

Activating the Tenant Vote

How New York's Tenant Electorate Could Change New York – And National – Politics

Dr. Russell Weaver

Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-Lab

Nationwide, and in New York, the housing crisis has emerged as a key electoral issue. Recent polls show housing affordability is top of mind for swing state voters,¹ and in New York State, where key congressional districts are on the ballot in 2024, New Yorkers report the cost of housing is at the top of their concerns.²

This brief examines the untapped potential of the tenant electorate as a voting bloc in state and federal elections in New York, based on new analyses by the Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-Lab of voter data from the Catalist national database. Nearly half of New Yorkers are renters, yet tenants vote at far lower rates than homeowners.

This analysis suggests that candidates for office, political parties, and other groups can activate tenants as a voting bloc by campaigning on and passing tenant protections, with the potential to transform both election results and policy decisions affecting New York tenants.

The Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-Lab advances an equitable economy and democratic community, collaboratively integrating scholarly and practical understanding to strengthen civic action.

Russell Weaver, PhD, is a quantitative geographer and Director of Research at the Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-Lab. His research programs are aimed at understanding pathways for context-sensitive, sustainable, and equitable community economic development.

Tenants Political Action Committee gives a strong public voice to New York tenants and works to make tenants a viable electoral force.

Key Findings

Tenants are a large, untapped political base – especially for Democrats and progressives.

Nearly half of New Yorkers rent, and compared to likely homeowners, likely renters are more likely to be registered with the Democratic or Working Families Parties and to be people of color.

Tenants are an under-activated political constituency.

In the 2022 New York statewide general election, likely homeowners turned out at nearly twice the rate of likely renters. Housing insecurity is a major factor that decreases tenant turnout at elections, and a low tenant turnout rate compounds racial disparities in voting.

Supporting and passing tenant protection activates tenants voters.

The owner-renter turnout gap was nearly halved in races in which a candidate supported Good Cause Evictions during the 2022 statewide general election. Stabilizing renters by passing policies that decrease evictions could also boost tenant turnout at the polls

Activating a tenant voter block could change New York State – and national – politics.

If tenants had voter parity with homeowners, they would have cast 1.6 million more ballots in the statewide 2022 general election, primarily for Democrats and candidates on the Working Families Party line — an election in which control of Congress, the Governor’s mansion, and the state legislature were on the ballot.

Data

This analysis examines 2022 New York State (NYS) general election data from the Catalist national database, which contains records on individual voters that were captured directly from state and local election boards (i.e., from official sources of voter data). Catalist then augments each record with “synthetic” or “modeled” variables that the firm creates through established statistical techniques. One such variable is a voter’s “homeowner score”, which ranges from 0 (presumed renter) to 100 (presumed homeowner). The analyses on which this factsheet is built defines “likely renters” as NYS voters whose Catalist-generated “homeowner scores” are strictly less than 50 – in other words, if Catalist reports that a voter’s likelihood of owning their home is less than 50/50, then they are treated as “likely renters” in the analyses.

Tenants Are A Large, Untapped Political Base – Especially for Democrats and Progressives

Nearly Half of New Yorkers Rent

According to U.S. Census Bureau data,³ roughly **49% of households in New York State (NYS) were renter-occupied** at the end of 2023, a higher rentership rate than any other state in the country.

Likely Renter Voters Lean to the Left

57.3% of likely renter voters are registered with the Democratic (DEM) Party or Working Families Party (WFP), compared to just 38.5% of likely homeowners. And, whereas 36.3% of likely homeowner voters are registered with either the Republican Party (REP) or Conservative Party (CON), just 15.1% of likely renter voters belong to one of these right-leaning parties.⁴

