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## Smoller and Moodian: Four Takeaways From the 2020 General Election

### Comments

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# Smoller and Moodian: Four Takeaways From the 2020 General Election

by [Fred Smoller and Michael A. Moodian](#) Nov 25, 2020 Updated Dec 8, 2020



Here are four takeaways pertaining to Orange County from the historic 2020 general election.

## 1. **Vote by Mail Is an Overwhelming Success**

Orange County is fortunate to have Neal Kelley as its registrar of voters. Several years ago, Kelley devised the vote center model, but because of resistance from the board of supervisors, he was not able to fully implement it until this year.

The registrar of voters mailed ballots to all voters about a month before the election. Voters could mail them back or drop them off in one of the county's 116 ballot drop boxes. Starting four days before Election Day, people could also vote at one of the 168 vote centers scattered throughout the county.

The vote-center model was an overwhelming success: Turnout shot up from an average of 73% of eligible voters for the four previous presidential elections to 87%—one of the highest in county history, in the middle of a pandemic. Additionally, there was no systematic voter fraud. State turnout was 80%, and national turnout was 65%, the highest it has been since 1908. Increased mail voting and the higher turnout it engenders, ironically, is one of the good things that has come from the tragic coronavirus pandemic.

The vote-center model saves hundreds of thousands of dollars each voting cycle because there is no need to set up and hire staff for more than a thousand polling centers. Because the state

adopted the OC vote-center model, taxpayers will save millions, perhaps billions of dollars, given how many elections are held in California.

Also, because the state allows mail ballots to be processed as they come in, we did not have the backlogs that caused reporting delays in places such as Pennsylvania.

Make it easier to vote and turnout surges. What a concept.

Vote by mail and early voting will be how California—and the nation—will vote. Our county, which has a national reputation for retrograde politics and one of the largest municipal bankruptcies in history, is the go-to county for early voting and vote by mail, the future of elections.

Many people have an emotional attachment to in-person voting. That the registrar of voters could make such a smooth transition to the vote-center model is impressive.

Hats off to Neal Kelley and his great staff. They and election workers across the nation are democracy's heroes.

## **2. Purple County, Competitive Elections**

The results also show that Orange County, CA, is no longer the ultraconservative Red county that it once was. However, the county is not as liberal Blue as other coastal regions. Instead, Orange County is increasingly Purple, with more competitive races than in the pre-2016 election, when local Republicans were more worried about the Republican they would face in the primary than who their Democratic opponent would be in the Fall election. Politically, Orange County is looking more like the rest of the state and country.

Democrats have had lots to celebrate in the last few years. For the first time in 80 years, Orange County voted for the Democratic candidate for president in 2016 (Hillary Clinton). Then, in 2018, the Blue Wave—which had been rising for years—washed over the county. Democrats won all Orange County congressional seats that year. For the first time in modern history, Orange County Republicans had no representation in the House.

In 2019, Democrats overtook Republicans in party registration. The Democrats enjoy a nearly 40,000 registrant lead, which continues to grow as older white conservatives exit the electorate and younger voters and people of color replace them.

Democrats also had lots to crow about November 3 when Joe Biden beat Donald Trump by nearly twice as many percentage points (9%) as the amount Hillary Clinton beat Donald Trump by in 2016 (5%).

However, rumors of the OC GOP's demise are greatly exaggerated: Michelle Steel and Young Kim defeated Harley Rouda (48th) and Gil Cisneros (39th), respectively. Rouda and Cisneros were part of that 2018 congressional Blue Wave.

Steel survived a bumpy road en route to her victory. As chair of the board of supervisors, she failed to convey clear and consistent messaging about the importance of wearing masks, even as COVID-19 numbers in the county spiked. (Remember her infamous and bizarre [“species discrimination”](#) remarks?) She also drew controversy when a past speech she gave surfaced about [pulling her daughter from college](#) because her daughter believed in gay marriage. Even the conservative Orange County Register Editorial Board endorsed Rouda, the Democratic incumbent.

Despite this, Steel was a countywide voice calling for the reopening of the economy. Perhaps her messaging resonated with voters experiencing COVID-19 restriction fatigue. Her district, the 48th, is also the most Republican district in the county.

The GOP’s incumbent assembly members also retained their seats, including Steven Choi, who received a stiff challenge from Irvine Councilmember Melissa Fox. [Democratic incumbent Cottie Petrie-Norris](#) was able to fend off Newport Beach Councilmember Diane Dixon’s challenge in the 74th assembly district.

However, local Democrats made gains in California’s upper house. UC Irvine law professor and political newbie Dave Min solidly beat state Senator and longtime Republican stalwart John Moorlach (SD 37).

The 29th Senate District seat has seesawed between the parties. Josh Newman (D) first defeated Ling Ling Chang (R) in 2016. Republicans saw his seat as vulnerable for a pickup, so they ran a successful recall against Newman for ostensibly voting for a gas tax and Chang won the Senate seat. Newman beat Chang again this year.

Increased partisan competition is also in officially nonpartisan races. Republican Andrew Do beat Sergio Contreras to retain his seat on the county board of supervisors in a district in which registration favors Democrats by nearly 16 points.

