



ANALYZING THE TURNOUT GAP BETWEEN TENANTS AND HOMEOWNERS IN THE 2022 NEW YORK STATE GENERAL ELECTION

WHY SUPPORT FOR “GOOD CAUSE” EVICTION MIGHT HAVE BEEN LINKED TO HIGHER RENTER TURNOUT, AND WHAT THAT COULD MEAN FOR A FUTURE MAJORITY TENANT ELECTORATE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Whether discussing the imprints of early 20th Century redlining practices on current patterns of urban segregation,¹ the direct links between historical American slavery and the modern racial wealth gap,² or enduring harms of the violent dispossession carried out by white settler-colonists on Indigenous lands,³ it is hard to argue that contemporary crises are fully “new” in character. Rather, society’s most inequitable policies and institutions from the past often carry their legacies forward, where they are mutated and reframed but rarely dismantled or wholly eradicated.⁴

Although it might not receive the same degree of popular attention or academic inquiry today as the phenomena named above, inequality in voter turnout by housing tenure fits snugly into this mold. At the time the U.S. Constitution was ratified, most states reserved the right to vote exclusively for white men who owned property.⁵ Women, persons of color, and tenants of all races and genders were legally barred from the ballot box – and this situation persisted well into the 19th Century. American government was designed,⁶ at the outset, to be of, by, for, and under the wholesale control of the owning class.

Now, just as opponents of slavery reparations for Black Americans argue that the move would “punish living Americans for an institution they neither participated in nor allowed to exist”,⁷ some observers would likely contend that property ownership requirements for voting died out around 150 years ago, and thus they have no bearing on current conditions. But these arguments do not hold up to scrutiny.⁸ Even if the franchise is no longer formally and explicitly owned by the class that owns everything else, the system still appears to do that class’s bidding at every turn. In a 2022 empirical analysis of local, state, and federal governmental officials in the U.S., the authors found a “virtual absence of renters at all levels of government” – leading them to

conclude that “there are few elected officials who will either make renters a top priority, or [who] have the personal credibility to voice renters’ struggles.”⁹ As a George Washington University law professor recently put it, “[t]he promise of democracy has not been kept to renters.”¹⁰

This situation is endemic to U.S. politics, such that with every new election or legislative battle there seems to come new insights that reinforce just how overpowering the owning class bias in the American system of government truly is. In New York State (NYS), for instance, a mere three landlord organizations “collectively spent almost...\$20 million [between 2018 and 2021] battling pro-tenant legislation”,¹¹ with great success. Among the legislation the NYS landlord lobby opposed (opposes) is the original statewide “Good Cause Eviction” bill,¹² which was written to “protect[] tenants from unreasonable rent hikes and retaliatory or discriminatory evictions.”¹³ Despite a recent poll suggesting that 67% of NYS residents support the bill, with a net favorability rating of +38 percentage points,¹⁴ the full measure failed to pass in back-to-back legislative sessions; and, despite winning nominal support for Good Cause in the 2024 state budget, which contained a version of the law marked by “sweeping exceptions that will exempt many of the state’s landlords from its provisions,”¹⁵ many of tenants’ strongest demands from the original Good Cause bill still lack support from the NYS Governor and most state legislators.¹⁶

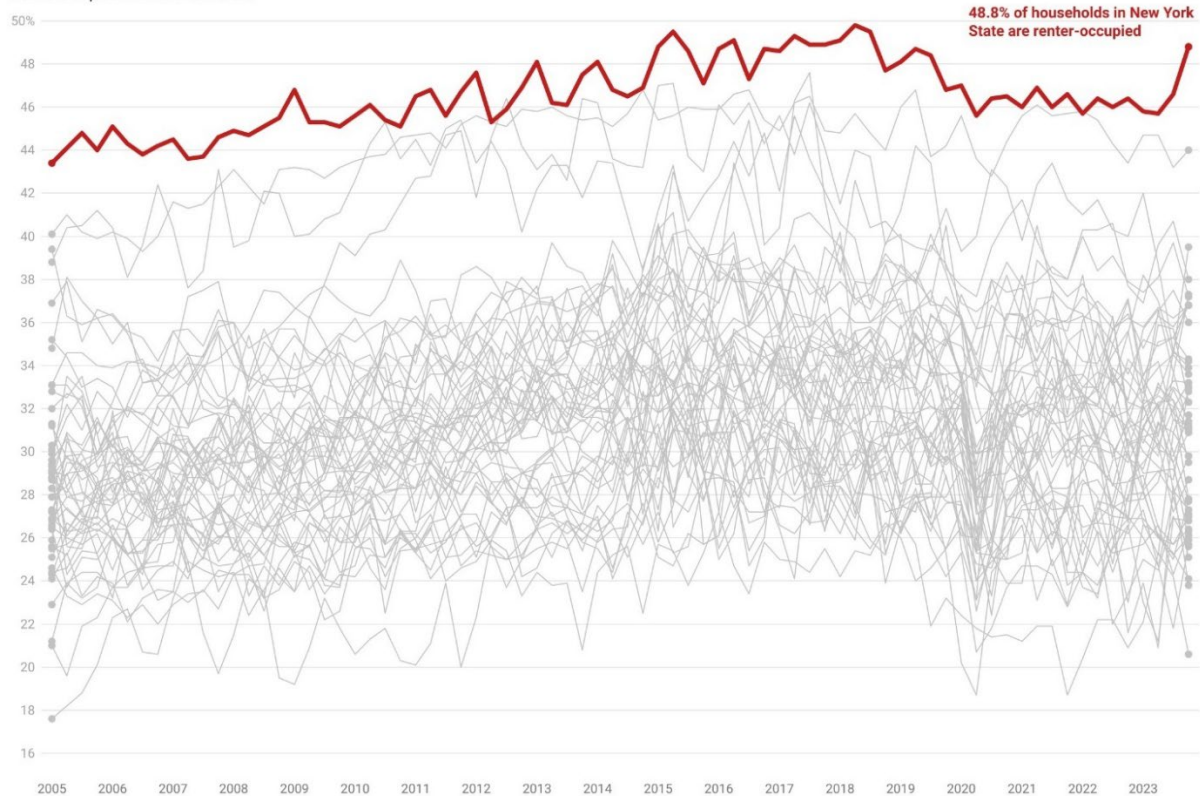
Landlords’ opposition to the original (i.e., strong) Good Cause measure has factored heavily in its failure to pass: reporting on the legislative debate noted that many lawmakers were unwilling to “take [an affirmative] stand” on Good Cause because the “real-estate industry has opposed [it] vociferously, portraying the bill as universal rent control and a socialist attempt to destroy property owners’ rights.”¹⁷ Simply put, even the *perception* of a *potential* threat to the owning class is enough to bring government action to a halt¹⁸ – to ensure that basic tenant protections that boast supermajority support among registered voters never become the law of the land.

In response to these claims, the owning class and its sympathizers would likely respond that New York is a democracy, such that if voters want pro-tenant laws at the state level, then they have every opportunity and ability to elect state representatives who will collectively ensure that those laws get enacted and enforced.¹⁹ (Either that, or they would argue that America’s capitalist economic system affords everyone equal opportunity to climb into the owning class.²⁰ Neither argument is grounded in any reality²¹ that can be clarified with just a little systems thinking.²²) This sort of disingenuous argument is one of many shields built into the American political economy to protect status quo power relations. By raising the banners of freedom and democracy as they are mythologized in America’s prevailing culture and self-image,²³ the owning class places the burden of social change on the oppressed individual;²⁴ for, the story goes, the system is built to carry out the public’s wishes, but it is up to individual members of the public to collectively elect representatives who go on to fulfill those wishes.

There are countless false assumptions embedded into this line of thinking, and enumerating and responding to each one would require its own volume.²⁵ What matters most to this article is the idea that renters can simply vote a pro-tenant legislature into office and then sit back and watch a tenant-friendly world take shape. At present, despite the observation that America is quickly becoming a nation of renters,²⁶ there is no state in the U.S. where renters are a majority of households. New York is closer than any other state to this milestone right now: according to U.S. Census Bureau data,²⁷ roughly 49% of households in NYS were renter-occupied at the end of 2023, about four percentage points ahead of California. But, even with this high degree of rentership, the state's governor and legislature continue to balk at legislation that would create universal protection for all renters across the state.²⁸ A reasonable interpretation of these circumstances is that tenants' path to strong, statewide pro-tenant laws – laws proposed and adopted by a majority of a state's legislators and signed by their respective governor – is currently a steep climb with virtually no path to the summit.

Rentership Rates by State, 2005Q1 - 2023Q4

Red Line Represents New York State



This graph excludes the District of Columbia

Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: U.S. Census Bureau Housing Vacancies and Homeownership (CPS/HVS) Quarterly Survey, 2005Q1 - 2023Q4 • Created with Datawrapper

Another problem with the idea that tenants and their supporters can achieve their legislative goals simply by voting for their preferred candidates is that – following decades of formal exclusion and more modern *de facto* exclusion in the form of their “virtual absence”²⁹ from government leadership positions – tenants are much less likely than homeowners to vote in elections for public office.³⁰ Regardless of the reasons for differential levels of participation by tenure – and it seems likely that an evolved disdain for political processes stemming from longstanding formal and informal exclusion from political power³¹ is certainly among them – the reality is that renters vote at rates that are consistently 20 to 30 percentage points lower than homeowner turnout rates.³² Thus, even when states like New York become majority renter, a fast approaching situation,³³ low voter turnout will continue to hinder the ability of tenants to collectively vote their way into a pro-tenant legal and political environment.

