

# **Involvement in the Arts**

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## **Introduction**

This installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows that the hearts of San Diegans may be committed to the arts, but their wallets are not. San Diego County adults generally agree that the arts improve a community's quality of life and – even more so – agree that exposure to the arts improves a child's academic performance. However, only 24% donated money to arts organizations last year and just 57% support paying five dollars more in taxes to support the arts. Both of these results are far below the statewide norm. Further, fewer than two-thirds (65%) attended a performing or visual arts event in the past year. The statewide percentage was 83% in 2001.

## **Attending Arts Events**

While the percentage of San Diegans who make it to art events lags behind the state, well over a majority of local residents did attend theater, music, dance or visual art events at least once last year. Still, of those who attended an event, three-quarters made it to five or fewer events. So even those who do go to these events are generally infrequent patrons. Overall, just 7% of county residents average one or more art events per month and can be labeled "arts aficionados."

The data clearly show that art event attendance is partially a function of family income: those with more money go – and go far more often – to events. In fact, just 50% to 60% who earn less than \$60,000 went to an art event last year. At the \$60,000 to \$80,000 level attendance rises to 70% and increases further to about 80% among those making in excess of \$80,000. Attendance can be described as "moderate" among affluent residents, as half of those with incomes over \$100,000 go to arts events three or more

times per year. The inference is that the arts are not a “poor man’s” diversion. However, with income levels closely tied to education, whether or not someone has a college education may also play a role.

Another factor driving event attendance is where a resident lives. Those on the eastern and southern tiers of the county are less frequent attenders. Forty percent in the eastern suburbs (La Mesa, El Cajon, Santee, Spring Valley, et. al.), southern suburbs (National City to the international border) and the backcountry did not go to an event last year and just 2% could be called frequent patrons. Since distance from arts venues is probably a factor, this could be due to that area’s far-flung expanse. Most arts establishments are located within the city of San Diego or in the County’s northern tier. Of course, residents in the north and urban core may in part be drawn to live in those areas specifically because of their proximity to the arts.

The results also show that, when it comes to one’s age, there is a subtle sweet spot for the arts among 35 to 44 year-olds. Half in this age group go to arts events three or more times and 7% patronize them more than 20 times. These are the years when parents may be introducing their children to the arts. If there is a demographic segment that arts proponents should be targeting, it is the thirty-something-plus category (preferably with more disposable income).

### **Direct Involvement**

Personal involvement in arts organizations is far more prevalent across California than it is here in San Diego County. While 19% of San Diegans volunteer for the arts, 24% of Californians do. But the main difference in involvement lies in generating monetary donations. Only 24% here contributed to arts organizations while 41% said they donated statewide in 2001. The “sunshine tax” appears to be taking a big bite out of the arts.

Volunteering for the arts is strongly related to event attendance. Just 7% who never attended an arts event donated their time but 36% of regular patrons volunteered. Monetary donations are similarly related to attendance as just 7% of non-attenders made a donation but 45% of regular patrons contributed. Despite more frequent donation activity among arts patrons, it appears that, since the overall percentage of local donors is dwarfed by the state's figures, county arts organizations have not been too successful at tapping into their core customer base.

Another interesting finding is that registering to vote is associated with volunteering for the arts. The survey finds that while 22% of registered voters volunteered, just 11% of non-registrants gave of their time. This suggests that the civic-mindedness of electoral participation carries over to personal sacrifices in other areas such as the arts.

As for donating money, a person's political ideology is surprisingly a better predictor of whether one will donate than a person's income. Thirty-nine percent of very liberal San Diegans say they donated, but only 15% of very conservative folks did. The percentage of moderate liberals donating money is even higher than the percentage of moderate conservatives. The tightness of this relationship is startling and suggests that support for the arts is a defining factor in what it means to be a liberal or a conservative. This could be exacerbated by a perception among conservatives, warranted or not, that artists and arts groups have drifted in an increasingly liberal direction. Whatever the case, arts organizations appear to have a tougher time "dialing for dollars" in conservative San Diego county.

Income *is* an important factor when it comes to arts donations, just not as significant as ideology. Here the results show that over half who earn more than \$150,000 per year donate to the arts, while 36% in the \$100,000 to \$150,000 category do. The percentage who donate continues to drop from there and only 9% of those earning less than

\$20,000 per year make monetary contributions to the arts. Again, arts patronage is much more of a rich person's pursuit.