NYS Registered Voters, by Likely Tenure and Party

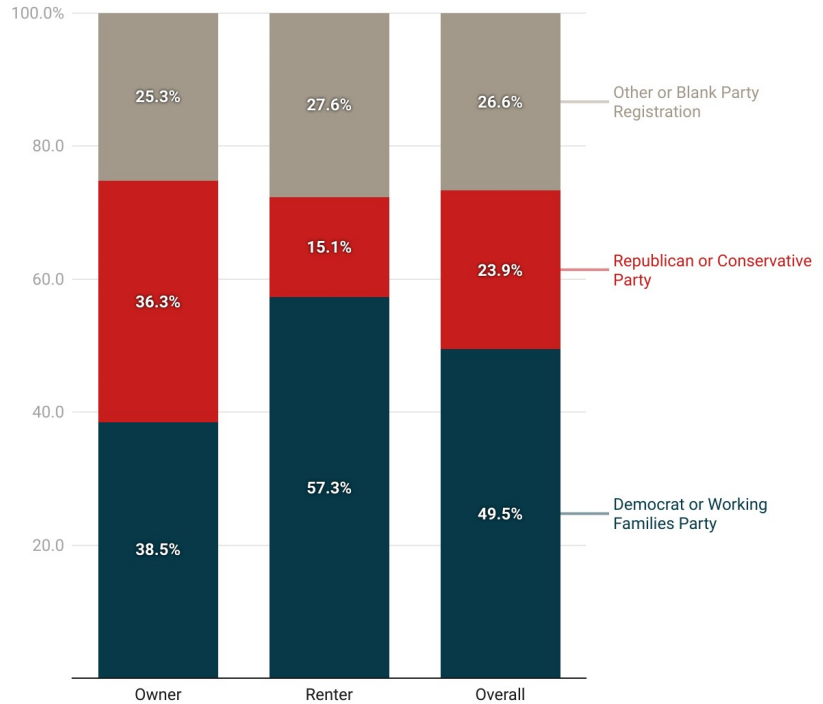


Chart: @RustBeltGeo · Source: Catalyst · Created with Datawrapper

Likely Renter Voters Are Disproportionately New Yorkers of Color

More than half (51.8%) of likely renter voter registrants in NYS are voters of color, compared to just 15.0% of likely homeowner voters. New Yorkers of color are disproportionately likely to be renters – two out of every three Black households rent in NYS⁵ – and, in turn, renter-voters are disproportionately persons of color.

Tenants Are An Under-Activated Political Constituency

Likely Homeowners Turned Out at Nearly Twice the Rate of Likely Renters in 2022

Likely renters cast ballots at rates far lower than homeowners. 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%. Consequently, likely homeowners were the driving force in the 2022 General Election despite being outnumbered on the voter registration rolls.

