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Odd-year elections may mute minority voices



The low voter turnout typical of odd-year elections like the one on Tuesday could create a disadvantage to Latinos and other minority voting blocs.

Several studies, including one released last month by the nonpartisan Greenlining Institute, have indicated a relationship between holding municipal elections held in odd-numbered years and the diversity of local governing bodies.

The Berkeley-based policy and research group determined “a skewed electorate due to low voter turnout undermines the integrity of our democracy and the chance for all communities to be fairly represented.”

A Riverside County early voting box is in place at the Palm Spring's City Clerk's office allowing residents and snowbirds ,to submit their ballots early Thursday, October 31, 2013. / Michael Snyder/The Desert Sun

Experts say such a **low turnout is one of the problems associated with elections held in odd-numbered years**, as there are no presidential, gubernatorial or congressional races to draw voters into campaign season.

And early voting trends suggest only a small percentage of eligible Coachella Valley voters will participate in this Tuesday's election, when the fate of candidates for two city councils, a couple of water boards and the Desert Recreation District will be decided.

By Friday, fewer than 7,500 people in Palm Springs and Desert Hot Springs had returned their convenient by-mail ballots.

In those cities' recent elections, the number of people voting by mail has outnumbered those at the polls.

Leaders in the three cities that hold their council elections outside of the even-year November ballots — Palm Springs, Desert Hot Springs and Rancho Mirage — aren't weighing any current proposals to change them.

But Palm Springs City Manager David Ready didn't rule out the idea.

"Getting out the vote is important," said Ready, who as city manager doesn't get involved in council candidates' campaigns.

"If the data is showing this may be an important issue to think about and consider, then councils in Palm Springs and across the state may want to consider it."

Only part of the Coachella Valley is participating in Tuesday's election.

Even with a total of five council seats up for grabs in Palm Springs and Desert Hot Springs, the number of candidates who stepped forward is smaller than in previous cycles.

Voters will also determine who sits on the Desert Water Agency, **Mission Springs Water District** and Desert Recreational District.

The Coachella Valley is certainly not the only region heading to the polls Tuesday.

One of the more notable races is in New Jersey, where voters will determine whether to re-elect Republican Chris Christie in a race that could have implications on the GOP leader's decision to jump into the 2016 presidential campaign.

But groups such as Voto Latino, a national organization that encourages diverse voter involvement, have found it tougher to get people engaged when higher ticket races are missing from the ballot.

"It is a challenge," said Jimmy Hernandez, spokesman for Voto Latino. "It's more difficult to reach out to our constituencies because they're not trained to be paying attention to political elections when it's not an even year and it's not the fall."

Voto Latino's chairwoman, actress Rosario Dawson, stumped in the Coachella Valley last year, a signal at how important the local Latino vote has become.

Riverside County ranks among the top 10 counties in the U.S. with the largest Latino populations, according to a Pew Research Center analysis released in August.

And both Democratic and Republican groups have increasingly focused on bilingual outreach as a way to get those voters to the polls.

Origins of the cycle

In California, Ready said communities used to be encouraged to hold municipal elections in the odd-number years in order to ensure the ballots for the presidential and gubernatorial elections did not exceed several pages.

Ready said there was also concern that if the ballots are too long, "there would be drop off" and voters won't pay attention to the smaller races.

By Friday, about 19 percent of the vote-by-mail ballots issued countywide had been returned.

The 7,447 ballots returned from Palm Springs and Desert Hot Springs by Friday equate to about 23 percent turnout among those cities' registered voters, according to the Riverside County Registrar of Voters.

In 2011 — the year that Palm Springs' Measure J sales tax hike dominated the election — nearly 51 percent of Palm Springs voters cast a ballot. That was higher than the turnout the city saw in the 2007 and 2009 elections.

Desert Hot Springs had a 25 percent turnout for its last municipal election, which was a drop from the previous two cycles.

Riverside County election officials do not release voter breakdowns based on ethnicity or race.

Registrar Kari Verjil also did not release any turnout projections last week.

"Any elections in the odd year are typically lower turnout," Verjil told The Desert Sun. "Just from watching TV in even-number years, there's always more campaigning going on in presidential years. That would probably be why."

The Greenlining study examined elections in six California cities, including Los Angeles, which held its municipal election in March.

Previous studies have also indicated low voter turnout, such as those typical in odd-numbered years, can impact the diversity of governing boards.

“Changes in the percentage of voters who turn out can and do alter mayoral election outcomes and racial representation on city councils,” said a 2005 study published by the Journal of Politics. “For Latinos and Asian Americans, lower turnout results in less equitable racial and ethnic representation on city councils and less success in the mayor’s office.”

Rancho Mirage holds its elections in even years. But the city votes in April, because officials feel it gives the snowbirds a chance to be in town for the campaign.

Mayor Richard Kite, first elected in 2000, said city leaders have discussed moving the election to the more popular November choice. But they’ve consistently settled on the April date.

“We tried to make the election at a time before people left for the summer,” Kite said. “If we have our election separate from all those, we are the only election in town and we can then get more focus on it.”

Hernandez said he hoped efforts such as National Voter Registration Day, which was on Sept. 24 this year, would help remind people that “even in off-year elections, in years like 2013, there are important races going on.”

“At the end of the day, what we do is empower the community to register to vote and get out the vote,” he said.

“That’s how you petition your government and how you elect people who will support legislation and policies that will benefit the long-term financial success of your family and communities.”

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