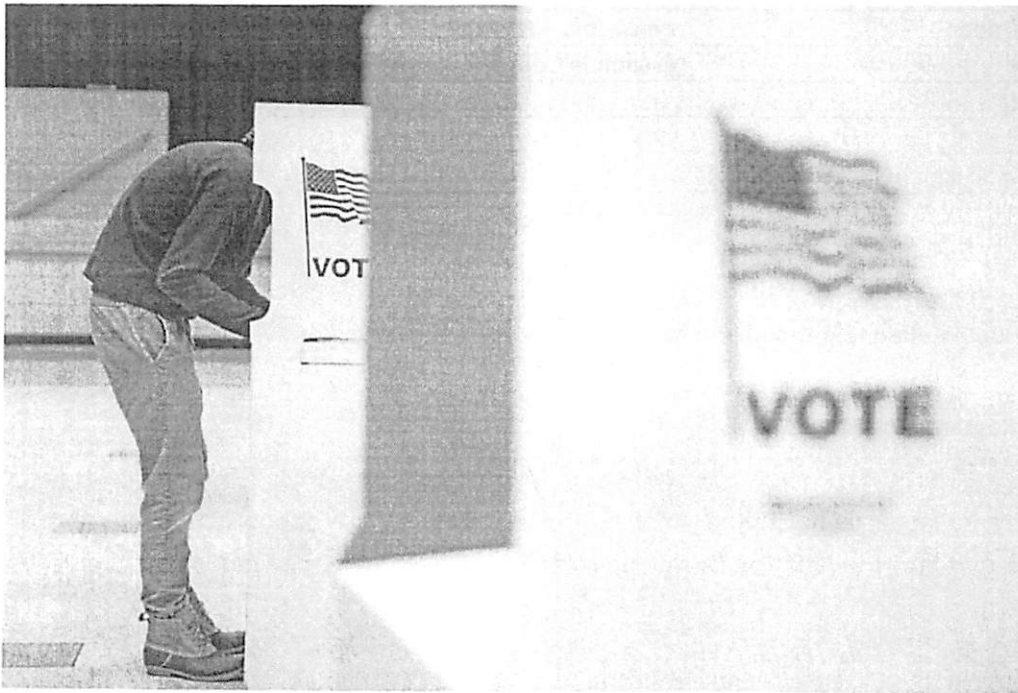
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FEATURED

SOME candidates, voters seeing red—OR blue

Move to fall elections brings partisan politics in Fredericksburg council, School Board races

Taft Coghill
Nov 2, 2021



A voter leans into the polling booth inside the polling station at Walker–Grant Middle School. Fredericksburg municipal elections were moved to November from May to meet a new state law.

TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Taft Coghill

When Gov. Ralph Northam signed a bill in March to move all municipal elections in Virginia from May to November, Fredericksburg City Council members bemoaned that their campaigns would become increasingly time-consuming and divisive.

Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw and the majority of council lamented that the city's longstanding tradition of nonpartisan elections would be coming to an end.

Some said their partisan fears have been realized as City Council and School Board races in the four wards were on the ballot Tuesday, along with state battles for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and House of Delegate.

The Fredericksburg Democratic Committee handed out sample ballots endorsing City Council and School Board members at all five precincts, a major shift from May elections.

Ward 3 School Board candidate Jesus Dominguez proudly declared that he's a Republican as he voiced opposition to Critical Race Theory and mask and vaccine mandates.

Rene Rodriguez, a candidate for City Council's Ward 3 seat and former chairman of the city's Electoral Board, said this year's election is "100 percent" more partisan than in the past.

"The rhetoric is pretty bad," Rodriguez said. "On the Electoral Board, we were afraid local races would become partisan and that's exactly what happened."

Rodriguez and Ward 4 candidate Amber Peebles were informed on Oct. 16 during Saturday voting that they were campaigning too closely to the polling station and in violation of the 40-foot rule required by law.

Fredericksburg General Registrar Claudia Herzog said during early voting, many voters asked her if candidates are affiliated with a particular party and were agitated when she informed them that they run as independents.

"They come in and want to vote a straight party ticket," Herzog said. "I always direct them to the candidates' website or the candidates themselves."

Dominguez said when he declared his candidacy with former General Registrar Marc Hoffman, he put down Republican as his party affiliation. Hoffman informed him that local races are nonpartisan, but Dominguez insisted.

