

## Features and Trends

Aficionados of Davis politics will of course use these election data to produce their own generalizations about Davis political life in historical perspective. That being the case, there is little or no need for me to provide interpretative commentary. But, I must admit to being unable to resist the temptation to do so anyway. My commentary takes the form of a series of observations regarding static *features* of these elections and changes and *trends* in them over time.

Several readers of this booklet in draft have urged discussion of many important matters that I do not treat. To heed those urgings seriously would require that I recast this modest compilation of data into a ponderous treatise on political history. Such a task greatly exceeds my resources and will. Therefore, what follows must be understood as selective and incomplete.

I invite those who want more to consult, among other sources, The Davis Enterprise 1996; Diemer 2000, 71-91; Fitch 1998; Larkey 1968, 1969-73; Li 1986-88, 1988-1998; Lofland and Lofland 1981; Lofland 1999, Ch. 2. In addition, people who want more should think about doing the researching and writing themselves.

### 1. THE POPULIST MOMENT OF 1917

In histories of Davis, the incorporation election of 1917 is characterized as a consensual event. As the *Enterprise* headline reporting the election put it, "Incorporation Wins by 3 to 1," meaning a vote of 221 to 87, which suggests a fair amount of community agreement.

Five initial members of what would later be named the City Council were also elected and a similar consensus on them is sometimes implied. But in fact, there was quite a diversity of voter opinion. The results, shown in Table 1, look more like those of recent Davis elections than of elections over the decades of the 1920s and 1930s.

Specifically, only the names of the five winners seemed to have been printed on the ballot. But this did not deter many of the 318 voters from writing in 57 other names! These 57 garnered 320 votes, which is 27% percent of votes cast.

In addition, 25 percent of possible votes were not cast at all (385 of 1590), the highest percent of bullet voting in Davis history (surpassing even the fabled 22% of the 2000 election).

While the five winners did garner 73% of all the votes cast (56% of all possible votes) (885 of 1205 and of 1590, respectively), there was clearly also a quite substantial dissent from the establishment-in-formation of the time.

### 2. TWO DECADES OF LIMITED OPPOSITION: 1920s-30s

These dissenters apparently saw also that they were far from winning an election in the circumstances at hand and stopped contending. I infer this because the next ten elections were notable for (1) the lack of opposition candidates, (2) low turnout, and (3) the extremely high percentages by which pretty much the same people were returned to office election after election.

At least in terms of what we can gauge from the pages of the *Davis Enterprise*, Davisites were content with (or perhaps apathetic about) political matters for almost the entire period framed by the two world wars. Consider, for example, these three *Davis Enterprise* reports of elections and their placement in the paper (reported below each story):

