Race for Seattle mayor seems to be more about Trump than the city

Oct. 26, 2025 at 8:00 am



By Alex Fryer

Seattle Times Opinion columnist

Imagine for a moment that Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell and City Council members attended the inauguration of President Kamala Harris. In this parallel universe, Harrell and company return to Washington, D.C., many times to attend bill signings and photo ops and such.

If this was our reality, would Seattle be in the same place politically?

What is the local election about, really? And what's at stake for our collective future?

Without a doubt, President Donald Trump scrambled the equation. Local and statewide polls showed an instant reaction — most of it anger directed toward corporations and the billionaire class. Images of Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos at the inauguration back in January sparked an intensely negative reaction that has not subsided.

This is the year, it seems, to finally eat the rich. At least in deep-blue Seattle.

Harrell channeled that he understood that sentiment at a recent debate: "I get up every day thinking about this fight, but people want to be convinced that this person who's been in power for 16 years is not siding with the corporations," he said. "And if you look at my background, I've been fighting corporations my entire life."

Challenger Katie Wilson shot back: "Those corporations are spending an awful lot of money trying to get you reelected, so they must be seeing something that they like."

The candidates' endorsements present a much more nuanced picture.

Organized labor is split. Harrell has MLK Labor and unions for home health care workers, building trades, transit operators, et al. Wilson's institutional support includes the same unions for home health care workers and MLK Labor, along with others.

But here's the thing. Love them or hate them, businesses pay the lion's share of city taxes. And increasingly, the burden falls on fewer companies — 65 taxpayers paid about $306 million of the payroll expense tax revenues last year — about 87%.

Economic populism may be the way out of the political wilderness for national Democrats, but it's a tough balancing act for municipalities. Which raises the question: Is it possible to encourage large businesses to locate and stay in a city while also viewing their employees and revenues as prime targets?

All the while, Bellevue and its lower taxes beckon.

Trump aside, Wilson and other candidates challenging incumbents on the Seattle ballot argue that problems like homelessness ought to be getting better by now.

How dissatisfied are Seattleites?

Polling by the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce shows 86% of residents feel the nation is on the wrong track, but people have much more positive views of how things are going locally. In fact, 49% of respondents said the city was moving in the right direction, the best since the chamber's polling began in 2021, when a whopping 68% of people said Seattle was on the wrong track.

But the poll identified two areas where people did not feel good.

About 58% disagreed with the statement: "The City has made meaningful progress in reducing the number of homeless encampments."

To the statement, "Seattle has made meaningful progress on shutting down open air drug markets," 61% disagreed.

The King County Regional Homelessness Authority operates the homelessness response system around here. Everyone in the political sphere agrees that RHA has fallen well short of expectations. What to do about it remains a mystery. Wilson does not mention the organization on her campaign website. Harrell says he will stick with RHA, for now.

Is the lack of progress on homelessness due to a dearth of taxpayer money? In his proposed 2026 budget, Harrell touts $225 million for homelessness response and $349 million for the Office of Housing.

Wilson talks about the need for new progressive revenue: a new capital gains tax, an increase in the payroll expense tax, a tax on vacant buildings, a professional services tax and higher property taxes.

It seems impossible that a city of 83 square miles and about 800,000 residents would still be in the throes of a homelessness emergency that was declared 10 years ago. But saying it's a lack of money doesn't account for the failure of policies and execution. Accountability — getting better results or suffering some sort of consequence — is ultimately the responsibility of voters, who have shown no recent history of taking out their frustrations by defeating spending measures at the ballot box.

As for open-air drug markets, the City Council passed an ordinance designating Stay Out of Drug Areas as a way for police to focus on hot spots. It's an attempt to bring some immediate relief to businesses and residents coping with ongoing street disorder.

In her response to a Downtown Seattle Association questionnaire, City Attorney Ann Davison wrote: “I fully support implementation of SODA, which is why I proposed the law in the first place.”

Erika Evans, who beat Davison in the primary by 22 percentage points, rejects SODA.

“SODA … zones do not reduce crime or improve outcomes,” she wrote in the questionnaire. “That’s not real safety.”

Evans added: “We must invest in what actually works: housing, behavioral health, and real alternatives to incarceration.”

Even though SODA is the law — passed by the City Council 8-1 — Evans said she wouldn’t enforce it.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with Seattle cops a few years ago. At the time, the King County Jail was not booking people arrested for misdemeanors. As a result, thieves would go into retailers, take items worth less than $750 and walk out the door.

An officer told me that he once talked to a guy he briefly detained at a home improvement store for stealing items. The guy, from Montana, said he couldn’t believe Seattle was so lax. One could pitch a tent anywhere, purchase drugs at almost any downtown street corner and steal with no consequence.

Jail is clearly not the answer for people with substance use disorders. On the other hand, removing jail as a possibility for low-level crimes doesn’t do anyone any favors, either. That’s the conundrum facing Seattle voters.

Three Seattle incumbents on next month’s ballot are considered underdogs since coming in second place in their respective primary races two months ago: Harrell, Davison, City Councilmember Sara Nelson.

I have followed these public servants closely since they took office in 2022. I don’t always agree with them. I’ve watched their missteps, miscues, miscommunications. I’ve also seen them take voter concerns about public safety and civic discord and actually do something.

By and large, Harrell, Nelson and Davison met the moment.

Do they deserve to be one-termers?

If the Seattle electorate is angry at Trump, does it make sense to take it out on City Hall? If voters are angry that not enough progress has been made on local issues for the tax money invested, are they sure the challengers could do any better?

Elections are about the future, but this one seems oddly mired in the past, determining whether we swing back to the days when encampment cleanups are called sweeps, wastes of public

resources like participatory budgeting are swept under the rug, cops are seen as oppressors and taxes are the salve that cured all community ills.

Seattle's recent history of one-term mayors shows that change can come with significant downsides. It often takes more than one term to successfully implement programs and reforms. With a new mayor every four years, the bureaucracy learns to keep its collective head down and not get too close to any leader's agenda. Stagnation rules.

In stressful times, it is perhaps hardest to stay the course. But new directions can cost the one thing that can never be recovered: Time.

Ballots must be postmarked or dropped off by 8 p.m. on Nov. 4.

***Alex Fryer**: afryer@seattletimes.com. Alex Fryer is a member of The Seattle Times editorial board.*