

GOVERNANCE

# Tax increase ballot measures: How to increase voter participation

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JUNE 2026



**MOUNTAIN STATES**  
POLICY CENTER





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## INTRODUCTION

No matter where you live, tax increases have a significant impact. State and federal tax increases are often easier to track, but local tax increases can sometimes fly under the radar. In fact, local tax increases are often considered during low-turnout special elections in winter and early spring, when few are even aware an election is being held. As a result, voter turnout in special elections can leave critical decisions to a small percentage of voters. To ensure the highest voter participation possible for tax increases, these ballot proposals should be moved to the November General election.

## Special elections suffer from low voter turnout

Voter turnout fluctuates across a four-year cycle. For example, in the November general elections in Washington state: the presidential election in 2016 had a 78.76% turnout, the 2017 off-year dropped to 37.10%, the 2018 midterms increased to 71.83%, and the 2019 off-year was down again at 45.19%.<sup>1</sup> This general four-year trend can be found nationwide. Special tax elections in the winter and spring consistently suffer from even lower voter turnout than off-year elections.

Again, using Washington as a case study, the February elections in 2016 had a 33.3% turnout, 2017 had a 38.53% turnout, 2018 had a 32.47% turnout, and 2019 had a 32.94% turnout. Special elections in other states also show this major drop-off in voter participation.

Special elections nationally, on average, have a 19% turnout compared to 44% in general elections.<sup>2</sup> There are many contributing factors as to why the general election has a higher turnout. TV ads and mailers in these elections generally attract more attention to vote on these ballots. Voters have also been conditioned to know that the “big ticket” ballot items occur at the November general election.

Despite this, nationally from 1981 to 2020, roughly 82% of local options sales tax ballot measures took place at a special election. These special elections usually determine matters like school bonds and city tax levies. This means important tax issues were decided during low-turnout elections.

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## Tax election dates in our region

Currently, Idaho holds its primary election in May, and a general election in November. Washington has a February and April local and special election date, along with an August primary and November general. Montana has a May special and local election date, with a June primary, and November general election. Wyoming holds an August primary and November general election. These are the dates tax measures are considered.

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<sup>1</sup> “Voter Turnout by Election,” Washington Secretary of State. Available at <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/election-data-and-maps/reports-data-and-statistics/voter-turnout-election>

<sup>2</sup> “The Sales Tax, Special Elections, and Voter Turnout,” By Dr. Jeremy Horpedahl, Arkansas Center for Research in Economics, March 16, 2017. Available at <https://uca.edu/acre/2017/03/16/the-sales-tax-special-elections-and-voter-turnout>

	Idaho	Washington	Montana	Wyoming
February		✓		
April		✓		
May	✓		✓	
June			✓	
August		✓		✓
November	✓	✓	✓	✓

### Changing election dates can improve voter turnout

Many cities and municipalities across the country have made changes to reform when elections are held to improve voter turnout. Some of these reforms have resulted in a 20%-40% increase in voter turnout. Consider the case of California. In 2015, SB 415 was enacted, which prevented local governments from holding elections on dates other than statewide election dates if past off-cycle elections had significantly lower turnout than the statewide.<sup>3</sup>

“Significantly lower” is defined as turnout less than 25% below the average of the last four statewide general elections in that jurisdiction.<sup>4</sup>

A 2021 report for California found:

“Registered voter turnout in city elections nearly tripled in 54 cities that moved their city elections from off-cycle dates to ‘on-cycle’ dates that featured gubernatorial and presidential races on the ballot in November 2016, 2018, and 2020. The average registered voter turnout in these cities was 25.54% in off-cycle elections and it increased to 75.81% when the cities moved their elections to on-cycle dates in 2016, 2018, and 2020.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, we see a trend of local government officials putting tax proposals on the calendar during elections with historically low turnout. Why shouldn’t these matters be considered at the November general

<sup>3</sup> “California SB415” Regular Session. LegiScan. 2016. Available at <https://legiscan.com/CA/text/SB415/id/1207878>

<sup>4</sup> “Report to the Legislature; Approved Mandate Claims - January 1, 2022 – June 30, 2022,” California Commission on State Mandates. Available at <https://csm.ca.gov/reports/approved-1-1-22-6-30-22.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> “Consolidation of Elections in California Creates Massive Gains in Local Voter Turnout,” By Alvin Valverde Meneses and Eric Spencer, February 2021. Available at <https://www.commoncause.org/california/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Consolidation-of-Elections-Creates-Massive-Gains-in-Local-Voter-Turnout.pdf>

*California’s SB 415 prevented local governments from holding elections on dates other than statewide election dates if past off-cycle elections had significantly lower turnout than the statewide.*

election ballot? Government officials proposing a tax increase owe it to their residents to put important decisions in front of them when they know voters are paying attention and more likely to participate in an election.

