

Races to Watch in California

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Highlight: Here are some of the key local and statewide races and measures to watch in California.

Body

Here are some of the key local and statewide races and measures to watch in California.

In some ways, California and its concerns have been more visible than ever in this presidential election.

Its junior senator, Kamala Harris, is the first Democrat from California to run on a major-party presidential ticket, and the first Californian of any party in years to appear on the ballot nationally.

The enormity of the wildfires this year has forced many Americans to reckon with the realities of climate change, and the issue has taken center stage during the presidential debates. Gov. Gavin Newsom has positioned himself as a kind of climate change truth-teller in contrast with the president, with whom he's sparred over the causes of the blazes that have hammered the state, the nation's most populous.

[See The Times's full voter guide for Californians, with information about how, when and where to cast your ballot. | Leer en español.]

But, ultimately, the presidential election is likely to serve more as a lure to the polls for many Californians, who have voted early in record-breaking numbers; they'll have much more say in a dozen statewide ballot measures and local contests — including congressional races.

In some House districts, Republicans are fighting to retake seats lost in the so-called blue wave of Democratic wins in 2018, particularly in previously long-held Republican strongholds, like in Orange County. Several of this year's races are expected to be tight, and they'll test the durability of those shifts.

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California House races to watch

District 21

Polls close at 8 p.m. Check back here for results.

The challenger is David Valadao, a Republican running for office in a part of California that has long been the deep red heart of a blue state. But don't expect to see Mr. Valadao invoking the president as he wages a tough, personal

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campaign to win back the Central Valley House seat he narrowly lost in 2018 to Representative T.J. Cox. Instead, Mr. Valadao, a dairy farmer from Hanford, has been portraying himself as a moderate option who can bridge partisan divides, while slamming his opponent as a Bay Area-style liberal who's out of touch with the needs of constituents in an agricultural economy.

Mr. Cox has countered with a bruising campaign tying his challenger to President Trump and the House minority leader, Kevin McCarthy, the Republican from the neighboring district who has been a reliable supporter of the president.

Republicans hope that if Mr. Valadao can retake the district — which favored Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election and is one of the nation's most heavily Latino — it might show a way forward for a political party whose influence in the state has slid in the past four years. In the March primary, Mr. Valadao led the field with about 50 percent of the vote, while Mr. Cox earned 38.6 percent. But experts say it's a tossup.

District 25

Polls close at 8 p.m. Check back here for results.

The voters of this suburban district north of Los Angeles have had something of a roller coaster year. The Democratic newcomer Katie Hill won the seat in 2018 as part of the state's "blue wave." But her resignation a year ago reopened the field to a wide range of contenders, including Ms. Hill's predecessor, the Republican Steve Knight, and the progressive talk show host Cenk Uygur, who was at one point endorsed by Senator Bernie Sanders before the endorsement was retracted amid an outcry over offensive comments Mr. Uygur had made previously.

In a May special election, though, Mike Garcia, a Republican and former military pilot, easily beat Christy Smith, a Democratic member of the State Assembly, making it the first time the G.O.P. has flipped a Democrat-held seat in California since the last millennium. That was just temporary, though. The two are now fighting a rematch, and it's looking like a tight race.

District 48

Polls close at 8 p.m. Check back here for results.

For years, this coastal Orange County district was dominated by the Republican Dana Rohrabacher, who was closely allied with President Trump and had been called "Putin's favorite congressman." In 2018, though, a former Republican from Laguna Beach, Harley Rouda, unseated Mr. Rohrabacher after three decades.

This time around, Republicans are pinning their hopes on Michelle Steel, the chair of the powerful Orange County board of supervisors who has served as an adviser to the president on Asian-American issues. Mr. Rouda has blamed Ms. Steel for exacerbating the coronavirus pandemic by undermining the advice of scientists and health experts, and Ms. Steel has accused Mr. Rouda of politicizing a pandemic.

District 50

Polls close at 8 p.m. Check back here for results

Unlike the aforementioned House races, this district, in San Diego County, never turned blue. Its Republican representative was Duncan Hunter, who resigned in January after he pleaded guilty to charges that he used his campaign coffer to finance a lavish lifestyle. It was the end of a decades-long dynasty in the district; Mr. Hunter succeeded his father.

Mr. Hunter's political vulnerability prompted Darrell Issa, a longtime former Republican congressman, to jump into the race against Ammar Campa-Najjar, the young Democratic challenger Mr. Hunter beat in 2018, despite the charges.

