

Shifting Political Landscape Impacts San Diego City Mayoral Election

Executive Summary

The November 2012 election brought a sea change to San Diego City Hall, as the first Democratic mayor in more than 25 years was elected. While the victory of Congressman Bob Filner was a surprise for some, much has changed since the last open mayoral election in 2005. New voter and demographic dynamics make future elections far more competitive for Democratic candidates.

In order to foster greater understanding of this issue, the National University System Institute for Policy Research (NUISPR) analyzed electoral data from the San Diego Registrar of Voters using GIS and database software. Our research suggests that the voting electorate has become **more independent**, **more diverse**, and **more similar to other large urban areas**. These new trends are likely permanent, and will have a stronger impact on the outcome of future election cycles.

Overall, we found that:

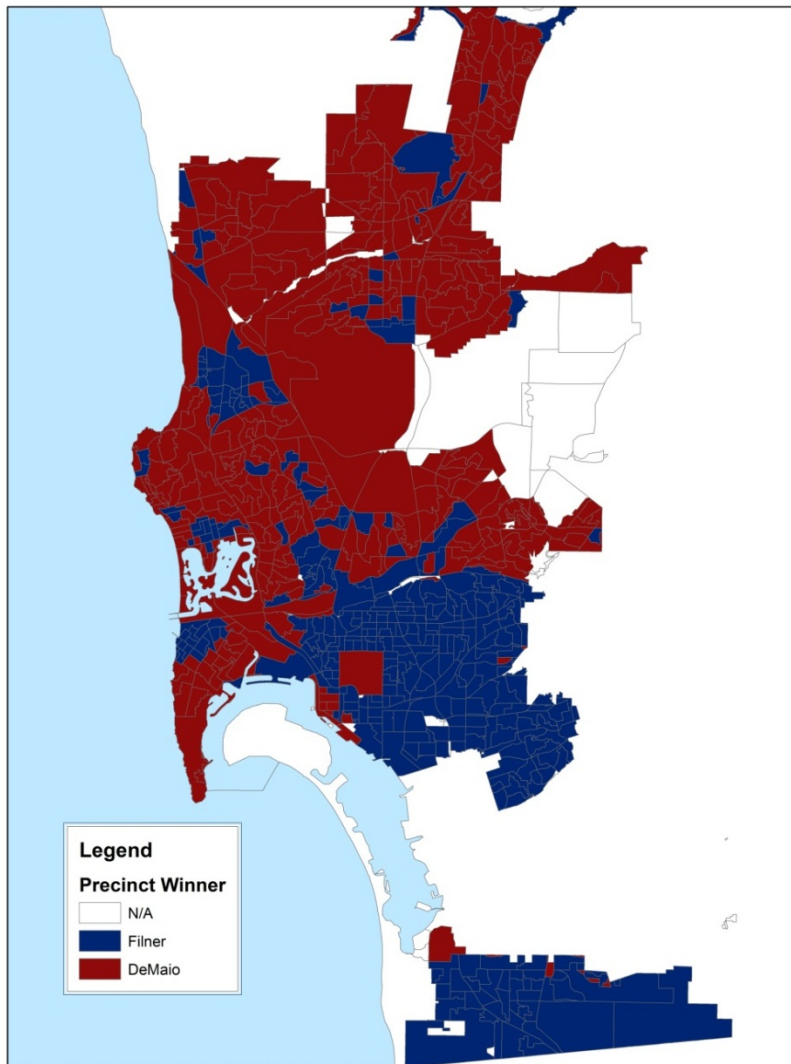
- **New city voters are more diverse and Independent than prior election cycles.** Asians, Latinos, and decline to state voters are an increasing share of the city electorate, and will continue to be so in the coming years.
- **Democratic voter registration has soared.** The Democratic Party has more than doubled their voter registration advantage over Republicans in the City of San Diego since the last open mayoral election.
- **San Diego's electoral center of gravity is shifting south.** After decades of northern city neighborhoods dominating citywide elections, current population trends suggest that the growing voter base south of Interstate 8 will become of increasing interest to both political parties.

Mayoral Election

On November 6, 2012, San Diego Congressman Bob Filner defeated Councilman Carl DeMaio in the mayoral election; the vote margin was 52.49% to 47.51%, respectively. Filner beat DeMaio in both the mail ballot vote count and the polling booth vote count. As projected by NUSIPR in October 2012, the majority (54.8%) of votes cast in this election were mail ballots, a historic first for the city.

