

Steve Padilla and 18th District Role Profile

Case Overview

Steve C. Padilla

58 Years Old

Male

Euro-Hispanic (Mexican-American, Portuguese-American)

Previously Married (Thumbtack, refer to individual section)

Graduated from Bonita Vista Highschool, Southwestern Police Academy

Bachelors Degree in Public Administration

13 Year Law-Enforcement Tenure, Detective

Democratic Party Member

Foundational Experiences and Pre-Political Career

Steve Padilla was born in Chula Vista. His father served in the United States Marine Corp during the Vietnam War, however sadly passed in an automobile accident shortly following his return; this forced Steve to step up where he could in the family, supporting his siblings as needed and taking a prominent leadership role in the absence of his father. His mother eventually remarried and brought a stepfather into the home. Padilla participated in the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts, before eventually going on to participate in the Explorer Scouts; following graduation from Bonita Vista Highschool, Steves path into public service began with Law Enforcement.

As the youngest cadet ever admitted, Steve successfully graduated from Southwestern Police Academy and went into law enforcement professionally. Serving in his role for over 13 years, he was specifically a detective assigned predominantly to cases

involving abuse of children and domestic strife. He also managed to pick up a few shifts as a substitute teacher in the Sweetwater Union Highschool district, and returned to school for a Bachelors degree. Public Administration was his graduating subject. His first true stint in putting that to use was in being the president of the Chula Vista Police Officers Association. It would springboard him forward into quite much more.

Early Political Career

Steve was admitted into the political ring a few times before he officially ran, mostly through assignments on committees, commissions and boards as Association President. This opened up his interest in political engagement; with the public goodwill and standing gained as an officer of the law, he jumped directly into the 1994 Chula Vista City Council Race. Padillas victory in this race made him the first latino member of the Council in its history, representing a constituency that (up until that point) had yet to have their voice properly heard in the cities politics. Promptly, his politics adjusted to this; banning the machine sale of Tobacco mostly affected the lower income brown and black population in the city who suffered disproportionate rates of addiction, restricting an industry built to sustain and profit from it. Higher standards for health and safety in mobile home parks addressed the consistent quality of life concerns found for the families unable to live anywhere else.

Besides that angle of his representation, he also focused on broader policymaking. Padillas tenure on the council came with a heavy (And successful) push for changes to the cities budgeting process, specifically changing the budget cycle into a biannual process. This allowed for quicker adjustments to the cities budget to fit growing needs. Showing evidence of willingness for more aggressive political action, he demanded the resignation of San Diego Unified Port District Member David Malcom over conflict of interest; as a consultant for Duke Energy, his responsibilities as a public servant contrasted his career obligations.

These early successes resulted in his re-election to the position of Councilmember, followed by him holding the position of Deputy Mayor. With momentum behind him, he successfully claimed the office of the Mayor. His race didn't go without conflict, as he struggled out a win with his contemporary and ally Mary Salas; Padilla campaigned on a platform of responsible government and development; properly managing the fast growing Eastern end of the city, renovating old neighborhoods, addressing traffic congestion and establishing a unified city school district were all primary promises.

Sala and Padilla respectively criticized each other for taking donations from the real estate lobby, due to both of them being mostly pro-growth candidates. Padilla continued his strong chain record of political aggression, as both shot volleys back and forth at each other in the news; specifically, Padilla targeted Salas' prior use of the term 'Gringo' in a newspaper article years ago. Padilla's ability to bring together unorthodox coalitions showed out in his endorsement repertoire, gaining a majority of the council in endorsements and leveraging former incumbents as well. Turnout in the 2002 Mayoral Election was quite low, allowing for Padilla to secure his victory.

Padilla's run as Mayor was relatively in line with the promises he made on the campaign trail, if uneventful. His most significant contribution was in being a crucial advocate for the Bay-Front Master Plan, an effort to transform over 500 acres of waterfront property into public parks, hotels, shops, restaurants and affordable new housing; on top of this, Chula Vista was officially recognized as the site of the University Park and Research Center over other alternatives across the country. Minor contributions include the "Give a Book" Charity Drive, wherein over 100,000 books were given to children in need. He was given membership of multiple state and national boards.

A good amount of Padilla's details here came down to personal revelations and controversy. At the San Diego Pride Stonewall rally in 2005, he made an announcement that proved unsurprising to many in his personal circle: Steve Padilla is gay. He became the first gay mayor in the city's history, and Chula Vista became the highest population city represented by a gay mayor. He was also given multiple posts on boards, the most prominent being the California Coastal Commission.

Of course, all comes to an end. Everyone struggles at some point in their careers. The next amount of time for Padilla proved to be quite difficult. Padilla's mayoral tenure was ended in relatively sharp fashion, with his loss in the general election to republican Cheryl Fox at a 45% to 54% margin. Due to her status as the wife of the notably popular former mayor Greg Cox, she used name recognition in conjunction with a campaign built on exploiting Padilla's coming-out and instigated scandals to win. Following this loss, his attempt at a full tenure on the City Council via vote failed; he

then lost the closest race in city history, being prevented from securing another chair seat in 2011 by a mere 2 votes.