Orange County’s eight largest cities—Anaheim, Santa Ana, Irvine, Huntington Beach, Orange, Garden Grove, Fullerton and Costa Mesa—account for more than half (54%) of the county’s population. Orange, Anaheim and Garden Grove have Republican majorities. Santa Ana, Irvine, Fullerton and Costa Mesa have Democratic majorities. Huntington Beach is split among three Democrats, three Republicans, and an independent. One of those newly elected Republicans is former UFC light heavyweight champion Tito Ortiz, who channels Donald Trump and hopes to become mayor.

Irvine voters replaced multitermer Christina Shea (R) with Farrah Khan (D) for mayor. Khan crushed the developer-friendly and very Republican Shea by nearly 12 points.

Democrats enjoy a 15-point registration advantage over Republicans in Irvine. The city’s Democratic majority on the council includes veteran Larry Agran, the Energizer Bunny of Orange County politics who “takes a lickin’ and keeps on tickin’.”

Democrats also retained their majority in Costa Mesa, with its Democratic Mayor Katrina Foley earning a solid victory. Costa Mesa's council shifted from being a majority Republican council to Democratic in 2018.

Jesse Unruh's dictum "Money is the mother's milk of politics" was on full display in Anaheim. Disney spent more than \$1 million backing resort-friendly candidates who won their respective races. This means that, along with Mayor Harry Sidhu, councilmembers backed by the resort industry will have a voting majority on the council.

The Democratic party says that as a result of the 2020 elections there will be more Democrats on school boards than Republicans or independents. That bodes well for the future of the party: City councils and school boards can be springboards for higher office.

### **3. Asian American Power**

Orange County has the largest Vietnamese enclave in the world outside Vietnam, and the broader Asian American community is a potent force in OC politics. Our elected officials increasingly represent OC's ethnic and partisan diversity. [According to the latest Census data, individuals classified as Asian compose 22% of the county's population](#), and OC's Asian American community continues to gain political clout. Republican candidates such as Phillip Chen, Steven Choi, Andrew Do, Young Kim, Janet Nguyen and Michelle Steel; Democratic candidates such as Tammy Kim and Dave Min; and others were victorious November 3.

Young Kim and Steel are two of three Korean American women elected to Congress this year. The national [GOP's Growth and Opportunity Project](#) in 2013 set forth a multimillion dollar effort to connect better with minority communities. An original report from this endeavor specifically stated "[The RNC must actively engage Asian and Pacific Islander American \(APA\) communities to help welcome in new members of our Party.](#)"

The outgoing U.S. president's racially polarizing rhetoric hurt efforts for Republicans to connect with minority communities during the past few years, but if former RNC Chair Reince Priebus were to look into a crystal ball seven years ago, he would likely be impressed with the gains Republican Asian American candidates made in Orange County in 2020.

Earlier this year, Jeff LeTourneau, who was the OC Democratic party vice chair at the time, shared a Facebook post on his personal page that praised Communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh. This outraged the county's Vietnamese American community (many of whom fled Communist Vietnam or are the ancestors of those who fled), drawing sharp rebukes from both parties and leading to LeTourneau's resignation. The 48th congressional district encompasses Little Saigon, and it is possible that this controversy made the difference in Rouda's slim defeat (2%) to Steel.

### **4. Propositions: Looking More Like the State but Still Conservative**

California is a liberal state, but its residents voted down most of the progressive propositions on the ballot this year, perhaps as a result of the pandemic and the economic disruption it has caused.

OC voted with the state on all but three (14, 17, 19) of the 12 propositions. Again, once an outlier among coastal counties, Orange County, although still fiscally and socially conservative, is looking more and more like the rest of the Golden State.

Unlike the state, the fiscally conservative county said no to Proposition 14, which will provide \$5 billion in bonds for stem cell research. State voters approved the sale of these bonds.

Also, OC voted narrowly (50.2%) against Proposition 17, which allows people who are on parole to vote. Fifty-eight percent of the state said yes, so it passed.

OC also parted company with the state on Proposition 19, which narrowly passed. It makes it easier for people older than 55 and others to take their property tax bills to other counties. OC voters turned it down—perhaps because it removed Proposition 13 (what has been called the “third rail of California politics”) protections on inherited property. Folks who inherit property and who rent it out will pay property taxes based on the current market value of the property.

County voters sided with the state on other propositions. They rejected rent control, and they voted in favor of Uber and Lyft drivers remaining contract employees, in both cases by bigger margins than the state.

On social issues, OC voted down proposals that would have reinstated affirmative action and allowed 17 year olds to vote, again, by greater percentages than the state. They also voted down Proposition 20, which would have toughened parole eligibility, increasing the prison population, and increasing state and local correctional costs by millions per year. Fifty-eight percent of OC voters rejected this.

Orange County, which has an airport named after John Wayne and was once a thriving far right utopia, has changed dramatically. We are Purple County.

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*Smoller and Moodian direct the Orange County Annual Survey. Read their latest report [here](#).*

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