

## **News & Notes: The Electoral Prospects of a New Chargers Stadium in San Diego**

### **Executive Summary**

San Diego city officials have pledged to put a new Chargers stadium proposal to a public vote in the future. With limited polling data and few details available on an emerging stadium proposal, it is unclear how a stadium ballot measure would fare before the electorate. To bring greater insight into this topic, the National University System Institute for Policy Research (NUSIPR) identified key dynamics to look for in a future referendum. Using GIS software and data from the Registrar of Voters, Statewide Database and Political Data Inc., NUSIPR developed baseline projections for the 2016 election cycle.

Overall, we found that:

**Public votes for new sports stadium are becoming less common.** The majority of new NFL stadiums that have opened or been approved in the last ten years did so without a direct public vote.

**Passing a new Chargers stadium ballot measure in 2016 is feasible.** Both historical data from the 1998 Proposition C election as well as current registration and turnout trends suggests a 2016 vote on the stadium will be challenging but winnable.

**New voter coalitions will be required for a stadium to succeed on the ballot.** The unique Republican-Latino voter coalition that emerged to help propel the new Padres ballpark to victory in 1998 may emerge in 2016, but will need to be expanded in order to succeed against current voter registration trends.

**Mayoral support isn't likely to have electoral consequences.** San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer is unlikely to be rewarded or punished by voters based on the outcome of current negotiations with the Chargers, or the result of a future Chargers ballot measure in 2016.

## Professional Sports Stadiums & the Electorate

In his January 2015 State of the City Address, San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer announced the creation of a Chargers stadium task force and pledged a new stadium proposal would reach the ballot for a public vote.

It is unclear what exactly a Chargers stadium referendum will look like, or what the vote threshold will be, but that will likely be dictated by the type of facility financing used. Prior NUSIPR research has identified that a new NFL stadium in San Diego County will likely cost between \$725 million to \$1.6 billion, with the public shouldering 2/3rds of that cost. With the Citizens Stadium Advisory Group taking tax increases off the table, and most finance conversations revolving around tax increment financing via an enhanced infrastructure financing district (EIFD), a 55% voter approval would be necessary (while EIFDs do not require voter approval to be established, they do require a 55% public vote to issue bonds.)

This commitment to a public vote runs against the current trend nationally as the overall trend has been away from public votes. In fact, the majority of the new NFL stadiums opened or proposed in the last ten years were approved without a direct public vote.

**Table 1: New NFL Stadiums Constructed or Opened Since 2005**

Stadium	Team	Proposed public cost (in millions)	Election?	Year Opened/Opening
New Atlanta Stadium	Atlanta Falcons	\$200	No	2017
New Minnesota Stadium	Minnesota Vikings	\$498	No	2016
Levi's Stadium	San Francisco 49ers	\$114	Yes	2014
MetLife Stadium	New York Giants & Jets	\$0	No	2010
AT&T Stadium	Dallas Cowboys	\$325	Yes	2009
Lucas Oil Stadium	Indianapolis Colts	\$620	No	2008
University of Phoenix Stadium	Arizona Cardinals	\$308	Yes	2006

## Sports Stadiums and Voter Choice

To some degree, stadium votes are cast under the same dynamics of any other electoral choice. As one researcher put it, "citizens vote on stadium referendums under conditions of incomplete information based on subjective perceptions of reality, centered on information received as a by-product of daily

activities or through the use of information shortcuts.”<sup>1</sup> Some of the various theories of what influences voter opinions of stadium referendums include:

- the perceived economic benefits of a new stadium;
- the level of financial risk to the public;
- the complexity of the proposal;
- the team identity and support within the community;
- the on-field performance of the team.

However, there is little empirical data to support any of these claims. One recent theory posits that the relative consumption value of professional sports to a voter is an influential determinant of voter behavior. In other words, the presence of a sports stadium (and presence of a team in a market) is simply another consumer good and the benefits differ based on the age, gender, income, ethnicity, education, and geographic location of a voter. Research studies that support this claim evaluated election results from the San Francisco Giants ballpark referendums and the public votes cast for the renovation of the Green Bay Packers’ Lambeau Field and the construction of the Houston Texans stadium.

