

# Split-ticket Voting in Orange County, November 2018 General Election

R. Michael Alvarez and Yimeng Li

December 7, 2018

## Executive Summary

Questions have been raised about split-ticket voting in the competitive U.S. House elections in Orange County, in particular whether it makes sense that Orange County voters in the competitive U.S. House races would split their ticket, voting for the Republican candidate for governor (John H. Cox) and for a Democratic U.S. House candidate, rather than voting a straight Republican ticket in these elections. In this report, we examine the data currently available from Orange County, and we find that there is nothing anomalous in the split-ticket voting patterns observed in the 2018 general elections in Orange County. Rather than being isolated to the competitive U.S. House elections in Orange County (or to specific precincts in those Congressional Districts), we show that the split-ticket phenomenon is countywide (in fact, it appears to be stronger in parts of Orange County that did not see competitive Congressional races). We also show that the split-ticket voting patterns seen in Orange County are similar to those seen in neighboring Los Angeles County, indicating that split-ticket voting in the November 2018 election is a more general Southern California phenomenon, and that there is nothing anomalous in the split-ticket voting patterns seen in Orange County.

## Split-ticket Voting in Orange County

Partisanship is typically strongly correlated with voting behavior in the United States. However, American voters often ignore partisanship; when other factors become more salient than partisanship (like campaign issues, actions of incumbent candidates, or other concerns), voters may cast their ballots for candidates of the opposing party. When this happens, in some elections on a lengthy ballot, we will often observe what political scientists call “split-ticket” voting, where voters support candidates of one party in some of the elections on the ballot, but will support candidates of the other party in other elections on the ballot.<sup>1</sup> Political science research has advanced a number of

---

<sup>1</sup>See for example, R. Michael Alvarez and Matthew M. Schousen, “Policy Moderation or Conflicting Expectations? Testing the Intentional Models of Split-Ticket Voting”, American Politics Research, 1993,

arguments for why voters might support a candidate of one party at the top of the ticket, while support candidates of the opposite party for legislative seats, especially if voters are persuaded to split their ticket by issues or other non-partisan factors.

The specific context of the 2018 general elections in Orange County lead us to expect to see split-ticket voting behavior. Orange County has long been a stronghold of the Republican party, and Republican candidates have in recent memory performed well in the county. In 2018, at the top of the ticket, the gubernatorial race was not overly competitive, and prior to the election statewide polling indicated a strong likelihood that the Democratic candidate for governor, Gavin Newsom, would win the election over his Republican challenger John H. Cox. There was not a great deal of campaign activity in the gubernatorial race, and thus, there was little that would overcome the sway of partisanship; our expectation was that we should see a strongly party-line vote in the gubernatorial election in Orange County.

The same was not true in the U.S. House elections in Orange County, especially in the heavily-contested districts (CA39 and CA45). Republican House candidates were heavily outspent in Orange County, and pro-Democratic messages strongly predominated pro-Republican messages.<sup>2</sup> Also, many independent groups were active in Orange County, especially those supporting Democratic candidates. Finally, a number of issues, like health care and the tax reform bill passed by Congress, may have favored Democratic candidates in Orange County. All of these factors lead us to expect to see Orange County voters supporting Democratic U.S. House candidates, especially in the competitive districts, and thus we expect to see higher rates of split-ticket voting than may have been seen in past elections.

## Countywide Split-ticket Voting

The data we use in this analysis comes from the official Statement of Vote that the Orange County Registrar of Voters (OCROV) has made available on their website: <https://www.ocvote.com/fileadmin/live/gen2018/sov.pdf>.

In Table 1, we present party vote shares by Congressional district in Orange County. As is clear from the table, in all Congressional districts, Democratic Congressional candidates outperform the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Gavin Newsom, with the over-performance ranging from 2% (in CA38 and CA39) to over 5% (in CA48). Meanwhile, Republican Congressional candidates perform worse than the Republican gubernatorial candidate, John H. Cox, across Orange County. The under-performance of Republican Congressional candidates is also large in magnitude, ranging from 2.4% (in CA39) to 6% (in CA48). As a result of the large over- and under-performance, Republican Congressional candidates win more votes than Democratic candidates in Orange County precincts in two out of seven Congressional districts, despite John H. Cox receiving more votes in

---

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X9302100402>; Barry C. Burden and David C. Kimball, *Why Americans Split Their Tickets: Campaigns, Competition, and Divided Government*, University of Michigan Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, <https://www.ocregister.com/2018/12/07/can-gop-win-back-orange-county-republicans-disagree-about-path-forward/>.

five.

