

Data Spotlight

Changes in Local Election Voter Registration and Turnout

June 2018

Bexar County's voter registration and turnout have historically been low. Turnout is especially low in local elections, which are not synchronized with national elections. SA2020 tracks voter turnout for the City of San Antonio, defined as number of ballots cast as a percentage of total registered voters eligible to vote in that election, as one of many indicators of progress toward the community vision established in 2010. Turnout among residents of San Antonio – not the county as a whole – has increased steadily in recent years, from 6.7% in 2011 to 13.2% in 2017. But after a marked jump from 7.6% in 2013 to 12.4% in 2015,¹ the trend leveled off, raising concerns that improvements in turnout would not continue.

While turnout is low across the board, older people and residents of higher-income, better-educated neighborhoods vote at much higher rates than do younger people and residents of neighborhoods where income and educational attainment are lower. *"Who Votes for Mayor?"*, an analysis by Portland State University, found 31% turnout among registered voters aged 65 and older in San Antonio in 2015, as compared to only 3.6% of registered voters aged 18 to 34. That disparity means that older voters have twenty times the electoral clout of younger voters.²

So do changes in voter registration and turnout differ by neighborhood in Bexar County? Community Information Now (CI:Now) analyzed and mapped the difference between 2015 and 2017 in number of registered voters, number of ballots cast, and turnout. We looked at all Bexar County election precincts with data in both years, and to ensure an apples-to-apples comparison not affected by runoff races, we looked only at first-round voting. We also mapped characteristics that might be expected to affect turnout: high and low educational attainment, income, poverty, older population, and race/ethnicity.

Not mapped in this analysis is change in the size of the voting-eligible population, which is very difficult to quantify for several reasons. First, good population counts are available only from Decennial Censuses, and we do know that Bexar County's voting-age population has increased substantially since 2010. Second, we do not have a trustworthy figure for the voting-age population deemed ineligible to vote because of a felony convictionⁱ, non-citizenship, or mental incapacitation.

"...older people and residents of higher-income, better-educated neighborhoods vote at much higher rates ..."

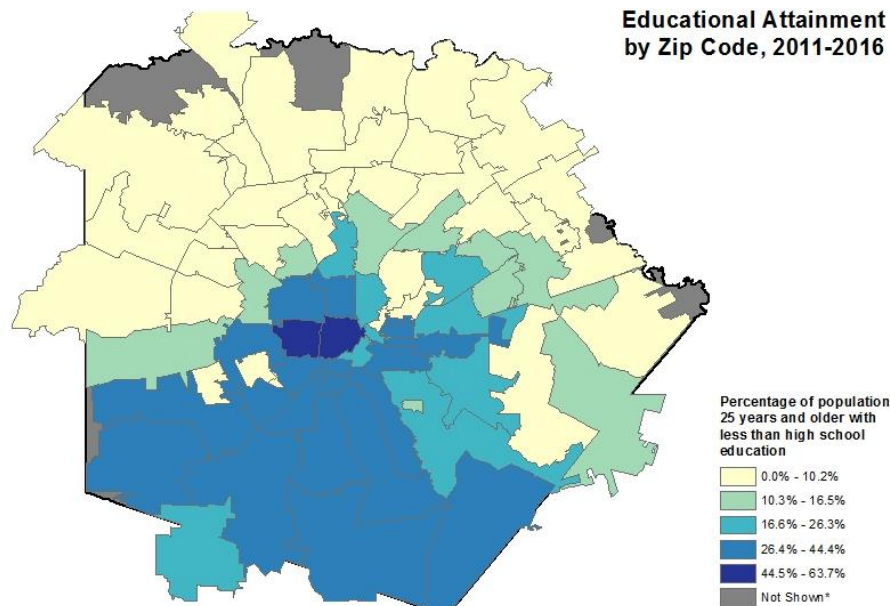
Beyond the demographic characteristics listed above, a major factor that affects turnout in local elections is interest in particular local races, ballot propositions, and bond issues. Hotly-contested races for Mayor and City Council draw larger turnout than lower-profile races with strong incumbents and no serious challengers, when turnout generally dips to less than eight percent. Looking back to the wide-open mayoral race in 2005, voter turnout peaked at 16.7%, but it typically hovers around six to eight percent when a mayoral candidate is seeking re-election.

The City of San Antonio mayoral races of 2015 and 2017 were both highly-contested and high-profile. While the 2015 election technically had an incumbent mayor who was finishing an appointed term, the race had four viable mayoral candidates. The 2015 ballot also included significant proposals to pay San Antonio City Council members a salary and to seek public votes for future streetcar and light rail projects, likely driving the significant jump from 2013. The 2017 ballot for City of San Antonio residents also included a bond election proposal and a number of ballot propositions. The crowded 2017 ballot included a total of 79 candidates, as compared to only 48 in 2015.