| April 13, 1918   | April 16, 1926   | April 17, 1936  |
|--|--|---|
| <p><b>City Election Passes Quietly</b></p> <p>The City election Monday passed off very quietly. The voting was light. The ticket endorsed by the business mens association and the Womens Improvement Club was likewise endorsed by the electors. Trustees elected; B. T. Brewster, John Jacobson, W. R. Pugh, Charlie Porter and A. G. Anderson, receiving the highest number of votes in the order named, but with little variation in the number of votes. F. A. Plant was elected Clerk and F. P. Wray, Treasurer.</p> | <p><b>MUNICIPAL ELECTION BRINGS OUT SMALL ELECTORATE</b></p> <p>At the time, or rather in time for the municipal election Monday, less than half by far of the electors of Davis had registered since the first of January, thereby becoming lawful voters. Also, less than half of those who had registered and were entitled to vote, took the trouble to cast their for city trustees two.</p> <p>There were but two trustees to be elected, with B. T. Brewster, a present incumbent, receiving 69 and Dr. F. M. Hayes, 66; scattering, Sidney Grady, 2; and C. M. Ray, 5.</p> <p>The two first mentioned, Brewster and allies, were the only real candidates, and both are well experienced on that particular job with Brewster having served two terms and Hayes, a part of one, resigning when he went east on his sabbatical leave of absence from the Aggie College at Davis. Hence, it is a safe prediction that the board work will move along on even keel.</p> | <p><b>Light Vote Cast In City Election</b></p> <p>With the usual apathy towards local elections when no fights are to be decided, the voting of last Tuesday totaled a mere 182 out of more than a possible 1200. The three offices of city councilmen were filled by two incumbent candidates and the third by Prof. C. E. Howell who is to occupy the vacancy left by Dr. T. E. Cooper.</p> <p>As the office of city clerk was uncontested Norman D. Thomas was re-elected to the position. He received one hundred and sixty votes.</p> <p>The only contest of the day was the treasurer's job. Ben French was elected by a vote of one hundred and thirty-five over F. P. Wray, incumbent, who received forty-seven votes. Wray made no effort to retain the job.</p> <p>The vote for the city councilmen were. A. J. Nickerson, 162; Warren Pugh, 158 and C. E. Howell, 152.</p> <p>The newly elected officers and re-elected incumbents will assume their respective jobs next Tuesday.</p> |
| <p><b>Placement:</b> Front page, below-the-fold story subsidiary to the Picnic Day schedule that dominated the front page. Percent turnout: votes not reported.</p>  | <p><b>Placement:</b> At the bottom of page 7 of this 8 page issue. Percent turnout: 12.</p>  | <p><b>Placement:</b> At the very bottom of the middle of the front page. Percent turnout: 23.</p>   |

It is further instructive to contemplate that the *Enterprise* reported *nothing* on the outcomes of the 1932 and 1934 elections—and that other records tell us who won but not how many people voted and who received what vote.

Most City of Davis records from before World War II have disappeared. But a few, mostly from the later 1930s, have survived. Among them are the nomination petitions for the 1936 election. At that time, a nominee needed the signature of ten voters in order to be on the ballot. Just below, I reproduce the list of the endorsing signatures for the three unopposed candidates on the ballot in 1936, who were elected with 89, 87 and 83% of the votes (from the 182 voters, which was 23% of the 801 registered voters).

What is noteworthy about the three lists is that they are in all relevant senses identical. The names and signature are all the same, in the same order, and signed on the same day. If anyone has ever wondered exactly what might be meant by an “old boy” network, we here have a definitive example of at least two meanings: Agreement and capacity for concerted action.

| NOMINATION P<br><small>(Special Act of 1919 as amended in 1923-24 and 61)</small> |               | NOMINATION P<br><small>(Special Act of 1919 as amended in 1923-24 and 61)</small> |               | NOMINATION PAPER<br><small>(Special Act of 1919 as amended in 1923-24 and 61 Class Terms.)</small> |         |
|---|---------------|---|---------------|--|---------|
| We, the undersigned electors of the City of _____                                 |               | We, the undersigned electors of the City of _____                                 |               | We, the undersigned electors of the City of _____ DAVIS  |         |
| hereby nominate <u>G. R. Howell</u>   |               | hereby nominate <u>W. R. Parr</u>   |               | hereby nominate <u>A. J. Nickerson</u>   |         |
| for the office of <u>Councilman, full term</u>                                    |               | for the office of <u>Councilman, full term</u>                                    |               | for the office of <u>Councilman, full term</u>   |         |
| NAME  | OCCUPATION    | NAME  | OCCUPATION    | NAME   | DATE    |
| 1. W. E. Dunfield   | Merchant      | 1. W. E. Dunfield   | Merchant      | 1. W. E. Dunfield  | 2-17-38 |
| 2. John Smith   | Mechanic      | 2. John Smith   | Mechanic      | 2. John Smith  | 2-18-38 |
| 3. C. A. Maghotta   | Editor        | 3. C. A. Maghotta   | Editor        | 3. C. A. Maghotta  | 2-17-38 |
| 4. Sidney Brady   | Merchant      | 4. Sidney Brady   | Merchant      | 4. Sidney Brady  | 2-17-38 |
| 5. Wm. D. H. H. H.  | Physician     | 5. Wm. D. H. H. H.  | Physician     | 5. Wm. D. H. H. H.   | 2-18-38 |
| 6. A. L. Anderson   | Merchant      | 6. A. L. Anderson   | Merchant      | 6. A. L. Anderson  | 2-18-38 |
| 7. G. L. Johnson  | Cook          | 7. G. L. Johnson  | Cook          | 7. G. L. Johnson   | 2-18-38 |
| 8. H. J. Johnson  | Hotel Owner   | 8. H. J. Johnson  | Hotel Owner   | 8. H. J. Johnson   | 2-18-38 |
| 9. W. H. Nelson   | Bank Employee | 9. W. H. Nelson   | Bank Employee | 9. W. H. Nelson  | 2-18-38 |
| 10. J. Anderson   |               | 10. J. Anderson   |               | 10. J. Anderson  | 2-18-38 |

