



2026

COUNTY SUPERVISORS

and the Power of
Representation



CLOSE THE GAP
CATALYST

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Why Study County Boards?

THE IMPORTANCE OF CALIFORNIA'S COUNTY BOARDS

California's 58 County Boards of Supervisors are among the most powerful and impactful political bodies in the state, yet they often operate under the radar of public attention. Counties are among the state's largest employers, with nearly 400,000 workers. Supervisors manage budgets reaching into the tens of billions, and directly shape constituents' quality of life.¹

County Boards' oversight spans critical systems including public health, criminal justice, homelessness response, substance use treatment, housing, transportation, and election administration. Supervisors sway land use decisions, climate and environmental policy implementation, and the allocation of state and federal funds. As federal policy shifts under the Trump administration, many serve as the front lines of response to crises like immigration raids and cuts to nutrition assistance.²

Boards' decisions can either advance or obstruct equity, sustainability, and democratic participation, making these seats essential targets for political engagement, representation, and accountability.

"Really, no one knows what a county does. And if your voters have the least idea, I can tell you right now that they don't know that you run the public health system. They don't know that you're in charge of all the foster kids and what happens to them. They don't know you're in charge of the tax collection. They don't know that you're in charge of all the elections, so that even if Trump were to decide there shouldn't be an election, you could say, 'Want to bet?'"

- **Sheila Kuehl**, Former Los Angeles County Supervisor

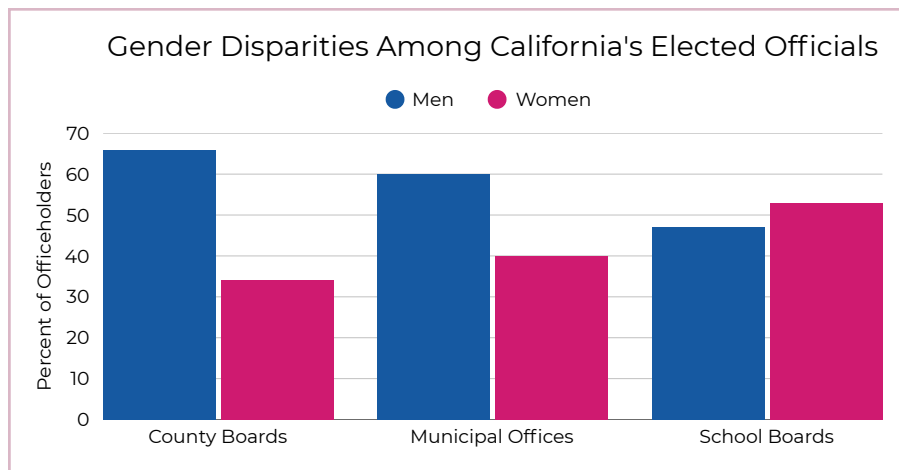
"County Supervisors are the gatekeepers for lifeline services... even if the County is only on the hook for a small fraction of the overall funding, they are the ones determining whether or not essential, cost-effective programs get funded, period."

- **Susannah Delano**, Close the Gap California Executive Director

REPRESENTATION ON CALIFORNIA'S COUNTY BOARDS

Boards of Supervisors have enormous influence over public budgets, services, and policies, but they are deeply unrepresentative of California's population.

As of 2025, just 34% of County Supervisors across all 58 counties were women, significantly trailing gender representation in California's municipal office (40%), school board (53%), and State Legislature (49%) seats. The disparity is even more stark for women of color, who make up less than 14% of all County Supervisors despite being upwards of 30% of California's total population according to U.S. Census estimates. 25 of California's 58 County Boards (43%) have only one or zero women currently serving.



This imbalance not only limits the diversity of voices shaping key decisions in critical policy areas, but it also restricts the leadership pipeline for higher office—undermining broader efforts to build representative democracy at the state and federal levels.

Additionally, 47.3% of California's County Supervisors are Republican Party members. This is nearly double the 25% Republican representation in the State Legislature and the 25.2% registered Republican voters across the state.³

“I can't believe that some of these boards don't have any diversity still. How can you speak to the needs of the community when you don't represent that community?”

It's ridiculous to not even see more Boards of Supervisors that are two, three women on the board... at minimum. What would it do to change that? What kind of priorities would the county have? What new solutions?”

- **Statewide Labor Union Leader**

PROJECT GOALS

County Supervisors' lack of demographic diversity attracts relatively little scholarly or public attention, despite their significant influence. This project explores Boards of Supervisors' operations and decision-making around key areas of community concern and examines norms and expectations of governance, including how boards' gender and ethnic makeup and Supervisors' political leanings impact how they function and what they focus on.

Interviews with advocates and Supervisors explore the culture of County Boards individually and as a whole, including the impact of gender disparity among board members, how they coordinate with one another, share resources, and engage in advocacy. Insights will contribute to the development of educational materials focused on helping prospective candidates understand the Supervisor role and how to effectively lead on County Boards.

“County Boards of Supervisors have a lot of power, and they have a lot of impact... Sheriffs, fire, and all of the other folks who have bargaining units, whether it's healthcare, whether it's social work, whether it's people who work as building managers... have to negotiate with the Board of Supervisors to get a fair contract... businesses and other corporate entities have to play ball... Having a labor-friendly County Board of Supervisors makes or breaks what those outcomes are.”

- **Danielle Cendejas**, Democratic Strategist & Partner with The Strategy Group

The Broader Context of County Governance

County governments' importance and particular lack of reflective representation in comparison with other levels of office makes them **an especially worthy target of intervention by candidate recruitment and support efforts.**

WHAT COUNTIES DO

Described by scholars as “forgotten” or “ramshackle” governments,⁴ counties are political subdivisions of state governments that provide services including health, welfare, criminal justice, elections, land use, roads and other public infrastructure, recording of documents, weights and measures, and agricultural enforcement. As conduits between state and local government, counties with large jurisdictions take up complex issues relating to environmental, transportation, and other urban services policy.⁵

The role of county governments evolved over the latter half of the twentieth century as factors like population growth, urbanization, and the need for regional solutions to issues that transcend municipal boundaries expanded counties' reach beyond just providing state-mandated services.⁶ In California, counties' relative autonomy to make governance decisions for residents depends on whether they are legally a charter or general law county, with charter counties having a greater degree of home rule.⁷

How well county governments respond to the needs of their constituents varies. Black residential spaces in inland southern California, for example, historically had to pressure county governments for basic development projects and public infrastructure such as street lights, paved roads, and park space that neighboring predominantly white and mixed-race areas enjoyed.⁸

REPRESENTATION AND WHY IT MATTERS

Data on representation in local offices, including on County Boards, is lacking. Political scientists explain that “no one knows” exactly how many women hold local office in the United States because “no one has the capacity currently to know without calling every city and township and county and school board—all 90,000 local governments.”⁹

Despite incomplete data, it's clear that county officeholders' gender and ethnic diversity is far from representative of the U.S. population. Women hold only an estimated 14% of county legislative seats across the U.S.,¹⁰ far below their numbers in statewide executive (31.6%), state legislative (33.6%), and municipal office (32.4%).¹¹ Survey data based on stratified random sampling shows that 72.5% of county governments across the U.S. have zero people of color on the board at all,¹² illustrating how women of color are particularly excluded from these roles.

