

# Untapped Opportunity:

## Local Water Board Elections and the Fight for Water Justice



An untapped opportunity exists at the epicenter of California's drinking water crisis. In a region of the state where the Human Right to Water remains out of reach, 142 special districts ("local water boards") shape water access. These democratically-elected institutions hold the potential to form the roots of local democracy — and to translate the Human Right to Water from aspiration to reality.

But as a closer look reveals, these boards are falling short of their democratic ideal.<sup>1</sup> In the local water boards of the southern San Joaquin Valley, elections are the exception, not the rule. Along with new research that details these boards' lack of demographic representation, our findings constitute a call to action — to leaders and allies of the water justice movement, to educators and researchers, and most importantly, to residents themselves.<sup>2</sup>

### Key Results

#### Did an election take place?

In local water board elections, when no more than one candidate runs for a seat, the seat does not appear on the ballot. There is simply no election at all. **In the southern San Joaquin Valley, 75 of 109 local water boards studied have not held a single election in the last four years (Figure 1).** Only five boards were run entirely by board directors whose seats were contested in the most recent election.

#### Uncontested, contested, or vacant?

Of the 565 local water board seats studied, **491 seats were uncontested in the most recent election.** Sixteen seats — three percent of seats studied — were vacant (Figure 2). In Tulare County, only five percent of current directors ran in a contested race. In Kings County, seven percent of local water board seats were vacant.

#### Comparing drinking water and non-drinking water districts

While 82% of drinking water board seats were uncontested in the last two election cycles, **in non-drinking water boards a full 94% of seats were uncontested (Figures 3 & 4).** In Kern County, 99% of non-drinking water board seats were uncontested — and in Kings County, not a single non-drinking water board director ran in a contested race.

Figure 1

#### Did an Election Take Place?

Distribution of Contested Seats on Local Water Boards

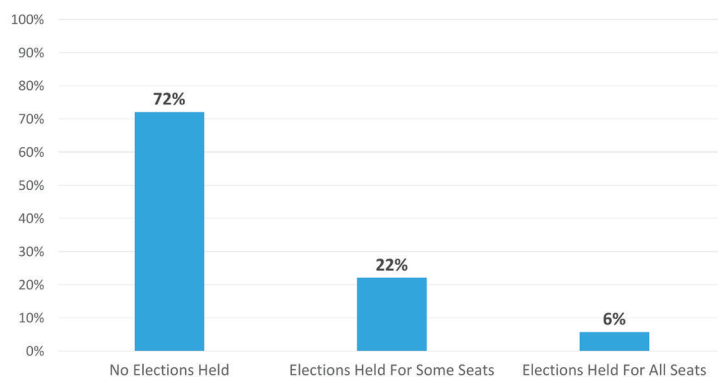
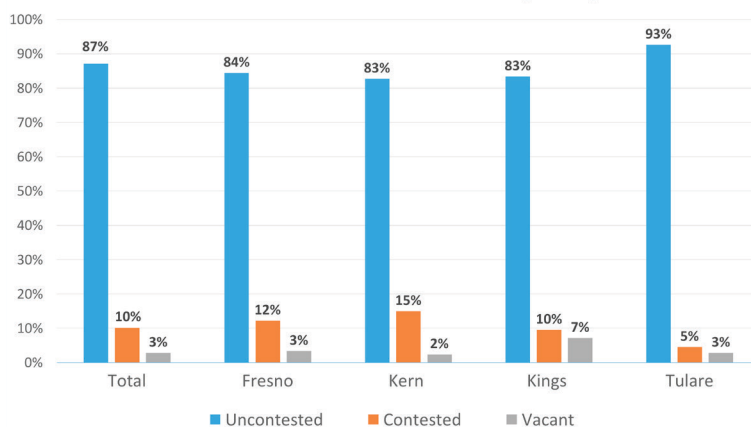