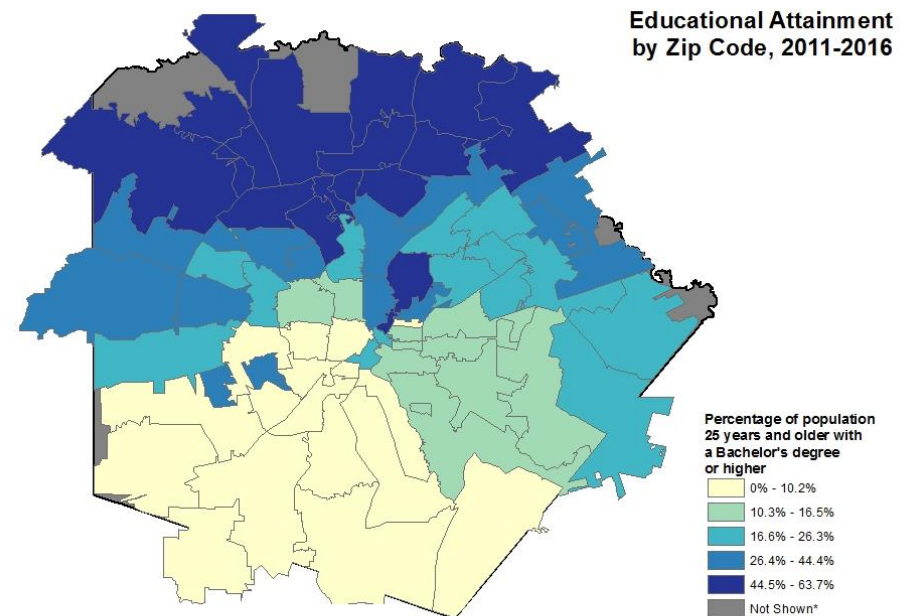


Factors that Affect Turnout

Educational Attainment



Educational Attainment Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2016 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table S1501
*Zip codes not shown when the majority of the area is outside Bexar County or data are not available.
*Margins of error associated with estimates not shown.

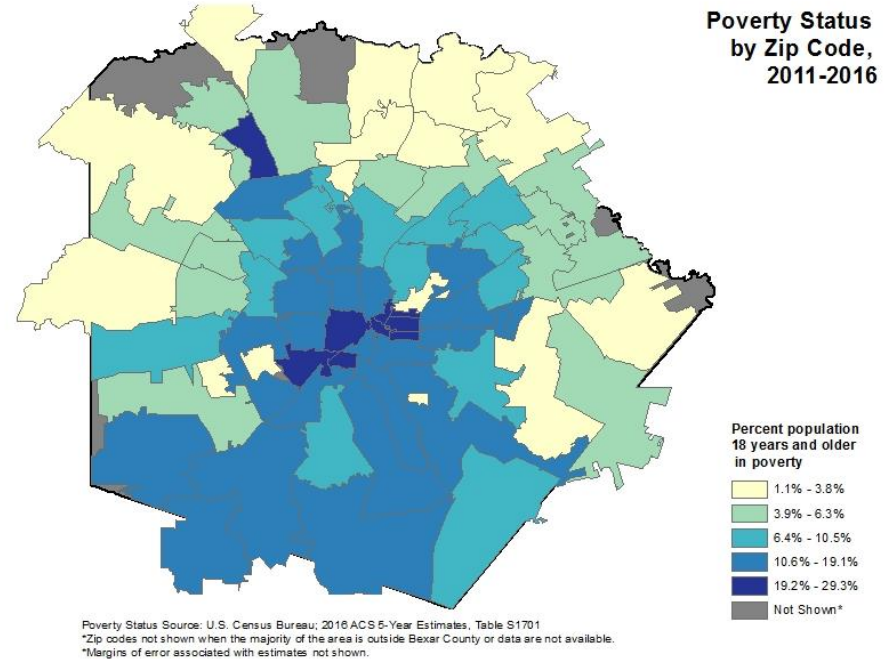
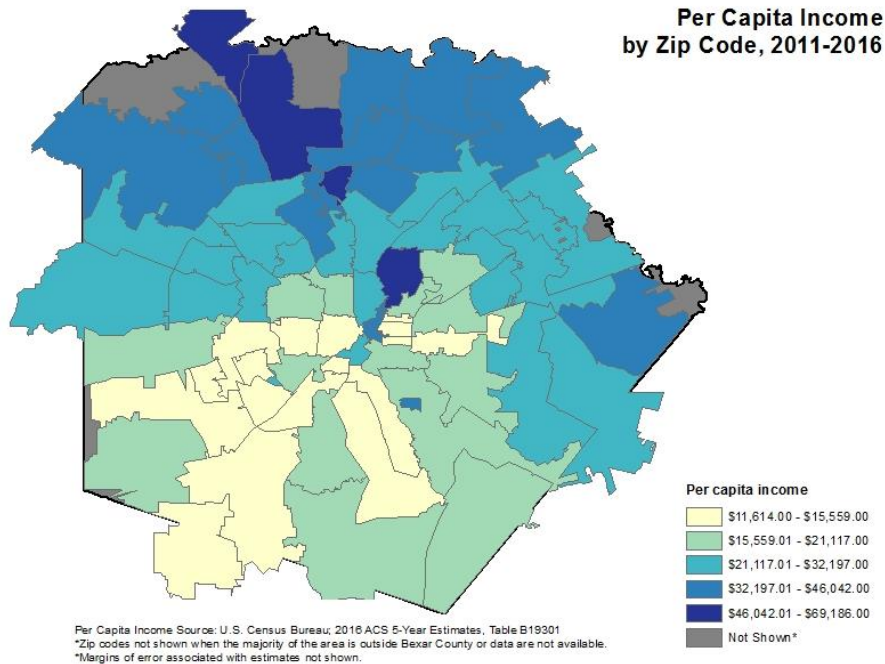


Educational Attainment Source: U.S. Census Bureau; 2016 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table S1501
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CI:Now mapped two key categories of educational attainment among adults 25 and older: percent of population with less than a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED), and percent of population with at least a Bachelor's degree. The population with less than a high school education is most heavily concentrated on the near-eastside, near-westside, and along the I-35 corridor on the southside, where between a third and nearly one-half of residents lack a high school diploma or GED. The map of percent population with a Bachelor's degree or higher is roughly the inverse pattern, with the highest concentrations on the far northside and in zip codes 78209, which includes Alamo Heights, and 78215, the lower Broadway corridor. A reference map showing major highways is included in the *Data Sources and Methods* section at the end of this report.

