

San Diego Mayoral Special Election: A New Contest Altogether

Executive Summary

Following the resignation of San Diego Mayor Bob Filner this summer, a special election to fill his vacancy has been scheduled for November 19th. With new political and demographic trends, the upcoming election will be vastly different from the November 2012 mayoral election, as well as the 2005 contest that resulted in a runoff between Jerry Sanders and Donna Frye. New voter coalitions and campaign strategies will have to be developed to win the support of an electorate that is increasingly voting earlier in the election calendar.

Our forecast is that:

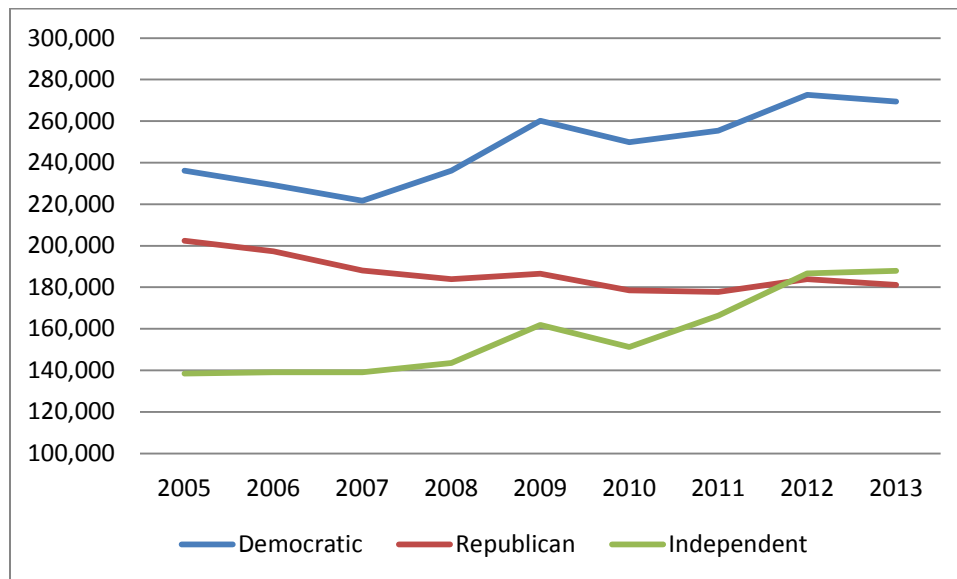
- **Significantly fewer voters will cast ballots.** Based on voting patterns and prior election history, less than half of all registered voters in San Diego are expected to cast ballots in the mayoral race.
- **Most votes will be cast absentee.** NUSIPR forecasts that more than 65% of votes will be cast absentee.
- **The “Filner voter coalition” will not be a driving force in November.** Latinos and young voters, which strongly supported Filner’s candidacy last November, are unlikely to participate in high numbers this year. However, LGBT voter precincts will generate high turnout rates.
- **The special election will favor the GOP candidate.** While Democratic voters outnumber Republicans history has shown that Republican voter turnout remains high across primaries and special elections while Democratic voters are much less likely to participate.

The key to understanding any election is knowing which voters are most likely to cast ballots and which will choose to stay home. In analyzing the November 2013 special election, NUSIPR looked at four major trends in San Diego: voter registration, voter turnout, absentee registration and electoral diversity.

