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October 30, 2014

To the City Council of the City of Los Angeles:



It has come to my attention that you are considering a ballot measure that would propose moving the city's regular elections to June and November of even-numbered years so that they would be concurrent with state and national elections. Naturally, this raises a number of questions about what the effects of such a change would be. While research on election timing is scarce, I recently published a book on the topic, titled, *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups* (University of Chicago Press, 2014). In what follows, I summarize some of the book's findings in hopes that they will be useful to you.

Shifting local elections to the same day as elections for governor or president increases voter turnout—quite substantially. This finding is well documented in my work and the work of others. In a study of California cities published by the Public Policy Institute of California in 2002, Zoltan Hajnal, Paul Lewis, and Hugh Louch found that turnout in off-cycle city elections averaged 36 percentage points lower than in city elections held during presidential elections. Using a sample of 57 cities across the country, a study by Curtis Wood published in *Urban Affairs Review* in 2002 estimated that off-cycle election timing dampened city election turnout by an average of 29 percentage points. Analyzing a sample of elections in 38 large cities over 25 years, Neal Caren also found that turnout was significantly lower in cities that did not hold elections at the same time as presidential elections, by about 27 percentage points (published in the *Journal of Urban Affairs* in 2007). In my book, I found that turnout in California city elections averages 35 percentage points higher when the elections are held during presidential elections rather than off-cycle (in the spring or odd-numbered years).

To put it simply, more voters are drawn to the polls for national and statewide elections than for local elections. Many voters who turn out to vote for president or governor do not make a separate trip to the polls for a purely local election. But when local elections are held on the same day as national and state elections, most of the people who turn out to vote for president or governor also vote in local races. Therefore, turnout in concurrent or “on-cycle” local elections is significantly higher.

It is important to point out that turnout in on-cycle local elections tends to fluctuate depending on which state and national races are on the ballot at the same time. Turnout is highest in local races held on the same day as a presidential general election. On days of gubernatorial general elections, turnout in concurrent local races is somewhat lower than that. And when local races are held on the same day as state and national primaries, turnout in the local races tends to mirror turnout in the primaries. In my study of turnout in California city elections, I found that average turnout in off-cycle city elections averaged about 26% of registered voters. In city elections concurrent with statewide primaries in midterm/gubernatorial years, turnout averaged 9 percentage points higher. Turnout was 16 percentage

points higher than the off-cycle average when city elections were held at the same time as presidential election primaries. And for cities holding elections in November of even-numbered years, turnout in city elections was 18 percentage points higher in midterm/gubernatorial years (compared to off-cycle elections) and 35 percentage points higher in presidential years (compared to off-cycle elections). Thus, by making city elections concurrent with state and national elections, turnout in city races will wax and wane with voter participation in state and national races.

Many people wonder whether any increase in turnout that would come from moving local elections to November of even-numbered years would be eliminated by “roll-off”—voters who cast a vote in presidential and gubernatorial races but don’t cast a vote in local races. It is true that some voters might not complete their ballots. But research shows clearly that on average, roll-off does not erase the turnout boost that comes with on-cycle election timing. My own study of California city elections only counts actual votes in local races (therefore excluding voters who roll off), and I still find a 35 percentage point boost in turnout during presidential elections. Many other studies also measure turnout in terms of the voters who actually participate in local elections—not just those who show up to vote for president—and their findings are similar. That means that the higher turnout of on-cycle elections is not erased by roll-off.

The effect of on-cycle election timing on turnout dwarfs the effects of other factors many people consider to be important. The presence of a mayoral candidate on the ballot does increase turnout in city council races, but only by a small amount. More competitive council elections also attract higher turnout, but again the effect is small relative to the effect of on-cycle election timing. Turnout in city races is also higher in cities with smaller populations, higher income per capita, and smaller minority populations. But the effect of election timing dwarfs these other factors.

My research also shows that the low turnout that accompanies off-cycle election timing increases the electoral presence of organized interest groups. Because those who have a large stake in an election outcome turn out to vote at high rates regardless of when the election is held, and because low voter turnout enhances the effectiveness of interest groups’ mobilization efforts, the members and mobilized supporters of organized interest groups make up a greater proportion of the active electorate in off-cycle elections than in on-cycle elections. This often has an impact on public policies. Highly motivated, well-organized groups that don’t face much direct competition over the policies they care about typically have more success in securing the policies they favor when elections are held off-cycle rather than on-cycle. Even when organized groups compete over policy, and even when voters on both sides of an issue are equally motivated to turn out, election timing can still tip the balance of power in favor of one group or another, with potential to change the outcomes of elections. Thus, not only does election timing matter for voter turnout—it also affects the composition of the electorate.

That said, Los Angeles is not alone in holding its elections off-cycle. As of 2012, 88% of all states in the U.S. held some or all of their municipal elections off-cycle, and 72% of states held some or all of their school board elections off-cycle. Why is this so? In my book, I provide a two-part answer. The first is that the Progressive reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were very successful in spreading the practice of off-cycle elections for local governments. They claimed that separating local elections from state and national races would improve local government, since voters would come to the polls focused on local issues and wouldn’t be swayed by the political parties that were very influential in state and national races. Since then, many state governments have tried to reschedule local elections, oftentimes trying to move them to the same day as state and national elections. Those proposals are almost always defeated, usually because the groups that benefit from the low turnout of off-cycle

election timing oppose the change. State legislative proposals to let local governments choose for themselves when to hold elections—as in California—pass at higher rates than proposals to mandate on-cycle election timing.

Naturally, there is much more in the book than I can cover here, but I hope this brief summary is helpful to you as you debate the topic in Los Angeles.

Sincerely,

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