To test this theory, and to shed more light on the voter groups that support professional sports stadiums in San Diego, NUSIPR conducted a predictive model by using the November 1998 Padres ballpark measure, Measure C, which passed with 59.64% of the vote in the City of San Diego. We obtained the 1998 vote returns by precinct from the San Diego Registrar of Voters, as well as archived precinct-level voter demographic and registration information from the Statewide Database. We conducted a series of regression tests using 50 different variables, which accounted for party affiliation, age, gender, ethnicity, voter turnout, and votes cast in other major contests that appeared on the ballot. We also evaluated the votes cast in the area immediately surrounding the old Padres ballpark (Mission Valley community planning area) as well as those cast near the proposed site in East Village (Centre City planning area).

The variables we found to have statistically significant positive correlations with the percentage of Yes votes in a precinct were:

- Residents of the Centre City Planning Area;
- Male voters (all ages);
- The greater percentage of Republicans in a precinct;
- The greater the proportion of residents with an Asian Ethnicity;
- The greater the proportion of residents with a Latino ethnicity.

Variables that correlate with “no” votes were:

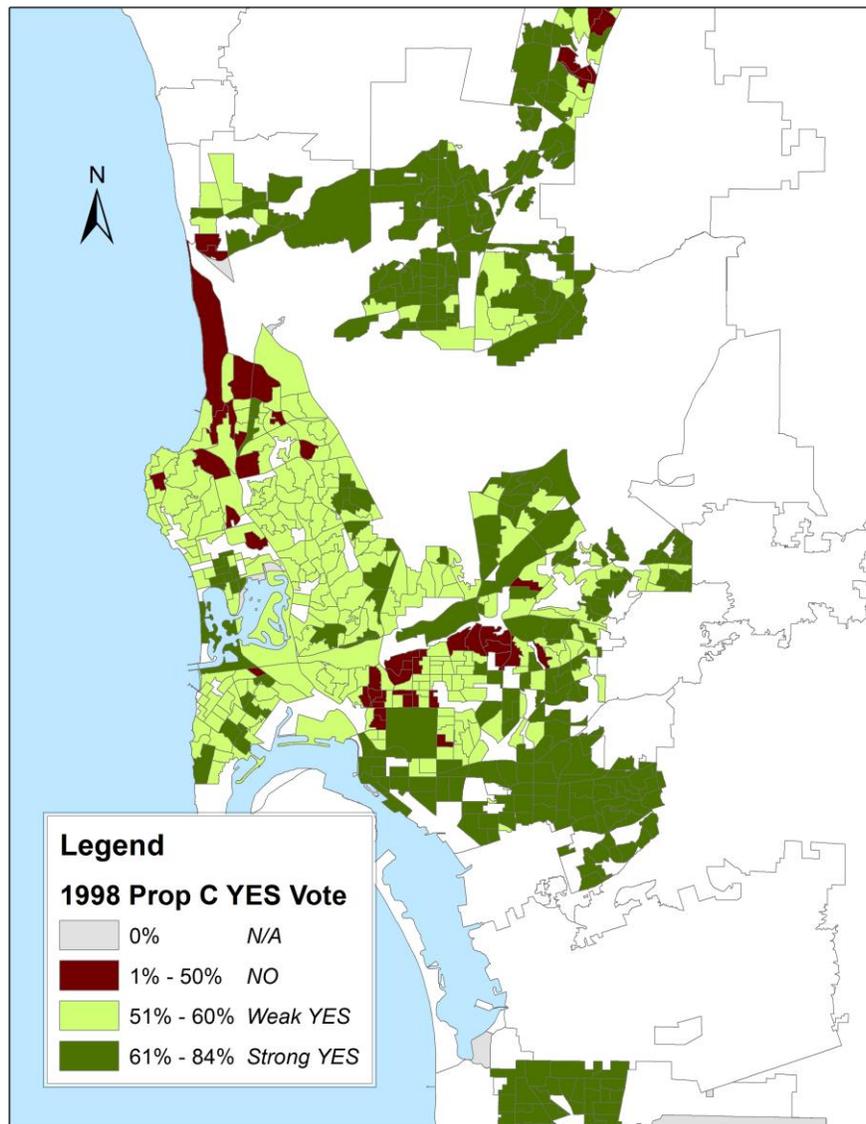
- Female voters (all ages), and
- Proportion of Independent voters (all ages, both Females and Males).