Factors that Affect Turnout

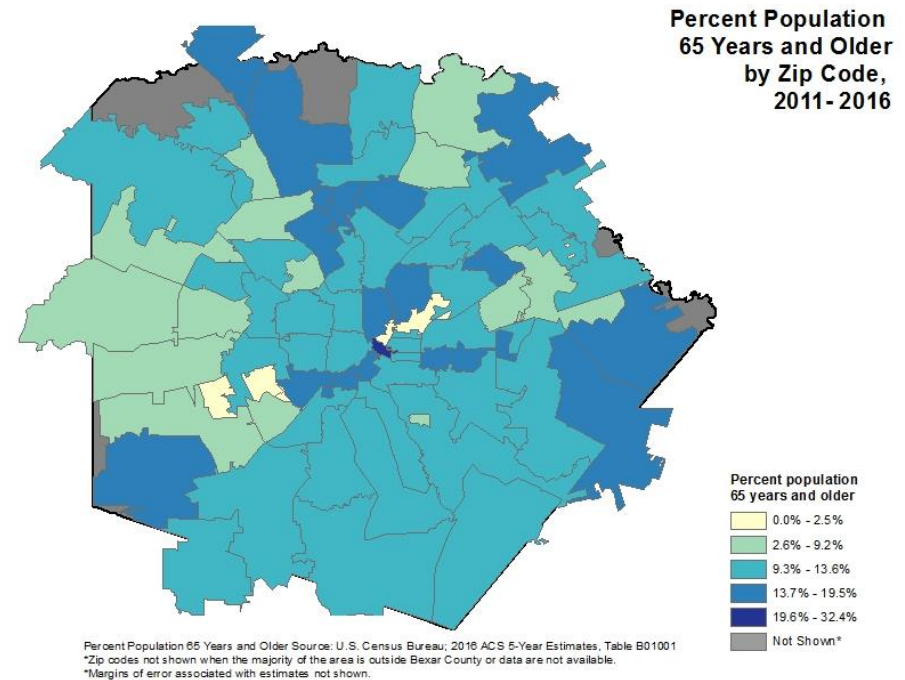
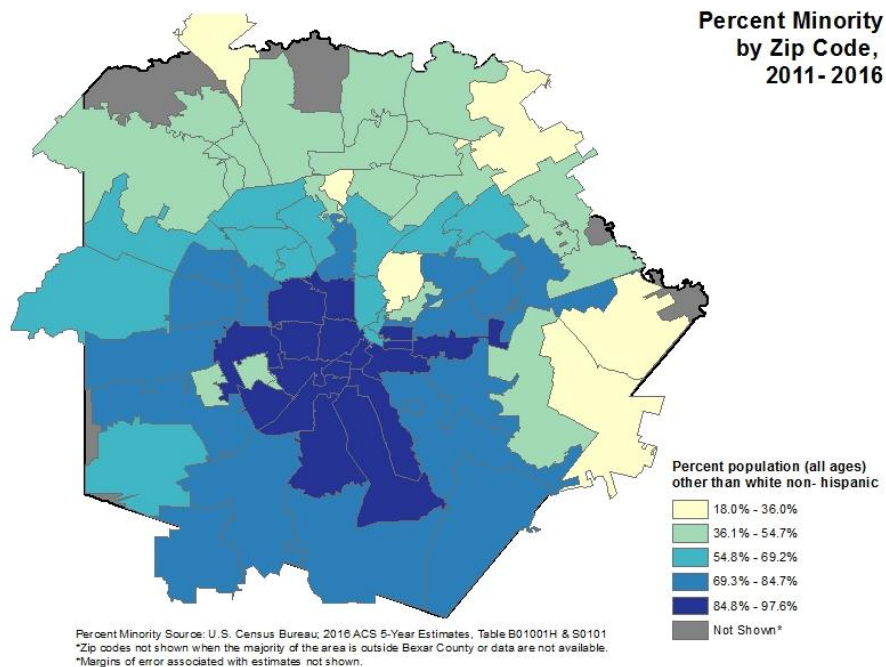
Income & Poverty



The highest per-capita incomes are found in zip code 78209 and in the Stone Oak area. The per-capita income in these neighborhoods is nearly four times as high as the lowest per-capita incomes on the near westside, near eastside, and portions of the southside. The near eastside, near westside, and Palm Heights and Englewood areas have the highest concentrations of poverty, with the lone high-poverty zip code at the I-10 and Loop 1604 intersection representing a high density of college students. But a significant proportion of the population – between about 11% and 19% – lives in poverty in a wide swath of neighborhoods inside Loop 410 on the northside and northeast sides.

