

Political changes in San Francisco during the past twenty years

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Introduction

Much of the current discussion in San Francisco is about how the city has changed, both in people and politics. Some people think perceived change is for the better, and others do not, but understanding how the city has changed politically should begin with some empirical understanding of political trends. To that end, I've put together three tableaus with a little bit of analysis to see if and how the city has changed politically in the past twenty years or so.

The first tableau is six Progressive Voter Index (PVI) maps from its inception in 1999 through the most recent PVI in 2015. All the maps are set to the same scale so changes through time can be clearly seen. The second tableau is a set of six maps from the past six Mayoral elections, with each map representing the performance of the frontrunning moderate-to-conservative candidate relative to the citywide mean. The third display shows the PVI correlations to those Mayoral candidates for each race.

These displays are being put out there so political workers can draw their own inferences on what's been going on in San Francisco these past two decades. My own examination leads me to believe that – in terms of the city's *internal* politics – there hasn't been much change except a bit around the edges. Alliances for any given candidate or ballot measure may come and go, but the views of the people making up those alliances have stayed relatively constant. I also think the city has been in its current political form for at least fifteen years, irrespective of demographic changes that some people celebrate and others denigrate.

PVI

The Progressive Voter Index (PVI), originally created by SF State professor Rich DeLeon in 1999, is a single-number value of each San Francisco precinct indicating how 'liberal' or 'conservative' it is by San Francisco standards.¹ San Francisco obviously has a different political scale than most places in the United States, so the PVI is a *relative* scale which allows us to see how precincts vote in relation to each other, on an understood liberal-conservative political spectrum. When aggregated to the district or neighborhood scale, we get a good sense of what the most liberal or conservative geographies in the city are. And when correlated with ballot measures or candidate results, PVI is a strong predictor of how people – vis-à-vis their geographic aggregations - will vote in elections.

There have been six iterations of the PVI: 1999, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015. Looking at these through time allows us to see how the politics of the city has changed in a relative sense. It is possible to see what neighborhoods have changed at least in relation to other neighborhoods, and if there have been major shifts in San Francisco politics it should be reflected here.

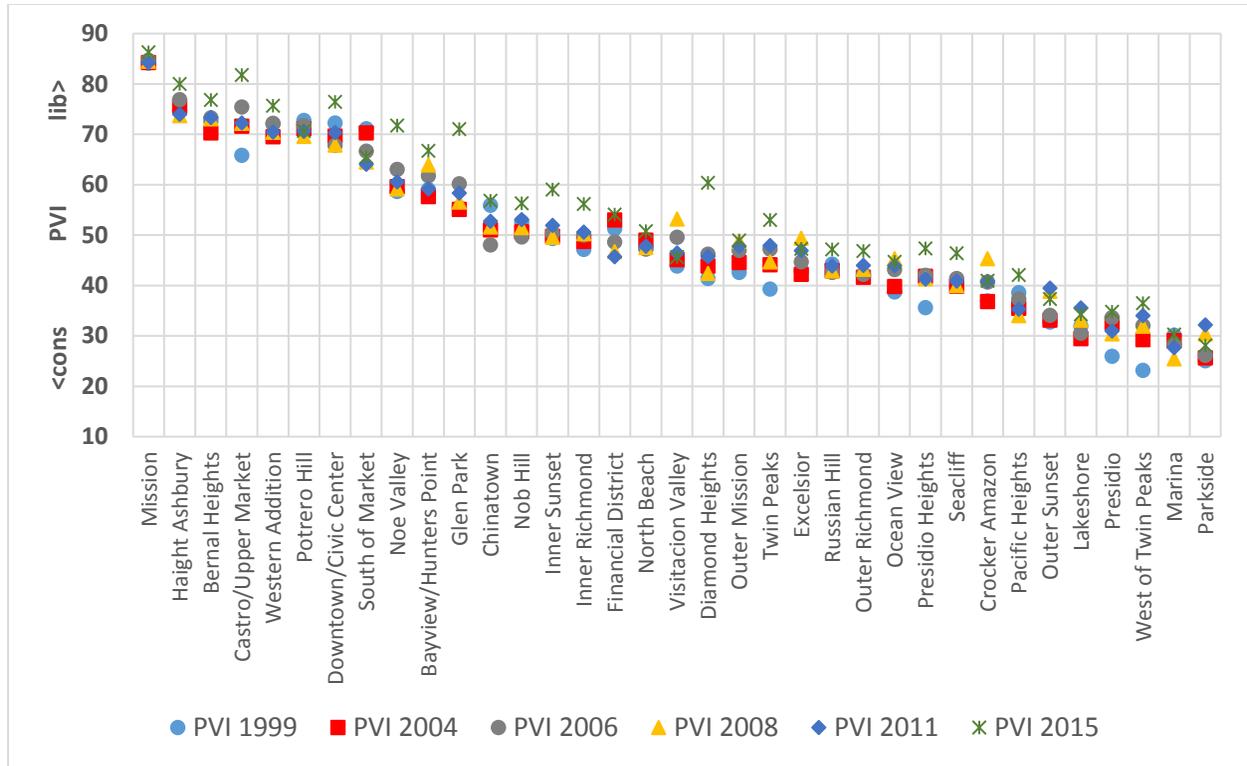
The PVI tableau shows the six PVIs set to the same scale. Lower numbers represent more conservative precincts. Each PVI uses the precinct lines from that year. District lines aren't represented because they change several times, and in 1999 there were no districts.

