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Smoller and Moodian: Issues Matter in Supervisor's Race

Comments

This editorial was originally published in [Voice of OC](#).

Smoller and Moodian: Issues Matter in Supervisor's Race

by [Fred Smoller and Michael A. Moodian](#) Mar 16, 2021



Democrats flipped a seat on the Orange County Board of Supervisors in a special election last week. The seat had been in Republican hands for 127 years. If the Democrats win another seat next year, they'll gain control of the county's highest-ranking legislative body.

Longtime GOP office holder John Moorlach says he would have won the race if the entire Republican party had united behind him, but two other Republicans ran and split the Republican vote. While Moorlach received the county GOP's endorsement, two Republican challengers—Newport Beach Mayor Pro Tem Kevin Muldoon and Fountain Valley Mayor Michael Vo—ran active campaigns. Moorlach received 31 percent of the vote; Muldoon got 11 percent; and Vo, nine percent. Together the Republicans received 51 percent of the total votes cast. This would have been more than enough to beat Democrat and Costa Mesa Mayor Katrina Foley (44 percent).

Moorlach is right, but the fact that he is out of step with most residents on the pandemic and climate change, according to countywide surveys we've conducted, was also a factor in this, his second defeat in four months.

In years gone by, the straight arrow Moorlach would have been a shoo-in to win back his old seat. Moorlach is a Republican stalwart who ran in a solidly Republican district—a district in which Republicans enjoy a five-point registration advantage.

Moorlach, an accountant, was appointed county treasurer after his data-driven prediction of the county bankruptcy in 1994. He was then elected treasurer and proceeded to serve nearly three

terms as county supervisor. From 2015 to 2020, he served in the state Senate but was defeated in November by political newbie Dave Min, a Democrat and UC Irvine law professor, who is to the political left of the very conservative Moorlach.

Moorlach's defeats need to be viewed in the context of a changing Orange County. OC has a long reputation of being the land of John Wayne, the Save Our State initiative, and the John Birch Society. However, Orange County today is diverse both culturally and politically.

Registration numbers for the two major political parties are relatively close, and the county has a significant number of independent voters. OC is increasingly looking like the rest of the country as opposed to being an ultraconservative outlier among coastal California counties.

These changes were first apparent in 2016, when for the first time in 80 years, Orange County voters picked Democrat Hillary Clinton over Republican Donald Trump. This was followed by a "blue wave" in 2018 when all Orange County House seats were captured by Democrats. In 2019, Democrats overtook Republicans in party registration; today, there are about 50,000 more registered Democrats than registered Republicans, and that number continues to grow. In 2020, the county voted for Democrat Joe Biden for president.

Orange County is not as liberal as, say, San Francisco, but not nearly as conservative as it was decades ago when John Schmitz, Bob Dornan, and Bill Dannemeyer represented the county in Congress. Neither "Red" nor "Blue," Orange County is "Purple."

Surveys we've conducted of the entire county show that Foley is more in line with most residents on the pandemic and climate change.

Moorlach's signature issue is California's public employee pension system which he believes, with good reason, is unsustainable and needs immediate reform. Moorlach is anathema to the state's public employee unions who ran fiercely negative ads against him.

Moorlach has also promoted baseless anti-vaccination conspiracy theories. Foley, on the other hand, is a staunch advocate for vaccines, mask wearing, and social distancing.

Coronavirus

Despite public protests and the pronouncements of some Orange County Republican officials, we found in the 2021 Orange County Annual survey that 83 percent of those surveyed said that the coronavirus is a real threat and 80 percent said it is not fully under control here. We found overwhelming support for government efforts to combat the virus, including the current rules on social distancing (90 percent) and a national mask mandate (70 percent). These prescriptions have been described by those on the extreme right as an unconstitutional infringement of civil liberties and individual freedom. Seventy-three percent said government efforts to fight the virus were either about right (38 percent) or did not go far enough (35 percent). Only about a quarter (27 percent) felt that government efforts to combat the virus went too far. Eighty percent said they had or intended to get vaccinated. Only 20 percent said they wouldn't.

We asked survey respondents to name the county's most important problem: The coronavirus came in third—behind housing affordability and homelessness. Not one of the 703 respondents mentioned public employee pensions in response to this open-ended query.

Climate Change

Foley believes climate change is a serious threat and fully supports government-led efforts to combat it. Moorlach, on the other hand, says he is unconvinced that human activity is responsible for warming temperatures and feels that dramatic government action to curb greenhouse gases will harm the economy.

Those polled expressed views that were more in line with Foley than Moorlach's views on climate change. Seventy-nine percent said that the threat of climate change was a serious problem and 70 percent said climate change was caused by human activities. Respondents also accepted increased environmental regulations even if this meant higher utility bills.

The 2021 survey also asked whether stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs or are worth the cost. When we first asked this question in 2010, 50 percent said that the stricter environmental laws and regulations were worth the cost. In 2020, that number rose 13 points to 63 percent.

While we found huge partisan differences in public attitudes toward the coronavirus and climate change, the county continues to trend blue. Therefore those, such as the eminently qualified Moorlach, who seek public office will have to broaden their appeal.

Messaging that appealed to the OC electorate even 10 years ago may not work today, and this is apparent in both our polling results and partisan changes in elected offices throughout the county.

Join the survey directors at Chapman University's Sixth Annual Public Policy Conference—titled Fighting Climate Change—on April 7. The day's panels and events will explore the issue of and proposed solutions to climate change. Admission to the virtual event is free but attendance requires a reservation. Visit this website for more information: www.chapman.edu/publicpolicy.

Correction: An earlier version of this story stated that *the seat had been in both Republican and male hands for 127 years*. The authors regret the error.

*Fred Smoller is an associate professor of political science at Chapman University, where he has been on the faculty since 1983. He received his Ph.D. from Indiana University. His major areas of interest are American politics, with an emphasis on local government and public administration. Smoller directs Chapman's annual local government conference and is the author of the 2018 book *From Kleptocracy to Democracy: How Citizens Can Take Back Local Government*. Contact Smoller at smoller@chapman.edu.*

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Smoller and Moodian direct the Orange County Annual Survey and will release the full 2021 report soon.

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Voice of OC is interested in hearing different perspectives and voices. If you want to weigh in on this issue or others please email opinions@voiceofoc.org.