

REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Why and How It Should Be Improved

SUMMARY

There are many models for electing city council members, encompassing variations between two extremes. At one extreme, all members are elected by all voters in the city (at-large elections) and, at the other, each member is elected by voters residing in separate segments of the city (district elections). Also, there are many models for selecting citizens to serve on advisory panels, which often have a powerful influence on government. The prevalent model emphasizes volunteerism and consequently favors selection of individuals who have both the financial means and the opportunity to serve.

This Grand Jury chose the city of Santa Barbara for study, but the findings and recommendations may also be relevant to other cities. The Jury finds that the city should adopt a hybrid system for electing city council members, and accordingly recommends that the Mayor and a Vice-Mayor be elected at-large and all other council members be elected by voters in designated districts defined by identifiable neighborhoods. In parallel, this Grand Jury recommends that all advisory panels, boards and commissions (that provide advice to city officials) have at least one representative from each electoral district (or identifiable neighborhood) which might be affected by any advice rendered.

INTRODUCTION

This investigation was stimulated by persistent claims that some segments of society are either not represented or are under-represented in local government. A useful guiding principle in democratic governance has been to organize the government so as to achieve the most equitable representation of the citizens being governed. The idea is that equitable representation is necessary to achieve long-term stability. The practical solution has been to adopt a representative democracy rather than a strictly egalitarian democracy, thus addressing the concern that simple “majority rule” might result in “the tyranny of the majority” (as when a group consisting of two lions and one lamb vote on what to have for dinner). The challenge has always been to achieve a balance of interests and thereby create some equity in the system for all citizens. Of course, in practice, there are always imbalances and some segments of the community are often disenfranchised. But local governments are flexible and can evolve to address imbalances and adjust to changing conditions.

This investigation is focused on the city of Santa Barbara because it is one of the major cities in the county. It currently has seven city council members, including the mayor, and members are all elected at-large. The city also encompasses most of the complexities encountered by any city government; for example, there are divisions based on geographic and socioeconomic conditions, which create different governmental needs in different neighborhoods. Also, the city has a harbor, an airport, and issues associated with ocean and mountain influences.

The principal method for gathering information was through interviews with political figures, current office holders, representatives from neighborhoods, and people who have served in government and/or have special knowledge of the implications of different structures for elections and government operations. Voter turnout and registration information (by precinct) was collected from the County Clerk. Census data for population density and median household income supported much of the testimony. General knowledge of the city was also used to interpret the data.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

There are numerous causes for inequity in government representation but the one that appears to be indisputable is socioeconomic conditions. Multiple socioeconomic factors (such as education and wealth) are influential on government. Although no single influence definitively predicts the outcome of elections or how government operates, taken together they have a powerful influence on representative government. For example, the cost of mounting a political campaign narrows the field of candidates to those who have discretionary wealth or have support from a community with such wealth. Consequently, someone from the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder potentially faces an invisible barrier which reduces his or her chances for election or participation in government operations.

While definitive proof is not possible, there are many facts about government in the city of Santa Barbara which add credibility to the above line of reasoning. Due to limitations of time and resources, the Grand Jury could not do an exhaustive historical study. The most recent comprehensive census was taken in the year 2000, and so we chose that year as a test case for evaluation. There are other privately owned data bases, such as those in the real estate industry, which aggregate the data differently from that available from census tracts, but time and cost limitations did not allow us to secure any of that data.

The map included in the Appendix to this report was constructed in collaboration with staff in the Office of the County Clerk-Recorder-Assessor. It summarizes the basic findings in the following terms:

- *Voter turnout/registration*: Variations are illustrated using a color code.
- *Population density*: Variations are illustrated using levels of cross-hatching.
- *Median household income*: Variations are illustrated using a number of dollar signs.

There is a fourth entry on the map which uses a “star” symbol to illustrate the general location (not the specific addresses) of the homes of successful candidates for city council over the past 20 years. We could not represent the changing voter turnout/registration, population density, and median income over the past 20 years, when some of the candidates were actually elected, and readers should keep that in mind. It is noteworthy that only 23 individuals have been elected to the city council over the past twenty years, indicating a rather low turnover rate.

One should also note that voter turnout/registration and not voter turnout/eligibility is shown on the map. Voter turnout/registration correlates inversely with population density. To simplify the map, we have chosen to aggregate some data, and consequently different regions on the map, defined as “Census Tract Boundaries,” are characterized by numerical ranges rather than by single numbers. For example, if a region is characterized by three dollar signs, \$\$\$, then the median income for that region is in the \$50,000-\$60,000 range.

