



# GETTING TO 100%

## HOW CHANGING THE ELECTION DATE CAN IMPROVE VOTER TURNOUT

*February 2015*



## ABOUT COMMON CAUSE

With a 40-year track record, chapters in 35 states, and nearly 400,000 supporters and activists across the country, Common Cause is one of the nation's most effective grassroots advocacy organizations dedicated to reforming government and strengthening democracy in America.

As founder John Gardner put it, "Common Cause is about making political decision-makers accountable to their constituents." In that vein, the issue of voter participation in elections has been central to our mission. We pursue policies nationally, in each state, and at the local level aimed at increasing voter engagement, removing barriers to voting, and ensuring that each vote is meaningful.

To that end, California Common Cause has successfully championed a number of state reforms, including Online Voter Registration, Pre-Registration of 16 and 17-Year olds (to be implemented), Same Day Registration (to be implemented), and the creation of a California Citizens Redistricting Commission to draw the district lines of state and congressional districts. These and many other reforms that California Common Cause has pushed should broaden the electorate and make our democracy one that is truly "of, by, and for the People."

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the greatest barometers for waning civic engagement in American politics is declining voter turnout in federal, state, and municipal elections. There are many potential contributing factors: general cynicism about government and elected officials, a decline in investment in civics education, and an increasingly transient society.

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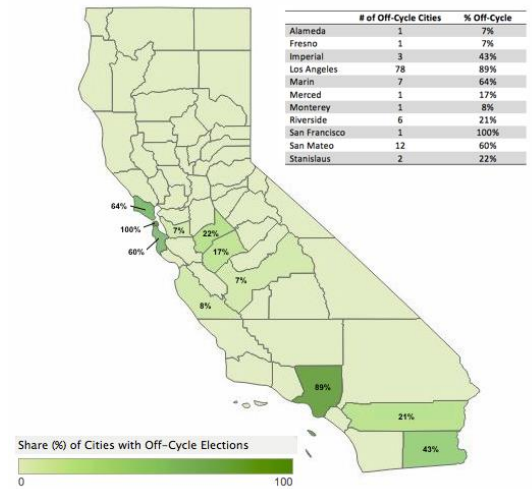
**Simply moving an election to be synchronized with the even year state elections can result in a 21-36% boost in voter turnout for municipal and other local elections.**

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Yet there is one major contributing factor to low voter turnout – the timing of elections – that could be addressed with a relatively simple policy change. The Public Policy Institute of California surveyed 350 California cities and found that simply moving an election to be synchronized with the even year state elections can result in a 21-36 percent boost in voter turnout for municipal and other local elections.

Using available data to compare election dates across municipalities, it was found that of the 482 cities in California, 369 hold their elections concurrent with statewide elections in June and November of even years. About 23 percent, or 113 cities hold their elections on dates other than June and November of even years.

Looking at the geographic breakdown of which cities across the state hold off-cycle elections, it was found that only 11 of the 58 counties have cities with off-cycle elections. Los Angeles County overwhelmingly has the most cities with off-cycle elections – 78 cities in that county have off-cycle elections. (See full-sized map in Appendix II).



## METHODOLOGY

The data for this report was collected from official county elections department websites, specifically available historical and current election information. Additionally, data was cross checked against city clerk and city elections department websites to fill in any missing information. Finally, when data was not available, the relevant city department was contacted in order to confirm election dates. In the cases where a city had altered the timing of its elections in the last five years, only data for the most recent election was used to determine whether the city holds on-cycle or off-cycle elections. For example, if a city that recently consolidated elections held elections in both 2013 and 2014, only the election dates for 2014 were considered.

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# THE STATE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CALIFORNIA

Perhaps one of the greatest barometers for waning civic engagement in American politics, is declining voter turnout in federal, state, and municipal elections. Turnout in the 2014 Midterm election was 35.9 percent of the voting eligible population.<sup>1</sup> It was the worst turnout in over seven decades. In California, less than a third of the eligible population voted.

