The Research Bureau

Absent Voters

Who is Voting and Not Voting (Yet) in Worcester Municipal Elections

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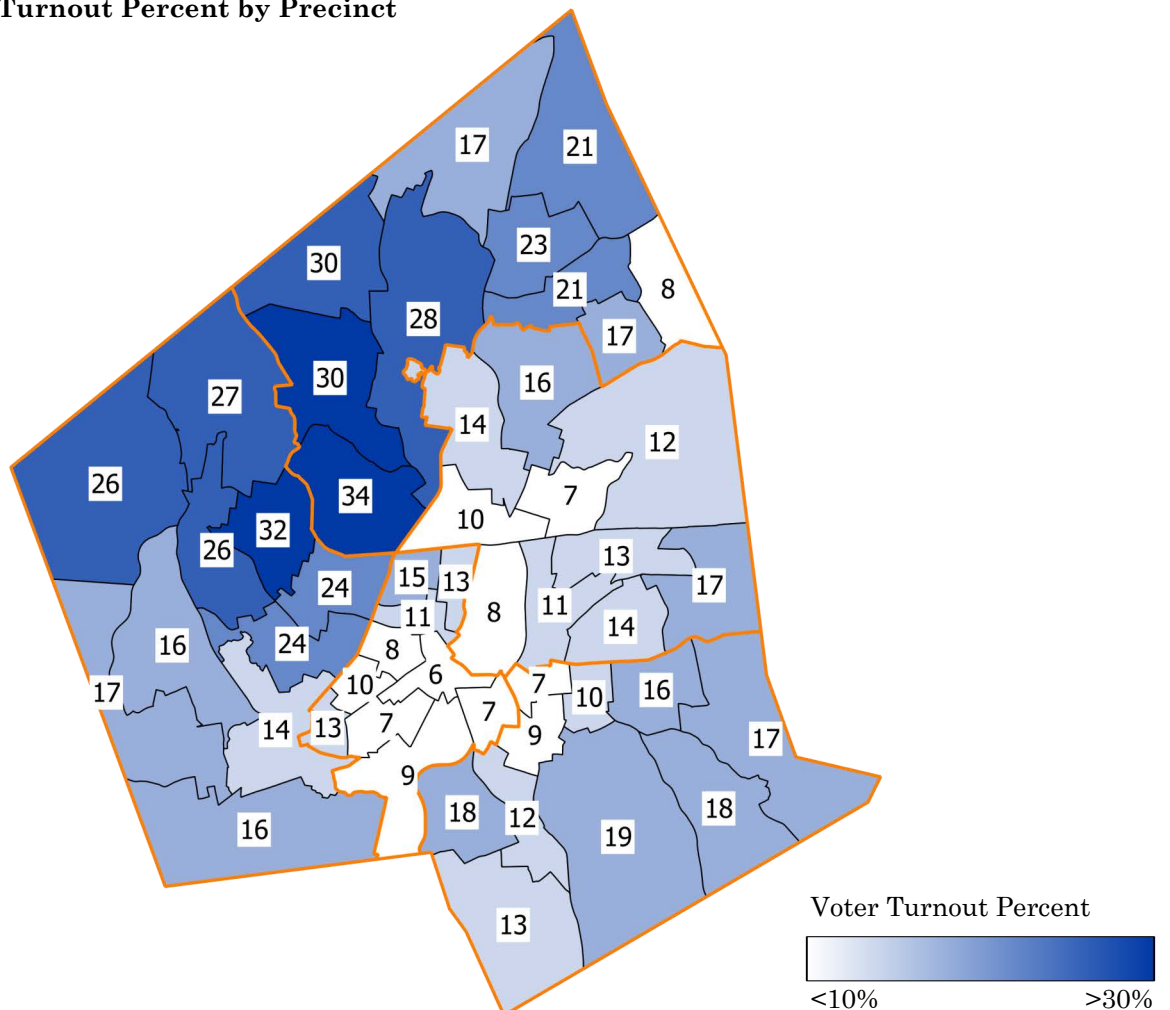Research in the Public Interest

Introduction

Worcester voters and the elections they decide are enigmatic. Lacking the intense media coverage of state and national races or the consultants and analysts that characterize larger contests, the municipal electoral process is shrouded in relative mystery. Voters and candidates alike rely on folklore and oral tradition instead of data and analysis to make sense of voting patterns and turnout.

In Worcester and many other cities with similarly low turnout, this lack of attention has been blamed, in part, for low and declining turnout in recent City Council and School Committee elections. Candidates—both challengers and incumbents—have lamented that a small percentage of the city's population controls the fate of its leadership. Those who have looked at numbe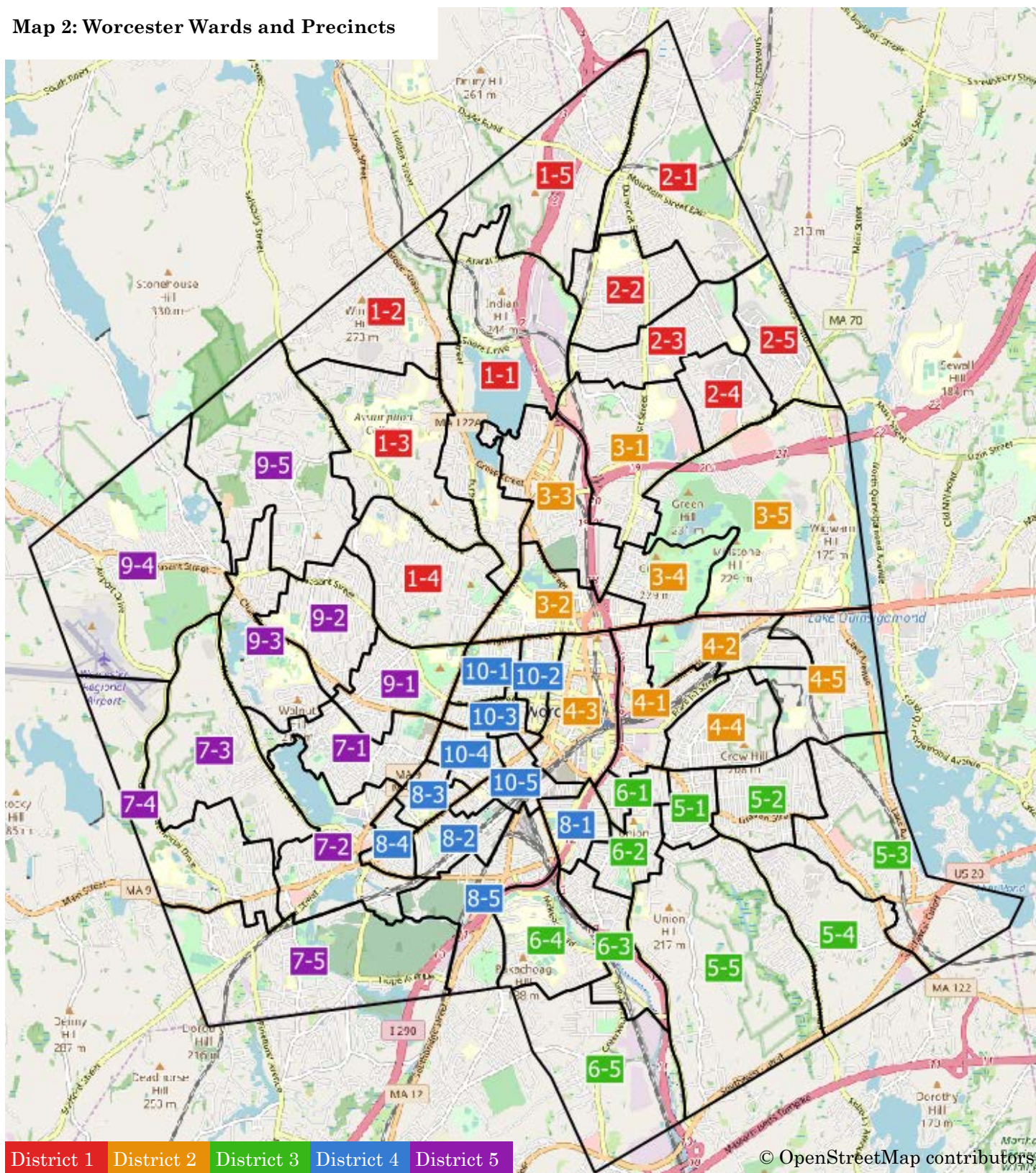rs released by the Election Commission have pointed to geographic disparities in voter turnout, and have warned of negative consequences for the diversity of Worcester's civic representation. Pessimists have been vindicated in their predictions of stagnation in residents' electoral engagement despite varied and long-running efforts to boost turnout from the Election Commission, political candidates and individuals.

