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From the Los Angeles Times

## L.A. County's unaccountable bosses

**Unchallenged power and neglect of key issues make county supervisors Exhibit A in the case for term limits.**

By Jim Newton

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The race to succeed Yvonne Burke on the county Board of Supervisors already promises to be one of the more significant Southern California political contests of 2008. That is partly a function of scarcity -- it's extraordinarily rare for seats on the board to come up for grabs -- but it's also one of power and the changing rules of local politics.

Over the years, the supervisors have developed their own signature brand of political influence, fashioning rules and traditions that have served them well. They are, in one sense, obscure figures. Don Knabe, for instance, who represents the county's 4th (and southernmost) District, could walk into most restaurants in Los Angeles and not risk being noticed. Sometimes the supervisors resent their low profile -- they even went so far as to create the office of "Mayor of Los Angeles County," a position that rotates among the five supervisors and manages to be meaningless, pretentious and slightly pathetic all at the same time.

But while anonymity can be disappointing, it also helps the supervisors avoid accountability, and that's just fine by them.

At the same time, the supervisors have anointed themselves unchecked overseers of their respective districts, an authority they grant each other by their tradition of deferring to one another on district matters, which cover such varied and vital topics as healthcare, welfare and social services, many targeted toward the county's poorest residents. The results are efficiency -- Zev Yaroslavsky rarely has to worry about another supervisor challenging his view of what's best for West Los Angeles -- but also neglect: the collapse of medical care at King-Drew Medical Center (later known as King-Harbor Hospital) was largely the result of Burke's determination to protect an African American staff despite its manifest inability and the deepening consequences for a largely Latino patient population.

The supervisors could change that if they wanted to. Indeed, in the case of King-Drew, the rest of the board eventually *did* step up and wrest exclusive control of the issue from Burke. But for the most part, the supervisors enjoy their individual power and appreciate the benefits of vague accountability. It gives them much authority and little responsibility. "Deference is a choice," said Rafe Sonenshein, a historian and expert on L.A. government and politics. "It's not required."

The board's immunity from most of the laws of local politics -- including contested elections and some modicum of public accountability -- is largely because the supervisors ducked the wave of term limits that washed over other Los Angeles offices in the 1990s and early 2000s.

By the time that political fad was over, Los Angeles' mayor, city attorney and controller, as well its council members, all had eight-year limits imposed on them, and the office shuffle began almost immediately. Over at the county, however, supervisors laid low for as long as possible and then, when voters finally did approve a limit on the supervisors' terms, the one that passed delayed the imposition of the limits and then set them at three four-year terms, not two.

The result: They're all still there. Supervisor Mike Antonovich, for instance, holds a seat that is nominally subject to term limits, but the likelihood is that he'll end up holding that office for more than 30 years -- he was first elected to represent the 5th District in 1980 and won't be termed out until 2012.

Term limits are a sore subject for many political observers. They have weakened governments across the

country, stripping experience out of city halls and state legislatures (including in California). They are, most profoundly, antidemocratic -- denying voters the right to elect an incumbent by mere imposition of a rule. In many ways, California was better governed before term limits, and some early champions of such limits, notably former Mayor Richard Riordan, have come to the conclusion that they cut too deeply into local politics as well.

And yet the Board of Supervisors may offer the best argument for them. The supervisors' relative anonymity and unfettered authority over development in their districts give them access to large contributions at the same time that would-be opponents have few issues to hold against them individually.

The result is nearly as antidemocratic as term limits -- witness that election after election goes by without the incumbents facing a challenge. The last time a new member of the Board of Supervisors was elected was more than 11 years ago.

As Sonenshein notes, the county political system is rife with pathologies, but they largely boil down to this: "The supervisors have no boss." They are accountable neither to each other nor to voters.

Even for critics of term limits, it's hard not to look forward to 2012, when those limits start to clear the way for more elections, such as the contest between Bernard C. Parks and Mark Ridley-Thomas. Los Angeles will be better for it.

Jim Newton is editor of The Times' editorial pages.

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