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GOP Central Committee Makes Change In Leadership

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The San Bernardino County Republican Central Committee has changed its leadership, a move which signals internal political divisions that have manifested over the last several years as the county party, which is yet retaining its edge over its rival Democrats despite voter registration numbers trending against it, is looking toward substantial challenges to its local primacy in the years ahead.

Committee members have elevated Fontana businessman Phil Cothran to the chairmanship of the central committee, replacing Jan Leja. Leja's tenure as the county party chairwoman came during a time when the fissures in the once-entirely dominant local Republican political machine began to show and have since deepened. Leja failed to bridge the growing gap in the county party, as personality, philosophical and strategic differences between the factions hardened in recent years. Cothran's ascendancy, however, does not presage a rapprochement but instead seems a harbinger of equally strident contention over the direction of the party to come.

At least since 1966, the governmental structure at most levels of San Bernardino County has been in the hands of the Republicans. That year, Ronald Reagan was elected governor, and a shift away from the Democratic Party in San Bernardino County began in earnest. With only a few notable exceptions over the next 55 years, Republicans have held the majority of political offices at the local agency, municipal, county and state level in San Bernardino County. There have been sporadic exceptions to that pattern in the Central San Bernardino Valley area, stretching from Fontana through Rialto, Bloomington, Colton and into San Bernardino, a largely blue collar district with an historically significant enough concentration of Democratic Party and union-affiliated voters to elect Democrats off-and-on. In most other areas of the far-flung 20,105 square mile county, the political leadership has largely consisted of Republicans. Throughout the late 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and most of the first decade of the Third Millennium, there were more, and for much of that time far more, registered Republican than registered Democrats in San Bernardino County. In 2009, that statistical edge for the GOP ended, and for the first time in more than four decades, the number of Democrats in the county eclipsed the number of Republicans. That trend has continued, such that at this point, 459,422 or 40.8 percent of the county's 1,126,096 total voters are registered as Democrats, while 334,876 voters or 29.7 percent affiliate with the Party of Lincoln.

Remarkably, however, the Republicans despite the registration disadvantage they face, have succeeded in holding onto most of the county's elective offices they controlled in their heyday. This has largely occurred because Republicans turn up to vote in far higher percentages than do Democrats nationally, statewide and particularly locally. In San Bernardino County, as well, the party structure the Republicans have has proven far more energetic, efficient and engaged than the local Democratic Party. The Republicans have proven far more effective at raising money than the Democrats and have more experience and are therefore more accomplished in employing the money they have to run convincing and targeted campaigns to drive Republican voters to the polls and wage efforts against their Democratic opponents. At present, four of the five members of the county board of supervisors are Republicans and in 16 of the county's 24 municipalities there are more Republican members of the city or town councils than Democratic members. Historically, the Republicans have done a far better job at hitching all of their horses up to one side of the wagon and pulling the load in a concerted direction than the Democrats, who have a

pattern of working at cross purposes to one another. Until quite recently, the Republicans have lived by the 11th Commandment, "Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican."

Beginning in 2013, however, a minor rift in the county GOP opened when Curt Hagman, then a member of the California Assembly who was to be termed out of the statehouse after what was to be the end of his sixth year in state office in 2014, settled on perpetuating his political career by running for Fourth District county supervisor, representing Chino Hills, Chino, Ontario, Montclair and south Upland. The Fourth District supervisorial post he coveted was at that time occupied by another Republican, Gary Ovitt. Refusing to honor Ovitt's incumbency, Hagman threatened to challenge him for the supervisor's seat. To strengthen himself for that run, Hagman in late 2013 moved to depose Robert Rego as the chairman of the San Bernardino County Republican Central Committee and assume the position himself. Rego had done yeoman's work for the county Republican Party, raising funds and creating a well-oiled and maintained political machine to promote the candidacies of Republican candidates throughout the county. By pushing Rego out, Hagman was able to seize command of local party operations and cut Ovitt off from party support, and instead direct that assistance to his own campaign. Ovitt opted out of seeking reelection. Hagman achieved victory in 2014, running successfully for Fourth District supervisor against Gloria Negrete-McLeod, then an incumbent Democratic congresswoman.