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

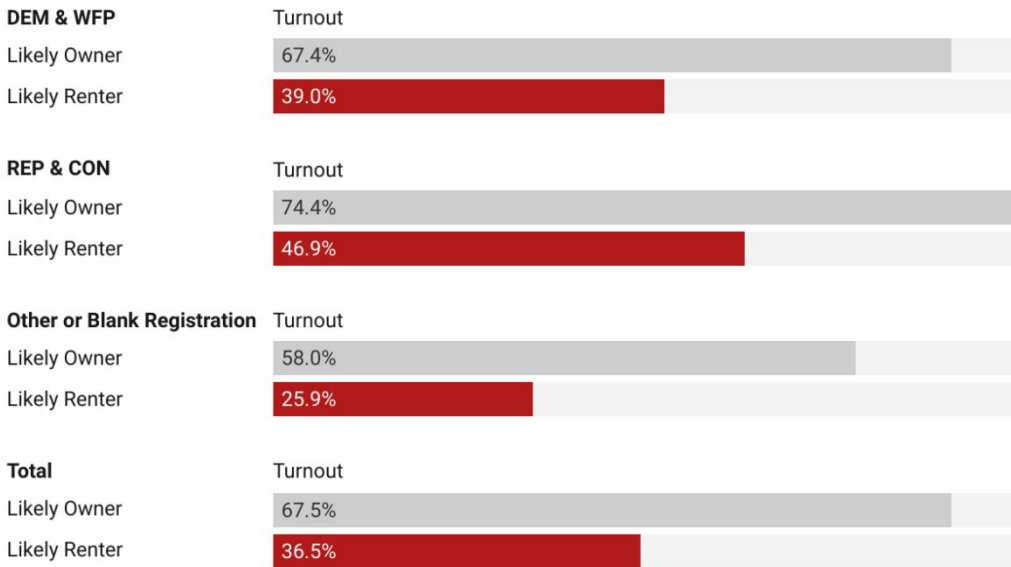


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

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

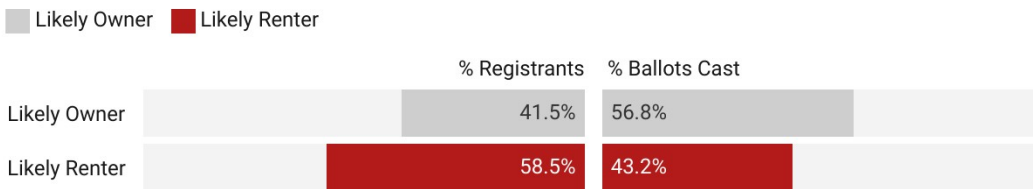


Chart: @RustBeltGeo • Source: Catalist • Created with Datawrapper

Housing Insecurity Decreases Tenant Turnout

A 2022 Princeton study found that increased residential evictions significantly decreased voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election.⁶ Evictions disrupt the stability of both neighborhoods and affected individuals, leading to economic hardship, displacement, and a loss of community ties, all of which diminish their investment in civic engagement as well as likelihood and ability to participate in the voting process.

Low Tenant Turnout Compounds Racial Inequality

In NYS, white voters outvoted voters of color by 7.9% in the 2022 general elections – the fourth highest racial voting gap in the country, up from 4.5% in 2020.⁷ Because tenants are disproportionately people of color, low tenant turnout compounds racial voting disparities and the disenfranchisement of communities of color.

Supporting and Passing Tenant Protections Activates Tenant Voters

Candidate Support for Tenant Protections Lowers the Owner-Renter Turnout Gap

According to a statistical analysis of the 2022 General Election using Catalist data, NYS tenants might have been relatively motivated to turn out for candidates who were vocal supporters or co-sponsors of the 2022 state-level Good Cause Eviction bill, which protects renters against rent hikes and evictions.⁸ In NYS Senate races that did *not* feature such a candidate, the average turnout rate among likely renters was roughly 29.0% (after adjusting for race-ethnicity and political party). 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.

The owner-renter turnout gap is nearly cut in half when candidates run on renter-friendly platforms. The estimated turnout gap between likely homeowners and likely renters in NYS Senate races was just 18.7 percentage points, considerably smaller than the statewide average of 31 percentage points. The results for Assembly races were nearly identical: the turnout gap between likely homeowners and likely renters in Assembly races that featured Good Cause proponents or co-sponsors dropped to 17.9 percentage points.

Table I. Homeowner-Renter Turnout Gap in 2022 General Elections

	Homeowner-Renter Turnout Gap
State Average	31%
Senate Race with Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	18.7%
Assembly Race with Good Cause Supporter on Ballot	17.9%

Source: Authors’ calculations based on data from Catalist

Table II. Turnout by Tenure in 2022 General Election Senate Races

	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%)

Source: Authors’ calculations based on data from Catalist

Table III. Turnout by Tenure in 2022 General Election Assembly Races

	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%)

Source: Authors’ calculations based on data from Catalyst

Stabilizing Renters Increases Tenant Turnout

A 1% reduction in residential evictions would have increased voter turnout by 2.73 percentage points in the 2016 presidential election, according to Slee and Desmond.⁹ Policies that have been proven to decrease evictions and stabilize renters and their neighborhoods, such as Good Cause Eviction Protections,¹⁰ Tenant Right to Counsel,¹¹ rent stabilization,¹² and rental assistance programs,¹³ could thereby boost civic participation and tenant voter turnout.

Activating a Tenant Voter Bloc Could Change NYS – and National – Politics

If Tenants Had Voter Parity with Homeowners, 1.6 Million More Ballots Would Have Been Cast in 2022

Simulating a situation in which likely renters turn out at the same rate as their likely homeowner counterparts using Catalyst 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**, where control of Congress, the Governor’s mansion, and the state legislature were on the ballot.