If these numbers seem low, it is nothing compared to turnout for local elections.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the poster child for low voter turnout, the City of Los Angeles has seen rapidly declining voter turnout in the last several decades. Between 1997 and 2013, voter turnout in Los Angeles citywide general elections decreased by more than 14 percent. Only 23 percent of registered voters showed up at the polls in 2013, even with a competitive mayoral race and multiple open city council seats on the ballot.<sup>3</sup>

While it may be easy to focus on Los Angeles as a sad example of voter apathy and disengagement, the voter turnout problem is not at all limited to municipal government in southern California. Across the state, city

governments are struggling with how to engage the public around elections.

Some policies to address voter turnout have centered around eliminating barriers to voting – increasing voter registration by making online voter registration a reality, allowing 16 year olds to pre-register, providing translated materials to voters who need language assistance, or providing accommodations to voters with disabilities. Others focus on voter apathy by supporting policies that engage voters through public education campaigns, increase the diversity of candidates through public financing systems, or require civic education in our K

through 12 curriculum, all long-term efforts aimed at motivating more people to vote.

Yet there is one major contributing factor to

low voter turnout – the timing of elections – that could be addressed with a relatively simple policy change. In a seminal study that compared a host of possible factors that could have an impact on voter turnout, Public Policy Institute of California researchers surveyed 350 California cities and concluded that the one policy change that would make a significant difference was changing city election dates to be “concurrent” with state election dates. “The turnout boost for cities holding concurrent elections was 11 to 23 percent among all adults, and 21 to 36 percent among registered voters.”<sup>4</sup> Put another way, by

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### Public Policy Institute of California reported:

The turnout boost for cities holding concurrent elections was... 21 to 36% among registered voters.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Election Project. Available online at <http://www.electproject.org/2014g>

<sup>2</sup> United States Election Project, 2014. During the same 2014 Midterm election, in California turnout of the voting eligible population for the gubernatorial race was just 22.4 percent – that is down 22.6 percentage points from the previous Midterm election in 2010 (when turnout was a still moderate 44 percent).

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<sup>3</sup> *L.A. mayoral runoff another low mark in voter turnout: 23.3%*. Los Angeles Times, June 11, 2013

<sup>4</sup> *Municipal Elections in California: Turnout, Timing, and Competition*. Zoltan Hajnal, Paul Lewis, and Hugh Louch. Public Policy Institute of California, 2002. Identifying other possible factors that affect voter turnout such as district vs. at-large elections, size of districts, partisan vs. non-partisan elections, the

moving their off-cycle elections to synchronize with the statewide elections in June and November of even years, cities saw a 21-36 percent jump in voter participation in city elections.<sup>5</sup>

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## WHY TURNOUT MATTERS

Declining civic participation in the form of falling voter turnout in our elections will have, and has already had, far reaching consequences. In most cases, the people who are able and motivated to vote on election day do not look like the population at-large.<sup>6</sup>

Those turning out to vote tend to be older, more affluent, and include more whites than the general population and represent different preferences, political views, and priorities.<sup>7</sup> Studies have found that in particular, low turnout in city elections substantially reduces the representation of

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prominence of duties of the elected offices vs. city staff, the existence of term limits, and a large number of new Americans.

<sup>5</sup> Hajnal, Lewis, and Louch, 2002. The PPIC researchers examined other factors which can improve turnout – such as the number of ballot measures or candidates running, which accounted for some differences in voter turnout. “Where there are one or more propositions on the municipal ballot, cities tend to draw about 4 percent more registered voters to the polls. Similarly, the degree of competition for the office (measured by the number of candidates) is positively related to turnout.

Predictably, uncontested elections draw especially few voters.” Also citing national studies showing a strong relationship between on-cycle elections and higher turnout (Espino, 2001; Hampton and Tate, 1996).

