

Disconnect (ed) – Redux

By Ward La Valley / January 10, 2016

The Great Calaveras Marjority - Whose Interests Does Calaveras County Serve?

Introduction

In early May 2014, FreeTri-Tip Dinner published “Disconnect – Whose Issues Are We Talking About?” In this piece we presented a lot of statistics that pretty much proved that people over the age of 55 are a clear majority of the votes cast in Calaveras elections. At the end we wondered aloud whether the Supervisorial candidates’ platform and policy priorities would reflect this insight. The answer was, generally, not so much. None of the candidates except 3rd District candidate Michael Olivera specifically mentioned “senior citizens” in any policy-related manner, and this, like almost all of Mr. Olivera’s published policy ideas, was not burdened with specifics.

After the election results came in later that year, and two new faces joined a Board that already had three new faces from the previous election, we resolved to watch the policy priorities of the Board through this filter. After all, it would make sense that if one age group casts three-quarters of the votes, that age group might reasonably expect to have its voice heard and its concerns addressed. But what are those concerns? Is there a ‘senior agenda’ and if so, what would it be?

This revisit of this issue will be in three parts:

Part One will update the statistics with information from the most recent elections, and answer three questions: first, what is the age distribution of the entire population of Calaveras County? Second, what is the age distribution of the registered voters and, finally, what is the age distribution of the people who actually vote?

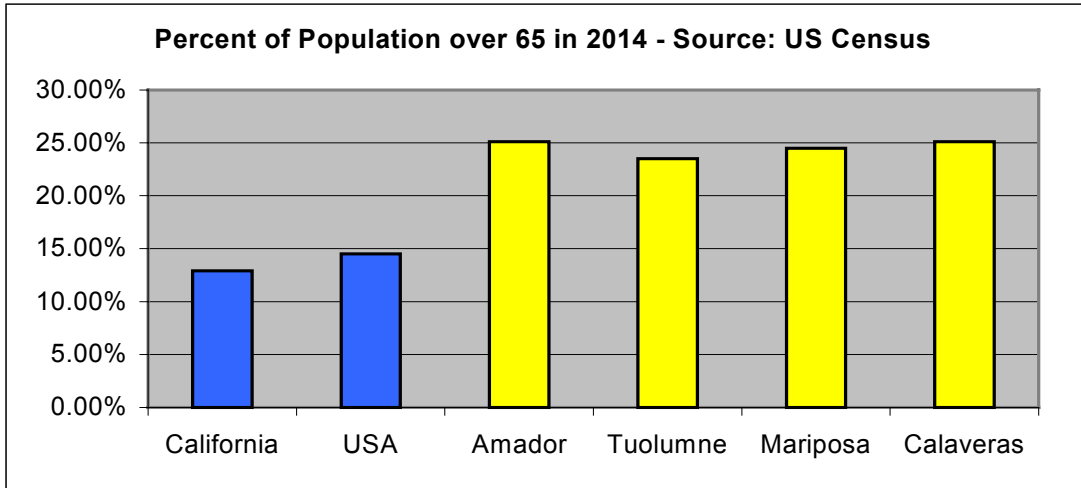
As in the first piece, we will find that in all three groups, population, registered voters, and actual voters, the age distribution is significantly older here than the State average. New this time, in Part 1 we’ll also look at some other statistics from the Census bureau that show what other politically important characteristics this population has in common.

In Part Two we’ll take up the what a ‘senior agenda’ might look like, that is, what the common characteristics of the majority might suggest from a local policy perspective. We’ll look and see if this analysis sheds light on politics and election results in Calaveras County. Then we’ll try and identify County-related issues and policies upon which this majority might logically and rationally agree in light of its common characteristics.

From there it gets really interesting (insert straight face emoticon). Part Three will seek to evaluate whether Calaveras County government is pursuing a policy agenda that is in accord with the interests of this vast majority of the voters, and if not, why not?

