

Local Politics and Mayoral Elections in 21st Century America

The Keys to City Hall

**Edited by Sean D. Foreman and
Marcia L. Godwin**

12 San Diego

Paradise Regained? Nonpartisan Appeals and Special Election Rules in San Diego's 2013–14 Mayoral Race

Steven P. Erie, Vladimir Kogan, Nazita Lajevardi, and Scott A. MacKenzie

Michael Aguirre

Age: 65

Sex: male

Race: Hispanic

Religion: unknown

Education: Bachelor's degree in political science, Arizona State University (1971); law degree, University of California Berkeley (1974); master's in public administration, Harvard University (1989)

Occupation: Partner at Aguirre Morris & Severson, LLP

Political Experience: San Diego City Attorney (2004–8)

David Alvarez

Age: 33

Sex: male

Race: Hispanic

Religion: unknown

Education: Bachelor's degree in psychology, San Diego State University (2002)

Occupation: San Diego City Councilman (2010–present)

Political Experience: San Diego City Councilman (2010–present)

Nathan Fletcher

Age: 37

Sex: male

Race: white

Religion: Christian

Education: Bachelor's degree in political science, California Baptist University (1997)

Occupation: Senior Director of Corporate Development at Qualcomm; Professor of Practice, University of California, San Diego

Political Experience: California Republican Party Deputy Political Director (2001–2); Representative Randy “Duke” Cunningham’s District Director (2003–5); State Assembly Member (2008–12)

Kevin Faulconer

Age: 47

Sex: male

Race: white

Religion: unknown

Education: Bachelor's degree in political science, San Diego State University (1990)

Occupation: San Diego City Councilman (2006–present)

Political Experience: San Diego City Councilman (2006–present)

This chapter examines San Diego's 2013–14 mayoral special election triggered by the resignation of a mayor engulfed in a scandal less than one year removed from a historic election victory. San Diego, a sunny seaside paradise and the nation's eighth-largest city, has long been an anomaly among American big cities characterized by Democratic voter majorities and elected officials. Republicans occupied the mayor's office in San Diego almost without interruption from 1992 until 2012, although Democrats filled a majority of city council seats during this period.¹ Thus, the election of Bob Filner, a liberal Democrat, as mayor in 2012 appeared to mark a turning point. Democratic control of the mayor's office would be short-lived, however.

In late August 2013, Filner resigned from office after multiple sexual harassment allegations were made against him. His resignation set in motion a special election in November 2013 to select a replacement. The race attracted four major contenders—Michael Aguirre, David Alvarez, Nathan Fletcher, and Kevin Faulconer. After a primary election in November 2013, where no candidate received 50 percent of the vote, Alvarez and Faulconer advanced to a runoff election in February 2014. Faulconer defeated Alvarez 53 to 47 percent, thereby becoming the only Republican chief executive among America's 10 largest cities. For Republicans, Faulconer's victory signaled paradise regained. In the following sections, we examine the city's political fault lines, the dynamics of the mayoral campaign, and the implications of Faulconer's victory for San Diego's future as well as Republican fortunes elsewhere.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CITY

San Diego had a council-manager system prior to 2005, typical of cities in the Southwest. In November 2004, a charter amendment was passed implementing a mayor-council system.² The mayor was removed from the council and was made the city's formal chief executive, with extensive powers. These

include the authority to manage the day-to-day operations of the city; prepare the city budget; introduce other legislation; veto actions by the council; and appoint, direct, and dismiss the city manager and departmental heads.

The size and partisan balance of the San Diego electorate have also exhibited big changes in recent years. Between 1980 and 2012, the city's population grew from 875,538 to 1,338,348 residents, a 53 percent increase. The electorate grew at nearly the same rate. Figure 12.1 plots the share of the two-party vote won by Democratic presidential candidates in San Diego and compares this figure to the national popular vote. Until the early 1990s, Democrats rarely won more than 45 percent, making San Diego more Republican than the country as a whole. Starting in 1992, however, the city began to resemble other big cities, which feature large Democratic majorities. By 2014, the Democratic Party had amassed a large voter registration advantage in San Diego: 42 percent of registered voters are Democrats, 28 percent are Republicans, and 30 percent decline to state a party affiliation.³

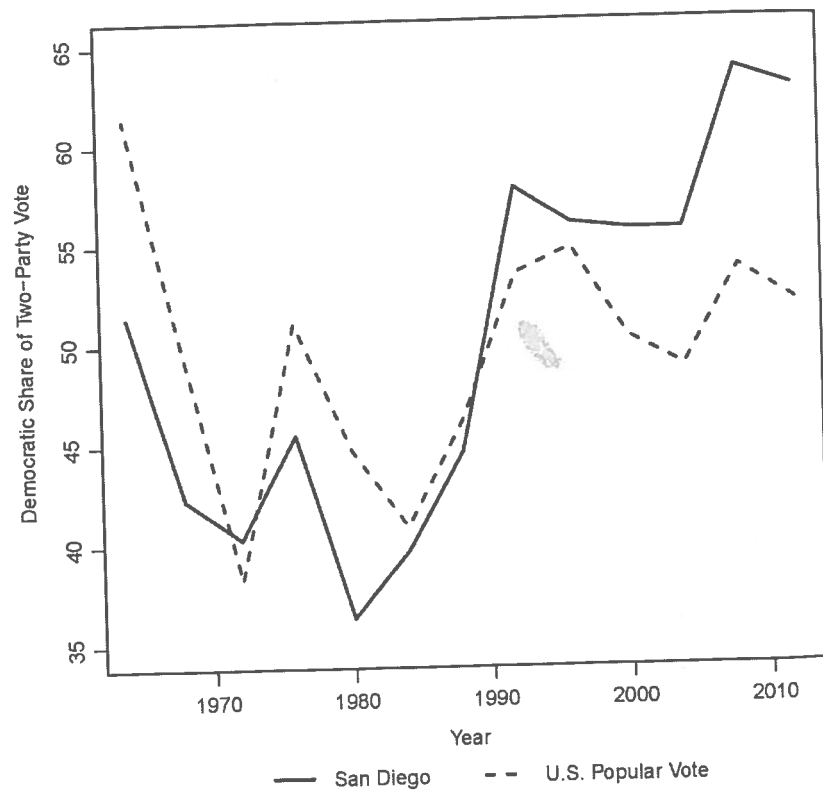


Figure 12.1 Democratic Share of Presidential Vote, San Diego and U.S.
Source: California Secretary of State, *Statement of the Vote*, various editions.