Latinos and Asian Americans on city councils and in mayors’ offices.<sup>8</sup> Low turnout elections increase the odds that politicians elected to office will hold different viewpoints than their constituents and be more responsive to special interest

concerns than the interests of the population at large.<sup>9</sup>

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### ***Ferguson reminds us why voter turnout matters:***

Ferguson is over 65% African American, and yet the Mayor and 5 of 6 of the City Council members are white – contributing to a huge racial and political disconnect. [T]he April 2013 Ferguson municipal elections drew only 17 percent of whites, and an even lower 6 percent of African Americans to vote.<sup>1</sup> When participation in our elections is not inclusive, the validity of our democracy is threatened.

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Last year, we saw the harms of an exclusive electorate play out on the national stage. The ongoing civil demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri following the fatal shooting of an African American teenager by a white

police officer, are a very real reminder of the consequences of having political leadership that does not represent the larger community. Ferguson is over 65 percent African American, and yet the Mayor and 5 of 6 of the City Council members are white –

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<sup>6</sup> *California’s Exclusive Electorate*. Mark Baldassare, Public Policy Institute of California. 2006.

“[A]lthough the state has become increasingly diverse, the adults who frequently vote are predominantly white, age 45 and older, and relatively affluent. In contrast, nonvoters (those who are not registered to vote) are mostly nonwhite, younger, and less affluent than frequent (or “likely”) voters.

<sup>7</sup> Baldassare, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *Where turnout matters: The consequences of uneven turnout in city politics*. Hajnal, Zoltan and Trounstein, Jessica, May 2005. *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 67, No. 2, pgs 515-535.

<sup>9</sup> *Election Timing and the Electoral Influence of Interest Groups*. Anzia, Sarah. *The Journal of Politics*, 2011. This paper finds that the low voter turnout that accompanies off-cycle elections “empowers the largest and best organized interest groups to have increased influence on election outcomes.”



contributing to the sense of racial and political disconnect.

Voter turnout and, specifically, the timing of elections in the city were likely a significant contributing factor to this reality. Ferguson's city elections were held in April 2013. The Washington Post found that where the November 2012 Presidential elections drew 55 percent of all voters to participate, the April 2013 Ferguson municipal elections drew only 17 percent of whites, and an even lower 6 percent of African Americans to vote.<sup>10</sup> When participation in our elections is not inclusive, the validity of our democracy is threatened.

## CA ELECTION DATES

### WHAT THE LAW SAYS

The California Elections Code specifies the dates that jurisdictions across the state may hold their elections. In general, Section 1000 of the California Elections Code dictates four established election dates:

1. The second Tuesday of April in each even-numbered year.
2. The first Tuesday after the first Monday in March of each odd-numbered year.
3. The first Tuesday after the first Monday in June in each year.
4. The first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of each year.

Cities may choose to consolidate their city elections with the statewide election dates, held in June and November of even years. In this report, we will describe cities that hold elections on the first Tuesday of June and November of even years as having consolidated or "on-cycle" or concurrent

elections with the state. All other election dates are considered off-cycle elections.

The Elections Code also provides for several exemptions to these election dates, including exemptions for special elections called for by the Governor and elections held in charter cities.

### LOCAL ELECTIONS

While this report focuses on city election dates, it is important to note that there are many other local elections that also merit examination as to whether changing the date would boost voter participation. These jurisdictions include county boards of supervisors and other county elected positions, school districts, water boards, community college boards of trustees, and others.<sup>11</sup>

### SPECIAL ELECTIONS

The state Elections Code allows for deviations from the specified election dates in the case of special elections, that is, elections called to fill a vacancy left by a departing elected official or to vote on a measure(s). Turnout can vary substantially across special elections, depending much on the political context of the election, how tuned in voters are, and whether or not a jurisdiction elects to conduct an all vote-by-mail election.