This report uses a variety of sources to conduct a deeper exploration of voter characteristics and electoral trends. Despite drawing less attention than larger races, plenty of data exists on Worcester voters, residents, candidates, and the interactions among the various groups involved in voting. This report draws on voter information from the Election Commission, cross-referencing it with property information, population demographics, and other sources to present and analyze Worcester voter turnout in a new way—one that, hopefully, leads to ideas for boosting civic participation.

Map 1: 2019 Voter Turnout Percent by Precinct

Voter Turnout Percent

<10%   >30%

Map 2: Worcester Wards and Precincts

| District 1 | District 2 | District 3 | District 4 | District 5 |

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In order to facilitate the district councilor system and enable a smooth ballot-casting process, the City of Worcester is divided into five City Council districts, made up of two wards each, which in turn are made up of five precincts each. This results in a total of 50 precincts. A resident's precinct governs which polling place they cast a ballot at, and in which district council race they vote. All 50 precincts vote for Worcester's six at-large City Councilors and six School Committee members.

Churn and "Supervoters"

In every election, voters can be divided into two groups—returning voters, who cast ballots in previous elections, and new voters, who are voting for the first time. If returning voters have voted in enough elections they are sometimes called "supervoters," reflecting both the depth of their commitment to voting and the large impact they have on the electoral process.
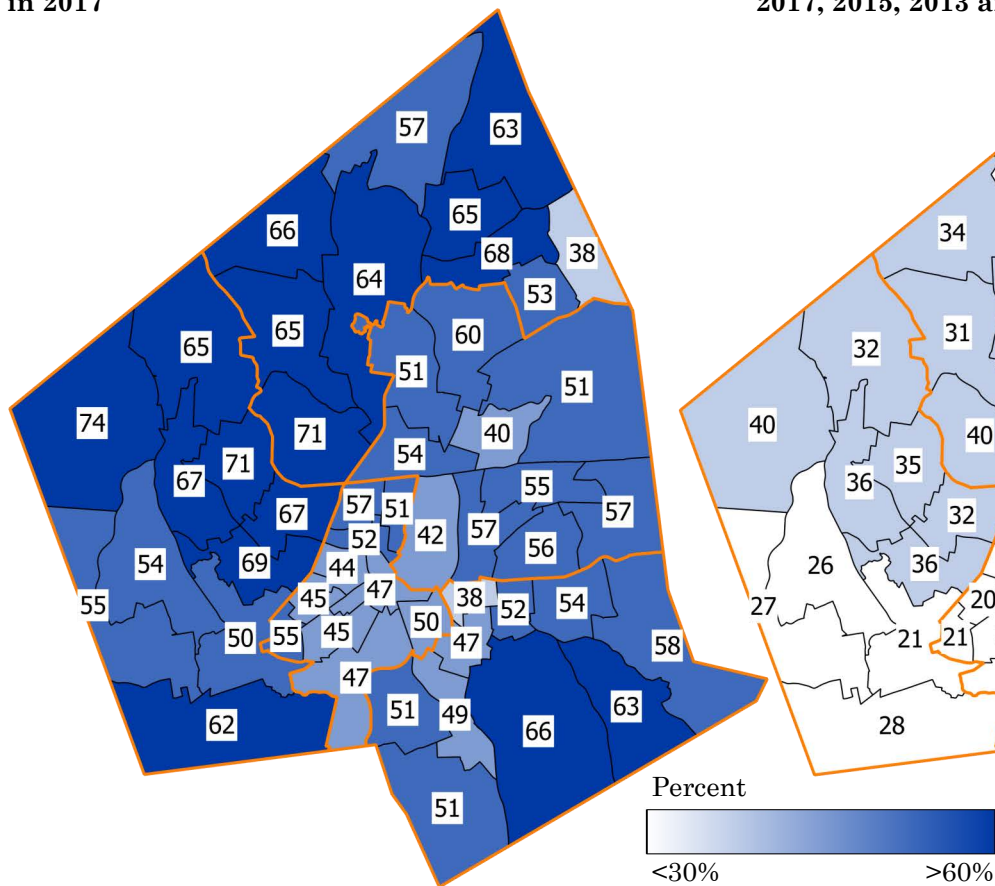
Around 60 percent of Worcester residents who cast ballots in the 2019 municipal election also cast a ballot in 2017, according to a comparison of voter activity lists provided by the Election Commission. Around 48 percent of 2019 voters cast a ballot in both 2017 and 2015. Around 29 percent of 2019 voters were voting in their fifth straight municipal election.

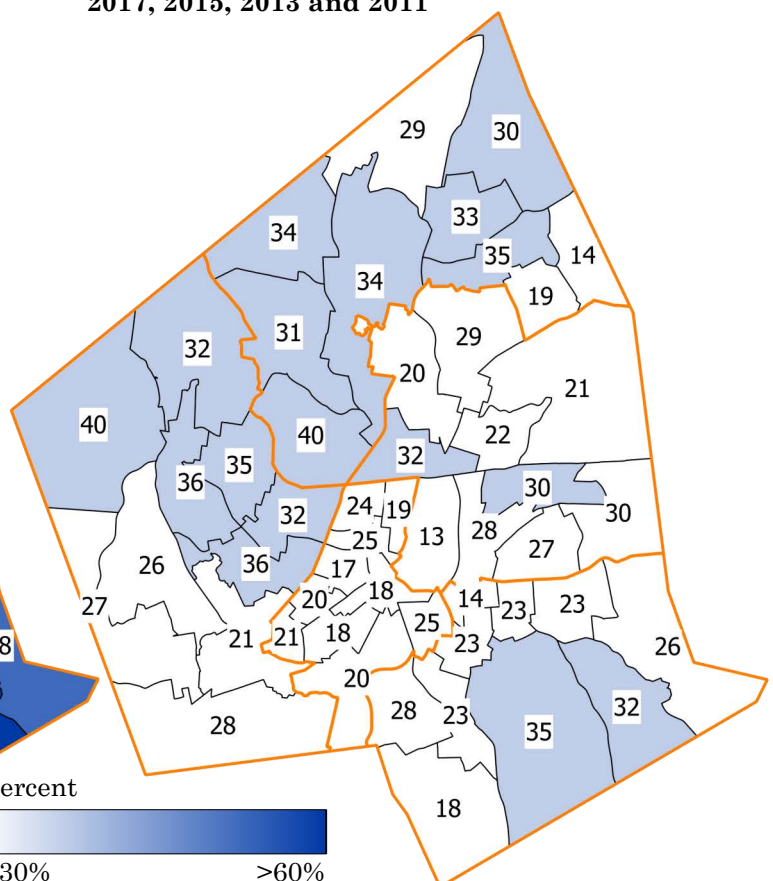These percentages are not consistent across precincts. Districts 1 and 5, on the city's "West Side," have substantially higher percentages of returning voters than District 2 and especially District 4, which feature higher numbers of new voters who had not voted in the previous election or elections. District 3 is more mixed, with some precincts featuring high numbers of supervoters and others, near downtown, seeing higher numbers of new voters (see maps 3 and 4).

Because they reliably turn out to the polls, supervoters and other returning voters are the focus of much of municipal campaign strategy. One of the Election Commission's most-requested datasets is the voter activity list, which contains the names and addresses of everyone who cast a ballot in a given election. Because candidates (correctly) believe residents who voted in past elections are more likely to vote in future elections, this list is often used as a mailing list for campaign literature, as well as for other forms of voter engagement.