During this period, institutional reforms increased Democratic influence in San Diego. Before 1984, local elections were held in odd-numbered years. Since then, mayoral and city attorney elections have been held in even-numbered presidential years. The change benefitted Democrats, as the drop in turnout in odd-year elections tends to be greater among California Democrats than Republicans.⁴ The city's shift from at-large to district city council elections in response to a civil rights lawsuit filed in 1988 has similarly helped Democrats by neutralizing the Republican turnout advantage in citywide elections.⁵

San Diego is an atypical border city with non-Mexican whites close to a majority of the population. As of 2012, 45 percent of residents are white (non-Latino), 29 percent are Latino, 16 percent are Asian, 7 percent are black and 3 percent are other races.⁶ However, the Latino population increased nearly threefold between 1980 and 2000. Although Latino voter registration and participation rates lag their growth in population, Latinos have become an influential voting bloc and now represent one in five San Diego voters.⁷

San Diego's economy traditionally has been dominated by the defense industry, strengthening the town's historically conservative politics. More than one-fifth of San Diego's workforce was involved in defense manufacturing during the Cold War. San Diego has successfully fought base closings and, as a result, still maintains a sizable military presence.⁸ The construction and real estate industries also have been a major force in San Diego's post-war growth and in local Republican circles. Tourism, another major industry, accounts for nearly \$20 billion in annual visitor spending and contributes nearly \$400 million annually in state and local taxes.⁹ Local hotel and restaurant owners constitute a pillar of the local Republican establishment.

The government sector (including two large public universities) has been the one major industry consistently favorable to Democrats and accounts for more than 15 percent of the local workforce.¹⁰ San Diego's expanding high-tech sector also makes a significant economic contribution. By 2010, technology firms generated 103,800 jobs and indirectly created another 120,400 jobs, representing nearly 30 percent of the San Diego area workforce.¹¹ The high-tech presence in local politics has been limited and sporadic.

THE CANDIDATES

Former State Assembly Member Nathan Fletcher was the first candidate to enter the 2013–14 mayoral race. A Marine Corps veteran, Fletcher previously had been a rising star in the state Republican Party. However, when running for mayor in 2012, Fletcher changed his party membership to unaffiliated after failing to secure the endorsement of the local Republican Party, which instead supported Council Member Carl DeMaio. Fletcher's decision to leave the party received national media attention and prompted a surge in the polls. However, he ran third in the 2012 primary. In May 2013, Fletcher again changed his party membership, this time from unaffiliated to Democrat.

Another Democrat entering the 2013 race was David Alvarez, a first-term council member elected in 2010 from the city's heavily Latino, southern-most district. Alvarez quickly became a progressive voice and was one of Mayor Filner's closest allies. During his short tenure, Alvarez helped draft a community plan for Barrio Logan, a diverse, older community south of downtown, which sought to protect local residents and businesses by limiting industrial expansion. This plan, narrowly passed by the city council, drew criticism from the maritime industry and was opposed by the other candidates running for mayor.

Council Member Kevin Faulconer was the lone Republican running to replace Filner. Faulconer was first elected in 2006, in a special election to replace a council member who had been accused of accepting campaign contributions in exchange for relaxing the city's strip club regulations. During his tenure, Faulconer spearheaded a ballot measure for Mission Bay Park improvements. He also favored a measure to replace the city's municipal pension system with 401(k)-style plans for new city employees. In the mayoral special election he emerged as the handpicked candidate of the Republican Party and business establishment, with former mayoral candidate Carl DeMaio opting to run for Congress.¹²

The final Democrat to enter the race was Michael Aguirre, a controversial former city attorney elected at the height of the city's pension scandal. As city attorney, he fought a series of unsuccessful legal battles to roll back pension benefits for city workers. These efforts, along with his combative management style, alienated him from key Democratic constituencies, particularly organized labor. His stint as city attorney ended when he lost his bid for reelection in 2008. In the runoff, his unexpected endorsement of Faulconer in the final week of the campaign became a significant news story.

THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign to replace Filner began on the day of his resignation in late August 2013. The city charter requires a special election to take place within 90 days of a mayoral vacancy; the city council scheduled the special election for November 19, just 83 days after Filner's resignation. Under this abbreviated timeline, the candidates had to organize their campaign staffs, craft messages to appeal to voters, recruit supporters, and raise sufficient sums of money to finance these efforts.

