

Apathy -- It's Our Way

- Indifference to local politics is part of being an Angeleno, and that's OK

By Gregory Rodriguez, Gregory Rodriguez is an Irvine senior fellow at the New America Foundation.

Interest in this year's Los Angeles mayoral campaign is underwhelming. The turnout for Tuesday's election is expected to descend to new lows. Editorial writers and good-government types scold us for our civic apathy. But their anxiety and hand-wringing are misplaced. Our stubborn indifference to the mayoral campaign is far from worrisome. Rather, it is a sign that the City of Angels in 2005 is in relatively good form.

Local politics has always been the last resort as a problem solver for Angelenos. You know that something is really wrong when we're paying attention — and voting. The turnout for the racially charged 1969 mayoral contest between Sam Yorty and Tom Bradley — the first election after the Watts riots — was the highest in modern times.

In the early-to-mid-1990s, the city was again on edge. Natural disasters, riots and a nasty recession threatened our survival. Concerned citizens regularly tuned in to KCRW-FM (89.9) to listen to "Which Way, L.A.?" They read Jill Stewart's frequently acerbic column on local politics in the now-defunct New Times Los Angeles. Intellectual debate on the nature and fate of the city reached a new level of intensity. Concern for L.A.'s future sent citizens to the polls in above-average numbers in 1993.

Political scientist Francis M. Carney detected this civic trait in 1964. Space, water and sunshine provided Angelenos "a margin of safety" against the city's growing social ills, he wrote. "It is not that politics seems futile or ugly or threatening to Angelenos. To most of them, politics seems unnecessary."

Carney rightly predicted that when that margin of safety diminished, the people of L.A. would turn to local politics. What he didn't foresee was that after the city was rescued, residents would revert to their old, indifferent ways.

Political scientists blame L.A.'s sprawl and fragmented political institutions for much of our municipal apathy. The county provides social services; the city polices the streets and fills potholes. All this leaves some residents confused about which local political jurisdiction they live in.

San Francisco is the antithesis of Los Angeles. Relatively small, dense and with city and county boundaries the same, it has remarkably high rates of civic engagement, according to Richard DeLeon, a professor of political science at San Francisco State University. The City by the Bay is a caldron of social movements, a magnet for migrants eager to be part of the city's political mix.

By contrast, people don't generally come to L.A. to join a civic enterprise. Since the early 20th century, they have come to realize suburban, not urban, dreams. Migrants from the

Midwest sought health and happiness in the sunshine. Civic activism wasn't on their minds.

L.A. is still more a space than a place. Despite phenomenal population growth, mass immigration and greater density, the city's political culture retains what essayist D.J. Waldie calls the "migrant's creed, the habit of dissociation." Newcomers don't create a new political culture; they buy into the old one or variations of it. A website that advises Swiss citizens how to acclimate to L.A. life prepares them for the inevitable. "In Los Angeles," it says, "the city where distrust and disloyalty dominate, the dog often becomes the faithful and reliable partner and buddy."

Defying the fantasies of civic activists, L.A.'s Mexican immigrants haven't much changed our political culture. The iron gates and fences that enclose the front yards of so many of their homes testify to the Mexican idea of the relationship between family and civic life. The immigrant group with one of the lowest rates of civic engagement is perfectly suited for L.A.

None of this means that Angelenos don't care about politics. Our turnout in state and national elections is respectable. We just haven't resolved the tension between our fundamentally suburban lifestyle and our aspirations to be a great city. Some civic-minded types say that L.A. will never be great unless it develops a more cohesive urban consciousness. I think we should make peace with its dual nature instead.

Carney recognized that our apathy toward local politics stems in part from our tireless pursuit of local pleasures. He rightly believed that our civic alienation is not pathological. Sophisticates who ridicule our suburban anomie don't understand that the city's fragmented nature is one of its greatest strengths. Our culture of nonconformity and individualism is well suited for our sprawling environment, indeed is a product of it. Angelenos don't tend to look to the city to give their lives structure, meaning or identity.

Ray Bradbury called L.A. a town with no elbows, "where you pick your neighbors 10 miles off and ignore those across the fence." In our city, alienation is not just a dirty word; it's another way to say freedom.

If huge numbers of Angelenos stay away from the polls Tuesday, it doesn't mean they don't care about their city. It may be that they're busy enjoying the openness and margin of safety this sprawling city still provides.