

Carlsbad Measure A Special Election: Controversial Ballot Measure Driving High Voter Turnout

Executive Summary

The National University System Institute for Policy Research (NUSIPR) is projecting more than half of registered Carlsbad voters will be casting ballots on Measure A. Using election data from the Registrar of Voters and Political Data Inc. voter software, NUSIPR evaluated the early ballots received as of this morning for the February 23rd special election.

Overall, we found that:

- **Voter turnout will be high.** Based on the early returns thus far, NUSIPR projects that more than half (53-56%) of all Carlsbad voters will cast a ballot on Measure A.
- **Older voters lead the absentee ballot count.** Seniors 65 years of age or older comprise 4 out of 10 early ballots cast, a trend that is likely to continue in Election Day voting.
- **Voter turnout is highest in neighborhoods surrounding Agua Hedionda Lagoon.** From prior election results, we can conclude that most of these ballots are opposed to Measure A.
- **More than 9,000 ballots will be cast today (Election Day).** Approximately 28% of ballots will be cast at polling locations on Election Day, and thousands of completed absentee ballots are expected to be turned in at these locations as well.

Measure A

Today is the last day for Carlsbad voters to cast ballots on Measure A, the proposed Agua Hedionda South Shore Specific Plan “85/15 Plan,” which would designate 203.4 acres between the Agua Hedionda Lagoon and Cannon Road for commercial use and the preservation of open space. An estimated \$10.5 million has been spent by project proponents to secure public support and voter approval. Early voting began January 25th, and since then, 23,056 out of 40,613 absentee ballots have been cast, generating a 56.8% absentee turnout rate.

Conservatively assuming that 72% of all ballots will be cast absentee, we estimate at least 9,000 ballots will be cast at polling locations today in addition to thousands of more absentee ballots manually turned in at these same locations. With total voter registration at 62,197 voters in Carlsbad, we can safely project that total voter turnout will range from between 53 to 56%. This is an extraordinarily high number for a special election, indicating a high level of voter engagement.

Indeed, this turnout level would be higher than the voter turnout in the February 2014 City of San Diego mayoral special election (43.58%), the June 2014 gubernatorial primary election (27.23%), and the November 2014 gubernatorial general election (44.76%). In fact, the last time a special election generated such a high turnout rate in San Diego County was the November 2005 statewide special election (52.77%), which was a sound voter rejection of eight state ballot measures.

Early voting has been dominated by older voters. While voters 65 years of age and older comprise only 31% of Carlsbad’s mail ballot electorate, they have turned in 41% of all absentee ballots thus far. As in many other elections, young voters are not turning out in strong numbers, with only 30% of those age 43 or younger returning absentee ballots as of election eve.

Table 1: Returned Absentee Ballots, by Voter Age

Description	Total	Age 18-24	Age 25-34	Age 35-44	Age 45-54	Age 55-64	Age 65+/No Age
Ballots Returned	23,056	622	1,163	2,328	4,007	5,389	9,547
Registration	40,613	2,070	3,869	5,761	7,853	8,276	12,784
Turnout Rate	56.8%	30.0%	30.1%	40.4%	51.0%	65.1%	74.7%

Voter registration in Carlsbad skews Republican, and in most primary election cycles Republican voter turnout would be significantly higher than Democratic turnout. However, absentee ballots returned by Republican voters in this special election is only marginally higher than Democratic voters. Both voter groups far outpace the turnout rate of Independent voters. Given past political behavior seen by coastal Democrats, this could well pose a problem for the “Yes” side.