Factors that Affect Turnout

Percent Minority & Age



The **Percent Minority** map shows the percentage of the total zip code population that is some race/ethnicity *other than* non-Hispanic white. While every zip code in Bexar County has a sizable minority population, the percent minority in most of the county's central zip codes, home to the county's oldest neighborhoods, ranges from 85% to virtually 100%. Bexar County's age distribution by zip code does not differ across zip codes to nearly the degree that other contextual factors do, but the zip codes with the heaviest concentration of 65-and-older population are found on the northside of the county.

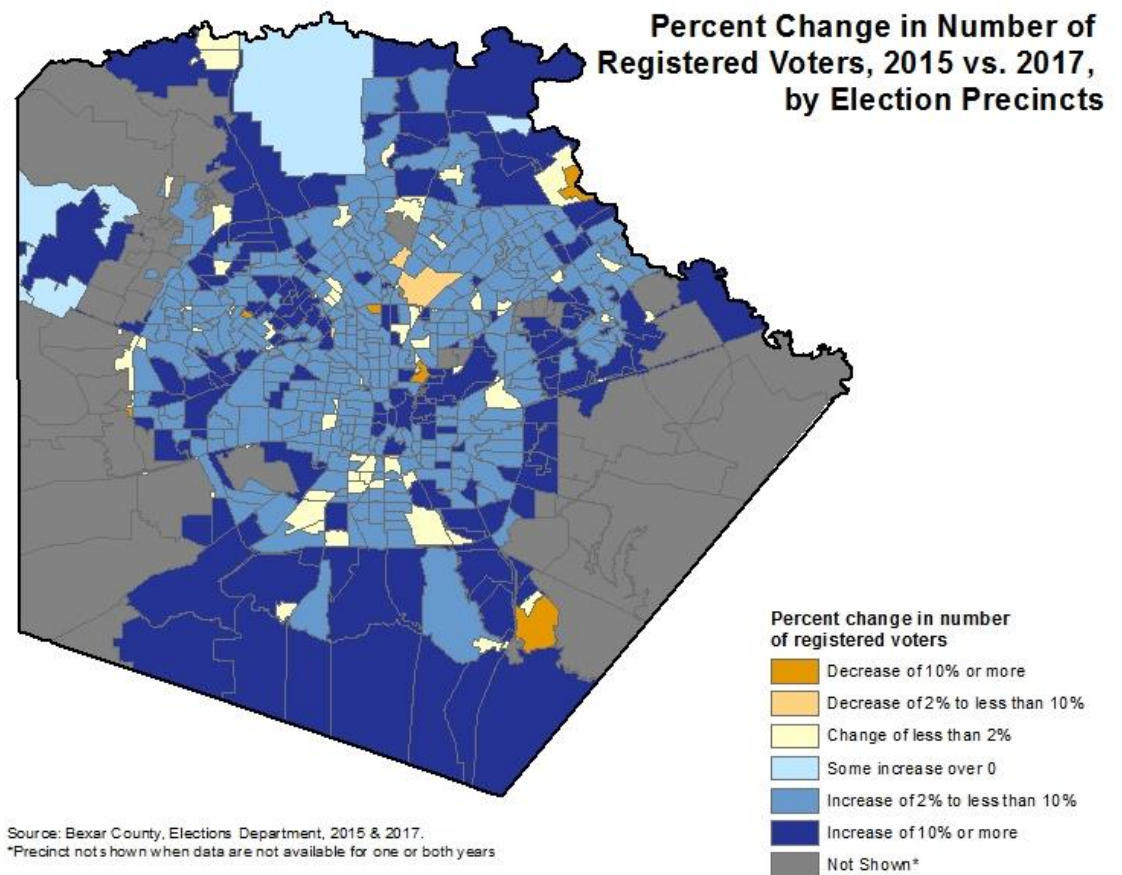
With those patterns, then, we could likely expect to see the highest voter turnout in the higher-income, higher-educated northside neighborhoods, particularly those along and outside of Loop 1604, along with pockets in and near Alamo Heights. We might also see higher turnout in zip codes with a higher density of older people; those zip codes are scattered across the county.

Change in Registered Voters

Bexar County overall saw substantial gains in the number of registered voters between 2015 and 2017, with that number growing from 821,615 to 1,026,817.³ Of 646 election precincts with registered voter data in both 2015 and 2017, 80% experienced an increase of 2% or more. While some of the increase in number of registered voters may be due to an increase in voting-eligible population, the increase in just a two-year period is likely to be fairly small.

Encouragingly, those gains were distributed across the county, with increases of 2% or more in nearly all election precincts inside Loop 410. Clusters of increases of 10% or more were seen in the far northside and far southside, near eastside and near westside, along the I-10 West corridor, and in precincts along and just outside Loop 410. A significant number of southside election precincts, though, showed no meaningful improvement, with the number of registered voters in 2017 varying from 2015 by less than 2%.