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California Propositions to watch

Proposition 15

It may sound obscure, but whether to change how some commercial property taxes are assessed is actually one of the most controversial questions facing California voters. That's because Proposition 15, if passed, would amend rules dictated by the 1978 ballot measure that many call a third rail in California politics. That measure, Proposition 13, effectively capped property taxes and set California on its current path.

Proponents say a move to create a so-called split roll, or creating a separate tax assessment for commercial properties, would really be like closing an unfair loophole for businesses, who have long benefited from artificially low property taxes, while local governments and school districts have been starved of the funding they need to provide adequate services.

Opponents say it would raise taxes in the midst of an economic crisis, when businesses can't afford the increase.

Read more from the state voter guide and The Los Angeles Times.

Proposition 16

Polls close at 8 p.m. Check back here for results.

The thing about California's ballot propositions is that many of them are efforts to undo the work of past measures. (See Proposition 15, above.) Proposition 16, which state lawmakers voted to put on the ballot, falls squarely in that category.

In 1996, California voters enacted a ban on using race, gender or ethnicity in university admissions or in public contracting. Proposition 16 would, in a year that has been defined by reckonings over racial inequity in all facets of American life, reverse that ban.

Proponents include state lawmakers and leaders of California's prestigious public universities, who say that data shows the ban has helped keep historically underserved groups, like Black, Latino and Indigenous Californians, from getting equitable access to education and work.

Opponents say that giving preferential treatment to any group in allocating resources is nothing more than discrimination by another name.

Read more about why, even in an era of widespread protest against racism, Proposition 16 is complicated.

Proposition 22

Polls close at 8 p.m. Check back here for results.

When California legislators passed a landmark law late last year that would require gig work companies to treat workers as employees rather than independent contractors, it tipped off an intense and really, really expensive battle over the future of work. The law was meant to give a rapidly growing work force benefits and protections afforded to full-time employees.

But gig work companies like Uber and Lyft said their drivers preferred the freedom and flexibility of being considered contractors. And so, they put Proposition 22, which would exempt them from many of the new law's provisions, on the ballot before voters and have spent roughly \$200 million to persuade voters to support it. They say prices for their services may rise and be harder to come by.

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Opponents, including major labor groups, say that if Proposition 22 passes, it would not only leave workers vulnerable, but it could also demonstrate that big companies can spend their way out of rules. The fight has become a kind of prelude for looming federal-level debates over how to regulate app-based work.

Read more about why Proposition 22 is unique and why it's important.

Local races with broader implications

Los Angeles district attorney

This summer was defined by widespread protests against police brutality and racism. But in California, debates over how to police the police were already well underway. For years, Black Lives Matter activists in Los Angeles have slammed District Attorney Jackie Lacey for failing to prosecute police officers who have killed people on the job. Now, she's facing a serious challenge from George Gascón, who was until recently San Francisco's district attorney and has pitched himself as a progressive reformer.

Still, the recent uprisings have shifted the terrain: Earlier this month, Los Angeles's mayor, Eric Garcetti, withdrew his endorsement of Ms. Lacey and endorsed Mr. Gascón.

San Diego mayor

The race to become mayor of California's second largest city is notable for a couple of reasons. First, it's come down to two Democrats — Todd Gloria, a state assemblyman, and Barbara Bry, a city councilwoman — to replace Mayor Kevin Faulconer, a Republican who will be termed out. Also, the two candidates have similar views on most issues, with one major exception being how they'd tackle the housing crisis. Mr. Gloria said he supported legislation that would allow denser development in single-family neighborhoods. And neither is in the clear lead.

Read more

- Because millions of people are voting by mail, Californians' ballots will continue to be counted days and even weeks after Nov. 3. Here's how long that's expected to take in every state. [The New York Times]
- Here's more information on California's senate, congressional, and assembly races. [CalMatters]
- Read about all of California's ballot propositions, including who's putting money behind which side. [CalMatters | The Los Angeles Times | SFGate | KQED | Official voter information guide]
- If you missed it, here's why one expert described California's ballot initiatives as "the second most expensive political exercise in the free world." [The New York Times]
- See where donors to each campaign come from. (Spoiler: California isn't all blue, but you're likely to notice patterns.) [The New York Times]

PHOTO: Early voting, including voting by mail, in this election has shattered records in states across the country, including California, where more than 6.5 million ballots had been returned as of Monday. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Robyn Beck/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Load-Date: November 4, 2020