

HOUSE BILL REPORT

ESHB 1932

As Passed House:

February 8, 2024

Title: An act relating to shifting general elections for local governments to even-numbered years to increase voter participation.

Brief Description: Shifting general elections for local governments to even-numbered years to increase voter participation.

Sponsors: House Committee on State Government & Tribal Relations (originally sponsored by Representatives Gregerson, Farivar, Peterson, Alvarado, Berry, Ramel, Stearns, Mena, Bateman, Reed, Simmons, Ormsby, Macri, Street, Orwall, Goodman, Berg, Lekanoff, Reeves, Nance, Riccelli and Fosse).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government & Tribal Relations: 1/9/24, 1/12/24 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/8/24, 52-45.

Brief Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill

- Permits cities, towns, and certain special purpose districts to choose to hold their elections in even-numbered years instead of odd-numbered years.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & TRIBAL RELATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 5 members: Representatives Ramos, Chair; Stearns, Vice Chair; Gregerson, Low and Mena.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Cheney, Ranking

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Minority Member; Christian, Assistant Ranking Minority Member.

Staff: Jason Zolle (786-7124).

Background:

Every November, the state holds a statewide general election. In years that end in an even number, the election includes general elections for federal, state, and county officers, as well as state or local ballot measures such as initiatives, referenda, and constitutional amendments.

In years that end in an odd number, general elections are held for city, town, and special purpose district officers, subject to a few exceptions. In addition, odd-year elections may include elections for:

- filling the remainder of unexpired terms for federal, state, and county officers; state legislators; supreme court justices; and superior court judges;
- county officers in a county governed by a charter that provides for odd-year elections; and
- state ballot measures.

State ballot measures must appear on the ballot at the next regular general election, and therefore they may appear in either even- or odd-numbered years. Special elections and recall elections also may occur in either even- or odd-numbered years.

Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill:

Cities, towns, and certain special purpose districts may choose to hold their elections in even-numbered years instead of odd-numbered years. To select this option, the legislative body of the jurisdiction may adopt an ordinance or policy, or voters may approve an ordinance or charter amendment referred by the legislative body. Prior to adoption, the legislative body must hold two public hearings at least 30 days apart to consider public input, and a final vote may not occur sooner than 30 days after the second hearing. If a jurisdiction chooses to switch its elections to even-numbered years, the term lengths of officers elected in the next odd-year election shall be one year shorter than provided by law. The choice to switch must be adopted before January 15 of an odd-numbered year to take effect in that election cycle. A jurisdiction that chooses to switch back to odd-numbered year elections must transition back with similarly shortened terms.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This issue has been discussed in the Legislature for several years. When more people participate in elections, the officials who are elected are more responsive to the people. This also gives government more legitimacy. Even-year elections is not a partisan issue, as Republicans have been leaders on this issue in other states like Arizona and Montana, and it has been achieved in bipartisan fashion in Nevada. Data shows that when local elections are held in even years, turnout increases and becomes more diverse, and more young people vote as well. Voters consistently poll in support of this issue in other states as well. Consolidating elections into even years saves money in many ways. The concern about voter fatigue is legitimate but the reality is that the increase in turnout in even-numbered years will be high enough to counter any drop-off due to voter fatigue. The mandatory trigger for low-turnout jurisdictions is a compromise, as it would require only about half of cities and towns to switch, which is reasonable.

(Opposed) The state has a 50-year tradition of having elections every year, and this bill begins a process to end that. This will have unintended consequences of damaging civic engagement and election infrastructure. Important local issues will tend to get lost in a buzz of national politics in even-numbered years, and positions like city council will be on page two of the ballot or even lower. Washington elects many local positions, so even-year ballots will be long, and there will be significant drop-off such that voters do not reach the end of the ballot. Also, it will be difficult to hire and retain experienced, trained elections staff because of a year-gap in elections. The mandate for some jurisdictions to switch should be removed because it should be a local decision when elections are held.

(Other) There are concerns about the bill, including voter fatigue, staffing issues, and software and printing difficulties. These concerns may or may not materialize, so the bill should remove the mandate for certain jurisdictions to switch, and then we can see how the transition goes with jurisdictions that voluntarily make the change. Last session the Legislature removed advisory votes from the ballot because they overload the ballot, but this would make even-year ballots even longer. The bill provisions conflict with existing law for term lengths for municipal court judges.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Mia Gregerson, prime sponsor; Alan Durning, Sightline Institute; Zoltan Hajnal, Yankelovich Center for Research, University of California San Diego; Andrew Villeneuve, Northwest Progressive Institute; Lindsey Schromen-Wawrin; Chris Roberts; Cindy Black, Fix Democracy First; Jazmine Smith, The Washington Bus; Joseph Lachman, Asian Counseling and Referral Service; and Representative Darya Farivar.

(Opposed) Conner Edwards; Lindsey Hueer, Association of Washington Cities; and Brian Hatfield, Office of the Secretary of State.

(Other) Mike Hoover, Washington State Association of Counties; Judge Whitney Rivera, District and Municipal Court Judges' Association; and Anthony Mixer.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: Tim Eyman; Jeannette Mcchesney; Mary Warren; Jason Michaud; and Lori Larsen.