

MATTHEW HOY APRIL 2, 2016 8:43 PM

# San Luis Obispo municipal elections aren't broken, don't need fixing

## HIGHLIGHTS

"Democracy vouchers" could cost city more than \$500,000

Surely, there are better ways to spend that money



BY MATTHEW HOY

Congratulations, residents of the happiest city in America!

Having solved San Luis Obispo's homeless problem with special meters, a slumlord problem with an invasive (and constitutionally suspect) inspection program, a rowdy youth problem with the opening of a skate park, your City Council now is looking into [fixing its broken election system](#).

The issue, as a 3-2 council majority saw it, is that "the playing field" is not level and not enough people are coming out to vote because they see the same names on the ballot all the time. (Vice Mayor Dan Carpenter [has since reconsidered](#) his support.)

To solve this "problem," the council is considering a system in which registered voters would each have a \$20 "democracy voucher" provided by the city to give to the candidates of their choice, if those candidates choose to forgo any campaign donations other than the vouchers.

The program would be funded out of the general fund to the tune of more than half a million dollars that couldn't possibly be better spent anywhere else in the city.

In 2014, there were three candidates for mayor (Jan Marx won her third two-year term) and five candidates for two open council seats.

In 2012, there were three candidates for mayor and five candidates for two open council seats.

In 2010, there were four candidates for mayor and six candidates for two open council seats.

Is this really evidence of a lack of competition?

As for the same names appearing on the ballot every two to four years, council members can fix that more quickly and at a fraction of the cost by not running for re-election.

Why the push for a solution in search of a problem? Because someone somewhere is trying to get politicians elected by giving them money to run their campaigns.

This is a threat to our democracy. Or something.

The new [initiative](#) is being pushed by [William Ostrander's Citizen's Congress](#) — a group that opposes like-minded citizens organizing themselves in a corporate form to influence public opinion and politicians. (I [wrote about their 2014 event](#) at Cal Poly on my blog, [hoystory.com](#).)

According to the Citizen's Congress, you should consider the \$20 vouchers a "tax rebate" — a tax rebate you have to give to a politician. A politician who has the power to raise your taxes.

That assault on the English language could provide a good source of clean, renewable energy, if we could hook up George Orwell's corpse to a turbine.

No, it's a forced donation to a politician, maybe. It's unclear what happens to your "rebate" if the politician you prefer chooses to follow in President Barack Obama's footsteps and eschew the public financing option and go for the big, bad money that isn't a tax rebate.

By big money, I mean \$300. Under a current city ordinance, that's the maximum outside donation that can be made by an individual for a citywide office. Because this is still a free country, candidates running for office can spend as much of their own money as they like.

If there are serious concerns that City Council members can be bought for \$300 for a part-time job that pays \$12,000 a year (\$14,000 for the mayor), only to get grief in the newspaper from the likes of me, then yes, San Luis Obispo, we have a problem.

The public financing plan would limit candidates to \$50,000 for a single election. In 2014, Jan Marx raised the most money in the mayoral race: approximately \$15,000.

And this is supposed to reduce the influence of money in politics? Psst. You're doing it wrong.

What should you, the voter, expect to get from all this "democracy voucher" money if the program is as successful as its proponents hope it will be?

More yard signs; good for local printers.

More direct mail pieces; good for local printers, the U.S. Postal Service and the people that sell "voter guides." Bad for trees.

More newspaper and web ads; good for The Tribune and Google.

More radio and TV ads; good for broadcasters.

More automated phone calls. This is only good for the people who provide that annoying service. (Who will undoubtedly find themselves listening to the stupid calls for eternity in the afterlife.)

More money for local political consultants. Tom Fulks approves.

Who are the losers? Taxpayers who'd like the City Council to be responsible stewards of their money.

*Conservative columnist Matthew Hoy is a former reporter, editor and page designer. His column appears in The Tribune every other Sunday, in rotation with liberal columnist Tom Fulks. Read Hoy's blog at [Hoystory.com](#). Follow him on Twitter [@Hoystory](#).*

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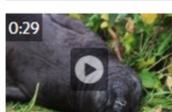
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## ABOUT MATTHEW HOY



Matthew Hoy, a conservative, is a San Diego-area native and 1994 graduate of Cal Poly's journalism program. He spent 15 years at various newspapers along the West Coast, including The Lompoc Record, The Daily World in Aberdeen, Wash., The North County Times in Escondido and The San Diego Union-Tribune. For 15 years, Hoy has written a blog on politics and the media, [Hoystory.com](#). Hoy's column will be published in The Tribune every other week, in rotation with liberal columnist Tom Fulks.

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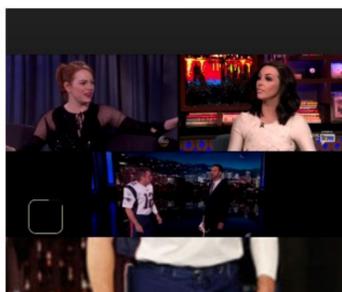
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