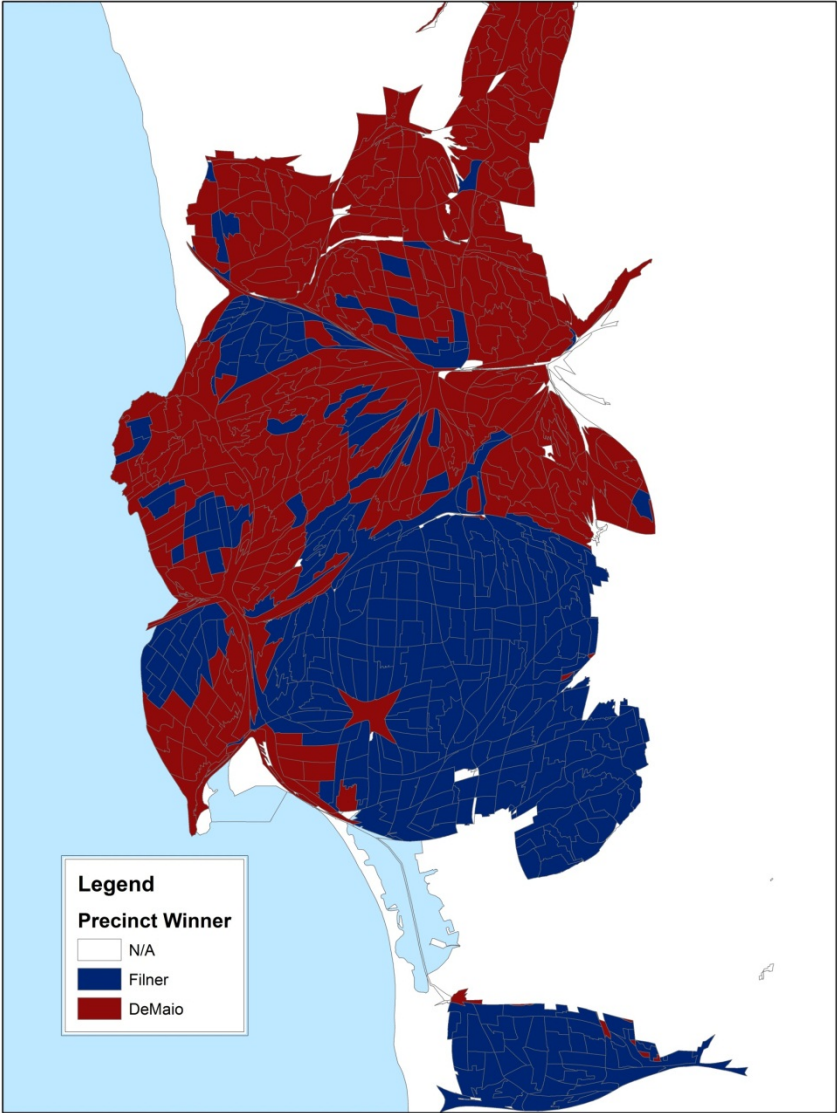
As the following illustration shows, DeMaio performed best in precincts north of Interstate 8, while Filner dominated nearly every southern neighborhood. Filner also earned strong voter support in precincts surrounding UCSD, as well as precincts north of the 8 with large percentages of Asian voter registration.

Figure 1: Winner by Precinct, San Diego Mayoral Election



The peculiar shape of the City of San Diego and the varying size of voting precincts obscure the actual distribution of votes in the mayoral election. Cartograms are a GIS technique that changes the geometry of maps to reflect variables, such as population density. When we use this model, the more votes, the larger the relative size of the precinct. Figure 2 shows just how large voter turnout in pro-Filner districts south of Interstate was in the November 2012 election.

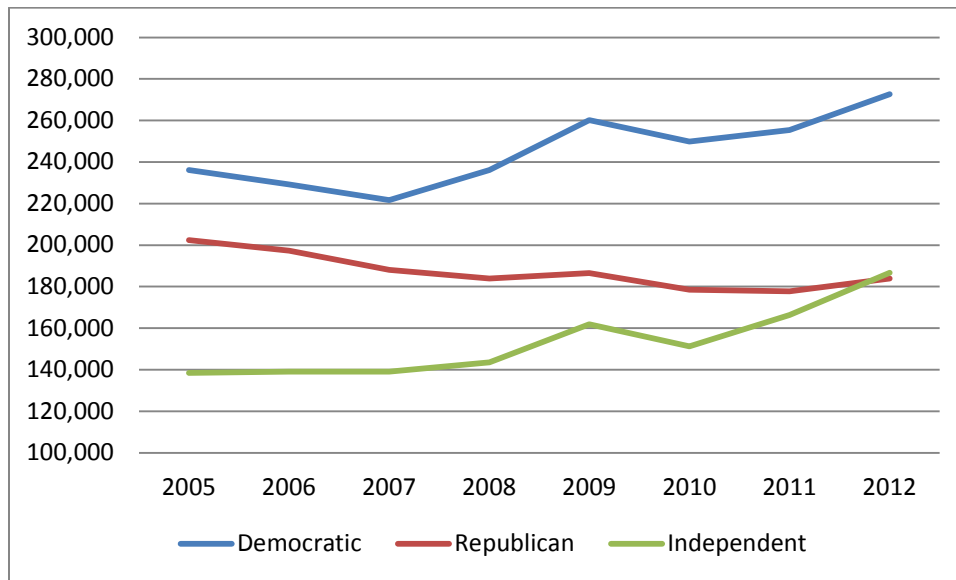
Figure 2: Winner by Precinct, San Diego Mayoral Election (Cartogram)