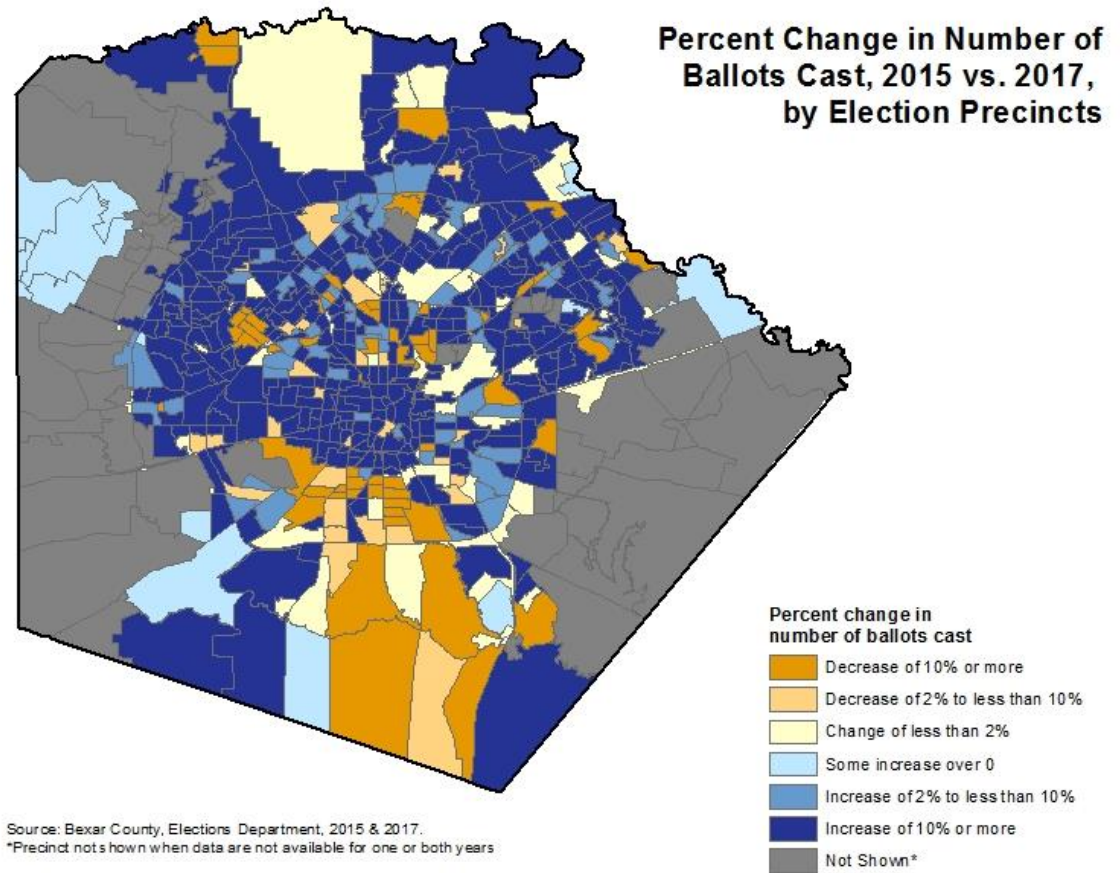
Virtually all of the county's gains, unfortunately, happened ahead of the 2016 national election. Between 2015 and 2016, 90% of pre-existing election precincts experienced some degree of increase in number of registered voters, and only 1% experienced a loss. In contrast, between 2016 and 2017 only 13% of precincts experienced some gain in registered voters, while 86% showed a loss.



Change in Ballots Cast

Bexar County overall saw an almost 20% increase in the number of ballots cast between 2015 and 2017, with the total growing from 97,686 to 116,222.¹ The map of percent change in number of ballots cast illustrates that dramatic increase, with over half of precincts seeing an increase of 10% or more in number of ballots cast. What is striking is that the number of ballots cast increased considerably in a large number of precincts where those factors associated with lower turnout – high rates of poverty, lower educational attainment, younger age, and few non-Hispanic whites – are highly concentrated. Increases of at least 10% were seen in a wide ring of neighborhoods all around downtown, bounded roughly by New Braunfels Ave. to the east, Loop 410 to the west, Division Ave. to the south, and Woodlawn Ave. to the north. This area is home largely to older neighborhoods that vary in era built and current demographics, but on average, per capita income is lower, the poverty rate higher, educational attainment lower, and minority population greater.

Modest increases and decreases were scattered across the county. A wide swath of precincts with decreases in ballots cast cuts through the southside. Some of these precincts are fairly rural, but most are densely populated. Most experienced a decrease of 10% or more in number of ballots cast, so the decrease is not explainable by the lack of growth of number of registered voters described above.

