

San Diego Mayoral Election: A Race to the Finish Line

Executive Summary

On the eve of Election Day, the National University System Institute for Policy Research (NUSIPR) projects a close race between Councilmember Kevin Faulconer and Councilmember David Alvarez. Using election data from the Registrar of Voters, NUSIPR evaluated the absentee ballots received for the February 11th runoff election.

Overall, we found that:

- **President Obama's endorsement of Alvarez will generate voter interest.** Due to the "Obama factor," we expect more voters, particularly Democratic voters, to tune in to the election and take a closer look at the candidates.
- **Absentee ballots are mostly cast by north of the 8 voters, Democratic voters.** While Republican ballots have a higher return rate, more Democratic ballots have been cast than GOP ballots. Most votes cast in the election have been from north of Interstate 8 Council Districts.
- **Voter turnout will be higher for the February 2014 election than the November 2013 election.** Based on the rate of absentee ballot returns, NUSIPR projects a 42%-45% voter turnout rate. This is notably higher than the November 2013 turnout rate of 35%.
- **More than 100,000 ballots will be cast on Election Day.** Approximately three out of ten (30%) ballots will be cast at polling locations on Election Day. Combined with absentee ballots turned in to polling locations on Tuesday, the Election Day ballot tally will likely exceed 100,000.

Obama Endorsement

On Saturday, February 8th, the Alvarez campaign announced that President Barack Obama endorsed Alvarez for mayor. NUISPR has previously opined that Alvarez needed something dramatic in this closing days of the campaign to generate voter interest and drive higher turnout at the polls. This is a significant event, and one that brings an important dynamic to the election. The endorsement grabbed the attention of many voters, particularly Democratic voters, who otherwise weren't paying attention to the election and were unlikely to vote. It has also sparked greater enthusiasm and energy from volunteers, donors and grassroots supporters, who will all be critical to the campaign's Get Out The Vote operations through Tuesday.

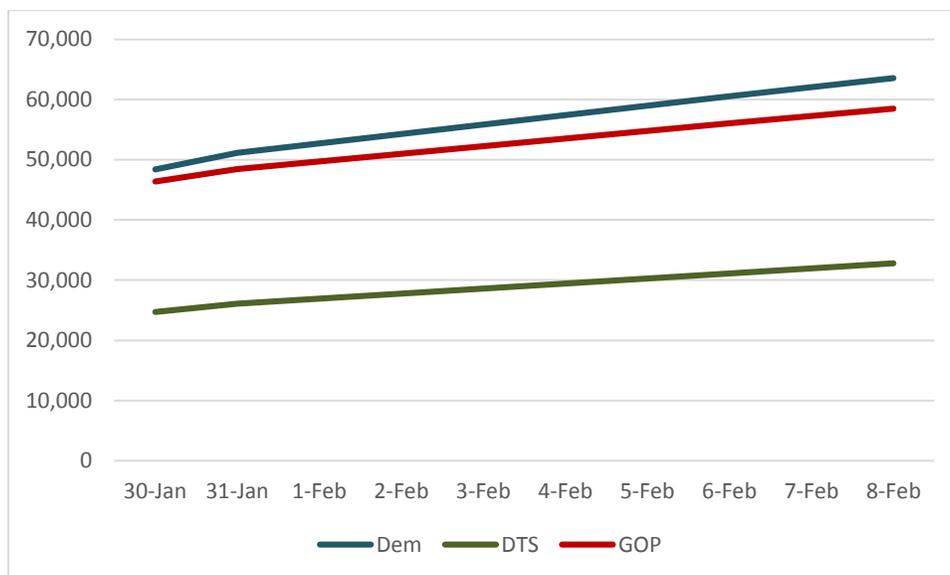
In campaigns, high-profile endorsements are often found to be double-edged swords; candidates receive new supporters, as well as new detractors. However, the downside to an Obama endorsement is negligible for Alvarez. While he may lose some crossover votes, he will earn greater credibility and awareness with the sizeable Democratic base. It remains to be seen if, and how much of a net vote gain Alvarez receives through his presidential support. To gauge the impact of the endorsement, NUISPR will be monitoring voter turnout in key Democratic precincts until the close of the election.