Despite his personal success, Hagman planted seeds of dissension within the local Republican Party. Whereas previously there had been an ethos of party loyalty among Republicans that essentially held individual personal ambition in check, Hagman's willingness to cut Ovitt off at the pass became a model for other Republicans thereafter. Since that time there have been multiple examples of one Republican moving to challenge another incumbent Republican, efforts which have met with varying degrees of success and failure. One upshot of all of this is that it appears to be gradually weakening the local Republican Party. In 2016, four Republicans – Angela Valles, Rick Roelle, Paul Russ and Bill Holland – challenged incumbent Republican First District San Bernardino County Supervisor Robert Lovingood. The four challengers lost. That same year, Republican stalwart Tim Donnelly angled at unseating incumbent Republican 8th Congressional District Congressman Paul Cook. Donnelly failed. In 2018, Donnelly again took an unsuccessful run at Cook. Then-incumbent Republican 40th District Assemblyman Marc Steinorth challenged incumbent Republican Second District San Bernardino County Supervisor Janice Rutherford. Steinorth narrowly lost. John Valdivia, then an incumbent Republican San Bernardino City Councilman, challenged Carey Davis, the incumbent Republican mayor of San Bernardino. Valdivia defeated Davis in the November 2018 San Bernardino mayoral runoff election. In the summer of 2018, incumbent Republican Hesperia Mayor Bill Holland and incumbent Republican Hesperia Councilman Paul Russ were instrumental in appointing Republican Jeremiah Brosowske to fill a vacant position on the Hesperia City Council. Later that year, when all three had to stand for election/reelection, they endorsed one another. But after a falling out, Holland and Brosowske went to war against one another as the election approached and they retracted their endorsements of each other. Russ sought to remain neutral in the dispute, but Holland withdrew his endorsement of Russ as well. Holland and Brosowske won, while Russ lost. Brosowske then supported an effort to recall Holland from office. That failed. Holland in September 2019 voted with two of his Republican colleagues on the council, Larry Bird and Cameron Gregg, to remove Brosowske from office. In 2019, incumbent West Valley Water District Board Member Greg Young had to stand for reelection. Two of his Republican board colleagues, Michael Taylor and Kyle Crowther, militated against him by persuading a Fontana resident, Angel Ramirez, to rent a residence in Bloomington to be able to run against Young. Taylor and Crowther then supported Ramirez in his unsuccessful bid to unseat Young.

As 2020 approached, a head of steam was building within Republican circles toward an effort to elect a Republican in the overwhelmingly Democratic San Bernardino County Fifth Supervisorial District, where Democrat Josie Gonzales was to be termed out after holding that position since 2004. It was believed that a concerted Republican effort could potentially succeed in electing a Republican to the Fifth District supervisor's slot, despite a substantial Democratic registration advantage. Some believed Clifford Young, who is also a West Valley Water District board member, might be the best standard bearer for the Republicans. Another faction of Republicans, however, instead promoted Fontana City Councilman Jesse Armendarez as the GOP's best shot at claiming the post long occupied by Gonzales. Those supporting Armendarez, who included many if not all of those who were opposing Greg Young in his reelection bid, moved simultaneously to undercut Clifford Young, who is no blood relation to Greg Young. The pro-Armendarez faction of the party in 2019 maneuvered to deny Greg Young the endorsement of the San Bernardino County Republican Central Committee in his water district board reelection effort, despite the consideration that Greg Young was an incumbent, was himself a member of the central committee and had for years demonstrated himself as a loyal and tireless campaigner for Republican candidates and Republican causes.

Ultimately, despite the intrigue against him, Greg Young, who was Clifford Young's ally, prevailed in his 2019 reelection bid.