Campaign Issues

During the special election, the major candidates took opposing views on a variety of issues facing San Diego. Both Alvarez and Fletcher supported a proposed "infrastructure mega-bond" that would provide hundreds of millions of dollars to pay for a backlog of street, building, storm drain, and

other repairs. The bond would be financed by a tax hike to be approved by voters. Faulconer and Aguirre opposed the proposal. Similarly, the candidates took different positions on increasing prevailing and minimum wages in the city (supported by Aguirre, Alvarez, and Fletcher; opposed by Faulconer), outsourcing city services to private companies (supported by Faulconer; opposed by Alvarez and Fletcher), and a plan to separate industrial and residential uses in San Diego's Barrio Logan community (Alvarez brokered the deal; Faulconer wanted to repeal it; Aguirre and Fletcher supported reopening negotiations).¹³

Such policy differences, especially between Alvarez and Faulconer, provided an important ideological component to the special election. Alvarez presented himself as a progressive alternative to the Republican-turned-Democrat Fletcher. Indeed, some observers believed that Alvarez ran too far to the left. Faulconer effectively pounced on unpopular Alvarez positions, including his previous support for a sales tax hike in 2010 that was soundly defeated by voters. While presenting himself as independent and nonpartisan, Faulconer stuck to a traditional Republican agenda, opposing new taxes and promising to hold down city spending.

These differences, while significant, were less pronounced than those that animated the 2012 mayoral election. In that contest, Republican Carl DeMaio and Democrat Bob Filner offered vastly different visions of San Diego's future. These differences were especially apparent in the plans offered by the two candidates to address the city's ongoing pension and budget problems. There was no similarly transcendent issue in the 2013–14 special election, although the candidates did attempt to highlight issues that they perceived were important to voters. Two issues that generated much debate were neighborhood investment and pension reform/fiscal responsibility.

Early in the campaign, Alvarez released a "Blueprint for San Diego's Future," which pledged to invest in underserved neighborhoods and touted his efforts to address the city's infrastructure deficit, improve neighborhood services, and support affordable housing programs. Alvarez promised to hold neighborhood summits with community groups across the city within his first 100 days as mayor to identify priorities for each community. He also promised to build new fire stations in underserved, high-risk areas and increase efforts to award city contracts to women- and minority-owned businesses. These plans were designed to appeal especially to San Diego's older and poorer communities. Most of these communities are located south of Interstate 8, which bisects the city—the area that includes Alvarez's council district and where he spent most of his time during the campaign.

On this issue, the Faulconer campaign attempted to walk a delicate line. On the one hand, Filner's success in 2012 demonstrated the political appeal of a neighborhood-focused campaign. The Faulconer campaign made outreach to communities south of Interstate 8, where Republican candidates rarely do well, a priority. Faulconer's "One San Diego Plan" cited the lack of investment these communities had received. On the other hand, Faulconer

also wanted to use Alvarez's focus on underserved communities against him elsewhere. Faulconer pledged equal investment throughout San Diego. Meanwhile, Faulconer's supporters accused Alvarez of wanting to cut funding to dozens of neighborhoods while steering money to a few communities in southeast San Diego.

Alvarez and Faulconer also sought to emphasize their own efforts on the fiscal front while blaming the other for the city's pension troubles. Faulconer, for example, opened the first mayoral debate of the runoff by citing his election during the "darkest days" of the pension scandal and his work to bring reform and stability to the city's budget process. At the same debate, Faulconer criticized Alvarez for drawing support from "the same unions that nearly drove the city to the edge of bankruptcy."¹⁴ Faulconer also touted his support for managed competition, a process that allows private companies to compete with city employees to provide public services.

Alvarez, not surprisingly, offered a different diagnosis for the city's fiscal mismanagement. He blamed past Republican mayors for scheming to underfund the pension system in order to pay for pet projects. During the primary, Alvarez explained that he had supported cost-saving agreements with labor unions even before voters approved a measure mandating similar savings. He also criticized the managed competition program, pointing out that city employees had won all contracts put up for bid, and suggesting that any savings could be achieved through the annual budget cycle without a time-consuming bidding process.¹⁵

Campaign Strategy

The strategies of the campaigns were dictated by the abbreviated timeline of the special election and the personal attributes of the leading candidates. Initially, the race lacked a progressive alternative to Nathan Fletcher. Fletcher had been the first to announce and was busy lining up prominent supporters, including the powerful unions representing the city's firefighters and police as well as white-collar employees. Fletcher also had the support of Qualcomm founder Irwin Jacobs. By entering the race early and lining up valuable endorsements, Fletcher tried to scare off would-be challengers on the Democratic side.

After seeing other Democrats pass up the race, including interim Mayor Todd Gloria, Alvarez declared his candidacy on September 5. Alvarez felt there was little daylight between the policy views of Fletcher and Faulconer. Neither candidate appeared to offer much to the working-class families and Latinos that formed Alvarez's core constituency. However, Alvarez was a first-term council member with a limited track record and little visibility outside of District 8 in southeast San Diego.

Fletcher's inevitability argument was quashed when Alvarez received two key endorsements. In early September, the San Diego and Imperial Counties

Labor Council endorsed Alvarez, despite active lobbying by Fletcher. Some labor leaders were wary of Fletcher's partisan and ideological credentials. This meant that Alvarez would have a portion of organized labor's vaunted field operation in November. A few weeks later, the San Diego County Democratic Party endorsed Alvarez, providing legitimacy to the relatively unknown candidate and allowing him to tap the party's fund-raising resources and volunteer base.

Even with these endorsements, Alvarez began the primary well behind Fletcher and Faulconer. Internal polling showed that Alvarez's name recognition was virtually nonexistent. In order to advance to the runoff, he would need to win more Democrats than Fletcher. Thus, the Alvarez campaign treated the November primary as akin to a closed party primary. Meanwhile, Faulconer successfully cleared the Republican field. All but assured of making the runoff, Faulconer could focus on cultivating Democrats and unaffiliated voters. Most importantly, his supporters could spend resources selecting a weaker opponent for the runoff. Republicans viewed Alvarez as the easier opponent.

The Faulconer team recognized that a partisan, ideological campaign was unlikely to attract the Democratic and unaffiliated voters their candidate would need to win a citywide majority. The national Republican Party brand has been toxic in California in recent years. Thus, Faulconer sought to cultivate an image of a nonpartisan "nice guy," with a history of working with members of both political parties.