California's County Boards are elected on a nonpartisan basis, but the political leanings of Supervisors matter for county spending and prioritization of crucial services such as welfare, health and public safety. Across the U.S., electing a Democratic County Supervisor rather than a Republican one leads the average county to increase overall spending by about 5%, with especially significant increases for social programs related to health and welfare, parks, and natural resources.¹³

Findings are mixed on whether Supervisor gender is linked to county spending patterns,¹⁴ but recent research finds that electing women to county government leads to increased spending on redistributive programs, especially under commission forms of government.¹⁵ This means that electing more women to County Supervisor positions is not only critical to improving basic descriptive representation but may also have substantive effects on the funding of services for under-resourced residents.

“Fresno County... I remember looking at their hallway, they have this plaque of all the Supervisors. And if you look at that plaque, it's predominantly white, predominantly men... this current board is all men.

It's mostly white, and it's mostly men when you look at the whole state... there are some boards that are a little different, but historical trends still seem to be true. In terms of diversity, it hasn't really changed much since I've worked with [County Boards].”

- Statewide Labor Union Leader

“Between Sacramento County and Kern County... the nine-county region as a whole is 47% white, yet 77%, or 35 of the 45 Supervisors, are white.”

- Pablo Rodríguez, Communities for a New California Founding Executive Director

County Boards in the News: Public Discourse and Criticism

When California county governments make the news in statewide outlets, it is often due to their role addressing hot-button issues like housing and homelessness, election integrity, gun safety, crime and drug use.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS CONCERNS

Housing affordability and homelessness are top issues for Californians.¹⁶ 60% of Los Angeles voters reported that they thought about leaving the city because of high housing costs in 2024.¹⁷ County Boards across the state impact housing and homelessness issues through policies on rent control and renters' rights, housing zoning and office-to-housing conversions, restrictions on RV parking and encampments, shelters, and more.

"[Kern County] had an opportunity to get a grant for a youth homeless shelter that had overnight beds, and they just turned it down because they were gonna have to pay for the maintenance... It's difficult for the people who live there."

- Regional Labor Union Leader

The issue of homelessness has placed California's county governments in the spotlight in recent years. Proposition 1, passed in 2024, aimed to reform California's behavioral health system and approach to mental health and housing support. The measure reallocated some funds from county governments to the state government and increased counties' reporting requirements, causing friction between counties and the state administration.

In spring 2025, a clash between county governments and Governor Gavin Newsom reached a boiling point. As counties sought a steadier stream of funding and clarity on which government entities bear responsibility for homelessness services, "an exasperated Newsom lambasted cities and counties for their progress on homelessness in an epic soliloquy."¹⁸ Social media posts from Monterey County Supervisor Luis Alejo accused the governor of finger pointing, and Newsom's staff responded with administration website screenshots showing Monterey County's lack of

progress on the issue. A few days later, the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) released a new proposal on homelessness including a statement accusing the governor of throwing “one-time money at this problem without any real strategy.”¹⁹

“The county folks have to try to represent more diverse and wide perspectives. There's also in some ways less mutual accountability in the day to day. And one example of that is around homelessness. People are like, we have allocated billions of dollars yet you barely see the result of that! So, what is not working here?

There are some pointing fingers because there is no overseeing entity that can say consistently, or measure, what is working in real time... there is no elected administrator or elected executive to actually be the one that's administering X project or X initiative... so I do see those as key shortcomings in the current structure of county governments in California.”

- Progressive Advocate

Consider the contrast between how Fresno and Los Angeles County Supervisors have discussed recent housing policy. “Every county resident deserves to live in a habitable space, just fundamentally,”²⁰ stated Los Angeles County Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell after co-authoring a successful measure to fight slum housing with regular inspections. Mitchell similarly described how “Housing is a fundamental human right... I believe that our county's Right To Counsel ordinance is an important part of fulfilling that vision,”²¹ when the all-women and majority-Democrat County Board unanimously approved a plan to provide free attorneys to low income renters facing eviction.

In stark contrast with Supervisor Mitchell's stance on housing as a human right, Fresno County Supervisor Steve Brandau stated in 2024, “It's not a role of the U.S. government, or the state, to provide a house for every single person.”²² Fresno County's all-men, majority-Republican Board unanimously approved Brandau's motion to adopt an ordinance that would remove homeless encampments.

With just five board members in charge of most counties, individual Supervisors' opinions on critical policy issues affect thousands or even millions of county residents.

APPROACHES TO DRUG POLICY

When drug enforcement policy falls to county governments, Supervisors must determine what combinations of deterrence, prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and law enforcement strategies to use. Even members of the same party disagree on how to best approach the complex issue, as evidenced by San Francisco Supervisors' competing suggestions for intervention approaches in 2025.²³

In Fresno County, the importance of each Supervisor's vote was evidenced by their 3-2 decision not to renew their Whole Person Harm Reduction Program's needle exchange pilot program in 2025. The program, which cost the county \$90,000 to maintain in 2024, saved an estimated 15 to 20 lives a week.²⁴ By keeping people out of the local emergency room, County Public Health Department Interim Director Joe Prado estimated that the program saved the county some \$6 million.

In addition to providing vital health care and cutting down on the number of discarded needles in public areas, County Supervisor Brian Pacheco cited the reduced cost and strain on local emergency rooms in his support of program renewal. In contrast, County Supervisor Garry Bredefeld expressed an opposing view on how to approach drug addiction when he voted not to renew, focusing on how the program was "enabling" rather than compelling treatment.

The Supervisors' differing approaches to drug use and prevention have very real effects on county residents' lives—most dramatically, for the estimated 15 to 20 residents per week who may die as a result of the decision not to renew, and also for taxpayers who must now fund an additional \$6 million in estimated healthcare costs. Where Pacheco cited these healthcare costs in his decision, Bredefeld's reasoning was rooted not in evidence but in his ideological stances on drug enforcement. Their votes illustrate the importance of electing county leaders who share constituents' values, as ideology may be balanced against practical consideration of taxpayer costs.

ELECTION DENIAL

Supervisory roles are critical when it comes to protecting—or denying—voting rights. The rise of a far-right faction in Shasta County government has led to it being termed "the epicenter of the state's election denial movement."²⁵ Voter fraud-related conspiracy theories have caused clashes

between county officials over election administration. The drama forced the area's lone Democratic woman official, Registrar of Voters Cathy Darling Allen, into retirement with stress-induced heart failure.²⁶



Shasta County Board of Supervisors. Photograph: Shasta County Clerk of the Board.

In 2025, the conservative all-men board named Florida lawyer Clint Curtis to the county's top elections post despite his lack of experience running elections and his association with proponents of election conspiracy theories, including MyPillow founder Mike Lindell and Steve Bannon. Supervisor Chris Kelstrom stated that Curtis' appointment could "change voting not only in Shasta County but possibly the whole state and possibly the whole nation."²⁷

The November 2025 special election provided the first test of Curtis' leadership, and his office implemented new voting security measures including video and photo recording and a post-election polygraph test of himself to affirm the integrity of the process.²⁸ Curtis faced criticism, reportedly not working with the Secretary of State on his plans for the election.²⁹ Shasta County significantly reduced the number of ballot drop boxes available to voters³⁰ and was late to report outstanding ballots.³¹ These outcomes illustrate how County Boards' decisions can obstruct equity and democratic participation.