"I'm not ashamed of being a Republican," Dominguez said. "I don't care if people know that I'm a Republican. So I'm leaving it at that. I'm not changing it to independent."

City Council member Matt Kelly attempted to discuss the partisanship at last Tuesday's City Council meeting, but was ruled out of order by Greenlaw. City Attorney Kathleen Dooley supported Greenlaw's ruling and the conversation abruptly ended.

Nearly 13,000 voters participated in the November 2020 election in Fredericksburg and more than 7,000 voted in November 2019. The last May election in 2020 had 2,864 voters.

Candidates said in forming their opinions about the change to November, they balance the positivity of a greater turnout with the possibility of having local issues receive less attention from voters.

"I do regret that there is a greater tendency to see what really should be nonpartisan issues through a more partisan lens," said Tim Duffy, the incumbent City Council member in Ward 3. "I certainly run into that in talking to residents."

The sample ballots handed out by the Fredericksburg Democratic Committee supported Duffy and School Board incumbent Jennifer Boyd in Ward 3. In Ward 4, incumbent City Council member Chuck Frye Jr. received an endorsement from Democrats, as did Jon Gerlach in Ward 2. Gerlach is running against Dr. Andrew Reese for a seat being vacated by Billy Withers.

Matt Rowe was endorsed for the Ward 1 School Board seat over write-in challenger Margie Lucas.

Caitlin Bennett, chair of the FDC, said she was dismayed by Kelly raising the issue at the City Council meeting. She expressed concern that if the discussion was allowed to occur, it could have led to a violation of First Amendment rights to free speech.

Bennett said the endorsements weren't requested by anyone running for office, but were done in response to a Republican recruitment effort. The Fredericksburg Republican Committee did not hand out sample ballots.

Bennett said there was concern from the FDC that some candidates are anti-mask and anti-CRT and a threat to the nonpartisan nature of local leadership. She said she wanted to ensure Black voters were aware there was potential political influence in the local election.

"We decided we couldn't pretend that it wasn't happening," Bennett said. "We needed to make sure our voters understood what's going on."

Bennett said she was especially worried about a possible uptick of political rhetoric seeping into the School Board. Ward 4 incumbent Malvina Kay, who ran unopposed, said her concern is that anyone who has political aspirations could use November School Board elections as a springboard.

"I'm concerned that it's going to be more political as opposed to local elections when you get to focus on local issues," Kay said.

But Dominguez said state and national issues should not be ignored in local campaigns. He said he believes party affiliation should be listed on the ballot so voters know where candidates stand.

"Unless you're a true independent, you cannot take politics out of a vote," Dominguez said.

Voters had mixed views on the municipal elections moving to November.

Longtime Ward 4 resident Claire Huie said she doesn't like to see partisanship in the city, but she's thankful for a higher turnout at the VFW Post 3103 precinct.

Karin Webber, who lives in Ward 3, said she's noticed more door-to-door visits from candidates and yard signs than in previous years.

Christina Manning said when she votes in city elections, she focuses strictly on local issues. She believes it's rare for city officials to influence state lawmakers.

"We're being asked our views on gun rights, abortion and other issues that local city officials have no say or input over," Rodriguez said. "We're trying to address safety on our roads and in our communities. That should never be a partisan issue."

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I've been covering Fredericksburg area communities since 2002, mainly as a sports reporter. I occasionally cover local government, as well.



POLITICS

Another town poised to join others moving local elections to November

Nonpartisan spring races dwindle as towns seek to boost turnout, cut election costs

BY: NIKITA BIRYUKOV - AUGUST 11, 2021 7:00 AM



Gov. Phil Murphy and all 120 legislative seats are on the November ballot as well. (Photo by David Dee Delgado/Getty Images)

When a 2011 law went into effect allowing certain New Jersey towns to move their May local elections to November, 86 municipalities held their nonpartisan races in the spring.

That number has fallen to just 41, and the outlook for May races has improved little in recent years. Jersey City voters moved their elections to November after a 2016 vote, Newton voters followed suit in 2018, and Ridgewood voters did the same last year.

Now, organizers in Teaneck appear to have succeeded in getting a question on November's ballot asking voters to move the township's local races to the fall.

The shift away from off-cycle local elections has largely been defined as an effort to boost voter interest in races that often see turnout that is far lower than in June primaries and November general elections.

"You definitely gain a larger electorate because more voters are going to show up when the governor's at the top of the ticket than when town council's at the top of the ticket," said Micah Rasmussen, director of Rider University's Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics.