Map 3: Percent of 2019 Voters Who Also Voted in 2017

Map 4: Percent of 2019 Voters Who Also Voted in 2017, 2015, 2013 and 2011
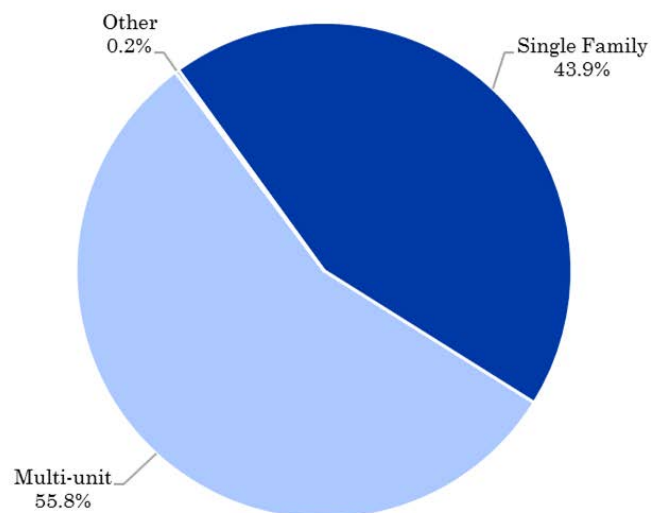

Percent

<30%   >60%

Voter Housing

A city's housing stock can influence the electoral process in both obvious and subtle ways. By cross-referencing voter activity lists with the City Assessor's list of properties, it is possible to examine the housing of Worcester voters, including the property classification of the building in which they reside.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the majority of Worcester residents (56 percent) live in multi-unit housing structures, while 44 percent live in single-family homes. The composition of 2019 voters did not match these demographics. Instead, single-family occupants were about 63 percent of voters, while those living in multi-unit developments were about 34 percent of the electorate (see charts 1 and 2). One implication of this is renter representation in government. According to the Census Bureau, 84 percent of single-family homes in Worcester are owner-occupied, while 87 percent of units in multi-unit buildings are renter-occupied.

This disparity has implications for city priorities because people's wants and needs differ based on their housing situation. One of the most obvious differences is the chasm between owners and renters, who may have different opinions on property taxes, zoning rules, or proposals like rent control. Housing stock can also be used as a proxy for economic status, as studies have shown that people with the means to purchase land unsurprisingly have higher incomes, on average, than renters.

Chart 1: Housing Classification of Worcester Residents

Source: 2018 5-year American Community Survey

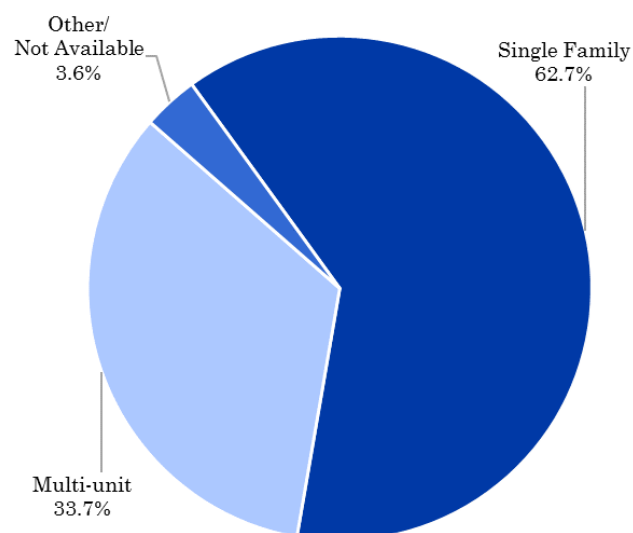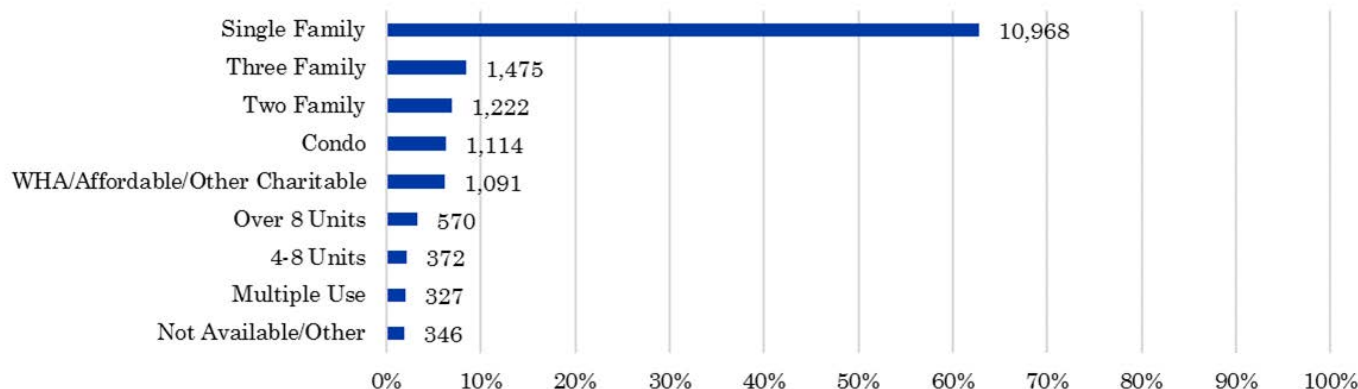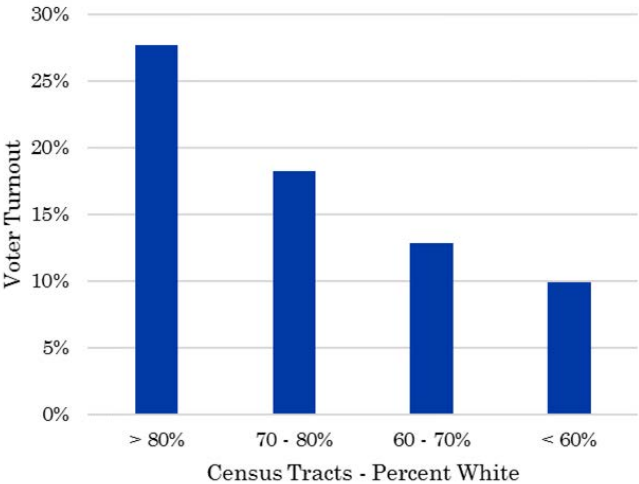**Chart 2: Housing Classification of 2019 Voters**

Chart 3: Detailed Housing Classification of 2019 Voters

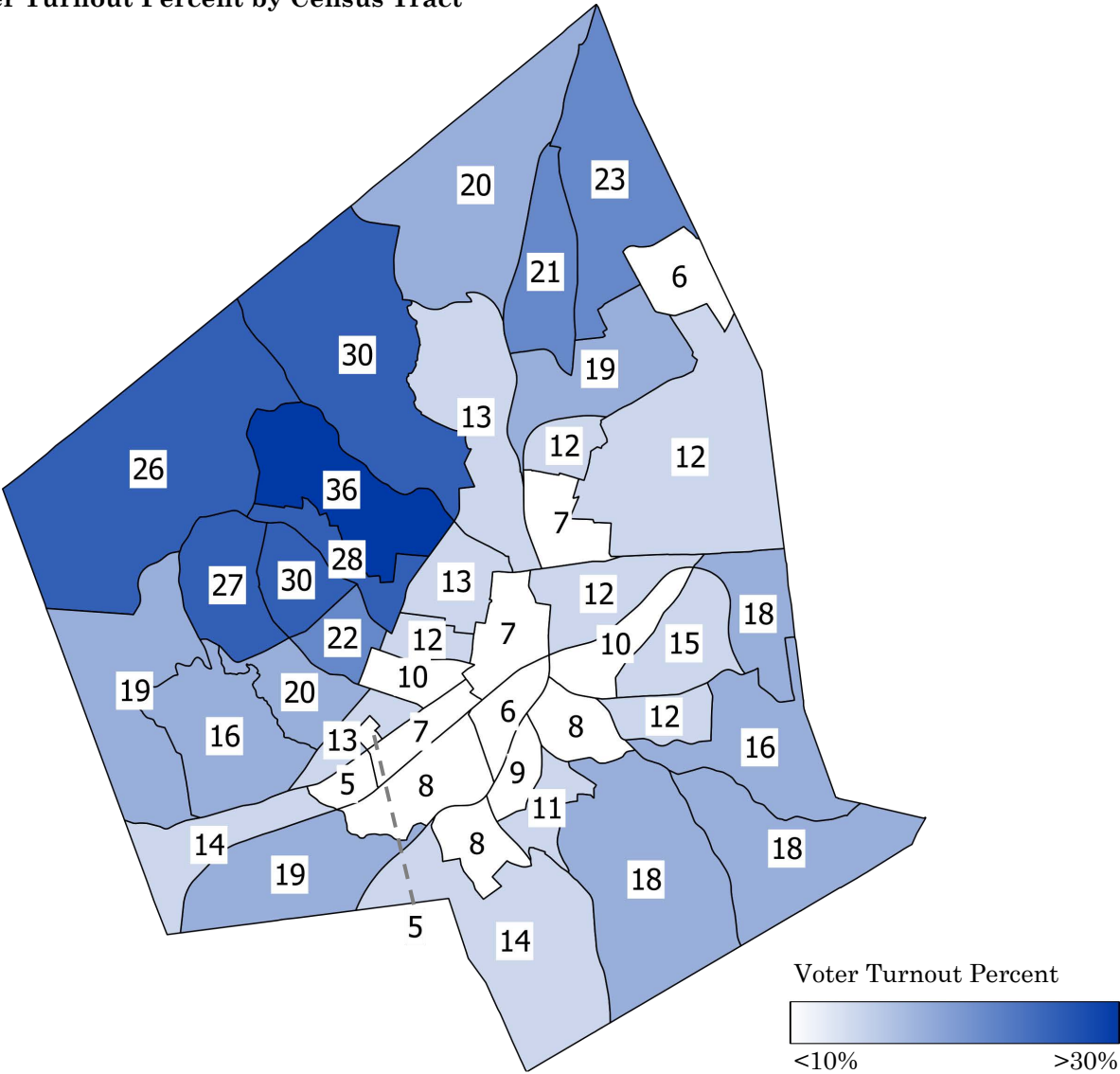|	
Single Family	10,968
Three Family	1,475
Two Family	1,222
Condo	1,114
WHA/Affordable/Other Charitable	1,091
Over 8 Units	570
4-8 Units	372
Multiple Use	327
Not Available/Other	346