Source: File folder labeled "Elections" in Box 3 of Collection D-352, History of the City of Davis Collection, Department of Special Collections, Shields Library, University of California, Davis.

### 3. QUIESCENCE CONTINUES: 1940s-EARLY 1950s.

Having served several terms each, the careers of the "old boy" merchants—seen to be aging in their 1938 picture on the cover of this booklet—were winding down. This apparently created a sense of new possibilities in 1940, where we see a sudden increase in the number of people contending for office that year. That election seems, though, to have an outcome similar to 1917-1918. The players begin to change, but contention, as measured by the number of candidates in subsequent elections, did not greatly increase.

### 4. POWER SHIFTS AND CONTENTION COMMENCES: MID 1950s TO THE PRESENT

After World War II, the "University Farm" began to increase enrollment and the size and range of its programs. In 1959, its central mission changed and, with that, its name. It became a general campus called the University of California at Davis.

Along with the rest of California, campus and community populations exploded. The some 1,700 students of 1950 grew to 12,600 in 1970. The Davis population of 3,554 in 1950 grew to 23,488 in 1970.

These enormous increases consisted in important part of more "modernist" and cosmopolitan faculty and administrators and their families. More liberal than the "downtown crowd" and the "old aggie" faculty, they began to think "reform," and "responsible government," and they embraced rapid growth.

These new sentiments and policy directions were organizationally expressed in the local chapter of the League of Women Voters, which became the power base from which the first woman, Kathleen C. Green, was elected to the City Council in 1958.

Looking back on that period, participants in these reforms with whom I have talked say that they view Green's election as the turning point in wresting control of the Council from the old-fashioned downtown and aggie-faculty crowds. It opened the way to the election of many more newcomer cosmopolitans, such as Clyde Jacobs (elected 1960, a professor of political science), Norman Woodbury (elected 1960, 1966, and 1970, a Sacramento lobbyist for municipal utilities), and Maynard Skinner (elected 1966, a UCD administrator).

As one can well appreciate, numerically overcome by a flood of reform-minded new residents, many among the downtown and aggie-faculty groupings were left rather embittered. An old order was passing.

## 5. THE "REVOLUTION" OF 1972

While opposed to these old Davis circles, the newcomer cosmopolitans were not entirely united among themselves. Their points of difference included (1) attitudes toward how rapidly Davis ought to grow and in what fashion, (2) degree of acceptance of traditional white male leadership, and (3) support or not of the Vietnam War and the broader cultural challenges of the time.

The cosmopolitans newly dominant in the late 1950s and 1960s envisioned rapid growth and reconstructing Davis' downtown as a series of Le Corbusier-style highrises and parking lots (Fitch 1998; Lofland 1999, 48-49). But, by the early 1970s, consequences of this rapid growth were becoming visible and stirred misgivings. Growth then became a key issue in the 1972 election.