A fairly detailed discussion of the map is provided in the Appendix and careful review of that discussion will be useful to those readers familiar with the city. Here the discussion is limited to a few general features. First, we see that the census tracts are not organized according to the patterns normally used to describe the city, and therefore census data can obscure some well-known facts about the city. For example, the Upper East, bordered on two sides by State and Mission Streets, is aggregated with a large area below Mission Street. This aggregation leads to a median household income which is relatively low (\$\$), yet anyone familiar with the city realizes that the Upper East is an affluent part of the city.

Another general pattern is immediately apparent from the map; namely, voter turnout/registration and median income are highest in a crescent-shaped region covering the northern part of the city and wrapping around to encompass the north-western part of the city. This region is often referred to as the “golden crescent,” and it is characterized not only by relatively high voter turnout and income but also by relatively low population density. In the past 20 years, the vast majority of city council members have come from the golden crescent region.

The map also shows a region of relatively high population density and low income in the Lower East and Lower West, concentrated primarily along the Highway 101

corridor, on either side of State Street. This region is troubled by relatively complex social issues such as indigents, drug dealers, gang activity, and congestion, and it clearly has been under-represented on the City Council.

As one might have expected, it is clear that political influence is concentrated in the neighborhoods at the high end of the socioeconomic ladder. This finding does not suggest that pursuit of that influence should be impeded in any way, but rather it suggests that the election system should be modified so as to increase the influence of those under-represented.

How might this be achieved? There are two pole positions with regard to how city elections might be conducted. The strictly at-large model, which is currently practiced in the city, requires a candidate to win a plurality of the popular vote. This model places a premium on candidates who have broad appeal to all citizens of the city. Those in favor of this model usually claim that at-large elections produce officials who are concerned with the entire city and not just a segment of the community. Of course, officials successfully elected at-large might naturally be supportive of at-large elections. But those opposing this model usually argue that officials elected at-large can ignore a problem in any particular neighborhood, should they choose, if they have strong support throughout the remainder of the city. Thus, at-large elections can potentially disenfranchise voters and neighborhoods having the least socioeconomic influence.

The opposing model is district elections, which is used in many cities (both large and small) throughout the world and, in some cases, cities are divided into very small districts. The number of districts is somewhat arbitrary but they are usually selected according to such factors as neighborhood interests and natural geographic divisions. Those in favor of this model make several arguments. In both time and money, the cost of running for office is relatively less and the candidates can spend more time on the substance of the election versus raising money. A candidate with limited appeal in the city at-large might, nevertheless, be very popular in a district because he or she understands the needs of the voters in that district. Although citywide issues are also involved in district elections, the candidates see them through the prism of their district and thereby government is linked more closely to all the neighborhoods in the city. Some people argue that district elections lead to a fractious spoils system, but a fractious system may be what is required to achieve a balance of interests in a diverse community. In fact, it has always been the job of democratic government to question and challenge the status quo. Any system which does that should be promoted.

Thus, at-large elections seem to be desirable in a largely homogeneous community but can lead to disenfranchisement of minority groups, especially socioeconomic minorities, in a heterogeneous community. When all council members are elected at-

large, accountability and responsibility are diffused. It is desirable to care about everything in the community, but this at-large caring can sometimes result in not caring about particular things important to some segments of the community. One witness with decades of experience in evaluating elections made a strong case for district elections: They stimulate voter turnout, lower cost to candidates, create a greater diversity of candidates, reduce disenfranchisement of some neighborhoods, dilute the influence of political machines, and increase accountability. This same expert estimated that the added cost to the city would be approximately \$10,000 to implement district elections.

So, what election system might balance concerns and achieve more equitable representation? Neither strict at-large nor strict district elections appears to be the answer. It seems to this Grand Jury that a hybrid system would provide a more equitable election system, especially in a city with diverse socioeconomic and geographic conditions or management needs. This Grand Jury concluded that the best hybrid system for the city of Santa Barbara would be at-large election of the mayor and a vice-mayor and district election of all other council members. The districts should be defined by identifiable neighborhoods. In order to replace the at-large system with a hybrid system, it will be necessary to change the City Charter. A ballot measure will be needed and a simple majority of those voting must approve the change.

Improving the election system alone may not be enough. Several experienced witnesses made the case that advisory panels, boards and commissions can have an unwarranted influence on decisions made by city officials, especially if the advisors do not represent the broad interests of the community. City officials are often obliged to rely on unelected advisors because they cannot possibly research all topics which come before them. This situation can at times lead to both unwise and unpopular projects. It is a difficult problem, and the solution may be to improve the methods for selecting advisors and thereby try to assure that they represent a broad cross-section of the community. One factor inhibiting broader participation may be inadequate (or lack of) compensation. Someone capable and inclined to participate may not be able to participate for lack of available time.

