



## POLITICAL CONSULTING

### Case Study

## RECALL THEM ALL

### 2013-2014 SAN BERNARDINO RECALL ELECTION

**Client:** San Bernardino Residents for Responsible Government/Residents for a Better San Bernardino

**Election:** November 4, 2013 & February 4, 2014

**Issue:** Recall Campaign for Nine (9) Elected Officials

**Campaign Period:** 11 months

**Results:** Four removed from office, one did not seek reelection, two failed to qualify, one recall suspended, one recall failed

**Voter Turnout:** 26.2%

**Campaign Strategy:** Three separate campaigns; one to qualify the recalls, a second in favor of the recall, and a third to replace elected officials

**Successful Tactics:** Sustained messaging and continual voter contact; a strong media campaign; large financial resources; strong legal representation; and large volunteer base

**Client Profile:** 18 area businesses and residents with 100 volunteers

“The voters of San Bernardino can finally let their voices be heard on those who led our City into bankruptcy,” – Scott Beard, Responsible Officer

WINNER – PRSA Polaris Award 2014

NOMINEE – AAPC Pollie Award 2015

The 2013 election in the City of San Bernardino was an historic one. In recent years, the city has fallen on hard times culminating with the city declaring bankruptcy in 2012. This led to an aggressive effort by a group of business owners and residents to try and bring new leadership into City Hall.

The Recall Them All campaign succeeded in bringing in this new leadership through a city-wide recall effort that successfully ousted sitting officials and ushered in an almost entirely new slate of elected officials. An election campaign combined tried-and-true campaign tactics with successful social media strategies.

The City of San Bernardino has a proud history, rich heritage and strong sense of community. It is the County seat and home to a state university as well as an international airport. Just a few decades ago, it was named an All-American City.

To say the City has fallen on hard times would be an understatement. The City Council was advised of impending bankruptcy in 2010, but no major budgetary adjustments were made and it was ranked “worst run city in America” in 2013 by a financial news media outlet. Other evidence of the City’s struggles include a 14.5% unemployment rate, a 50% increase in homicides, home values that have declined more than any other large city in the U.S. and finally, in 2012, the City was forced to declare bankruptcy.

In early 2013, a group of business owners and residents decided it was time for major change. Disgusted with a fractured and divisive City Council that openly fought with each other during council meetings, it was obvious to this group that a change in elected leadership was necessary. However, a seven-ward system, elected Mayor and 26-year career elected City Attorney had made past attempts at wholesale change impossible. A new approach was necessary.

In short order, a strategy was shaped around a goal to force dramatic changes in elected leadership. In addition to seven (Ward-elected) Council seats, the Mayor and City Attorney positions were also identified as key leadership positions, for a total of nine elected seats. Of the nine, five were up for re-election in the 2013 cycle which suggested focusing a recall effort on those remaining four seats. A strategic decision was made to announce a “Recall Them All” campaign to accomplish two objectives: 1) Make a clear statement that all elected leaders were equal to blame for the city’s demise; and 2) remove accusations of special interest politics and/or that the PAC was only attacking individuals.

When the 26-year City Attorney incumbent learned of the recall effort, he fought back with everything in his arsenal, including all the resources of the City Attorney office. This meant filing a stream of injunctions (12 in total) and coordinating an anti-recall campaign, which included a counter-petition (to confuse residents about the petitions).

The signature gathering of over 41,000 signature continue through the summer months and was supported with a steady stream of media statements (posted via Facebook and Twitter). These were facts about the demise of the city under prior leadership, and statements of support by residents, business leaders and opinion makers. The two regional news dailies covered the sensational Recall Them All effort almost daily, and [stories](#) were posted or retweeted as needed, as well as stories from [bloggers](#) and [national news](#) outlets. A loyal 640 Facebook followers shared posts constantly, and ‘Boosted Post’ efforts ensured that a wider net of engaged voter citizens were being reached. Every incorrect claim about the PAC from our opponents was immediately and strongly refuted – and in fact, a campaign-style commercial was posted and shared ([“Liar, Liar”](#)) that put a harsh light on the dis-information tactics of the opposition.

Moving into campaign mode, efforts were intensified with a new message to vote Yes on the Recall as well as vote Yes on our Candidates (both the “replacement candidates” as well as new candidates for the open seats). A strong media effort earned the [endorsement of the local daily](#) to support the Recall and new candidates (a list of engaged media is included in our Addendum). Creative campaign mailers were used that were repurposed on social media, including an eye-popping animated campaign poster ([“Gepetto”](#)) that showed the other council members dancing on the strings of the City Attorney, and another mailer ([“It’s Not Funny”](#)) that showcased the ridiculousness of a Recalled council woman still trying to run for Mayor (in the post-election run-off).

Election night 2013 was both reward and vindication for city residents that desperately needed new leadership for their bankrupt city. Six of the nine elected positions on the ballot were new faces in City Hall for 2014; and even the three remaining council members understood there was new attitude of shared commitment and respect for their role in governance.

The election wasn’t close on any level. The City Attorney was run out on a 65-35 majority and a completely unknown businessman took the reins of Mayor. City residents truly recognized it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put the city on a new path, and they voted accordingly.

Success has been attributed to three distinct PR components: 1) Consistent strong messaging; 2) a steady information stream to local, regional and national media; and 3) a polished digital communications campaign that coordinated social media, video and the website to great effect.

## Strategy at the Core.