Racial and Ethnic Demographics

Voter information files do not provide any demographic information beyond date of birth. But because the racial and ethnic characteristics of Worcester residents differ by geography, it is possible to gain some insight into other demographics by using geographic information to map individual voters, aligning voters with tracts drawn by the U.S. Census Bureau instead of by precincts drawn by the Worcester City Council. This allows a more direct comparison of demographic data collected by the federal government to local election records. Around 0.3 percent of 2019 voters and 0.5 percent of registered voters were unable to be mapped in this way.

Chart 4: 2019 Voter Turnout Percent by Type of Census Tract (Percent White)
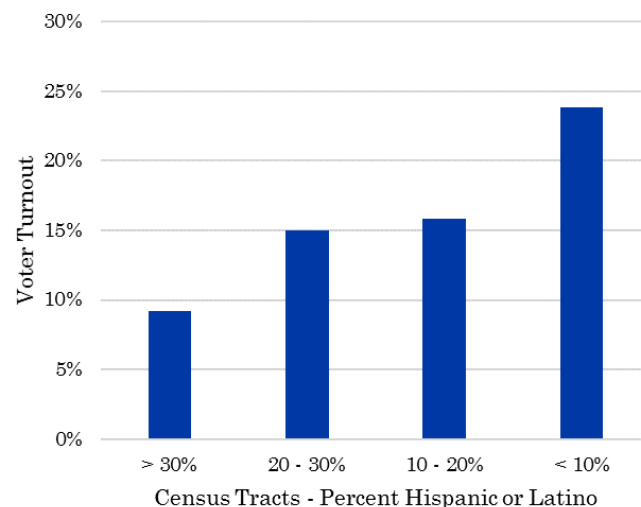

Map 5: 2019 Voter Turnout Percent by Census Tract

Looking at voters in this way shows some racial patterns. In tracts where white residents make up more than 80 percent of the population, voter turnout in the 2019 election (based on registered voters) was 28 percent. In tracts where white residents are less than 60 percent of the population, voter turnout was 10 percent (see chart 4). While this does not confirm individual voters' races, the 2019 election did show that areas with a high percentage of white residents voted at much higher rates than more racially diverse areas.
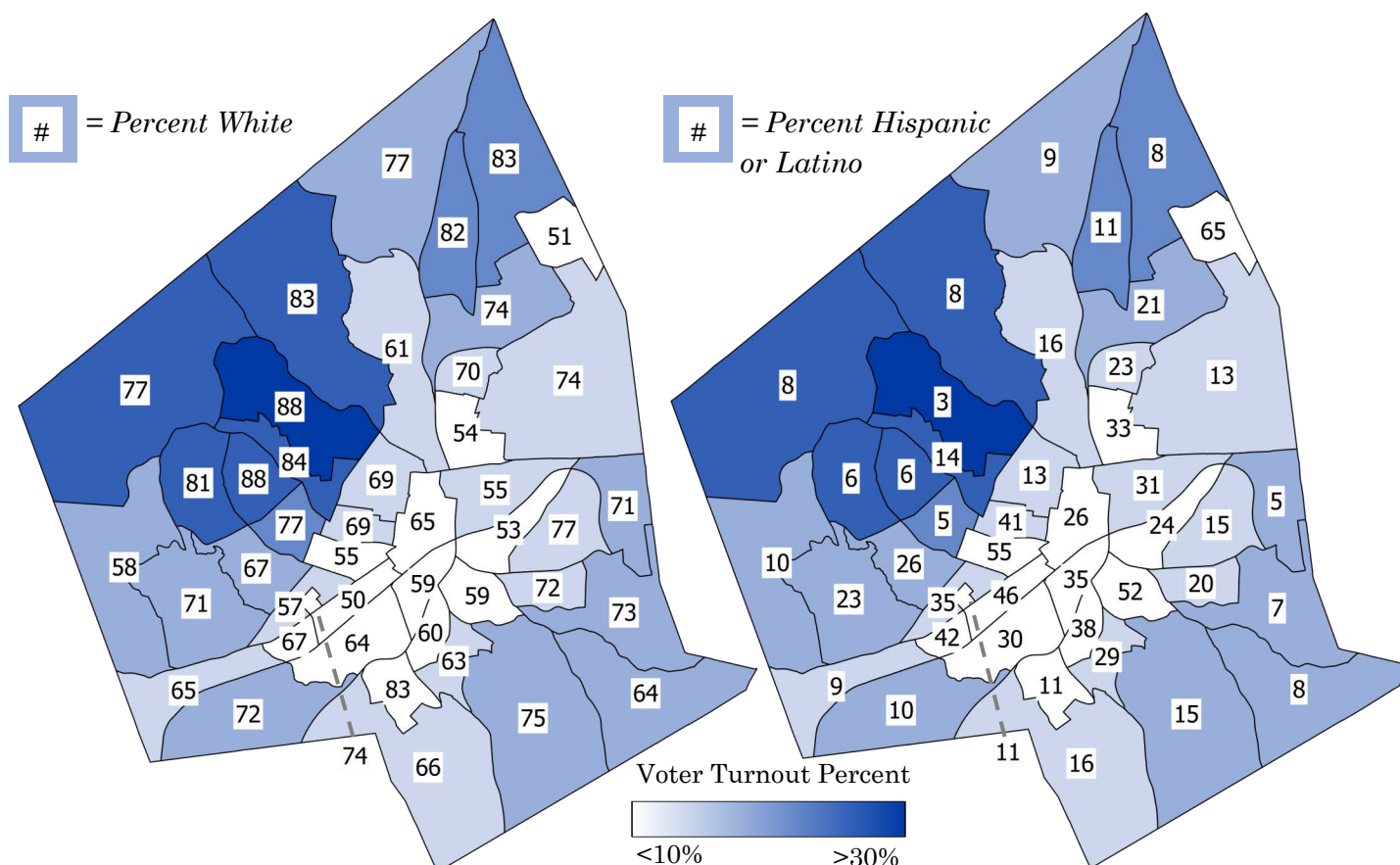
Hispanic or Latino neighborhoods show a similar pattern. In tracts where more than 30 percent of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, 9 percent of registered voters showed up to the polls in 2019. In tracts where Hispanic or Latino residents are less than 10 percent of the population, voter turnout was 24 percent (see chart 5). For Census Bureau counting purposes, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity is treated separately from race because multiple races can identify as Hispanic or Latino.

Chart 5: 2019 Voter Turnout Percent by Type of Census Tract (Percent Hispanic or Latino)

In map 6, below, both voter turnout percentage from 2019 and what percent of each census tract is white (on the left) or Hispanic or Latino (on the right) are identified. Voter turnout percent is identified by color, as in map 5. Demographic percentages are indicated by the number.

Map 6: 2019 Voter Turnout and Demographic Percentages by Census Tract

Voter Age

Voter behavior by age has been well-studied, with many reports concluding that older residents vote more frequently and reliably than younger voters. This can incentivize candidates to focus on concerns and events that appeal to older residents, and has also led to efforts to boost youth voter registration and turnout by those concerned about the implications of this disparity.