Interview Findings and Analysis

The 17 interviewees who participated in this project include current and former County Supervisors from up and down the state, County Board staff members, political strategists, and labor union and nonprofit leaders who work alongside them and advocate for county-level reforms. Participants were uniformly generous with their time and provided deep insight and expertise.

Interviews help illuminate the culture of County Boards individually and as a whole, including the impact of gender and racial disparity among board members, how they coordinate with one another, define priorities, share resources, and engage in advocacy. Central themes that emerged through the interviews include the importance of county government's "safety net" function, how boards' limited size can lead to a high level of cooperation or tensions among members, the persistent "boys' club" mentality in some regions, and the need for Supervisors to prioritize community and develop a broad understanding of issues in order to govern effectively.

THE IMPACT OF COUNTY BOARDS

Interviewees emphasized the significant power of boards to make change. They are required to implement policies mandated by the state government, but Supervisors' ideological leanings and priorities affect how they approach the issues. Individual members have power to shape policy conversations and what boards focus on.

"There are dozens of departments... a variety of programming and services, whether it has to do with addressing our homelessness crisis, to climate change, to the state of our probation and jails. So there's a lot that the county does, and a lot that the county touches, that a lot of people don't necessarily know about, but has a very direct impact."

- County Board Staff Member

“Safety Net” Issues and Progressive Priorities

Social safety net issues, or those that provide support to people during times of economic hardship, emerged as a top area of focus. Board members’ views on how much responsibility for social welfare lies with the government affect county residents’ access to services.

“More people will understand the role [County Supervisors] play and our value when you consider the services and the cuts coming down from the federal government. I represent 2 million people, 850,000 of which are Medi-Cal recipients. So when you have a federal government cutting Medicaid... severely limiting SNAP benefits... I think there is a heightened appreciation for the safety net level of government.”

- **Holly J. Mitchell**, Los Angeles County Supervisor

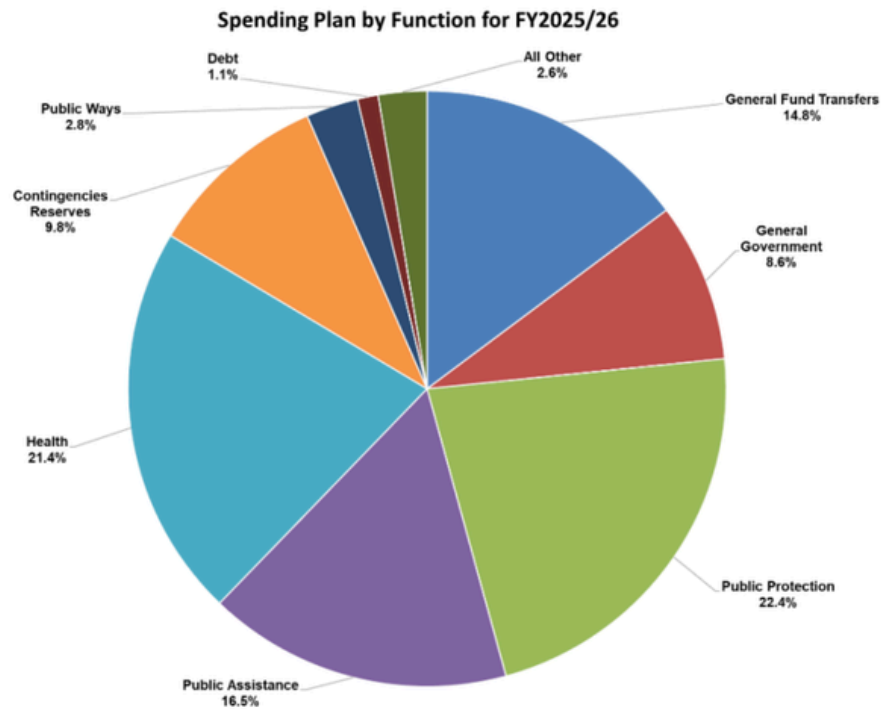
“County government is where it all comes together. It's truly the safety net. And when you get the safety net right, so many other things come together for communities. I wish I had known the power and the significance of county government earlier in my career.”

- **Wendy Root Askew**, Monterey County Supervisor

“With cities, there are the foundational things that residents need that you can see... like streets. With the county, you're talking about the basis of the social safety net, so it's a lot of the fundamental things that a lot of our residents need that maybe you can't see... a lot of the programming and services of the county are targeting our most vulnerable communities and helping uplift and empower them.”

- **County Board Staff Member**

For example, boards may vote whether to implement guaranteed income programs or benefits for low-income renters. They can open (or close) county hospitals and homeless shelters. Supervisors’ values impact their decisions about the extent of the safety nets that county residents going through hardship have to fall back on. And county investments impact larger societal costs borne by taxpayers—as in the case of harm reduction programs that save on future healthcare costs.



Solano County's Governmental Funds Spending Plan by Function graph from their Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Recommended Budget includes a total of \$1.645 billion. The Public Assistance and Health categories represent social safety net functions of county government. Public Protection includes law enforcement, corrections, and emergency services spending. From: [solanocounty.gov](https://www.solanocounty.gov)

Solano County Supervisor Cassandra James explained, “We are the administrative arm of the state. We carry the safety net programs to ensure residents can move forward... the largest budgets belong to human and social services and public safety.” In terms of her particular concerns, she continued, “I’m a process and policy person, and I want to make sure that the process is fair and that everyone has access to those opportunities.” Supervisor James recounted how she has worked to bring in new organizational partners and piece together funding to address homelessness and affordable housing, develop a guaranteed income program, and highlight issues in policing and the need for preventative public safety measures in her community.

Since her election in 2024, Supervisor James has increased the board's focus on issues she cares about. While she is not always successful in getting the votes needed for new policies, she is changing the conversation. In her words, “I want to be able to look my kids in the eyes and say that I've done my best.”

Los Angeles County Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell described being “deeply proud” of her work on poverty alleviation, recounting her efforts to introduce a guaranteed income pilot and center equity and inclusion in housing and land use policies. She discussed the importance of being innovative while “acknowledging that some of our systems were designed to not meet the needs of the people we’re currently serving.” Her priorities reflect her progressive values, and her efforts to pilot guaranteed income and fund a community hospital, for example, directly affect county residents’ lives.

“I led my board in... a referral to declare a public health emergency in mental illness and substance use disorders. And the reason I did this was obviously not because it was a new emergency, or people didn't know, but it had the effect of... vaulting expansion of our mental health services to a top priority of the county.”

- **Susan Ellenberg**, Santa Clara County Supervisor

Santa Clara County Supervisor Susan Ellenberg cited providing funding for childcare and purchasing a hospital to improve availability of services in a low-income area as some of her board’s most impactful decisions. She also worked to increase investment in mental health services and better integrate them into the county’s healthcare system. This single Supervisor’s work to champion the expansion of services greatly impacted her community.