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<sup>1</sup> Kellison, Timothy and Mondello, Michael. “Voters and Stadiums: An Initial Test of the Sport Referendums Model.” Oral presentation. 2014 North American Society for Sport Management Conference. May 29, 2014. <[https://www.nassm.com/files/conf\\_abstracts/2014-006.pdf](https://www.nassm.com/files/conf_abstracts/2014-006.pdf)>.

Using GIS software, we also evaluated the precincts where Yes votes were cast at percentages higher than the citywide average. Geographically, the strongest Prop C supporters (shown in dark green) came from precincts in Southeastern neighborhoods, Otay Mesa, San Ysidro, Scripps Ranch, and Rancho Bernardo. Opponents (shown in dark red) were largely concentrated in the Kensington, the UCSD/UTC area, and Uptown neighborhoods.

**Figure 1: Proposition C Votes by Precinct, November 1998**



The mapping data and regression tests suggest that a unique Republican-Latino voter coalition emerged to push Proposition C through Election Day. It could well be that Republican and Latino voters in San Diego consume higher amounts of baseball programming and other professional sports. Nielsen TV

viewership data supports the premise that sports viewership generally leans Republican. Surveys have also revealed that baseball is a sport that is dominated by older, Caucasian male fans, which comprise a large proportion of the Republican electorate. While Latinos only comprise a fraction of Major League Baseball viewership, they arguably may be more motivated by a stronger sense of fan loyalty and affinity to local sports teams. One explanation is that relatively less economic mobility over multiple generations has helped shaped a stronger Latino community identity with San Diego and a vested interest in the success of the Padres (and, by extension, the Chargers as well).

Campaigns also matter. The Republican-Latino voter coalition may also be a function of the electorate taking voter cues via political party endorsements; both the San Diego Democratic Party and Republican Party endorsed Proposition C. Latino voters are overwhelmingly registered Democratic in the City of San Diego. It is unclear whether the party endorsements were communicated to targeted voters in campaign mailers, robocalls, or other mediums, but it is reasonable to assume that they were, given San Diego’s prior election cycles.

**Onward to 2016**

There has been considerable change and growth within the San Diego electorate since 1998; less than a 1/3 of San Diego City voters today (179,327 out of 667,249) cast ballots on the Padres ballpark ballot measure. However, we can evaluate voter trends and make reasonable projections on what the voter landscape will look like countywide in 2016.

Looking at voter registration data from the San Diego Registrar of Voters voter groups that were unfavorable to a new Padres ballpark are all growing as a proportion of the electorate. Democrats, women voters, and decline to state “Independent” voters comprise a larger share of voters than they did in 1998. Conversely, the largest voter group in favor of PETCO Park’s passage on the ballot is shrinking – there are now nearly 100,000 fewer Republican voters registered today in San Diego County than in 1998. This loss is somewhat offset by the significant growth of Latino and Asian voters in the region.

**Table 2: Voter Registration in San Diego County, 1998 & 2015**

Year	Total Registered Voters	Democratic	Republican	Decline to State	Male	Female	Latino	Asian
1998	1,512,934	524,568	605,805	309,964	742,841	770,093	223,534	14,662
2015	1,554,031	537,264	506,093	426,131	740,078	801,869	305,466	99,881

Ultimately, what matters most is the expected voter turnout in 2016; not all registered voters will cast ballots. Presidential general election cycles, especially those with open presidential contests, generate the highest voter turnout. Using voter information from Political Data Inc., NUSIPR modeled the projected voter turnout for fall 2016, by filtering the entire registered county electorate for only those voters who cast ballots in the November 2012 presidential election, or the November 2014 gubernatorial election, or have registered to vote since the November 2014 election. The resulting voter

universe is 1,275,913 ballots cast by 1,554,031 voters (82.1% voter turnout). This would be on par with the last presidential open general contest (November 2008), when 83.72% of county voters cast ballots.

With stadium discussions now including an earlier timeline for voter approval, NUSIPR also modeled the June 2016 election voter turnout. We filtered voter records for only those voters who cast ballots in the February 2008 presidential primary, or the June 2012 presidential primary, or the June 2014 gubernatorial primary, or has registered to vote since June 2014. In this scenario, the predicted voting universe is 895,872 out of 1,554,031 voters (57.6% voter turnout). This is similar to the turnout rate of the last presidential open primary contest (February 2008), when 60.67% of county voters cast ballots.

