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California's Local Elections

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**Reimagining Local Government Conference
Chapman University**

**California and Local Elections
By Joe Mathews**

When it comes to understanding the problem of low turnout in California's local elections, we are overlooking a fundamental cause: Californians are not nearly divided enough.

That may sound like an odd observation, but it's an important one.

Political scientists and civic groups are too polite to admit it, but heavy turnout requires conflict and disagreement. For all the routine condemnation of politicians and activists who use wedge issues, divisiveness has its advantages. Turnout surges in a local election when communities are deeply divided in some way, when elections are close, or when people harbor deep fear about the results.

This hard truth is posing an enormous, if largely unrecognized challenge for California, its local governments, and all the institutions – from churches to business groups to civic entities -- that seek to engage citizenry.

Because the central reality of 21st century California is that people here are more unified, and more alike than ever before.

It's possible that readers of that last sentence have never heard anyone say such a thing. California, the media tells us, is defined by its diversity, and all its different races and ethnicities and religions. But that is an outdated view—more true in the mid 1980s, during massive foreign immigration and in-migration from other states, than it is now.

Today, halfway through the second decade of the 21st century, California is defined by a convergence among its people. The central change in the state is that, after more than 150 years of being a place where most Californians were born or raised outside the state (or outside the country), California in this decade now has a new, and rapidly growing, homegrown majority. Most Californians are from California now. And while they may have different heritages and grandparents from different places, they have more and more in common.

We Californians are more likely to have grown up in the communities where we live. More of us have gone to the same schools, listened to the same music, and rooted for the same sports teams. And, most strikingly, we are thinking and voting more alike than ever before.

It's not merely that we are a one-party state, with utterly predictable elections, where Democrats win the big races and along the coast (and Republicans predictably prevail in their inland strongholds). It's that polling shows there are no wedge issues in California anymore, or in any of our major cities.

We have made up our minds. Big majorities now favor left-of-center positions on every major issue – guns to immigration, taxation to spending -- even those that divide the country as a whole. And the demographics that support those big majorities tend to be among the younger parts of the state -- meaning our like-mindedness will grow as elderly dissenters die off.

Yes, we still have close votes on some ballot measures, but these are often measures that look at very small questions, or do not offer clear framing of issues, or

involve technical questions that confound us. For example, Californians are split nearly 50-50 on the question of whether to impose an extraction tax for oil and gas. But they want the state to pursue policies that address climate change and advance alternative energy.

It's hard to reckon with our lack of divisions because we're not used to thinking about unity as a challenge. But our unity is a serious problem for civic engagement and voter turnout. Fernando Guerra, the Loyola Marymount University political scientist, has noted after several recent low-turnout local elections in Southern California that such elections provide little real competition, conflict or division.

There was "little partisan competition," Dr. Guerra said in 2014 after record-low turnout in elections in the city of Santa Monica, which prides itself on being one of California's most engaged places (just look at the overwhelming attendance at Santa Monica city council meetings). "Without competition, people don't feel that it's worth coming out.

Guerra added: "Part of that is also a lack of ideological competition. There's great consensus in California. California is a very Democratic state and a lot of the values that the Democratic Party espouses are actually the majority's."

Guerra is right, and his reasoning is logical. Why bother voting in California if you already know which views will prevail?

Californians, after all, enter 2016 knowing with virtual certainty that the state will give its electoral votes to a Democratic presidential candidate, and that we will return big Democratic majorities to the state legislature. In our most high-profile California race, it's all but certain that we'll elect one of two Democrats – either the Attorney General Kamala Harris or Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez – to an open U.S. Senate seat. Those Democrats differ greatly in style, but can you name a single substantive policy disagreement between the two?

You can't—because there aren't any.

Sanchez and Harris are Californians, after all.

Low turnout in local elections is not an only-in-California quandary. While participation in presidential elections remains strong, local election turnout has fallen across the United States in recent decades.

University of Wisconsin researchers, working with *Governing* magazine, assembled data on 144 large U.S. cities that showed a decline from an average of 26.6 turnout among the cities' voting population in 2001 to just 21 percent in 2011. Los Angeles, with its dismal voter turnout (just a fifth of registered voters cast ballots in the last mayoral elections), is not the only place setting records. Bill de Blasio was elected mayor of New York in the lowest turnout election since the 1950s. The District of Columbia saw its lowest mayor turnouts in nearly 40 years.

