



2022 General Election Preview

Part 1 -- Partisan Races

October 17, 2022

The November 8 General Election will have one of the greatest impacts on the long-term composition of the California Legislature since the imposition of term limits in 1990. A combination decennial redistricting and term limits has resulted in 37 of the 120 current legislators leaving their seats to seek higher office, local office, or simply walking away from elected office altogether. With several incumbents in tight races, it is possible that fully one-third of the Legislature will be comprised of brand-new legislators. This class of legislators will likely serve together for the next decade and, as a group, will shape the action and leadership of the Legislature during their time in office together.

Despite this enormous change in individual representation, there will be no significant change in the partisan makeup of the Legislature. The California electorate is overwhelmingly comprised of Democrats, with approximately 47 percent of the 21 million registered voters being Democrats and only 24 percent registered as Republicans. With the Republican Party consistently losing registered voters over the years, this has led to more and more legislative seats for Democrats and fewer seats for Republicans. At this time, three-quarters of the Legislature is comprised of Democrats. As outlined below, and depending on voter turnout, those numbers will not likely improve for the Republicans, and in fact, could get a lot worse.

State Senate Elections

The California State Senate is comprised of 40 Senators, each representing approximately 1 million residents. The current partisan makeup of the Senate is 31 Democrats and 9 Republicans. With Senators elected every four years on a staggered basis, this election will feature the 20 even-numbered districts. Of these 20 races, there are nine races deemed to be competitive in November, but only four of those races will be between a Democrat and Republican candidate. Three are between two Democrats and one is between two Republicans.

SD 16 Senator Melissa Hurtado (D) vs. David Shepard (R). This agricultural-focused district comprising parts of Kern, Tulare and Kings counties is the one seat where Republicans could possibly gain a seat, as Democrats in this Central Valley district often cross over party lines and vote Republican.

SD 40 Senator Brian Jones (R) vs. Joseph Rocha (D). Senator Jones was redrawn into a San Diego County district that is much less Republican than the seat he was originally elected to in 2018, thereby making this race competitive. He is running against a Navy veteran and attorney named Joe Rocha. It is an exact replay of the primary which Jones won by 9 percentage points.

SD 38 Catherine Blakespear (D) vs. Matt Gunderson (R). This is currently a Republican seat held by Senator Pat Bates who is leaving due to term limits. This newly drawn seat includes coastal Orange and San Diego counties seat and now favors Democrats by 6 percentage points. To hold this seat, the Republicans are counting on a self-described moderate and former car dealer, Matt Gunderson. The Democrats are hoping to elect the current Encinitas Mayor, Catherine Blakespear. This is a priority race for parties and spending in this race could exceed \$10 million.

SD 6 Roger Niello (R) vs. Paula Villescaz (D). This Sacramento County Senate district is an almost evenly split seat in terms of voter registration and is trending more and more Democratic. Republican Roger Niello has significant name recognition in the area as a member of the well-known Niello family of car dealers and as a former Assemblymember representing parts of this district. Paula Villescaz is a school board member, health care advocate and former legislative staffer.

State Assembly Elections

The California State Assembly is comprised of 80 members, each representing about 500,000 residents. The current partisan divide in the Assembly is 60 Democrats to 20 Republicans. As a larger body, there are many more open and contested seats in this general election than in the Senate. There are 59 safe Democratic seats and 9 competitive races between the two parties, with several involving Republican incumbents and only two with incumbent Democrats. When votes are finally tallied, it is very likely that the Democrats will increase their current numbers in Sacramento.

AD 7 Assemblyman Ken Cooley (D) vs. Josh Hoover (R). Redistricting was not kind to Assemblymember Cooley. His seat was redrawn to lose 6 points of Democratic registration and he picked up areas of Sacramento County that he has not previously represented. He is being strongly challenged by legislative staffer and Folsom Cordova School Board trustee, Josh Hoover.

