

## A HOT ELECTION CLOSE TO HOME

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Forget the fall TV line-up, the season's most interesting drama has got to be the 2004 race for the presidency. Both campaigns are raising and spending record amounts of money, and those independent 527 organizations are pouring in tens of millions more. The race definitely has our attention.

Locally, our KPBS/Competitive Edge Research poll conducted just after Labor Day finds that an incredible 90 percent of registered voters say they are "absolutely certain" they will cast a ballot in this election. In last year's white-hot recall race 70 percent of respondents told us they were absolutely certain to vote. Actual turnout was 67 percent in San Diego County. With that in mind, our fearless prediction is that turnout here will top 75 percent, something we have not seen since Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in 1980.

With all the noise and fury of the current presidential political maelstrom, local races can slip under the average voter's radar. The stakes are high in two city of San Diego races -- the mayor's race and Proposition F, the so-called "Strong Mayor Initiative."

Recently, national newspapers have splashed scathing stories on the city of San Diego's fiscal situation across their pages, even going so far as to speculate that bankruptcy may become San Diego's lot. Additionally, the city manager issued a report detailing \$656 million worth of unfunded needs including police, fire, parks and libraries. It is in this context that city voters will head to their polling place in less than two months.

First, Proposition F, the strong mayor measure, would fundamentally change San Diego city governance. The progressive era model in which an insulated staff of professionals guides the operation of the city along with the City Council would be left behind. Instead the mayor would direct the city's operations and serve as a counter-balance to the council. As of now, despite the initiative's importance, San Diegans do not seem sharply focused on Proposition F. The KPBS/Competitive Edge Research poll finds that 38 percent support the change while 29 percent oppose the revised version of Proposition F, hardly a commanding lead, and over one-third are uncertain how they will vote.

Supporters were dealt a setback last week when a judge ruled the ballot wording was "not impartial." That's being charitable. We tested both versions and our data shows that the initial wording would have helped the ballot measure immensely by turning the 9

percent lead it now has into a 23 percent bulge.

The mayor's race is another important one for the city of San Diego. The poll finds Mayor Dick Murphy garnering 38 percent of the vote and county Supervisor Ron Roberts 24 percent. At first blush that may seem positive for Murphy. He has a double-digit lead, and Murphy supporters can highlight the fact that Roberts has not improved on his primary showing.

But the mayor's office is really up for grabs because 39 percent of San Diego voters are undecided. This large chunk of voters combined with the many "soft" supporters -- those who will probably (instead of definitely) vote for a candidate -- means that almost two-thirds are now "in play." Roberts' supporters can rightly argue this shows that the mayor has not been able to "close the deal" with the electorate despite four years in office.

So what do these numbers mean for the candidates?

For Supervisor Roberts, he needs to trumpet his message of fiscal responsibility loud enough to rise above the din of the presidential race. Deeper analysis suggests that this is especially true in the communities north of state Route 52. While Roberts beats Murphy in his supervisorial district, he must convert more folks in communities like La Jolla, Scripps Ranch and Rancho Bernardo.

For Mayor Murphy, he must find a way to swing Democrats, especially female Democrats, to his camp. They tend to be the voters who are most on the fence. If Roberts continues to set the terms of debate, this will be hard. After all, while Roberts is also a Republican, he has survived quite well in a supervisorial district with a Democratic edge in registration.

An interesting twist to this campaign is that if Roberts is successful in wounding the mayor politically, it may actually doom the strong mayor initiative; an initiative that Roberts himself supports. It is a short step from fanning suspicion of the incumbent mayor to fostering doubt about giving more power to the office.

As San Diegans peel themselves away from the spectacle of the presidential campaign to focus on other campaigns, they will notice at least two exciting horse races taking place right in their own back yard.

Credit: Nienstedt is president and Nelson is director of business development with Competitive Edge Research ([www.cerc.net](http://www.cerc.net)).

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