The survey also finds that donations more frequently come from those in their 50s and 60s (roughly one-third in that age category claim to have donated) and those in the north suburbs (the I-15 corridor north of Rancho Bernardo). This perhaps reflects the recent success of Escondido's California Center for the Arts.

### **Taxing for the Arts = Forced Donating?**

The discovery that support for a five dollar tax to fund the arts receives far less support here than it did statewide in 2001 is not surprising to long time students of local politics. Not only is San Diego more ideologically conservative than the balance of the state, but the region has had a well-deserved reputation as a low-tax enclave. Only 35% would definitely be willing to pay a five dollar tax and 22% would probably pay it – so the support it does get is fairly soft. On the other hand, 26% say they would definitely not be willing to pay the additional money. Since it would take two-thirds support to pass an arts tax, actually winning at the ballot box with this hypothetical measure is a longshot.

Part of this is certainly due to the City of San Diego's fiscal situation. Though the non-city portions of the County traditionally tend to be more fiscally conservative, it is city residents who display significantly less support for the art tax. Indeed, only 51% in the city support a tax compared to 61% outside the city. While passing an arts tax outside the city would not be easy, it would have a fighting chance since fewer than one-third (31%) currently oppose it. But with 41% in San Diego proper opposing an arts tax – even at the relatively paltry sum of five dollars – it is currently a non-starter.

The influence of ideology on an arts tax is strong. Residents on the far right of the ideological spectrum are virulent in their opposition. Fifty-four percent would oppose

such a tax (45% *definitely* would not be willing to pay it). The reception among moderate conservatives is much less chilly, though 36% are ready to vote against such a tax. However, moderate liberals generally embrace the prospect of an arts tax, while those on the far left are almost giddy at the prospect. The results show that, if it were up to them, very liberal residents would likely pass the tax – despite the two-thirds requirement. This again shows how arts issues, and art funding in particular, are defining characteristics of the battle between the left and right in modern American politics.

Not surprisingly, the survey finds that art-goers are more likely to support the tax than those who do not patronize the arts. We find strong opposition among non-attenders as 44% would be unwilling to pay the tax. Strong support for the tax does not build until a resident has attended an arts event at least three times in the past year. This means that tax proponents would not be able to rely on votes from even infrequent attenders.

Finally, it is worthwhile noting that more support for an arts tax exists among voters than non-voters. While 59% of the former would be willing to pay the tax, only 51% of the latter would. Though this again reflects the positive relationship between voter participation and the arts, it is not enough to indicate that the electorate is primed to pass an arts tax.

### **Attitudes are Positive**

While San Diegans are less inclined to support public funding and private funding is less prevalent, San Diegans recognize the contributions that arts make to the community in at least two respects. Residents overwhelmingly agree that the arts do produce a better quality of life and do promote academic achievement among students. Attitudes are intense, as 65% *strongly* agree on the first point and 70% *strongly* agree on the second. Even 80% of those who do not attend art functions agree that the arts possess these

positive qualities.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps more than any other research we have conducted on San Diego County, this poll reflects the contradictions of local public opinion while also bringing into high relief the stereotypes associated with the region.

On one hand, local residents “buy” the idea that arts are a civic good. In fact, their attitudes are right in line with other Californians. But those attitudes are not translating into support at the ballot box, dollars in the coffers or even tickets to theaters and exhibitions.

The low tax atmosphere coupled with the financial troubles facing the County’s largest city should send chills down the spine of anyone thinking about pursuing a countywide arts-related tax. The two-thirds approval threshold is currently insurmountable. The only chance supporters appear to have would be to take an art tax to a small city which is flush with cash where the electorate is ideologically moderate.

For those promoting the arts, the question of why more folks do not patronize art-related events is partially answered by economics. The cost puts attending even one event out of reach of many and certainly limits how frequently residents will go. One interesting point to consider is that, while art event attendance is tied to income, county attendance trails the state’s despite the fact that incomes here are in-line with the statewide average. This suggests that the higher cost of living in San Diego takes a significant bite out of the arts budget of local residents and helps to stunt patronage.