

Elections Commission
City & County of San Francisco
Lucy Bernholz, President
Charles Jung, Vice President
Elections
Roger Donaldson
Christopher Jerdonek
Becca Chappell
Viva Mogi



John Arntz, Director of

Martha Delgadillo, Secretary

To: Secretary of State Shirley N. Weber
Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis
State Senator Scott Wiener
Assemblymember David Chiu
Assemblymember Phil Ting

From: Members of the San Francisco Elections Commission

Date: June 22, 2021

Re: Proposed September Date for the 2021 gubernatorial recall election

We are the members of the San Francisco Elections Commission (“Elections Commission”), write to express our concerns regarding the pending decision to fix the date for the 2021 gubernatorial recall election for September 14, 2021, or perhaps an even earlier date in September 2021.

At the Elections Commission meeting held on June 16, 2021, the Director of the San Francisco Department of Elections (“the Department of Elections”) reported that, earlier in the day, Secretary of State Weber had informed the State’s registrars that the gubernatorial recall election would likely be held no later than September 14, 2021. Previous estimates of when this recall would occur centered on dates in November, and the accelerated date of September 14 is problematic for all counties. This date would shorten the timeline for election planning by approximately two months – and would provide the State’s registrars with less than 90 days to execute a Statewide recall election for California’s more than 20 million registered voters.

The Elections Commission is responsible for ensuring that the City conducts free, fair, and functional elections. We have the greatest confidence that our department leadership and staff will do so. The Department has a very strong track record of delivering on its mission in the last decade, up to and including, the November 2020 General election which was conducted under extremely challenging conditions and still saw a near-record turnout rate among San Francisco voters. Delivering critical election services and maintain public faith in the process requires adequate time and resources.

By advancing the date of a 2021 statewide election from November to September, the Department of Elections loses almost 60 critical days of preparation. This pushes the operational capacity of the Department of Elections to a point of concern and possible compromise.

A September date for this election causes several significant challenges to the operation of free, fair, and functional elections. From producing and quality-checking ballots to secure polling places, transport vehicles, and poll workers the timeline puts excessive stress on the basic operational structures of elections. Meeting these requirements during the summer, after more than a year of COVID-19-related restrictions, will require extraordinary measure. In addition, an election in September – which is an unusual time for an election – will align with the return to school, itself a major undertaking for the residents whose children have been schooling at home for more than a year. An election in September will require significant outreach and awareness building to ensure people are prepared and ready to vote – but the time to do this outreach is, by definition, cut short. The short preparation window for a September election could also compromise the ability of registrars to provide translated materials and conduct outreach to multilingual communities. The abbreviated election timeline would also make it exceedingly difficult to meet federal deadlines for distributing ballots to overseas and military voters.

A September date also increases the costs to the County in several significant ways. The Department of Elections staff will likely have to work overtime, to meet the shortened time frame. While we understand that the State has budgeted approximately \$215 million for this election, that substantial amount of funds may prove to be insufficient due to the greater expenses required to complete election-related tasks on an urgent, expedited basis. We will also be logistically and legally unable to consolidate other local ballot issues and measure with a September date, something that might have been possible with a November date.

Elections are a bedrock part of our democracy. At a time when both domestic and foreign forces are actively seeking to raise concerns about the free, fair, and functional nature of our election we urge to consider the bigger picture. Moving the election to a date that will knowingly stress the ability of election departments across the state to provide free, fair, and functional elections will have short-term consequences in terms of outreach and costs, and potential long-term consequences in terms of public trust.

We urge State decisionmakers to reconsider the September date for the recall election. While a November date would be best from an operational standpoint, even a date in October would be desirable from the perspective of ensuring the voters of San Francisco, and all Californians, have access to a free, fair, and functional election process.

Thank you for your immediate attention to these concerns.

Sincerely,

Lucy Bernholz, President

On behalf of?

All members sign?

Cc: Mayor London Breed
Members of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors
San Francisco Director of Elections, John Arntz