A quick visual inspection of the tableau shows a lot of similarity through the years. In fact, with a couple exceptions, I would argue that in a general sense the city's neighborhood politics have barely changed since 1999. The conservative parts of the city include the Sunset, the Marina, and West of Twin Peaks, while liberal areas include the Mission, Haight-Ashbury, and Bernal. The Richmond, D11, and D3 are mixed but hover around the middle-of-the-road.

The 2015 PVI revealed a slightly more liberal city than the previous PVIs, perhaps because of the chosen ballot measures for that PVI iteration or perhaps because it is a real effect. Glen Park, Upper Noe, and Diamond Heights become a little more liberal, as do parts of the Richmond. Figure 1 is a neighborhood aggregation of all the PVIs, using the Data SF Planning neighborhood definitions. The neighborhoods are ordered by mean PVI, from most liberal to most conservative. Overall the pattern changes little from PVI to PVI, and most neighborhoods have seen less than a ten-point change in PVI through the years.

¹ <https://tinyurl.com/zsqexyx> is the most recent methodological paper for the PVI

Figure 1: Neighborhood aggregation of PVI through six PVI's and 16 years



Mayoral votes

The second tableau shows results from the past six mayoral races, back to 1995. The maps display the level of support for the primary (or frontrunning) ‘moderate/conservative’ candidate in the *November* race. For most of these races, the choice was relatively clear, though in 1999 Willie Brown was less conservative than Jordan, who ran again, and Clint Reilly. However, Brown was seen as more conservative than popular progressive stalwart write-in candidate Tom Ammiano. The other candidates shown are Frank Jordan in 1995, Gavin Newsom in 2003 and 2007, and Ed Lee in 2011 and 2015.

The scale of each map is the percent that a precinct is above or under the citywide mean for that candidate. For example, if Gavin Newsom received 73.7% of the citywide vote in November 2007, and a precinct gave him 80%, then for this map the precinct has a score of +8.5%. This scale is done to normalize the various races given different turnouts, and that some races used ranked choice voting and others didn’t. What the map shows instead of an absolute vote is how much more or less a candidate is supported by a precinct compared to the citywide mean. Obviously, a more conservative part of the city (red on these maps) will support a more conservative candidate but by a higher margin than other parts.

Unlike ballot measure indices though, candidate voting relies on many different factors, like ethnicity, ‘home base’, money raised, a strong campaign team, and personality. Therefore, these maps can’t really be used to tell ideological differences through time. Instead though they show how coalitions and bases of support change over the years.

In 1995 Jordan faced reelection against Brown, losing though he had the support of many of the outer neighborhoods like the Marina, Richmond, Sunset, Excelsior, and Outer Mission. The Richmond and Excelsior aren’t particularly conservative neighborhoods, but over twenty years ago, they identified with the more conservative candidate, even though they’ve consistently voted for more liberal candidates at the supervisorial level. When Brown ran for reelection in 1999 against less popular conservatives and Ammiano, Brown’s strongest support came from African-American and lower-income communities. He failed to gain strong support in the west side, at least in the November portion of the race, indicating the west side was still voting conservatively for other candidates. These neighborhoods supported Brown in the December runoff.