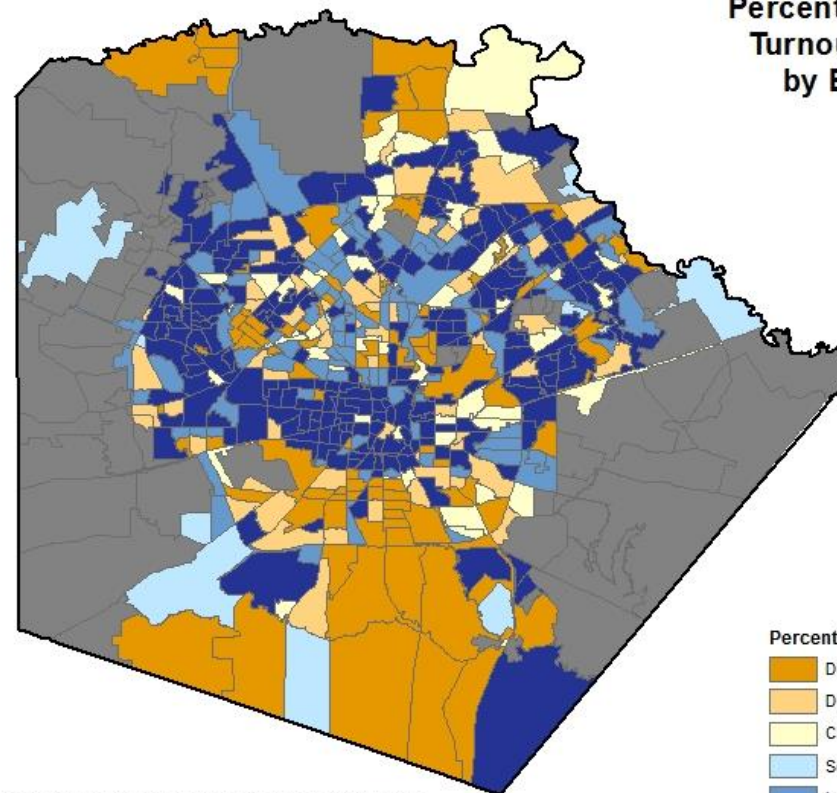


Percent Change in Turnout

Voter turnout, defined as the number of ballots cast as a percent of registered voters, increased markedly between 2015 and 2017 in election precincts all over the county. The largest clusters of increases, where turnout was at least 10% higher than in 2015 (e.g., 11% vs. 10%), were in the same ring of neighborhoods that saw higher increases in number of ballots cast.

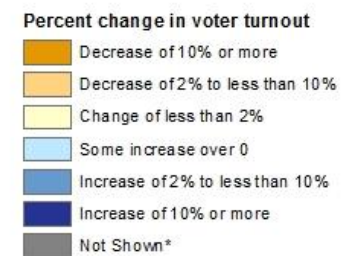
Substantial increases in turnout also occurred along and north of the Hwy 151 corridor on the northwest side, as well as outside Loop 410 on the northeast side in a band stretching from about Nacogdoches Rd. to I-10 East. Those northwest side neighborhoods have some of the lowest concentrations of older population in the county. As the northeast side includes a number of independent municipalities, turnout in that area was likely influenced by the specifics of municipal races and issues unrelated to the City of San Antonio ballot.

The precincts with a significant decrease in turnout were largely concentrated on the southside, with a few clusters on the far northside. Major changes in precincts close to the county line on the north, south, and east sides should be interpreted with caution, as these are more sparsely-populated precincts, and small numerical changes can present as substantial percent changes.



Source: Bexar County, Elections Department, 2015 & 2017.
Voter turnout is defined as the number of ballots cast divided by the number of registered voters, expressed as a percent.
*Precinct not shown when data are not available for one or both years

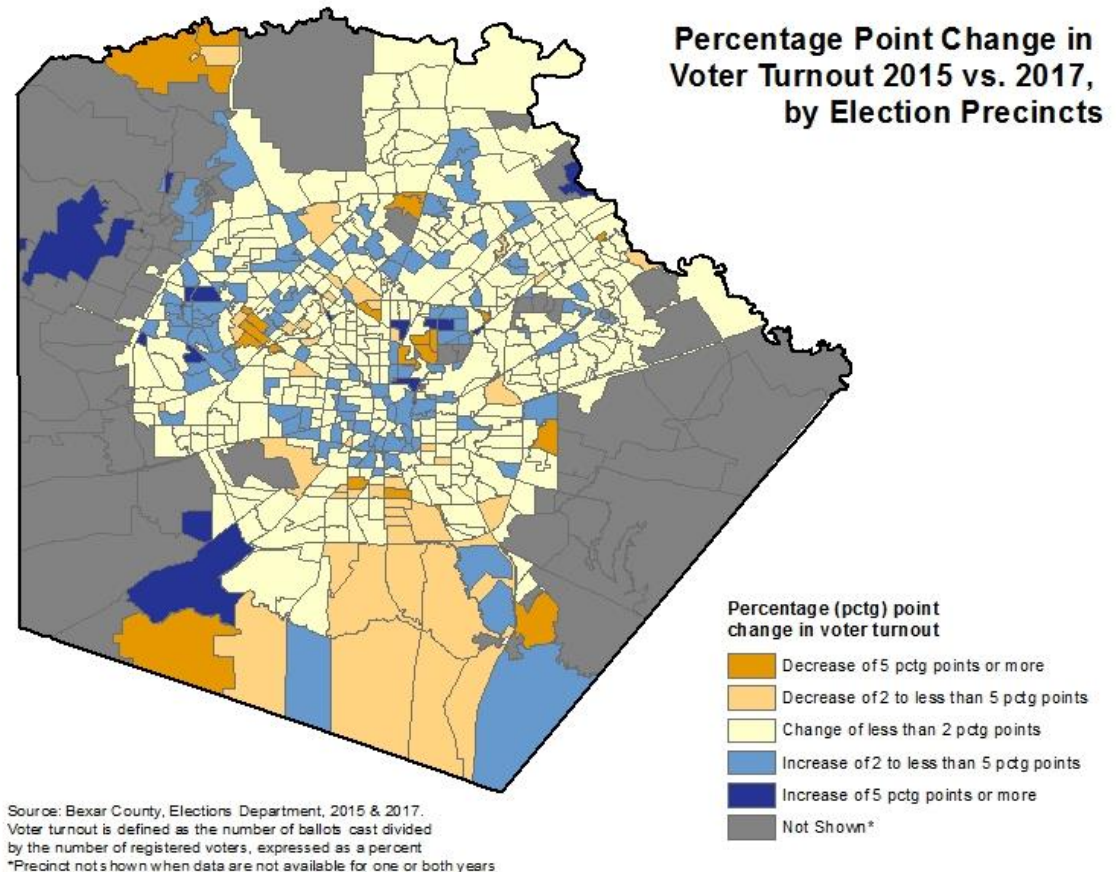
Percent Change in Voter Turnout, 2015 vs. 2017, by Election Precincts