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. **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**, impacting not just state politics but also national races.

A Tenant Voting Bloc Could Select the Majority of the State’s Legislators

During the 2022 General Election, likely tenants accounted 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 below, ***in the imagined scenario of turnout parity, likely renters would cast a majority of ballots, in a majority of districts, in both legislative chambers, as well as in statewide (e.g., gubernatorial) contests.***

Specifically, renters would have 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 housing tenure. 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%).

Table IV. Ballots Cast in 2022 If Renters and Owners Had Turnout Parity

	Status Quo	With Tenure Turnout Parity	Change
Number of Ballots Cast	5,548,027	7,131,086	↑
By Tenure			
% Likely Homeowner	56.8%	44.2%	↓
% Likely Renter	43.2%	55.8%	↑
By Race-Ethnicity			
% 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%	↑
By Political Affiliation			
% 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	↑

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from Catalist. See also <https://blogs.cornell.edu/highroadpolicy/nys-senate-districts>; <https://blogs.cornell.edu/highroadpolicy/nys-assembly-districts>

Conclusion: Tenants Could Be A Powerful Voting Bloc

Tenants make up nearly half of New York's population and could become a robust, reliable voting bloc that leans Democratic and progressive. Activating renter voters could also help eradicate racial voting disparities, empowering communities of color to have a voice in the political process.

Looking at the 2024 elections and beyond, candidates have an opportunity to expand and solidify their base by campaigning on and passing tenant protections. In 2022, when New York Democrats lost four House seats to Republicans and Governor Kathy Hochul won the General Election with just 53% of the vote, tenant voters could have played a decisive role in securing a different outcome.

However, the Democratic Party in New York has not consistently activated – or even welcomed – tenant voters.¹⁴ NYS passed Good Cause Eviction in 2024 after years of advocacy by tenant groups and their allies, but New York's tripartite Democratic leadership also significantly watered down the law, leaving millions of renters without Good Cause protections, while also rolling back tenant protections they had previously passed in 2019.¹⁵

Still, tenants do not have to wait for party leaders to take them seriously. New York progressives has already begun organizing tenant voting blocs to elect champions like Diana Richardson, who won a state Assembly seat in 2015 by refusing real estate donations¹⁶, and Julia Salazar, who became the first Democratic Socialist state senator in 2018 and was the lead sponsor of the Good Cause Eviction bill until its passage in 2024.¹⁷ More recently, Ithaca's Solidarity Slate achieved a historic victory by electing a tenant majority to its Common Council in 2023, who have committed to bringing rent stabilization to the majority renter upstate city.¹⁸

While tenant champions running for office face stiff opposition with deep pockets – real estate is regularly among the largest spenders on state elections¹⁹– the data shows that activating tenant voters can be a boon for candidates.

As New Yorkers continue to struggle amidst a historic housing crisis, activating tenant voters offers a profound opportunity to boost turnout and elect political leaders at all levels of government who will put housing stability and affordability at the top of their policy agenda.

Notes

¹ HIT Strategies housing survey conducted from April 8th, 2024 to April 20th, 2024, among various demographics of registered voters in AZ, MI, PA, NV, and NC. <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000018f-e6a8-d7f2-a19f-feb875820000>

² Molly Burke, “New Yorkers find housing affordability is a ‘major problem.’” *Times Union*. November 27, 2023. <https://www.timesunion.com/capitol/article/new-yorkers-concerned-housing-affordability-poll-18517391.php>
Siena College Research Institute. “Voters: Cost of Living in New York Is Top Issue for Albany to Address; Other Major Problems: Crime, Migrant Influx & Affordable Housing.” September 19, 2023. <https://scri.siena.edu/2023/09/19/voters-cost-of-living-in-new-york-is-top-issue-for-albany-to-address-other-major-problems-crime-migrant-influx-affordable-housing/>

³ U.S. Census. “Housing Vacancies and Homeownership.” <https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/index.html>

⁴ Note that these four parties – DEM, WFP, REP, and CON – are the only four parties that are currently recognized by, and have statewide ballot lines, in NYS. 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, respectively; and (2) the system of fusion voting 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.