Unreflective Values and Unrepresentative Boards

Supervisors’ priorities vary widely across the state, affecting constituents’ access to services. Melissa Vargas of Communities for a New California pointed out how counties in the Central Valley region are “significantly underfunding” affordable housing programs like rental assistance and the construction of new units, despite the fact that housing is a central concern for residents. She cited Merced County’s budget for 2025-26, in which “they’ve allocated almost 55 million dollars to the sheriff’s department, whereas for the housing budget it’s only been 11.5 million.” If budgets are a statement of values and priorities, then, the county government’s values may not be in alignment with their residents.

While the position is nominally nonpartisan, Supervisors' ideological stances regarding the role of government to provide social safety net services to residents fundamentally affects what issues they bring to the decision-making table, how they prioritize and vote on those issues, and ultimately, county residents' quality of life.

One regional union leader cited how the “very conservative,” mostly white and male Kern County Board of Supervisors is “very focused on law and order, and very not focused on the social determinants of health, or you know, the things that might lead to higher crime, like very high rates of poverty.” In his experience bargaining with the county government, they have failed to address social safety net issues through strategies he described as “willfully failing to hire” and laying off healthcare workers, eliminating positions, and paying low wages that lead to high turnover—all of which negatively impact county residents' quality of life.

He explained, “they have some of the worst health outcomes in the country. Very few healthcare providers per 100,000 population, about half the statewide average... Really high rates of suicide. Really high rates of opioid addiction. And the county who's tasked with solving it just kind of shirks its duty and does nothing to try to solve these issues.” Despite the fact that Kern County has a “massive reserve,” they “take state money and won't perform the services for things like public health, behavioral health, mental health.” Their approach stands in stark contrast to the all-Democrat, majority-women Santa Clara County Board and the majority-Democrat, all-women Los Angeles County Board.

Pablo Rodríguez of Communities for a New California, whose organization tracks supervisorial representation in California's Central Valley, stated, “Not only are County Supervisors not representative of their constituents, they frequently deprioritize or outright ignore solutions to issues that people of color viscerally care about and advocate for. Issues such as the housing crisis, environmental issues (air quality, water quality), lack of educational and job opportunities for youth, and healthcare.”³²

DECISION-MAKING, BOARD CULTURE AND NORMS

Unlike state and federal governments, counties do not have multiple branches. California's Boards of Supervisors serve as the primary governing body of a county, with legislative, executive, and quasi-judicial powers. A majority of board members must be present in order to conduct business,

which can only occur during public meetings to ensure transparency, as governed by the Ralph M. Brown Act. Decisions are made by majority vote, and county business is wide-ranging; with so few members, boards do not have the capacity for legislative committees where different members address different topics. In addition to setting county priorities and overseeing departments, programs, and employees, boards approve annual budgets, allocate funding for services, and manage county property. They also manage litigation involving the county.³³

Supervisors may introduce agenda items independently. Or, they may discuss them with one other board member or their staff without violating the Brown Act, and thus be assured that at least one other Supervisor has helped think through the proposal before bringing it to the full board.

Since measures must pass with a majority vote, “it’s about counting to three,” as Solano County Supervisor Cassandra James put it. Los Angeles County Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell described how, “when there’s disagreement, this is politics and it’s about numbers... winner takes all.” How boards handle disagreements varies depending on the personalities involved.

What is it actually like to serve on these governing bodies? How do Supervisors, whose values and understandings about the role of county government may differ from their colleagues’, participate in decision-making and work to achieve their policy priorities?

“The first two years for me, it was a master class in learning about power, and how power was wielded... I think it was the biggest surprise for me, given that I’d worked so closely with the previous Supervisor for a decade... she had been sort of a 1-4 vote on the board when she was there. So it was really easy for her to stand firmly in her values.

She could just say, ‘These are my values. And this is how I’m going to vote on something,’ and it doesn’t really matter... we were never going to get a third vote... there was no negotiating. But I very quickly found myself where I was like, ‘Oh, there is negotiating. I can... get some of my things done.’”

- **Wendy Root Askew**, Monterey County Supervisor

Collaboration, Civility and the Status Quo

While a measure only needs three votes to succeed, several interviewees—including Supervisors and those who work alongside them—discussed how County Boards prefer reaching unanimous agreement when possible. Members strive for civility, and many interviewees observed witnessing relatively little public dissension, even on boards with ideologically disparate members. This aspiration to harmony may lead to a relatively, refreshingly polite atmosphere for many boards, but too much emphasis on unity can stifle debate and change, maintaining a “status quo” approach.

“There is ideological battle sometimes, but... there is a sort of wanting to get along, and wanting to show that we can get to 5-0 votes. So I think there is a harmony that plays into those Boards of Supervisors where they want to present a ‘we’re all on board with this’ and a front in that way. A lot of the conflict is happening behind the scenes...”

- **Danielle Cendejas**, Democratic Strategist & Partner with The Strategy Group

“Regardless of the political makeup and whether it's a more Democratic-leaning or Republican-leaning board... you very rarely see someone abstain, or not vote, or a 3-2 divide. After all of the challenges and conversations in that negotiation process, you end up seeing, most of the time, the public vote being a 5-0.”

- **Statewide Labor Union Leader**

A tendency towards unity can transcend political ideological disagreement. Santa Barbara County Supervisor Laura Capps proudly described her board as “fantastic” and explained, “We get along really well... we certainly have five different perspectives... we range from conservative to progressive. Yet we find a lot of consensus... and really learn from each other. And often items that I would have thought would have been a 3-2 vote end up being a 5-0 vote.” Supervisor Capps’ ideologically diverse board has developed a culture that encourages discussion, rather than stifling debate.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell recounted how she once asked her staff to provide “the analysis of the times the lone Republican on the board and I disagreed. And I was really surprised. It was like single percentage points that we voted differently on a motion.” Despite their differing political ideologies, they came to agreement an overwhelming majority of the time.



Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, 2026. From: [LACounty.gov](https://www.lacounty.gov).

While finding common ground through respectful deliberation and consensus is a worthy goal, agreement among Supervisors without substantive discussion or learning can lead to, as one regional labor union leader termed it, a problematic “good old boys’ club” atmosphere. He described how in his experience bargaining on behalf of union workers, the “one Democrat on the board might be more apt to listen to the voices of the community... But I don't know. We frequently see her just get buddy-buddy with the rest of the board and silence the voices from the community... there's very little public dissension on that board.” He was disappointed that a Supervisor who seemed more likely to share his organization’s values would not publicly disagree with her fellow board members or introduce change to the conversation.

Pablo Rodríguez of Communities for a New California pointed out the downside of chumminess among Supervisors when recounting how their agreements are not always in the best interests of the community. Many Supervisors in the Central Valley region, he explained, have backgrounds in agribusiness development and the fossil fuel industry. “They, in the name of profits, generally work really well together.” New, disparate voices may be better aligned with constituents’ values and priorities.