Table 2: Returned Absentee Ballots, by Voter Party Registration

	Returned Ballots	Registered Absentee	Turnout Rate
Democratic	6,721	11,576	58%
Republican	10,060	16,364	61%
Non-Partisan Decline to State	5,156	10,460	49%

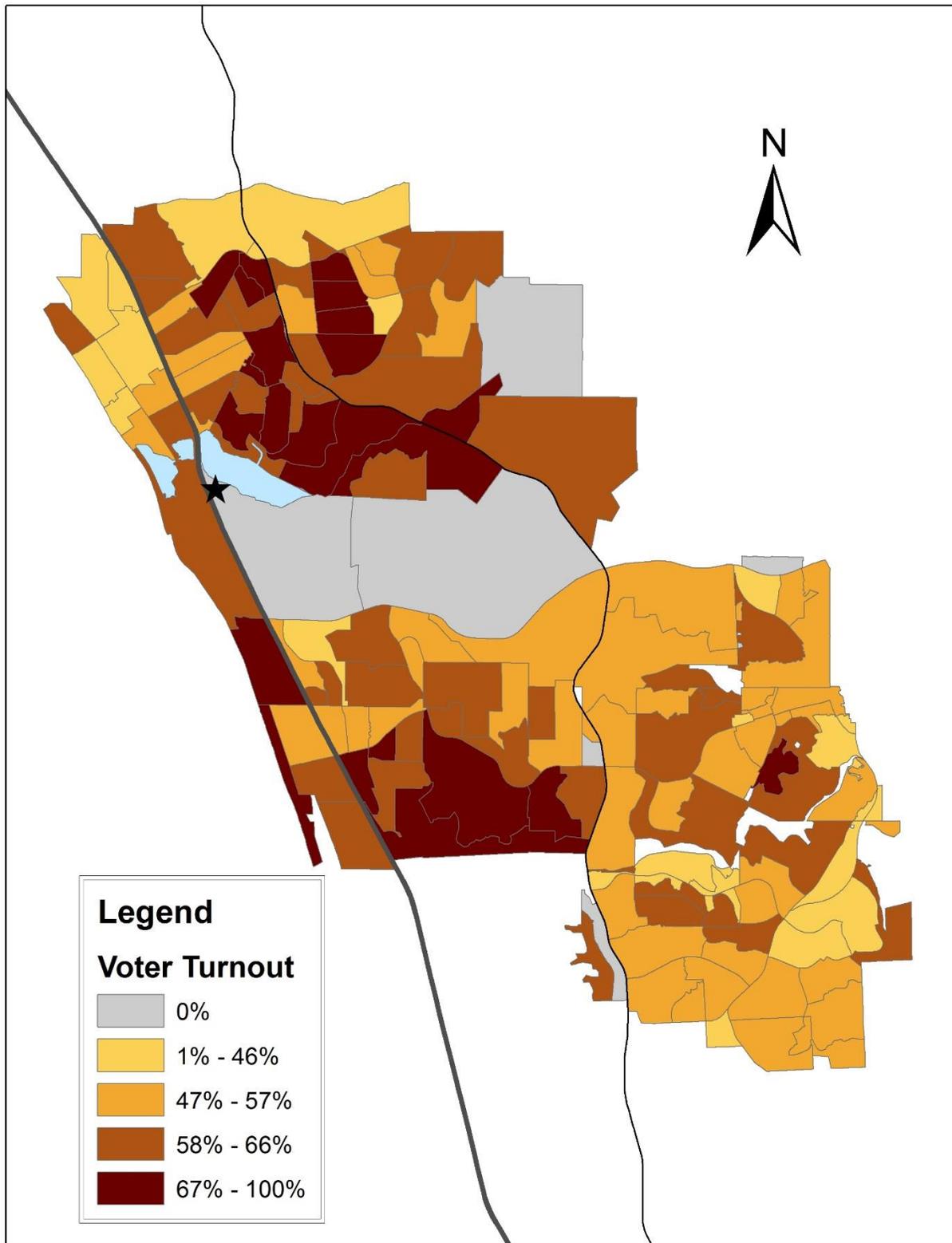
When we mapped absentee ballots returned by neighborhoods we found that those communities geographically located closest to the project site, along Cannon Road and near Interstate 5, have been casting ballots at significantly higher levels than the citywide average. These include the communities of Hedionda Point, Kelly Ranch, Rancho Carlsbad/Sunny Creek, and Agua Hedionda Lagoon. Voter turnout is also high in communities with large numbers of older homes, such as Tamarack Point and Olde Carlsbad. Generally, turnout is low in neighborhoods dominated by newer developments, renters, and non-Caucasian voters.