⁵ U.S. Census. “Demographic Characteristics for Occupied Housing Units” [https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2022.S2502?q=S2502&g=040XX00US36.36\\$0500000](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2022.S2502?q=S2502&g=040XX00US36.36$0500000)

⁶ Slee, Gillian and Matthew Desmond. “Eviction and Voter Turnout: The Political Consequences of Housing Instability.” *Politics and Society*. 2023, Vol. 51(1) 3–29. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00323292211050716>

⁷ Brennan Center for Justice. “Growing Racial Disparities in Voter Turnout, 2008–2022.” March 2, 2024. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/growing-racial-disparities-voter-turnout-2008-2022>

⁸ Senate Bill S3082. “Relates to prohibiting eviction without good cause.” <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/S3082>

⁹ Slee, Gillian and Matthew Desmond. “Eviction and Voter Turnout: The Political Consequences of Housing Instability.” *Politics and Society*. 2023, Vol. 51(1) 3–29. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00323292211050716>

¹⁰ Cuellar, Julieta. “Effect of ‘Just Cause’ Eviction Ordinances on Eviction in Four California Cities.” *Journal of Public and International Affairs*. 2019, Vol. 30. <https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/effect-just-cause-eviction-ordinances-eviction-four-california-cities>

¹¹ Mironova, Oksana. Community Service Society. “Right to Counsel Works: Why New York State’s tenants need universal access to lawyers during evictions.” March 7, 2022. <https://www.cssny.org/news/entry/right-to-counsel-new-york-tenants-lawyers-evictions>

¹² Chee, Ameer and Sarah Treuhaft. PolicyLink. “Our Homes, Our Future: How Rent Control Can Build Stable, Healthy Communities.” February 2019. https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/OurHomesOurFuture_Web_08-02-19.pdf

¹³ Kneebone, Elizabeth, Katherien O’Regan, Haley Raetz and Quinn Underriner. New York University Furman Center. “Rent Payments in Affordable Housing During the Pandemic: The role of rental subsidies and the safety net.” September 2021. https://furmancenter.org/files/publications/Rent_Payments_in_Affordable_Housing_During_the_Pandemic_Turner_Center_Final.pdf

¹⁴ Tomao, Pete. “Is the NYS Democratic Party Ready to Stop Ignoring Renters?” *City & State New York*. February 21, 2023. <https://www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2023/02/ny-democratic-party-ready-stop-ignoring-renters/383121/>

¹⁵ Lewis, Rebecca. “Tenant advocates alarmed about latest budget negotiations.” *City & State New York*. April 15, 2024. <https://www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2024/04/tenant-advocates-alarmed-about-latest-budget-negotiations/39573>

¹⁶ Tee, Vivian. “Working Families Candidate Diana Richardson Wins Brooklyn Assembly Post.” *New York Times*. May 6, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/nyregion/working-families-candidate-diana-richardson-wins-brooklyn-assembly-post.html>

¹⁷ Del Valle, Gaby. “Salazar Takes Aim at Dilan’s Tenants’ Rights Record in State Senate Primary.” *City & State New York*. July 23, 2018. <https://www.cityandstateny.com/politics/2018/07/salazar-takes-aim-at-dilans-tenants-rights-record-in-state-senate-primary/178256/>

¹⁸ Dougherty, Matt. "Tenant Takeover: Renters Gain Majority on Ithaca's City Council." *Ithaca Times*. January 10, 2024. https://www.ithaca.com/news/ithaca/tenant-takeover-renters-gain-majority-on-ithaca-s-city-council/article_68cdf546-ab38-11ee-8b9e-171aa8362c3b.html

¹⁹ Ang, Joy, Robert Galbraith and Alison Wilkey. "Pay to Play: How Big Real Estate Money is Leaving New York Tenants in the Dust." April 2022. <https://housingjusticeforall.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Pay-to-Play-Report.pdf>