Fletcher, like Faulconer, attempted to portray himself as a centrist. Having moved from the Republican Party to unaffiliated to the Democratic Party within the last two years, he could claim to be above the partisan fray. Of course, the same rapid about-face in partisanship and on issues made him an easy target for opponents, who portrayed him as a political opportunist. Fletcher emphasized his personal biography, as a former marine, state assembly member, and technology executive with good ideas and a wealth of practical experience.

Alvarez attempted to sell his candidacy as the voice of everyday San Diegans ignored by city hall. His personal biography—as the son of a janitor and fast-food worker—was well-suited to make such an appeal. Early on, his campaign coined the slogan "Alvarez for All of Us" to emphasize that the candidate would tend to the interests of working families and minority communities, not the downtown and corporate interests backing his opponents.

In the mayoral debates and in a series of negative ads, the candidates all attempted to paint their opponents as captured by special interests. Alvarez portrayed Faulconer as a tool of a downtown cabal responsible for "decisions to underfund pensions and our neighborhoods." Faulconer and his supporters were relentless in reminding voters that Alvarez's main source of financial support was organized labor. Meanwhile, both Faulconer and Alvarez pounded away at Fletcher's flip-flopping.¹⁶

Campaign Finance and Advertising

Despite the compressed timeline of the special election, the candidates raised large sums to support their campaigns, which were supplemented by millions of dollars of independent expenditures raised by their allies. In the absence of formal communication with candidates, independent expenditure campaigns can air ads disparaging opponents while absolving the candidates they support of any responsibility for the attacks. In many elections, independent expenditures can dwarf the limited and regulated contributions raised and spent by the candidates themselves. This was the case in the 2013 special election.

Overall, Alvarez and his supporters raised the most money. Figure 12.2 displays the contributions received by the three major candidates (excluding contributions below \$100) and by independent expenditure campaigns supporting them (\$1,000 and above).¹⁷ Alvarez's campaign committee raised just over \$850,000 in direct contributions. Pro-Alvarez committees, mostly organized by the Labor Council, raised an additional \$4.33 million. These totals do not include any money raised through the local political parties earmarked for member outreach and mobilization during the campaign. All told, the amount the Alvarez campaign raised exceeded expectations and allowed it to fund extensive advertising and field operations.

Faulconer worked extremely hard at fundraising, devoting significant time each day to cultivating supporters and donors. Ultimately, Faulconer raised the most in direct candidate contributions, over \$2.4 million, including large sums from local business supporters and from suburban areas in the county. Pro-Faulconer independent committees, mainly organized by the business community and the San Diego County Republican Party, raised an additional \$1.37 million.

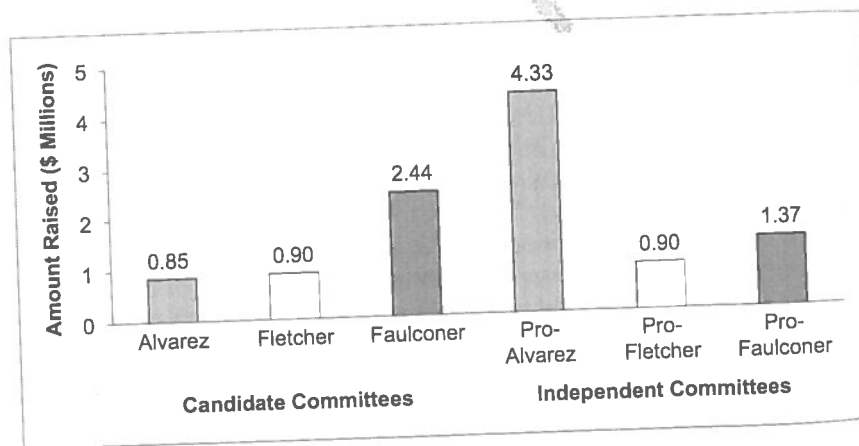


Figure 12.2 San Diego Candidate Contributions: Candidate and Independent Committees

Source: Authors from information in Joe Yerardi, "Follow the Money," *inewssource.org*, February 14, 2014, <http://inewssource.org/2013/09/26/follow-the-money-updated-daily/>.

Fletcher and his supporters also raised a large amount of money to finance his campaign in the November primary. Indeed, Fletcher raised more in direct contributions during the primary, \$908,000, than Alvarez did over the entire campaign. Pro-Fletcher committees, including the "Restoring Trust in San Diego" PAC organized with Jacobs family money, raised an additional \$574,000. Fletcher also received the support of a second independent expenditure committee financed, in part, by a group representing liquor stores and small neighborhood markets.

The campaigns worked to disseminate their messages to voters through earned as well as paid media. In addition to the mayoral debates, which were televised and reported on in local newspapers, and short interviews with each of the candidates aired on local television, the candidates sought to drum up free coverage of their campaigns. The campaigns also timed key endorsements to maximize free coverage. Fletcher, for example, announced that he received Governor Jerry Brown's endorsement in mid-October. The endorsement, covered by *U-T San Diego* and on local television, was designed to demonstrate Fletcher's partisan bona fides just weeks after losing the Democratic Party's endorsement to Alvarez.

Faulconer's campaign was particularly innovative in this regard. With Fletcher out of the runoff, Faulconer's team worked quickly to attract his supporters. In early January 2014, the campaign sent out a press release listing Fletcher Democrats who were supporting Faulconer. Faulconer also garnered positive media coverage when he received endorsements from several African-American pastors in southeast San Diego and, later, Father Joe Carroll, a popular civic leader known for his work on behalf of the homeless. Such media coups burnished Faulconer's image as a nonpartisan leader.