The gap between turnout levels can be chasmic. Only 1,932 voters in Ridgefield Park's cast ballots in the village's May 2020 local elections. That's less than a third of the 6,302 ballots cast in that year's November election.

Though the jump in turnout isn't always so large, its existence is near universal. Just 1,020 Bordentown voters turned out in the city's May 2017 commission elections, compared to the 1,403 that voted in that year's general election. The difference in turnout accounts for roughly 13% of the city's registered voters.

Organizers behind the push to move Teaneck's local races are hoping the referendum will lead to a similar turnout bump there.

"People are programmed around that Election Day is in the beginning of November," said former Teaneck Councilman Alan Sohn. "People are not programmed to realize that there are elections in May. It's harder to take off. Businesses don't give off or have vacation. Schools don't have vacation. It's harder for child care purposes, and turnout is significantly lower in May versus November."

Turnout in Jersey City's November 2017 election increased by nearly 17% over its May 2013 race, a difference of more than 6,000 votes. Raw turnout – the percentage of registered voters who came out to vote – rose by 5%, from about 28% to roughly 33%.

Extra costs for taxpayers

Cost is another factor cited by supporters of shifting election dates. While there is some cost-sharing with state and county governments for May elections, municipalities pay the lion's share of expenses that typically run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Teaneck organizers estimate moving local elections could save the township as much as \$50,000 every two years, but that number is higher elsewhere.

In Trenton, where the City Council moved local races to November last year, the cost of May elections was estimated to be as high as \$181,000. But there are also some expenses involved in the shift.

"There will be added costs because, I think, the government is going to have to issue notices that the election is changing," Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora said.

He added the city would likely have to foot the bill for a December runoff election in case no candidate won a majority during the nonpartisan November vote, though that's nothing new. Trenton already paid for runoff elections held in June before.

A new development makes November elections more attractive: In-person voting will be available starting this fall. The bill Gov. Phil Murphy signed into law earlier this year provides up to nine days of early voting before a general election, but made no similar accommodations for May races.

Rising partisanship

Though turnout and cost pose barriers to holding local elections in the spring, the off-cycle contests also align with a core tenet of the state's 1947 constitution.

New Jersey runs legislative and gubernatorial elections in odd years to minimize the impact of national issues on state elections. The principle extends to the few remaining May races, which largely focus on local issues and are often free of the partisan bickering that defines many November races.

There's a worry among some that moving local races to coincide with ones for higher office could harden partisanship at a local level and move campaigns away from municipal issues.

"In a lot of towns I've worked in with May elections, including my own, there's legitimate antipathy to bringing those types of things in, and a lot of the resistance that I've seen when people try to move these to November has been the argument that it will lose the uniquely local feel that people like in those elections," said Mickey Quinn, a Democratic strategist involved in every competitive legislative race.

Some towns have indeed opposed moving their elections. Officials in Bordentown, where Quinn resides, voted to move their election to November in 2016, but the ordinance was vacated after facing opposition from residents who wanted to keep the city's elections focused on local issues.

"That was it, there was no appetite," Quinn said.

The mechanics of how election dates get changed are also a factor in these decisions.

Gusciora supported a referendum to move Trenton's elections to November that also would have allowed residents to choose whether elections in the capital became partisan, but he balked when the council nixed the ballot question and moved the election on their own, later overriding the mayor's veto.

"They decided to forgo the original ordinance and do the switcheroo and move the election to November, and that also gave them – without voter approval – a six-month extension on their term," he said. "I thought that was inappropriate."

Governing bodies have attempted to move their elections in the other direction to avoid being dragged down by national politics.

Fearing the effect Donald Trump would have on their races, Republican officials in Mount Laurel in 2019 approved a referendum to move local elections to May and make them nonpartisan.


That effort was stymied by a bill sponsored by Assemblywoman Carol Murphy (D-Burlington), a Mount Laurel resident, which required a supermajority vote to introduce such a referendum and raised the number of petition signatures needed to place such questions on the ballot.

Moves in the other direction have also been blocked by local elected officials. Medford Lakes' borough council last year shot down an ordinance to shift its local races to November despite voter support for a nonbinding resolution calling for them to do just that.

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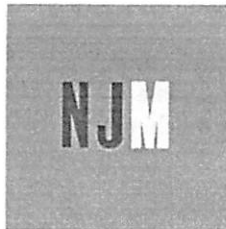


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