Local Progress Executive Director Ivan Luevanos-Elms described how County Board members, in his experience, have historically not been politically radical or demographically diverse, with a “status quo” culture that tends towards concessions. But the kind of leaders who seek these offices is changing.

He explained, “a lot of the folks that have served in county government come from more status quo backgrounds. More inclined towards an approach of, ‘let's not shake it up. Let's not be too radical. Let's not really be too transformative.’” However, he continued, “in the last few years, we've actually had real progressives take power... places like L.A. County have been fairly progressive in comparison to other county governments. But [County Boards have] also been the one level of government that is still majority white, male and older. And so it's no surprise that the influx of people of color joining these boards, women joining these boards, queer folks joining these boards, have started to shift [this approach]... I think there is some maneuvering and strategic thinking around, how can you still introduce and bring about that more transformative policy or work in an environment that is a little bit more status quo centered, that maybe is not willing to really talk about things like funding public safety or exploring alternatives to policing?” New progressive board members, he argues, can have great power and influence if they are able to bring critical issues into focus and navigate the boards' decision-making processes successfully.

Space for respectful disagreement and differences among Supervisors' opinions is needed to ensure that a homogenous “status quo” approach does not stay the norm. When board members prioritize deliberation, decision-making in the best interests of the community is possible. An over-emphasis on 5-0 votes and maintaining unity risks stifling new voices and constituent concerns.

Factors Shaping Board Civility Culture

At a time of increasing violence and incivility in politics, even at the local level,³⁴ many Supervisors still strive for civility in their interactions with colleagues—perhaps a result of social pressure due to the boards' small size.

“[County Boards] really try to work more collaboratively... part of the reason is because there are so few votes.

It's like, imagine if you're at your school and you want to be student council president. How you would handle working with relationships, with people, is very different than if you had to deal with your four other roommates all the time. If you're dealing with a student body of like 5,000 people, you can anger some people, and you'll still have some friends... If you alienate your four roommates, there's no one else to go to. So the investment is just very different, and the calculus is very different.”

- **Mike Young**, California Environmental Voters Executive Director

Santa Barbara County Supervisor Laura Capps described the difference between serving as a County Supervisor and serving as a State Legislator as, “you're not really winning an argument when you speak. It's more about consensus... you're not really scoring points up there. Sometimes that's almost easier to do. But then you would risk potentially offending or annoying your colleagues, and you still have the rest of the hearing to get through once the item is passed, right? ...It's five of you... and it's the same five every Tuesday... the end goal is to really maintain that relationship, and understand where they're coming from, and forgo the short term win.” In such close quarters, civility makes board service more socially comfortable.

Even if Supervisors disagree on an issue, maintaining friendly (or at least cordial) relations may prove necessary in order to work together on a future issue. As one former Supervisor put it, “You try to get five [votes] because you don't like there to be out and out war on the board. It never goes away, and you get nothing the next week.”

A strategy Solano County Supervisor Cassandra James recounted was to “lead with the pleasantries” when seeking understanding and compromise during a “really contentious” meeting with ideologically diverse board members—reflecting the emphasis on civility.

“Don't tear down your colleagues. Oh, not only because you may need them on something else, but... it tarnishes everybody. It's not professional. It's not dignified, and it's just not necessary.”

- **Susan Ellenberg**, Santa Clara County Supervisor

One interviewee who worked as a county government staff member observed how Supervisors' gender impacted their decision-making and how they worked together. “After the transition to an all-woman Board of Supervisors,” she explained, “it seems to be more collaborative. There's more empathy involved in decision making...” Even in cases when the Supervisors did not agree on an issue and it passed with a split vote, she recounted how they tended to put their disagreements aside and come together to move forward the new policy, allowing for compromise through amendments. She attributed this “spirit of cooperation” to having an all-women board.

“What it means to have an all-woman Board of Supervisors... You're seeing these sorts of values and working styles play out where, even if they might disagree on the merits of the measure and have their own reservations, they're still going to move forward and do the work that needs to be done.

...I haven't really experienced [that at] other government entities that I've worked at... seeing how they operate as decision-makers is very unique, and I think goes back to having women in leadership and all women at the table.”

- **County Board Staff Member**

The Limits of Civility: Power Struggles and Tensions

While many current and former Supervisors emphasized respect and civility, not every board enjoys congenial relationships between members. Attempts to maintain civility with unreasonable actors can effectively encourage bad behavior and maintain unfair practices and power imbalances. Even if they maintain outward politeness and do not exhibit any inappropriately combative communication practices, Supervisors may sabotage colleagues they disagree with under the guise of enforcing rules and proper behavior.

Beyond structural factors like the small size of County Boards encouraging members to work closely together by necessity, individual Supervisors' communication styles and how willing they are to play well with others ultimately determines the decision-making culture of any one board. As one former County Supervisor put it, “the collaboration or lack thereof, the affection or lack thereof, the camaraderie, colleague-ness, it all depends on the people.” Sometimes, the people present a problem.

“I wish it didn't get personal and ugly... but it does.”

- **Wendy Root Askew**, Monterey County Supervisor

“I've realized that I won't have the votes on the board. But how do I use the power of my office to convene and be able to push forward priorities?”

- **Cassandra James**, Solano County Supervisor

One Supervisor described a colleague on the board, “who's very difficult, who's just mean, who will go against his own self-interest... who will do whatever he can to maintain power.” She recounted trying to figure out, “how do I work around you? How do I work with you?” This colleague, she continued, “will throw a tantrum. And then everyone on our county staff will capitulate.” It is not just that one of her colleagues is difficult to work with, she explained, it's that his behavior is tolerated and even encouraged by others in the professional space who give in to his demands. In an attempt to avoid conflict and maintain an atmosphere of civility, staff acquiesce to unreasonable behavior, which allows that behavior to continue.

She recalled thinking, “Wait! How can the rules be different for him than they are for me?...I think this is just sexism...” She eventually called out county legal staff members' behavior after she and her male colleague received different answers from them after asking the same question. “When I asked, the answer was ‘no,’ but when he asked, the answer was ‘yes.’ So was that because I’m new and he’s not? Was that because I’m a girl and he’s a boy? ...Is it because he was going to throw a fit in public, and I wasn't? Is it because he yelled? Help me understand why the answers are different when we sit here supposedly holding the same power.” What ultimately helped her navigate her new role and the challenging power dynamics involved was creating a space with other elected women. She formed a book club to read Robert Greene's *The 48 Laws of Power*—not necessarily to use the strategies the book describes, she explained, “but so I could put words to what was happening around me... why does [my colleague] do the things he does and behave the way he does.” This Supervisor and the women elected officials in her group may not have been used to wielding power like some of their more combative colleagues, but reading a book that's description begins with “amoral, cunning, ruthless, and instructive” assisted them in understanding the approaches they experienced from others.

Veteran Supervisors wielding power against newcomers through their knowledge of the rules and entrenched relationships with county staff was brought up by Solano County Supervisor Cassandra James, who was similarly navigating service on an ideologically divided board. They may do it relatively politely, but her more senior colleagues, “can weaponize the rules and regulations, especially if you don't know them” and “use the rulebook to silence” others. She recounted having to forge relationships and learn supervisory regulations as major concerns in her first months in office.