Alvarez also used endorsements to generate positive coverage and convey a sense of momentum for his campaign. On successive days in September, the campaign announced endorsements from prominent current and former local Democratic officeholders. The campaign sought to energize Latino voters by lining up endorsements from prominent Latino officials across the country, such as San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro. To highlight Alvarez's support for and Faulconer's opposition to bread-and-butter Democratic issues like gun control and the environment, Alvarez scheduled events with California's two Democratic U.S. senators. Finally, the Alvarez campaign secured its greatest prize on the eve of the runoff election when President Barack Obama formally endorsed the candidate.

Much of the campaign was carried out through paid media, including traditional television ads and campaign mailers. The candidates also tried to reach and stay in touch with supporters through Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. Faulconer's advantage in direct contributions helped his campaign maintain a constant presence on television. He was the first candidate on the air during the primary in October. One ad featured former Mayor Jerry Sanders talking about Faulconer's ability to get things done. The Labor Council paid for a positive television ad for Alvarez at that time, emphasizing the campaign's "Alvarez for All of Us" slogan.¹⁸

Predictably, the ads became more negative as the campaign wore on. Faulconer and Alvarez supporters were responsible for a series of negative mailers received by San Diego voters. The pro-Faulconer Lincoln Club, an influential Republican business organization, aimed to knock Fletcher out during the primary by sending a mailer targeting Democrats and unaffiliated voters with an image of Fletcher next to Republican strategist Karl Rove. On the back, a truck with the license plate "FLETCHER" and plastered with GOP stickers was pictured under the phrase, "Hiding from his Extreme Right-Wing Record." More egregious was an anti-Alvarez mailer with an image of the candidate in a black suit fanning himself with a wad of money. The ad and its "gangster" image of Alvarez was condemned as "dog-whistle racism" by a Latino advocacy group. Later, in the runoff election, the Lincoln Club ran ads declaring Alvarez a "mayor for some."¹⁹

Pro-Alvarez groups sent out mailers touting Faulconer's ties to the wealthy and big business. One mailer, for example, informed voters that Faulconer was a member of the San Diego Yacht Club. The ad pictured Faulconer with an "I Love 1%" button and repeated the Alvarez talking point about Faulconer giving bonuses to staff while voting to cut pay to police and firefighters.

Bases of Grassroots and Organizational Support

In most cities, the Democratic field operation, often financed and staffed by organized labor, is superior to what Republican candidates can bring to bear. The Republican ground game in San Diego, however, is underrated and has helped keep local candidates competitive in a setting where they are frequently outspent and outnumbered. The Faulconer campaign recruited hundreds of supporters locally and around the state to work precincts on the primary and runoff election days. Even before Election Day, Faulconer's team was busy using microtargeting to identify voters who were both likely to turn out and likely to support their candidate. These voters were sent mailers with simple messages reminding them about the upcoming election. Many of these voters were also sent text message reminders as the election drew near.

The Republican Party's absentee voter program was particularly effective: 68 percent of absentee ballots issued to registered Republicans for the runoff election were returned compared to 58 percent of Democratic absentee ballots, according to the county Registrar of Voters. Most voters in both the primary and special election registered their choices through the mail rather than at the polls.

The Alvarez campaign faced a more difficult mobilization challenge. Young and Latino voters, who were most likely to support Alvarez, were also those least likely to turn out. Thus, Alvarez either had to target appeals to higher propensity voters, most of whom lived outside the candidate's base in southeast San Diego, or increase turnout among young and Latino voters. Neither

strategy would be easy to carry out during the 52 days between the primary (November 19) and the start of early voting for the runoff (January 11).

Ultimately, the Alvarez campaign opted to try to change the profile of the special election voter. To encourage young and Latino voters to vote, Alvarez spent heavily on mobilization south of Interstate 8. The campaign trained volunteers to work in these diverse communities, encouraged supporters to identify other voters in their households, and engaged in repeated contacts with low-propensity voters. The campaign organized vans to bus voters to the county Registrar of Voters office, the only location allowing early in-person voting. These efforts were not sufficient, however, to overcome Faulconer's advantage among early mail-in voters. By sinking so much into a get-out-the-vote campaign, Alvarez left himself open to the charge of being out of touch with Democrats north of Interstate 8, who could have made the difference in a close election.

The candidates drew their core organizational support from the three most important actors in San Diego politics. The first actor, organized labor, was divided between Alvarez and Fletcher in the primary. Unions representing local firefighters and police and white-collar employees backed Fletcher while the Labor Council and teachers supported Alvarez. Except for the police union, which endorsed Faulconer, organized labor was solidly behind Alvarez in the runoff.

The second actor was the San Diego County Republican Party. Backed by the building and restaurant industries, the party supported Faulconer from the start. While Faulconer cultivated a nonpartisan image, his core constituency was conservative and Republican. The third actor, "downtown interests" consisting of businesses, developers, and property owners represented by the Downtown Partnership and the regional Chamber of Commerce, eventually came out for Faulconer. Fletcher had substantial support in the local technology sector and among downtown business owners.²⁰ After the primary, the business community, including the technology sector, closed ranks behind Faulconer.

The Alvarez campaign began with the smallest base of support in the electorate. It hoped to count on heavy support among Latinos and working-class communities. Alvarez had no political base north of Interstate 8 and his personal background and ideological views were not well suited to appeal to older and moderate suburban voters.²¹ Although Alvarez attempted to appeal to these voters with scheduled events and advertising, selling them on a young, inexperienced Latino was difficult. Fletcher's smoother, more polished demeanor was an easier sell. In the November primary, Fletcher outpolled Alvarez in every council district north of Interstate 8. Alvarez's critics wondered why Fletcher was not quickly made a more integral part of the subsequent runoff campaign.²²

Unlike 2012, when San Diego Republicans were split between mayoral candidates Fletcher and DeMaio, Republicans were unified and Democrats split in 2013. Having little need to tend to his Republican base, Faulconer

could focus on unaffiliated and moderate Democratic voters north of Interstate 8. He could also afford to go on offense, opening campaign offices south of Interstate 8 and reaching out to the gay and African-American communities. While these efforts probably yielded few votes, they reinforced Faulconer's image of a nonpartisan moderate willing to represent all of the city's communities.

