



The Powerful Progressive Voter Index

Targeting Precincts in San Francisco
with a Left-Right Rank

By David Latterman



San Francisco is a dense, highly political city with a strong geographic and demographic overprint on how people vote. There are dozens of neighborhoods, each with a distinctive demographic profile and voting history. Voters have weighed in on over 100 ballot measures in the past five years and in countless local races. Literally millions of dollars are poured each year into the politics of San Francisco, a city of just 800,000 people. This system employs a lot of consultants, pollsters and assorted campaign staff—and they’re all looking for an edge.

The San Francisco Progressive Voter Index (SFPVI) is an extremely accurate single-number ranking of a precinct’s political leaning. The scale is from 0–100, where lower number precincts are more “conservative” and higher number precincts are more “liberal” (at least by left-leaning San Francisco standards). Unlike many indices that are empirical formulas of party registration or average vote percentages, the SFPVI is an indexed precinct-level factor analysis of ballot measure results.

Professor Rich DeLeon of San Francisco State University originally created the SFPVI in 2002 to look at geographic voting trends throughout the city. Fall Line Analytics joined the project in 2004 and now calculates bi-yearly updates to the formula. In a tradition started by Professor DeLeon, the methodology and data of the SFPVI is open-sourced to the entire San Francisco political community via a popular online political billboard and Fall Line’s website.

The SFPVI currently uses 20 measures going back three years for all 580 precincts. When the SFPVI is updated, it’s considered a moving average of “San Francisco Values.” Using the SFPVI, we can track political changes in neighborhoods and districts over time—even demographic subsets. It’s used all over San Francisco for voter targeting, outreach, framing issues, polling and even discussing whether or not something or someone should go on the ballot.

Because so many San Francisco ballot measures have a clear ideological underpinning (at least to us), the SFPVI is able to very accurately capture how a precinct normally votes on a “left-right” scale. For example, the current 2008 SFPVI uses recent issues like “Withdrawing U.S. military personnel from Iraq,” “Firearm ban” and “Diversity on city commissions and boards.”

How It’s Used

Check out Figure 1 (page 40)—it’s a precinct-level map of the SFPVI. The lighter colors are the more liberal parts of the city, while the darker regions show the more conservative portions. You can easily see political differences in neighborhoods, which is a great asset for field campaigns. In 2008, *The San Francisco Chronicle* did a fun article comparing the most liberal precinct and the most conservative precinct in the city using a neighborhood and lifestyle comparison.

In addition to making maps, we often correlate SFPVI values to ballot measure and candidate results in San Francisco. These charts are also usually given demographic or other values on top on the SFPVI so we can see how

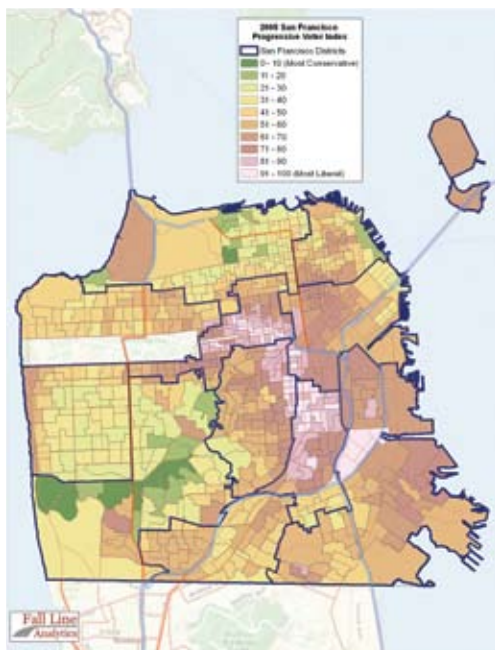
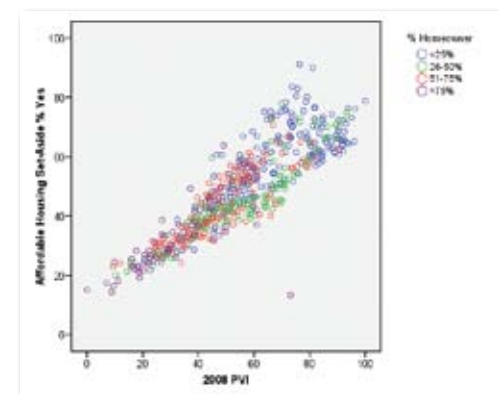
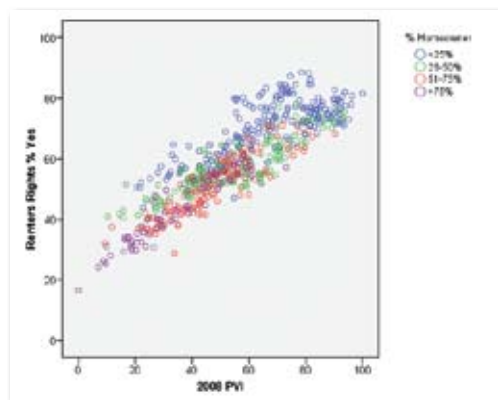


Figure 1: A precinct-level map of San Francisco. Lighter colors are more liberal areas, and darker regions are more conservative.

Figure 2: SFPVI correlation with 2004 sales tax and business tax measures, with an ethnicity overlay. Note the much SFPVI stronger correlation with the business tax.



certain groups of people (different ethnicities, homeowners, independents, etc.) vote relative to their conventional-wisdom politics. Most importantly, the SFPVI allows us to determine where the median voter is for a given issue. For different issues, the crucial swing voter is politically in different places. The SFPVI identifies the geography and political leanings—and therefore demographics and psychographics—of the quantifiable swing vote. This, of course, is critical for targeting and strategy.