Whereas building real tenant power (i.e., self-determinative power) is a long-term project that will necessitate substantial and continuous organizing for transformative, structural change,³⁴ housing crises like the one at play in NYS³⁵ demand more immediate action to improve housing security for renters in the here and now. Based on the instructive stalemate over the original Good Cause eviction law, and the power of the real estate lobby to keep that stalemate locked in place, it does not seem likely that any new moral arguments or public opinion data will convince a majority of lawmakers in each house of the NYS Legislature (let alone the state’s Governor) to adopt strong, universal tenant protections. It also seems unlikely that pro-tenant groups will ever be able to match the degree of campaign spending, and the resulting level of political influence, available to well-funded landlord associations.³⁶ Consequently, as skeptical as this author might personally be toward an electoral theory of change³⁷ for bringing about a more prosocial, pro-tenant housing system (see above), one path to nearer-term gains might reasonably run through the ballot box. To build this case, and to generate a picture of what the NYS electorate might look like in a world where renters participate in elections at the same rate as homeowners, the remainder of this article draws on comprehensive, statewide voter data from the established³⁸ data vendor Catalist.³⁹

Herein, the Catalist database, which supplements official state voter registration records with modeled attributes that specify a voter’s likely race and housing tenure (among other characteristics), is used to evaluate voter turnout in the most recent (2022) NYS statewide General Election. Analyses are performed at the NYS Senate (upper legislative chamber) and Assembly (lower legislative chamber) levels, and they reveal that, while likely renters in NYS turned out, on average, at rates that were around 30 percentage points lower than likely homeowners, renters were significantly more likely to vote in races for which a vocal supporter of Good Cause eviction appeared on the ballot (compared to races that did not feature such a candidate). Moreover, in both the Senate and Assembly, the districts with the highest renter

turnout rates in races containing *new* candidates (i.e., non-incumbents) were those where the winning⁴⁰ candidates⁴¹ ran vocal pro-tenant, pro-Good Cause eviction campaigns. These findings suggest that renters might be more likely to activate themselves in elections that contain authentic opportunities to capture seats in state government, as opposed to status quo opportunities to vote for the incumbents or mainstream candidates who have habitually failed⁴² to deliver on the “promise of democracy” to renters.⁴³

The article closes with a thought experiment that imagines a NYS political system wherein renters turn out at the same rates as their homeowner counterparts. The resultant picture suggests that closing the tenure turnout gap would have added roughly 1.6 million ballots to the 2022 General Election tally – predominantly from left-leaning individuals who are disproportionately persons of color. This finding implies that efforts to mobilize renters in statewide elections might double as efforts for communities of color to build and capture political power that has, seemingly by design,⁴⁴ thus far been reserved for the [disproportionately white⁴⁵] owning class.

CATALIST DATA

Insofar as well-cited⁴⁶ empirical research has previously documented the reliability of Catalist’s voter data,⁴⁷ the present study eschews dedicating scarce space to exploring this topic any further (readers should instead consult Stephen Ansolabehere’s and Eitan Hersh’s extensive review of Catalist and its accuracy⁴⁸). For current purposes, what matters is that the “Catalist National Database is built on a reliable foundation collected from Election Officials in all 50 states and the District of Columbia – a unified national voter file”;⁴⁹ and that the database offers “...comprehensive and accurate...models and synthetic variables [that] are extensively” used in practice to inform program and campaign decisions.⁵⁰

Among those synthetic variables are a voter’s race – which is almost never recorded or reported by state boards of election⁵¹ – and a score (ranging from 0 to 100) that quantifies how likely a voter is to be a homeowner. Following what is said to be the “most common” classification practice in logistic regression, whereby predicted probabilities at or above 50% are assigned to one of two groups and values below 50% are assigned to the other group,⁵² herein voters with Catalist homeowner scores that are strictly less than 50 are classified as “likely renters”, while voters with Catalist homeowner scores of 50 or greater are classified as “likely homeowners”. In other words, if Catalist’s data indicate that there is a better-than-half chance that a voter owns their home, then that voter is coded as a likely homeowner (and oppositely for likely renters). Although follow-up studies that perform sensitivity analyses using different thresholds will prove useful in the long run, for now, this simple division of NYS voters into likely renters and likely

homeowners using Catalist’s modeled data will do well to offer baseline insights into the state’s housing tenure turnout gap.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR REGISTERED VOTERS IN NYS

In February 2024, I queried Catalist’s New York State (NYS) voter file for all registered voters in the state. The query yielded a total of 11,227,894 voters, slightly below the 11,924,143 active registered voters reported in the most recent enrollment statistics⁵³ from the NYS Board of Elections (BOE).⁵⁴ According to Catalist, more than half of those voters are linked to homeowner scores below 50 (out of 100), placing them into the category of “likely renters”; however, given that renter-occupied households are only about 49% of all NYS households (see above), it is reasonable to assume that Catalist’s statistical models might be underpredicting homeownership among registered voters. As such, while it is tempting to say that “likely renters” outnumber “likely homeowners” on New York’s voter registration rolls, a more conservative conclusion is that ***renters are close to making up a majority of eligible voters in NYS.***

Based on this above conclusion alone, one can argue that NYS renters appear to have at least some power in numbers. Specifically, just under 6.6 million NYS registered voters represented in the Catalist database (58.5% of Catalist records, or about 42% of the NYS adult population⁵⁵) can be classified as “likely renters” using the modeled homeownership score. Consistent with conventional wisdom,⁵⁶ likely renter-voters are both more racially diverse and more left-leaning than likely homeowner-voters.

Concerning the latter, compared to 38.5% of likely homeowners, 57.3% of likely renters are registered with the Democratic (DEM) Party or Working Families Party (WFP). And, whereas 36.3% of likely homeowners are registered with either the Republican Party (REP) or Conservative Party (CON), just 15.1% of likely renters belong to one of these right-leaning parties. (Note that the four aforementioned parties – DEM, WFP, REP, and CON – are the only four parties that are currently recognized by, and have statewide ballot lines, in NYS.⁵⁷ The groupings used here reflect the observable conditions that: (1) both “minor” parties [WFP and CON] are relatively small in number, making up just 1.3% and 0.4% of NYS registered voters,⁵⁸ respectively; and (2) the system of fusion voting⁵⁹ in NYS often results in endorsed WFP candidates appearing on both the DEM and WFP lines, and endorsed CON candidates appearing on the REP and CON lines.⁶⁰)

NYS Registered Voters, by Likely Tenure and Party

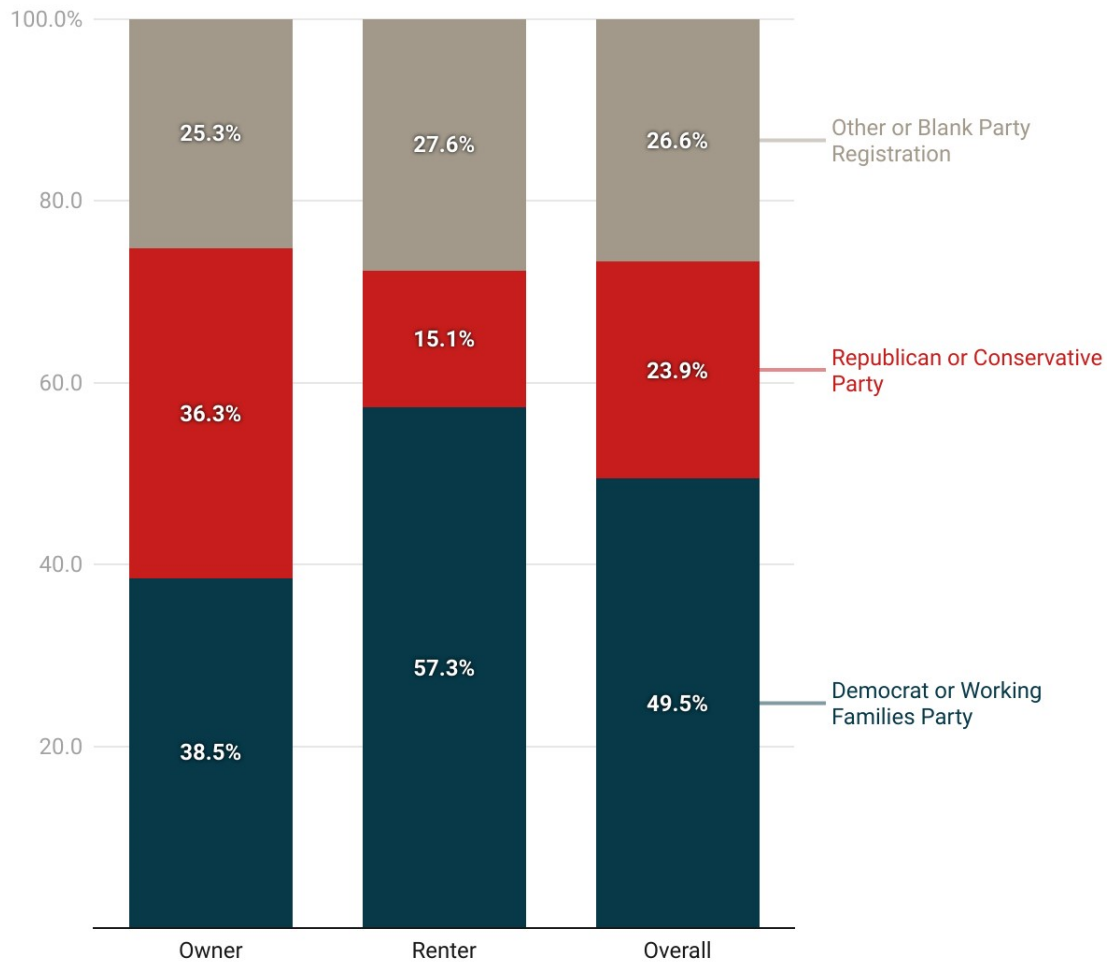


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

With respect to race, more than half (51.8%) of likely renters are voters of color, compared to just 15.0% of likely homeowners. Once again, the takeaway is that persons of color are disproportionately likely to be renters, and, in turn, renter-voters are disproportionately persons of color.⁶¹ Thus, to the extent that renters (1) participate in electoral politics at lower rates than owners, and (2) are underrepresented in government offices and related institutions of political power, political inequality by tenure intersects with and compounds broader patterns of racial inequality in American society.