Voter Registration

From an examination of Registrar records, NUSIPR found that the partisan registration gap has dramatically widened in the City of San Diego. From October 2005 to October 2012, Democratic ranks grew by 36,491 voters; Independents have increased by 48,270 voters, while Republicans **decreased** by 18,465 voters. At the time of the 2005 general mayoral election, the Democratic Party had a 33,804 voter registration edge over the GOP. Today, that edge has more than doubled, to 88,760 voters. The number of Independent voters in the city has also now surpassed total registered Republicans.

Chart 1: Registered Voters in the City of San Diego, 2005-2012

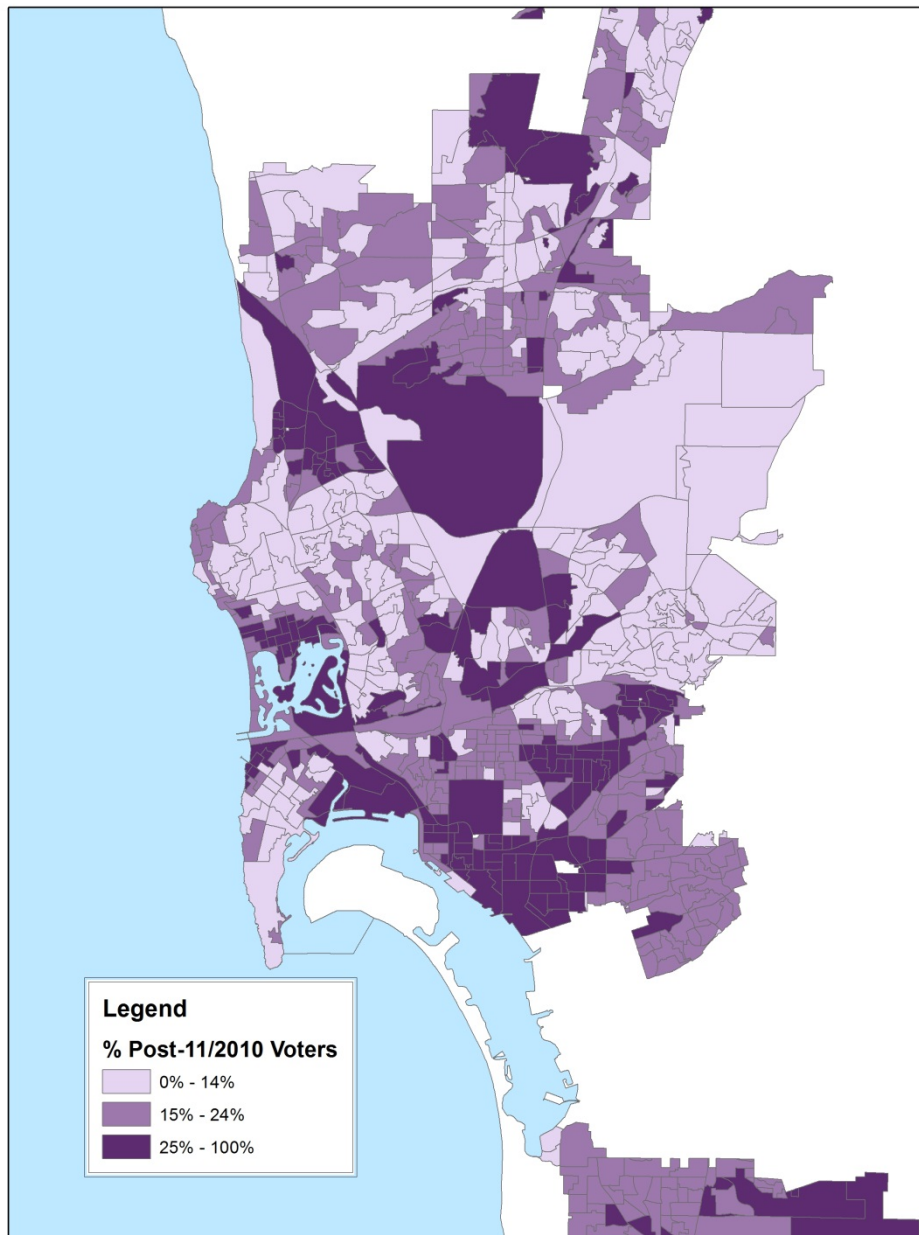


Trending Voter Groups

NUSIPR found that new voters in the City of San Diego are more diverse, urban and independent than voters in prior election cycles.