The problem of low turnout is widely acknowledged; dozens of commission and committees around the country are studying it. (There are also signs of fall-off in local elections in other Western countries and some non-Western industrialized nations). But this low local turnout hasn't received quite the same level of discussion as another, closely related American political problem: our political polarization.

Polarization has many causes. But one major cause, as the journalist Bill Bishop has shown, is the "big sort" – the way in which Americans increasingly concentrate in

areas where like-minded people surround them. This produces the much-discussed polarization – the most ideological or extreme candidate has the advantage in the increasingly homogenous districts where we live. But there’s another problem with homogeneity that we don’t discuss as much: homogeneity discourages participation. Why bother to vote or participate in civic life if you already know what kind of person your district will elect?

Unfortunately, surveys, written by proper and polite researchers and pollsters, have not focused on this particular reason—too much homogeneity-- for not voting. Instead, the question is often asked in backward way. Do you think the identity of your mayor or your congressman makes a difference? People will often say yes. As opposed to the more salient and precise question: in your community, will your vote make any difference in the kind of person who becomes mayor?

So we must look into the existing data to identify this reason for non-voting expressed in other ideas.

When the U.S. Census surveys people on why they vote and don’t vote, they get many different answers. A 2012 survey, with data put together by reported on by Pepperdine University’s Davenport Institute in conjunction with the National Conference on Citizenship, found the top seven reasons listed for not voting in California:

1. *“Too busy, conflicting work or school schedules”*
2. *“Not interested, felt like my vote wouldn’t make a difference”*
3. *“Illness or disability”*
4. *“Registration problems”*
5. *“Didn’t like candidates or campaign issues”*
6. *“Out of town or away from home”*

7. *“Forgot to vote or send in absentee ballot”*

To look at the list is to be reminded there are two big groups of reasons why people don’t vote. The first group involves process barriers – from voter registration to finding the time or to being present on Election Day. The other involves people’s attitudes and views of the importance of voting.

Obviously, these two groups of reasons overlap. Indeed, there is a contest of sorts between reasons for voting (and for not voting). Those of us who have decided to vote have made the calculation that the value of voting – in their minds – outweighs any costs from navigating the process. Voting is, in other words, worth the trouble.

It’s not hard to see the importance of conflict, of wedge issues, and of fear in this Pepperdine list of reasons not to vote.

Consider the first two reasons for not voting. In the top reason, people who don’t have time to vote, or have conflicting schedules, are stating a priority – work or school or family is more important than voting. Which brings us to the second reason: it’s easier to make yourself a priority, and see voting as unimportant – if you “feel like your vote wouldn’t make any difference.”

That response – that your vote doesn't make a difference – is routinely interpreted as people saying they don't believe in the system. But it can mean more than that – that the vote doesn't literally matter, because the outcome, particularly in a homogenous community, is going to reflect that community.

Unfortunately, California reform efforts have addressed only one side of the non-voting equation – the process. We've tried to make it easier to vote – via mail ballots, via early voting – and to register to vote. But the question of giving people issues to follow, of giving potential voters something to vote for – or, given human nature, something to vote against – has not been addressed. Yes, the two voter-approved state reforms of recent years – the redistricting commission and the top-two system of voting – were sold as ways to attract moderate candidates and give voters more of a choice. But there is little evidence of more moderate candidates – and voter participation by moderates has declined. I would argue that top two, by eliminating primaries and the guarantee that every party is represented on a general election ballot, discourages many voters from participation by giving them fewer choices.

If boosting local voter turnout weren't hard enough given these realities, California has also two major barriers to local participation that, in combination, are peculiar to this state and its communities.

The first is our constitutional requirement that local elections be non-partisan affairs. Political scientists have found that partisan contests produce more turnout. For years, I've been asking scholars what would be the fastest way to get more people to vote locally—without fail, the answer has been a move to partisan elections. Such a switch would be particularly powerful in these polarized times—the people most likely to vote are party members and partisans. And the machinery and label of parties could provide a boost to turnout, and the possibility of competition in every election.

And competition in every election would be a major advance in California municipalities. It has become commonplace for cities to cancel their elections for lack of candidates.