NYS Registered Voters, by Likely Tenure and Race

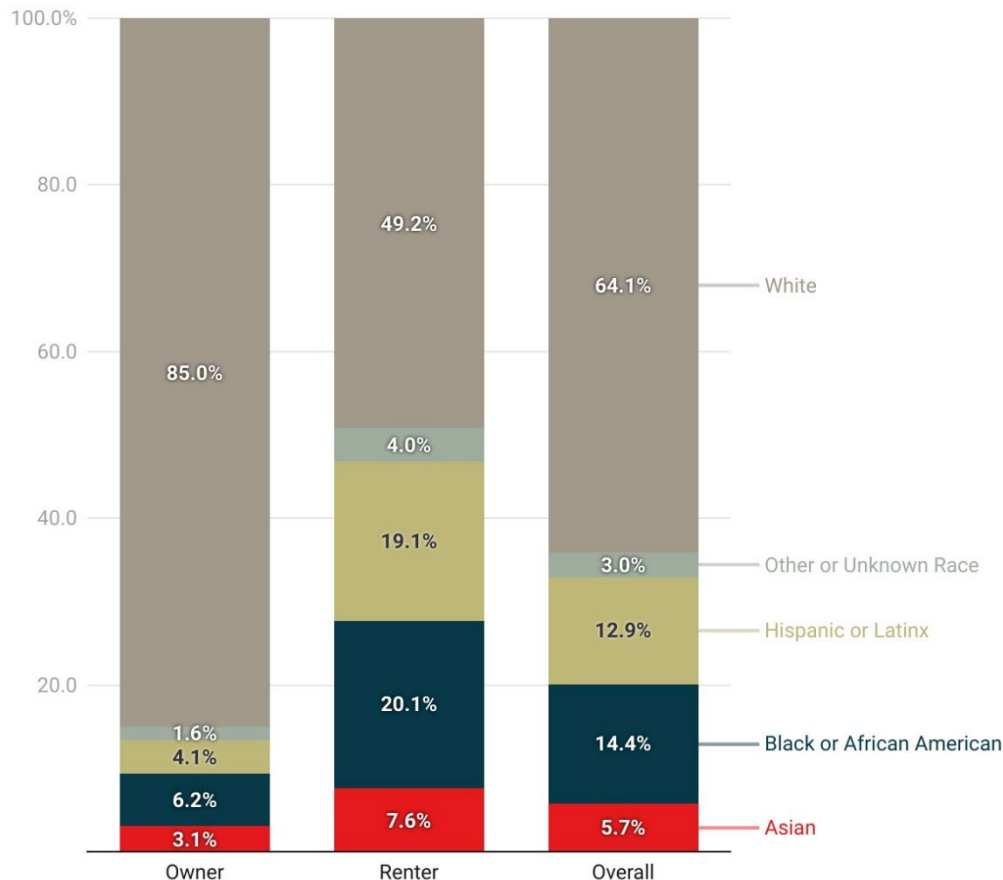


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

TURNOUT AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR VOTERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE 2022 NYS GENERAL ELECTION

Even though likely renters appear to make up a formidable share of NYS registered voters, they turn out at such low rates that they end up being a minority of ballot casters. Namely, engaging the Catalist database reveals that, in the 2022 statewide General Election, likely homeowner-voters out-participated likely renter-voters by 31 percentage points. Whereas likely owners turned out at a rate of 67.5%, turnout among likely renters was just 36.5%. Broken out by political affiliation, the tenure turnout gap ranged from a low of 27.5 percentage points among REP and CON voters to a high of 32.1 for blank or other party voters. For Democratic and WFP voters, the tenure turnout gap was 28.4 percentage points.

Voter Turnout in the 2022 NYS General Election, by Likely Tenure and Party Affiliation

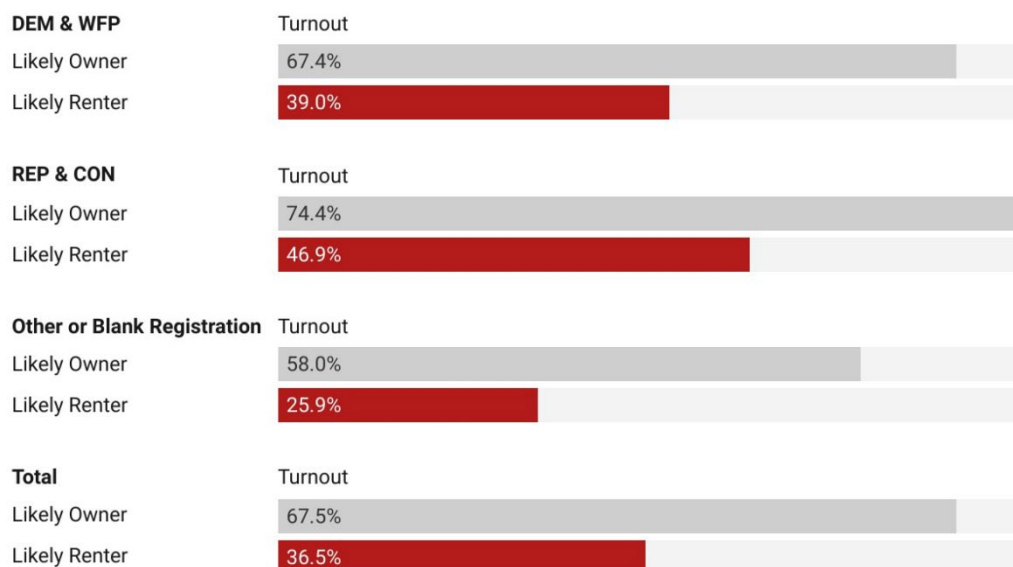


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

One consequence of these disparate turnout rates is that likely homeowners were the driving force in the 2022 General Election.

Share of (1) Registered Voters and (2) 2022 General Election Participants in NYS, by Likely Housing Tenure

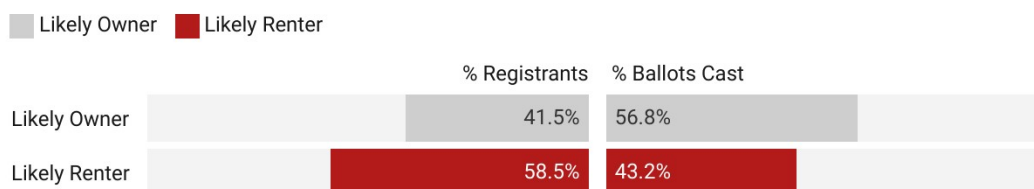


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

Recalling that the universe of likely renter registered voters is substantially more racially and ethnically diverse than the universe of likely homeowner registrants, one should expect lower renter turnout to translate into a non- or under-representative body of General Election voters. Indeed, whereas Catalist estimates that roughly 36% of all NYS registrants are voters of color, fewer than 23% of voters who participated in the 2022 General Election fit this description. As such, the universe of voters who turned out in the 2022 General Election was disproportionately white (77.4% of General Election voters v. 64.1% of all registrants).

Share of (1) Registered Voters and (2) 2022 General Election Participants in NYS, by Race

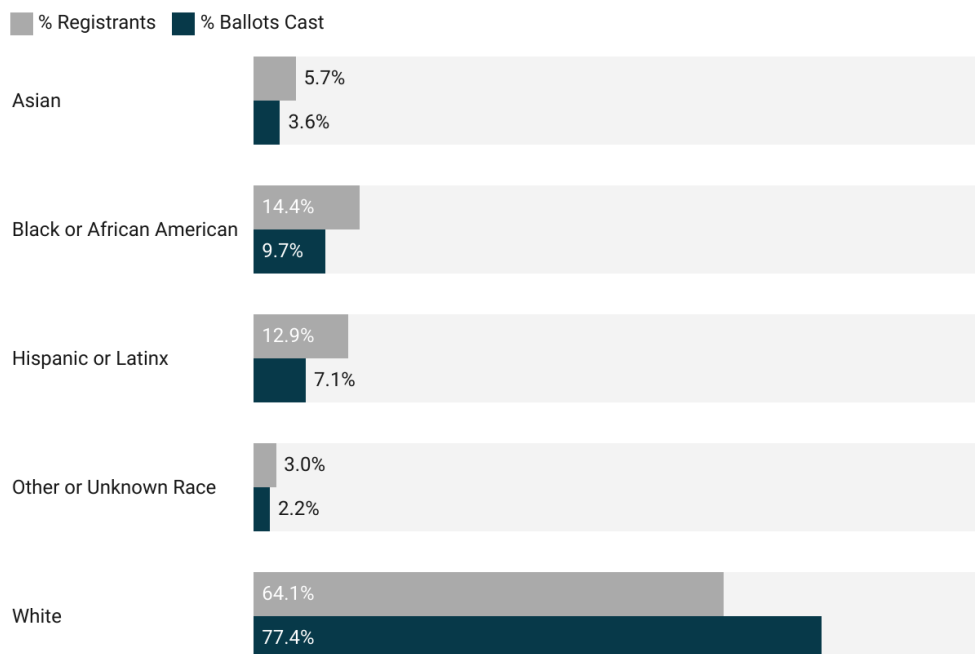


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

Finally, just as renters are more likely than homeowners to be persons of color, they are also more likely than homeowners to belong to left-leaning political parties. Consequently, lower levels of electoral participation among renters relative to homeowners implies that the body of voters who select candidates in statewide elections is likely to be somewhat more conservative than the distribution of

Share of (1) Registered Voters and (2) 2022 General Election Participants in NYS, by Party Affiliation

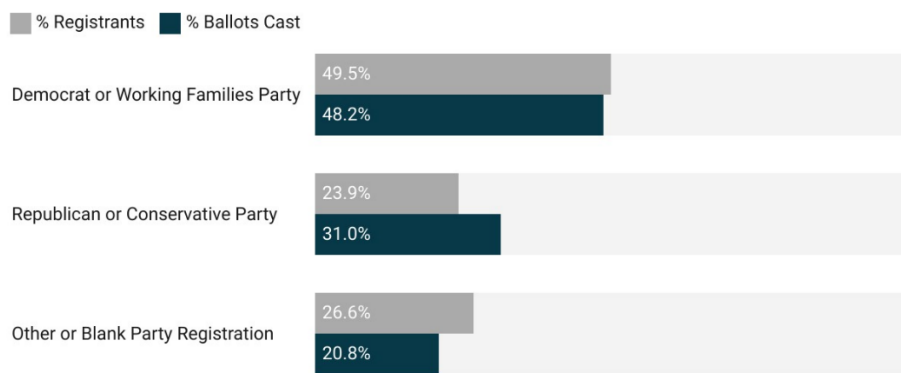


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

registrants would suggest. Catalist data support this assertion, showing that, despite accounting for just 23.9% of registered voters, Republican and Conservative Party members cast 31.0% of ballots in the 2022 General Election.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF DISTRICT-LEVEL TURNOUT: WAS VOCAL CANDIDATE SUPPORT FOR GOOD CAUSE EVICTION ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER RENTER PARTICIPATION?