Table 1: Vote Share by Congressional District in Orange County

	Overall		Governor			U.S. House of Representatives			
	Ballots	DEM	REP	None	REP-DEM	DEM	REP	None	REP-DEM
CA38	5,809	49.5%	48.5%	1.9%	-1.0%	51.5%	44.5%	4.0%	-6.9%
CA39	162,126	46.1%	51.8%	2.1%	5.8%	48.1%	49.4%	2.4%	1.3%
CA45	312,700	48.5%	49.7%	1.8%	1.1%	50.8%	46.8%	2.4%	-4.0%
CA46	154,136	61.9%	35.1%	3.0%	-26.8%	66.4%	29.6%	4.0%	-36.7%
CA47	90,592	48.6%	48.7%	2.6%	0.1%	51.0%	44.2%	4.7%	-6.8%
CA48	303,973	46.9%	51.0%	2.1%	4.1%	51.9%	45.0%	3.0%	-6.9%
CA49	77,393	41.1%	57.4%	1.5%	16.3%	45.4%	52.1%	2.5%	6.7%

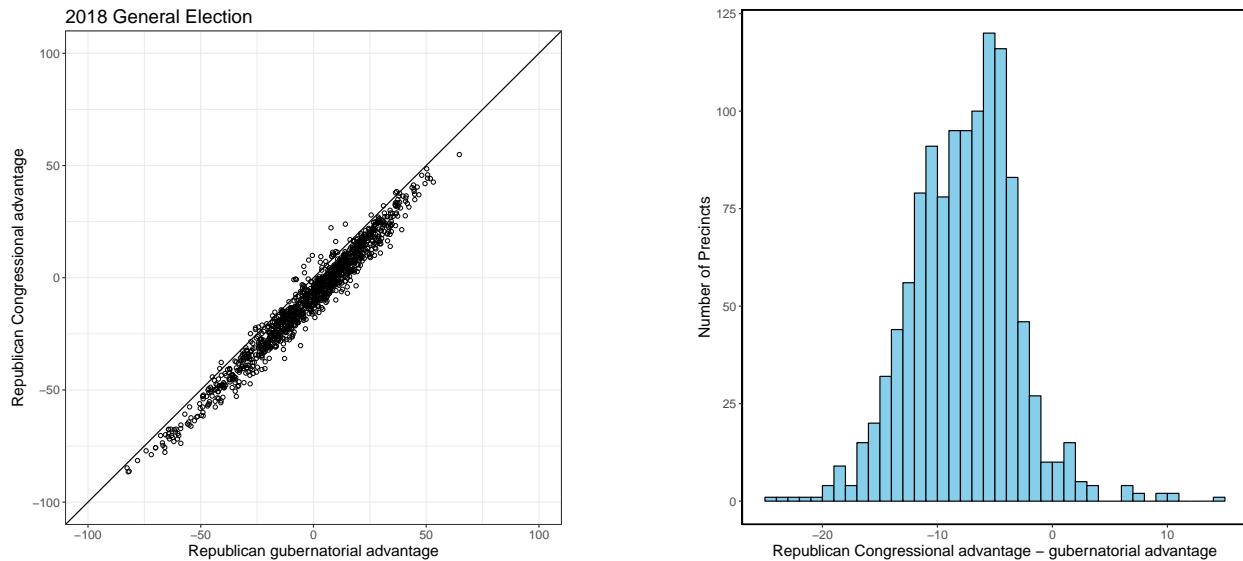
We further investigate the extent and magnitude of Republican Congressional candidates' under-performance by examining the candidate vote share by precinct. For each precinct, we calculate the *Republican Congressional advantage* as the candidate's vote share minus their Democratic counterpart's vote share. Similarly, we calculate the *Republican gubernatorial advantage* as the John H. Cox's vote share minus Gavin Newsom's vote share. On the left of Figure 1, we show the scatter plot of Republican Congressional candidate advantage (y-axis) and Republican gubernatorial candidate advantage (x-axis) by precinct, with points falling on the 45 degree line (solid) when Republican Congressional candidates perform equally as well as the Republican gubernatorial candidate. Clearly the performance of the Republican Congressional candidates is strongly correlated with John H. Cox's performance at the precinct level. However, most points lie below the 45 degree line (with a large number of them falling well below the 45 degree line), indicating that Republican Congressional candidates under-perform the Republican gubernatorial candidate across most precincts in Orange County, with a large deficit in a large number of precincts. On the right of Figure 1, we show the histogram of Republican Congressional advantage minus Republican gubernatorial advantage by precinct. Confirming our observation from the scatter plot, the Republican Congressional candidates generally under-perform the Republican gubernatorial candidate, John H. Cox, with a typical magnitude of Republican Congressional advantage minus Republican gubernatorial advantage between -4 and -12 percentage points.