Of the nine candidates in that election, three seemed most clearly to catch hold of the problems of growth and of broader concerns: Joan Poulos (an attorney), Richard Holdstock (a UCD administrator), and Bob Black (former UCD student body president and partner in a local health food store).

These three questioned the dominant, growth-oriented cosmopolitans politically and their physical appearances questioned it in other ways. With the single exception of Kathleen C. Green, elected in 1958, council members were always male. Moreover, these males were clean-shaven, short-haired, and coat-and-tie wearing. The more recent ones were rather more cosmopolitan and liberal than the old downtown and aggie-faculty circles, but all of them could be seen as standard issue "old-fashioned."

Poulos, Holdstock and Black were otherwise: a woman, two males with beards (one of whom wore hippie-like garb, long hair, and no coat or tie).

The contrast is shown nicely in their picture on the front cover of this booklet, as compared to the photo to the right on this page, which shows the three men they replaced.



OUTGOING CITY COUNCILMEN Ralph Aronson, Vigfus Armundson, and Harry Miller smiled for cameramen at last night's otherwise spontaneously joyous council swearing-in ceremonies. Mayor Armundson, a Sacramento lawyer, and Aronson, a retired pharmacist, did not seek re-election this year; Miller, a UC Davis M-H specialist, was bested by the three winners. ENTERPRISE PHOTO

*Davis Enterprise*, April 19, 1972.

In 1972, the changing of the city council was a public ritual of power in transition. In it, the old members left their seats and the new members then occupied them. Here is an observer's account of the sense of that moment:

They began the meeting with a table full of business-looking men, all clean-shaven, wearing suits and ties . . . [The men who replaced them] were bearded,

one had long hair and both wore short-sleeve shirts, and there was a woman. For me it was a visual representation of the change . . . and it was very potent and very charging (Mickey Barlow quoted in Moreno 1981, 1-2).

These three new progressives not merely won, they *won overwhelmingly*. Bob Black, the weakest winner at 59%, still came in 26% ahead of Harry Miller (33%), the modern “old boy” incumbent seeking reelection. The top vote-getter, Joan Poulos, received 74%, a mandate not seen since the 1950s. Indeed, it was rather a throw-back to the era of uncontested government, but achieved in a situation of high contest.

(Some later election winners and their “slates” have claimed mandates on much weaker wins, casting doubt on the idea of a mandate. But the results of the 1972 elections are an example of a *real* mandate, in the numbers and in the way many people felt about them.)

## **6. THE PRO-GROWTH RESURGENCE OF 1976**

Starting in 1972, what were now called “the progressives” were on a roll, so to speak. But this did not mean they completely dominated. With concerted effort, James Stevens, a now rare (in Council races) registered Republican, was even the top vote-getter in 1974, counterbalancing the liberal Tom Tomasi.

Perhaps encouraged by Stevens’ first-place win in 1974, in 1976 four people who clearly made a living out of land, construction, and rental transactions, and who supported rapid growth and broad development, ran for the Council (Whitcombe, Hilliard, Hoyt, Taormino).

As can be seen, they miscalculated. Slow-growth candidates bested them in the still active wake of 1972.

The import of this, historically, is that these “growth machine” forces seemed to have learned a political lesson from that election. This was the last time prominent Davisites who clearly and by occupation made money out of building, buying and selling land or housing, or renting housing ran for Council.

Instead, after this year they supported surrogate candidates, people on whom they could count, but who were not publicly associated with profiting from land, construction, or rental enterprises. (Financial interest disclosure laws may also have functioned to discourage growth machine involved people from running for political office.)

(I must of course except maverick developer Mike Corbett from the above generalization. On cities as “growth machines” and growth coalition strategies, see Molotch 1976; Logan and Molotch 1987; Jones and Wilson 1999.)

## **7. DECLINE IN ELECTORATE SUPPORT OF WINNERS**

In the Davis plurality-winner system, growth in the number of candidates who can draw significant support has meant—as a mathematical necessity—a decline in the percentage of the electorate who support the people winning elections.