Part 1

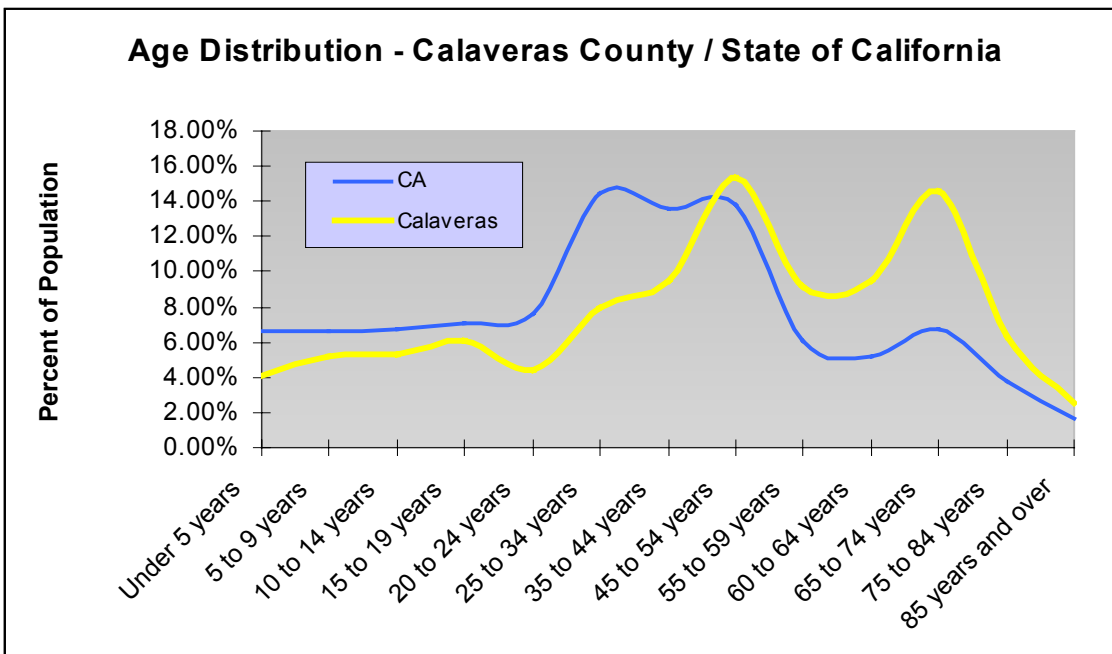
Although it may not seem that way from attending a Board meeting, Calaveras County's population has a lot in common. Ethnically, we are overwhelmingly Euro-American. But perhaps more importantly, we're pretty old and getting older. In Calaveras County, as well as Amador, Tuolumne, and Mariposa, the population over 65 is proportionally



twice that of the State as a whole (see chart above).

The median age in Calaveras County is 50.3 versus a median age in California of 35.6 (US Census American Community Survey 2014).

The entire age distribution of Calaveras County as compared to the rest of the State looks like this: (US Census American Community Survey 2014):



This chart also indicates that around age 50 is the point where the population of Calaveras County turns from proportionally smaller to proportionally larger than California; the pattern is similar for Amador, Tuolumne, and Mariposa Counties as well.

Other common characteristics that are equally striking include housing and economics.

Significantly, people in Calaveras County overwhelmingly live in their own single-family homes; the home ownership rate in Calaveras County is 79% vs. 54.8% Statewide; only 4.6% of the population in Calaveras County lives in multi-family housing as compared to 31% Statewide.

Incidentally, the median value of all those single family owner-occupied housing units in Calaveras County (around 18,500 total) in 2014 was \$242,600 vs. \$371,400 Statewide.

Eleven (11%) of total Calaveras County income is from Social Security vs. 5% Statewide, and around half of Calaveras County is not in the labor force (53% in Amador, 47% in Calaveras), as compared with 36% Statewide. The median household income for age 65 and over in Calaveras County is around \$44,000, versus around \$65,000 for ages 25 to 64. (Source: US Census 2013 Community Survey).

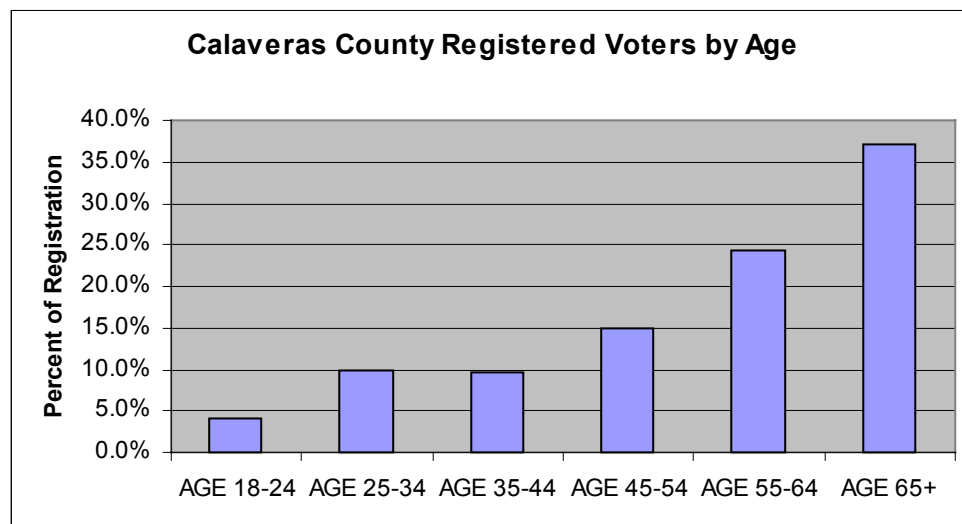
In summary, Calaveras County's population is older, ethnically homogeneous, and is predominately retired or semi-retired with a moderate and relatively fixed income. Four out of five of us live in a separate one-family home that likely constitutes the family's primary financial asset.