## Split-ticket Voting by Congressional District

Next, we look at the under-performance of Republican Congressional candidates separately for two contested races (CA39 and CA45) and five non-contested races (CA38, CA46, CA47, CA48, and CA49).

As Table 1 shows, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, John H. Cox, wins 5.8% and 1.1% more votes than his Democratic competitor, Gavin Newsom, in CA39 and CA45 precincts in Orange County. Despite these advantages in the gubernatorial contest, Young Kim (Republican) wins only

Figure 1: Republican Congressional candidates under-perform Republican governor candidate, John H. Cox, across precincts in Orange County



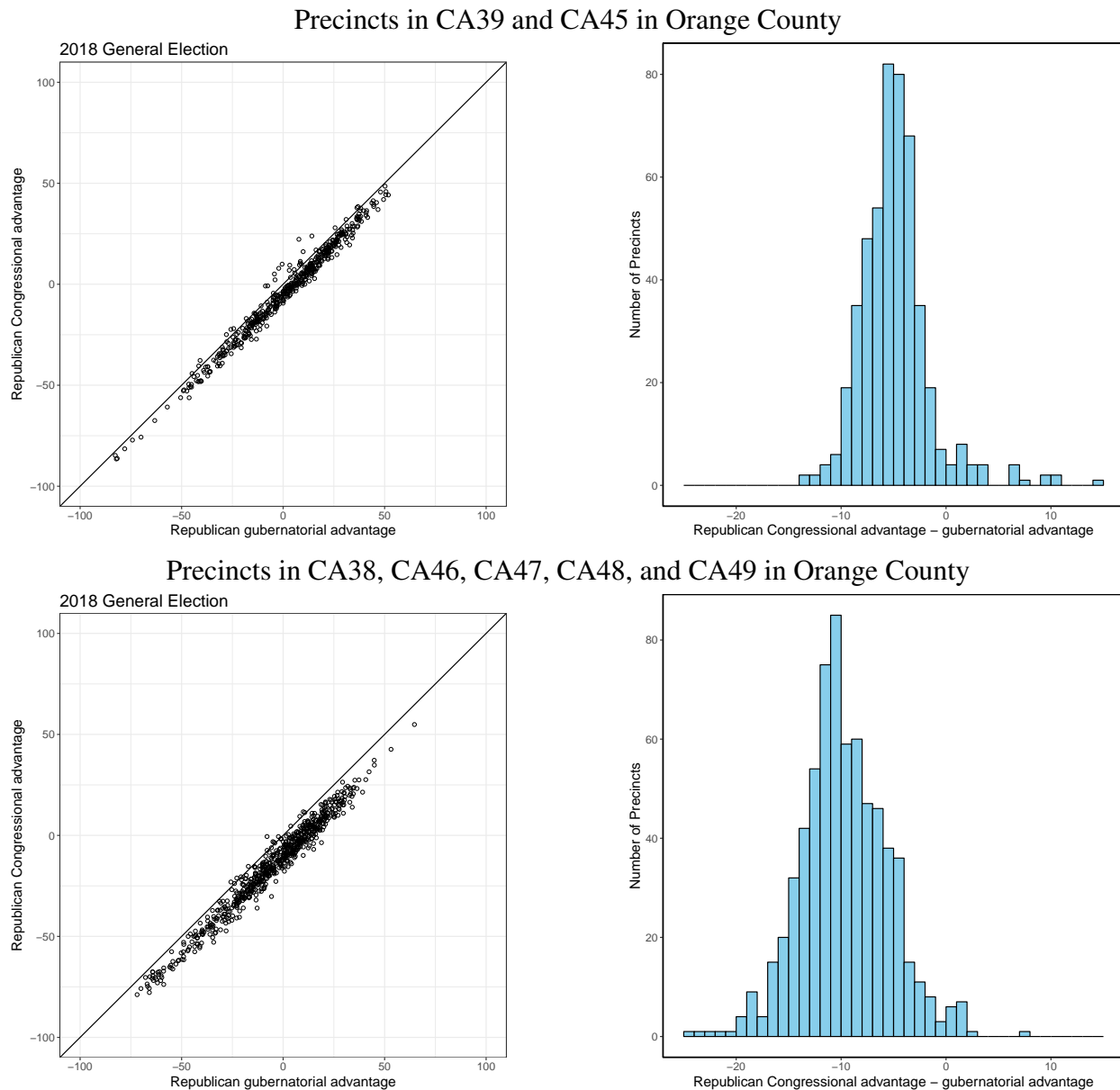
Note: The figure on the left displays Republican Congressional advantage (y-axis) and Republican gubernatorial advantage (x-axis) by precinct. The figure on the right displays the histogram of Republican Congressional advantage minus Republican gubernatorial advantage by precinct.