Legislative solutions to low turnout in special elections have been proposed in the past, including (in the case of vacancies in the state legislature) allowing the Governor to appoint interim members until the next statewide election or designated election date.

<sup>10</sup> *How Ferguson exposes the racial bias in local elections.* Washington Post, August 15, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> *Assembly Committee on Elections and Redistricting Analysis of AB 2550 (Hernandez).* Ethan Jones, April 22, 2014. Pg. 5.

## WILL A LONG BALLOT TURN OFF VOTERS?

Consolidating elections would help to increase voter turnout by ensuring that local elections are held on dates that are already more widely publicized and that may have more high profile races on the ballot. However, concerns have been raised that in a consolidated election, the ballot may be too crowded with national and state races, ballot measures, and even judicial retention races; will voters “drop off” before they get to the city election choices at the end of the ballot? Most evidence indicates that

participation rates on city races that are consolidated with even-year state elections are still higher than in elections on off-cycle dates.

For instance, in the City of Pomona, which has a population that is 70 percent Latino, the overall turnout for the 2012 Presidential election was 62.44 percent, with fully 49 percent of voters marking choices for city council races. That is more than double Los Angeles’ turnout (23 percent) in 2015 for mayoral and city council races.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Research Brief: *Odd Year vs. Even Year Consolidated Elections in California*. The Greenlining Institute. Hernandez, Joseph P., 2013.

## WHICH JURISDICTIONS HOLD ELECTIONS OFF-CYCLE?

There are currently 58 counties and 482 incorporated cities in the state of California. There are three counties – Alpine, Mariposa, and Trinity – that contain no incorporated cities. In total, there are 361 general law cities and 121 charter cities. Under the California

Constitution, cities have the power to become charter cities, thereby gaining greater local control over their own municipal affairs.

This report compiles data on

election dates using information publicly available on county elections’ websites, city elections department websites, city clerk websites, and directly from city and county elections departments (when data was not publicly available). Using that data to compare election dates across municipalities, we found that of the 482 cities in California, 369 hold their elections concurrent with statewide elections in June and November of even years. 113 cities (or 23 percent) hold their elections on dates other than June and November of even years (Table 1). See also Appendix I.

**TABLE I: Turnout in Cities with On-Cycle Elections**

Cities	2008 Presidential Turnout	2008 City Council Turnout	2010 City Council Turnout	2012 Presidential Turnout	2012 City Council Turnout
Alhambra	77%	50%	Canceled	67%	58%
Downey	88%	52%	42%	70%	49%
Pomona	76%	52%	42%	62%	49%
Santa Monica	86%	42%	31%	79%	49%



The 369 cities that hold their elections on-cycle have an average population of 56,250 people. Those 113 cities holding non-concurrent elections have a slightly higher average population of 89,509 people.

**TABLE II: On-Cycle vs. Off-Cycle Elections**

	California Cities	
	Number	%
Cities with On-Cycle Elections	369	77%
Cities with Off-Cycle Elections	113	23%

Considering whether charter cities are more or less likely to hold on-cycle elections, we found that charter cities are slightly more likely to hold elections off-cycle than general law cities (26 percent of charter cities are off-cycle compared to 23 percent of general law cities) (Table 2).

**TABLE III: Charter Cities vs. General Law Cities**

	Charter Cities		General Law Cities	
	N	%	N	%
On-Cycle	90	74%	279	77%
Off-Cycle	31	26%	82	23%
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>		<b>361</b>	

Finally, analyzing the geographic breakdown of which cities across the state hold off-cycle elections, we found that only 11 of the 58 counties have cities with off-cycle elections (Table 3). Los Angeles County overwhelmingly has the most cities with off-cycle elections - 78 cities in that county have off-cycle elections (or 89 percent of all the cities in Los Angeles County). See Appendix II.

