

Analyzing Absentee Ballots Cast In San Diego Mayoral Special Election

Executive Summary

Early voting in the San Diego mayoral special election began on October 21st, and since that time, more than 110,000 ballots have been cast citywide. With less than a week left to go before Election Day, the National University System Institute for Policy Research (NUSIPR) projects a race to the finish line for the mayoral candidates. Using data from the Registrar of Voters office and GIS mapping software, NUSIPR evaluated early precinct returns in the November 19th election.

From the last three weeks of absentee ballot returns, we found that:

- Thirty-five percent of all projected special election voters have cast their ballots. Overall, NUSIPR projects that 46% of the city electorate (313,000 voters) will cast ballots in the election.
- **Democratic turnout is lagging Republican turnout.** Despite outnumbering Republicans in the City by more than 90,000 voters, heavily Democratic precincts are returning fewer absentee ballots and fewer ballots overall than GOP precincts.
- Turnout is low in Latino precincts and south of Interstate 8 neighborhoods. In most southeastern & border precincts, more than 85% of registered voters have not yet cast a ballot.
- Election Day voters will make an impact on November 19th. As many as 100,000 voters will cast ballots at polling locations on Election Day, leaving the outcome of the race unknown.

Absentee Voters

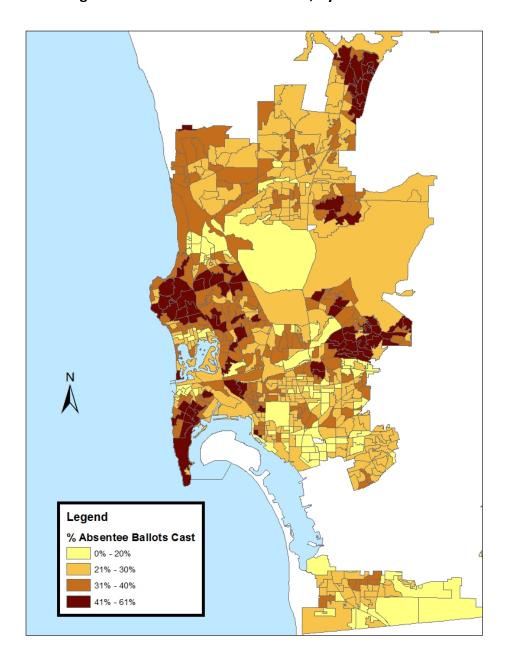
Since 2002, California voters have had the option to register as "permanent vote-by-mail" (PVBM). This registration option allows for ballots to arrive automatically in voter mailboxes for each election. The program has proven to be popular throughout the state, including San Diego. The number of PVBM voters in the City of San Diego has more than tripled in the last eight years (110,277 in 2005 to 351,458 in 2013). The majority (52.3%) of City voters now participate as permanent absentee voters. As a whole, PVBM voters have a higher turnout rate than the citywide electorate. They have also recently become the voting majority in local elections. In the November 2012 mayoral election, PVBM voters cast the majority (54.23%) of total votes for the first time in a city election. For the current mayoral special election, NUSIPR projects nearly 7 out of 10 (67%) ballots cast will be from permanent absentee voters.

Early Voting Results

Political campaigning began early in the mayoral special election. High-propensity absentee voters have been targeted with voter mail, robocalls and door-to-door campaigning even before the first ballots were issued. With a compressed election time frame, candidates have been working hard to build broad voter coalitions and lock in the votes of their political base as early as possible, so as to concentrate more time and resources on undecided voters.

Voting in the mayoral special election began on October 21st. Since that time, ballot returns have been brisk. According to the Registrar of Voters, out of 366,896 absentee ballots issued, 110,549 (30%) have been returned. As the following map illustrates, cast ballots have been concentrated in a handful of neighborhoods – Rancho Bernardo, La Jolla, South University City, Scripps Ranch, Navajo, Mission Hills and Point Loma. These high-propensity neighborhoods lean Republican, and demographically are more Caucasian and older than the citywide population overall.

Figure 1: Absentee Ballots Received, by Voter Precinct



Absentee voting continues to grow in popularity, but there are still some communities in San Diego where poll booth voting on Election Day is more prevalent. Furthermore, while PVBM voters generally have a higher voter turnout than the overall electorate, some absentee voters still fail to participate in elections. The following map illustrates how few voters have cast ballots in the special election to date. Non-voters are found predominantly in college and youth-oriented communities, as well as Latino, Asian and African American neighborhoods.