It is tempting to say that the personalities of the main candidates, the realities of an off-year election, and the compressed timeline imposed by Filner's resignation left no room for campaigns to matter in the special election. Internal polling by the candidates, however, suggests a campaign with plenty of ups and downs and uncertainty. In early September 2013, Fletcher looked to be the clear favorite. By December, the race between Alvarez and Faulconer was virtually a tie. In January 2014, Faulconer appeared to have the election well in hand. Just two weeks out, however, the race had narrowed considerably. Both sides viewed the special election as a winnable contest.

EXPLAINING THE REPUBLICAN REVIVAL: CANDIDATES OR ELECTORAL RULES?

Faulconer's election presents an empirical puzzle given San Diego's demographic and partisan shift in recent years. How could a Republican candidate win where his copartisans accounted for fewer than 27% of registered voters? And why did the San Diego electorate change its mind so quickly, backing Faulconer after electing a liberal Democrat (Filner) just 15 months earlier?

Many observers echoed longtime *U-T San Diego* columnist Logan Jenkins, who attributed Faulconer's success to his moderate image and the emphasis his campaign placed on common-sense fiscal reforms and back-to-basics city issues.²³ John Nienstedt, Faulconer's campaign pollster, argued that the candidate successfully broadened his appeal across partisan lines by focusing on issues such as homelessness, environmental protection, and pension reform that were popular among broad swaths of the electorate.²⁴

The *U-T San Diego* editorial board reached a similar conclusion: "Kevin Faulconer won this election because he embraced the inclusive, bipartisan approach that most San Diego voters want to see in their mayor. The Alvarez campaign did not."²⁵ Just a month after his election, the new mayor received top billing at the annual convention of California's Republican Party, with commentators pointing to Faulconer's moderate approach as a model for bringing the party back from the political wilderness in state government.²⁶

While such laudatory observations rightly credit the Faulconer campaign for its sound strategy and execution, we believe they overstate Faulconer's cross-partisan appeal and ignore how electoral rules contributed to his victory. Aspects of San Diego's system for electing mayors tilt the playing field in favor of Republican candidates and did so to a great extent in the

2013–14 mayoral election. Had the Alvarez-Faulconer contest been held in a presidential election year, we think it is likely that Alvarez would have come out on top, and local observers would be drawing different conclusions about the candidates' respective campaign and messaging strategies.

November 2012 Mayoral Election

As a comparative baseline, we start by considering the 2012 mayoral election. As noted, this election resulted in the first victory for a Democratic mayor since the late 1980s. One of the most surprising aspects of the election, however, is the relatively small margin by which Bob Filner defeated his opponent Carl DeMaio. Filner won by less than 5 percent, receiving nearly 245,000 votes compared to the more than 313,000 ballots cast locally for President Barack Obama on the same day. Although DeMaio outperformed Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate, by roughly 36,000 votes, this can explain only half of the gap between Filner's and Obama's totals.

To examine the dynamics behind the 2012 presidential election, we rely on a technique called ecological inference, which applies a statistical model to precinct-level returns and allows us to estimate voters' support for candidates. Table 12.1 presents the results of our statistical analysis of the 2012 election, showing how voters split their ballots between the presidential and mayoral contests. The first stark finding is the high degree of partisan loyalty shown by San Diego voters—with nearly 80 percent of Obama supporters casting their ballot for Filner and more than 90 percent of Romney voters supporting DeMaio. Partisanship, more than any other factor, structured voters' choices in the 2012 mayoral race.

Although San Diego's local elections are officially nonpartisan, these results show how partisan mayoral contests have become. This is partly due to a 1996 federal court decision that struck down California's prohibitions against political parties endorsing or supporting candidates for nonpartisan offices. As has been the case for Democrats in other elections, both Filner and Obama drew their support from the poor and diverse neighborhoods south of Interstate 8.

Table 12.1 Presidential versus Mayoral Vote in San Diego in 2012

	Filner	DeMaio	No vote in mayor's race
<i>Obama</i>	78%	10%	11%
<i>Romney</i>	0%	96%	3%
<i>Other</i>	11%	3%	33%

Source: San Diego County Registrar of Voters.

Note: estimates made using ecological inference regression method.

Table 12.1 also points to important differences between Democratic and Republican voters, particularly in presidential election years. Obama supporters generally displayed less partisan loyalty in the down-ballot mayoral race, backing DeMaio at a higher rate than Romney supporters backed Filner. Nearly one in ten Obama voters also failed to cast a vote in the mayoral election, compared to much lower rolloff among Romney voters. Many Obama voters may have left that part of their ballot blank because they could not determine the partisan affiliations of the mayoral candidates.

Although the absence of partisan labels makes identifying copartisan candidates difficult for Democrats and Republicans alike, nonpartisanship is thought to disadvantage Democrats, in part because of lower levels of educational achievement and socioeconomic status among this subgroup.²⁷ This disadvantage is greatest in presidential election years, when many politically uninterested and uninformed voters—those most vulnerable to the informational challenges posed by nonpartisan ballots—show up at the polls. Filner prevailed over DeMaio despite higher rates of defection and rolloff among Obama voters due in part to high presidential election turnout.