**TABLE IV: Counties with Local Off-Cycle Elections**

	On-Cycle Cities	Off-Cycle Cities	Percent Off-Cycle
Alameda	13	1	7%
Fresno	14	1	7%
Imperial	4	3	43%
Los Angeles	10	78	89%
Marin	4	7	64%
Merced	5	1	17%
Monterey	11	1	8%
Riverside	22	6	21%
San Francisco	0	1	100%
San Mateo	8	12	60%
Stanislaus	7	2	22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>113</b>	

## REFORM EFFORTS

There have been several statewide legislative attempts to consolidate elections in recent years, in addition some local efforts by cities (many of which were successful).

Most recently, during the 2013-2014 legislative session, CA Assemblymember Roger Hernandez introduced Assembly Bill 2550 which would have eliminated three of the established election dates from the state constitution, requiring general municipal and general district elections to be held in June and November of even years, or November of odd years. The bill failed to clear the Assembly Appropriations Committee, primarily due to concerns over cost. Because the bill would enact a “state-mandated local program,” the state would have been required to reimburse all local jurisdictions for the associated costs of moving election dates. The cost estimate from the Appropriations Committee was upward of \$1 million and included the cost for 42 general law cities and 4 charter cities

to notify voters of the change in election dates.<sup>13</sup>

Given the concentration of municipalities with off-cycle elections in Los Angeles County, the issue of whether to consolidate local elections has gained particular traction. On March 3, 2015, the City of Los Angeles will vote on a ballot proposition on whether or not to consolidate city elections with statewide elections held in even years.<sup>14</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### WHAT CAN CALIFORNIA CITIES DO?

Individual cities may consider ordinance or charter changes to move their elections to synchronize with the state election dates. Charter cities would likely have to amend their charter to move the election date, which could involve a vote of the city council and a ballot measure vote by the voters. For general law cities, in most cases, moving the election date could be an ordinance change through a majority vote of the city council.

Cities will want to consider how to transition the terms of elected officials, possible adjust their budget cycles, and most importantly, how to inform voters of the election date change.

<sup>13</sup> Assembly Committee on Appropriations Analysis on AB 2550 (Hernandez), April 29, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Recently, the City of Los Angeles has taken a number of actions to increase voter turnout including the establishment of the Los Angeles Municipal Elections Reform Commission, which included California Common Cause Executive Director Kathay Feng. The

### WHAT CAN THE STATE LEGISLATURE DO?

The state legislature has an opportunity to act on several fronts. These include proposals to amend the Election Code to designate a set of specific dates synchronized for maximum coordination with state or other elections, for both regular elections and special elections. The Legislature may also consider bills which allow specifically impacted communities to make a showing of how the off-cycle elections have a disparate impact on voter turnout, such that the remedy could include moving the election date to synchronize with statewide elections.

The Legislature should consider reforms that would make the scheduling of special elections less ad-hoc than current practice, where special elections are sometimes set just one month before or after a regularly scheduled election. Proposals include consideration of an interim appointment of a non-candidate to fill the empty seat, or designating an elected official of a neighboring district as the temporary caretaker, until the next available election date. Addressing the sheer number of special elections in some jurisdictions caused by vacancies would also ameliorate voter fatigue and confusion.

Commission's primary recommendation was to amend the City Charter to move the dates of the City's regular primary and general municipal elections from the current schedule of March and May of the odd numbered years to a new schedule of June and November of the even numbered years. <http://electionscommission.lacity.org/>

# APPENDIX I: TABLE OF OFF-CYCLE CITIES, BY COUNTY

CITY/TOWN	ELECTION DATES
<b>ALAMEDA</b>	
Piedmont	February (even years)
<b>FRESNO</b>	
Clovis	March (odd years)
<b>IMPERIAL</b>	
Brawley	November (odd years)
Calipatria	November (odd years)
El Centro	November (odd years)
<b>LOS ANGELES</b>	

