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## **Pandemic Politics – How COVID Has Altered the Local Election Landscape**

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On March 20, 2020, California entered lock-down. It was unclear how long lock-down would last, and no one was thinking about the various impacts it might have on upcoming elections. But by August, the CA Secretary of State had issued technical and legal guidance to counties on the upcoming elections, noting that the pandemic would impact the November 2020 election cycle.<sup>1</sup> Local candidates, like those for City Councils and County Supervisors, are required under the Political Reform Act of 1974, to file various campaign reports and statements, depending on their campaign activity. The impacts on local candidates attempting to navigate the legal requirements to run for office in California soon became apparent. Questions and conundrums emerged, such as: how does one get original, wet signatures on required campaign reports and statements from both the treasurer and the candidate when no one is supposed to visit each other? How does one open a required campaign bank account when it may not be healthy to go into public places such as a bank? How does one campaign when one is supposed to stay 6 feet apart and no one will answer the door? Heretofore accepted methods of campaigning were taboo: No fundraising picnics, no door-to-door canvassing, no shaking hands. COVID-19 prompted changes in how local campaigns were conducted. Some of those changes had begun to emerge prior to the pandemic, but their usefulness sky-rocketed in quarantine. Other changes were entirely new...some will stay and others will likely end once the pandemic is over.

### **Everything moved online.**

Over the past 10 to 15 years, campaigns, even local ones, have moved much of their work to the digital realm. But COVID-19 required that almost all campaigning be done digitally. Candidates quickly had to pivot from physical face-to-face campaigning to virtual face to face campaigning. For local candidates, this was a significant shift in perspective and planning. Once lock-down began, digital tools that existed prior to COVID-19, became the only game in town. Online meeting platforms like Zoom and social media sites like Facebook and Instagram allowed local candidates to interact with their constituents from the home. Zoom was popular prior to lock-down, but the pandemic catapulted its use. In December of 2019, Zoom had approximately 10 million users. By December 2020, that number was 350 million.<sup>2</sup> For candidates, Zoom, Facebook, Instagram, and Facetime became a way to meet with their treasurer, their volunteers, and consultants, as well as a way to hold fundraisers and connect with constituents and

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<sup>1</sup>Election Administration Guidance Under COVID-19, Secretary of State, <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/statewide-elections/2020-general/election-admin-guidance.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Rani Molla, "The Pandemic was Great for Zoom: What Happens when there is a Vaccine?" December 4, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/recode/21726260/zoom-microsoft-teams-video-conferencing-post-pandemic-coronavirus>, accessed March 25, 2021.



contributors. Social media platforms became the virtual picnic, the virtual town-hall, and the virtual hand-shake. As COVID-19 cases and deaths soared in California, local candidates realized these social media sites and apps were the only real campaign trails they would travel this season. And so, as a result, they increased their social media presence. One San Jose City Council candidate, Jake Tonkel, noted that prior to the pandemic he had decided to not do many live videos, but once the lock-down was in place his position changed and he and his team made them a mainstay.<sup>3</sup> Campaign consultants also began suggesting that local candidates hold virtual town-halls during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Candidates for a Ventura County Board of Supervisors seat, Oxnard Councilwoman Carmen Ramirez and Oxnard Mayor Tim Flynn took to Zoom and Facebook to reach voters, Flynn noting this was a big change from his normal campaign method of, “walk, walk, and then walk some more”.<sup>5</sup> Councilwoman Ramirez noted that many of her constituents don’t have computers or good band-width.<sup>6</sup> Digital campaigning will never entirely replace picnics, BBQs and home fundraisers, and digital forums have limitations, among them the digital divide. Nevertheless, digital campaigning will remain a tool used by candidates to reach voters and for meetings with campaign workers who may not live nearby or whose busy work schedules make virtual meetings more accessible.

Further, Zoom and other webinar platforms enabled agencies, like the CA Fair Political Practices Commission to host Candidate/Treasurer trainings and Campaign Filing Officer trainings virtually. These trainings had historically been done largely in-person. But when lock-down ended travel, in-person trainings also ended. Webinars became the only way to train candidates, treasurers and filing officers about their obligations under the Political Reform Act. The FPPC held 43 workshops and webinars in 2020, seventeen of which were in-person trainings. This was approximately the same number of trainings they held in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

Electronic campaign fundraising via sites like Venmo, Anedot, Stripe, Win Red, Act Blue, and Pay-pal, all existed before the pandemic and were regularly used in Federal elections. But as contributions in the 2020 cycle were on the decline, candidates at all levels of government turned increasingly to electronic processing systems for accepting contributions. In June 2020, the non-profit website Open Secrets noted that candidates were increasingly turning to smaller donations

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<sup>3</sup>Gabriella Abdul-Hakim and Kendall Karson “Campaigning During the Pandemic: Local Candidates get Creative,” June 16, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/campaigning-pandemic-local-candidates-creative/story?id=71262188> (accessed March 25, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Dana Healy, “Ten Creative Ways to Campaign During COVID-19,” June 10, 2020, <https://ninenorth.org/10-creative-ways-to-campaign-during-covid-19/> (accessed March 25, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Leung, “Knock, Knock, Who’s Campaigning? Coronavirus Casts Doubt on Candidates Most Effective Tool,” Ventura County Star, August 27, 2020, <https://www.vcstar.com/story/news/2020/08/27/ventura-county-election-november-candidates-covid-19-campaign-impacts/3381032001/> (accessed March 25, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Fair Political Practices Commission, *Annual Report 2020*, <https://www.fppc.ca.gov/content/dam/fppc/NS-Documents/Annual-Report/2020-Annual-Report.pdf> and *Annual Report 2019*, <https://www.fppc.ca.gov/content/dam/fppc/NS-Documents/Annual-Report/2019-Annual-Report.pdf> (accessed March 24, 2021).