Voter Registration

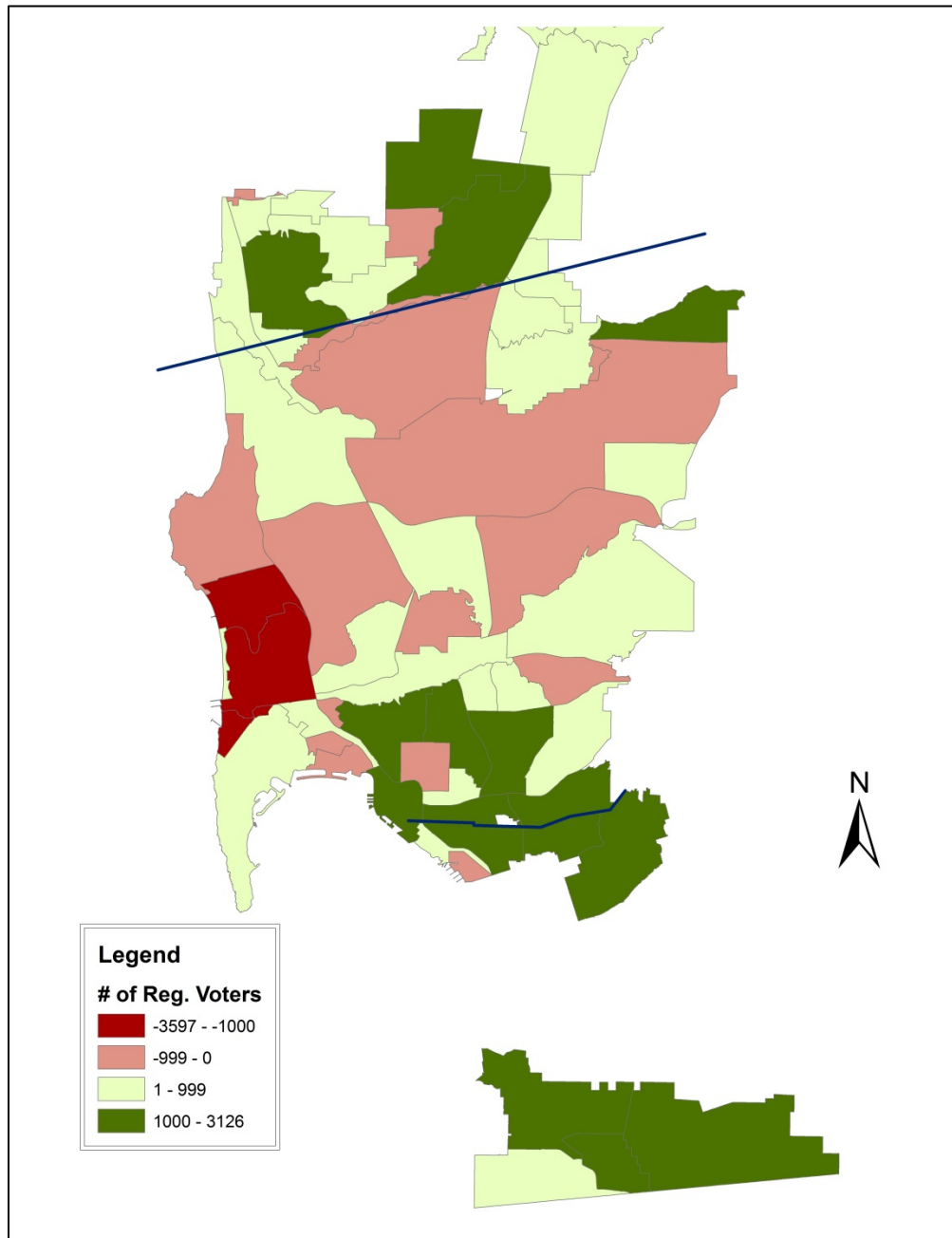
Since the 2005 mayoral elections, Democratic voter registration has continued to outpace Republican registration in the City of San Diego. The Democratic Party has widened its registration advantage over the GOP from 33,000 voters to more than 88,000 voters. There is also now more registered Decline to State voters than registered Republicans in the City of San Diego. Still, neither party has an outright registration majority in San Diego.

Chart 1: Voter Registration in the City of San Diego, 2005-2013



Due to in and out migration and aging of the City's population, this will be the first mayoral special election for many San Diegan voters. An estimated 42% (286,000 out of 677,000) of voters in the City of San Diego have registered to vote since the 2005 election, and the most growth in registration has occurred in the far north and south of the City while Mission Bay and Pacific Beach (colored in red) have been home to the largest registration decreases. Indeed, the geographic differences in net registration help to explain why candidates both during 2012 and now during the special election have stressed the importance of "neighborhood" initiatives and a shift away from downtown, with 84% of net additions in registration being located north of Los Penasquitos Preserve and south of Imperial Avenue (outlined in blue).