Newsom came in first in November 2003 by coalescing support from the west side neighborhoods as Jordan did, but only achieving mixed results in the south (who were more likely to support Newsom in the December runoff). In 2007 Newsom had the support of most of the city, shown by the pale colors on the map – meaning most of the city’s support for Newsom hovered around the mean.

Ed Lee was elected with an entirely different coalition. He was technically an incumbent for the November 2011 race, but he was also seen as – if not a moderate – then slightly more conservative than the other main candidates Chiu, Herrera. Lee unsurprisingly did extremely well in heavily Chinese neighborhoods like the Richmond, Sunset, Portola, and Vis Valley. His lack of support in the progressive core of the city indicates that much of the city saw him as the moderate whether true or not. When he ran for reelection in 2015, Lee performed rather evenly in most parts of the city except the most liberal neighborhoods like Bernal, the Mission, and the Haight.

Mayor vs PVI

The third tableau shows the six mayoral results correlated with PVI. Instead of a normalized percentage though, the mayoral result is expressed in terms of percentage for that candidate. Despite the earlier contention that mayoral or citywide voting is based on many factors, each mayoral outcome correlates well (strongly inverse) with PVI except for Brown in 1999, further making the case that this race didn't fall upon traditional political lines since the true moderates were weaker candidates. Table 1 shows the PVI used for each race, and the R value of the correlation.

Table 1: R values and PVI datasets for the PVI vs Mayoral correlations

Year/Candidate	PVI used	Pearson's R
1995/Jordan	1999	-0.838
1999/Brown	1999	-0.025
2003/Newsom	2004	-0.866
2007/Newsom	2008	-0.485
2011/Lee	2011	-0.678
2015/Lee	2015	-0.776

Four recent Mayoral races have strong inverse PVI correlations: Jordan 1995, Newsom 2003, and Lee both in 2011 and 2015. Newsom's PVI correlation is weaker in 2007 mainly because he did so well citywide and most precincts that has any support for Newsom voted for him at over 70%. Brown's vote in November 1999 was relatively flat except for his stronger reperformance in heavily African-American precincts. In the December runoff, however, Brown collected the support of more traditionally moderate precincts, and that Mayoral vs PVI correlation is more standard.

Discussion

The PVI analysis shows that for the most part, the internal politics of San Francisco haven't changed much in twenty years. The neighborhoods that are liberal or conservative have remained constant. Therefore, it can be said that the people who make up these neighborhoods haven't changed their political views. In the cases where neighborhoods have changed or turned over, the neighborhoods have still maintained their political character.

A lot has been made about some of the new residents to San Francisco during the past five years or so. This influx is covered by the 2015 and to a lesser extent 2011 PVIs, and for the most part little has changed. It's true that a few precincts that have many new residents voted, for instance, for Scott Wiener in November 2016 is higher numbers than expected, but overall the influx of new residents has done little to change the fundamental nature of the city's politics. This could be because 1) newcomers don't vote consistently or 2) they aren't as conservative as people think they are. I actually lean towards the former because with the exception of November 2016 – an open presidential year – turnout has been consistently low, especially in these parts of D6 and D9.

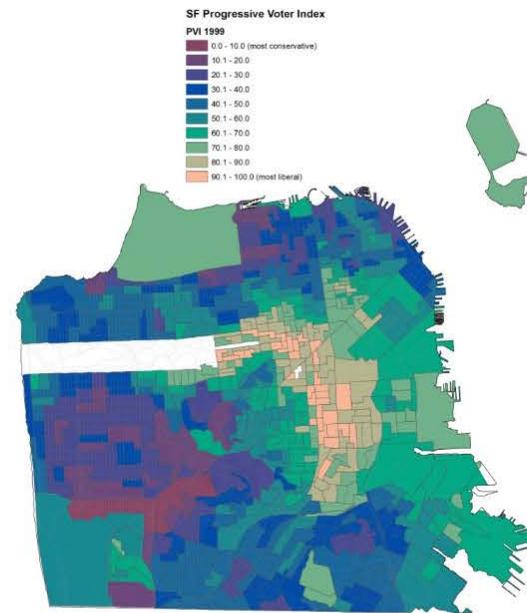
But there's also an argument for 2), because D8 and D5 have many new residents, and the 2015 PVI showed several neighborhoods as more liberal than previous PVI iterations. Then again, note the difference in Ed Lee's performance in Mission Bay from 2011 and 2015, where Lee had a lot of support in 2015 and less in 2011. Overall, I think if the new residents voted more consistently they would have a tangible impact on some of the city's politics, especially in east side races, but for all the talk about this changing demographic, they haven't.

