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ANALYSIS

Prickly ethnic issues color O.C. elections

Demographics change some campaign outcomes in a formerly white-bread county - but not others.

By Ashley Powers and Dave McKibben, Times Staff Writers
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Long a caldron of tension over race and immigration issues, Orange County demonstrated in this week's balloting that while it has undergone enormous demographic shifts, it still struggles with its changing complexion.

A once-sleepy congressional race that revved up when a Vietnamese candidate's campaign warned Latino immigrants not to vote captured the most attention, but who won city council and school board seats across the county also turned on the import voters gave to accusations of racial and ethnic insensitivity.

Democratic Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Santa Ana) breezed to reelection against the GOP's Tan Nguyen, whose campaign had mailed letters to Latino voters warning immigrants not to vote. But in Costa Mesa, candidates who were targeted because of their anti-illegal immigration proposals easily kept their seats.

The inflammatory campaign season included a state Republican leader calling an Arab American city council candidate an extremist for supporting a mainstream Islamic-American relations group; community upheaval over a Westminster school trustee's change of heart over hiring a Vietnamese American superintendent; and Irvine's mayor fighting off accusations that she'd snubbed the city's Taiwanese community by awarding sister-city status to a town in China.

If anything, experts said, Orange County's divisive elections underscore its transition to a place where immigrant groups have gained enough political clout to contend for local posts and tangle with county power brokers, analysts said.

"Orange County's reputation is as a place that is — or least was — intolerant as a white-bread, ultraconservative community," said UC Irvine political scientist Mark Petracca. "It's clear the Orange County I've experienced in the last 20 years has had some of those elements, but they've declined as the demographics and economics have changed."

The county and its long-dominant Republican leaders have been saddled with a sometimes thorny legacy concerning ethnic politics. The signature incident occurred in 1988, when the local GOP sent uniformed poll guards to heavily Latino polling stations, some with signs in Spanish declaring that noncitizens couldn't vote. In 1994, the county birthed Proposition 187, a ballot measure that would have denied benefits to undocumented immigrants had the courts not overturned it.

Over the years, Orange County has diversified, with the latest census figures showing that ethnic minorities constitute about half its population. Little Saigon is home to the largest Vietnamese community outside Vietnam, and Santa Ana, the county seat and California's ninth-largest city, is more than three-quarters Latino. On Tuesday, it cemented another milestone: an all-Latino City Council.

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"We've had white groups dominating local politics and ethnic groups fighting for crumbs. Now the racial and ethnic groups that were always there are coming into political power," said Louis DeSipio, a UC Irvine political scientist who specializes in ethnic politics.

The shift is reflected in the rise of politicians such as Sanchez and Assemblyman Van Tran (R-Garden Grove), but also in a strong backlash against illegal immigrants from residents unnerved by the changing demographics.

In December 2005, Jim Gilchrist, who founded the Minuteman Project border patrol group, drew a quarter of the votes in a House race in which he ran as an American Independent Party candidate and drummed so hard on the illegal-immigration issue that the county GOP chairman referred to him as "Jimmy One-Note."

On Tuesday, the same issue turned a Costa Mesa City Council election into a referendum on Mayor Allan Mansoor's efforts to allow local police to enforce immigration law. Donors from such out-of-town addresses as Temecula and Beverly Hills wrote checks to support his stance.

Despite opposition from the police union and business heavyweights such as South Coast Plaza developer C.J. Segerstrom & Sons, Mansoor and fellow council hopeful Wendy Leece topped a six-candidate field for two open seats.

"Somehow, these voters think the Costa Mesa City Council can control illegal immigration," said Councilwoman Katrina Foley, who backed the pair's rivals.

In Anaheim, Westminster and Irvine, among the county's most diverse cities, campaign mudslinging centered on ethnicity and religion, heating up typically blasé elections.

Arab American businessman Bill Dalati, seeking a seat on the Anaheim City Council, was attacked in a letter from former state Republican Party Chairman Shawn Steel as being anti-American and an extremist-group supporter. The local chapter of the group in question, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, dismissed the accusations as having little impact on the race, but the candidate partly blamed his fourth-place finish on them.

"Every time I'd be out campaigning, people would ask me about my views on war and my international stance. Not many people asked me what I was going to do for Anaheim," Dalati said.

Race became an issue in elections for the Westminster school board, which was roiled by controversy this year when it offered the superintendent post to a Vietnamese American educator — only to rescind the offer a week later when Judy Ahrens and another trustee changed votes.

A group that formed to reinstate the applicant, Our Children Our Vote, fielded a slate of candidates, none of whom were successful. Ahrens, whom the group accused of racism, is clinging to her seat by several dozen votes, a number expected to change as provisional and absentee ballots are counted.

"Race was never the issue" in the decision to rescind the job offer, Ahrens said. "That doesn't mean people won't use it for their own interests, to pursue their goal to win a campaign."

In Irvine, Mayor Beth Krom's sister-city visit to China created an international dust-up when she signed a document pledging that the city would refuse to recognize Taiwan. Challenger John Duong emphasized the issue in mailers, but it apparently had little impact in a city where more than one-third of residents are Asian American: Krom dominated with 60% of the vote.

"Irvine wasn't about racism; it was about nationalism," said Petracca, the political scientist. "People in Irvine who objected so strongly to what she did were from Taiwan."

The Nguyen-Sanchez battle had the most scintillating controversy when his campaign mailed the letter to 14,000 Latino voters, warning immigrants not to vote. That sparked state and federal investigations into possible voting rights violations and denouncements by GOP leaders. Sanchez emerged victorious with 61% of the vote in the ethnically diverse district, just as political observers had expected.

It was a sign of how much the county's political landscape has changed. A decade ago, when Sanchez first captured her seat, the Republican incumbent blamed the upset on a Latino civil rights group, which he accused of systematically registering illegal immigrants to vote.

ashley.powers@latimes.com

david.mckibben@latimes.com

Times staff writers Jennifer Delson and Seema Mehta contributed to this report.

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