The average voter age in the 2019 Worcester municipal election was 58.2 years old. This can be traced, in part, to voter registration rates—85 percent of Worcester residents age 55 or above are registered to vote, compared to 62 percent of eligible voters below 55, when comparing election data to U.S. Census Bureau data. The numbers get more extreme at both ends of the spectrum, as only 27 percent of 18 and 19 year olds are registered to vote, compared to 98 percent of those aged 70 to 74 (see chart 6).
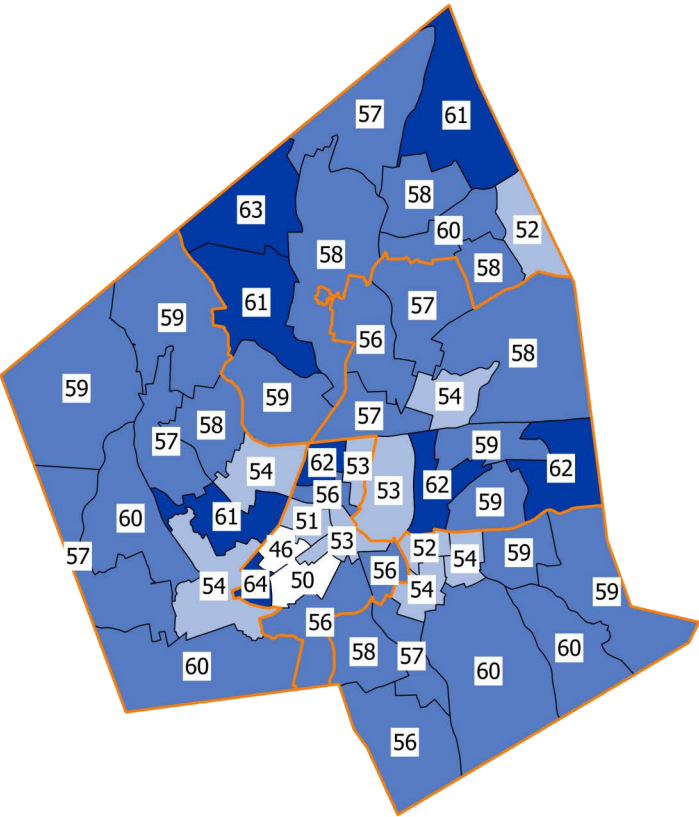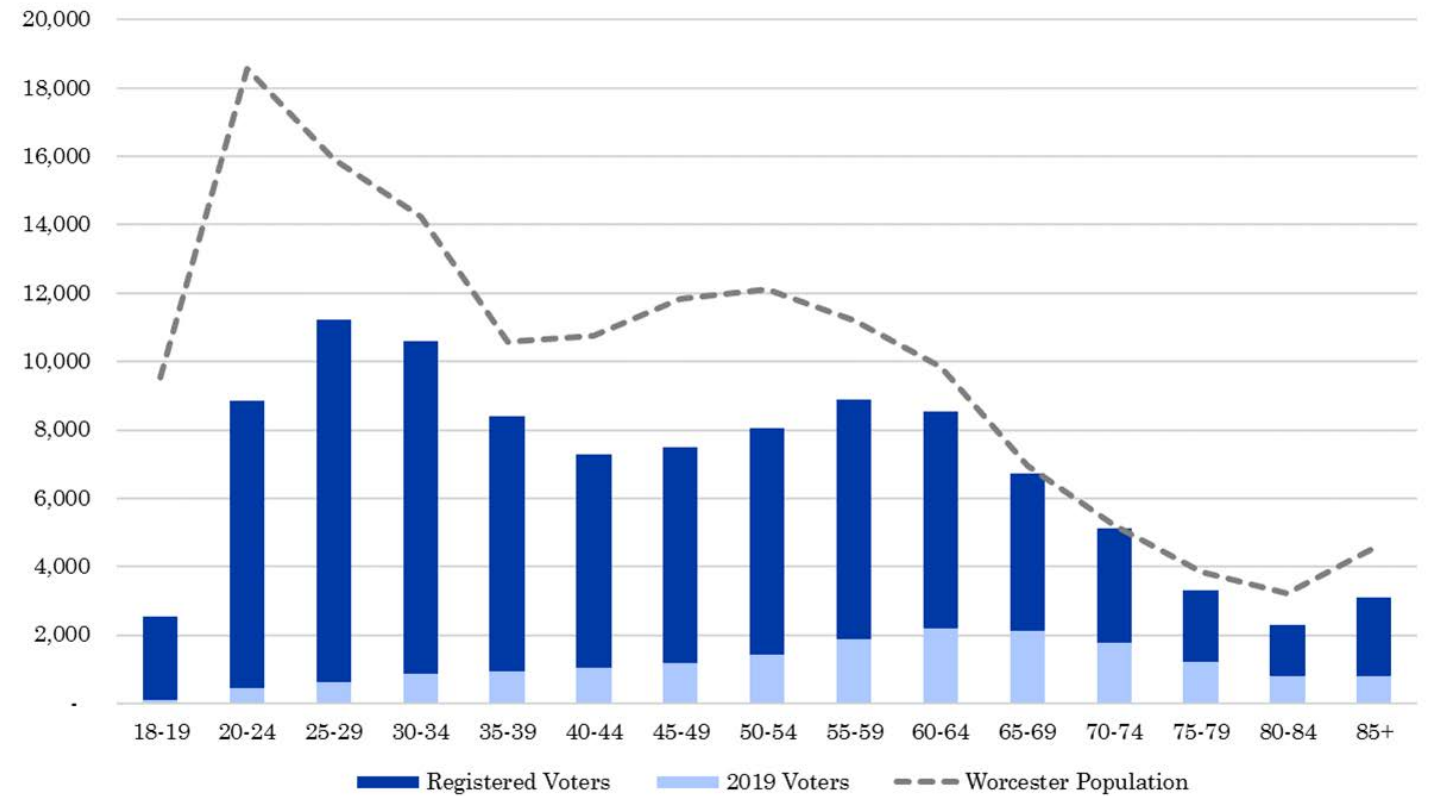
Map 7: Average Age of 2019 Voters

Chart 6: Electorate and General Population by Age Group

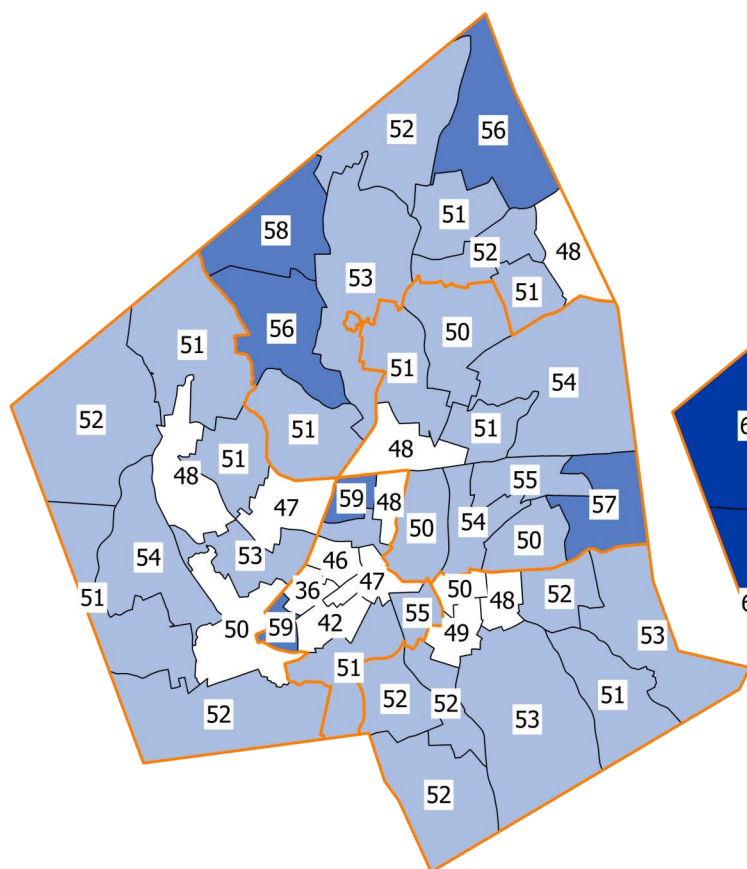*Source: Worcester population from 2017 5-year American Community Survey*

Even within the universe of registered voters, though, there are age disparities. While around 17 percent of registered voters turned out to the polls in 2019, only 10 percent of under-55 registered voters turned out, while 28 percent of registered voters over age 55 did. This means residents over 55 made up 62 percent of 2019 voters, despite being only 37 percent of registered voters and 30 percent of voting-age Worcester residents.

