



## **House race shows Democrats' improved prospects in Inland Empire**

**Longtime Riverside County supervisor, a Republican, might once have easily won a seat in Congress, but Democrats hold the edge in his district. New residents and political boundaries have shaken things up.**

By Phil Willon, Los Angeles Times

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For the first time in 20 years, a Republican running for Congress in Riverside needs help.

John Tavaglione huddled with supporters in the mirrored back room of a local Coco's on a recent rainy evening, laying out a ground game for his first crack at federal office. As a Republican and political heir of a powerful Riverside family, the longtime county supervisor would have breezed into Washington, D.C., in past elections.

The Inland Empire was heralded as California's new conservative frontier — the "new Orange County" — just 10 years ago. But political districts have been remade. Weed-covered fields have metamorphosed into Spanish-tile suburbs packed with new voters.

In the district Tavaglione is eyeing, Democrats hold the edge in registration, symptomatic of the GOP's slide countywide.

"I think we've got a tough road ahead of us," former GOP Assemblyman Ted Weggeland, a Tavaglione advisor, told supporters in the room. "The Democrats want this seat, they're going to work hard for it and they're going to fund it."

Democrats have a shot at winning at least three congressional seats in Riverside and San Bernardino counties this year, after holding just one since the Vietnam War ended. And they could pick up enough state Senate seats in the Inland Empire to help put an iron grip — the rare and coveted two-thirds majority — on Sacramento's upper house.

In 2002, the majority of registered voters in both counties were Republican. Democrats now claim a slim majority in San Bernardino County. In Riverside County, the GOP's 13-point registration advantage has dwindled to 4.7 points over the last decade.

"Political analysts could phone in their predictions for the Inland Empire races" in the past, said Jim Brulte of Rancho Cucamonga, a former leader of the state Senate's Republicans who is now a consultant. "Now, we may not know until election night who wins."

The most powerful undercurrents have been a torrent of newcomers and the new political districts, drawn by an independent commission after the 2010 census. Latinos, who as a group tend to vote Democratic, drove the influx of nearly a million new residents between 2000 to 2010 and now account for 2 million of the 4.2 million people living in the two counties.

"Most of the Latinos in the Inland Empire are not new immigrants. They are second-generation, or higher generations, and the barrier to citizenship is not there," said UC Riverside professor Karthick Ramakrishnan, who studies politics and immigration.

So "what happened in 2008 might not be a fluke," Ramakrishnan said. "That was the first time in a very long time that a Democratic presidential candidate, Obama, won both Riverside and San Bernardino counties."

In legislative races, Democrats are targeting a Senate district that covers Corona and Moreno Valley and an Assembly seat that takes in Riverside and Moreno Valley, said Kenneth Hampton, chairman of the Democratic Party in Riverside. "It's great," he said. "We haven't had competitive races for so long."

Three of the new House districts now have a majority or plurality of Democratic voters, and the new boundaries are far less incumbent-friendly than those crafted in the last reapportionment, in 2001. Then, inland districts that snaked into San Clemente or up from San Diego protected Republicans, leaving a single Democratic-leaning district, whose seat is now held by Rep. Joe Baca (D-Rialto).

"Before, members had such conservative districts it didn't matter how they voted on issues that affected the have-nots," said Baca, running this year in a newly crafted district. "Maybe now we'll come together on comprehensive immigration reform and other priorities."

Riverside County voters have not elected a Democrat to Congress since liberal Rep. George Brown's district was gerrymandered into San Bernardino County after the 1990 census. Brown had been the only Democratic congressman in either county since 1972 until he died in office in 1999 and Baca won his seat.

Democrat Mark Takano is trying to break that streak. Takano is a teacher and Riverside Community College trustee who narrowly lost to Rep. Ken Calvert (R-Corona) in 1992 and 1994, even though the district they ran in was solidly Republican and included a conservative chunk of Orange County.

Takano says his campaign will be about creating jobs in a county still ailing with 12.5% unemployment. "The No. 1 focus is on unemployment," he said. "Republicans in the House have not been focused on what's best for America ... including creating jobs."

Tavaglione, his Republican opponent, finds himself in the unfamiliar realm of a partisan dog fight. He's been elected to the county Board of Supervisors five times, all in nonpartisan elections.

Tavaglione's campaign advisor, Jim Nygren, said the supervisor has represented portions of the congressional district in some capacity for the last 17 years and is more focused on getting things done than engaging in petty politics — exactly the type of representative voters say they want.

"He's had support from Democrats and Republicans," Nygren said.

Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge, a political science professor at UC Riverside, is among the Democrats who have endorsed Tavaglione. Still, Loveridge knows that for many voters, "party trumps."

"John is well liked by people who've worked with him. But it's a different kind of district, and party labels are in play," Loveridge said. "If you want to be effective in Congress or the state Legislature, it comes with risk to step outside party lines."

One of the wild cards this year is the new voter-approved primary system pitting the top two finishers, regardless of party, against one another in November.

In one congressional race, Republican Rep. Gary G. Miller of Diamond Bar will battle Republican state Sen. Bob Dutton of Rancho Cucamonga, with Democratic candidate and Redlands Mayor Pete Aguilar reaping a possible reward from the GOP slugfest. For the state Senate, Republican Assemblyman Jeff Miller of Corona may benefit from two Democrats fighting it out: former Assemblyman Steve Clute of Riverside versus Riverside attorney Richard Roth.

Inland Empire economist John Husing, a former Democratic campaign manager who now eschews the party and is unaffiliated, said the biggest winners in the region may be independent, moderate voters who are tired of partisan backbiting.

"In the end, we might get more balanced candidates," he said, "and that will tend to favor people from both parties."

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