Comparing the projected voter demographics for the 1998 ballpark measure and the 2016 election cycles, **it is evident that stadium proponents will have to build a broader coalition beyond Republican and Latino voters.**

**Table 3: Projected Voter Turnout in the City of San Diego & San Diego County, 1998 & 2016**

Turnout Projection	Democratic	Republican	Decline to State	Male	Female	Latino	Asian
1998 Citywide	36%	44%	12%	48%	52%	8%	2%
2016 June Countywide	37%	38%	21%	47%	53%	15%	6%
2016 November Countywide	35%	34%	26%	47%	53%	18%	7%

One final issue is whether the vote takes place on a city or county-wide basis. Given the regression analysis, the higher percentage of Republican voters countywide would seem to help the efforts of stadium backers. The more difficult issue to evaluate is how voters outside of the City of San Diego will feel about investing county resources in a facility located squarely in the center of another city.

### The Risks to Mayoral Support

San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer has taken a central role in the quest for a new Chargers stadium, using his political capital and public office to move the process forward. Any controversial public proposal requires a recognizable, articulate spokesman to shape public opinion and speak before the media, and Faulconer has, to a certain degree, already taken on that role. It is likely that he will assume an even more prominent role after May during the stadium negotiations and the presentation of the ballot question before the City Council, (possibly) the County Board of Supervisors and the public.

It interesting to ask the question of whether Mayor Faulconer faces any political downside or risk to his involvement in the Chargers stadium process. The research suggests he does not. A recent Georgetown University study examined the subsequent years in public service served by city mayors in 235 situations since 1900 where a professional sports team stays, leaves, arrives, was selected as an expansion site, stayed while a stadium was being built, or moved away/moved to a neighboring city.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the study

<sup>2</sup> Carr, Patrick J. "The Politics of Stadium Financing: The Price of Mayoral Support." Chicago, IL. April 2009. <[http://citation.allacademic.com//meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/3/6/1/7/8/pages361781/p361781-1.php](http://citation.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/3/6/1/7/8/pages361781/p361781-1.php)>.

found that mayors who lose **teams don't do any worse or better in their later political careers than mayors who retain teams or preside over new stadium construction**. Statistical tests did however identify that Republican mayors served slightly fewer years than Democratic mayors when they became involved in a stadium project. The study also found a statistically significant negative correlation between the years served by mayors in public service and the percentage of public subsidy towards a stadium project. In other words, the more public money put in, the greater the risk to one's political career. Thus, while Mayor Faulconer may suffer few political repercussions of a failed stadium vote or the Chargers leaving San Diego, he may face negative consequences if the public stadium financing is considered large and lavish.

## **Conclusion**

For a Chargers stadium to succeed at the ballot box, it will likely require a few factors to head in San Diego's favor. Some of these are relatively straight-forward. Endorsements from both the San Diego Republican and Democratic parties would be valuable for appealing to partisan, high propensity voters, which will be a substantial share of the voting electorate. A well-funded, well managed Yes campaign will need to start work to identify and appeal to skeptical and undecided voters, and secure the votes of supporters early. The measure is also likelier to succeed if an organized, funded No campaign never emerges or has high profile endorsers with cross-party appeal. Prominent listing on physical ballots would also likely generate more Yes votes. Unknown exogenous events, such as an economic recession, may also be detrimental to the fate of a campaign.

The Yes campaign will also need to think about how to appeal to Democrats, female voters and thread the needle between the positive value of going "county wide" while not surfacing long-standing tensions between the City and the rest of the county. Suburban voters are suburban for a reason and the quickest way to defeat will be a stadium proposal that is seen as using county resources to fund a "city-centric" project.

Given the projected voter landscape, and specifically the large number of women and Independent voters expected to cast ballots, it will be interesting to see if stadium proponents use sophisticated voter contact techniques to sift through, identify and communicate with likely supporters. Advanced voter "microtargeting" programs combine polling surveys, commercial data, voter registration information and other public data, and use statistical techniques to identify unique voter groups by attributes such as lifestyle, consumer choices, geography, etc. Such microtargeting programs are costly, experimental, and rarely used in local races. It may well be that unknown stadium proponents could be identified using *ESPN* and *Sports Illustrated* magazine subscription lists, or a variety of other data points which reveal a high consumption of professional sports. If the election is a close contest, victory or loss at the ballot may hinge on whether such techniques are used.

## **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.