The Mayoral results show that city politics cannot be described in simply ideological terms. Campaigns are won and lost by identity voting, money, strength of campaign teams, and turnout. Willie Brown did exceptionally well among African-Americans, and Ed Lee won on the strength of the Chinese vote. But we see that for all the recent races, the conservative neighborhoods – and the people who comprise them – elected the more 'conservative' mayor. Some candidates were able to build stronger coalitions

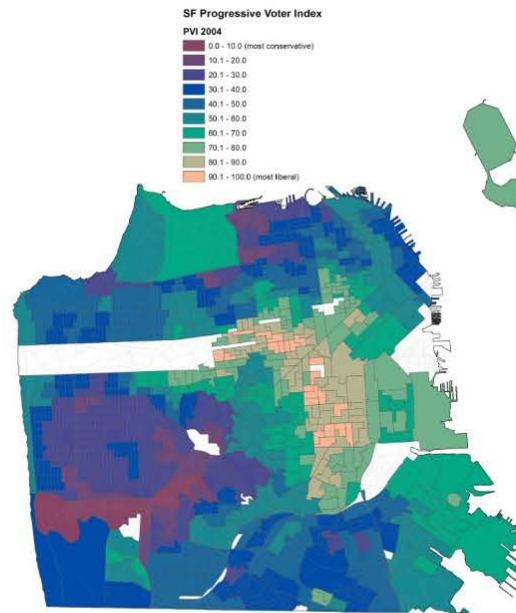
among disparate groups, like Newsom with his newer LGBT base in 2007 after same-sex marriage, but for the most part no candidate has been able to fully cross ideological lines. I myself was surprised at the consistency of the PVI vs Mayoral plots, save 1999, and if I had chosen Jordan it would have shown a transitional PVI profile.

Winning future races in San Francisco will depend on a candidate's (or a ballot measure proponent's) ability to understand what changes in San Francisco and what doesn't, and how to assemble pieces that in themselves are relatively consistent from year to year. It remains to be seen how involved the newer residents of San Francisco will become, though they have the ability to alter city politics if they ever become a consistent voting bloc. In short, the politics of San Francisco haven't changed in any drastic way for twenty years, and successful workers in city politics will recognize some of the strongly consistent spatial and temporal patterns we observe instead of overanalyzing what has changed.

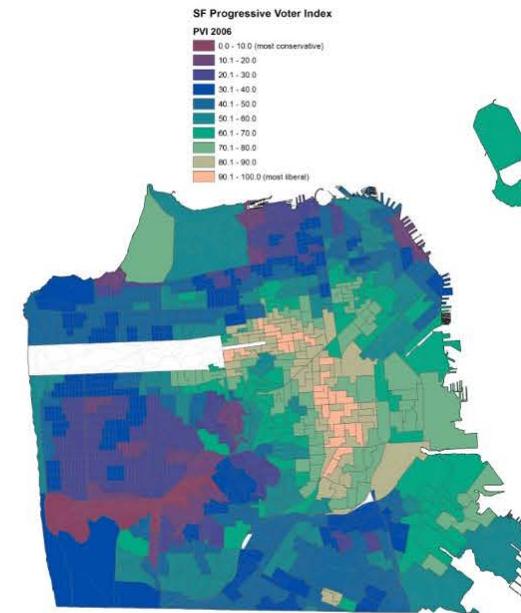
Tableau 1: The last six Progressive Voter Index maps, 1999 - 2015