The Electorate

The electorate is composed of two groups, the pool of registered voters and those that actually vote.

Registered Voters:

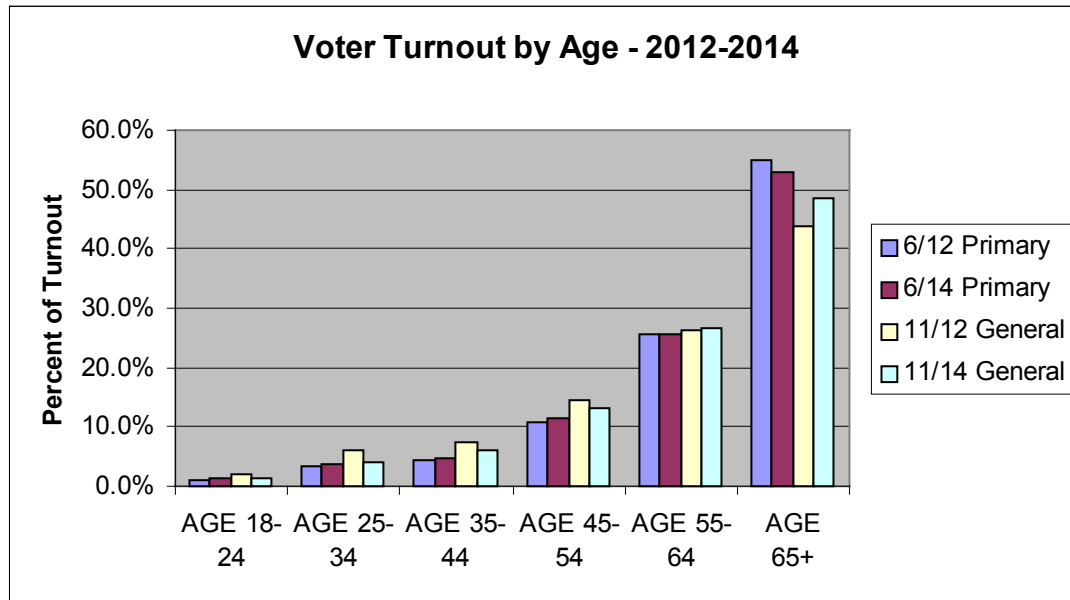
The chart below indicates that over 60% of the registered voters in Calaveras County are over age 55, and over 37% are over age 65 (the general population age 65 and over is 25%).



Actual Voters:

As we know, not all registered voters actually vote.

The chart on the next page shows the age distribution of the voting electorate in Calaveras County in the last four elections (source Political Data, Inc.):



Here we see that persons over age 55 dominate election turnout in Calaveras County (the same holds true for Amador, Tuolumne, and Mariposa Counties), constituting over 75% of votes cast in any given election.

Indeed in Primary elections, persons age 65 or over by themselves represent a majority (over 50%) of the votes cast. As we know, many non-partisan elections are decided in the Primary election, suggesting that the votes cast from this one age bracket effectively determine election outcomes in Calaveras County.

Conclusion

The truth is these facts have been around for a long time, and will come as no great surprise to anybody who just looks around at the people they see in the County every day.

Nevertheless, it is important to underscore just how significant this majority is, or could be, in Calaveras politics.

Because, if this is a Democracy, and there is a huge majority of actual voters with substantially similar economic and social interests, it stands to reason that our Board of Supervisors meetings should be virtual celebrations of harmony and consensus as the best interests of the majority are tended to. Is this the case?

End of Part 1