1.3% more votes than Gil Cisneros (Democrat) in CA39 precincts in Orange County, while Mimi Walters (Republican) is 4.0% short of votes compared to Katie Porter (Democrat) in CA45 precincts in Orange County. These amounts to a lower Republican Congressional advantage than Republican gubernatorial advantage in these contested races, of 4.5% and 5.1% respectively.

Despite the sizable under-performance in CA39 and CA45, the Republican Congressional candidates under-perform the Republican gubernatorial candidate, John H. Cox, *more* in five non-contested races. The difference between the Republican Congressional advantage and the Republican gubernatorial advantage is 5.9% for CA38, 6.9% for CA47, 9.6% in CA49, 9.9% in CA46 and 11.0% in CA48.

In the top and bottom panels of Figure 2, we show that for precincts with contested and non-contested Congressional races, respectively, the scatter plots and histograms are similar to those in Figure 1. Comparing the scatter plots, the points are more concentrated near the 45 degree line in the scatter plots for CA39 and CA45 precincts and farther away from the solid line for precincts in CA38, CA46, CA47, CA48, and CA49. This pattern indicates that the Republican Congressional candidates under-perform the Republican gubernatorial candidate, John H. Cox, more in non-contested races, and it is a general countywide phenomenon, not driven by a handful of anomalous precincts. Turning attention to the histograms, there is a clear left shift in the distribution of Republican Congressional advantage minus Republican gubernatorial advantage, when we move from contested races to non-contested ones. A typical magnitude of the Republican Congressional advantage minus the Republican gubernatorial advantage is between -4 and -8 percentage points for CA39 and CA45 precincts, and -9 and -13 percentage points for precincts in CA38, CA46, CA47,

Figure 2: Republican Congressional candidates' under-performance is larger in magnitude in precincts in contested Congressional districts in Orange County



Note: The figures on the left displays Republican Congressional advantage (y-axis) and Republican gubernatorial advantage (x-axis) by precinct. The figures on the right displays the histogram of Republican Congressional advantage minus Republican gubernatorial advantage by precinct.

CA48, and CA49.