The descriptive statistics from above make it clear that the housing tenure gap in voter participation contributes to the persistent disempowerment of tenants and persons of color across New York State (NYS). Although it might be tempting [for some observers, anyway] to victim blame, and to argue that tenants actively co-create their own circumstances by voting in fewer numbers than homeowners, recall that social scientists⁶² and legal scholars⁶³ have repeatedly found that renters' interests are systematically ignored, downplayed, or intentionally kept off the public agenda in the U.S. political-economic system.⁶⁴

On that backdrop, instead of faulting renters for disengaging from a political system that was never designed to work for them, one ought to fault the system⁶⁵ for relentlessly failing to meet the needs and advancing the interests of the non-owning class. Alternatively stated, if renters are rarely or never given the opportunity to vote for candidates or initiatives that promise to help them build authentic, self-determinative tenant power, then one should not expect renters to enthusiastically participate in elections. But, what happens when such choices *are* available, at least in some form?

As stated in the introduction, "Good Cause" eviction has been a hotly debated issue in NYS for at least the three most recent legislative sessions (including the present one⁶⁶). The early-2024 iteration of the Good Cause bill being pushed by pro-tenant groups and legislators would:

“...provide tenants with a baseline right to remain in their homes by prohibiting non-renewals and no-fault evictions unless a landlord proves good cause. Further, the law would also require landlords to justify rent increases greater than 3 percent or 1.5 times the Consumer Price Index (CPI), whichever is higher. An unreasonably high rent hike at the end of a tenant's lease term can serve as a *de facto* eviction notice. The failure to pay rent, substantial lease violations, committing or permitting a nuisance, and apartment use for illegal purposes all qualify as “good causes” for eviction.”⁶⁷

Under these provisions, Good Cause represents a structural change. At present, most tenants live in a state of constant precarity. Even if a renter wishes to renew their lease at the end of their current agreement, they can effectively be pushed out of their home if their landlord decides to raise the rent to a new, unaffordable (for the existing tenant) level that would allow for greater landlord profit. That is, the current political-economic system prioritizes the *investment*, or profit-

making,⁶⁸ function of housing over its *dwelling* function. Good Cause eviction would not eliminate the hoarding of housing units (by landlords) for profit; but it would limit the amount of annual profit-seeking that is legally permissible, by pegging rent increases to inflation in order to keep housing costs [comparatively] affordable for existing tenants. One goal of such a scheme is transparently to keep New Yorkers housed while maintaining their current purchasing power.

Insofar as Good Cause aims to deliver structural changes to protect renters' housing security, its location in the current NYS political landscape allows for something of a quasi-natural experiment. Namely, Good Cause was a prominent and contentious issue⁶⁹ in many of the NYS legislative races during the most recent (2022) statewide elections. As such, it can be useful and instructive to compare renter turnout in districts that featured Good Cause supporters to corresponding turnout levels in races without such supporters, in order to ascertain whether tenants might be more likely to participate in statewide elections when candidates directly engage with their (tenants') interests and well-being. To identify which races contained Good Cause supporters, I drew on the lists of Good Cause (co)sponsors in each of the upper⁷⁰ and lower⁷¹ chambers of the NYS Legislature during the 2021-22 session (i.e., the session that fed into the 2022 General Election). For races that did not feature incumbents, I used a combination of candidate websites⁷² and public statements⁷³ to determine where candidates stood on the Good Cause issue ahead of the 2022 election.

Using these sources, I identified 24 NYS Senate District races (out of 63) that observably featured a Good Cause supporter.⁷⁴ On the Assembly side, I found 56 races (of 150) where a Good Cause (co)sponsor or vocal supporter appeared on the ballot.⁷⁵ Next, from Catalist, for each district, I recorded turnout rates by race-ethnicity and likely housing tenure. Finally, I estimated a general linear model (GLM) with a full factorial design,⁷⁶ in which group turnout was the outcome and the three categorical variables of race-ethnicity, likely tenure, and presence of a Good Cause supporter on the ballot – as well as all possible interaction effects between these phenomena – were the independent variables. I performed this analysis at both the NYS Senate (63 districts) and Assembly (150 districts) levels of analysis.

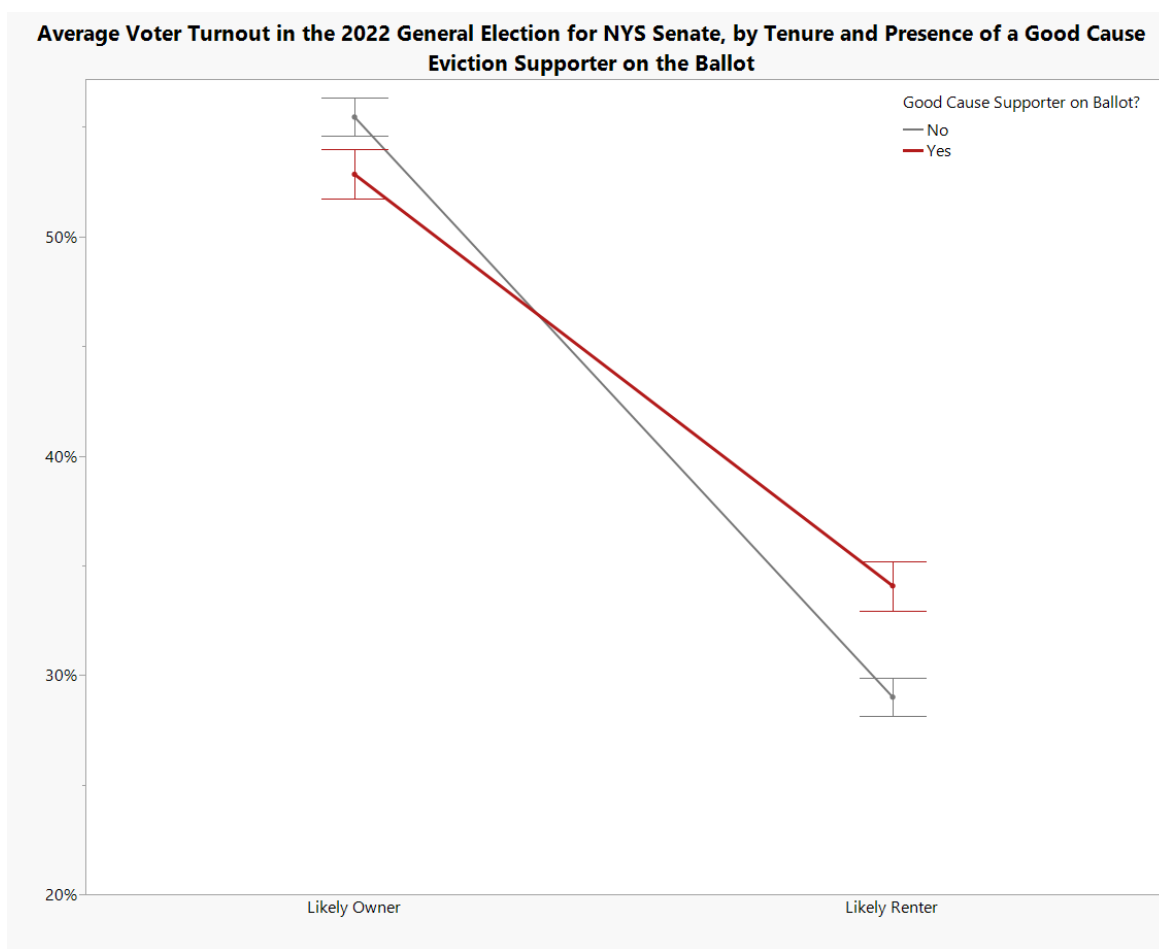
SENATE DISTRICT RESULTS

The following table and graph report the estimated marginal means⁷⁷ from the Senate District model for each housing tenure, based on whether a Good Cause supporter featured in the race (NB: estimated marginal means are average turnout rates that adjust for all other factors in the model, including race-ethnicity). Whereas these results reaffirm the wide turnout gap between likely renters and likely homeowners in NYS, they also suggest that tenants might have been more motivated to turn out for candidates who were vocal supporters or (co)sponsors of the Good

Cause eviction bill. In races that did *not* feature such a candidate, the average turnout rate among likely renters (after adjusting for all variables in the model) was roughly 29.0%. In races that included Good Cause proponents, however, average renter turnout was more than five percentage points higher, at 34.1% – a *statistically significant* difference that cannot be explained by chance alone.