One measure of this is an answer to the question, What percentage of the voters were needed to win an election? Taking the four tables of elections as four time-periods, I have added and averaged the lowest winning percentage for each of the four. Here is the result:

|  | Time Period |           |           |           |
|--|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|  | '18-'38     | '40-'58   | '60-'78   | '80-'00   |
| <b>Average Lowest Winning Percent of Voters Voting</b> | <b>78</b>   | <b>64</b> | <b>48</b> | <b>40</b> |

These four percent numbers document a very substantial and long-term decline in the proportion of the voters from whom a candidate needs support in order to be elected. Indeed, in the election of 1994, we saw a person win office with the support of only 29% of people voting.

A second measure of decline of support for election winners answers the question, What percent of people voting supported the top vote-getter? Here is that calculation for the same four time periods:

|   | Time Period |           |           |           |
|---|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|   | '18-'38     | '40-'58   | '60-'78   | '80-'00   |
| <b>Average Percent of Voters Voting for the Top Vote-Getter</b> | <b>95</b>   | <b>76</b> | <b>55</b> | <b>48</b> |

It is particularly noteworthy that even in the most recent elections the percentage of votes of the top vote-getter was declining. Thus, the average top vote percentage was 53 in the six elections of 1980-90. But, this declined to an average of 42% in the five elections of 1992-2000.

Therefore, it would be incorrect for any recent top vote-getter or commentator on recent elections to characterize a win as “the strongest mandate in Davis history.” Instead, the historical trend is exactly the opposite.

The irony in this trend is that the percentage must continue to go down if the number of attractive candidates goes up. Davis may have entered a period of institutionalized minority government. Therefore, a rising chorus of complaints that city government is not representative should not be surprising.

There is, though, another side to this. Government of multiple factions none of which has a majority is a feature of systems of proportional representation. In those systems, the problem of governance is solved by devising coalitions of working majorities. In an ad hoc and de facto way, such a system of coalition government of factions characterizes the Davis City Council.

## **8. MERCHANTS TO MATRONS**

There has been a long term shift from the significant participation of male merchants to that of upper-middle-class, non-merchant females. If five-term Councilman Calvin A. Covell is the poster boy of the “old boy” network of Davis politics before World War II, Lois Wolk (or perhaps Davis Assemblywoman Helen Thomson) is the poster girl of the “old girl” network prominent since the late 1970s.

The city moved from the heavy influence of the G Street retailers to the prominence of the educated wives of the new professional elites who became important in the Davis economy after World War II.

On the surface, this was only a shift in the gender composition of the Council. But there was more to it. The new “old girls” were not from the merchant class, nor did they clearly represent it. Therefore, the shift was in location in the economy *combined with* change in gender composition.

On this dimension, these new council people either had no clear occupational careers aside from political office holding, or were in legal, teaching or public bureaucracy occupations.

## **9. PROFESSORS DECLINE**

Before and for a period after World War II, a number of University of California professors ran for and served on the Council. These included F. M. Hayes, James B. Kendrick, Ben A. Madson, S. H. Beckett, J. P. Fairbank, E. B. Roessler, Harry B. Walker, and Clyde Jacobs.

The period after the turning-point election of 1972 was notable for the absence of professors—even as candidates, much less successful ones. Since the 1980s, the only unambiguously-a-professor candidate was Richard Falk in 1986 (not elected).

(I qualify the term professor in this way because the cases of two other possible-professors present ambiguities. Thrice-elected Jerry Adler ['80, '84, '88] was a law professor who left his UC professorship and entered private practice. Jerry Kaneko ['94] was retired from his UC professorship during an important part of his Davis political career.)

(However, a number of other UC employees ran for and were elected to the Council.)

## **10. NON-VOTE/BULLET VOTING RISES**

As mentioned, bullet voting is the practice of casting less than one's allotment of two or three votes in order not to harm a candidate (or candidates) one strongly favors.