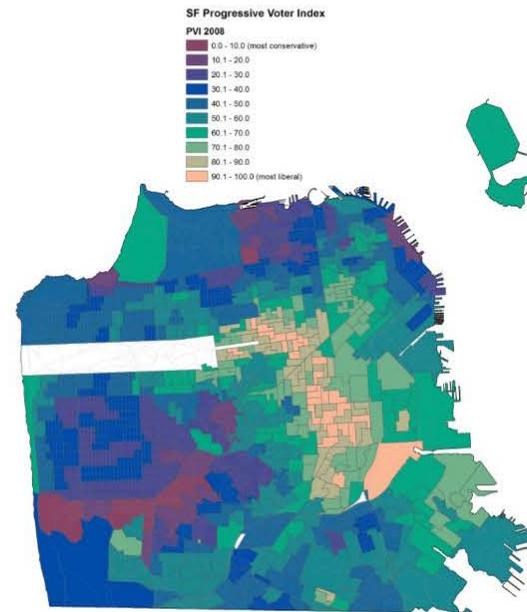
PVI 1999



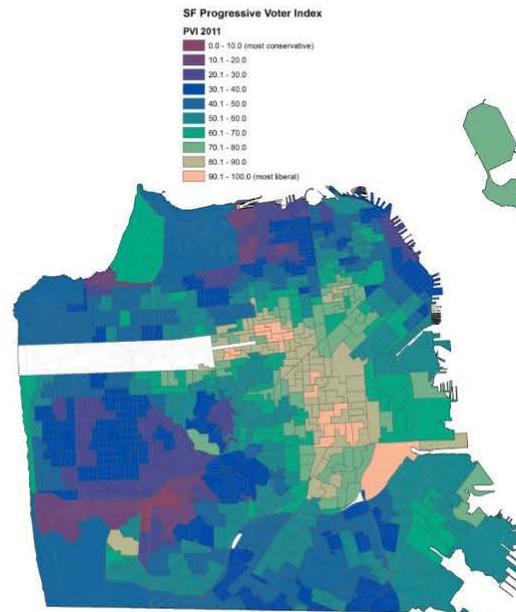
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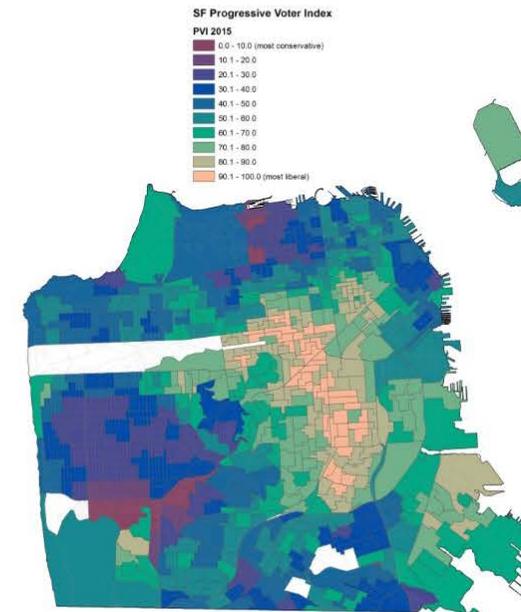
PVI 2006



PVI 2008



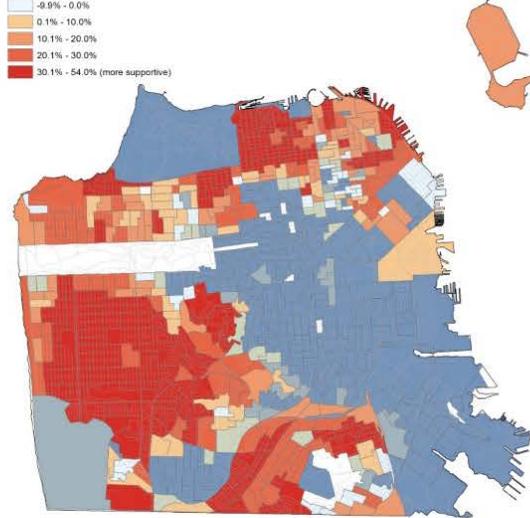
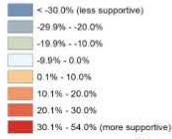
PVI 2011



PVI 2015

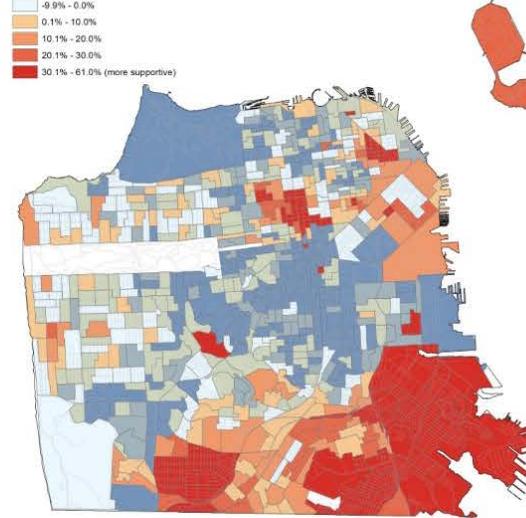
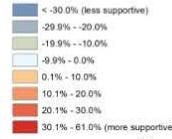
Tableau 2: The normalized results for the 'moderate' candidate for the past six mayoral races: 1994 - 2015

