

## Three Reasons Why It's Hard to Vote in Local Elections—and Why I'll Vote Anyway

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The other afternoon, a woman knocked at my door. Her forehead was dewy with sweat, her chest heaving a bit with the exertion of tackling the hill in front of our house. "My husband is running for county sheriff," she gasped, "and I hope you'll consider voting for him." After quickly outlining the man's fine, electable qualities, she pressed a postcard into my hands and thanked me for my time.

No, seriously. Thank you, lady. Because unless your husband turns out to be in league with the Devil, he gets my vote.

I have a simple rule about elections: If I meet you in person, or if you send a personal emissary to my door, nine times out of ten I'll vote for you. Human contact wins me every time. Does that make me a ridiculously easy sell? Undoubtedly. But the Doorstep Test also gauges what I feel is an important quality in a candidate: desire. I want to know how badly you want to be elected. If you're hoofing up my street at dinnertime, the answer is probably "pretty badly."

That may be a paltry reason for casting a vote (admittedly, I do try to be an educated voter most of the time), but municipal elections are hard enough as it is. [A study by the organization Fairvote](#) found that in mayoral races from 2008 to 2011, no major city managed to drum up more than 45 percent of its voters. In a few places, like San Antonio and El Paso, turnout was in the single digits. Americans, who are lazy about voting in general, are positively indifferent to their local races. Why?

1. **We can't find information.** Analysis and punditry about national races blast in a fire hose stream we're desperate to shut off. Information about local races comes in a trickle. In lieu of mailed sample ballots—my town has given up on them—simply finding out who's on the ballot requires some detective work. (I Googled my way to [elections.virginia.gov/ballot](http://elections.virginia.gov/ballot), then Googled some more to figure out my precinct.) Small barriers to entry can make blasé voters give up.
2. **We have no idea who anyone is.** In the past fourteen years I've lived in five different states. No matter where I land, the president of the United States is the same. Not so the county clerk. Familiarizing myself with local political players requires a complete do-over in every new town. Sometimes that seems like too much work.
3. **We're not sure why it matters.** More than those national officials we love to complain about, local leaders regularly make decisions about things that affect our daily lives. Our schools. Our roads. Our jobs. Our communities. They're also more likely to bridge partisan divides and get the job done. (When was the last time you heard about a municipal filibuster?) Yet there's a fundamental disconnect between how much attention we lavish on federal government compared with how roundly we ignore the workings of local government. Some have suggested [scheduling local elections concurrently with national elections](#) to increase turnout, but that doesn't solve the problem that most citizens are ignorant about what their towns and counties do for them.

Honestly, I only started paying attention to local government recently, after writing a book about why people love their towns and discovering that part of loving your town is becoming engaged with its politics. Writing to elected officials. Popping a political sign in the yard.

And voting. There are people in our towns who care immensely about what happens. I love that, in my small town, candidates for local office (and their wives) sometimes knock at my door. They're engaged and committed. They want to lead, badly. The least I can do is show up to vote for them.