### **What are the objections to election consolidation?**

Washington’s Secretary of State, Steve Hobbs, warns of “ballot fatigue” when asked about consolidating elections. His office shared in an email:

“Data shows that the more issues there are on a ballot, the more unlikely voters are to complete the entire thing. With the bigger federal, congressional, and legislative races appearing near the top, more local issues are pushed to the bottom and receive less attention. Other states and counties that have made changes like holding all even-year elections in hopes of boosting voter participation have reported substantial numbers of blank races on ballots that can reach up to six pages long.”

For increasing voter turnout, Secretary Hobbs recommends funding outreach to engage voters. Another option to consider would be requiring a character or word cap for ballot summaries to avoid ballot fatigue after consolidation.

### **Idaho case study for election date reform**

Idaho has made significant progress to consolidate elections. In 2023, Idaho lawmakers eliminated the annual March election<sup>6</sup>, and in 2024 removed the August school elections to increase voter turnout and civic engagement.<sup>7</sup> Historically, this is when school districts often offer supplemental levies; instead, those were shifted to the May primary or November general election with higher voter turnout.

Idaho Secretary of State Phil McGrane stated that these recent changes have been appropriate. There is a concern that further consolidation could lead to extra pressure on volunteer election workers who would have a packed ballot. The office said that they are satisfied with the legislative actions and will continue to push extra messaging in the election cycles to continue and increase voter turnout. It should be mentioned that the consolidation of elections can also lead to reduced costs of administration.

What could take reforms a step further in the right direction in Idaho is moving these school district and local taxing district issues to the general

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<sup>6</sup> “House Bill 292,” Idaho State Legislature, 2023. Available at <https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sessioninfo/2023/legislation/H0292.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> House Bill 521,” Idaho State Legislature, 2024. Available at <https://legislature.idaho.gov/sessioninfo/2024/legislation/h0521/>

*If the purpose of the primary is more for party politics and has a lower turnout, then the tax proposals should be moved to the November general, where there is the highest voter involvement.*

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elections in November rather than continuing to allow the May primary as an option.

According to Idaho’s Secretary of State website, “The purpose of primary elections in the State of Idaho is to allow members of a recognized political party to select that party’s nominees to go on the general election ballot. Primary elections are often referred to as ‘party primaries.’”<sup>8</sup>

The data from every state show that there is a higher turnout in every single general election than in the prior primary. If the purpose of the primary is more for party politics and has a lower turnout, then the tax proposals should be moved to the November general, where there is the highest voter involvement. This increased voter participation is especially critical when considering new taxes and fees.

### **Conclusion**

Special elections have a lower turnout than primary or general elections. A low-turnout election should not be used to consider increasing the tax burden imposed on citizens and businesses. Policymakers should ensure that in every instance, ballot measures proposing tax increases are voted on in the general election, or at a minimum, during the primary election. Government officials should strive to maximize voter participation on important issues and requiring tax increases to be considered at a primary or general election does just that.

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<sup>8</sup> “Primary Elections in Idaho,” Idaho Secretary of State, 2026. Available at [http://sos.idaho.gov/elect/primary\\_elections\\_in\\_idaho.html](http://sos.idaho.gov/elect/primary_elections_in_idaho.html)

# SUMMARY & KEY FACTS

This study argues that tax increase ballot measures should be considered during November general elections rather than low-turnout special elections to ensure broader voter participation. Evidence from states such as California and Idaho suggests that consolidating elections can significantly increase turnout and improve civic engagement, especially on issues that directly affect taxpayers.

## Key Facts:

- ❑ Special elections draw far fewer voters than general elections, averaging about 19% turnout nationally compared to 44% in general elections.
- ❑ Between 1981 and 2020, roughly 82% of local-option sales tax measures nationwide were decided during special elections.
- ❑ California's election-consolidation reforms increased average voter turnout from 25.54% in off-cycle elections to 75.81% in on-cycle elections.
- ❑ Idaho has already reduced the number of special election dates by eliminating March elections in 2023 and August school elections in 2024.
- ❑ The study recommends requiring all tax increase ballot measures to appear on November general-election ballots, or at minimum on primary-election ballots, to maximize voter participation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Cardwell is an alumnus of the University of Washington and Liberty University, obtaining a bachelor's degree in political science.

Sam has worked on multiple legislative and congressional campaigns across Washington State. He has experience in the governmental sphere as a legislative intern and a session aide at the Washington State Legislature.

Sam is the author of several MSPC studies, including *Adopting a new income tax liability threshold* and *Powering the Mountain States: A snapshot of the region's energy portfolio*.

His work has appeared in many local news publications and was featured on "Hannity" on Fox News Channel.