Nov 1995 - Frank Jordan
Precinct pct off citywide mean



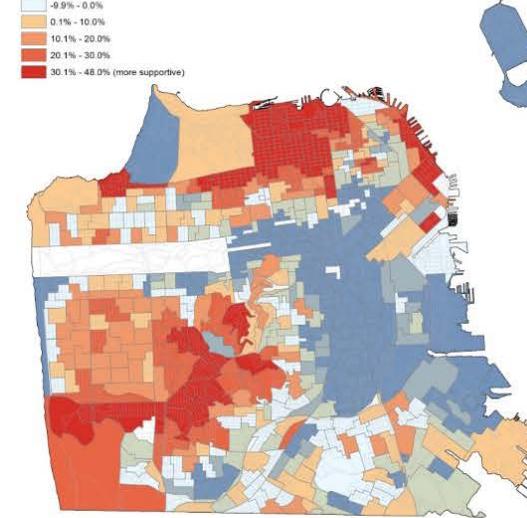
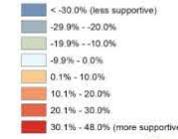
Jordan Nov 1995

Nov 1999 - Willie Brown
Precinct pct off citywide mean



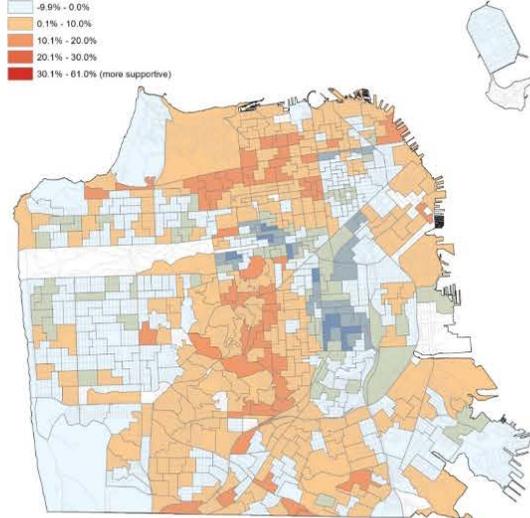
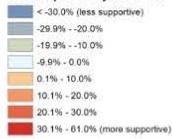
Brown Nov 1999

Nov 2003 - Gavin Newsom
Precinct pct off citywide mean



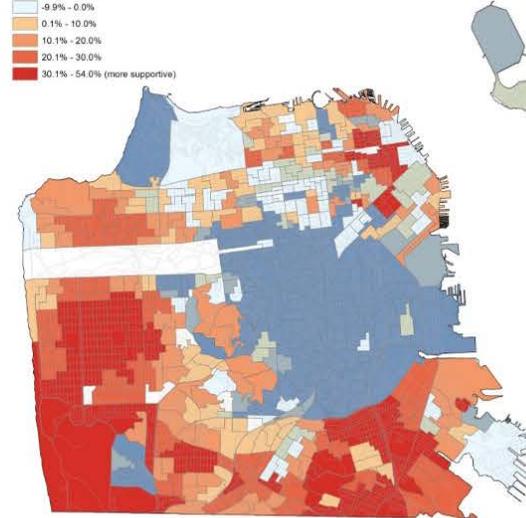
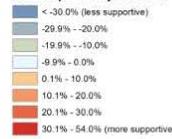
Newsom Nov 2003