Figure 1: Net Change in Voter Registration by Community Planning Area, 2005-2012

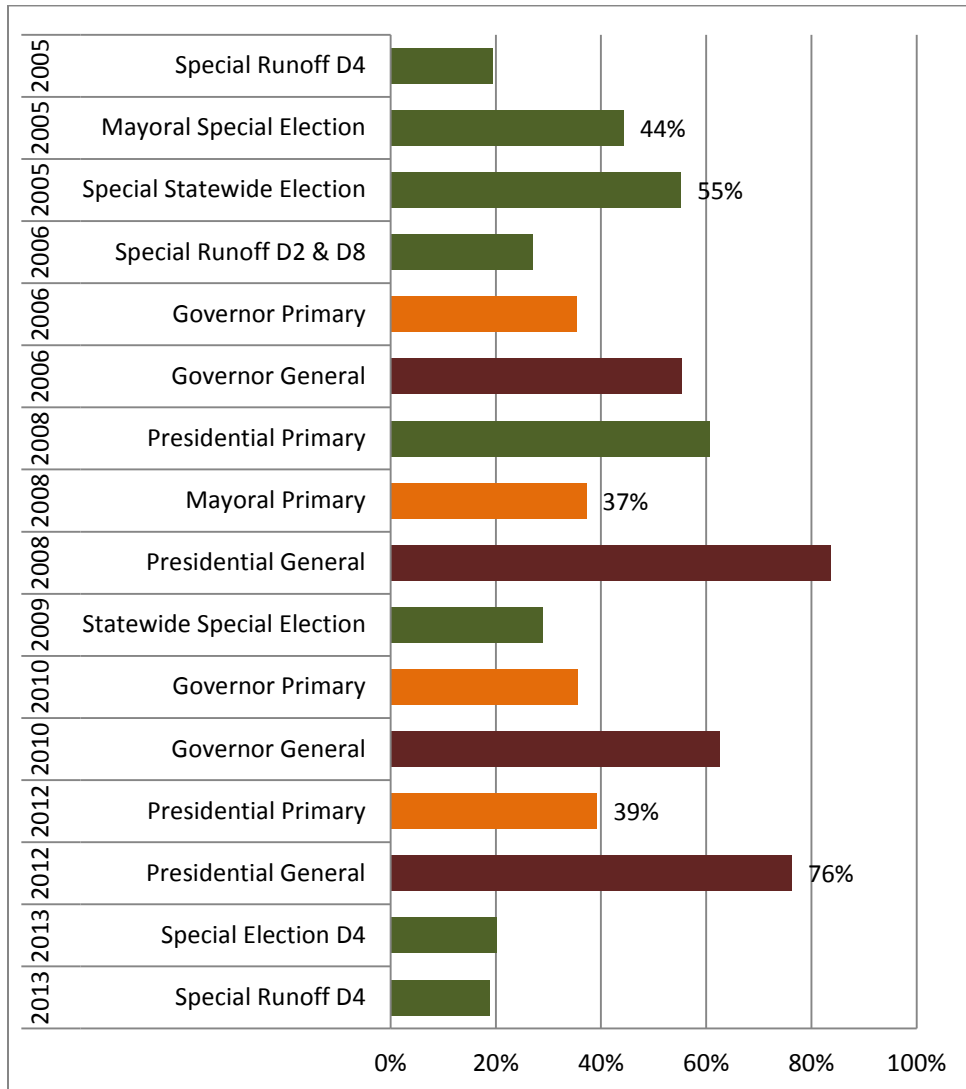


Voter Turnout

Voter turnout in the City of San Diego fluctuates widely based on the type of election. Gubernatorial and presidential general elections have generated the highest turnout rates. They are illustrated in Chart 2 in red. Controversial ballot measures (which often appear during these election cycles) and competitive

races also contribute to greater voter participation. Primary elections, illustrated in orange, and special elections (green) typically have lower voter participation rates. As a general rule, the fewer contests that appear on a ballot, the lower the turnout. Turnout numbers are provided in the chart for those elections (2005 special, 2005 special statewide, etc.) involving a race for Mayor of San Diego.

