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Black candidates make Sonoma County history amid national election wave

‘When you don’t have a seat at the table you bring your own chair’



Pictured from left to right are Sonoma County Supervisor-Elect Joanna Paun, Santa Rosa City Councilmember-Elect Melanie Jones-Carter and State Assemblymember-Elect Jackie Elward. (Courtesy of Melanie Jones-Carter)

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For the first time in its 176-year history, Sonoma County voters have elected a Black county supervisor and sent a Black woman to the state capitol in Sacramento. Local Black residents now hold seats at the highest levels of local government: the State Assembly, Board of Supervisors and City Council for the county's largest city.

Their electoral achievements echo the landslide success for Black candidates across the country — most notably in Georgia, where eight black women were elected to nearly every statewide race, and in Mississippi, which hasn't had a Black senator since the 1880s Reconstruction Era.

"Just talking about it gives me chills," said Jackie Elward, who was elected to represent the State Assembly's 12th District. She is the first Black woman to represent the 12th District and appears to be the first African-born person elected to the state Legislature. Six years ago, Elward was also the first Black woman elected to the Rohnert Park council.

"If you told me about 23 years ago that I would be coming to America and running for the Legislature and being not only the first Black woman, but the first Black person to represent both Marin and Sonoma County in 2026, I would have said 'you're bluffing,'" she said.



Jackie Elward, candidate for California State Assembly District 12, reacts as Senate election results are announced during a watch party Tuesday at Pub Republic in Petaluma. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

Joanna Paun, elected last week to represent Sonoma County's southern 2nd District on the Board of Supervisors, said she was humbled to be part of the larger landscape of political achievement this year.

"I think a lot about my ancestors, I think a lot about my parents who integrated their public schools, about my grandparents who throughout their life did not fully have access to their own civil rights and to the right to vote, on and on back to the times of slavery, which is not that far away from us," she said.

Paun pointed to a now widely-praised story by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution tracing Georgia Governor-elect Keisha Lance Bottoms' ancestry back to Sheppard Peek, who was a slave.

"Here she is the first Black governor of that state. There's just so many amazing momentous things like that," Paun said.

The significance of the moment extends beyond its history-making. In Sonoma County, Black residents make up less than 2% of the population, a statistic that has led Black residents — their experiences and outcomes — to be overlooked, Paun said.





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Joanna Paun, running for 2nd District Sonoma County Supervisor, smiles at an election night watch party at Griffo Distillery and Tasting Bar in Petaluma, Tuesday, November 3, 2026. (Darryl Bush/For The Press Democrat)

With the election of Melanie Jones-Carter to Santa Rosa City Council's District 4 seat, the county's largest city will have two Black council members. Natalie Rogers was the first Black woman elected in 2020. She served as mayor 2022 and 2024.

Despite the county's small Black population, Black women have long been leading the political fight from behind the scene, said Jones-Carter.





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Melanie Jones-Carter, a candidate for then Santa Rosa District 4 Council race prepares to canvas a neighborhood on Oct. 3. At left is Matt Radisch, volunteer coordinator with the campaign. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Kirstyne Lange, president of the NAACP Santa Rosa–Sonoma County Branch, noted the elections of Paun, Elward and Jones-Carter now doubled the number of local Black elected leaders currently in office. The three join Rogers, Healdsburg Vice Mayor Ron Edwards and Sonoma County Sheriff Eddie Engram.

“When you don’t have a seat at the table you bring your own chair. All of these candidates have brought their own chair,” Lange said, “Now having that physical, visible representation of Black leaders is an opportunity to have representation and growth and a perspective that hasn’t been brought to the table.”

Wartime shipyard origins

Sonoma County’s Black population began to grow during and following World War II, when African Americans who worked the shipyards in Marin County moved into local neighborhoods, including Santa Rosa’s South Park, according to Gaye LaBaron, longtime Press Democrat columnist and chronicler of local history,

Many of those workers had migrated to the San Francisco Bay Area from the U.S. South for maritime job opportunities. Many members of the Black community in Sonoma County trace their roots to those wartime migrations.

For decades, political power systematically evaded the Black community. But robust grassroots organizing, campaigning and advocating would yield the inevitable, bringing Black candidates from the background into elected office, said Jones-Carter. She said she’s been a part of a culture of women helping women succeed in the political sphere.

The council member-elect said she is close to both Paun and Elward, and helped both candidates canvass before starting her own campaign this summer.

The support the women shared, which included Melanie Bagby, who is in the lead of a yet-to-be-called race for Sonoma County’s 4th District Supervisor seat, came from a sense of community.

“We just try to help each other through this process,” she said. “We try to lift each other up and bring along other women interested in politics.”

Those relationships have developed outside of Santa Rosa and Sonoma County, for Jones-Carter who shared a story about meeting California State Controller Malia Cohen a few years ago.

Jones-Carter said she hosted a Sonoma County meet-and-greet for Cohen at her home, as a way for the controller to familiarize herself with the county.

“It was so encouraging to see all these women that were successful and proud of their careers,” she said.

That relationship has blossomed with Cohen supporting Jones-Carter through her campaign, with plans to attend her swearing-in at City Hall in December.

“I wouldn’t expect the state controller to come to my house and help me,” she said. “That says a lot about where our county is now. We have relied on each other.”

People power

One of the most notable aspects of this year’s midterm election was the success of grassroots campaigns over candidates supported by super PACs backed by the wealthy. This year, Elon Musk reportedly spent $445 billion on a failed attempt to help Republicans maintain control of Congress. In Texas alone, Musk’s $158 million effort to defeat Democrat James Talarico wasn’t enough to overcome what Talarico repeatedly called his “people-powered movement.”

Elward said her campaign faced a similar onslaught coming from big-moneyed interests. But those funds were no match for a ground-game that prioritized “talking to people.”

“People have the power and they showed us,” Elward said. “I see this as a gift from our constituents because they still believe, they still have that hope, that the leaders, the Democratic leaders will do the right thing for them.”

While acknowledging the historic milestones reached in Sonoma County and the rest of the country, the success of Black female candidates and what they campaigned on spoke to the shared values and needs of the broader community.

“I think this is an honest effort of community finally being open to the lived experience of people who are hard-working and who are standing up for the values that they align with, they just happen to also be black women,” Lange said. “It’s indicative of what we’re seeing across the county.”

“It’s very exciting to see their hard work and perseverance in their respective races,” Lange said. “The product of those three candidates knocking on thousands of doors collectively to really get people to see who they are and to meet them and introduce themselves, their platforms, their views to community members who wouldn’t really know who they are.”

But while their elections bring visibility and representation, Elward and Paun said as elected leaders they must now deliver meaningful policy. It is a call that Progressives and Democrats across the county share after their sweeping victories.

“Representation is more than occupying a seat. It must translate into meaningful policy, equitable resource allocation, measurable outcomes, and accountability,” Paun added later in a text. “We should never have to demonstrate that there are enough Black people in Sonoma County to justify being seen, heard or served.”

Jones-Carter referred to herself as just the next Black woman to be elected to the Santa Rosa City Council, after Rogers.

“And I won’t be the last,” she said.

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