Agoura Hills	November (odd years)	Carson	March (odd years)
Arcadia	April (even years)	Cerritos	March (odd years)
Artesia	November (odd years)	Claremont	March (odd years)
Avalon	April (even years)	Commerce	March (odd years)
Azusa	March (odd years)	Covina	March (odd years)
Baldwin Park	November (odd years)	Cudahy	March (odd years)
Bell	March (odd years)	Culver City	April (even years)
Bell Gardens	November (odd years)	Diamond Bar	November (odd years)
Bellflower	March (odd years)	Duarte	November (odd years)
Beverly Hills	March (odd years)	El Monte	November (odd years)
Bradbury	April (even years)	El Segundo	April (even years)
Burbank	February and April (odd years)	Glendale	April (odd years)
Calabasas	November (odd years)	Glendora	March (odd years)

**LOS ANGELES (Continued)**

Hawaiian Gardens	November (odd years)	Paramount	March (odd years)
Hawthorne	November (odd years)	Pasadena	March (odd years)
Hermosa Beach	March & November (odd years)	Pico Rivera	November (odd years)
Hidden Hills	March (odd years)	Rancho Palos Verdes	November (odd years)
Huntington Park	March (odd years)	Redondo Beach	March (odd years)
Industry	June (odd years)	Rolling Hills	March & November (odd years)
Irwindale	November (odd years)	Rolling Hills Estates	November (odd years)
La Cañada Flintridge	March (odd years)	Rosemead	March (odd years)
La Habra Heights	March (odd years)	San Dimas	March (odd years)
La Mirada	March (odd years)	San Fernando	March (odd years)
La Puente	April (even years)	San Gabriel	March (odd years)
La Verne	March (odd years)	San Marino	November (odd years)
Lancaster	April (even years)	Santa Clarita	April (even years)
Lawndale	April (even years)	Santa Fe Springs	November (odd years)
Lomita	November (odd years)	Sierra Madre	April (even years)
Long Beach	April and June (even years)	Signal Hill	March (odd)
Los Angeles	March (odd years)	South El Monte	November (odd years)
Lynwood	November (odd years)	South Gate	March (odd years)
Malibu	April (even years)	South Pasadena	November (odd years)
Manhattan Beach	March (odd years)	Temple City	March (odd years)
Monrovia	April (odd years)	Vernon	April (even and odd years)
Montebello	November (odd years)	Walnut	April (even years)
Monterey Park	March (odd years)	West Covina	November (odd years)
Norwalk	March (odd years)	West Hollywood	March (odd years)
Palmdale	November (odd years)	Westlake Village	November (odd years)
Palos Verdes Estates	March (odd years)	Whittier	April (even years)

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**MARIN**

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Corte Madera	November (odd years)	San Anselmo	November (odd years)
Fairfax	November (odd years)	San Rafael	November (odd years)
Larkspur	November (odd years)	Tiburon	November (odd years)
Mill Valley	November (odd years)		

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**MERCED**

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Merced	November (odd years)
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**MONTEREY**

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Carmel-by-the-Sea	April (even years)
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**RIVERSIDE**

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Blythe	November (odd years)	Palm Springs	November (odd years)
Desert Hot Springs	November (odd years)	Rancho Mirage	April (even years)
Norco	November (odd years)	Riverside	June and November (odd years)

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**SAN FRANCISCO**

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San Francisco	November (odd years)
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**SAN MATEO**

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Belmont	November (odd years)	Redwood City	November (odd years)
Brisbane	November (odd years)	San Bruno	November (odd years)
Burlingame	November (odd years)	San Carlos	November (odd years)
Foster City	November (odd years)	San Mateo	November (odd years)
Millbrae	November (odd years)	South San Francisco	November (odd years)
Portola Valley	November (odd years)	Woodside	November (odd years)

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**STANISLAUS**

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Ceres	November (odd years)
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Modesto	November (odd years)
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## APPENDIX II: CONCENTRATION OF OFF-CYCLE CITIES