via online platforms,<sup>8</sup> while the political news site Politico argued that, “Amid all the once-in-a-lifetime features of this election, the explosion of online fundraising may be the one that truly transforms politics over time.”<sup>9</sup> Methods of getting potential contributors to such fundraising sites also changed. The journalist Amy Wada noted in a CBS news article in October of 2020 that there was an increase in political text message fundraising, “In September 2020, call and text blocker app RoboKiller said Americans received 2.7 billion political text messages. That’s up from 1.8 billion the month before. The coronavirus pandemic is partly to blame.”<sup>10</sup> Open Secrets argues that fundraising text messaging was the new marketing vehicle during the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> While it is unknown exactly how often digital fundraising sites were used by local candidates, the evidence suggests they were used and used more often than in the past. This a trend that is likely here to stay as use of paper checks has been in decline since prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

### **Everything took longer**

One impact that took many local candidates by surprise was that everything took longer during lock-down. Many local candidates were caught off guard, expecting things to be as they were the last time they ran, or if new to the game, caught totally unawares by the legal requirements of campaigning and the difficulty of doing them during a pandemic. It took longer to get signatures, which led to delays in filing necessary forms. It took longer to open bank accounts, which led to delays in being able to begin campaigning. This experience will likely have some lasting impact and local candidates may do more planning ahead than was needed in the past.

Electronic filing systems for campaign reports and statements had been adopted prior to COVID by many local jurisdictions. Local jurisdictions which had adopted electronic filing systems were well placed to handle the challenges that emerged when lock-down began. It quickly became clear to jurisdictions without electronic filing, that getting requisite wet signatures on campaign reports and statements was difficult, to impossible, in lock-down, and staffing elections’ offices during a pandemic posed a health and safety risk. The California Political Reform Act requires

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Evers-Hillstrom, “Political Donations Dropped off at Coronavirus Pandemic Peaked,” June 9, 2020, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/06/political-donations-dropped-off-as-coronavirus-pandemic-peaked/> (accessed March 25, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Elena Schneider, “How Act Blue has Transformed Democratic Politics,” October, 30, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/10/30/democrats-actblue-fundraising-elections-433698> (accessed March 25, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Amy Wada, “Here’s How to Stop Receiving Political Text Messages on Your Phone,” October 13, 2020, <https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2020/10/13/political-text-messages-cell-phone-election-2020/> (accessed May 23, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Ollie Gratzinger, “Small Donors Give Big Money in 2020 Election Cycle,” October 30, 2020 <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/10/small-donors-give-big-2020-thanks-to-technology/> (accessed May 23, 2021)

<sup>12</sup> Claire Greene, Marcin Hitzenko, Brian Prescott, and Oz Shy, “U.S. Consumers’ Use of Personal Checks: Evidence from a Diary Survey,” February 10, 2020 <https://www.atlantafed.org/-/media/documents/banking/consumer-payments/research-data-reports/2020/02/13/us-consumers-use-of-personal-checks-evidence-from-a-diary-survey/rdr2001.pdf> (accessed May 23, 2021)



original signatures on a number of campaign reports and statements. Original signature has historically been interpreted by the Commission to mean a wet signature. This wet signature requirement presented logistical problems for many candidates and their treasurers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Secretary of State issued guidance on compliance, but at the end of the day, original (wet) signatures were still the legal requirement, thus adding logistical challenges to campaigning during a pandemic. The experience of the pandemic will likely prompt a number of local jurisdictions to explore adopting an electronic filing system where a digital signature is considered an original signature.

### **What will remain? What will be tossed aside?**

The experience of pandemic politics will have a lasting impact on local politics. On a practical level, it will likely lead to more and more local jurisdictions adopting electronic filing systems - a logical and time-saving choice, even during normal times. Electronic contribution vendors were heavily used at the national level prior to the pandemic, but their use at the local level grew and will likely continue to grow. Zoom and other virtual meeting applications will remain, though their use will decline when gatherings are allowed again. That said, FPPC training webinars, already increasing in popularity pre-pandemic, will remain post-pandemic.

The growth of digital campaigning at the local level raises interesting questions for future research. Does digital campaigning favor younger, tech savvy candidates (and/or consultants)? Will the pandemic upend some political careers of older/established candidates who do not adapt to digital campaigning? Will local races become less local and more statewide as candidates can easily solicit and accept contributions from across the state due to the rise of digital fundraising and the ease of contributing via the click of a button? Research on local politics has historically been scant given the difficulty of gathering data across multiple jurisdictions. But as local campaign finance data moves online (jurisdictions in California are now required to post campaign statements and reports with 72 hours of their filing deadlines), some of these barriers are being lowered. The events of the past year - from Black Lives Matter protests, to calls for police reform, to counties taking center stage in the battle to fight COVID-19 - highlighted how crucial it is that we better understand the dynamics of local politics and elections.