Nov 2007 - Gavin Newsom
Precinct pct off citywide mean



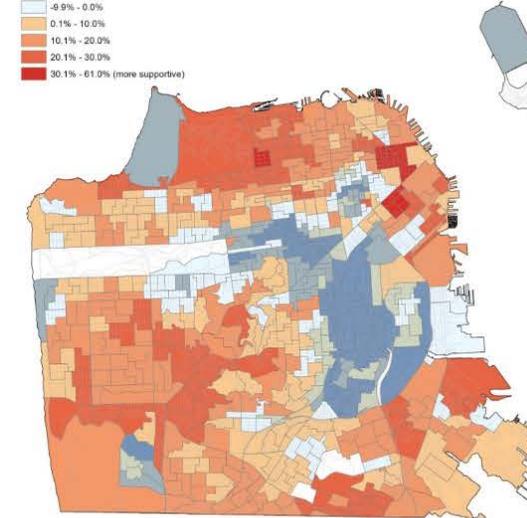
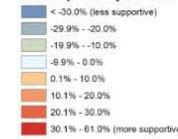
Newsom Nov 2007

Nov 2011 - Ed Lee
Precinct pct off citywide mean



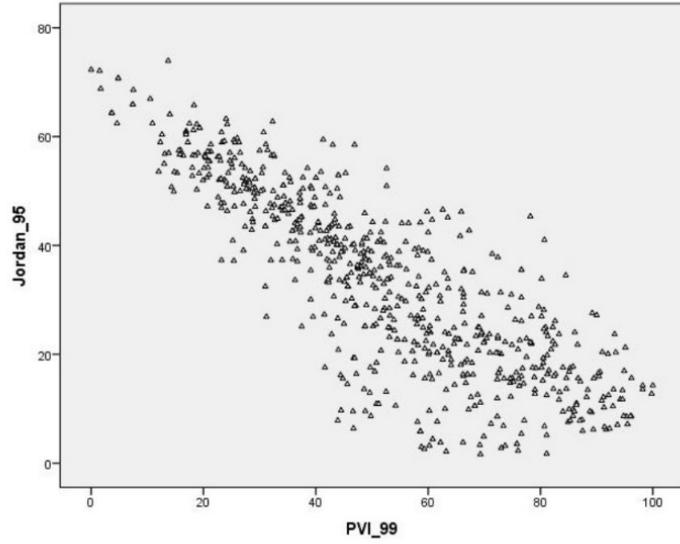
Lee Nov 2011

Nov 2015 - Ed Lee
Precinct pct off citywide mean

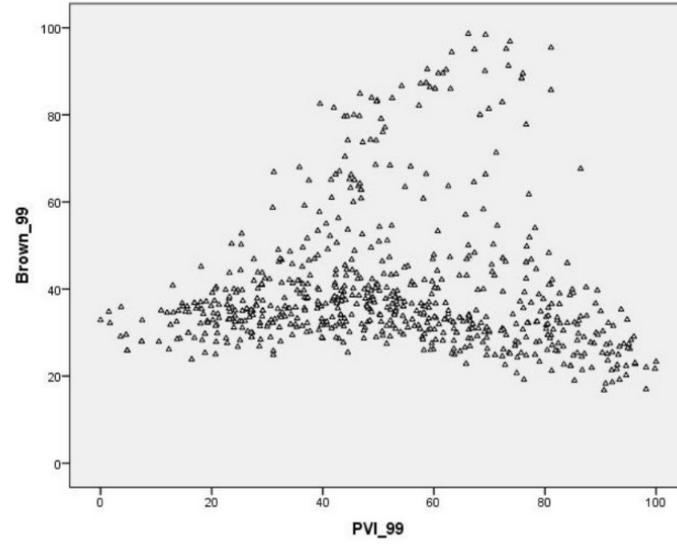


Lee Nov 2015

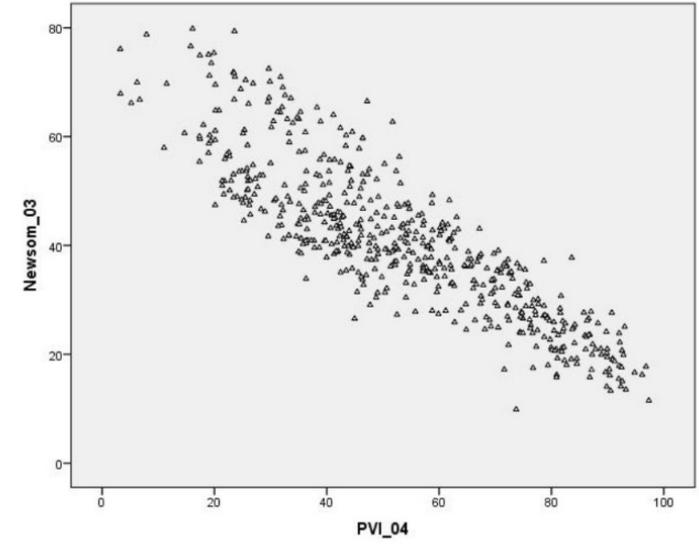
Tableau 3: PVI vs Mayoral scatterplots: 1999 - 2015