Percentage Point Change in Turnout

We also calculated **percentage point** change in turnout to identify the most extreme changes in turnout, calculated by subtracting 2015 turnout from 2017 turnout. Following the earlier example of percent change, 11% turnout in 2017 following 10% in 2015 would equal a 10 *percent increase* turnout over 2015, but a *percentage point* increase of only 1%. Thus those election precincts with a five percentage point or greater change in turnout experienced a remarkable change from one election to the next.

Several precincts did see that degree of change, either positive or negative. Precincts near the county line are less densely populated, and small numbers can dramatically magnify percent and percentage point changes.ⁱⁱ Several densely-populated urban precincts experienced that dramatic change, though. Among those experiencing dramatic increase were precincts in the North Shearer Hills/Ridgeview and Oak Park/Northwood neighborhoods to the west and east of Alamo Heights, with dramatic *decreases* in precincts immediately to the south. Three other high-increase precincts were on the northwest side, near SeaWorld San Antonio, Northwest Vista College, and Guilbeau Rd. A cluster of precincts with dramatic decreases centers on the Bandera Rd./Evers Rd. corridor near Loop 410.





Mirroring the pattern in percent change, both urban and more rural areas of the southside saw modest but meaningful decreases in turnout, particularly along and south of Military Dr. Modest but still meaningful percentage point *increases* in turnout occurred in precincts throughout the older core neighborhoods inside Loop 410. Some of these increases may be at least partially a product of neighborhood change, as higher-income, higher-education residents move into neighborhoods like Dignowity Hill, the Lone Star area, and neighborhoods immediately south of King William and Lavaca. The pattern is not universal, however, as other changing neighborhoods like lower Broadway/Westfort, Alta Vista, and Beacon Hill did not see significant percentage point change in turnout.

So What Does This Mean?

Without a longer-term analysis than just two elections, it is difficult to distinguish a meaningful trend from “noise” in the data. And without a much more in-depth analysis, we can’t say much about the potential drivers of the differences between 2015 and 2017. Given the timing of the increase, certainly the 2016 election played a role in the dramatic increase in number of registered voters, whether the newly-registered voters were solely self-motivated or benefited from a voter registration drive or other outreach. Similarly, the number of ballots cast and voter turnout might be a result of differences in the ballot and community interest in those issues and candidates, demographic changes (both county in-migration and migration among neighborhoods), or local efforts to increase turnout.

And many new local efforts to increase both registration and turnout launched between May 2015 and May 2017 – initiatives not in place or at scale at the time of the May 2015 first-round election. SA2020 launched ilovesanantonio.org in late March 2017, providing sample ballots, information about local issues and candidates, voting dates and locations, and identification requirements. MOVE San Antonio focused largely on mobilizing younger people via registration drives, a voter’s guide, a Saturday Night Live-style candidate forum, reminders to vote, and poll parties. And 2017 appeared to see a higher-than-usual number of candidate interviews and forums hosted by a wide range of local organizations and interest groups.

But whatever gains those efforts realized, those gains appear not to have taken hold to the same degree in southside neighborhoods. Voter registration totals showed more improvement than did turnout, but precincts experiencing no change or a decrease in registered voters are largely concentrated on the southside. Most of the southside saw decreases in voter turnout, with that decrease reaching or exceeding 10% in most precincts. Had number of ballots cast remained stable over time, the decrease in turnout might have been largely explainable by the increase in the denominator – number of registered voters – but number of ballots cast declined on the southside as well.

Again, definitive conclusions would require a longer-term and much more extensive analysis, but two reasonable conclusions do emerge. If we value civic engagement via participation in our local elections, it appears we should continue local voter registration efforts. Beyond that work, though, we must ensure that turnout efforts and supports effectively reach the residents of our southside neighborhoods.



Methods, Notes, and Sources

Both the 2015 and 2017 election data were pulled from the Bexar County Elections Department website. Because the runoffs can vary so much, only May (first-round) results were analyzed for each year. Precincts that did not have data for both years, making comparison impossible, were excluded from the analysis. Where the number of registered voters or ballots cast was recorded as zero in 2015 and some number greater than zero in 2017, the change is classed as “some increase over zero.”

All demographic data mapped at the ZCTA (Zip Code Tabulation Area) level are from the 2016 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Five-year Estimates. Five-year estimates were chosen over one-year estimates to reduce the size of the margin of error. The tables used were B01001H (race/ethnicity), B01001 (age), S1501 (educational attainment), S1701 (poverty), and B19301 (per capita income). A map of precinct boundaries overlaid with major highways is below, and Bexar County voter precinct maps can be download on the Bexar County [website](#).