AD 22 Juan Alanis (R) vs. Jessica Self (D). This Central Valley seat favors Democrats by 8 percentage points but, like many seats in the Valley, voters tend to vote more conservative, so this seat is potentially winnable for the Republicans. Neither candidate has held elective office before, and with no incumbent, this race is wide open.

AD 27 Esmeralda Soria (D) vs. Mark Pazin (R). AD 27 is another Central Valley seat with no incumbent running. This Merced, Madera and Fresno County seat pits Fresno City Councilmember Esmeralda Soria against former Merced County Deputy Sheriff Mark Pazin. Voter registration strongly favors the Democrats by 16 points., but the vote totals between all Democrats and all Republicans in the primary were nearly evenly split which suggests this is a competitive race.

AD 40 Assemblymember Suzette Valladares (R) vs. Pilar Schiavo (D). Assemblymember Valladares won election to this Santa Clarita area Democratic seat in 2020 when the Democrats failed to place a candidate in the General Election. Redistricting increased the Democratic voter registration and added new communities, thereby reducing the power of incumbency to Valladares. This will be a hard seat for the Republicans to hold.

AD 47 Christy Holstege (D) vs. Greg Wallis (R). This seat encompassing Riverside and San Bernardino desert towns is currently occupied former Republican and current Independent Chad Mayes. Redistricting turned this seat into one that solidly favors Democrats. Assemblyman Mayes, who eked out a win in 2020 as an Independent, chose not to run in this new seat. His former district staffer Greg Wallis will face Palm Springs Mayor Christy Holstege.

AD 70 Diedre Nguyen (D) vs. Tri Ta (R). This Orange County seat favors Democrats by 5 points, however almost 25 percent of voters in this district are registered with neither party. This race features two Vietnamese-born and current local government candidates – Westminster Mayor Tri Ta

on the Republican side and Garden Grove Mayor Pro Tem Diedre Nguyen on the Democratic side. While the Democrats have a 5 point registration advantage, the total votes for Republican candidates far exceeded the vote total of Nguyen who was the lone Democrat in June which suggests that Ta should prevail in November.

AD 72 Assemblymember Laura Davies (R) vs. Chris Duncan (D). Republican Laura Davies is seeking to hold on this coastal Orange County seat, which after redistricting is now about evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. As the only two candidates in the primary, Davies won decisively which suggests that she should prevail in November.

AD 76 Assemblymember Brian Maienschein (D) vs. Kristie Bruce-Lane (R). Redistricting pushed former Republican and current Democrat Maienschein further north into areas of San Diego County that have traditionally voted for Republicans. This new territory, combined with a lackluster primary showing, suggests that Maienschein is vulnerable. However, as one of the few seats they need to defend, the Democrats are expected to spend what it takes to keep this seat in their column.

Voter Turnout

As noted at the outset, if Republican voters show up and vote and Democrats do not, we could expect a fairly status quo election result. However, over the years the California Democratic Party and their labor union allies have demonstrated an ability to exceed voter turnout expectations. If that happens in November, we could see significant losses for the Republicans.

Typically, the top of the ticket dictates voter turnout, but polling shows that Governor Newsom will easily win and that race is not generating much discussion or interest. If the Governor's race does not inspire interest, how will that affect voter turnout? Will Democrats bother to turn in their ballots if the Governor's race is uninspiring? The same question also applies for Republican voters.

What effect will the hyper-competitive Congressional races that overlap with some of the partisan legislative races have on turnout and voter preference? The Congressional races are generating significant interest and spending because the outcomes in California could decide the balance of power in the House of Representatives. Will that drive higher voter turnout in those races?

Finally, there are seven statewide ballot measures with advertising that has flooded the airwaves. Despite record spending, voters are not energized by measures dealing with sports betting and dialysis clinics. However, there is one statewide ballot measure that could inspire younger, more progressive, pro-choice voters to vote – Proposition 1 would enshrine in the State Constitution a woman's right to seek and receive an abortion and choose birth control. Will this initiative help the Democrat candidates further up the ticket?