

Local Election Ballot Guide

Every four years there is a presidential election, the next one is in November 2020. Yet elections are about more than the president and members of Congress. This piece is to be a simple explanation of some of the local positions that appear on the ballot. These local positions hold a decent amount of power over our day-to-day lives.

An important reminder is that all elected officials are accountable to you the voter. Their job is to represent the interests of people. Another reminder is that elections do not only happen every four years. Here is a quick overview:

- **June 2018** - Midterm Primary Election
- **November 2018** - Midterm General Election
- **March 2020** - Presidential Primary Election
- **November 2020** - Presidential General Election (After this, the cycle continues with Midterm Primary Election in March 2022)

Yes, there are four main elections. If you are wondering which is the most important to vote in, the answer is all four. Primary elections are to narrow down the amount of people running for a specific seat.

Example:

Mary, John, and Kevin are all running for a specific city council seat in 2020. The voters during the March primary cast a vote for who they want. The two candidates who get the most votes then move onto the November general election. The winner of this general election then takes office.

First up is the County.

For the South Bay it is Santa Clara County.

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors is made up of five board members. Each board member represents a different part of the county. Voters only vote for the board member that represents their area.

What does the Board of Supervisors do?

They decide what County money gets spent on. Most of the money is spent on health and welfare programs. They decide how much money is given to programs for mental health, jails, and county hospitals. They can also raise the minimum wage, protect the environment, and help with housing.

Another county-level official is the District Attorney.

The District Attorney is the lead prosecutor of the County.

What does the District Attorney do?

They decide which charges, if any, to pursue in court.

Examples:

- Mike was arrested for armed robbery. The District Attorney can decide to pursue rehabilitation or the maximum punishment for Mike.
- A cop kills a member of the community. The District Attorney decides whether to investigate this killing. They can also hold the cops accountable.

Next up is City Council.

This will use San Jose as an example. San Jose is made up of ten districts and each district has their own councilmember.

The mayor of San Jose is voted on by all the city's voters. The mayor of San Jose then picks one of the city councilmembers to be the Vice Mayor. The mayor acts as the "leader" of the city council but still only has a single vote.

What can the city council do?

They can raise the minimum wage, house the homeless, and invest in public transportation. They also spend money on dealing with potholes and giving the police more money.

Example:

- San Jose voted recently to give a tax break to high-rise developers.

Last are School Districts.

The School Districts' political body is the School Board. The school board is typically made up of five members called "trustees." These trustees are often parents, teachers, or people wanting to help the schools. The trustee position is not paid and part-time.

What do school board trustees do?

They appoint a superintendent who helps them run the district. They can decide what gets taught in schools and how much money is for Special Education and English Language Learner programs. They also focus on hiring school counselors and deciding how much teachers get paid.

Bonus: California State Legislature.

State legislators spend their time between the Capital and their own districts. They have a district office and an office in the Capital. Each California Assemblymember represents an area of roughly 460,000 people. There are 80 assemblymembers.

What do Assemblymembers do?

They work on the state budget and draft bills that impact the whole state.

Example:

- Assembly Bill 5 would change the law to classify Lyft and Uber drivers as employees, which would allow them to unionize and get better pay. Each bill has to pass both the Assembly and Senate. The Governor then either signs or vetoes (rejects) the bill. He signed Assembly Bill 5.

The State Senators' job is practically the same as Assemblymembers'. Only difference is that the Senators represent more people.

Important Takeaways:

There is a lot more to each elected position than just a couple sentences.

The key information is that there are multiple elections and political offices deal with different policy.

Most importantly: your vote matters.

There will hopefully be more of these short political overviews down the road.