

# **Under the Influence**

## ***OC Board Of Education Members Mari Barke & Lisa Sparks and the charter school movement***

In 2018, Marilyn “Mari” Barke (Mrs Jeff Barke) and Lisa Sparks (Mrs Daniele Struppa) were candidates for the Orange County Board of Education (OCBOE). Barke for District #2 and Sparks for District #5. They were both elected thanks in large part to assistance from pro-charter school advocates (Charter Public Schools PAC & California Policy Center) who in effect ran their campaigns.

Barke ran against two other candidates including incumbent David Boyd. Sparks was running in an open seat against four other candidates. They were both endorsed by the editorial board of the Orange County Register. Both Barke and Sparks won their respective races.

Mari Barke had never been elected to public office. She is a wife and mom of two adult children. [Her bio](#) says she was a “teacher” (but not in the way she wants you to believe) and handled finance for a small business. Campaign finance records indicate she is an executive at the California Policy Center (CPC) - a conservative group that attacks teachers unions and supports charter school initiatives. (More on CPC and the Barke family’s connections there below). Her husband Jeff is a family medicine concierge doctor who is part of Personal Care Physicians medical group and affiliated in some minor way with Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach. Jeff was previously a member of the Los Alamitos Unified School District Board of Education (about 2006-2018). While on the Los Al School Board, he was one of the then-majority who demanded a science teacher tell the board annually [how they planned to teach opposing views on climate change](#). When local parents got familiar with Jeff’s attempts to shove creationism, climate change denial, etc. on Los Al kids, they ran a candidate against him. He was defeated in his bid for re-election.

Jeff Barke is also an elected member of the Orange County Republican Central Committee, an elected member of the Rossmoor Community Services and a member of Orange County’s GOP Lincoln Club, a wealthy group of GOP donors. He has been one of those who decides what candidates and campaigns are funded by the Lincoln Club. He was recruited by the Trump 2020 campaign to push anti-masking theories during the coronavirus pandemic as part of a PR campaign to provide cover for the President’s push to re-open the economy. He has relentlessly pushed the anti-masking agenda. He has appeared frequently at COVID protests and rallies without wearing a mask. He is sympathetic to anti-vaxxers and the [QAnon](#) conspiracy theory group which the FBI has warned against. He fancies himself as a sort of TV doctor.

Lisa Sparks is Dean of the School of Communications and an endowed professor at Chapman University in Orange. Unlike Barke, [her resume](#) goes on and on. Her husband, Daniele Struppa, is the President of Chapman University. They have two school-aged daughters but it’s unclear where they are enrolled. In 2020, after less than two years serving on the Board of Education, Sparks had grander aspirations and ran in the California primary for the 45th congressional seat currently held by Rep Katie Porter. Sparks came in fourth with 4% of the vote, failing to make the November run-off.

In their 2018 OCBOE campaigns both Barke and Sparks had unprecedented financial support for their campaigns. Barke’s gross take was more than \$424,000 and Sparks gross take was nearly \$374,000. Barke alone outspent the incumbent Boyd nearly 5:1. Further, Sparks transferred \$25,000 from her warchest into Barke’s warchest. Both Barke and Sparks benefited tremendously from contributions from Charter Public Schools PAC (CPS PAC). Barke received \$245,706 of “support” from CPS PAC and Sparks received \$84,862 of “support.” By support we mean, in-kind contributions. A review of [expenses made by CPSPAC during that period](#) indicates that the various

in-kind contributions they made to both the Barke & Sparks campaigns went to Missouri-based [Axiom Strategies](#). In fact, numerous expenses made on behalf of various candidates by CPS PAC were payments to Axiom Strategies. A basic review of the Axiom website doesn't indicate staff or relationships with other political consultants or campaigns in California. We are assuming that Axiom is CPS PAC's political consultant of record and any support they give clients is through the Axiom political consulting firm which handles direct mail, media buying, digital and phone service, etc. Pretty much soup to nuts for political campaigns. This also suggests to us that in fact Charter Public Schools PAC was in effect running the bulk of the political campaigns for both Barke & Sparks. [Among the team at Axiom Strategies is one-Trump acting US Attorney General Matthew Whitaker]

Both Barke and Sparks received other contributions from The Family Action PAC and a group linked to Howard Ahmanson among others. Barke received contributions from Orange County Supervisor Michelle Steel and Orange County Sheriff Don Barnes.

Sparks made numerous payments to CEC consulting, a local Orange County political consultant run by Chris Emami and tied closely to GOP attorney Mark Bucher who is also a member of the Orange County Republican Central Committee. Bucher is also CEO of California Policy Center, a right wing think tank. We'll come back to him later. Sparks also paid at least \$45,000 to Bieber Communications for direct mail services.

After the election was over, Sparks made a \$10,000 contribution to the Orange County Lincoln Club. We assume that was to cover her membership in the group. Socializing with that group could have helped her future congressional campaign.

Like Sparks, Barke made similar payments to CEC Consulting and Bieber Communications. She also made payments to the Lincoln Club to reimburse them for mailing services.

As for Mark Bucher, he is an Orange County attorney with a long history of political controversies. Most notably involving the Orange Unified School District. He has from time to time supported slates of candidates there who have taken majority control of the board, then lost that control and regained. At one time he was of counsel to Orange Unified School District.

Bucher is CEO of the [California Policy Center](#). That think tank among other things is anti-teachers union and pro-charter schools. In 2015 they had revenue of \$1,313, 416 and expenses of \$1,227,312. Obviously well funded. It's connected to [State Policy Network](#) (SPN), an umbrella organization for a consortium of conservative and libertarian think tanks that focus on state-level policy. Also, closely affiliated with Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation and Americans for Prosperity. SPN is closely aligned to the Tea Party movement.

Bucher & Jeff Barke are partners in a charter school venture proposed in Orange Unified, the Orange County Classical Academy (OCCA). With much controversy, Orange Unified by a vote of 4:3 approved their charter school in December 2019 and they hope to open the school Fall 2020. Orange Unified staff had recommended the Board deny the proposal for multiple reasons including budget concerns and a religious bias. The principal of the highly successful Orange Lutheran High School also had grave concerns about religious bias. Unlike many charters, this school is not the idea of a core group of founding families nor does it have a major donor. This is an idea Bucher and Jeff Barke are pushing, objectives are not entirely clear. Neither men have the experience needed to launch a successful charter. Neither lives in Orange or has school-aged kids.

A review of [Federal Election Commission records](#) indicates that after her election to the BoE in 2018, Mari Barke reports she became a "consultant" to Bucher's California Policy Center -- the group that

played such a key role in her 2018 election. And then in 2019, she reports multiple times that she was an “Executive” at CPC.

[Mari Barke campaign filings](#)

[Lisa Sparks campaign filings](#)

[Mari Barke twitter](#)