There are clear geographic patterns in this statistic, as central precincts, especially around Main South, have much lower average voter ages compared to those on Worcester's borders (see map 7).
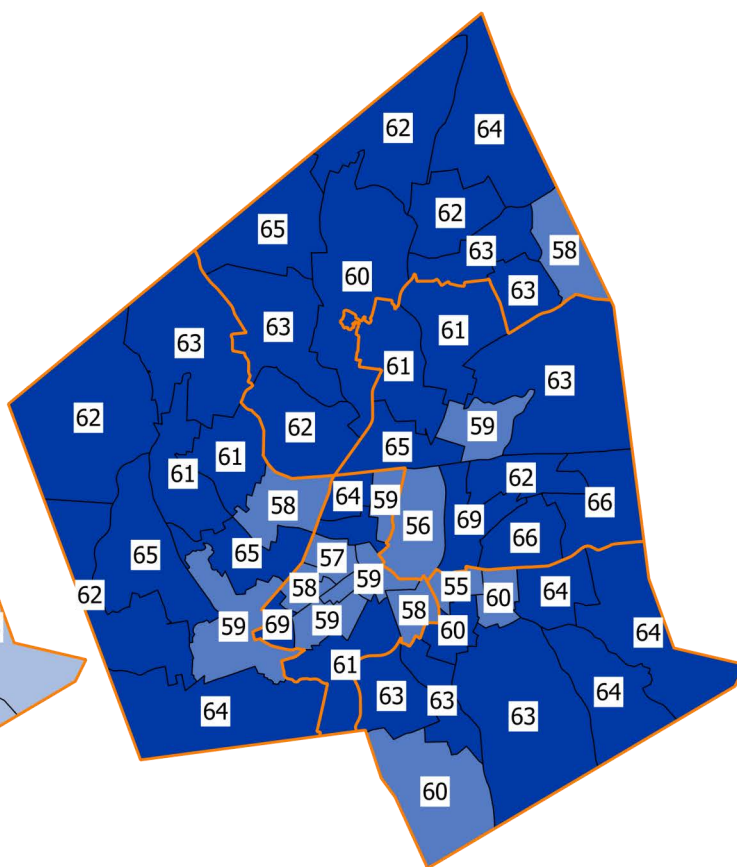
The idea that older voters show up to the polls more reliably is backed up by looking at returning voters in the 2019 election. The average age of "new" voters—those who voted in 2019, but did not vote in the 2017 municipal election—was 51.9 years old. The average age of "returning" voters—2019 voters who also cast a ballot in 2017—was 62.3 years old. While the same geographic differences were present for both new and returning voters, the link between age and having voted before is clear (see maps 8 and 9).

Map 8: Average Age of 2019 "New" Voters (did not vote in 2017)

Map 9: Average Age of 2019 Voters Who Also Voted in 2017
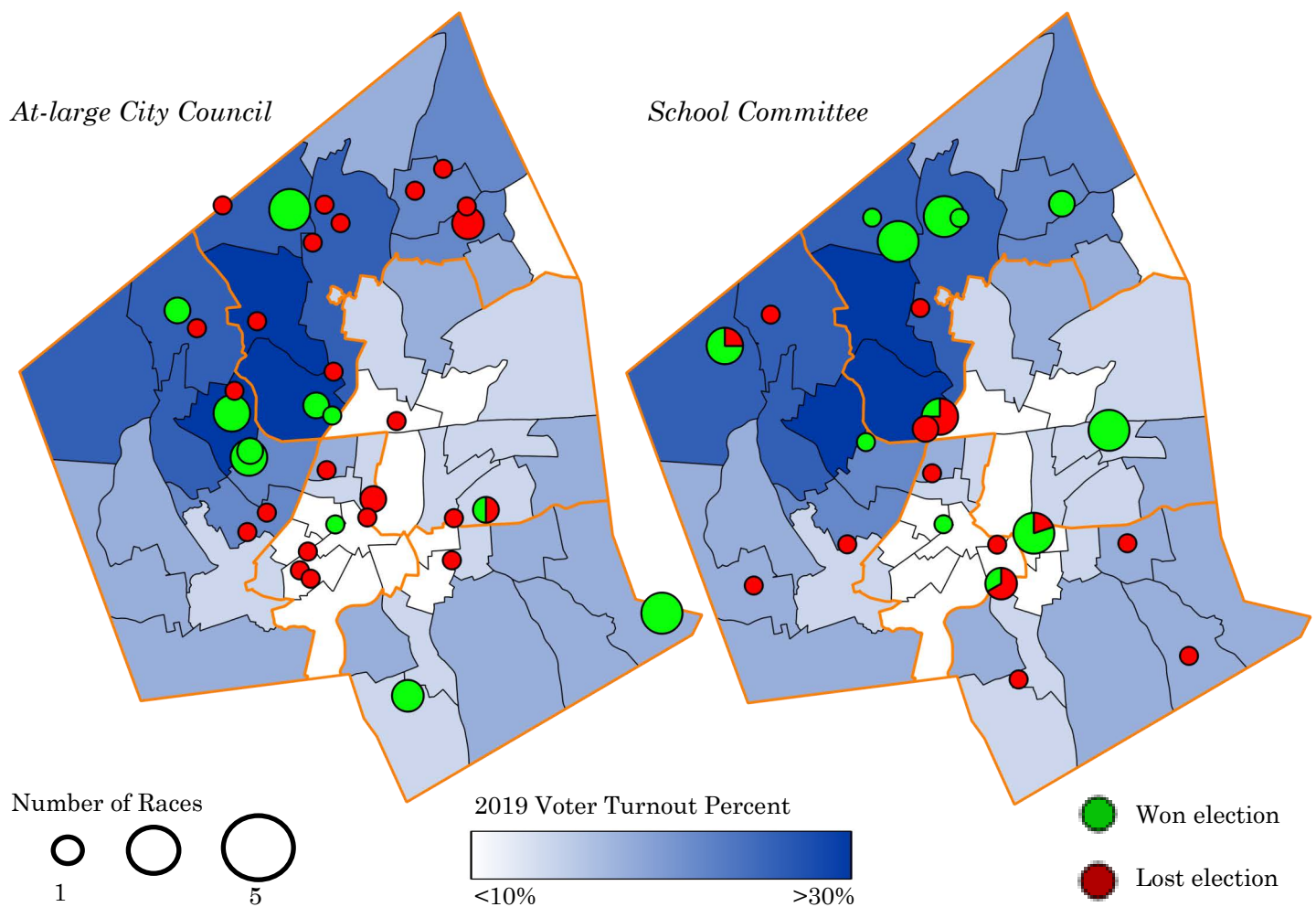
<u>Candidate Dispersion</u>

Political candidates' home neighborhoods can be electoral factors. Because much of campaigning is encouraging supporters to go to the polls, the presence of one or more strong candidates would theoretically boost turnout in an area. This could also work in reverse, as a more involved neighborhood could boost a "local" candidate's campaign.

For At-large City Council, most successful and unsuccessful candidates come from Districts 1 and 5, the areas with the highest voter turnout. Another large portion of races run originates in the extremely low-turnout downtown area, but only one race has been won from that area in the last five elections. There are also success stories from District 3, although there are far fewer overall candidates from that area and District 2.

The School Committee picture has fewer overall candidates, but also more candidates who have both wins and losses on their campaign record over the last five elections. Similarly to City Council, though, most School Committee winners come from high-turnout precincts in Districts 1 and 5, while unsuccessful candidates are more scattered. School Committee does have more examples of successful candidates from downtown, despite its low turnout.

While there are success stories from low-turnout precincts, it is clear there is a correlation between living in a high-turnout area and electoral success. Because Worcester's high-turnout areas are clustered together, this has resulted in some "clumping" of successful candidates. The District City Council setup, adopted in a 1983 referendum, ensures at least one representative from each of the five designated areas (no equivalent system exists for School Committee).

