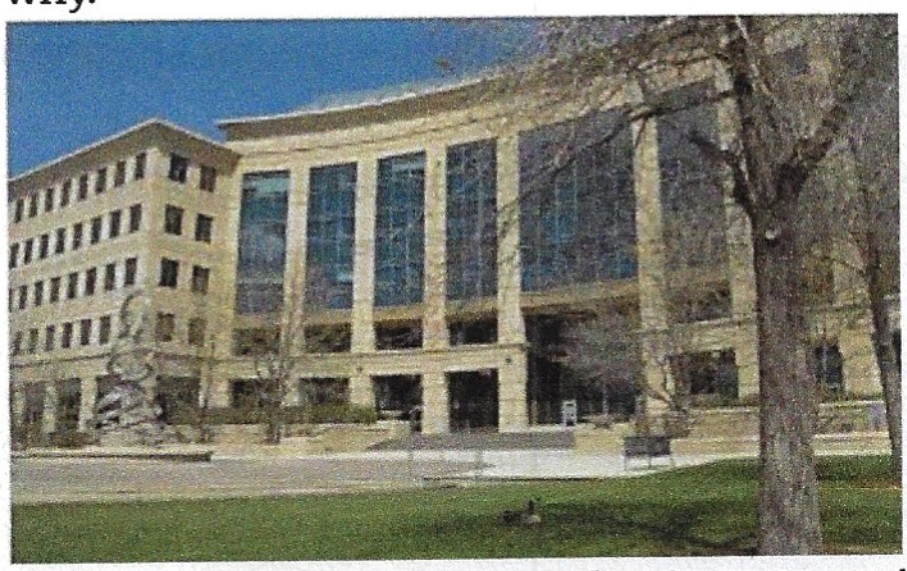
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Moving Aurora's elections would overload voters

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When fewer than one in three registered voters choose who governs their city, the natural question is why.



In Aurora's 2025 municipal election, approximately 79,000 voters cast votes on a citywide question, out of roughly 252,000 registered voters. Nearly seven out of 10 did not participate in that decision.

That should concern anyone who believes representative government depends upon an informed and engaged citizenry.

Aurora's Ballot Question 3D proposes moving municipal elections from odd-numbered to even-numbered years, alongside state and national elections. The expectation is straightforward: more people will vote. And they almost certainly will. But increasing turnout and developing an engaged citizenry are not necessarily the same achievement. Confusing the two risks substituting a statistical improvement for the harder work of strengthening self-government.

Even-year elections already attract substantially higher turnout, driven by federal and statewide contests. Adding municipal candidates naturally exposes them to a larger electorate.

But what does that additional participation tell us?

It tells us more people voted. It does not establish that more people understand City Council's responsibilities, the differences among candidates or the consequences of their policies.

A ballot records a decision. It does not record the reasoning behind it.

Participation and comprehension are different things. Representative government benefits from both.

Another consideration deserves attention: the cognitive demands imposed upon voters.

Human attention is finite. So are working memory, available time and the capacity to investigate competing claims.

An even-year Colorado ballot may require citizens to evaluate federal and state candidates, county officials, judicial retention questions, constitutional amendments and local propositions.

Question 3D would add Aurora's municipal candidates to that undertaking.

We should not confuse the convenience of voting once with the intellectual burden of making more decisions simultaneously.

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The former may decrease. The latter grows.

Research examining lengthy ballots documents the consequences. As voters encounter additional decisions, they may become more likely to skip contests or rely upon shortcuts, including name recognition, ballot position and familiar political associations.

When information demands exceed available attention, people simplify.

Such shortcuts are not necessarily irrational. But neither are they equivalent to independently evaluating candidates' qualifications, positions and judgment.

Municipal government deserves particular attention. Decisions involving public safety, water, infrastructure, land use, taxation and spending directly affect citizens' lives.

Yet these matters must compete with national political controversies commanding far greater attention and resources.

More people may vote for City Council. Whether they devote greater attention to those seeking to govern their city is another question.

There is also an institutional problem worth examining.

Low turnout in a stand-alone municipal election signals that something deserves investigation.

Perhaps citizens lack information about local government, question its relevance, dislike their choices or feel disconnected from civic institutions.

Different problems require different remedies.

Moving municipal elections to even-numbered years may increase turnout without resolving those underlying conditions.

And once participation numbers improve, what incentive remains to investigate them?

Political institutions respond to incentives. If elected officials and political organizations regard higher turnout as satisfactory, pressure to invest in sustained civic education and engagement may diminish.

This is not an accusation about motives. It recognizes that institutions respond to how success is measured.

There is a meaningful difference between mobilizing people to cast ballots and cultivating citizens who understand what government is doing in their name.

The former can be accomplished through election timing and campaign organization. The latter requires education, communication, accountability and sustained participation.

If turnout becomes our principal measure of democratic health, we risk losing sight of the condition we intended to improve.

Odd-year municipal elections provide something consolidated elections do not provide as directly: a distinct measure of citizens' willingness to participate without the attraction of federal and statewide contests.

That information has diagnostic value.

It invites us to ask where participation is weak, why citizens are disengaged and how their involvement might be strengthened.

Certainly, odd-year elections have disadvantages. Smaller electorates can magnify organized interests' influence, while consolidated elections make participation more convenient.

These are legitimate considerations. But convenience and engagement remain separate objectives.

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Rather than assuming greater turnout resolves our participation problem, Aurora ought to examine its causes and measure progress toward addressing them.

Aurora's deeper challenge is not simply that too few citizens vote in municipal elections. Too many remain disconnected from the government closest to them.

We should be asking what citizens know about municipal government, whether they understand how decisions are made and whether they recognize their responsibility to hold elected officials accountable.

Those questions demand more than a calendar adjustment.

They demand the cultivation of civic responsibility.

Elections are how citizens select representatives. An informed and engaged citizenry gives that mechanism enduring meaning.

Changing an election date is relatively easy. Developing citizens who understand, participate in and hold their government accountable is considerably harder.

The ultimate measure of self-government is not merely how many people vote, but whether citizens possess the knowledge, interest and commitment necessary to govern themselves.

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