2013–14 Mayoral Special Election

Filner's resignation ensured that his replacement would be chosen in a special election not held concurrently with any state or federal contest. The absence of other salient contests reduced voter interest and participation compared to the 2012 election. As Table 12.2 shows, Alvarez eked out a second-place finish in the November primary, trailing Faulconer by 15 percentage points. All told, 225,000 fewer voters cast a ballot in November 2013 than in November 2012.

With the runoff scheduled for early February 2014, both candidates campaigned vigorously through January. Although the race attracted widespread media attention, this did not translate into high voter interest. Slightly

Table 12.2 San Diego Special Mayoral Election Results

Candidate	November 2013 primary		February 2014 runoff	
	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent
Kevin Faulconer (R)	101,953	42%	153,491	53%
David Alvarez (D)	65,740	27%	136,701	47%
Nathan Fletcher (D)	58,355	24%		
Michael J. Aguirre (D)	10,783	4%		
Other	4,946	2%		

Source: San Diego County Registrar of Voters.

more than 40 percent of the registered voters cast a ballot in the runoff, a steep decline from the 75 percent that voted in the 2012 presidential race. Although turnout fell across the board, Table 12.3 shows that it did not decline uniformly across partisan subgroups. Among Democrats, participation fell by more than 30 percentage points between the presidential election and the February runoff, compared to a 25 percentage point decline among Republicans. Indeed, Republican turnout in the February runoff exceeded Democratic turnout by more than 10 percentage points. This gap ensured that, despite a nearly 90,000 lead in voter registration, only 20,000 more registered Democrats voted in February than Republicans.

The decline in turnout was particularly sharp among unaffiliated voters. Often described as political independents, surveys indicate that the vast majority are “closet partisans” who lean toward one party. They support candidates from that party nearly as loyally as registered partisans do.²⁸ President Obama won a hefty majority of unaffiliated voters in 2012, but turnout among this group declined by more than half between the presidential election and the February mayoral runoff. In addition, the vast majority of voters across all partisan subgroups cast their votes by mail, diminishing the returns of union-organized election-day get-out-the-vote operations, which have historically benefited Democrats in San Diego.

Together, higher turnout among Republicans, low rates of participation by unaffiliated voters, and heavy reliance on mail-in ballots disproportionately hurt Alvarez. At the precinct level, turnout was closely related to the partisan composition of the electorate, with higher participation in the Republican-leaning parts of the city. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the drop in turnout between November 2012 and February 2014 played a decisive role. Overall, we estimate that more than 40 percent of Filner voters sat out the February runoff, compared to about 25 percent of DeMaio voters. Had the same voters who cast their ballot in the 2012 mayoral race

Table 12.3 Voter Turnout and Candidate Support by Partisanship and Election in San Diego

	Democratic	Republican	Decline to state	Other
Registered voters ^a	262,790	175,020	190,163	1,456
Turnout in November 2012	76.8%	81.3%	66.9%	68.3%
Turnout in February 2014	45.4%	56.8%	31.7%	33.3%
Absentee ballot (February 2014)	65.6%	67.4%	67.6%	68.8%
Estimated support for Alvarez ^b	>99%	<1%	32%	26%

Source: San Diego County Registrar of Voters.

^a At the time of the February 2014 runoff.

^b Estimates made using ecological inference regression method.

also voted in the February 2014 runoff, Alvarez would likely have carried the race by a respectable margin.

The ecological regression method combined with detailed records on voters who turned out in the election,²⁹ also allow us to examine the cross-party appeal of each candidate. As reported in the bottom row of Table 12.3, the results show that neither Alvarez nor Faulconer made substantial inroads into their opponent's partisan base. Indeed, our estimates suggest that both candidates retained support from more than 99 percent of their copartisans. Although higher than is typically observed for state and federal elections, one explanation for the unusual rates of partisan loyalty in the race is the timing of the election: low turnout in the special election meant that only the most informed and motivated voters chose to cast their ballot. These voters are precisely the kinds of voters who are least willing to support candidates from the other party.

Consistent with columnist Logan Jenkins's argument, our analysis shows that support from unaffiliated voters was pivotal to Faulconer's victory. Overall, Faulconer won more than two-thirds of unaffiliated votes, more than enough to offset the gap between the number of ballots cast by Democrats and Republicans. Given the exceptionally low turnout among unaffiliated voters in this election—the opposite of what one would expect if independents were fired up by the campaign—we are skeptical that Faulconer's moderate message was a key driver of his support among this part of the electorate.

Faulconer's edge among unaffiliated voters probably reflects much higher rates of turnout among Republican-leaning unaffiliated voters compared to their Democratic-leaning counterparts, mirroring the gap in turnout among registered partisans. Together, the vote counts and our ecological models strongly suggest that differential rates of turnout in this low-profile election, rather than decisions made by each campaign or the substance of each candidate's message, were the most important causes of the Faulconer victory.

GOVERNING A DIVIDED CITY

If, as we argue above, Faulconer's success was due largely to Republican advantages in a low-turnout special election, it raises serious questions about the new mayor's ability to govern in the coming years. Despite his hard-earned victory, Faulconer will be forced to work with a likely Democratic city council majority that has considerable doubts about his policy priorities, such as efforts to outsource city services. Although previous Republican mayors have skillfully exploited their agenda-setting and budgetary authority to prevail in the face of city council opposition, the task will be particularly difficult for Faulconer, who will need to plan for a reelection campaign that may feature a strong Democratic opponent during a high-turnout presidential election in 2016. With the Democratic

advantage in voter registration expected to grow and too few Republican allies in other city offices, political reality will force Faulconer to live up to his nonpartisan nice-guy image rather than hewing closely to a conservative Republican policy agenda.

