Memo on Voter Turnout if San Jose Mayoral Elections are Moved to Presidential Years

Submitted by Commissioner Garrick Percival

The Charter Reform Commission has been tasked by the San Jose City Council with evaluating whether the city's mayoral elections should be moved to the presidential election cycle from its current gubernatorial cycle. This memo is designed to assist the Commission and the broader public in their examination of the potential effects of shifting the timing of mayoral elections. How might moving San Jose's mayoral elections to presidential years affect voter turnout rates?

Historically, voter turnout rates in city elections are lower than in races for elected office in higher levels of government. The low rate of participation is partly a product of the timing of many city elections.

Political reformers of a century ago often advocated for "isolated" or "off-cycle" city elections which are scheduled in years separate from state (gubernatorial) and national (presidential) contests. Off-cycle elections, it was argued, allowed voters to concentrate on local issues and candidates.[1] They were also seen as tool to combat the power of 19th and early 20th century urban political machines who relied on the political support of racial and ethnic minorities and newly naturalized citizens. Middle-and-upper class, predominately white, voters were often seen as protectors of "good government." [2]

Elections are often described as pillars of a representative democracy. They allow the people to choose representatives who make decisions on behalf of the public. Today, some observers argue that low turnout city elections weaken the bonds between the people and their elective representatives. When turnout increases, local government becomes more representative and responsive to the broader public. These are outcomes particularly important in a racially and ethnically diverse community.

Today, San Jose's mayoral elections are not isolated or off-cycle elections in the traditional use of the terms. They are held in what political analysts often call "midterm" or "gubernatorial" elections where, in states like California, citizens vote for governor (and other statewide offices) and members of the U.S. Congress but not for president. Turnout in gubernatorial elections (for example 2010, 2014, 2018) is higher than off-cycle elections but is regularly lower than turnout in presidential years.[3]

Peer-reviewed political science research provides clear evidence that if the goal is to increase voter turnout in city elections, then most impactful reform is to move the timing of city elections to presidential years.[4] There is no other city-level reform that produces such a significant effect on turnout. A number of cities in California, including Fresno, Riverside, Sacramento, and San Diego (among others) hold mayoral elections in presidential years.[5] Some observers, however, argue increased turnout brings a cost. Local elections in presidential years will cause voter confusion, decrease volunteerism in local elections, or drive up campaign costs.[6]

The table below examines total votes cast in the San Jose's mayor's race in each of the past four elections. Also included is a corresponding voter "turnout" measure, which is captured by dividing the total number of votes cast for mayor by the total number of registered voters in the city in each of the given election years. For example, in 2014, 180,930 total votes were cast in the mayor's race. There were 416,329 registered voters in the city. Dividing 180,930/416,329 produced a 43.4% turnout rate.

Voter Turnout in San Jose Mayoral Elections in Gubernatorial Years versus Turnout for Citywide Policy Measures in Presidential Years

	A. Total Votes Cast for Mayor (Gubernatorial Election Years)	B. Turnout as % of Registered Voters in San Jose	C. Total Votes Cast for Citywide Policy Measure* (Presidential Years)	D. Turnout as % of Registered Voters in San Jose
2020	--	--	391,371	73.8
2018	159,323	36.7	--	--
2016	--	--	311,278	69.4
2014	180,930	43.4	--	--
2012	--	--	298,614	71.3
2010	134,410	37.8	--	--
2008	--	--	280,574	71.9
2006	208,411	55.9	--	--

*San Jose vote totals in presidential years are calculated from votes cast for citywide policy measures. In 2020, vote totals are calculated using San Jose Charter Amendment Measure G (expand oversight powers of Independent Police Auditor); 2016 Measure G (business tax increase); 2012 Measure D (minimum wage increase); 2008 Measure J (telecommunications taxes). Vote data is archived with the Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters at
https://www.sccgov.org/sites/rov/Resources/Pages/PastEResults.aspx
Voter registration data used to calculate voter turnout rates can also be found at the Registrar of Voters' website https://www.sccgov.org/sites/rov/Resources/Pages/Statistics.aspx
Data collected by Dr. Garrick Percival, Department of Political Science, San Jose State University
Dr. Mary Currin-Percival, Department of Political Science, San Jose State University

A question for the Charter Reform Commission is what might voter turnout look like if the San Jose mayoral elections were moved to the presidential cycle? To form a general estimate, we can use a proxy measure, in this case vote totals for a citywide policy measure placed on the ballot in each presidential year. It may appear strange to compare voter turnout in a mayor's race to a citywide policy measure, but the key metric of comparison is the expected turnout differential in *citywide* races across the two types of election cycles (i.e., presidential versus gubernatorial/midterm).

Over the past four presidential cycles (2020, 2016, 2012, 2008), voter turnout in San Jose citywide policy measure contests is, on average, 28.2% higher than turnout in the mayor's race held in the previous gubernatorial election year. Importantly, when averaged across future election cycles we might expect turnout in San Jose mayoral elections to increase in the range of 28%-33% if they are moved to the presidential cycle. These estimates are consistent with findings in studies using a larger sample of cities.[7] In San Jose, this would equate to 148,203 to 169,375 additional voters in any given mayoral election using current voter registration figures (529,299) in the city. The relative competitiveness of mayoral elections, and whether the mayor is elected in a primary or general election generates additional uncertainty, but these factors will operate independently of the decision to move mayoral elections to presidential years or to keep them in their current (gubernatorial) cycle.

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[1] For a review of this history see Terry Christensen and Tom Hogen-Esch (2006), *Local Politics: A Practical Guide to Governing at the Grassroots.* Routledge.

[2] Ibid.

[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/24/voter-turnout-always-drops-off-for-midterm-elections-but-why/

[4] See Zoltan Hajnal and Paul Lewis "Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections," Urban Affairs Review (2003), 38, 5: 645-668. Also see Melissa Marschall and John Lappie's 2016 report "Mayoral Elections in California, 1995-2014" at https://kinder.rice.edu/sites/default/files/documents/FINAL_CA_LEAP_REPORT_0310.pdf

[5] https://ballotpedia.org/United_States_municipal_elections,_2020_-_Municipal_elections_across_the_United_States

[6] https://www.latimes.com/local/political/la-me-pc-lawmakers-approve-measure-to-boost-voter-turnout-in-cities-20150716-story.html

[7] See Melissa Marschall and John Lappie's 2016 report, "Mayoral Elections in California, 1995-2014."