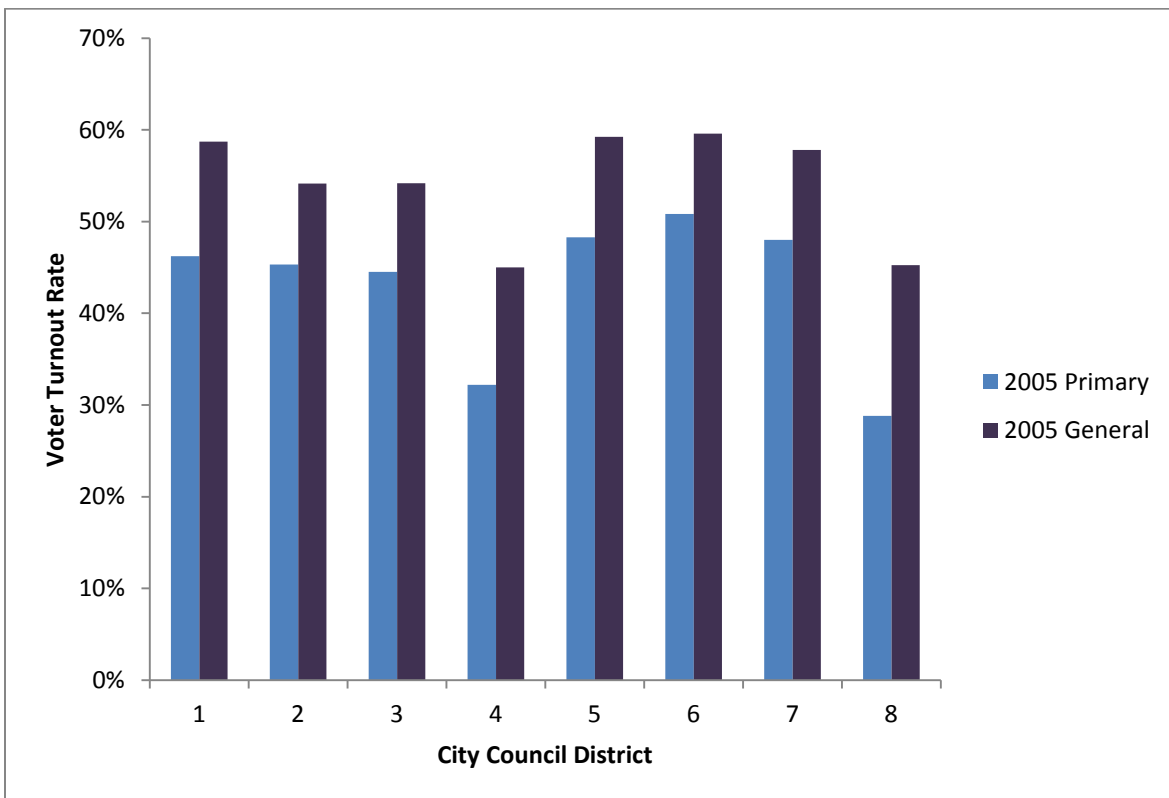
Chart 2: San Diego City Voter Turnout by Election, 2005-2013



The July 2005 mayoral special primary election generated a fairly high 44% turnout. The competitiveness of that election likely contributed to turnout, along with the controversy surrounding the ballot measure which transferred control of the Mt. Soledad Veterans Memorial site to the federal government. Following the primary race, the November 2005 runoff election between mayoral candidates Jerry Sanders and Donna Frye produced a marginally higher voter turnout in the city (55%). Given this history, the lack of any other measures on the ballot, and the relatively low name-ID of the candidates running, **NUSIPR projects a turnout rate more analogous to July of 2005 - 46%.**

It is also important to note that turnout significantly differed by Council Districts in the 2005 mayoral elections (in this section we are referring to the council districts as they existed prior to the redistricting effort of 2010). Council Districts in the northern part of the city (Districts 1, 5, 6, 7) produced the highest turnout rates, while southern districts (3, 4, 8) produced turnout rates short of the citywide average. It is worthwhile noting that the turnout increases between the primary and the run-off elections in Districts 4 and 8 (13% and 17%) were significantly higher than other districts. We believe that this is most attributable to the high-profile statewide ballot measures that appeared in the November election. More than \$250 million was spent throughout California on television ads, direct mail and other campaigning tactics to sway voters both to support and defeat the measures. Most noticeably, labor unions spent significant resources to get Democratic voters and their union members out to the polls to reject the ballot measures, which were largely pushed by then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger as part of his “Year of Reform” initiative, which proposed shifting political power in California away from unions and the Democratic Party. Districts 4 and 8 are heavily concentrated with Democratic voters and labor union members, and would have been prime precincts to increase turnout to oppose the Schwarzenegger agenda. We do not believe the same dynamic will hold this cycle.

