



League of Women Voters of Falls Church

May or November Local Elections? A Pro/Con Fact Sheet

In November 2010, the Falls Church City Council voted to repeal a January 2010 ordinance that moved municipal elections from May to November. The Council also approved an advisory referendum on the election date question for the November 2011 ballot, giving voters, not the Council, the choice of Election Day. City Attorney John E. Foster advised the Council that the referendum’s outcome, though termed “advisory,” would be binding.

As a result of the Council’s actions, **the next Falls Church City Council/School Board elections will be held in May 2012. Meantime, the question will be put to City voters on the November 8 ballot. If voters choose to change the date, the first local November election would be conducted in 2013.**

Voters will be asked to vote “yes” or “no” on the question: “Should the City of Falls Church amend Section 3.01 of its Charter to hold elections of members of City Council in the month of November rather than the month of May...” **For a complete study on this issue, published by the League of Women Voters of Falls Church in January 2001 and titled *Falls Church City Council and School Board Elections—November or May? A Voter Service Report*, please visit the League’s website at <http://lwvfallschurch.org/ElectionChange.html>. Please note that the League does not take a position on this issue.**

Both election dates offer advantages and disadvantages, which are summarized here. For more detail, please see the back of this fact sheet.

MAY LOCAL ELECTIONS (a “No” vote on the referendum)		NOVEMBER LOCAL ELECTIONS (a “Yes” vote on the referendum)	
PRO	CON	PRO	CON
Focus on local matters; voters more informed about City issues	Lower voter turnout (average of 27% from 2000 to 2010)	Higher voter turnout (average of 71% in even years, 2000 to 2010; average of 48% in odd years, 2001 to 2009)	Voters who don’t pay attention to local issues decide close City races
A more compact, City-centered ballot	Outsized influence by smaller groups within the City	More efficient for voters—combined with state elections; fewer trips to the polls	Longer, more complex ballot; local issues at the bottom; “down ballot” races suffer from “undervotes”—greater turnout may be negated by fewer votes for local races
Lower cost to run for election	Higher cost of elections	Lower cost of elections; reduces work of election officials	Higher cost to run for election due to “noise” of state and federal races; injection of party funds into local races
Nonpartisan elections with independent candidates			Elections more partisan; fewer independents involved; could end City’s nonpartisan tradition
Accountability for Council incumbents who approve City budget in April; newly elected Council/School Board members begin at start of City fiscal/school years			Council and School Board members elected mid-fiscal/school year rather than at the end of it; potential negative impact on City budget and schools

FACTS TO CONSIDER

- May election dates for cities and towns have their roots in a municipal reform movement that began in the 1880s and continued into the early 20th century. Scheduling city elections in the spring helped assure that they would focus on city issues and not become entangled with state and federal issues. This movement did not extend then nor does it apply now to Virginia’s 95 counties, which hold their elections for supervisors and school board members in November.
- Virginia state elections are held in odd-numbered years, and federal elections take place in even-numbered years. This schedule, with state and federal elections in different years, assures that state elections do not become entangled with and perhaps overshadowed by federal elections.
- Since July 1, 2000, Virginia law has allowed cities and towns to move their May elections to November.
- According to the State Board of Elections (www.sbe.virginia.gov) and the Virginia Municipal League (www.vml.org), most municipal elections remain in May. Specifically, 20 cities, including Falls Church, and more than 150 towns in the commonwealth hold local elections in the spring. Nineteen cities and 28 towns hold elections in November. This count includes cities moving from May to November elections in 2012—Alexandria, Franklin, Hopewell, and Portsmouth.
- Turnout in May elections in Falls Church from 2000 to 2010 ranges from 13% (uncontested election in 2006) to 32% (2000 and 2008). Turnout in November elections in Falls Church from 2000 to 2010 ranges from 28% (2007) to 86% (2000). In general, turnout in November elections held in odd-numbered years (state races) is not as strong as turnout for November elections in even-numbered years (federal races). Turnout for primary elections, held in months other than May and November and including elections when only one party and one contested office are on the ballot, ranges from 5% (2001) to 48% (dual party presidential primary in 2008). The most recent primary on August 23 attracted a 6% turnout.
- According to the Falls Church Registrar, the City currently spends an additional \$18,000 every two years to hold local elections in May. In its 2001 report, the League noted that this cost was then \$4,200 every two years. Elections in November and primaries, regardless of whether both parties have candidates on the ballot or the number of races, also each cost \$18,000. The costs for any election are somewhat less when voter turnout is expected to be lower because fewer election officials are needed. The Registrar further notes that the state and federal governments reimburse localities for some costs associated with running elections. Virginia has encouraged cities to move local elections to November by reducing the subsidy for May elections.
- Falls Church has a long tradition of nonpartisan local elections, dating back to the time it first became a town in 1875. Candidates for Town and City Council and more recently for School Board have not been nominated or endorsed by the local wings of the national political parties, Democratic or Republican. Candidates have run independently from those parties and have financed their campaigns personally and by individual contributions, not party funds. An independent candidate for City Council typically spends less than \$8,000 to run for election. According to the Virginia Public Access Project (www.vpap.org), the cost to run for election to state office frequently requires in excess of \$100,000 and consequently involves party support. To run for attorney general, lieutenant governor, and US House of Representatives for Virginia costs in excess of \$1 million, and for governor, \$10 million and more.
- With a November election, new Council and School Board members would take office in the middle of a fiscal/school year, and incumbent Council candidates would be six months away from their budget votes the previous spring.
- Newspaper accounts report that local races newly held in November 2008 in Manassas Park, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach show significantly fewer votes for local elections (“Manassas Park voters ignore local races,” January 22, 2009, InsideNova.com), a more partisan tone (“Beach mayoral race has more partisan tone in November,” November 2, 2008, HamptonRoads.com), and a lack of awareness of local candidates (“Suffolk vote shows some unready to pick mayor,” November 7, 2008, HamptonRoads.com).

ON THE BALLOT: (“no” on the referendum = May; “yes” on the referendum = November):			
May 1, 2012 (Local only— regardless of outcome):	<i>IF</i> November 5, 2013 (State and Local every 4 years):	<i>IF</i> May 6, 2014 (Local only):	<i>IF</i> November 3, 2015 (State and Local every 4 years):
City Council/School Board (3 seats)	Governor/Lieutenant Governor/ Attorney General	City Council/School Board (4 seats)	Virginia Senate (40 seats)/House of Delegates (100 seats)
	House of Delegates (100 seats)		City Council/School Board (3 seats)
	Sheriff/Commissioner of Revenue/Treasurer		
	City Council/School Board (4 seats)		