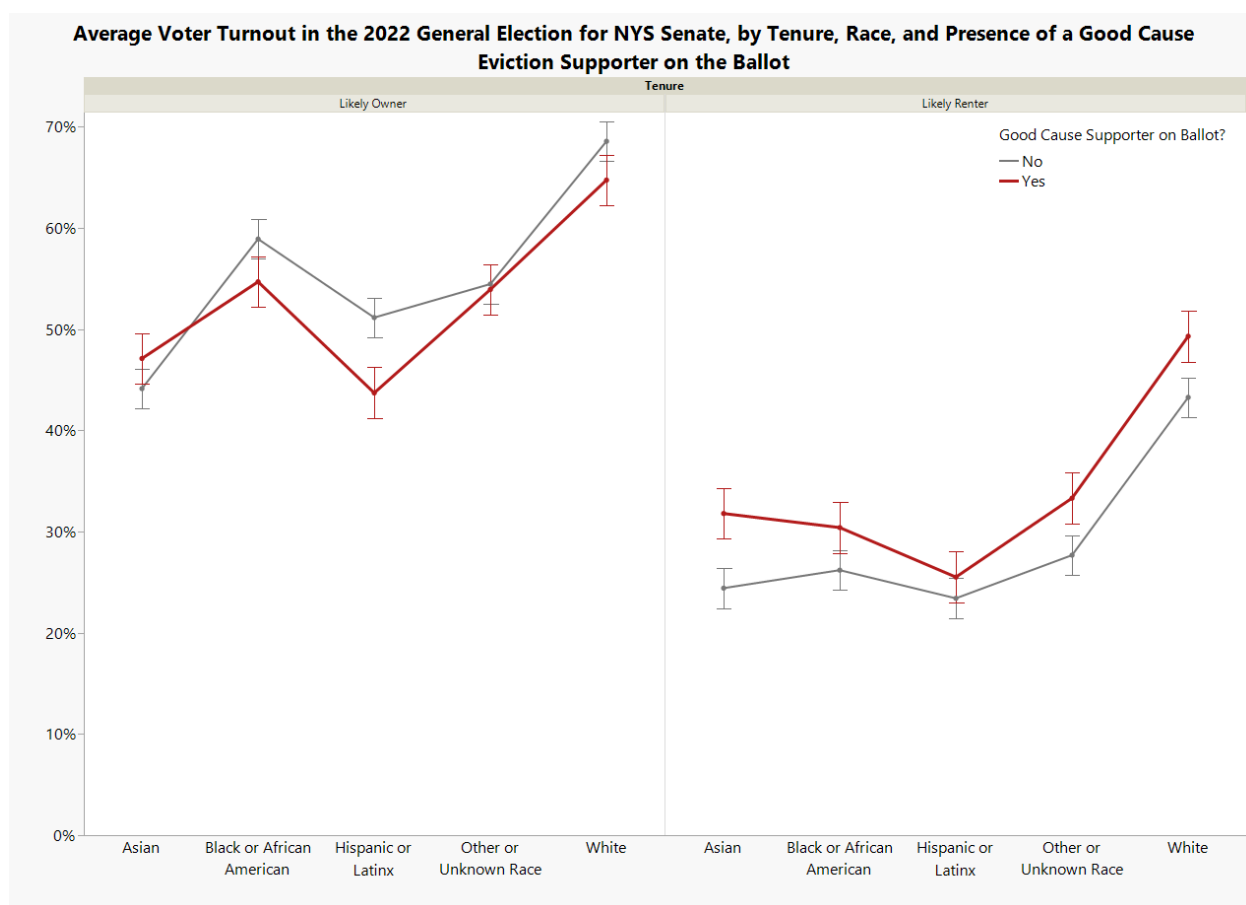
Meanwhile, likely homeowners might have been uniquely *unmotivated* to turn out in these races: compared to an estimated marginal mean turnout rate of 55.5% in races without Good Cause supporters, likely homeowners turned out, on average, at just 52.8% in districts with Good Cause supporters on the ballot (after adjusting for the variables described above). This difference, of nearly three percentage points, also cannot be explained by chance alone.

Crucially, as with all statistical analyses, these findings do not mean that the presence of a Good Cause-supporting candidate definitively *caused* renters to turn out at higher rates and homeowners to turn out at lower rates – but the results point to a clear, and nonrandom, association between these phenomena.



NYS Senate Districts	Likely Owner		Likely Renter	
	Turnout Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	Turnout Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	52.8%	(51.7%, 54.0%)	34.1%	(32.9%, 35.2%)
No Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	55.5%	(54.6%, 56.4%)	29.0%	(28.1%, 29.9%)

Expanding these results by race-ethnicity, the next graph and table show that, while likely renters of all races exhibited higher average turnout (after adjusting for all modeled variables) in races that contained Good Cause-supporting candidates compared to those that did not, the largest differences occurred for Asian renters, white renters, and renters with other or unknown racial identities. Each of these groups were associated with average turnout rates in Good Cause races that were roughly six or seven percentage points greater than corresponding rates in districts without Good Cause supporters on the ballot.



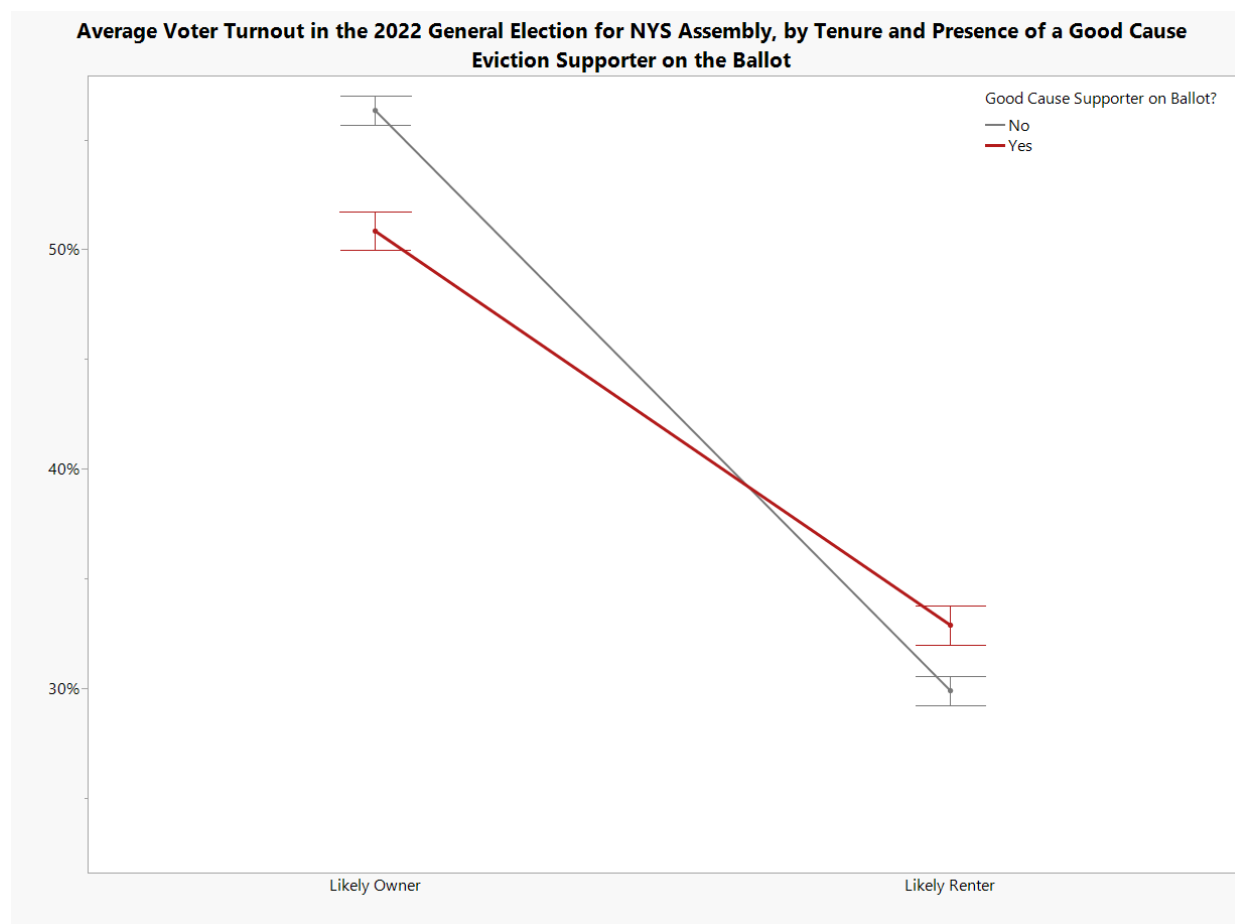
NYS Senate Districts	Good Cause Supporter on Ballot		No Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	
	<i>Turnout Estimate</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval</i>	<i>Turnout Estimate</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval</i>
<i>Likely Renters</i>				
Asian	31.8%	(29.3%, 34.3%)	24.4%	(22.5%, 26.4%)
Black or African American	30.4%	(27.9%, 32.9%)	26.2%	(24.2%, 28.2%)
Hispanic or Latinx	25.5%	(23.0%, 28.0%)	23.4%	(21.4%, 25.4%)
Other or Unknown Race	33.3%	(30.8%, 35.8%)	27.7%	(25.7%, 29.7%)
White	49.3%	(46.8%, 51.8%)	43.3%	(41.3%, 45.2%)

ASSEMBLY DISTRICT RESULTS

Because the analysis at the Assembly District level drew on the same underlying voter data, the results in this section are nearly identical to results produced at the Senate District scale. Any differences that arise come from how the [same] voter data are aggregated. Assembly Districts are geographically smaller and more numerous than Senate Districts. As such, there is more variation in observed turnout rates. Thus, one should not expect the quantitative findings to *exactly* equal the Senate District findings; however, the qualitative patterns of findings should be invariant across scales and therefore lead to the same interpretations.