Notes

ⁱ Felony voting restrictions vary widely by state. Texas denies voting rights to persons in prison, parolees, and felony probationers, translating to an estimated disenfranchisement rate of 2.5%. This rate varies widely by demographic characteristic, however. The estimated statewide disenfranchisement rate for African-Americans is 6.2%, about 2.5 times as high as that for Texas overall. ⁴

ⁱⁱ For example, imagine an election precinct where three of 10 registered voters cast ballots in 2015 (30% turnout) and five of 10 registered voters cast ballots in 2017 (50% turnout). That precinct would have seen a whopping 20 percentage point increase in turnout, but only two additional voters cast ballots.

Sources

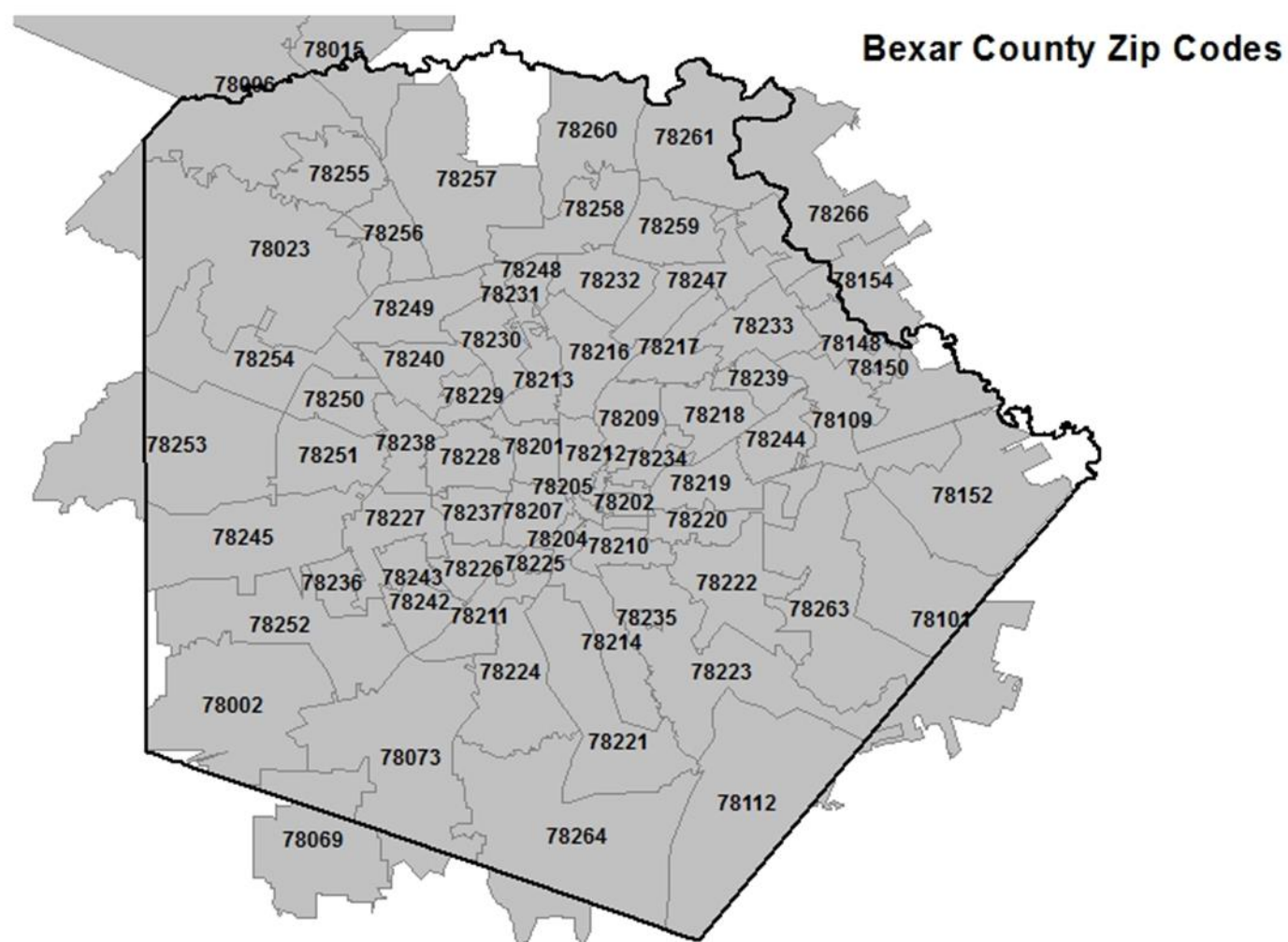
¹ SA2020. (2018.) Data dashboard: civic engagement. Retrieved from http://dashboard.sa2020.org/progress_type/civic-engagement/6/

² Jurjevich, J., Keisling, P., Rancik, K., et al. (2016.) Who votes for Mayor? Portland State University. Retrieved from <http://www.whovotesformayor.org/>

³ Bexar County Elections Department, May 2015 and May 2017 Election totals reports. Retrieved from <http://www.bexar.org/2186/Election-Results>

⁴ The Sentencing Project. (2016.) State by state data: Texas. Retrieved from <https://www.sentencingproject.org/the-facts/#detail>

Reference Maps



Reference Maps

**Major Highways within
Bexar County**