Map 10: Municipal Candidate Home Addresses, 2011—2019

At-large City Council

School Committee

Number of Races

1   5

2019 Voter Turnout Percent

<10%   >30%

Won election
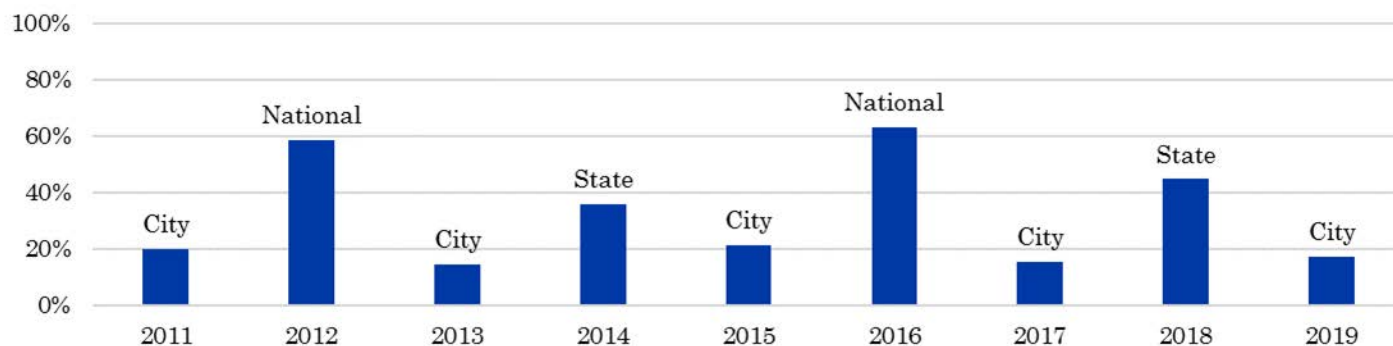
Lost election

Statewide and National Elections

There is one case where Worcester residents show up to vote in high numbers—statewide or national elections, held on even-numbered years every two years and four years, respectively.

Of the roughly 16,000 voters in the 2017 municipal election, more than 15,000, or 95 percent, had also voted in the 2016 race, which contained the U.S. Presidential contest. This was similar to the most recen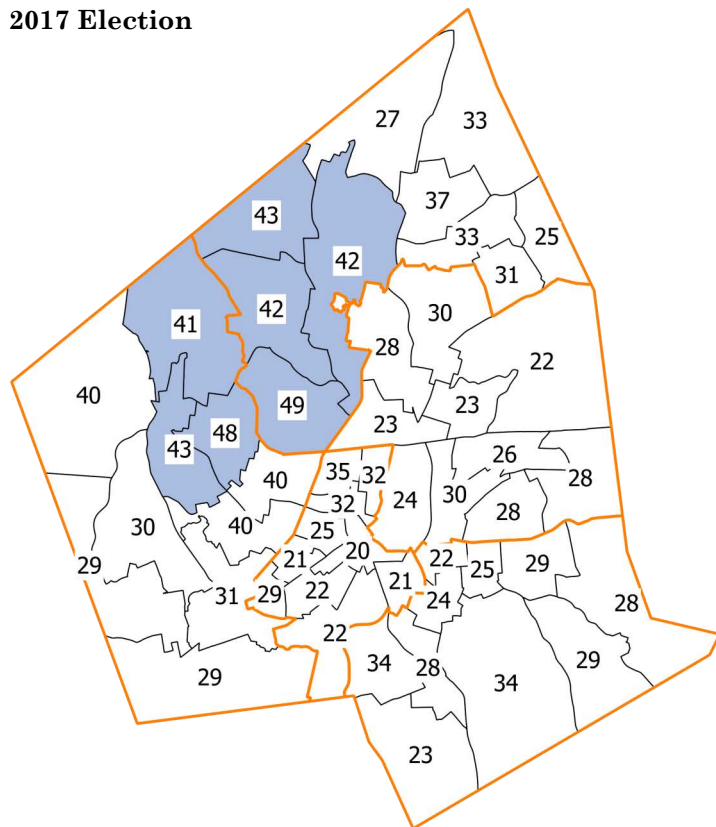t pair of elections—of the roughly 17,500 voters in the 2019 municipal election, nearly 16,000, or 91 percent, had also voted in the 2018 race, which contained races for Governor and U.S. Congress.

While municipal election voters are highly likely to have voted in state or federal races, the opposite does not hold true—the high turnout for elections in even-numbered years means many people do not continue voting when the next year's municipal election arrives. Of the more than 62,000 voters in 2016, only 25 percent went on to vote in 2017. Of the nearly 50,000 voters in 2018, only 32 percent went on to vote in 2019.
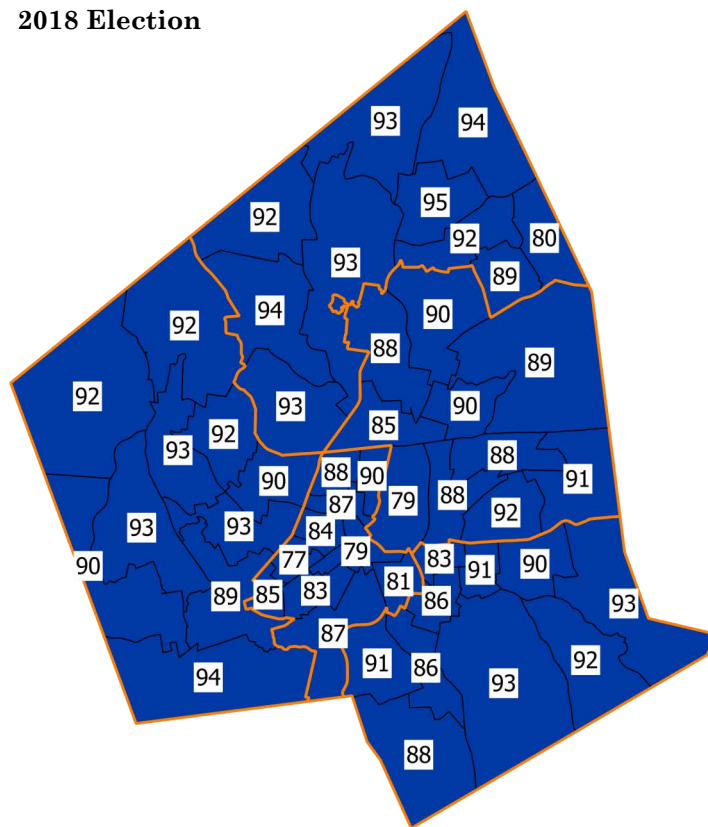
Chart 7: Worcester Municipal, State and National Election Turnout

Map 11: Percent of 2018 Voters Returning From 2017 Election

Map 12: Percent of 2019 Voters Returning From 2018 Election
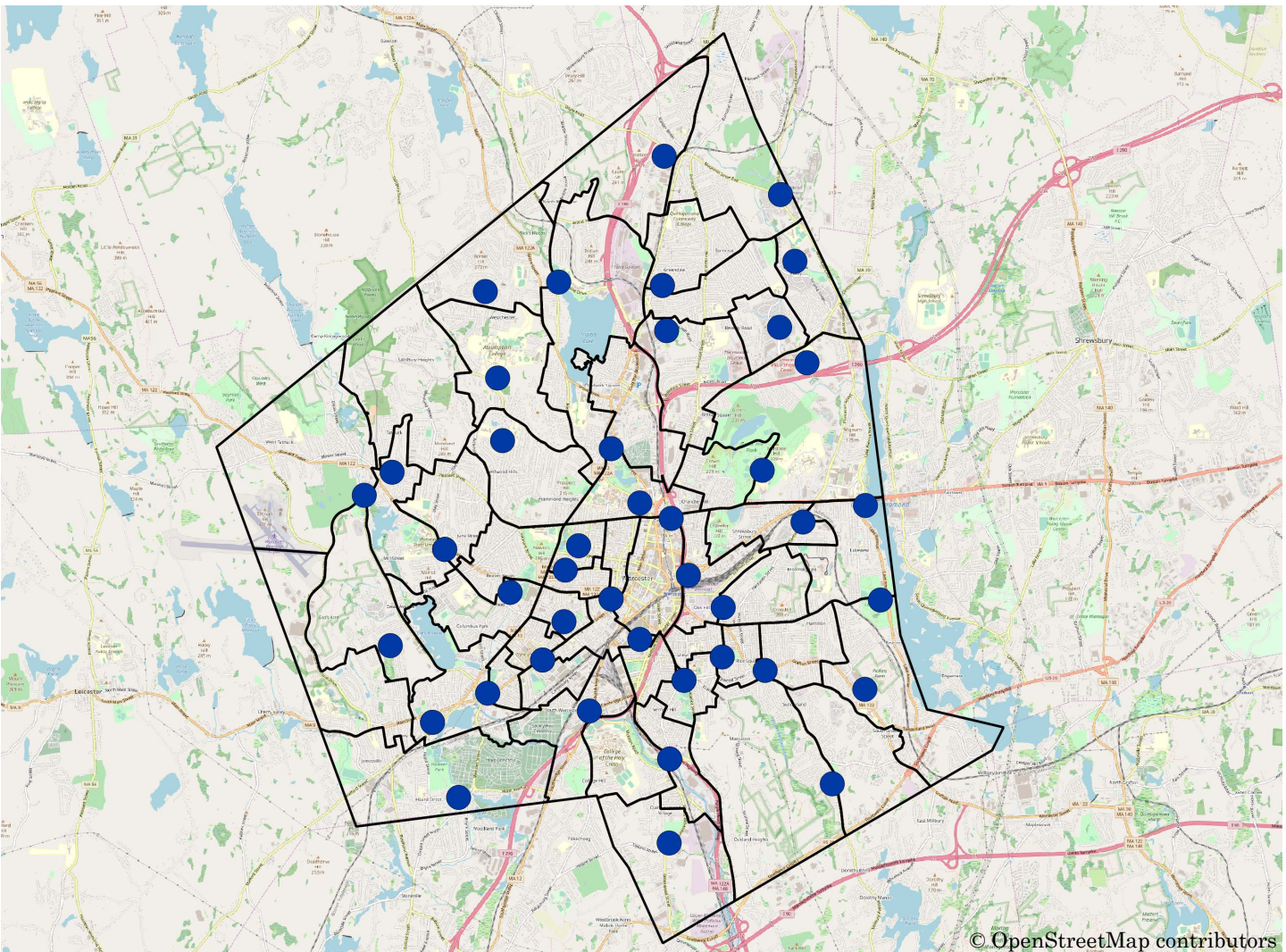
Polling Locations