Table 3: Returned Absentee Ballots, by Neighborhood

Neighborhood	Absentee Ballots Returned	Absentee Ballots in Hand	Turnout Rate
Hedionda Point	692	971	71.3%
Kelly Ranch	659	969	68.0%
Rancho Carlsbad / Sunny Creek	453	676	67.0%
Agua Hedionda Lagoon	301	453	66.4%
Aviara	1,225	1,871	65.5%
Tamarack Point	1,111	1,711	64.9%
South Beach	1,117	1,775	62.9%
Olde Carlsbad	2,457	4,047	60.7%
Poinsettia	2,914	4,936	59.0%
Robertson Ranch	210	356	59.0%
CITY OF CARLSBAD	23,056	40,613	56.8%
La Costa Greens	883	1,609	54.9%
Rancho La Costa	5,210	9,611	54.2%
Calavera Hills	1,417	2,630	53.9%
Rancho Carrillo	841	1,620	51.9%
La Costa Ridge	431	833	51.7%
Industrial Corridor/City Centre	151	302	50.0%
Bressi Ranch	242	493	49.1%
North Beach	602	1,230	48.9%
La Costa Oaks	1,351	2,833	47.7%
Village	413	874	47.3%
Barrio	376	813	46.2%
Carlsbad Ranch	0	0	0.0%

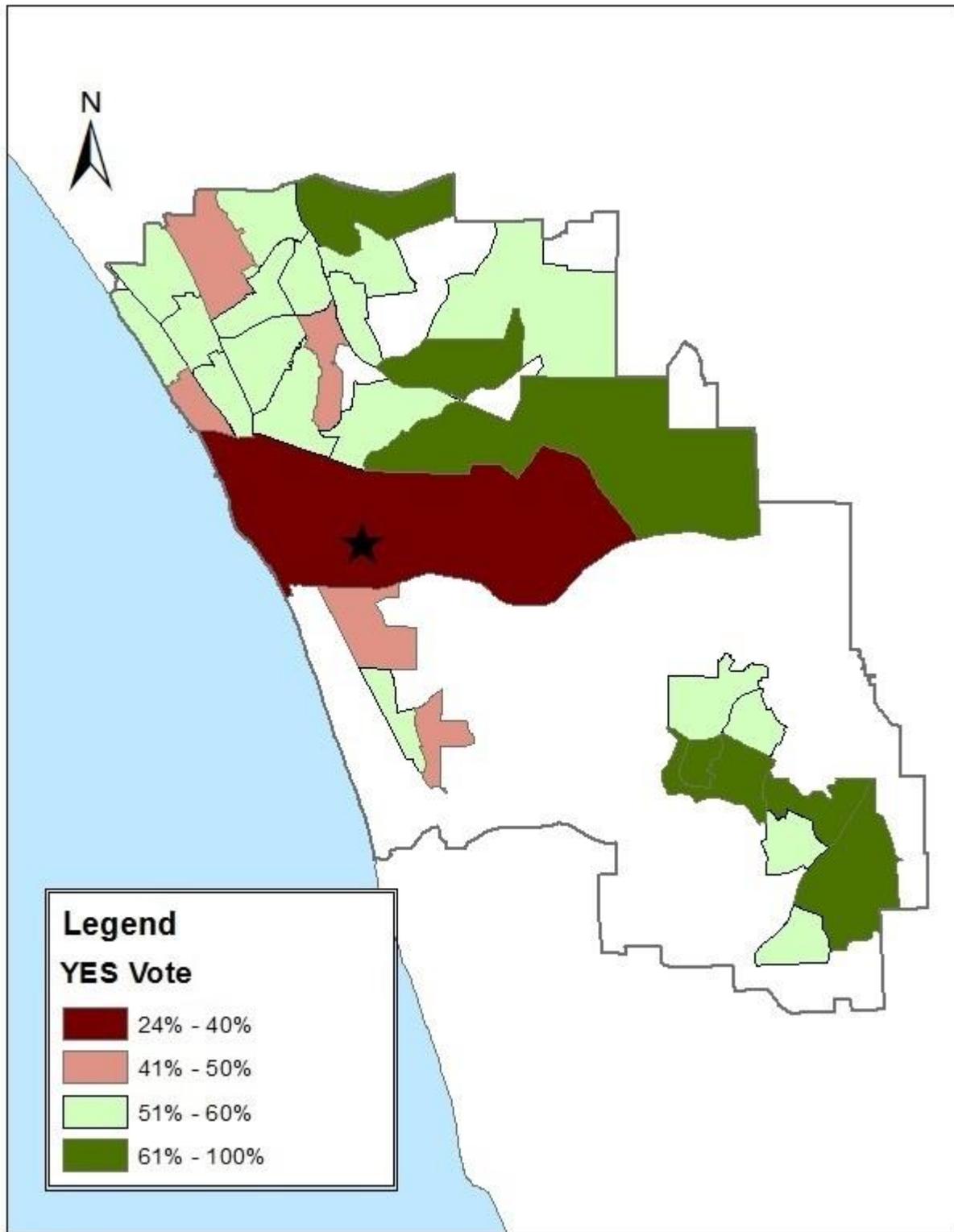
NUSIPR also used GIS mapping software to spatially display returned absentee ballots by voter precincts. Clear voting patterns emerge, with those precincts located within the vicinity of Agua Hedionda and the project site (indicated with a black star) generating a higher voter turnout than most other areas within the city.