Why so few candidates? The answer lies in the second peculiarly Californian reason for low local turnout. Our complex state governance limits the power and discretion of local elected officials and voters.

As I've written previously (including in a paper for last year's Chapman conference), California has systematically centralized authority in Sacramento. Levels of taxation and spending on local services are set largely at the state level, by wildly complicated and often counter-intuitive formulas that are the residue of state ballot measures, court decisions, law and regulation. Much of what passes for conflict in California politics involves whether the big majorities that support particular policies can must the two-thirds supermajorities necessary to get around a particular limit or rule on spending and taxation. These fights for two-thirds are not longstanding, engaging fights over an issue or a vision of a future; they are one-offs to muster an even more overwhelming level of support.

In this centralized, supermajority-mad system, California communities rely primarily on revenues from the state. Our city officials have little say in major issues; our school board members can't do much to decide funding or curriculum. So such local

bodies tend to be dominated by representatives of the constituencies – public employees and developers – who rely on them.

To understand this undemocratic reality is to question why one should vote in California local questions. And I should confess: this is not an abstract question for this writer.

Last November, I weighed whether to skip the local elections in my small city, South Pasadena. Election day was a busy time, and the fall required so much travel and work (not to mention raising three small kids) that I didn't manage to secure a mail ballot.

And there was precious little on the ballot. There was no competitive city council race. There were two local school board seats open, and only three candidates for the two seats; all three candidates would have made perfectly reasonable school board members. There was no one to worry about or fear. The other thing on the ballot was a parcel tax for our small city's library. It's a nice library that I don't use much, and I was certain, given the public commitment to the library, that the parcel tax would pass easily without my vote.

On Election Day, after leaving for work before 6 a.m., I found I had arrived home at 7:50 pm, 10 minutes before the closing of the polls. The middle school where the whole town voted was a five-minute walk, so I went over. I didn't go over out of any commitment to the result, or any feeling that my vote would matter. I knew it wouldn't. I went for the reason many Californians still bother to vote – perhaps for the only reason, it's worth voting: the sense of completing a civic, even a sacred duty.

This civic or sacred reason for voting is not rational. But there is no rational reason to vote. Indeed, as philosophers have observed for centuries, voting is a paradox. We are supposed to vote because there is a chance, however small, that our vote might count. But the practical reality is that, in an election so close that an individual vote would count, the result would likely be decided by chance and peculiarities of the count. (Exact vote totals tend to change with each count).

Reasons to vote can't be about our own vote—they are about obligations, duties, and the feelings we have about democracy. And those reasons are based on us feeling connected to our communities and to the issues. We have to feel that there are stakes that matter.

The California political consensus, and the homogeneity of opinion in so many communities, lower the stakes of our elections – to the point where voting has lost its magic for most of us. This is the fundamental reason why we see such persistently low turnout in local elections.

The good news is that there are ways to raise the stakes. The bad news is that the most reliable ways to raise the stakes can harm communities. For example, there are few better ways to drive turnout in American politics than by appealing to race and fear of the other. It's no accident that the highest turnout elections in California's largest city, Los Angeles, came during the black-vs.-white clashes between Tom Bradley and Sam Yorty in 1969 and 1973.

We shouldn't want to go back to that kind of race to engage people. But we need strategies that create conflict and real stakes to drive local engagement and voter turnout.

One popular strategy – used most recently by Ted Cruz in the Iowa caucuses – is to employ the Internet and mailings to create social pressure to vote. If you show people that their neighbors are voting, and you threaten to show your neighbors that you aren't voting, you can drive more people to the polls. Other, less coercive social tools may work as well. Since the use of mail ballots has all but ended the ethic of voting in private, it may be time to suggest that people vote together, filling out mail ballots at big parties, events or even at parades. If voting can be a way to bring communities together in fun and shared activity, elections could be win-wins.

But we also need to cultivate wedge issues – debates that raise big issues, that split communities and California, and thus can engage communities across multiple election cycles. Could climate change stir new conflicts that keep us connected and voting? Will the pervasiveness of technology in our lives stir divides that cause us to pay attention? Will changes in our education and economic systems inspire back-and-forth in our communities?

We need to figure out how to divide ourselves, and quickly. In the meantime, we shouldn't be too fast to condemn those who would divide us. After all, unity and consensus are threats to local democracy.