As the number of credible and attractive candidates increases and winning an election becomes in some ways more problematic, bullet voting would seem, logically, to become more attractive.

As also mentioned, one rough measure of bullet voting is to subtract the total votes cast for all the candidates from the number of possible votes. The difference is “votes not cast,” some unknown portion of which is bullet voting. This calculation appears in the next to bottom row of each of the four tables.

The trend of the raw series of these percentages is not, to me, clear. In an effort to sharpen the focus, I have grouped the percents of votes-not-cast into the four time periods used in each of the four tables and averaged each. The result is shown on the next page.

I would say there is no strong trend in the three earliest periods, but there is a clear upturn in the fourth and most recent period.

|                                   | Time Period |         |         |         |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|
|                                   | '18-'38     | '40-'58 | '60-'78 | '80-'00 |
| Average Percent of Votes Not Cast | 5           | 9       | 7       | 15      |

The percent of votes not cast is especially striking for the election of 2000. The 22% observed there is the highest ever seen in a Davis regular election. This outcome might be related to the fact that a former Davis mayor publicly advocated bullet-voting for the person who did in fact emerge as the top vote-getter in the 2000 election. *Davis Enterprise* columnist Gerald Heffernon might also have bolstered the effort by discussing it (in negative terms) in a column published shortly before the election. (Ironically, bullet voting helped prevent other candidates of a similar persuasion from getting elected—a case of bullet backfire or ricochet effect, in Heffernon’s nice phrases.)

However, Tony Bernhard has pointed out to me that two additional factors make this “no vote voting” more complicated and difficult to assess.

One, before the 1980s, Davis Council elections were “stand alone” in April and only about Davis matters. Consolidation of City with primary and general elections in recent decades diversified the reasons people vote. As well, “it’s a well-demonstrated fact that what happens at the top of the ticket affects turnout . . .” (Walters 2000). Therefore, increase in non-voting in City elections may simply reflect “downticket drop off” among people motivated to vote on upticket matters and ignorant of or disinterested in downticket topics.

Two, people may vote less than their allotment because of what Bernhard terms “candidate aversion” or “unpalatability.” In this case, it’s not that people favor a particular candidate and under-vote to help her or him, they simply run out of candidates for whom they feel they can vote.

**11. CONSERVATIVE TO LIBERAL**

Over the long-term—the span of 1917 to the present—there is no doubt that the Davis electorate has become, on balance, rather more liberal, a shift that came into dramatic focus in the election of 1972.

Thus, Council members of recent decades have rarely been publicly acknowledged Republicans. (By my count, there were only three after 1972.) The great dominant center became mainstream (“labor” and “new”) Democrats, and a few people just slightly to the left of that Democratic center, but still Democrats-in-good-standing.

The single and spectacular exception was, of course, Green Party member Julie Partansky, Council member ‘92-’00, and mayor ‘98-’00. The fragility of the electoral strength of this “further left” view is signaled by the special constellation of her top vote-getter win in ‘96. The field was exceptionally large and strong, which flattened out the vote and she was the top vote-getter with the lowest percentage ever garnered.

This “center” is clearly to the left relative to the center in American politics, but it is not clear to me that the Davis electorate is moving either left or right from it. Instead, there is a contest within it between people supportive or opposed to growth per se and supportive or opposed to particular patterns of growth and land use.



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The only known copies of several Council pictures are framed and bolted to the south wall of the Davis Community Chambers. Digital scanning of those pictures for this publication required that the City's specialist in picture-security unbolt and take each down so that I could scan them. This was a distinctive act of generosity and I am much indebted to Karen Harris, City Manager's Office, for arranging it. I am also in her debt for the use of other Council photographs she has on file. Don Percell, the City's picture-security specialist, not only unbolted the pictures, he helped me figure out how best to scan them. I thank him for his genial and effective assistance.

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