Figure 1: Absentee Voter Turnout, by Voter Precinct



While our returned absentee ballot dataset don't reveal the number of Yes or No votes cast thus far on Measure A, we can use data from prior elections to make reasonable inferences about Measure A's prospects. Proposition D in June of 1994 was an advisory vote on the then-proposed Legoland development project in the City of Carlsbad. Controversial at the time, the project ultimately passed with 57.4% of the vote in favor. Looking at precinct level data, those neighborhoods immediately surrounding the development site were more likely to vote no than those furthest away.

Figure 2: June 1994 Proposition D (Legoland), Percentage of Yes Votes by Voter Precinct



Conclusion

Absent public polling data on voter opinions on Measure A, it is reasonable to speculate that the high turnout of precincts immediately surrounding the project site are largely voters casting ballots in opposition to the perceived changes in traffic flow and property views that Measure A would cause. The stronger the nexus a voter has to a major development project, the more likely they are to be motivated to cast a ballot in opposition. Conversely, those voters whose residences are further away from the project site are more likely to be in favor, or undecided.

Further worrisome for the Yes on A campaign is the dichotomy in turnout rates; voter turnout east of El Camino Real (indicated in black in Figure 1) is 53.8%; turnout west of El Camino is 59.9%. Also, from what we know from past election cycles, Republican voters are generally more supportive of development projects than Democratic voters. A significantly higher Republican voter turnout would be a reassuring sign of voter passage. In this election cycle, Republican turnout is only marginally higher than Democratic turnout.

Still, the Yes on A campaign has spent millions of dollars on a professional campaign effort to appeal to Carlsbad voters, compared to the grassroots, volunteer-led No on A campaign that has limited funding. In some respects, the special election cycle has equalized the electoral battleground between the two campaigns – there are fewer undecided, independent casual voters which to appeal to. In a presidential general election, there would be dozens of more local contests and electoral noise which would compete against the strong views and emotional reactions that Measure A has generated in Carlsbad. There are a large number of voters who are either opposed to Measure A or find it controversial - project opponents collected 20,479 voter signatures last fall, forcing a referendum on the proposal. With total votes cast in this election at only about 30-35,000, it would appear that driving voter turnout higher will be more critical for the proponents of Measure A than its opponents.

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.