## Split-ticket Voting in Los Angeles County

In this section, we examine whether the under-performance of the Republican Congressional candidates is limited to Orange County. In order to do so, we conduct a similar exercise for Los Angeles County. The data we use in this analysis comes from the official Statement of Vote that the Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters has made available on their website: [https://www.lavote.net/docs/rrcc/svc/3861\\_svc\\_precinct\\_zbc.pdf?v=1](https://www.lavote.net/docs/rrcc/svc/3861_svc_precinct_zbc.pdf?v=1).

In Table 2, we present party vote shares by Congressional district in Los Angeles County. We focus on 14 Congressional districts with a Democratic and a Republican candidate running.<sup>3</sup> As is clear from the table, in 12 out of 14 Congressional districts, the Democratic Congressional candidates outperform the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, Gavin Newsom, with the largest over-performance of 3% seen in CA25. Meanwhile, Republican Congressional candidates perform worse than the Republican gubernatorial candidate, John H. Cox, across Los Angeles County. The under-performance of Republican Congressional candidates is also large in magnitude, and is at least 3% for 11 out of 14 Congressional districts.

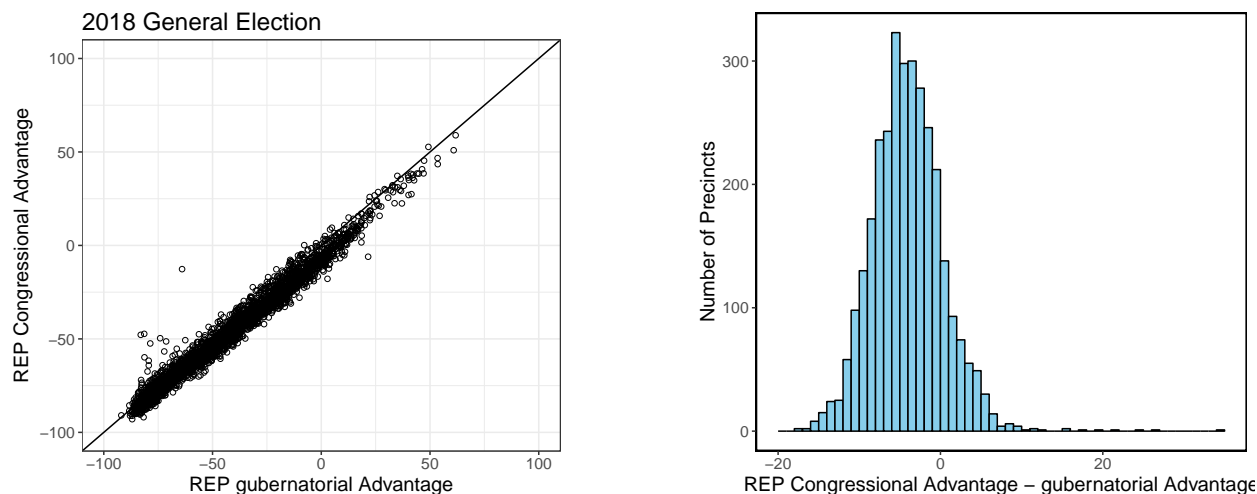
Table 2: Vote Share by Congressional District in Los Angeles County

	Overall	Governor				U.S. House of Representatives			
	Ballots	DEM	REP	None	REP-DEM	DEM	REP	None	REP-DEM
CA23	24,955	45.4%	51.9%	2.7%	6.5%	44.3%	51.1%	4.6%	6.8%
CA25	198,801	51.3%	46.3%	2.5%	-5.0%	54.1%	43.1%	2.8%	-11.1%
CA26	4,535	51.5%	46.3%	2.2%	-5.2%	54.1%	42.2%	3.7%	-11.9%
CA28	262,298	73.5%	24.1%	2.4%	-49.4%	75.0%	20.7%	4.4%	-54.3%
CA29	162,760	75.7%	21.6%	2.8%	-54.1%	76.6%	18.4%	5.0%	-58.2%
CA30	271,454	68.4%	29.3%	2.3%	-39.0%	70.3%	25.4%	4.3%	-44.9%
CA32	186,109	63.2%	33.8%	3.0%	-29.4%	64.9%	29.5%	5.6%	-35.4%
CA33	327,578	66.1%	31.5%	2.4%	-34.6%	66.8%	28.6%	4.7%	-38.2%
CA35	32,053	70.4%	26.4%	3.2%	-44.0%	72.1%	23.3%	4.7%	-48.8%
CA37	249,502	84.0%	13.3%	2.6%	-70.7%	84.3%	10.3%	5.3%	-74.0%
CA38	206,520	63.8%	33.3%	2.9%	-30.6%	65.8%	29.2%	5.0%	-36.6%
CA39	62,048	55.4%	41.3%	3.4%	-14.1%	55.4%	39.8%	4.8%	-15.5%
CA43	204,911	75.9%	21.4%	2.7%	-54.4%	74.2%	21.3%	4.5%	-52.9%
CA47	140,964	67.6%	30.0%	2.4%	-37.5%	68.8%	26.6%	4.5%	-42.2%