Chart 3: Voter Turnout in the 2005 Primary & General Mayoral Elections, by Council District



The “Filner Coalition” and the 2012 Mayoral Election

One of the key developments in the 2012 Mayoral election was the emergence of what some pundits and politicians saw as a new and permanent coalition among the City’s electorate. This “Filner Coalition” was comprised of young voters (particularly UCSD and SDSU students), minority voters, and the LGBT community. A key question for San Diego’s political future is whether this coalition is permanent or its importance in 2012 reflected fairly unique circumstances. To examine this question NUSIPR developed a methodology¹ to determine which precincts with a predominance of LGBT, Latino, and/or Youth voters. We then looked at 1) their aggregate support for Filner, 2) their collective turnout rate in the November 2012 presidential general election and 3) their turnout rate in the May 2009 statewide special election. We found that while LGBT voter precincts maintain a high electoral participation rate, Latino and Youth precincts have a noticeably lower turnout rate in special elections.

Table 1: The Voting Patterns of the Filner Coalition

	2012 Mayoral Contest Turnout	% Voted for Filner	2009 Overall Turnout
Citywide	69.38%	52.15%	28.93%
LGBT Precincts	74.54%	71.10%	28.56%
Latino Precincts	60.8%	70.9%	18.0%
Youth Precincts	57.91%	61.03%	18.39%

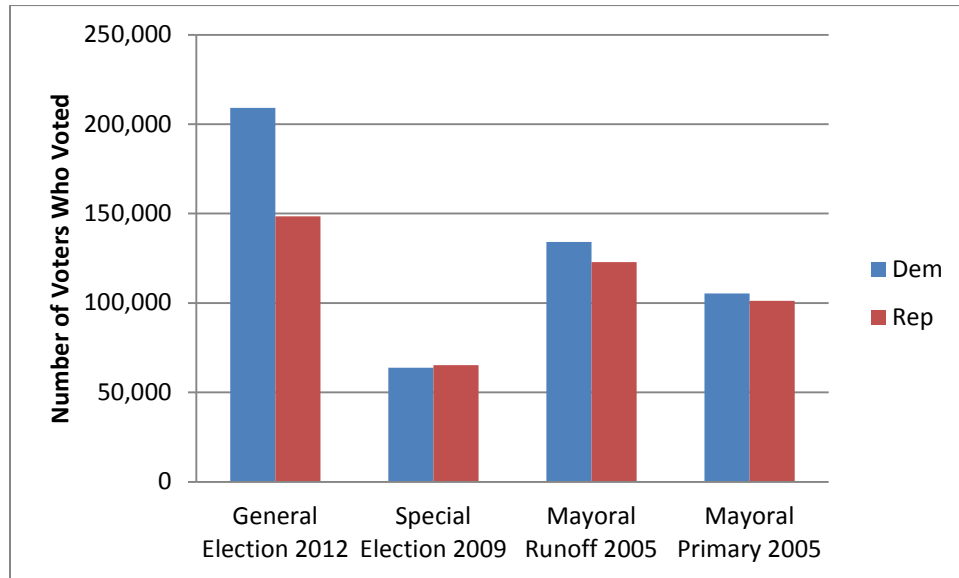
It would be difficult to see how Latino and youth voters will remain a large political force in November, especially given the strong turnout rate of Republican voters and GOP-friendly suburban neighborhoods north of Interstate 8. This is not to suggest that they will not be relevant or important factors in the election. However, these precincts will not be as large of a driving force in the upcoming election as they were last year.

In contrast, votes cast in GOP-friendly northern neighborhoods take a larger share of overall turnout in special elections. For example, during the 2004 and 2012 mayoral general elections, North-of -8 voters cast approximately 57% of total votes. However, during the 2005 general election these voters are accounted for approximately 70% of votes cast. It is also the case that independent voters are particularly fickle and much less likely to cast votes during low turnout elections. As Chart 4

¹ For LGBT precincts, NUSIPR selected those precincts which were: 1) in and around the Uptown Planning Area, 2) voted 80% or more in opposition to Prop. 8 in 2008, and 3) scored highest among Census Tracts with the largest percentage of “unmarried partners,” as defined by the U.S. Census. For young voters, NUSIPR examined precincts which had 48% or more voters aged 18 to 24 years, and in addition had 75 or more total registered voters. For Latino voters, we narrowed our list to those city precincts which had 48% or more Latino voters, and had 75 or more total registered voters.

demonstrates, Republican voters are a larger percentage of the voting electorate in special elections than presidential general elections.