Padilla did not give up. Returning from his loss in 2014, Padilla returned to power through election to a different seat in the city council in 2016. He was reappointed to his position on the California Coastal Commission as well, eventually climbing to the post of chair. He secured re-election to his seat in 2020. This is where the eventual jumpover into the state senate finally began. His political comeback after his prior controversy and trial by fire sent him to the highest point of his career.

Senatorial Tenure and Record

Padilla has served for a total of 3 years out of his elected 4 since securing the position in 2022. He has sponsored and co-sponsored a total of 25 pieces of legislation while in office.

While serving as Senator, Padilla was assigned membership to the following committees in the 2023 and 2024 legislative sessions.

- Senate Agricultural Committee
- Budget and Fiscal Review Committee
- Senate Governmental Organization Committee
- Housing Committee
- Natural Resources and Water Committee
- Legislative Budget Committee
- Climate Change Policies Committee

Electoral Statistics

Padilla was elected to the California State Senate in 2022, winning by an effective blowout in District 18 with a 59.8% (115,103 individual votes) to opposition candidate Alejandro Galicia's 40.2% (77,223).

Based on his strong career in the mayoral circuit and political comeback after initial setbacks prior to his senatorial race, Padillas slice of electoral support in District 18 is

wide and consistent. His strongest base of support belongs to the urban center of Chula Vista, his hometown and the most populous city represented by District 18. His strongest electoral opposition can be found eastward, in the more rural “Inland Empire” areas on the borders of Nevada and Mexico.

Ideology and Biases

Padillas positions have been divided into three separate

Economically, Padilla is best described as a **Developmentalist Liberal**. During his earlier career as a Councilmember and Mayor in Chula Vista, much of his focus was oriented towards the enthusiastic (but well controlled) expansion of housing, economic productivity and sound zoning. He was a strong proponent and adopter of ‘Smart Growth’, a national urban planning theory that believes in the sculpting of cities around compact and walkable urban centers as a counter to sprawl. The most specific example of this position is in the Bay-Front Master Plan, where he secured hundreds of acres of beachfront property for use and construction. He has shown support for increased consumer protection regulations and mild government intervention to guarantee this. His alignment with labor unions and labor protections has coincided well with this.

Padillas social positions are intrinsically **Progressive**, both due to his own identity and the makeup of his district. Padilla coming out in the mid 2000s made him one of the first openly queer mayors in the country, and his background in the ethnically diverse latino and immigrant communities of Chula Vista helped mold his positions on immigration and racial policy. Padilla has supported the enshrinement and protection of LGBTQ rights, specifically through bill SB497 demanding the security of gender-affirming care from infringement in the state of California. He is a member of the Latino Caucus and championed the establishment of a Latino Commission.

Due to the conditions of his district and prior positions, Padilla is effectively required to be **environmentally conscious**. Conservation of the Salton Sea is a critical issue for his constituency in Salton City, and bill CA369 specifically was proposed as a renovation project to protect and sustain the Salton Sea. He has shown consistent support for environmental action beyond just the requirements of his district, through support of regulation on geothermal waste through sponsored bill SB819; alongside this, he co-sponsored AB1083 (‘The California Environmental Equality Act’), which would regulate

housing projects across the state and establish certain land as protected under law for ecological purposes.

Idiosyncrasy (Political Compromises, Maverick Tendencies)

Despite his image as a straightforward liberal, there are multiple wrinkles in Padillas political game that set him apart from his colleagues representing coastal democratic cities. Most of these adjustments put him in a unique position when operating on the floor.

Though he holds a strong base of support among labor unions, Padilla has cooperated multiple times with private companies and corporations, to the point of being considered a fairly pro-business candidate; This nearly apolitical growth-first mindset has allowed for multiple examples of cooperation across the aisle.

Padilla has taken an unexpected lead on the issue of AI in the State Senate, spearheading the issue of AI regulation through bills like SB579 and SB243. His rhetoric mostly angles on cautiously integrating AI into consistent use and safeguarding children and families from its negative effects.

Unlike a few other democratic candidates who are more critical of policing, Padillas career in law enforcement has given him a base of support and rhetorical wedge among Law Enforcement in his district. He does not endorse policies oriented around defunding police departments; however, he has shown support for police accountability, specifically through SB627, which prohibits law enforcement officers from using facial coverings or concealment in the line of duty.

Prominent Issues

- Economic Development and Regulation. Longterm objective from before senatorial run, supports growth-focused policy and regulating key industries. AI is most recent example.
- LGBTQ and Minority Representation.
- Salton Sea Conservation. Most prominent environmental bill pushed is suited towards investing in safeguarding the Salton Sea. Direct constituent need.