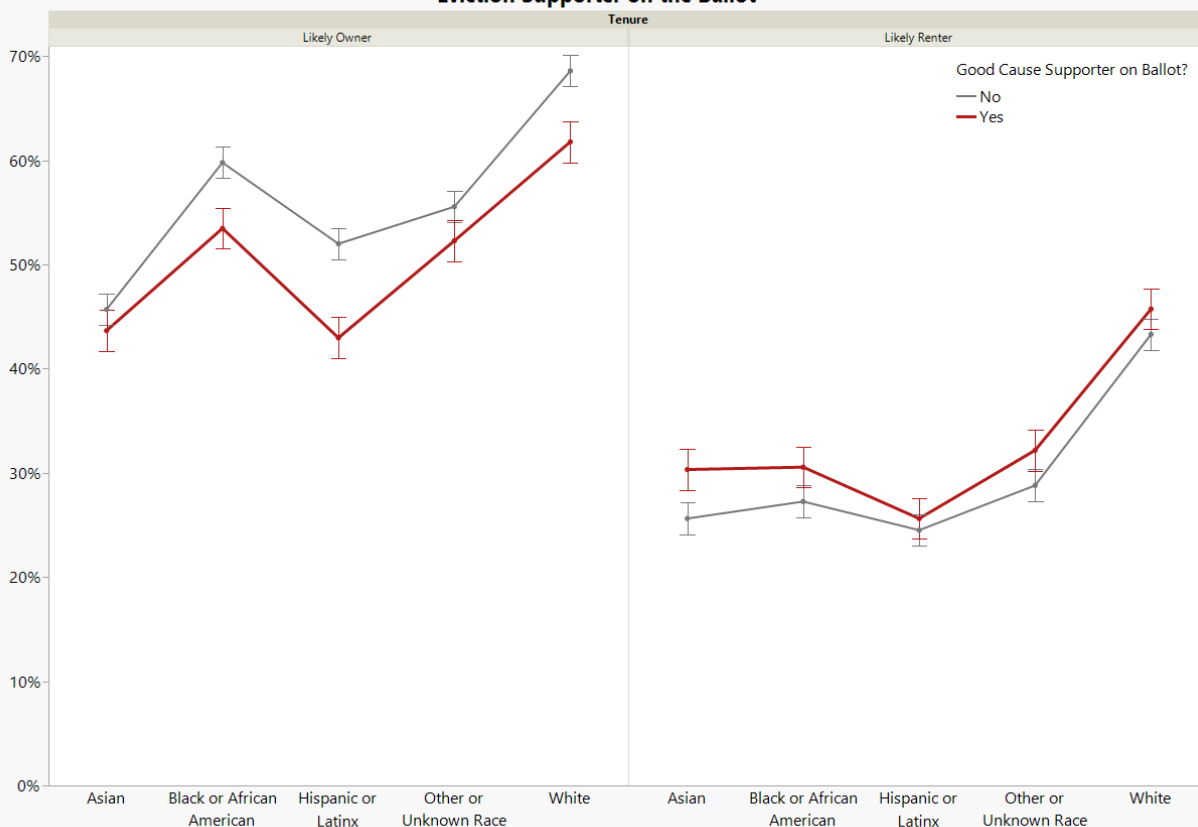
Because that outcome is in fact realized here, the results are presented in this section without additional comment. The figure at the top of the next page shows average turnout in 2022 Assembly District races by tenure and presence of a Good Cause Eviction supporter on the ballot. The table that follows the figure summarizes the key data points from the graph, confirming that the turnout gap between likely owners and likely renters was smaller in races that featured Good Cause eviction supporters. The corresponding figure and table on page 17 add voter race-ethnicity to the analysis.

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NYS Assembly Districts	Likely Owner		Likely Renter	
	Turnout Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	Turnout Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	50.8%	(50.0%, 51.7%)	32.9%	(32.0%, 33.8%)
No Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	56.3%	(55.7%, 57.0%)	29.9%	(29.2%, 30.6%)

Average Voter Turnout in the 2022 General Election for NYS Assembly, by Tenure, Race, and Presence of a Good Cause Eviction Supporter on the Ballot



NYS Assembly Districts	Good Cause Supporter on Ballot		No Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	
	Turnout Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	Turnout Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
<i>Likely Renters</i>				
Asian	30.3%	(28.4%, 32.3%)	25.6%	(24.1%, 27.1%)
Black or African American	30.6%	(28.6%, 32.5%)	27.3%	(25.7%, 28.8%)
Hispanic or Latinx	25.6%	(23.7%, 27.6%)	24.5%	(23.0%, 26.0%)
Other or Unknown Race	32.2%	(30.2%, 34.1%)	28.8%	(27.3%, 30.3%)
White	45.7%	(43.8%, 47.7%)	43.3%	(41.8%, 44.8%)

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The results from the preceding section strongly suggest that renters might become more engaged in statewide elections when they have an opportunity to vote for candidates or initiatives that actively aim to extend the “promise of democracy”⁷⁸ to them, by directly advancing renter interests in a system that has so far worked almost exclusively for the owning class.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, the ostensible increases in renter turnout in Good Cause-friendly races were, on average, still too small to close the tenure voting gap: likely renters still participated at rates that were roughly 18 percentage points lower than their likely owner counterparts, on average (after adjusting for race-ethnicity). Eighteen percentage points is considerably smaller than the raw, unadjusted difference of 31 percentage points, which is the average size of the tenure turnout gap across NYS (see “Turnout and Descriptive Statistics for Voters Who Participated in the 2022 NYS General Election”); but it is presumably still too large a difference to allow for renters to meaningfully shift the composition of the NYS Legislature.

That being said, there is at least some suggestive evidence for the claim that when strong, pro-tenant candidates stand for election, and when renters become more activated in response to the presence of such candidates, tenants can capture political power. To be sure, the following table shows, for each NYS legislative chamber (Senate⁸⁰ [upper] and Assembly⁸¹ [lower]), the five races associated with the highest turnout among likely renters according to the Catalist data. Of the ten districts represented in the table, eight featured races in the 2022 General Election wherein incumbents ran for, and won, reelection. That is not a surprising outcome. On the whole, 95% of 2022 NYS legislative races were won by incumbents.⁸² What is more interesting, then, are the two district races that did *not* include incumbents on the ballot.

On the Senate side, now-Senator Kristen Gonzalez stood for election in the newly drawn (for 2022) 59th district. Throughout her campaign, in which she ultimately won the Democratic primary⁸³ over a more mainstream candidate who had the backing of New York City Mayor Eric Adams,⁸⁴ Sen. Gonzalez was a vocal and visible champion of Good Cause eviction.⁸⁵ As such, the observation that her race featured one of the highest turnout rates among likely renters in the state – and the *highest* level of renter turnout in Senate races that did not include an incumbent – seems to suggest that her candidacy and strong pro-tenant message mobilized renter voters. And that mobilization was crucial to her securing what reporters at the time called a “big victory” for the left-wing of the Democratic Party.⁸⁶

Renter Turnout Rank	Senate District (Winner)	Likely Renter Turnout	Assembly District (Winner)	Likely Renter Turnout
1	47 (Hoylman-Sigal)	54.6%	76 (Seawright)	57.6%
2	28 (Krueger)	54.2%	67 (Rosenthal)	56.7%
3	59 (Gonzalez)*	46.3%	52 (Simon)	56.3%
4	37 (Mayer)	46.1%	73 (Bores)*	54.2%
5	26 (Gounardes)	46.1%	66 (Glick)	52.7%
Average Turnout for Likely NYS Renters		36.5%		36.5%

*Race did not feature an incumbent

Note: with the exception of SD-26, all “top-five” renter turnout races on both the Senate and Assembly sides featured Good Cause eviction supporters.

A similar situation played out on the Assembly side of the Legislature. Of the top-five renter turnout races for Assembly in 2022, one – for Assembly District 73 – did not feature any incumbents. The eventual Democratic nominee and winner, newcomer and now-Assembly Member Alex Bores, remarked during his campaign that he would “proudly”⁸⁷ cosponsor the statewide Good Cause eviction bill if he were elected to the state Legislature. Although Mr. Bores is not currently listed as a Good Cause cosponsor,⁸⁸ his vocal support for the measure likely resonated with renters in the district, who turned out in the 2022 General Election at substantially above-average rates and helped Mr. Bores secure a lopsided victory over his Republican opponent.⁸⁹

Importantly, these two examples should be seen as noteworthy steps toward building pro-tenant power, as opposed to hard proof that pro-tenant candidates who enter statewide races will achieve electoral victories solely through their pro-tenant messaging and campaigning. Nonetheless, the fact that both instances of newcomer, avowedly pro-tenant, candidates winning their races with the highest levels of likely renter turnout observed in non-incumbent races is presumably more than mere coincidence. With that in mind, how might tenants and their allies approach future statewide elections in order to build more formidable tenant power?