In the last two years, 128,640 voters have joined the city electorate. Voters registered after November 2010 now comprise nearly 1/5 (18.9%) of all voters citywide. As expected, some of this data reflects the presence of transitory voter populations. As the following chart illustrates, many new voters are concentrated in areas dominated by college students and young people. However, a large number of new voters reside within the redevelopment areas, as well as older Latino and immigrant neighborhoods South of Interstate 8. Sorting the data by community planning groups finds that the majority (51%) of these new voters reside South of the 8, and a plurality live in urban neighborhoods (vs. suburban, coastal or rural). As illustrated in the following chart, many South of the 8 precincts have large numbers of new voters.

Figure 3: New Voters as a Percentage of All Registered Voters, City of San Diego



A large share of new voters are registered Independents; 39.1% of all new voters registered after November 2010 are unaffiliated with political parties. In contrast, only 27.5% of the total citywide electorate are registered Independents. This trend is reflected statewide; according to data from the Secretary of State, more voters are registering as decline to state than ever before.

One of the major demographic shifts in San Diego over the last decade has been the increase in the Asian and Latino populations. Asians are the fastest growing ethnic community in the City of San Diego,

increasing 24% from 2000 to 2010. Latinos followed closely behind, increasing 21% over the same time period. In comparison, the number of non-Hispanic Caucasians decreased 2.8% from 2000 to 2010.

Voter demographics reflect these shifts in population. Mark DiCamillo, director of *The Field Poll*, noted in his November 2012 post-election report that 90% of the 3.5 million net increase in statewide voter registration since 1994 has been the result of registration among Latino and Asian populations. In the City of San Diego, there are 117,632 Latino voters and 60,825 Asian voters, comprising 17% and 9% of the total electorate. Prior to November 2007, Asians and Latinos only comprised 22% of San Diego City voters.¹ Asian and Latino voters made up 32% of those registering to vote since November 2010.

While Asian city voters are fairly split along partisan lines, the majority (53%) of Latino voters are registered Democrats. **San Diego Asian and Latino voters are somewhat more likely to register as Republicans or Independents than Asian and Latino voters statewide.**

Table 1: Asian & Latino Voters, by Political Affiliation

	Democratic	Republican	Decline to State
Latino San Diego	51%	16%	29%
Latino Statewide	56%	18%	22%
Asian San Diego	31%	28%	37%
Asian Statewide	36%	25%	36%

It is also the case that while Independents, Asian and Latino voters historically have poor electoral participation rates, their turnout soars for presidential general elections, which coincide with mayoral general elections.

¹ These figures reflect those city voters that registered prior to November 2007, and are still city residents today. It does not include city voters who registered prior to November 2007, and have since moved, died, or been otherwise expunged from registration records.

Conclusion

As San Diego grows and changes over time, so too will the electorate.

In prior San Diego election cycles, much of the political focus was on “coastal voters” and “suburban voters,” and the issues they care about. Moving forward, in order to remain competitive, Democratic and Republican candidates will have to pay greater attention to the issues of voters who live in San Diego’s older urban core. We would expect issues like homelessness, public transit and the quality of San Diego Unified Schools to become a permanent part of the electoral dialogue. Political survival requires candidates to deepen their education and awareness of a growing constituency. This doesn’t mean that the debates over smokestacks and geraniums are over but it is hard to imagine that the growth wars of the 1980s and the cries of “Stop Los Angelization Now” will have the political effect they did during prior decades.

In addition, Democratic candidates must be viewed as favorites to win in future City-wide elections than Republicans. But that said, Democratic candidates are only favored and not the presumptive winners that they are in some other large American cities. For example, the majority (55%) of Independent voters live north of the 8, many in neighborhoods represented by Republican elected officials. Special elections also favor Republican candidates, as votes cast in GOP-friendly northern neighborhoods take a larger share of overall turnout.²

Finally, Independents will remain decisive in the immediate future. Neither Democrats nor the GOP have an outright registration majority in the city. As prior research has shown, unaffiliated voters are low information voters that pay little attention to the campaign rhetoric until shortly before Election Day. This presents an opportunity. If candidates can appeal to a majority of Independents, they will be one step closer to victory.

² Compare the 2004 and 2012 mayoral general elections, where North of the 8 voters cast approximately 57% of total votes, vs. the 2005 general election, where they cast approximately 70% of votes citywide.

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.