

Jim Costa needs urban Fresno's help if he's to beat Johnny Tacherra and stay in Congress

By John
Ellis



Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, and GOP challenger Johnny Tacherra in the House District 16 race.

Here's how the 16th Congressional District — currently represented by Fresno Democrat Jim Costa — came to be, based on the 2010 U.S. Census numbers.

It was 27.5% of the old 19th Congressional District, a strongly GOP area represented pre-2012 by Turlock Republican Jeff Denham and, before him, Mariposa Republican George Radanovich. Added in was 36% of the 18th District, a true central San Joaquin Valley swing district of Democrats and Republicans that was represented by Atwater Democrat Dennis Cardoza. Line drawers then took a smidge of Tulare Republican Devin Nunes' old district — around 8%, but strongly Republican..

Finally, they put in 23% of the former 20th District, which was represented by Costa.

For Costa, that part of his old district is the key to him staying in Congress — or being dumped by an upstart, underfunded and unheralded rural Fresno County dairyman.

The chunk of the old 20th District is heavily Democratic, urban Fresno. It is the very heart of Costa's political strength,

both in the old 20th District and now in the 16th District.

But one influential political consultant says not even urban Fresno can save Costa, and come January, Republican Johnny Tacherra will head to Washington as the new 16th District representative.

Tim Orman, a political expert who makes his living doing this sort of thing, even worked up a spreadsheet to back his argument. His conclusion is that Tacherra will win the race by a razor-thin 239-vote margin.

It's not an exact science because nobody knows how many of the 42,600 mail and provisional ballots left to count in Fresno County are from the 16th District part of the county. Not even county Clerk Brandi Orth knows.

Those exact numbers are known in Madera and Merced counties, which have much smaller voting bases which makes that sort of parsing easier.

So Orman had to guess at the Fresno County number, though it is based on some math and solid assumptions — he took the percentage of 16th District Fresno County votes cast as a portion of the entire county's vote total so far to reach his number. And that number is 9,277.

Others, such as former Congressman Richard Lehman, think there are more than that number of mail and provisional ballots left to count in Fresno County's part of the 16th District.

In truth, nobody knows for sure.

But Orth said she expects to have counted a good number of the remaining mail ballots by the time she announces a vote-count update Friday afternoon. Both Madera and Merced also plan to update their vote count Friday, so the muddled 16th District race should start to come into sharper focus.

All the pundits are basing the number of votes Tacherra and Costa ultimately win on how the voting has gone so far. For example, if Tacherra is at 51% of the vote and Costa 49% in ballots already counted, then experts are guessing the remaining ballots will break the same way.

The thing is, Fresno County has more ballots left to count than either Madera or Merced, and that's where Costa's chances come in. Right now, Tacherra holds a 736-vote lead, but Costa so far is winning 62.5% of the vote in Fresno County.

At the same time, he's losing in both Madera and Merced.

So Fresno County has to come through, or Costa's done for.

Unfortunately for Costa, lots of his 16th District core constituency stayed home this year, so there may not be enough votes left to count in Fresno, even with Costa winning around 63% of them, to offset Tacherra's edge in Madera and Merced counties.

In 2012, Costa won 42,032 of the 61,985 votes cast in Fresno County. So far this year, he's only won 16,235 of the 25,985 cast.

If Tacherra pads his lead after the Friday updates, it may be over, but the general feeling among both Republicans and Democrats is that Costa will close the gap. Still, the ultimate outcome will remain unknown. That's how close it is.

In 2010, the last time Costa was in deep political trouble, he turned an election night 1,823-vote deficit into an eventual 3,031-vote victory after all the mail and provisional ballots were counted.

He can only hope history can repeat itself.

Contact John Ellis: jellis@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6320 or [@johnellis24](https://twitter.com/johnellis24) on Twitter.

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