To answer this question, recall that, per Catalist data, *likely tenants make up a sizeable, near majority share of the NYS electorate*. To date, due at least in part to the American political-economic system having been designed, and continuing, to “favor[] property owners and harm[] renters [since] colonial times”,⁹⁰ tenants have not been able to leverage their numbers into political muscle. Persistently low turnout rates relative to homeowners have led to the “virtual

absence” of tenants from positions of power.⁹¹ The data and anecdotes presented to this point seem to imply that championing tenant interests can increase renter turnout and even, in certain circumstances, allow strong pro-tenant candidates to capture statewide elected positions. More often, though, the incumbents who have [long] presided over the existing system – the system that knowingly disempowers renters and leaves them with “diminished political rights”⁹² – get reelected without ever threatening the status quo in an authentic way. Worse, with a 95% incumbent success rate,⁹³ there is effectively no incentive for incumbents (or the mainstream candidates who are frequently picked to succeed them when they decide to move on) to “take a stand”⁹⁴ on pro-tenant issues that could put them in conflict with their (disproportionately owning class) electoral bases and/or New York’s well-funded anti-tenant lobby.⁹⁵

Given these circumstances, one possibility for pro-tenant voting blocs to build long-run power in the NYS Legislature is to stage electoral strikes or mass defections. Based on their numbers, a concerted effort to *not* turn out to vote, or to vote exclusively for a so-called “third” party, would send shockwaves through the political system. Although likely renters in NYS can be found across the ideological spectrum, the Catalist data suggest that a mass renter vote strike or defection would disproportionately, and forcefully, impact the NYS Democratic Party. At present, there is growing consensus among political observers in the U.S. that “Democrats have taken too many of their supporters for granted.”⁹⁶ Just as it has been called out for expecting Black Americans to vote Democratic despite “offer[ing] little...[beyond] a nominally less racist and misogynist space from which to work”,⁹⁷ observers have noted that the Democratic Party continues to “ignore[e] renters” all while counting on tenant support at the ballot box.⁹⁸

If that support were to be withdrawn *en masse*, then Democrats would stand to lose considerable ground in NYS. Indeed, by failing to build “robust renter mobilization efforts”,⁹⁹ the Democratic Party has arguably built a house of cards instead. Large-scale collective action by renters in the form of a vote strike could feasibly bring most or all of that house down. However, doing so would involve taking numerous, serious risks that cannot be ignored. Chief among those risks is that the likely beneficiaries of a renter vote strike – the NYS Republican and Conservative Parties – tend to push policies that are even more unfriendly to renters¹⁰⁰ than what exists at present. Thus, simply withdrawing from elections in a vote strike could backfire in the short term. And, in game theoretic fashion,¹⁰¹ because Democrats know that renters would likely be even worse off under a more right-leaning state government than they are now, the Party effectively knows that it can continue to “ignore renters”¹⁰² without losing their votes in large numbers.¹⁰³

This impasse has been more or less institutionalized in state and national politics,¹⁰⁴ with the outcome being reinforcement of the status quo: preservation of a system that is strongly biased toward the owning class and actively harmful to renters.¹⁰⁵ Breaking the stalemate will require a

credible threat¹⁰⁶ on the part of tenants and their allies. Working early in an election cycle to, say, move scores of tenants to sign a highly visible vote strike pledge or petition – and ensuring that party leaders and candidates for state offices are constantly reminded about that petition, at every step of the way – could send a strong signal to party leaders and mainstream candidates that they can no longer follow business as usual. They must either adjust their platforms to incorporate renter interests, or they will see their tenant voting bases evaporate. To the extent that the latter outcome would do damage to both sides of the struggle, the existence of a vote strike/defection pledge might serve as a credible enough threat to open good faith negotiations between mainstream parties and their [growing, potentially majority] tenant wings. If those negotiations fail, or if candidates and parties who receive tenant support fail to deliver on negotiated terms, then the tenant bloc would be in a position to either deliver on its promise to strike; or to shift its support to a different (including perhaps its own, newly formed) political party. Regardless of which action obtains, the distribution of political power in NYS would almost certainly experience a radical shift.

Importantly, the preceding paragraphs should not be read as the author advocating for a large-scale tenant vote strike. Rather, adhering to the mission of *High Road Policy*,¹⁰⁷ I am merely attempting to follow the data and empirical evidence from above to the leverage points they implicate, whereat intervention might kickstart processes of transformative, systems-level change.¹⁰⁸ The analyses strongly suggest that an organized tenant voting bloc is one of those leverage points. That there are nearly as many renter households as homeowner households in NYS means that the observable failure of widely supported pro-tenant laws to be passed at the state level is an issue of inequality and *injustice*. To social scientists Erik Olin Wright and Joel Rogers, an *inequality* becomes an *injustice* when there are actions that we as a society can take to correct the inequality, but we choose not to do so.¹⁰⁹ Passing and enforcing pro-tenant laws is one method to begin correcting the historic inequalities described in this article. Yet, because such actions have not come to fruition, tenure inequality is an evident *injustice* whose elimination demands new, more forceful tactics. Collective action to withdraw support from parties or officeholders that have repeatedly failed to combat tenure-based political inequalities is one such tactic that has potential to build and grow real tenant power.

A second way to begin building a powerful tenant voting bloc is for mainstream parties to *give tenants a reason to turn out to vote before a vote strike becomes necessary*. The inchoate evidence developed in this article shows that renters seem to be more inclined to participate in elections when their interests are unambiguously represented on the ballot. Renter turnout in 2022 NYS General Election races that featured Good Cause eviction supporters was meaningfully higher than in all other districts – and at least two newcomer candidates who were vocal Good Cause proponents won their seats on the backs of some of the highest renter turnout rates in all

of NYS. Instead of forcing tenants into a corner from which a coordinated electoral strike appears to be their best option for influencing state policy, New York's political parties and their candidates could simply acknowledge the unequal nature of the current system¹¹⁰ and commit to equalize the rights¹¹¹ of tenants and homeowners in state law. The final section of this article concludes with a thought experiment that imagines what the NYS legislative landscape would look like if renters were actually incentivized to vote at the same rates as their homeowners counterparts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: IMAGINING A NEW YORK STATE WITH TURNOUT PARITY ACROSS HOUSING TENURE

If there is an organizing theme to this article, it is that renters in New York State (NYS) have power in numbers. If tenants came together as a coherent bloc, then their numbers would rival those of homeowner-voters across the state. Tenants, in short, are a sleeping giant in New York politics. Evidence from the 2022 statewide General Election strongly implies that this renter giant can be temporarily roused from its slumber when opportunities exist for it to advance its material interests. Unfortunately, the status quo offers too few such opportunities, as it remains doggedly committed to its historical, systemic imperative to serve and protect the owning class.¹¹²

In contrast to the arguably temporary, piecemeal tenant mobilization that can be observed in 2022 General Election patterns, a *permanent* awakening of the renter voter class is needed to build authentic tenant power capable of enacting system-level changes to NYS government and housing policy. Whereas the path to such an awakening might demand strategic and collective withdrawal from status quo politics in the near-term (e.g., in the form of a renter vote strike or mass defection to a tenant-led party), one can imagine that a longer-term consequence of such actions would be the closing of the existing voter tenure gap.

Toward that end, this article closes with a simple thought experiment. Drawing once again on the Catalist voter data described earlier, I computed the subgroup turnout rates, for each legislative district (both the Senate and Assembly), for likely voters and likely renters, by political party and race-ethnicity. For each subgroup, I then simulated an outcome where likely renters in that group (e.g., Hispanic or Latinx *renter*-voters in Senate District 59) turn out at the same rate as likely homeowners from that same group (Hispanic or Latinx *owner*-voters in SD 59). The exercise reveals that, ***if there were no tenure turnout gap between racial or partisan groups in NYS, then roughly 1.6 million more New Yorkers would have cast ballots in the statewide 2022 General Election.*** More than half (51.5%) of those ballots would have been cast by voters registered with either the Democratic or Working Families Parties. Only 14.1% of such ballots would have been cast by Republican or Conservative Party registrants, with the remaining 34.4% of ballots coming

from voters with no or some other party affiliation. With respect to race-ethnicity, more than half (54.9%) of ballots would have been cast by voters of color: 20.9% by Black or African Americans; 14.2% by Hispanic or Latinx voters; 4.9% by Asian voters, and 15.0% cast by voters with some other or unknown racial identity. The upshot is that ***in a world of turnout parity across housing tenure, the profile of who turns out to vote in NYS would become more racially and ethnically diverse, and it would experience a political shift to the left.***

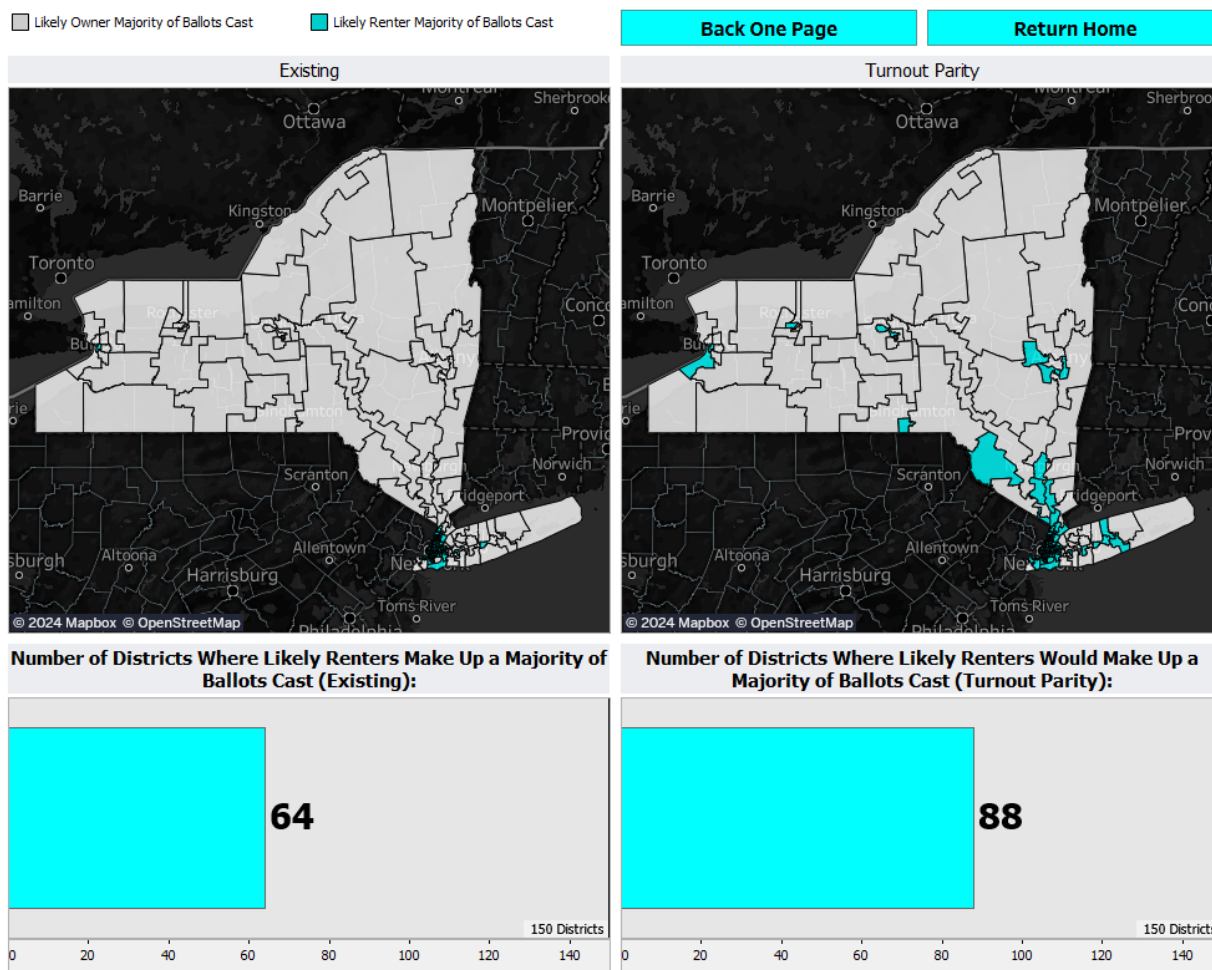
Going even beyond the racial and ideological shifts noted above, the potentially transformative power of closing the tenure gap in voter turnout is perhaps best seen in how it could alter New York's political geography. Under the status quo, which was set during the 2022 General Election, likely tenants account for a majority of ballots in just 28 Senate Districts (out of 63, 44.4%) and 64 Assembly Districts (out of 150, 42.7%). However, as documented in the table on the following page, ***in the imagined world of turnout parity, likely renters would potentially cast a majority of ballots, in a majority of districts, in both legislative chambers, as well as in statewide (e.g., gubernatorial) contests.*** Specifically, likely renters would have ostensibly cast a +12-percentage point majority (55.8% v. 43.2% under the status quo) of all 2022 General Election ballots if subgroup turnout rates were equal across modeled housing tenure. In this scenario, the number of Senate Districts where likely renters would constitute a majority of ballot casters would have increased from 28 to 33 (out of 63, 52.4%). And the corresponding number of Assembly Districts would have risen from 64 to 88 (out of 150, 58.7%). Crucially, the districts where likely renters are *currently* responsible for casting a majority of ballots are concentrated in the New York City metropolitan region. There are virtually no “renter voter majority” districts upstate, regardless of the legislative chamber.¹¹³ Under the turnout parity scenario, however, upstate would gain seats in both chambers. On the Senate side, the 63rd district, which lies mostly in the City of Buffalo, would presumably see its turnout pool flip to majority tenant. In the Assembly, one or more districts near the cities of Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany, and Binghamton would change to majority renter turnout, as would several districts in the Hudson Valley region.

