

Another day, another mayoral election

The San Diego Union - Tribune - San Diego, Calif.

Author: Job Nelson and John Nienstedt

Date: Jun 14, 2005

Copyright Union-Tribune Publishing Co. Jun 14, 2005

If they awarded a prize for the craziest political race of 2004, San Diego's race for mayor would take top honors. We would edge out wacky competitors such as Washington state's gubernatorial race because at least candidate Dino Rossi conceded last week. Citizens here are just now gearing up for a "do-over" election (which probably won't actually elect a mayor) in six weeks time.

With some fresh faces in the mayor's race, it will be a much different campaign the second time around. The latest KPBS/ Competitive Edge Research Poll finds that not only have the candidates changed, but the political landscape also has shifted.

While the city's financial problems were an issue in November, the full extent of the ugly problem is now coming to light, and the ramifications worry county and city residents alike. One major concern is that San Diego's once-solid reputation is being sullied. Almost 60 percent of county residents believe that folks around the country now have a worse impression of the city. That often- posited-but-never-proved contention that San Diego nurses an inferiority complex is becoming a reality. In chilling news for elected officials, these negative numbers climb even higher -- pushing 70 percent -- when those who are not registered to vote are removed from the equation.

So what does the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research survey tell us about this summer's race?

The first insight is that the city's electorate is fairly engaged. Fifty-five percent of city voters say they are now paying close attention to San Diego city issues and politics. Will this produce higher turnout at the polls? No one really knows because, despite the crisis atmosphere and heightened attentiveness, scheduling a July election consigned the candidates to toil for votes in the wasteland of midsummer politics.

The real question is whether San Diegans will find enough time in their packed summer schedules to stroll down to the neighbor's garage to cast a vote or whether they'll remember to mail-in that absentee ballot before taking off for their summer vacations. It is upon such considerations that the leadership of the city rests.

Suppose attentiveness remains high while voter turnout will be low. This most likely scenario means that the pool of actual voters will be very informed. Unlike last November's election where the din of the presidential race drowned out other campaigns, voters who will actually cast ballots in July won't be distracted. Candidates promoting detailed reform plans should have a fighting chance this time around.

The second lesson is that there is no single "right way" appeal to residents. In a fascinating finding, the poll shows that folks are evenly divided between optimistic, pessimistic and, what we call "mayor-dependent" camps.

The optimists -- who make up 31 percent -- agree with the idea that any reasonably qualified mayor will lead San Diego to the promised land of financial recovery. This group is disproportionately populated by folks who are not paying very close attention to local issues. Therefore they are not likely to dominate the civic debate.

On the other side are the pessimists who think that no mayor, no matter how qualified, can possibly pull San Diego out its quagmire in the next few years. Thirty percent place themselves in this group. Obviously, these folks tend to believe that San Diego's reputation has worsened. They will be drawn to more radical remedies. Interestingly, this point of view appeals to more men than women.

In the middle are the 32 percent who pin their hopes entirely on the next mayor. The right mayor will pull us through, they feel; the wrong one won't. These pragmatists are going to be listening very closely during this election cycle and saying "show us what you've got" to lead the city.

As for the prospect of bankruptcy, residents are not there ... yet. Most think San Diego will avoid bankruptcy, though relatively few are rock solid in that view.

The poll indicates that the electorate voting on July 26 will be highly informed. Because the stakes are as high as they have ever been, because voters will be paying close attention, and because this will be the only race in town, no candidate will get a free ride. All of the major candidates will be fully vetted by the news media and the voters. Maybe then San Diego will finally hand off the prize for the craziest race to some other hapless city or state.

Nelson is a research analyst and Nienstedt is president with Competitive Edge Research (www.cerc.net).

Credit: Nelson is a research analyst and Nienstedt is president with Competitive Edge Research (www.cerc.net).