Campaign Contributors and Expenditures

Due to each of these organizations paying out equivalent individual donations, the relative 'top 5' have been listed and highlighted below. Expenditures are also included to accurately reflect his media and campaign spending habits.

Total Contributions – \$898,713

- > California State Council of Service Employees (\$19,400)
- > California Teachers Association (\$19,400)
- > Southwest Regional Council of C8arpenters (\$19,400)
- > State Building and Construction Trades Council (\$19,400)
- > United Domestic Workers of America (\$19,400)
- > California State Association of Electrical Workers (\$17,200)
- > California State Council of Laborers (\$14,550)
- > American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (\$9,800)
- > California Correctional Officers Peace Association (\$9,800)
- > California Dental Association (\$9,800)

Total Expenditures: \$1,196,721

- Left Hook Communications LLC (\$232,875)
- Amplify Campaigns LLC (\$215,232)
- The California Democratic Party (\$82,000)
- Meta Platforms Inc., Facebook (\$73,134)
- Lac Inc (63,206)
- Vencer Public Affairs & Strategy Inc (\$39,245)
- USPS (38,240)
- Google Client Services LLC (\$38,197)
- Lake Research Partners (\$36,157)
- Trade Desk Inc (\$32,997)

District 18: Basic Overview

Economic Makeup

- District 18s highest economic output is located in Chula Vista, with over 127,000 people congruently employed.

- Its most dominant industries are divided into Healthcare and Social Assistance (15.8% of employment), Retail Trade (10.9% of employment), and Public Administration (8.86% of employment).
- Divided into industries based on payment, Utilities (\$95,980), Public Administration (\$87,047) and Management of Companies and Enterprises (\$81,650) pay the most.
- As the border between San Diego and Tijuana, Chula Vista receives the boon as a logistical and tourist hub. Intersects between Interstates 5 and 805, state routes 125 and 54.
- District-wide, a whopping 69% of jobs are focused on service. Manufacturing comes in second place at 10% and agriculture makes up 10%.
- District 18 currently suffers an unemployment rate of 13.3% for total individuals, 18% for children and 13% for seniors.

- **Demographics**

> Population: 964,890

> Racial Breakdown:

- 69% Hispanic (665,774.1)
- 17% White (164,031.3)
- 7% Asian (67,542.3)
- 4% Black (38,595.6)
- 29.6% of population is Foreign Born.

> Median Age: 35.9

- 62% of population between ages of 18 and 62. In second place, 14% under the age of 18.
- Divided further down, the 10-19 and 30 – 39 age groups both make up 15% of individuals in District 18.
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> Income

- Median Household Income: 77,843
- Income Per Capita: 32,463

> Urban / Rural Divide

District 18 suffers from a strong divide in urban and rural representation due to its

geography. Chula Vista makes up the bulk of its economic productivity and population count, defining it firmly as Urban; Salton City and Imperial are in the center of the district, with much lower populations and a makeup better defined as Suburban; the less densely populated and more agriculturally inclined interior is secured eastward of both, with the lowest population and being very qualified well as Rural.

Geography and Ecology

District 18 is notoriously divided along its geographic lines, spanning nearly the entirety of the border with Mexico and including three distinct regions. Each will be explained in separate sections below.

Chula Vista is the juggernaut of District 18, situated on the lower coastline and separated from the rest of the district by the Otay Mountain Wilderness Area. With a population of 257,030, the city makes up the bulk of District 18s gross economic output and is its most dominant population center.

Salton City and the Salton Sea stand in the middle of District 18. Defined by the Colorado Desert and the unique biome attached to the Salton Sea, they are unfortunately wedged between the two alternate ends of the district while suffering unique concerns at the same time due to their preserved ecology. Though sitting closer to the political center with a mild conservative lean, significant amounts of voting in the area can be heavily swayed depending on policy attached to the handling of the Salton Sea.

Eastward are the primarily agricultural and heavily rural areas beyond even suburban population centers. Decidedly conservative and usually considered under-represented due to a lack of voting power and connection with the rest of the district.

Political Registration

A total of 531,983 voters out of the 964,890 individuals living in District 18 are registered to vote, meaning that roughly 55.1% of the district is registered to vote per

the 2025 census. In terms of party affiliation, they are listed below in accordance with the 2020, 2014 and 2012 presidential elections.

> 2020

- Democrats: 73.7%
- Republicans: 24.3%

> 2016

- Democrats: 75.9%
- Republicans: 18.8%

> 2012

- Democrats: 73.9%
- Republicans: 23.5%

General Positions

District 18s political preferences are divided firmly based on their location. Chula Vista is decidedly democratic, with a working class and professional age voter base aligned with the parties goals and principles. They require consistent growth, economic stability in San Diego and value a socially liberal bend.

In contrast, voters inland in the Salton Sea area are more comparatively conservative. However, the issue of the Salton Sea is considered crucial due to its ecological and economic significance.

Citations

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