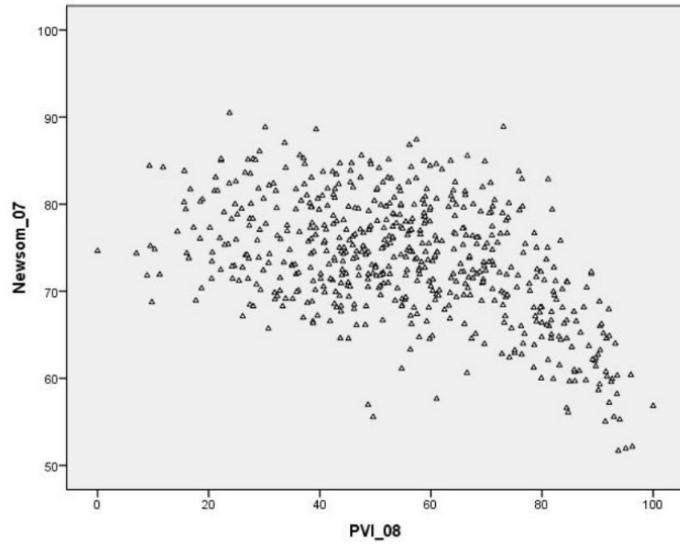
Jordan 1995 R=-.838



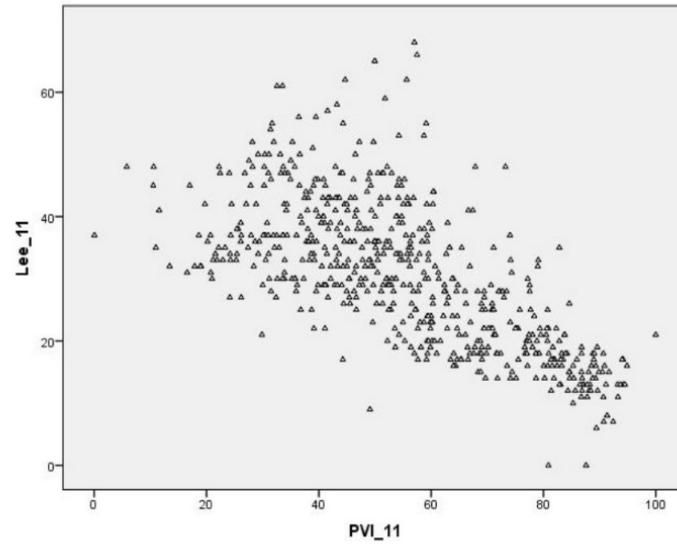
Brown 1999 R=-.025



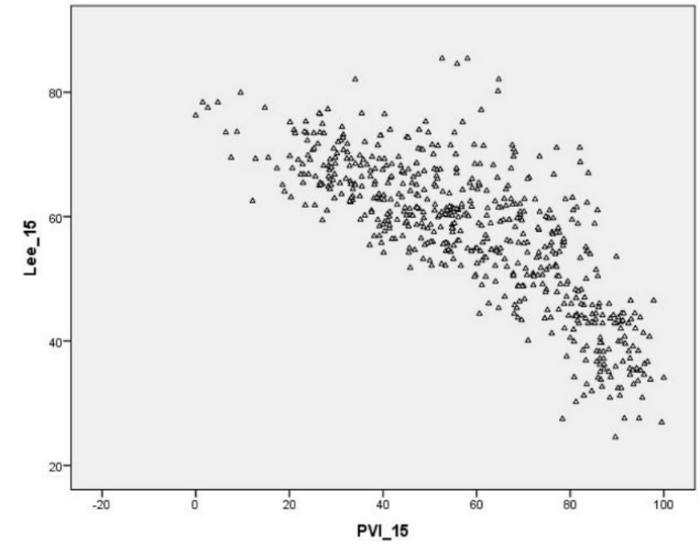
Newsom 2003 R=.866



Newsom 2007 R=-.485



Lee 2011 R=-.678



Lee 2015 R=-.776