Our results also offer reason to question whether Faulconer's victory provides a recipe for Republican success in other big cities in California and across the country. While we agree that playing to the political center is an effective and necessary strategy in San Diego and other cities with similar political terrains, doing so may not be sufficient to guarantee future Republican victories. Much will depend on whether Republicans like Faulconer can distance themselves from their unpopular copartisans at the national level and deliver tangible policy benefits to the increasingly diverse electorates that will determine the urban political future.

NOTES

1. Democrats Michael Zucchet and Toni Atkins were acting mayors for brief periods following Republican Dick Murphy's resignation in 2005.
2. The charter change was made permanent by voters in 2008.
3. San Diego County Registrar of Voters, *Report of Registration: State Reporting Districts*, April, 4, 2014, http://www.sdvote.com/voters/Eng/reports/current_reg_report.pdf.
4. National University System Institute for Policy Research, *San Diego Mayoral Special Election: A New Contest Altogether*, 2014, http://voiceofsandiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/NUSIPR_Mayoral_Special_Election_Brief-Final.docx.
5. Steven P. Erie, Vladimir Kogan, and Scott A. MacKenzie, *Paradise Plundered: Fiscal Crisis and Governance Failures in San Diego* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
6. San Diego County QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 5-year Demographic and Housing Estimates for the City of San Diego* (2008–2012), <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>.
7. Matt Barreto, "New Poll: Latino Vote Will Be Critical Factor in San Diego Mayoral Election," *Latino Decisions*, January 22, 2014, <http://www.latinodecisions.com/blog/2014/01/22/latino-vote-critical-factor-in-san-diego-mayoral/>; Josh Emerson Smith, "Chasing San Diego's Latino Vote," *San Diego City Beat*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.sdcitybeat.com/sandiego/article-12680-chasing-san-diegos-latino-vote.html>.
8. Joel Kotkin, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution Is Reshaping the American Landscape* (New York: Random House, 2000); Dennis McDougal, *Privileged Son: Otis Chandler and the Rise and Fall of the L.A. Times Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).
9. "San Diego Tourism Industry Research," *The Official Travel Resource for the San Diego Region*, <http://www.sandiego.org/industry-research.aspx>.
10. *American Community Survey 5-Year Economic Estimates for the City of San Diego*.
11. Bruce Bigelow, "San Diego's Economic Engine Boosted by High-Tech Jobs, Wages," *Xconomy*, October 13, 2011, <http://www.xconomy.com/>

- san-diego/2011/10/13/san-diegos-economic-engine-boosted-by-high-tech-jobs-wages/.
12. Scott Lewis, "Inside Look at Tense La Jolla Confab Where Republicans Chose Faulconer," *Voiceofsandiego.org*, September 10, 2013, <http://voiceofsandiego.org/2013/09/10/inside-look-at-tense-la-jolla-confab-where-republicans-chose-faulconer/>.
 13. Lisa Halverstadt, "The Mayoral Candidate Scorecard," *Voiceofsandiego.org*, November 18, 2013, <http://voiceofsandiego.org/2012/05/04/the-mayoral-candidate-scorecard/>.
 14. Craig Gustafson, "Alvarez, Faulconer Spar in First Debate," *U-T San Diego*, January 15, 2014, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/jan/15/mayor-alvarez-faulconer-first-debate/>.
 15. Craig Gustafson, "Mayoral Issue: Managed Competition," *U-T San Diego*, January 25, 2014, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/jan/25/future-decisions-on-managed-competition/>.
 16. "Top Candidates Meet for San Diego Mayoral Debate," *KPBS.org*, October 14, 2013, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2013/oct/14/top-candidates-meet-san-diego-mayoral-debate/>.
 17. Joe Yerardi, "Follow the Money," *inewssource.org*, February 14, 2014, <http://inewssource.org/2013/09/26/follow-the-money-updated-daily/>.
 18. Dorian Hargrove, "Kevin Faulconer Spends Big Money on TV Ads," *San Diego Reader*, October 18, 2013, <http://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2013/oct/18/ticker-kevin-faulconer-spends-big-TV-ads/>.
 19. "Craig Gustafson, "Ugly Ads in Grim End to Mayor's Race," *U-T San Diego*, February 7, 2014, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/feb/07/grim-finale-to-mayoral-race/>.
 20. Mark Walker and Lori Weisberg, "The Business Competition between Fletcher and Faulconer," *U-T San Diego*, September 14, 2013, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/sep/14/the-business-competition-between-fletcher-and/>; Lewis, "Inside Look."
 21. Erie, Kogan, and MacKenzie, *Paradise Plundered*.
 22. Fletcher went mountain climbing in South America shortly after losing the primary. He ultimately endorsed Alvarez, but showcasing him before the runoff would likely have helped little while consuming a day or two of media coverage that Alvarez could scarcely afford to give up.
 23. Logan Jenkins, "After a Year of Turbulence, Faulconer Offers Reassurance," *U-T San Diego*, February 12, 2014, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/feb/12/tp-after-a-year-of-turbulence-faulconer-offers/>.
 24. Mark Walker, "Centrist Campaign Led to His Victory," *U-T San Diego*, February 13, 2014, p. A-1.
 25. "Lessons for San Diego Democrats," *U-T San Diego*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/feb/12/faulconer-alvarez-mayor-lessons-democrats/>.
 26. Steven Greenhut, "Faulconer a Big Star at State GOP Convention," *U-T San Diego*, March 15, 2014, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/mar/15/tp-faulconer-a-big-star-at-state-gop-convention/>.
 27. Eugene C. Lee, *The Politics of Nonpartisan Elections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).
 28. Bruce E. Keith, David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, Elizabeth A. Orr, and Mark C. Westlye, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
 29. Provided by the San Diego County Registrar of Voters.