

## Fresno's Mayor and LA County: What a fight!



# THE CITY BEAT

GEORGE  
HOSTETTER

Posted by George Hostetter on January 13, 2015

"We knew we had problems when the returns from Los Angeles County started coming in."

That's what Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin told me several days ago when we chatted by phone about her race for the state controller's office.

Turns out LA County voter returns are still catching the eyes of political gurus throughout the state.

To refresh, Swearingin, a Republican, lost to Betty Yee, a Democrat, in the Nov. 4 general election by a 54%-46% margin.

Yee had 3,810,304 votes. Swearingin had 3,249,668 votes. That's a difference of 560,636 votes. Those numbers from the state's official Statement of Vote.

I called the mayor to get her take on the overall and county-by-county returns for her race. I also took a glance at county-by-county statistics for voter registration and voter participation in the Nov. 4 campaign.

I'm not an expert on voter numbers. But some of the LA County statistics stood out when compared to other counties.

I made a few phone calls. I learned that other reporters who do have expertise in this area saw what I saw. They, too, are curious.

I offer a few of my thoughts only because the statistics could impact Swearingin's political future. She is termed out in two years. She is seen as a rising star in California GOP circles. She may run for governor in 2018. She doesn't like to lose.

But I wonder: Do the Democrats have a system in place that makes it impossible for a Republican to ever again win a statewide office?

Here we go:

\* As of Oct. 20, 2014, there were 17,803,823 registered voters in California. That was 73.30% of all the people eligible to be registered (24,288,145).

\* There were 7,708,683 registered Democrats -- 43.30% of total registered voters.

\* There were 5,005,422 registered Republicans -- 28.11% of total registered voters.

\* The others were registered to other parties or declared no party preference.

\* The Republican statewide total is just 64.93% of the Democratic statewide total. Let's say the Republican-Democratic registration totals were turned in a human's height. Let's say the Democratic total equaled a man standing 6 feet 4 inches. The Republican man would stand 4 feet 1 inch.

\* There were 2,473,691 registered Democratic voters just in LA County. There were 1,010,254 registered Republican

voters just in LA County.

\* The Republican number of registered voters just in LA County is 40.84% of the number Democratic registered voters just in LA County. (I'm comparing only Democrats and Republicans because they're the only political parties in California with the organization and platform to actually govern. The other parties and the people of "no party preference" are merely along for the ride in our republic.)

\* Let's say the Democratic total of registered voters just in LA County equaled a woman standing 6 feet 4 inches. By comparison, the Republican woman in LA County would stand 2 feet 7 inches.

\* Let's subtract LA County's Democratic and Republican registered voters from the statewide totals. In the other 57 counties, there were 5,234,992 registered Democrats and 3,995,168 registered Republicans. That means in the other 57 counties, the Republican total of registered voters is 76.31% of the Democratic total. (If you're a Republican interested in competitive races, that's a substantially better percentage than the 64.93% for the entire state.)

\* LA County had the most people eligible to vote: 6,096,320. The next closest was San Diego County at 2,135,863.

\* None of California's 58 counties was a perfect 100% when it came to registered-to-vote/eligible-to-register ratio. Five counties had ratios over 80%. They were tiny Alpine County (87.01%) and Sierra County (89.1%), moderately-sized Nevada County (80.39%), well-to-do Marin County (84.20%) and LA County (80.34%).

\* If LA County were a state, it would rank No. 8 in the U.S. in population with 10.02 million people. LA County consists of 4,752 square miles. It's smaller than Connecticut (only Delaware and Rhode Island are smaller among the 50 states).

\* LA County with more than 10 million people does just as good a job of registering its people to vote as Nevada County with fewer than 100,000 people. LA County with more than 10 million people is nearly 11 percentage points better than San Francisco County (69.37%) when it comes to registering its people to vote, even though San Francisco County has just one-twelfth of the population of LA County.

\* On Election Day (Nov. 4, 2014), Democrats swept the races for statewide offices.

\* Statewide, 42.20% of people registered to vote actually cast ballots, either by mail or at precincts. There were 7,513,972 voters.

\* Only one county, Sierra, saw more than 70% of its people registered to vote actually vote. In Sierra, 1,627 of 2,229 registered voters cast ballots -- 72.99%.