Recently, political and media attention has focused on the idea of polling location accessibility. In past elections with higher turnout, the city had 70 precincts, with a corresponding number of polling locations. In 1992, a redistricting plan based on declining population reduced that number to 50.

Worcester has 50 polling locations, one for each precinct in the city, but because some buildings were deemed convenient and accessible for more than one precinct, these 50 polling locations are spread across 42 addresses. These locations are in churches, housing complexes, city-owned buildings, and others—but since 2008, not school buildings, because of student safety concerns.

The factors that go into making a location suitable for a polling place are varied—distance from potential voters, handicap accessibility, parking, walkability and public transit access, to name a few—and are best considered on a case-by-case basis. Because moving a polling place can be disruptive to voters who are used to showing up to a particular location, switching polling places is only done after deep consideration and public comment.
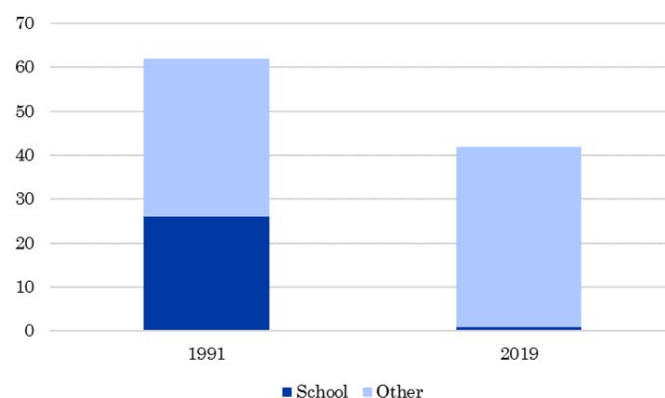
It is possible to calculate voter turnout within a certain distance from polling locations, to see if proximity to a polling locations is more likely to make someone vote. Within a quarter mile—a generally-accepted standard of "walking distance"—of polling places, voter turnout in 2019 was around 15 percent. Outside of this radius, voter turnout was around 18 percent.

Map 13: Municipal Election Polling Locations in 2019

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Recently, the Worcester City Council asked the Board of Election Commissioners and the Superintendent of the Worcester Public Schools to move voting locations, as appropriate, into Worcester Public Schools buildings. Part of the order, approved by all 11 councilors, was to ask them to work to declare Election Day a teacher development day for Worcester Public Schools, which would also give students the day off. This would alleviate safety concerns caused by public access to school grounds when children are on site.

Chart 8: Polling Locations by Type

Schools are appealing locations for polling places for a number of reasons—by virtue of needing to accommodate many people and vehicles every day, they are designed to be accessible. They are also under government control, as opposed to churches or supermarkets. However, there are other buildings that fit this description—the Council order made specific mention of Worcester Housing Authority buildings, specifying that polling places should not be moved out of those locations.

Map 14: Municipal Election Polling Locations in 2019 and 1991

■ 2019 (School)
● 2019 (Non-school)
● Both years
■ 1991 (School)
● 1991 (Non-school)

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Conclusions

Voter turnout for municipal elections in Worcester is low enough to raise serious concerns about whether recent electorates are sufficiently representative of the community as a whole. A closer look at available data shows that low turnout does not impact all demographics or geographies equally, confirming the intuitive cause for alarm that candidates, government officials, and community members have been sounding for years.

In trying to correct these disparities, it is important to keep in mind the groups data shows are not represented in the current electorate, relative to their population. These include younger residents, occupants of multi-unit buildings, first-time (potential) voters, nonwhite residents (who make up around 21 percent of the city population), Hispanic or Latino residents (who also make up around 21 percent of the city population) and residents of low-turnout areas such as District 4 (downtown).

A number of strategies, many of which are specifically targeted at some of the affected population, have been discussed at the state or federal level. Lowering the voting age from 18 years old, perhaps to 16, has attracted serious attention from lawmakers interested in how it would affect the youth vote, with the goal of introducing good voting habits earlier. Same-day voter registration, in which residents do not need to register separately and earlier from election day, is a reality in 21 states, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, which has noted evidence that it increases voter turnout. Both ideas have been the subject of proposed legislation in Massachusetts, and nine municipalities have filed home rule petitions to lower the local voting age, pending legislative approval.

Some turnout-boosting efforts are currently active on a statewide scale. Starting in 2020, Massachusetts residents who provide information to the Registry of Motor Vehicles, MassHealth or the Commonwealth Health Connector as part of certain transactions will be automatically registered to vote (unless they opt out). The state also provides funding and assistance for early voting locations for state and presidential elections so that voters have more options for when and how to cast their ballots. Local officials have publicly hoped funding would be made available to extend early voting to municipal election years.

Given high voter turnout in state and federal election years, relative to municipal elections, some have suggested synchronizing municipal elections to line up with higher-profile contests. This would entail holding municipal elections on even-numbered years instead of the current odd-numbered schedule, although others argue local candidates and issues could be overshadowed by more prominent races in this scenario. There are other logistical considerations for this idea, such as the cost savings of holding fewer elections and the need for a transition period for the terms of elected officials who are in office at the time the change goes into effect.

Separately from proposed voting reforms, which are often led by lawmakers or community advocates, is the regular redistricting process for the City of Worcester. Ward and precinct boundaries are set using U.S. Census Bureau population statistics, and the upcoming 2020 Census will precede the next opportunity to redraw electoral boundaries. This is perhaps most relevant to the discussion of polling locations, and whether having more of them or locating them in school facilities—as one local proposal suggests—should be a City goal.

Keeping underrepresented groups in mind when devising strategies to increase voter turnout will allow for a more efficient and targeted use of resources, whether those efforts are being made by the City of Worcester, individual campaigns, or interested community members and groups. Policymakers should keep these groups in mind when presented with opportunities such as the upcoming municipal redistricting process or pending statewide and local proposals.

Methodology

Except where indicated, the source for all graphics is the Worcester Election Commission. Two main types of documents were used—a current voter registration list showing every Worcester resident who is registered to vote, and voter activity lists showing every voter in a given election year. Because these lists are not compiled exactly at the moment of an election, the numbers used may differ slightly from results posted on the Election Commission website. The Election Commission also provided ballot information from previous elections with candidate addresses.

Other sources used include a list of properties and corresponding "use codes" from the City Assessor's office and a list of properties from the Worcester Geographic Information System (GIS) department. Because address spellings or styles are sometimes not consistent across these sources and Election Commission data, some voters could not be matched to housing type or a geographic latitude and longitude. These discrepancies are noted on the appropriate pages. Census data cited is from the 2018 5-year American Community Survey. Some percentages do not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

The WRRB would also like to thank the staff of the City Clerk's office for qualitative feedback and fact-checking for this report.

Worcester Regional Research Bureau, Inc.