

Election Observers Panel

Prior to the November 7, 2006, general election, grand jurors met with the Registrar of Voters (Registrar) and other officials of the Sacramento County Department of Voter Registration and Elections for a briefing on the conduct of elections generally, and specifically, polling place operations. Thereafter, grand jurors took advantage of opportunities to participate in precinct officer training sessions, and served as precinct observers. Over 40 polling sites were visited by Grand Jury members during polling hours on Election Day to observe election officials and precinct procedures, and to interview voters about their voting experience. Grand Jury members who visited these polling places reported that overall, the Registrar did an effective, efficient job in providing polling places, conducting the election, and collecting and counting ballots.

For the November 2006 election, there were 624,444 registered voters and 368,162 (or 58.95%) actually voted. Of these, 184,815 cast absentee ballots, and 183,347 voted in person at one of 500 precincts. The ballot for this election was particularly long, as there were contested and uncontested races for federal, state and county offices, as well as special districts (e.g., school boards, and utility, flood control and other special districts); and there were at least 17 propositions on many Sacramento County ballots. There were 178 different ballot types required to take into account election variances in different geographical areas of the county.

The Registrar conducts many voter registration programs, including outreach efforts to potential voters in county high schools. The Registrar also conducts outreach and educational programs for those interested in casting absentee ballots. The Registrar conducts mandatory training programs for precinct officers and teams of four or more precinct workers, and distributes an extensive manual with “how to” and “what if” text and photographs, as well as the hands-on opportunity to operate new electronic ballot marking and tabulation equipment. Voting throughout the county involves the marking of a paper ballot, appropriately preserved as a paper trail that is then electronically counted and tabulated. The county also uses AutoMARK voter assist terminals, a ballot marking system designed to provide privacy and accessibility to voters who are vision impaired or have a disability or condition that would make it difficult or impossible to mark a ballot in the usual way. This technology also provides language assistance to voters who are more comfortable speaking a different language or who need help to better understand written instructions.

The Grand Jury did observe some problems and “glitches” in the absentee voting process and at polling places. For example, due to breakdown in communications between the Registrar, the

printer, and a mailing contractor, some citizens were initially sent an absentee ballot that did not contain a correct listing of candidates and propositions for their particular precinct, but this was quickly corrected by new mailings in all questionable areas, and strong liaison with local newspapers reminding voters to check identification numbers on their ballots to assure the correct precinct candidates and propositions. In addition, there was concern that the long ballot weighed over an ounce, therefore requiring additional postage, but to the Registrar's credit, arrangements were made with the post office guaranteeing the processing of all under-stamped ballot return envelopes to be delivered at the county's expense, thereby assuring the right to vote for those few who did not use the appropriate postage.

During the course of polling place voting, there were occasions when some questions regarding proper registration and voters' arrival at the incorrect polling place were raised. However, the Registrar provided telephone hot-line services, that were an effective way of resolving problems, and if not immediately resolved, a provisional ballot process was implemented. There were occasions when electronic vote count and tabulation scanners, and AutoMARK machines, did not appear to work properly, but for the most part, these problems were quickly remedied by either experienced precinct officers, or immediate technical assistance from the Registrar by a mobile team of experts. All polling sites appeared to be handicap accessible. Some polling sites had inadequate parking space, long wait times to obtain ballots, and an inadequate number of polling booths, but the Registrar has made assurances that attempts will be made to remedy these sometimes unpredictable problems. Poll workers were helpful and knowledgeable in providing assistance to voters and voters responded favorably to inquiries regarding their voting experience.

The County Registrar's Office, staffed by 36 full-time and 75 temporary employees and over 4,000 paid volunteer workers, lived up to the motto: "We proudly conduct elections with accuracy, integrity and dignity."

Excerpted from: Sacramento County Grand Jury 2006-2007 Final Report