In conclusion, it appears to this Grand Jury that some changes in the system for electing city council members and in the system for selecting members for advisory panels, boards and commissions would be beneficial. We realize that officials of the city of Santa Barbara are aware of the need for change and we respectfully urge them to consider seriously the recommendations offered in this report.

FINDINGS

Finding 1

The level of participation in city elections by precincts correlates well with income levels for similar geographic areas.

Finding 2

The neighborhoods where elected officials live in the city correlate well with those areas having relatively high income and voter turnout.

Finding 3

The at-large election system in the city clearly favors those candidates with the broadest appeal and socioeconomic circumstances which result in funding.

Finding 4

A candidate lacking broad city appeal and favorable socioeconomic connections might, nevertheless, be very popular within a specific district and better able to represent it.

Finding 5

Citizen advisory panels, boards and commissions have a strong influence on city government, and the absence of broad citizen representation results in excessive influence by interest groups that have the time and money to participate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

The Santa Barbara City Council should place before the voters a ballot measure to amend the City Charter so as to implement a hybrid election system. This new system should provide for at-large election of a Mayor and Vice-Mayor and for district election of all other council members from districts defined by identifiable neighborhoods in the city.

Recommendation 2

The Santa Barbara City Council should implement a system for selecting members for advisory panels, boards and commissions which assures that such groups include representatives from all identifiable neighborhoods and/ or electoral districts that might be affected by advice rendered.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

In accordance with Section 933(c) of the California Penal Code, each agency and government body affected by or named in this report is requested to respond in writing to the findings and recommendations in a timely manner. The following are the affected agencies for this report, with the mandated response period for each:

Santa Barbara City Council—90 days

Findings	All
Recommendations	All

City of Buellton – Information only

City of Carpinteria – Information only

City of Goleta – Information only

City of Guadalupe – Information only

City of Lompoc – Information only

City of Santa Maria – Information only

City of Solvang – Information only

APPENDIX

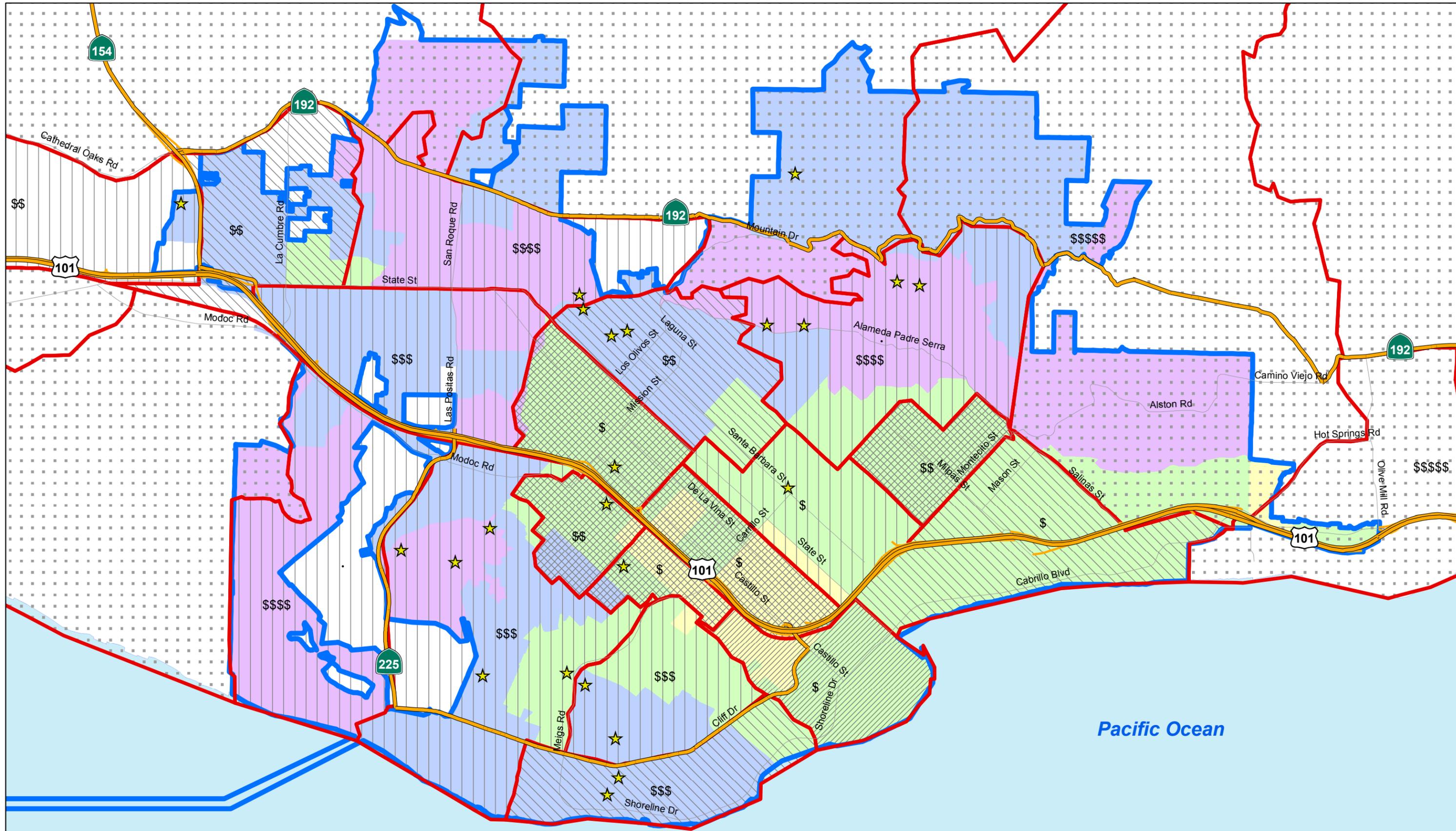
The accompanying map is organized according to voter turnout/registration level and census tract data on population density and median household income. Refer to the map for the location of streets named in the following discussion. In order to disaggregate some of the data and get a clear understanding of this report, consider how the city is described in weekly real estate magazines:

Expressions such as the following are used: Upper and Lower East; Upper and Lower West; Upper and Lower Riviera; Mission Canyon; San Roque; Samarkand; the Mesa; and also Upper and Lower State. For the central part of the city, the dividing boundaries between East and West regions and Upper and Lower regions are not sharp, but all real estate agents recognize them to be State Street and Mission Street, respectively. On the Riviera, the dividing boundary between the Upper and Lower regions is recognized as Alameda Padre Serra. Moving to the East, the dividing boundary between the Upper and Lower regions is identified as Salinas Street.

Household incomes and property values in the Upper parts of the city are generally higher than the city average and the population density is lower. Above Mission Street, proceeding along State Street, we arrive at the intersection of State Street with San Roque Road, which is northeast of State, and Las Positas Road, which is southwest of State. The San Roque region is centered on this intersection and the Samarkand region is to the southwest of the intersection along Las Positas Road, until Highway 101 is reached.

Returning to the central part of the city, as we move down from (the perimeter defined by) Mission Street, Alameda Padre Serra, and Salinas Street toward Highway 101, household incomes and property values generally decline, and the population density increases. Below Highway 101, this trend continues, although population density diminishes on the Eastside because of industrial activity. Once the coastal region just above and along Cabrillo Boulevard is reached, the area, including some of the Lower Westside, consists mostly of hotels, condominiums and apartments.

In most of the Westside, just below Highway 101, we find relatively low household incomes, low property values, and high population densities. This pattern continues until the bluff is reached and rises up to the Mesa, which is roughly centered at the intersection of Cliff Drive with Meigs Road and Carrillo Street. On the Mesa, we again find relatively high household incomes, high property values, and low population density.



Joseph E. Holland
 Clerk - Recorder - Assessor

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau,
 Assessor's Base Map, County Elections
 Compiled: March 27, 2007
 Prepared by: Dennis Loyst

City of Santa Barbara 2000 State Wide Election Voter Turnout

Legend

Voter Turnout %	
White	Out of City
Yellow	< 60
Light Green	60 - 69
Blue	70 - 79
Purple	80+

Census Tracts 2000 by Pop Density	
White	0 - 2000
Light Blue	2001 - 5000
Diagonal Lines	5001 - 8000
Vertical Lines	8001 - 11000
Horizontal Lines	11001 - 25000

Census Tracts by Income	
\$	\$0.00 - \$40,000.00
\$\$	\$40,000.01 - \$50,000.00
\$\$\$	\$50,000.01 - \$60,000.00
\$\$\$\$	\$60,000.01 - \$75,000.00
\$\$\$\$\$	> \$75,000.00

- ★ Candidates Homes
- Blue Outline City of Santa Barbara
- Red Outline Census Tract Boundaries