Figure 3 presents the scatter plot and histogram similar to those in Figure 1, but for Los Angeles County. Since there are many more precincts in Los Angeles County than Orange County, we

<sup>3</sup>Two Democratic candidates compete in CA27 and CA44. A Democratic candidate and a Green Party candidate compete in CA34 and CA40.

Figure 3: Republican Congressional candidates under-perform Republican governor candidate, John H. Cox, across precincts in Los Angeles County



Note: The figure on the left displays Republican Congressional advantage (y-axis) and Republican gubernatorial advantage (x-axis) by precinct. The figure on the right displays the histogram of Republican Congressional advantage minus Republican gubernatorial advantage by precinct.

have more points in the scatter plot compared to Figure 1. But similar to what we saw for Orange County, the performance of the Republican Congressional candidates is strongly correlated with John H. Cox's performance at the precinct level. More importantly, Republican Congressional candidates under-perform the Republican gubernatorial candidate across most precincts in Los Angeles County, just like in Orange County, even though the magnitude is somewhat smaller. The histogram in Figure 3 shows that the typical magnitude of Republican Congressional advantage minus Republican gubernatorial advantage was between -3 and -6 percentage points in Los Angeles County.

## Conclusion

Despite the importance of partisanship in driving voting behavior, political science research has shown that there are often conditions under which voters will weigh factors other than party heavily in their decisionmaking; this can result in partisan split-ticket voting. As we have argued earlier, the conditions in the 2018 general election in Orange County were favorable to finding significant split-ticket voting — Republican voters would be likely in this context to support their candidate (John H. Cox) at the top of the ticket, but to vote for Democratic candidates for U.S. House races, given the intense campaigns waged by Democratic candidates and supporters in Orange County.

And this is what we find. The evidence that we have presented in this report, using currently available data, shows that in the competitive Congressional races in Orange County, there was partisan split-ticket voting. Furthermore, the evidence shows that this split-ticket voting was a

countywide phenemon. And finally, we showed that Orange County was similar to Los Angeles County, in that there is similar split-ticket voting going on in Los Angeles County.

This evidence strongly supports the hypothesis that the split-ticket results in Orange County's 2018 general election were driven by the electoral context, by competitive campaigning in Orange County, and by behavioral decisions by voters. Furthermore, we do not see evidence in these data that the split-ticket results were driven by any electoral malfeasance. Based on the evidence presented here, as we show that the split-ticket results were countywide, and not isolated to only the competitive House elections or to specific precincts in those House districts, we do not believe there is any indication that the split-ticket results were produced by electoral manipulation. Furthermore, as the split-ticket results are also seen in neighboring Los Angeles County, that in our opinion provides further support for the hypothesis that the split-ticket results are driven by general patterns of voting behavior in Southern California, and not by any type of electoral malfeasance.

At this point in time, we only have aggregated data and we do not currently have individual-level data (for example, survey data) that would give us the opportunity to analyze split-ticket voting in a more granular manner. Using aggregated data to study split-ticket voting, which is a individual-level phenomenon, introduces the possibility of ecological biases. We will conduct future analyses of these data and using survey data, and update this report when those analyses are available.