Figure 2

#### Uncontested, Contested, or Vacant?

Local Water Board Seats in the Southern San Joaquin Valley



- 1 In the four counties that comprise the southern San Joaquin Valley — Fresno, Kern, Kings, and Tulare counties — 142 special districts hold authorities and responsibilities related to water management. Ultimately, our study sample included 109 of these "local water boards": 64 boards that serve drinking water to residents ("drinking water boards") and 45 that deliver non-drinking water to farms, dairies, and other entities ("non-drinking water boards"). These boards include 15 types of special districts, from Community Services Districts to Public Utilities Districts, Irrigation Districts, and more. On most boards, any resident is eligible to run for a seat on the board of directors, generally a five-member board on which each director serves a four-year term. Typically, all district residents are eligible to vote — though, in some districts, only landowners hold voting rights.
- 2 A 2013 PolicyLink study found that 65% of the San Joaquin Valley's low-income unincorporated community residents were people of color. But according to a forthcoming California Civic Engagement Project report, in early 2018 fewer than 15% of local water board directors in the southern San Joaquin Valley were Latino. Of the 242 non-drinking water board directors studied, 3% were Latino — and none were Latina. See: Romero, M. (forthcoming). Latino Representation in California's Water Board Elections. California Civic Engagement Project, Davis, CA.

Figure 3

Election Status: Drinking Water Board Seats

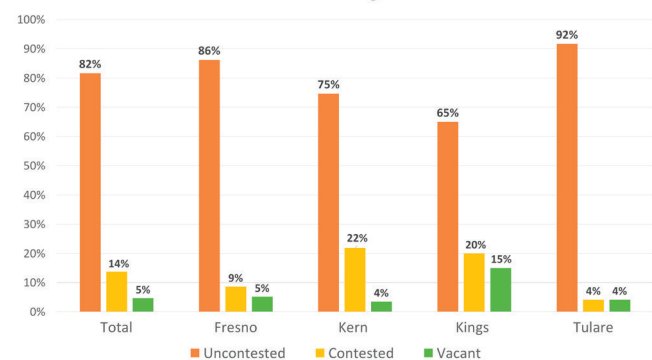
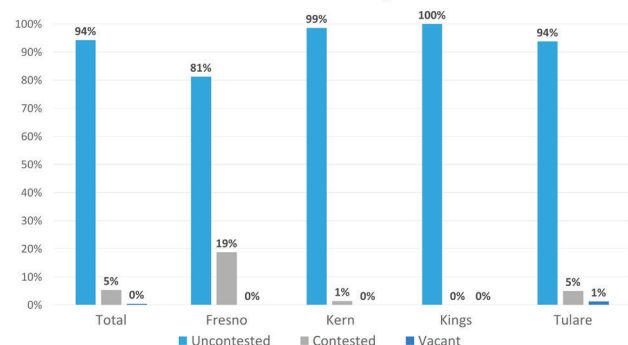


Figure 4

Election Status: Non-Drinking Water Board Seats



## Recommendations

### 1) Create local water board leadership pathways and invest in trainings for potential and current water board leaders

The predominance of uncontested board elections points to a reality: there are simply not enough residents running for their local water boards in the southern San Joaquin Valley. As such, training programs and leadership pathways are needed to motivate and support a diverse group of potential water board candidates. Local water boards' capacity to catalyze meaningful change depends on informed and engaged board directors. Targeted trainings can provide the forum for community organizers, service providers, and experienced water board members to share essential knowledge and expertise with future and current water board members alike. These leadership pathways hold the potential to foster civic engagement not only in local water boards, but in other elected and appointed seats as well.

### 2) Advance public understanding of local water boards' roles and responsibilities

Local water boards shape communities' access to safe, affordable, and reliable water. They are among the most

powerful potential drivers of local impact and regional change in the fight for water equity. The districts they lead are also among the least-understood forms of local government. From this paradox stems opportunity. Realizing this opportunity depends, first, on broadening and deepening our collective understanding of local water boards' roles and responsibilities.

### 3) Continue research on representation and accountability in elected seats that shape the Human Right to Water

Further research to build understanding of electoral representation and accountability across a broader diversity of districts and regions is key. A dataset that includes demographics not only of current board members but also of candidates who lost would prove crucial to parsing the relationship between demographic representation and contested elections. An exploration of the political, social, and environmental factors that shape contestedness and local water boards themselves would provide further context for our findings. The work to understand local water boards — and the place they hold not only in the fight for water justice, but also in the landscape of democracy in California — is far from complete.

To read the full report, please visit: [https://www.communitywatercenter.org/publications\\_resources](https://www.communitywatercenter.org/publications_resources)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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