\* If Sierra County was No. 1, then which county was No. 58? That would be LA County. In LA County, 1,518,835 of 4,897,915 eligible voters actually voted in the Nov. 4 election -- 31.01%.

\* Statewide, the majority of votes cast in the Nov. 4 election was done by mail. Statewide, 4,457,705 of the 7,513,972 votes were of the vote-by-mail variety. That's 60.52%.

\* Statewide, only 39.48% of votes in the Nov. 4 election were cast at precincts on Election Day. That's 2,966,267 of 7,513,972 votes.

\* Californians from Crescent City in the north to San Diego in the south like to vote by mail. Alpine County on Nov. 4 had five precincts, but all 468 votes were vote-by-mail. Sierra County had 22 precincts, but all 1,627 votes were vote-by-mail.

\* In fact, vote-by-mail was the preferred method of voting in 57 of California's 58 counties. No. 57 on this list of 58 counties was Humboldt County with 57.20% of voters casting their ballots by mail.

\* Just one of the 58 counties saw its vote-by-mail portion fall below 50% of total votes cast. That would be LA County

at 37.99%. In LA County, only 577,023 of the 1,518,835 votes cast in the Nov. 4 election were by mail.

\* Only one county saw more than half of its votes cast on Election Day at precincts. That would be LA County at 62.01%. In LA County, 941,812 of the 1,518,835 votes cast in the Nov. 4 election were at precincts.

\* The counties that ranked Nos. 2 through 6 in actual number of precinct voters were No. 2 Orange County, No. 3 San Diego County, No. 4 Alameda County, No. 5 Riverside County and No. 6 San Bernardino County. Together, these five counties totaled 876,134 precinct voters, 65,678 less than LA County by itself.

\* Is LA County an outlier, something outside the expected range of values? Let's take a look at more numbers. Take, for example, the ratio of registered voters to people eligible to register. As noted above, statewide it's 73.30 and in LA County it's 80.34%. That's a difference of seven percentage points. If you take away LA County's numbers from the equation, the statewide ratio of registered voters to people eligible to register for the remaining 57 counties is 70.94%. By that standard, LA County's ratio is nearly 10 percentage points higher than ratio of the other 57 counties.

\* For another example of LA County as outlier, take a look at precinct voters. The statewide average of precinct voters for all 58 counties was 39.48%, while LA County's percentage of precinct voters was 62.01%. That's a difference of nearly 23 percentage points. But what happens if you take LA County from the mix and look just at precinct voters for the other 57 counties? You find that precinct voters in the other 57 voters were only 33.77% of the total voters. That's more than 28 percentage points behind LA County.

\* Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin (Republican) lost the state controller's race to Betty Yee (Democrat) by 560,636 votes. Yee prevailed in LA County by 306,566 votes. LA County gave Yee by far her biggest net gain of votes. Swearingin with 46% of the vote did second best among Republicans running in the seven partisan statewide offices.

\* Pete Peterson did the best among the seven Republicans running for state offices with 46.4% of the vote in the Secretary of State race. Peterson lost to Alex Padilla by 514,377 votes. Padilla (from Los Angeles) won LA County by 352,309 votes. LA County gave Padilla by far his biggest net gain of votes.

So...what's happening here?

Let's begin by reviewing several of my assumptions as I pursued an answer to that question.

I figured there is immense value to winning statewide office in California. The state is the biggest, most important state in the richest, most powerful country in the world. Holding statewide office in California is a ticket to power, influence and fame. The party that controls all statewide offices in California is the party that controls 24/7 the lives of nearly 40 million people (not to mention tens of billions of dollars).

I figured there was value in recalling two local elections -- the 2013 Measure G/residential trash special election and the 2014 Fresno City Council District 1 race between Esmeralda Soria and Cary Catalano. Both were non-partisan races, but both had a strong Republican flavor on one side and a strong Democratic flavor on the other. Swearingin supported Measure G and Catalano. The unions were against Measure G and for Soria. The unions beat Swearingin both times.