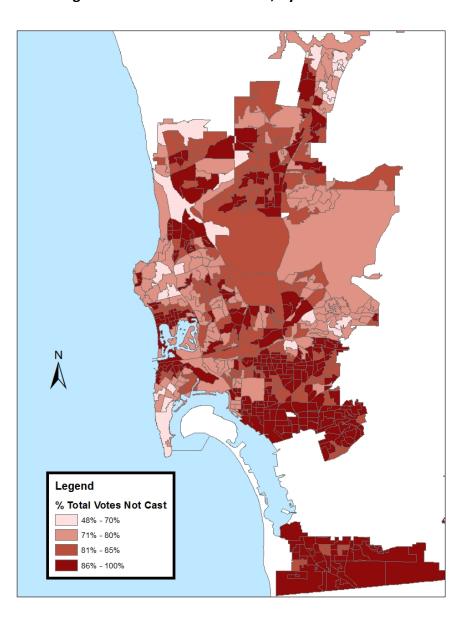


Figure 2: Total Ballots Not Cast, by Voter Precinct

In addition to PVBM turnout, NUSIPR also examined partisan voter turnout and turnout by political jurisdiction. To date, Republican turnout has outpaced Democratic turnout. In the 100 precincts where Republicans are the greatest proportion of total registered precinct voters, 39.2% of absentee ballots have been cast, and 23.8% of total votes received. In comparison, the top 100 Democratic voter precincts have returned only 23.4% of absentee ballots issued, with a total of 11.8% precincts votes received. It is important to note that in prior special elections, Republican voter turnout has matched or exceeded Democratic turnout in the City, and Republicans comprise a disproportionate share of total votes cast.

Among the major candidates, Nathan Fletcher and Kevin Faulconer have benefited from higher voter turnout in their former and current political districts. In Nathan Fletcher's former 75th State Assembly District, 31.9% of absentee ballots issued have been cast, and 18.5% of total precincts votes have been received. These figures are very similar to those from Councilman Kevin Faulconer, whose Council District 2 has seen a 32.5% absentee return rate, and 17.2% of total ballots returned. Council District 8, David Alvarez's District, has lagged both Fletcher and Faulconer, with only 23.2% of absentee ballots returned, and 11.1% of total votes received.

As previously projected by NUSIPR, Latino voters are not expected to play as large of a role in the outcome of the special election as they did in the November 2012 mayoral general election. So far, Latino voter turnout has lagged the citywide average. In the 50 precincts where Latino voters comprise the largest proportion of total registered voters, 22% of absentee ballots have been cast, with a total of 10.5% precinct votes received. Still, we anticipate a more motivated and informed Latino voter electorate than prior elections.

Election Day Voters

Based on the results from prior city elections, NUSIPR has projected that 33% of ballots (103,300) will be cast at polling locations on Election Day. We also anticipate a somewhat higher voter Election Day turnout rate in District 8 and Latino neighborhoods than that seen in prior elections. District 8 voters have a higher level of familiarity with their city representative David Alvarez, which reduces information costs that inhibit electoral participation. The Alvarez and Fletcher campaigns, along with labor unions and the Democratic Party, have been concentrating significant resources and volunteer manpower to "Get Out The Vote" in heavily Democratic precincts South of the 8. Still, the majority of votes will be cast from high-propensity northern city neighborhoods.

Conclusion

More than half of the projected ballots have yet to be cast in the mayoral special election. Few voters have tuned into the citywide contest. With the Thanksgiving season approaching, many voters have also been too busy to take the time to vote. Still, we project approximately 46% of all registered voters will cast ballots in the election. Registrar of Voters Supervisor Michael Vu has also projected that more than 50% of city voters will participate. We credit the growing use of the permanent absentee voter program, an intense competition for votes among three quality candidates, as well as the widely publicized resignation of former Mayor Bob Filner as facilitators of a relatively higher voter turnout rate.

With the election coming down to the wire, key to victory will be an effective Get Out The Vote program that can bring voters out to the polls on Election Day. Alvarez would appear to have the advantage. His key endorsements by the Democratic Party and the Labor Council have provided him a strong, well-funded GOTV operation by organizations that are powerful third-party validators in many voter households. Regardless of which two candidates qualify for the runoff election, it is clear that the race for votes will continue until polls close on Election Day.

About the National University System Institute for Policy Research

The National University System Institute for Policy Research (NUSIPR) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that formulates and promotes high quality economic policy, and public opinion research so as to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of local governments in San Diego County and to improve the quality of life enjoyed by the region's residents.

NUSIPR publishes regular independent research and analysis for the public on a range of topics, including unemployment, business growth, and the San Diego housing market. The Institute also works collaboratively with clients to develop high quality research products that are tailored to their policy needs.