

## Aguirre's chances of winning? Let's count

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Nobody wants to be a party pooper, but hear me out, folks:

It's way too early to be dancing on the grave of City Attorney Michael Aguirre.

So back to your desks, all of you. There'll be no conga line today.

True, Aguirre won just 29 percent of the vote in last week's city attorney primary. That was good for second place, a few points behind Judge Jan Goldsmith, Aguirre's November runoff opponent.

By every measure, 29 percent is an abysmal show of support for an incumbent – especially because, to our knowledge, Aguirre has never invaded a foreign country.

The Republican euphoria on Election Night reflected that realization, and a belief that the people had soundly rebuked the city attorney who wants to be their champion.

As I watched a jubilant Goldsmith give a bear hug to District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis, I thought, “So this is what the post-Aguirre world will look like. None of the friction, just big old bear hugs all around.”

While I wait for mine, I've checked in with some of the city's top political consultants – two Republicans, two Democrats, none of whom is inclined to ever work for Aguirre. I wanted to know whether I should start writing his political obituary.

Not so fast, they warned. This is still anybody's race.

And they made three points.

The first: The presidential race will draw twice as many people to the polls this fall as showed up last week. So at least 70 percent of November voters will not have voted for either Goldsmith or Aguirre.

Plus, the modest primary electorate tilted Republican, while a large turnout in San Diego tilts Democratic, a group more sympathetic to Aguirre.

It's tempting to say that makes it a whole new ballgame.

It's also tempting, since we're in San Diego, to note that moving into a bigger ballpark doesn't necessarily turn a losing team into a winner.

Which brings me to their second point: The Aguirre lineup this fall will

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have more power hitters.

Aguirre received no help from the Democratic Party or organized labor in the primary. Both were distracted by the candidacy of Council President Scott Peters, who finished third in the city attorney's race with 20 percent of the vote.

With Peters gone, the party is certain to endorse Aguirre. The labor council, after examining Goldsmith's record in the state Assembly, may consider Aguirre the lesser of two evils (though not the police and firefighter unions, which still are incensed by Aguirre's efforts to roll back their pensions).

If Aguirre cobbles together some approximation of a traditional Democratic coalition, he can match the support Goldsmith will get from the Republican/business axis.

Third: Consider that, four years ago, Aguirre was praised for his skill as a campaigner, but this year, he barely campaigned at all.

Like Muhammad Ali covering his head while his opponents pounded him into the ropes – a technique Ali dubbed “rope-a-dope” – Aguirre exerted as little energy as possible, saving himself for the later rounds. That 29 percent, he pointed out last week, represents a pretty loyal hard-core base.

This tactic might have been crazy, or brilliant, or a reflection of his diminished grass-roots support.

But assuming, as many do, that Aguirre will self-fund most of his re-election bid, saving his money for November demonstrates, if nothing else, uncharacteristic self-restraint.

Convinced he can win yet?

Me neither, especially when you consider that Aguirre's disapproval rating is high – above 50 percent and holding – and that voter turnout won't solve that problem.

My consultant friends agreed that he needs to run an effective citywide campaign – he can't count on the media to tell his story – that gives people a reason to like him again.

“He needs to show some learning curve,” one consultant said.

“He needs to show contriteness, contemplation,” said another.

Goldsmith has struck a chord by telling voters he won't be a second mayor: a reminder of the times Aguirre has upstaged or undermined Mayor Jerry Sanders.

Aguirre “needs to put his overreaching in context: 'I took office during extraordinarily difficult circumstances and I'm learning the proper boundaries,' ” a consultant told me.

Aguirre has shown contrition at times, though never for a sustained period. And judging by his post-election comments, he won't be telling voters he's changed, but that he's right.

He said the race should hinge on how Goldsmith views three issues: a) lowering the height of the Sunroad building, b) stopping large developments until a 20-year water plan is in place, and c) requiring a public vote on infrastructure bonds.

On all three, Aguirre and Sanders famously disagreed.

Meanwhile, consider what Goldsmith has to do to win:

- 1.) Tell people that he can work with Sanders, the popular mayor they

just re-elected.

2.) Remind them that Aguirre often cannot.

3.) Convince them that they don't want four more years of conflict at City Hall.

Last year, when Aguirre began insisting that the city embrace toilet-to-tap technology – the subtext of issue (b) above – I asked him why he would take up such an unpopular cause when a tough re-election campaign was hanging over his head.

“I have to do what's right every day,” Aguirre said, “because I don't know how long I'm going to be around.”

No one does, no matter how tempting it is to think this race is already over.

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