As one former County Supervisor said of the Brown Act, “it's difficult to know when you're going to run into trouble.” Supervisor James actually hired an attorney to help her interpret the Brown Act after a respectful meet and greet invitation to two colleagues prior to her swearing-in resulted in one of those colleagues reporting her for breaking a rule forbidding three supervisors to be at one event. Supervisor James explained, “After that, I knew that I had to get an attorney to really interpret these rules in the most layman’s way... in our next meeting, I went back and I was like, ‘it’s a free event, it’s public, there’s nothing that’s being discussed, and I don’t have access to closed session items.’ So now [my colleagues are] aware that I understand the jargon.” With the help of an expert, Supervisor James is navigating the complex legalities of her new role.

As the newest member of her board, she has “tried to meet with [colleagues] individually and find where our overlapping values are, so I will become more human to them, and we can have some decent conversation.” Navigating relationships between colleagues on a five-member board does not always go smoothly, but Supervisors can cope by ensuring they are aware of board rules, advocating for themselves, and working to build social ties with fellow Supervisors and others in the local government space.

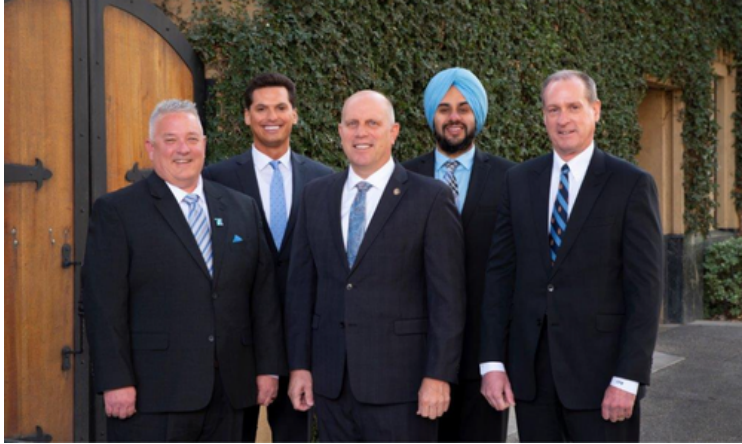
“Boys’ Clubs” and Incumbency Advantage

While the demographics of California’s County Boards may be shifting, as some progressive advocates working in the space have observed, other interviewees confirmed that county government remains a “good ol’ boys’ club”—especially in central regions of the state.

Multiple labor union leaders who work alongside County Boards in the Central Valley described their dynamics in those terms. United Domestic Workers President Astrid Zuniga stated, “we need to see more women, and I think some of the things that are near and dear to our community's heart are many of the social justice issues. And equity and equality would be more addressed if there were... Democratic women, right, but women in general.”

“I've only seen one woman on that [Stanislaus County] Board... It's a good ol' boys' system.”

- **Astrid Zuniga**, UDW President & CA Democratic Party Labor Caucus Chair



Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors, 2025. From: StanCounty.com.

Zuniga explained the advantage of incumbency enjoyed by some board members who “have been there for 20 years or more.” A lack of term limits has led to long-serving, entrenched Supervisors who do not share the same priorities as their constituents. “A lot of these people are household names in the Valley. You have a really slim chance of winning against one of them... they’ve got this kind of entitlement. Maybe they don’t take it for granted, or they say they don’t. But I don’t see them doing as much work as the candidates that we put out there, or that others put out there, that really try holding tons of fundraisers, walking and talking and knocking on doors... people are going to vote for the name they’ve always seen on that ballot.” Incumbents’ name recognition and visibility makes it difficult for newcomers to break into county government.

While there may once have been a time when county seats were more cost accessible to candidates, in one progressive advocate’s words, “a lot of local seats end up now being so much more expensive than they used to be.” For new candidates, it is increasingly difficult to raise enough money and votes to unseat an entrenched incumbent.

Another labor union leader described the makeup of County Boards succinctly as “it’s mostly white, and it’s mostly men.” Indeed, 66% of supervisors across California are men, most of whom are white. Despite the region being overwhelmingly Latino compared to the rest of California,³⁵ he explained how Central Valley counties in particular lack diverse representation. Power is wielded instead by a few wealthy community members connected to the agricultural industry.

“Especially the more rural counties, my understanding is that it's folks that are connected to the grower families... that have wielded political power and influence, who are most often rich, wealthy men, who are trying to keep and hold power. And not provide power to workers... in their own industry, or workers in other industries.” He attested to the importance of increasing the diversity of Supervisors, including electing more women, “but also support them. Because they're probably going to have a lot of challenges... I'm sure this good ol' boys' club mentality is gonna be difficult to break through once they're there.” He posited that rare newcomers who are able to break into the “boys' clubs” of county board governance will be outnumbered and possibly othered by colleagues, requiring additional support from those who advocate for more reflective leadership.

One Board of Supervisors staff member in Southern California observed that the “good ol' boys' club” system of a powerful few grooming handpicked successors may be changing. “This sort of pay your dues mentality, where you need to do certain things over the course of like 20 years, and then maybe you'll get a shot if the right person mentors you and handpicks you to be the next person in the role after they retire. Things are not necessarily like that anymore. And we have a lot of people who are just very dissatisfied and disillusioned by the current systems that we have and... have decided that they're going to take matters into their own hands and run for office!” Newcomers who appeal to constituents' sense of political disillusionment and run as outsider candidates ready to change systems can succeed.

Some “girls' clubs” of support are in formation for women Supervisors. As Monterey County Supervisor Wendy Root Askew described of her role as Vice Chair of the Women of the National Association of Counties, “There just aren't that many of us... we try to create a welcoming space. We're like, ‘Oh, you're a woman! You're here! Welcome! You want to hang out? Here's my number.’ Because... the men, they've got their spaces.” Her organization creates spaces for women, who remain significantly outnumbered in county leadership across the nation, to connect with and support each other.



The Women of the National Association of Counties. From: [Facebook.com/WomenofNACo](https://www.facebook.com/WomenofNACo)

“Good ol’ boys’ clubs” of governance remain strong—especially in central areas of California. But inroads toward more reflective representation are being made as candidates dissatisfied with the status quo decide to run for office, finding support from organizations like labor unions and women’s groups with common interests in values-driven, reflective leadership.

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Current and former Supervisors and advocates who work closely with County Boards were asked to shed light on characteristics and practices that lead to effective county governance. Connection with the local community, open communication with constituents, and willingness to learn about a broad array of issues and topics rose to the top of the list.

Community Involvement and Listening to Constituents

As one county staff member advised supervisorial candidates, “it’s not only about winning a campaign, it’s also about the actual act of governance... get to know the communities that you want to serve and also get to know the systems that you’re going to be working within, to change.” For newcomers to county politics, not only being passionate about issues but also having extensive networks and relationships is critical to gain trust and a base of support.

One progressive advocate explained that county governments’ unique structure means they “have to be coordinating and working with mayors, with other councils, with school boards on how some of these countywide initiatives are going to be implemented.” Gaining the support of local leaders and other community members can, then, both help candidates win election and help smooth the way for new County Supervisors to do their jobs more effectively.