This simple thought experiment reveals that, if tenants and their allies are open to electoral strategies, and if they are capable of organizing into a unified voting bloc, then their strong numbers give them a path to capturing state political power at all levels, from the Governor's office to both chambers of the legislature. Moreover, with that power arguably comes greater capacity to build cross-region tenant solidarity. As it stands, tenants are a minority of electoral participants virtually everywhere upstate; however, if likely renters matched the turnout rates of their likely homeowner counterparts, then tenants would stand to gain significant upstate representation. The resulting upstate-downstate legislative coalitions, which, again, could realistically rise to majority levels in both chambers of the NYS Legislature (refer to the table on the next page), would thus have the generative and transformative power to begin eradicating

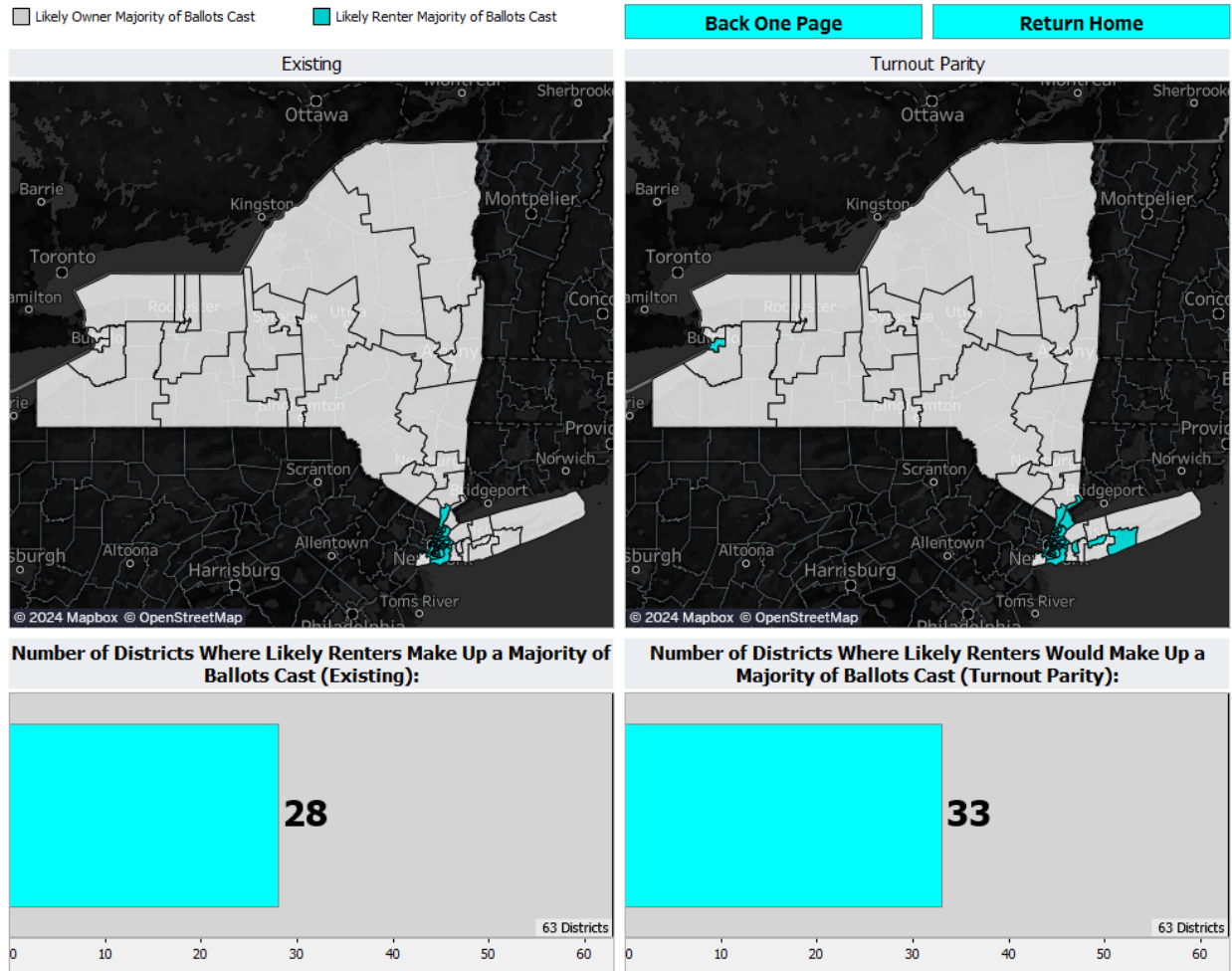
the owning class bias in NYS government and politics – and to build up a system in which the political rights of renters and owners are finally and fully equalized.¹¹⁴

	Status Quo	Tenure Turnout Parity	Change
Number of Ballots Cast	5,548,027	7,131,086	↑
<i>By Tenure</i>			
% Likely Homeowner	56.8%	44.2%	↓
% Likely Renter	43.2%	55.8%	↑
<i>By Race-Ethnicity</i>			
% Asian	3.6%	3.9%	↑
% Black or African American	9.7%	12.2%	↑
% Hispanic or Latinx	7.1%	8.7%	↑
% White	77.4%	70.2%	↓
% Other or Unknown Race	2.2%	5.1%	↑
<i>By Political Affiliation</i>			
% Democratic or Working Families Party	48.2%	48.9%	↑
% Republican or Conservative Party	31.0%	27.3%	↓
% No or Other Party Affiliation	20.8%	23.8%	↑
Number of Senate Districts Where Likely Tenants (Would) Constitute a Majority of Ballots Cast	28	33	↑
Number of Assembly Districts Where Likely Tenants (Would) Constitute a Majority of Ballots Cast	64	88	↑

Sources: <https://blogs.cornell.edu/highroadpolicy/nys-senate-districts/>; <https://blogs.cornell.edu/highroadpolicy/nys-assembly-districts/>



Picture of how the political geography of the NYS Assembly would change under turnout parity across housing tenure (see: <https://blogs.cornell.edu/highroadpolicy/nys-assembly-districts/>)



Picture of how the political geography of the NYS Senate would change under turnout parity across housing tenure (see: <https://blogs.cornell.edu/highroadpolicy/nys-senate-districts/>)

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ABOUT HIGH ROAD POLICY

High Road Policy is a quarterly issue memorandum published by the Cornell University School of Industrial Labor Relations (ILR) through its Buffalo Co-Lab. It aims to contribute actionable insights to contemporary policy and political discourses in and beyond the regions and communities of Upstate New York. Content for memoranda comes in part from the Co-Lab's Data for Equitable Economic Development and Sustainability (Good DEEDS) program, which democratizes local and regional data for the purposes of: empowering residents and institutions; informing public policy debates; and providing an empirical basis for ensuring that change and development in Upstate communities follows the High Road to shared prosperity for all residents, from the present to all future generations.

NOTES

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- ⁵⁴ Notably, the BOE data report an additional 1.18 million voters who are registered but classified as “inactive”, for a total of 13.1 million voters. The Catalist database approaches this number [12.2 million] when including voters who are linked to multiple records, pre-registered voters, and “potential voters” whose active status is not confirmed. The implication is that the Catalist voter file is slightly narrower than the BOE’s records, but it still covers roughly 93% of the BOE universe — ensuring that it is highly representative of NYS voters.
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