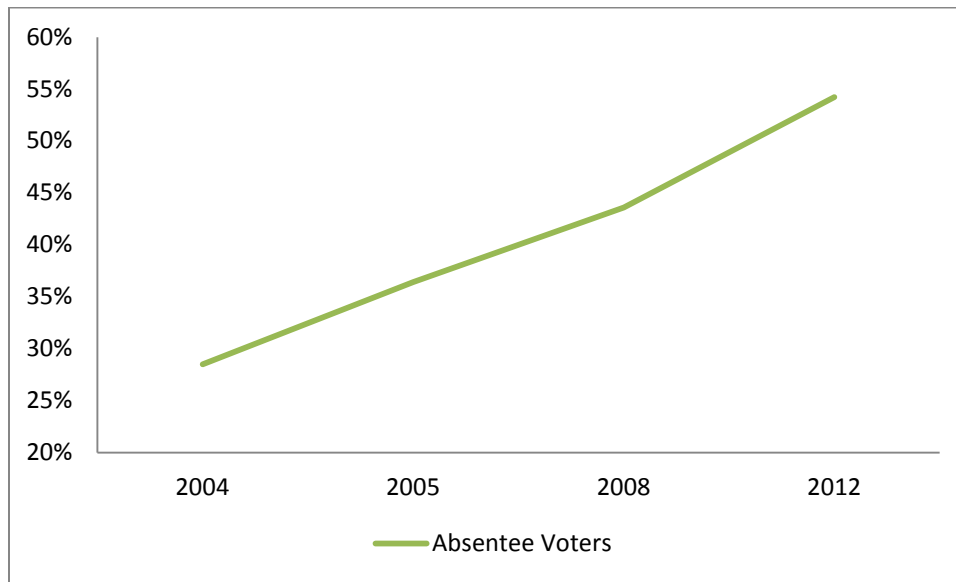
Chart 4: Partisan Voter Turnout in San Diego, 2005-2012



Absentee Voters

One of the ways in which the upcoming election will be different than most prior mayoral elections is the importance of absentee voters. After changes to the state law in 2002, voters no longer have to request absentee ballots each election cycle. With a new registration option for “permanent vote-by-mail” (PVBM), ballots now arrive in voter mailboxes for each election automatically. This has significantly changed the dynamics of local elections, which have historically focused heavily on motivating voters to cast ballots at polling locations on Election Day. These “Election Day voters” are quickly dwindling in number and the total number of permanent absentee voters in the City has more than tripled since 2005 (110,277 in 2005 to approximately 351,458 in September 2013). Indeed, the majority (52.3%) of San Diego City voters is Permanent Vote By Mail and absentee voters have also become a greater proportion of total votes cast in San Diego mayoral elections, growing from 36.4% in November 2004 to 54.23% in November 2012. NUSIPR projects that 67% of the ballots cast in the November 2013 mayoral special election will be absentee.

Chart 5: Absentee Voters as a Proportion of Total Votes Cast by San Diego Mayoral Election, 2004-2012



Electoral Diversity

Today, nearly 3 out of 10 (27%) registered voters in the City of San Diego are Asian or Latino and since 2005, Latino voters have increased from 68,671 in 2005 to 117,329 in September 2013. Asian voters have increased from approximately 35,708 in 2005 to 63,538 today. While these groups have traditionally had lower turnout rates than the overall population, their sheer size and growth rate means they cannot be completely ignored or marginalized by any serious mayoral campaign.

Conclusion

In some respects, San Diego’s mayoral elections all stand apart from each other. Each cycle is different from the next. Still, there are trends developing within the San Diego electorate that are shaping campaign strategies and political behavior. Due to the rise of absentee voting, campaigns must communicate with voters earlier in the election cycle, putting a premium on securing early endorsements and campaign funds quickly so as to communicate with absentee voters before they mail in their ballots. A more diverse electorate means more multilingual campaign tactics that respect cultural boundaries and tailored messages which stand a better chance of building a successful multi-ethnic coalition. A growing electoral population south of the 8 requires campaign platforms to include plans to increase neighborhood investments, increase public safety, reduce homelessness, and address

long-standing challenges in financing community infrastructure in neighborhoods with limited raw land for new development.

With growing diversity and complexity, San Diego's mayoral elections are taking the shape of other major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles. However, in contrast to other big cities in America, no one political party or demographic group overshadows the outcome of mayoral elections in San Diego. It remains a city where numerous winning coalitions are possible and turnout can dramatically impact the partisan makeup of the participating electorate.

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.