“I think the ones that are really rooted in the community are the ones who end up being better Supervisors. ...People who come up through community organizations and progressive movements tend to be much better Supervisors than those who come up through the business community.”

- Regional Labor Union Leader

By definition, public leaders are accountable to constituents. Community members and stakeholder organizations provide comments and collaborate with the board throughout the policy implementation process.

“I get to sit up there on the dais, and my economics teacher will be there giving public comment, or my minister...”

- Laura Capps, Santa Barbara County Supervisor

A Board of Supervisors staff member explained how the work requires collaboration. “The departments have to be involved. The public has to be involved” and this “co-governance,” she continued, involves “wanting to ensure that... the right voices are in the room and space that can help shape it.” A motion passing a board vote, she explained, “That’s step one. We’ve got to get to touching people’s lives, and that takes a lot of steps after the vote, after the press conference.” She contended that Supervisors who ensure community members are at the table “changes how government can work... you’re having your blind spots checked on you. Like, ‘oh, okay, I didn’t realize that... Someone with lived experience is helping me see this clearly, that maybe this policy isn’t as helpful, and I should include this.” The importance of listening to and communicating closely with constituents—through emails, newsletters, phone calls, or public comment at board meetings—was a top aspect of good County Board governance for many interviewees.

Solano County Supervisor Cassandra James recounted leveraging her community ties in an attempt to sway her colleagues. “I knew it was going to be a disagreement. So I had to use the power of community. I invited the City Council to come, I invited various neighborhood associations, different affinity groups, provided some talking points, and asked them to share their stories.” The contentious vote did not go the way Supervisor James wanted, but her colleagues were forced to hear from community members.

When elected leaders fail to listen, constituents notice. The Alameda County Board has received complaints and criticism for delaying and limiting public comment, for example.³⁶ Interviewees described how other boards similarly fail to provide avenues for robust conversation. A regional labor union leader shared how the Kern County Board “blows through decision-making” by “not really listening to the voices of the community.” By suppressing public comment, Supervisors “mitigate the amount of criticism that they take to their face.”

As one Board of Supervisors staff member recounted, it's valuable to hear directly from county program participants because "when you're the one experiencing it, you're the one who knows more clearly than anyone else what you need." She explained that "there's a way to do government that is more humane... How do we really humanize how you interact with government, but also make it so it is as effective as possible?" Whether county leaders prioritize listening to constituents or limit public comment has consequences for the kinds of policy enacted.

The Importance of Experience and "Doing Your Homework"

County supervisorial candidates must attract voters, dollars, and endorsements to win. Previously holding local office is one potential path to prepare for county leadership, although it does not guarantee electoral victory or effectiveness in office. As one progressive advocate cautioned, "even if you're a mayor of a big city... the vast majority of your district has no clue who you are." Especially in large counties, prior state or even federal officeholders may run. Other useful backgrounds cited by interviewees include nonprofit, foundation, or community organization leadership. Experience as a County Board staff member or on a county commission was also cited as beneficial to understanding the system.

"As a Supervisor, you serve on a lot of boards in the county. And so, even if your background was having worked for Planned Parenthood or something like that, you're gonna need to learn water policy and land use policy. And you're gonna need to learn about a lot of legal requirements... it's like drinking from a fire hose."

- Regional Labor Union Leader

Not all leadership experience was viewed as relevant. Progressive advocates discussed how the goals of business and county government service are not always compatible, for example. As one former Supervisor put it, "Sometimes people think their business experience is sufficient to qualify them for running for office, and I think nothing could be farther from the truth. Because the whole point of a business is to make a profit. And the whole point of a county is not to. To provide services, that is the whole point. So anyone who thinks it qualifies you having run a company to run a county is frankly, I believe, wrong."

Regardless of a supervisory candidate's background, it helps to come into the role with an appetite to learn and take on a large workload. Monterey County Supervisor Wendy Root Askew described county government as "perfect for policy nerds." Similarly, one progressive organization leader advocated for prospective Supervisors to have "a genuine wonkiness" and attention to detail. Dedication to "doing your homework before board meetings" to understand the issues at hand was emphasized by Santa Clara County Supervisor Susan Ellenberg.

Serving effectively entails working hard to navigate complex systems in order to accomplish policy goals on behalf of diverse constituents, and holding to one's values amidst the competing priorities is essential. One former County Supervisor recounted how it's important for a supervisory candidate "to know who they are and to trust it," because voting on the issues "tests your values every minute that you're there."

Looking to the Future

Structural Solutions

Why are County Boards so unrepresentative of the diversity of California's population? Part of the issue lies with counties' electoral systems. Potential structural solutions include implementing term limits, mandating general elections, and increasing the size of boards.

Term Limits

Term limits for elected officials have bipartisan public support; 2024 polling found that 77% of respondents would like to see term limits enacted or shortened for County Supervisors.³⁷ Yet despite this widespread sentiment, just 14 of California's 58 counties have supervisorial term limits in place.

Because of advantages inherent to incumbency, term limits create opportunities to elect more representative boards. Rates of re-election are higher for incumbent officeholders and it is difficult for new candidates—especially women and people of color—to break in. Term limits help level the playing field by guaranteeing open seats on a set timeline, allowing for more advance planning and recruitment of candidates. Women tend to strategically emerge as candidates in locations where they are most likely to win, including when there is an open seat.³⁸ Term limits, and the open seats they create, are especially salient for the recruitment of women candidates.

Without term limits, County Supervisors can serve for decades. For example, Alameda County's Keith Carson retired at age 75 in 2024 as the state's longest-serving Supervisor after 32 years on the board. As of 2025, six Supervisors across California had been in office for more than 25 years. Kings County Supervisor Joe Neves, first elected in 1994, is the longest-serving.

"It's very much been a good ol' boys' system... I would love to see the dynamic shift.

If you can't do what's right by the people, then we can bring in a term limits proposition... like, okay, you've served your time... maybe it's time you step aside and let some fresh blood come in with some new ideas."

- **Astrid Zuniga**, UDW President & CA Democratic Party Labor Caucus Chair

Mandatory General Elections

In addition to relatively few counties having term limits in place, the current system for county offices allows candidates who win a low-turnout primary election with more than 50% of the vote to automatically win the race. They are not required to compete in the general election, as is the norm in state legislative and other contests.

According to data from California Common Cause, 80 of the 129 County Supervisor contests in the 2022 election cycle ended after the primary. As former California Common Cause Executive Director Jonathan Mehta Stein explained, "California's current approach to county primary elections results in incumbent supervisors, district attorneys and sheriffs consistently winning reelection in low-turnout primary elections. It also keeps low-profile county offices that are critically important permanently under the public radar."³⁹ Because primary elections see significantly less voter turnout, especially when there is no presidential race on the ballot, fewer constituents have a voice in the election of their county leaders.

Pablo Rodríguez of Communities for a New California described mandatory general elections as his top priority when considering how to improve reflective representation on County Boards.

"The need for mandatory general elections to elect County Boards of Supervisors cannot be overstated. By aligning County Supervisor elections with general elections, we can ensure higher voter turnout and greater democratic participation."