The question is not whether Obama's endorsement is a plus for the Alvarez campaign – it's what the strategy is to share the news of the endorsement with voters with just hours left before Election Day. The Alvarez campaign will have to raise awareness to targeted voter groups that need more encouragement to vote – Democratic voters, young voters, and Latino voters south of the 8. Alvarez will also have to turn out a higher number of Democratic voters on Election Day than in November 2013, when approximately 29,500 Democratic votes were cast, compared to 24,000 Republican votes. At this late stage in the election, mailers and rallies featuring the President are not options. Radio ads and recorded phone messages to voters could be taped and distributed, depending on Obama's participation.

Absentee Voter Turnout

In the past week, Democratic votes have pulled further away from the total number of Republican ballots cast. As of February 8th, the total number of Democratic votes cast was 63,567, while GOP ballots tallied at 58,492. Both parties outpace ballots returned by Decline to State voters (32,772). Overall, slightly less than half (45%) of all Democratic absentee ballots have been returned, compared to 58% of GOP ballots, and 35% of Independent ballots.

Figure 1: Total Ballots Cast by Political Party, January 30th-February 8th, 2014



Voter turnout has been higher in City Council Districts north of the 8 than those south of the 8. Turnout in most South of the 8, Democratic-leaning Council Districts, including Councilmember Alvarez’s District 8 (Districts 4, 8 and 9) is lagging the citywide average (47%). Voter turnout in northern, Republican-leaning Districts (5, 6, 7) are exceeding the citywide average. In Councilmember Faulconer’s District 2, which is split between north and south, turnout (50.6%) is high.

Table 1: Absentee Ballots Received by Council District, February 8th, 2014

| Council District | Absentee Ballots Issued | Absentee Ballots Returned | Absentee Turnout Rate |
|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 46,520 | 23,428 | 50.4% |
| 2 | 43,108 | 21,829 | 50.6% |
| 3 | 45,544 | 21,456 | 47.1% |
| 4 | 33,580 | 12,670 | 37.7% |
| 5 | 49,170 | 25,423 | 51.7% |
| 6 | 38,450 | 18,642 | 48.5% |
| 7 | 42,998 | 23,008 | 53.5% |
| 8 | 25,617 | 9,115 | 35.6% |
| 9 | 28,065 | 10,526 | 37.5% |
| Total | 353,052 | 166,097 | 47.0% |

Final Voter Turnout

NUSIPR anticipates a higher voter turnout for the February 2014 election than the November 2013 election. On any given day in the past week, total votes cast has exceeded the total votes cast at the same point in time in the last election by about 28,000-32,000 votes. Based on the rate of absentee ballot returns thus far, NUSIPR projects a final 42%-45% voter turnout rate. This is notably higher than the November 2013 turnout rate of 35%. Furthermore, we expect that approximately three out of ten (30%) ballots will be cast at polling locations on Election Day, which is within the range of poll voting from past local special elections (29%-35% of total vote). Combined with absentee ballots turned in to polling locations on Tuesday, the Election Day ballot tally will likely exceed 100,000.

Conclusion

With the election coming down to the wire, key to victory will be an effective Get Out The Vote program that can bring identified supporters out to vote on Election Day. Still, there are a number of undecided voters who have yet to make their choice for Mayor. Both candidates have powerful third-party validators that can help reduce voter information costs. Alvarez's endorsements include President Obama, the Democratic Party and former Councilmember Donna Frye, key figures in a city where Democratic voters make a strong plurality of the electorate. On the other hand, Faulconer has key endorsements from the *U-T San Diego*, former Mayor Jerry Sanders and Father Joe Carroll, two popular local leaders which have been featured prominently in campaign ads. There are now only hours left before all the votes need to be cast in this contest. It is clear that, given the unknown factors of Obama's endorsement and a late rise in Alvarez's standing in the polls, 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.