I figured there was value in recalling how the unions beat Swearingin twice. Both races were tight. Swearingin's side jumped to early leads thanks to first vote-by-mail returns. But both times the unions said their "ground game" would make the difference. What's a "ground game" in politics? That's getting out the vote on Election Day. In a nutshell, the ground game is precinct voters. The unions and their Democratic Party allies had an unbeatable ground game in those two elections. The unions and their Democratic allies knew how to generate just enough precinct voters to win. The unions and their Democratic allies handed two bitter defeats to the Swearingin side.

I figured a political party doesn't just buy a superb "ground game" off a supermarket shelf. It takes organization, money, hard work, tactical and strategic thinking, Napoleonic leadership. But most of all a superb "ground game"

requires untapped reserves. If the vast majority of a potential pool of likely supporters traditionally votes by mail and turns in its ballots weeks before Election Day, then a party can have all the money and dedication in the world but would be left impotent on Election Day because there's hardly anyone left to herd to the polls in the final 24 hours. In other words, "untapped reserves" by my thinking are people registered to vote, belong to the party in question, don't vote by mail, don't vote all that often, are known to the party apparatus and, with sufficient encouragement by shrewdly-directed party volunteers, can be persuaded in substantial numbers to cast a ballot at a moment's notice on Election Day.

I figured the potential rewards of ballot-box success in California are so enormous and the analytical power of computerized Big Data so immense that it would be absurd for a political party not to try to exploit these trends year in and year out forever.

I took a look at the State of California's 2014 Statement of Vote, looked at the LA County numbers, and assumed LA County is California's Germany. You know how it is through history with Germany (or the Germanic states of yore or the Holy Roman Empire of long ago). It's stuck there between the East and the West. It's got all those people and all that geographic value. Germany for centuries was the key to European power. Germany is what you wanted to control if you had grand ambitions. So it is with LA County today if you want to control California and, therefore, be a big shot on the national and international stages.

I took these assumptions to their inevitable conclusion. LA County, despite its huge population, does better than just about every other county in California when it comes to getting people registered to vote because that's precisely what various register-to-vote organizations want above all else. The result is a huge reserve of people who have jumped through the bureaucratic hoops necessary to vote but, because they had to be cajoled to register in the first place, may not be your most dedicated voters. Then you've got a Democratic Party that thoroughly dominates LA County. The Republican Party in LA County is just a wart on the body politic there. The Democratic Party has a real good idea (thank you, Bell Curve) how statewide election results will unfold in the other 57 counties. California's Democratic Party has built in LA County the world's best "ground game" on Election Day. The Democratic Party then generates on Election Day the number of precinct voters necessary to give Democratic candidates for statewide office a guaranteed margin of victory. It's all as easy as pie.

Finally, I assumed these assumptions must have an element of truth to them because I couldn't bear the alternative. I couldn't bear to think that people of goodwill in LA County go to all the trouble of getting such a large number of people to register to vote and go to all the trouble of developing a sophisticated "ground game" on Election Day and then do nothing on Election Day, thereby betraying the democratic process as millions of potential voters stay home after they had been manipulated into registering in the first place.

I called Dan Schnur. He is executive director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California. Schnur was very nice to me. But I had blindsided him, and for that I apologize. He hadn't had time to crunch the numbers in the Statement of Vote. He suggested I call LA County Registrar of Voters Dean Logan.

I did call Logan. First, though, I called the California Secretary of State's office. I told a spokeswoman that I didn't understand some of the numbers from LA County. She said the Secretary of State simply takes the numbers and posts them on the Internet. She said the Secretary of State does no analysis of the numbers.

LA County Registrar of Voters Logan was generous with his time. He said I wasn't the first reporter to ask him about LA County's unusual numbers. He said he, too, is intrigued by LA County's unusual numbers. He said LA County may have the most diverse population of any county in California (I didn't say anything, but would beg to differ). He said a lot of the statewide organizations focused on registering people to vote are headquartered in LA County. He acknowledged that people are people, whether they live in Modoc County or LA County, but said LA County people for some reason like to vote by precinct. He said LA County's vote-by-mail ballot isn't easy to use (adding that he's working hard to change that). He said he and his office are dedicated to delivering the best voting experience possible to LA County residents.

But in the end, Logan had a simple response to my questions about Los Angeles County's unusual numbers in the Nov. 4, 2014 general election: "That's a hard question to answer."

Swearingin reportedly has visions of running for governor of California in 2018.

She'll have to handle all those "reserves" in LA County.

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