For instance, San Francisco often sees contentious and expensive ballot measures pertaining to affordable housing and real estate development. One ballot measure in November 2008 called for a \$1.5 billion (yes, billion!) set-aside over 10 years to fund affordable housing. This measure failed 52 percent to 48 percent. Figure 2 indicates that the swing SFPVI score was around 57 (center-left). There is also a percent homeowner by precinct overlay on the chart, which is an important determinant of how people vote. As a comparison, a renter-rights measure the same election passed handily and had a central SFPVI score of around 38. Some politically moderate renters, who voted no to large expenditures for new developments, still voted to protect their own rights. This analysis helps consultants target and create messaging for the next initiative.

In addition to analyzing correlations to ballot measures for targeting purposes, we can use the SFPVI to perform detailed analyses of the electorate itself. Figure 3 is a chart showing voting frequency of various demographics of the electorate, as a function of the politics of where they live. This is person-level data taken from the county voter file. This kind of analysis is particularly useful in targeting for low-turnout elections.

The SFPVI is also used to analyze candidate races, from district elections to citywide races. The SFPVI can show how a politician's fortunes can change over time, along with the support of a crucial group. Case in point: Mayor Gavin Newsom, a pro-business Democrat who is now running for governor of California, barely won his 2003 mayoral runoff with 52 percent of the vote against a Green Party candidate. In 2007, he cruised to reelection with over 70 percent of the vote against a weak field. One of the reasons for this success was his 2004 legalization of gay marriage (although it turned out to be temporary), which secured his support in the politically important and active lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Figure 4 shows his two races, correlated with SFPVI and with high-LGBT precincts highlighted. The LGBT community did not strongly support Newsom in 2003, except among the most conservative. However, in 2007, Newsom had LGBT support at almost all political levels, a fact he is currently using to his advantage in his gubernatorial campaign.

Limitations of the SFPVI

When using the SFPVI for candidate races, however, it's important to take into account all of the other variables that go into the success of a candidate: personality, quality of campaign and incumbency to name a few. More than once I've heard that someone is running in a district because "the incumbent doesn't fit the PVI of the district," meaning he

Figure 3: Looking at turnout frequency at the voter level for various demographics – based on the SFPVI of where they live.

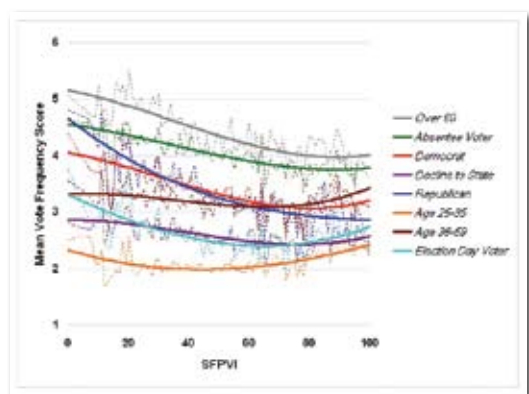



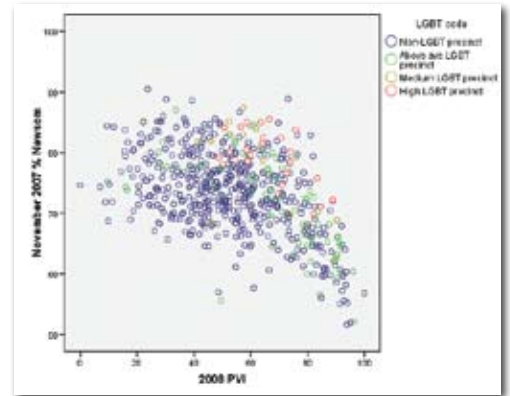
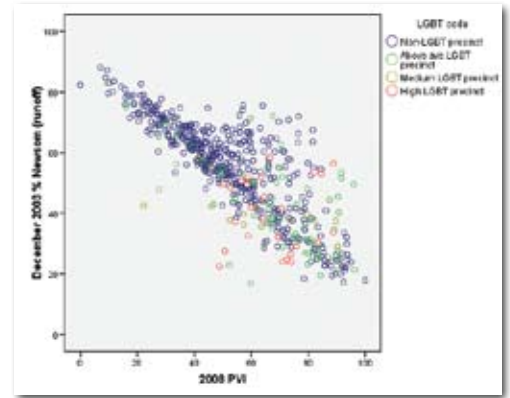
Figure 4: A tale of two Newsoms. After gay marriage, Mayor Gavin Newsom gained political favor among LGBT voters of all political stripes.

or she is perceived as too liberal or too conservative for the constituency. The candidate often doesn't understand all the other factors that go into the success of an election or a term in office, focusing instead only on constituents' political leanings.

Also, for the various ballot measures that are analyzed, we can't really capture how strongly a precinct was targeted with outreach efforts, or the quality of the campaign, or the amount of money that is spent. Finally, it should be made clear that our data points are precincts, not individual voters. For the purposes of the SFPVI, precincts are aggregated people. Yet we can capture a lot of data in those precincts and given the large number of precincts, we can establish accurate baselines for various groups provided their numbers are large enough.

Overall, the SFPVI is a flexible, powerful tool to analyze elections in San Francisco. Because San Francisco has such distinctive neighborhoods and demographics, and a lot of electoral data, we can analyze elections in great detail. This kind of index can actually be created for any geography that has the data available. It has, in fact, been created for the entire state of California—over 19,000 precincts. As long as campaign workers know how to best use the index, we will likely see the demand increase for sophisticated but easy-to-interpret analytical tools. 

David Latterman, a political analyst in the San Francisco Bay area, is president of Fall Line Analytics. He prefers to study the voters and how their demographics and opinions shape an election.



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