Of note is that Armendarez was part of Fontana Mayor Acquanetta Warren's ruling coalition on the Fontana City Council, which consisted of her, Armendarez and Republicans John Roberts and Phil Cothran, Jr. The 4-to-1 advantage the Republicans have on the Fontana City Council is remarkable because Fontana's voters are overwhelmingly Democratic, with 51,264 or 49.4 percent of the city's 103,822 total voters registered as Democrats and 20,635 or 19.9 percent identifying as Republicans.

Warren is allied with both Clifford Young and Greg Young. Warren was in favor of the Republican Party backing Clifford Young in the 2020 race for Fifth District supervisor. She did not look gladly upon the Republican faction which consisted of Armendarez, Taylor, Crowther, Ramirez and Phil Cothran, Sr., the father of Fontana Councilman Phil Cothran, Jr., moving to oppose Greg Young's reelection and blocking Clifford Young's effort to run for Fifth District supervisor by rigging the central committee's endorsement of Armendarez in his run for supervisor. It did not sit well with her that the Armendarez/Taylor/Crowther/Ramirez/Phil Cothran faction finagled getting Ramirez the Republican Central Committee endorsement over Greg Young in the race for West Valley Water District board member in 2019.

In last year's race for Fifth District supervisor, after the contest between four candidates in the March 2020 Primary boiled down to a runoff between Armendarez and then-Rialto Councilman Joe Baca, Jr., a Democrat, the Armendarez campaign found itself in trouble for multiple reasons. For one, it was in an uphill battle because of the overwhelming voter registration numbers that favored Baca, such that more than half of the district's voters – 50.4 percent – were registered Democrats and 18.9 percent were Republicans. Every bit as problematic was that the tactics those supporting Armendarez had used in which they ruthlessly sought to wound both Greg Young and Clifford Young greatly offended a number of Republicans. Consequently, those Republicans failed to line up, or line up enthusiastically and effectively, with Armendarez.

As the 2020 Fifth District supervisor race wound toward a conclusion, polling the Armendarez camp did indicated that the numbers were running against the Fontana councilman and in favor of the Rialto councilman. In a desperate ploy, those affiliated with the Armendarez campaign attempted to use hit pieces, mailers sent from what was ostensibly represented as an independent expenditure committee, the California Taxpayers Alliance, to move Democratic voters away from Baca. The mailers, which were sent exclusively to high propensity Democratic voters, attempted to link Baca with then-President Donald Trump. "Right-Wing Super PACs Spent Millions For Trump And Have Supported Career Conservative Joe Baca, Jr.," read one mailer's all capital letter headline. The mailer's summary stated, "Keep the Trump Team Off Our Board of Supervisors. We need to defeat conservative Joe Baca, Jr."

The tactic failed, as an insufficient number of the district's Democratic voters found it credible that Baca was affiliated with the Republican president while he was engaged in an electoral contest against the Republican Armendarez.

The attack on Baca by way of President Trump had further complications. Mayor Warren is a close Trump ally. Depicting the now-former president in negative terms perturbed her.

Armendarez, who opted not to run for reelection to the Fontana City Council to instead run for supervisor, is now out of office. Warren has privately said she does not regret no longer having him as a member of her coalition. Phil Cothran, Sr., a successful insurance agent in Fontana, has over the last 30 years become a major behind-the-scenes political player. He has donated substantial amounts of money to local candidates for elected office, primarily Republicans. He is a major donor to politicians in Fontana, and one of Warren's primary political sponsors. One of the rewards he has reaped from that is the advancement of his son's political career.

Nevertheless, his identification with a faction of the local Republican Party that has militated against other Republicans, including Armendarez against Clifford Young and Ramirez against Greg Young, represents a schism in the Republican Party that was unthinkable in years past. Cothran's status as the head of the county party raises the prospect that elements of the Republican Party which were so cohesive in recent decades have now been fractured to the point that the Democrats, if they can overcome their own disarray, might end the GOP's domination of San Bernardino County.

-Mark Gutglueck

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