- **Pablo Rodríguez**, Communities for a New California Founding Executive Director in *The Fresno Bee*, March 13, 2024

Increased Board Size

With the exception of consolidated city-county San Francisco, where the 11-member County Board also acts as the city council, California's counties currently have five-member boards representing anywhere from 1,200 to 10 million county residents. The relative size of a board—meaning how many people each officeholder represents—has consequences for who gets elected.

As of 2019, research based on a representative sample of boards across the U.S. found that more than 50% of counties had no women serving at all, but the likelihood of women Supervisors' presence increased with larger boards.⁴⁰ Similarly, larger County Boards are more likely to have at least one person of color serving.⁴¹

This aligns with work exploring the representational consequences of legislative size for other governing bodies. The representation of women as well as Black, Asian, and Latino officeholders increases as the ratio of seats-to-persons, meaning the relative size of a legislative body, increases.⁴²

A measure to increase the size of the Los Angeles County Board from five to nine members passed in November 2024, garnering attention from news outlets nationwide. It's the first reform in 172 years for the board *Politico* dubbed "the most powerful elected body you've never heard of... an elected body that, despite running under the radar nationally, is one of the most powerful in the country."⁴³ It remains to be seen how the reform will affect representation on the currently all-women board, which will expand from 5 to 9 members starting in 2032. The measure and its prominence in the political press highlights the power of county governance and brings up questions about fair representation.

"In L.A. County, we have five people representing 10 million people. People can argue, is that representative? People can argue, are we actually hearing the voices that reflect the entire county of Los Angeles?"

- **Progressive Advocate**

CANDIDATE RECRUITMENT AND COACHING

Alongside structural changes to county electoral systems, candidate recruitment and support provide a potential solution to California's unrepresentative County Boards.

Recruiting women supervisorial candidates is crucial. The overall probability of a woman running in a given California County Supervisor race nearly doubled between 1996 and 2019,⁴⁴ but a high water mark of .34 means that as of 2019, there was still a nearly two-thirds probability that no woman would run in any given County Supervisor race.

Recruiting more women to run and coaching them to win and serve effectively can help level the playing field for historically excluded candidates to break into the “boys’ club” of county government.

Targeted recruitment is poised to accelerate representation. Research from the Center for American Women and Politics analyzing the impact of Close the Gap California’s recruitment campaign for gender parity in the State Legislature outlines how the organization has contributed to a 104.3% increase in Democratic women’s representation since it launched in 2013.⁴⁵ The strategy can be replicated nationwide and at other levels of office.

“While these boards are small, they carry big purses! And as unrepresentative as California’s County Boards are today, the upside is that a targeted recruitment intervention at this level has massive potential for transformative impact. When you consider that one Supervisor may make decisions on behalf of millions, even targeting a limited number of open seats would be meaningful.”

- **Susannah Delano**, Close the Gap California Executive Director

In addition to candidate recruitment, providing support and resources to guide supervisorial candidates could set them up to run, win, and serve constituents more effectively. Resources specifically for new County Supervisors are limited, making it challenging for newcomers to learn about the vast array of issues counties address and the intricacies of the legalities surrounding them. Solano County Supervisor Cassandra James explained, “You have CSAC [California State Association of Counties], which has a new Supervisor institute. That has been so helpful in understanding the different components of the county, and understanding county government... I would have loved to have taken that before even being sworn in... after I complete each module, I was like, ‘Wow, I wish I had this tool beforehand!’” Educational programs and materials aimed at preparing them for success would help level the playing field for emerging supervisorial candidates.

“County Boards of Supervisors have a profound impact on essential aspects of life—from whether families have access to food and housing, to how well our children are cared for.

We need leaders at the County level who are ready to co-govern with courage.”

- **Holly J. Mitchell**, Los Angeles County Supervisor

Open County Supervisorial Seats Due to Term Limits, 2028 Cycle:

County	District	Incumbent	Party	Gender
El Dorado	2	George Turnboo	Republican	Man
Kern	4	David Couch	Republican	Man
Kern	5	Leticia Perez	Democrat	Woman
Lassen	4	Aaron Albaugh	Republican	Man
Los Angeles	4	Janice Hahn	Democrat	Woman
Los Angeles	5	Kathryn Barger	Republican	Woman
Orange	3	Donald P. Wagner	Republican	Man
Orange	4	Doug Chaffee	Democrat	Man
San Diego	2	Joel Anderson	Republican	Man
San Diego	3	Terra Lawson- Remer	Democrat	Woman
San Francisco	1	Connie Chan	Democrat	Woman
San Francisco	7	Myrna Melgar	Democrat	Woman
San Joaquin	5	Robert Rickman	Decline to State	Man
San Mateo	5	David Canepa	Democrat	Man
Ventura	3	Kelly Long	Republican	Woman

Research Methods

Close The Gap California, a non-PAC 527 organization that recruits and prepares progressive women to run for the California State Legislature and County Boards of Supervisors, collected data and conducted initial analyses for this report. Interviewees included 17 current and former County Supervisors and stakeholders active in the county government space, including representatives from the California State Association of Counties, National Association of Counties, and advocacy groups that work at the county level.

Through open-ended questions, participants shared detailed accounts and examples of how County Boards make decisions, what drives their priorities, and how the makeup of the board influences its culture and approach to governing. We talked with Supervisors about their paths to office, from deciding to run to campaigning and serving.

We analyzed interview data to identify and code common themes about county board priorities, norms and operations, decision-making, and characteristics that contribute to successful supervisory leadership.

About Close the Gap Catalyst

[Close the Gap Catalyst](#) is a nonprofit 501(c)4 organization established in 2025 to advance women's leadership. Through research, education, and advocacy, Catalyst works to make reflective representation the norm and shape the broader ecosystem to build power in parity.

Director of Research Dr. Sarah Carson authored this report.

Acknowledgements

Close the Gap Catalyst honors the brave, community-minded women who have served and are serving, often alone, on California's County Boards of Supervisors. For decades of California's history, you have bravely forged a path. You make a difference every day.

Thank you to the interviewees who generously shared their time and insight with us. We are tremendously grateful for your participation and assistance shedding light on the complex and often overlooked world of county government.

Finally, we profoundly appreciate the wisdom of interviewee Pablo Rodríguez, Founding Executive Director of Communities for A New California, who tragically passed away before this report was published. To Pablo and the community leaders working to carry on the advocacy for community inclusion he embodied, thank you.

Endnotes

1. Los Angeles County's 2024-2025 budget of more than \$45 billion, for example, surpassed the combined budgets of several U.S. states.
2. In 2025, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to support immigrants affected by federal immigration raids, and the San Francisco and Santa Clara County Boards of Supervisors worked to prohibit federal agents from using city property for immigration enforcement. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors also voted in October 2025 to support families affected by the federal government shutdown's interruption of SNAP benefits. See: Ellis, Rebecca, and Email. "L.A. County to Create Fund for Immigrants Affected by ICE Raids." *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 2025. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-07-16/l-a-county-to-create-fund-for-immigrants-impacted-by-ice-raids>
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