

COUNTY GOVERNMENT

In the US, there are 4 tiers of government: (1) Federal, (2) State, (3) County, and (4) City. Many people know about some Federal issues. Some people know about some City issues. However, most people are unaware of the political issues that occur in between those two ends of the spectrum. That lack of focus is unfortunate because the County government is arguably the most impactful of the four tiers, yet it continues to hide in plain sight for many people. This article attempts to shine some light on that particular blind spot of our collective political conscience.

ORANGE COUNTY SUPERVISORS WIELD A HUGE AMOUNT OF INFLUENCE, OVER A HUGE AMOUNT OF PEOPLE

When Orange County was established in 1889, the population was approximately 13,000. Those 13,000 people were represented by 5 County Supervisors. Thus, each Supervisor represented approximately 2,600 constituents.

Since that time, the population has increased by a multiple of 246. Currently, the population is estimated to be approximately 3.2 million. To put that figure in context, the population of Orange County is larger than the population of 21 different states. Of the 3,142 counties in the U.S., Orange County is the 6th most populated.

Because of the massive population growth, the size of the County government's footprint has correspondingly expanded. Currently, there are more than 18,000 employees who work for one of the County's 22 different Departments.

Despite the exponential growth in population and the government structure, one thing at the County-level has not changed over the last 130 years: there are still only 5 Supervisors.

Having such a limited number of elected officials representing such a large populace is not a common practice. States with smaller populations elect voluminous legislatures to represent their political interests. Other counties have more than 5 Supervisors (i.e., Cook County, IL has 17 elected "Commissioners"). Within Orange County, many of the 34 cities elect 7 members to their respective councils, and three of the four Community College Districts in Orange County elect seven trustees.

However, Orange County only has 5 elected officials (Supervisors) to represent its 3.2 million residents. Thus, each Supervisor represents approximately 640,000 constituents, which is approximately the same size as our local congressional districts.

Even though they represent a similar amount of people, far more attention is typically paid to congressional races. However, a member of congress is only one

cog in a 435-person machine. Consequently, their vote constitutes less than 1/2 of 1% of the number of votes needed to get anything done. Contrast that with a County Supervisor who is one member of a 5-person body. Because only 3 votes are needed in order to achieve a majority, each Supervisor potentially holds 33% of the ability to get something done at the County level.

County Supervisors do not only wield huge influence, over a huge amount of people; they are also responsible for distributing a huge amount of money. The most recent annual budget for Orange County was approximately \$6.2 billion. Supervisors also enact ordinances, approve contracts, and govern unincorporated areas (i.e., Rossmoor, North Tustin, Ladera Ranch, Coto De Caza, etc.).

In addition to directly electing Supervisors, voters also indirectly choose other members of the County government. The Supervisors appoint 17 different Directors. They also appoint a CEO who, in turn, appoints 11 other Directors. Supervisors also appoint members to the 85 different Boards, Committees, and Commissions.

CURRENT SUPERVISORS

The 1st District is comprised of Garden Grove, Westminster, and Santa Ana. Andrew Do is the current Supervisor for this district. He is up for re-election in 2020.

The 2nd District is comprised of Newport Beach, Costa Mesa, Huntington Beach, Seal Beach, Rossmoor, Stanton, Cypress, and parts of Buena Park and Fountain Valley. Michelle Steel is the current Supervisor for this district. She is up for re-election in 2018.

The 3rd District is comprised of Irvine, Tustin, Orange, Villa Park, Yorba Linda, and part of Anaheim. Todd Spitzer is the current Supervisor for this district. He is currently running for District Attorney. If he wins that position, there will be a special election to fill his vacant Supervisor seat. If he does not win the D.A. race, then he will remain a Supervisor until he is termed out of office in 2020.

The 4th District primarily encompasses Fullerton and part of Anaheim. Shawn Nelson is the current Supervisor for this district. He is termed out of office in 2018.

The 5th District consists of south Orange County. Lisa Bartlett is the current Supervisor for this district. She is up for re-election in 2018.

REPUBLICANS HAVE HAD A MONOPOLY ON COUNTY GOVERNMENT FOR 30 YEARS, BUT DEMOCRATS HAVE THE NUMBERS TO CHANGE THAT

At present, all 5 Supervisors are Republicans. That monopoly on County governance is not a recent phenomenon. Over the course of the last 30 years, there have been 24 different individuals who have served as Orange County Supervisors; only one of

them was a Democrat (Lou Correa, 2005-2006). During that same time span, there have been 37 different elections for County Supervisor, and almost all of them have been landslide victories. Those victories have created a pipeline for Republican officials who subsequently ascend to higher offices.

Some might assume that it is natural for Republicans to win often and win easily because Orange County is conservative. However, the voter registration data tells a different story. In Supervisor District 1, Democrats hold a 15-point advantage. In Supervisor District 4, Democrats hold an 8-point advantage. Thus, there are enough Democrats to win these elections.

Personally, I do not believe that Democrats continue to lose these races because they don't care. Instead, I think they lose because they don't know. The good news is that is an easy fix. We all need to heighten our awareness and diligently vote down ballot, and we need to do it immediately.

DEMOCRATS NEED TO START WINNING SUPERVISOR SEATS IMMEDIATELY IN ORDER TO AVOID FURTHER REPUBLICAN GERRYMANDERING IN 2021

In 2020, the US census will re-calculate population statistics, and in 2021, various entities will be tasked with re-drawing political maps. County Supervisors are responsible for re-drawing their districts. Because Supervisors serve 4-year terms, the three candidates who are elected in 2018 will be involved in the map-drawing process (the two other Supervisors elected in 2020 will also, obviously, be involved in the process). Last time the maps were re-drawn in 2011, the unanimously Republican Board of Supervisors gerrymandered the maps in a way that ensured their grasp on power. Republican candidates subsequently won two very close elections because of said gerrymandering. Next time the maps are drawn, it would be nice to have a voice in the process and hopefully prevent further manipulations.

INCREASING THE NUMBER OF SUPERVISORS TO BETTER REPRESENT A GROWING POPULATION?

It may also be worth considering an expansion of the number of Supervisors from 5 to 7. After all, every other aspect of the County has grown in scope since its inception 130 years ago.

There is a proposed constitutional amendment working its way through the state legislature right now which would require any county with a population exceeding 5 million to elect a CEO and 7 Supervisors. That measure is expected to be on the ballot in 2018. Although every California resident would be able to vote for that measure, Los Angeles is the only county with a large enough population to be subjected to the expansion. Fearful that increased participation might loosen their complete control of county politics, numerous Republicans (including Michelle Steel) have publicly opposed such an idea.

Orange County adopted a charter in 2002. Accordingly, residents may enact certain measures through the initiative process. If approximately 100,000 signatures could be collected in support of such a measure, an initiative to increase the number of Supervisors could be placed on the ballot. Once on the ballot, a majority of voters would need to approve the measure.

VOTING DOWN BALLOT

Although this article focuses on County Supervisors, it is just one example of a broader theme: the importance of voting down ballot. At the county level, there are 6 other elected positions (D.A., Sheriff, Assessor, Recorder, Auditor, Treasurer). The county positions are “non-partisan,” meaning there is no party denomination next to the candidate’s name on the ballot. Unlike state and federal elections, a county race can be won at the primary stage, if any candidate receives more than 50% of the vote.

There are also state Senate and Assembly races, City Council races, School Board races, Sanitations District races, Water District races, Community College District races, etc.

There is no doubt that congressional races matter. It is equally without doubt that other races matter, too. It is incumbent on us to be aware of the significant role those other races play in our lives, and vote accordingly.