

COLUMN

Running elections now a PR game, and OC knows how to play the game

SANTA ANA » Sure, there was that pro-Trump rally outside the Orange County Registrar of Voters back in 2020, led by the former police chief-turned-yoga instructor who whipped up hundreds of “patriots” with cries of “stolen election!”



Teri Sforza
Columnist

But while election workers have received death and lynching threats in Arizona, Michigan, Georgia and elsewhere, things have never gotten really ugly here in the O.C. Even the rally organizer back then — Alan Hostetter, former La Habra police chief who took a hatchet into the Capitol on Jan. 6, wished death upon “tyrants and traitors,” and was sentenced to more than 11 years in prison — made it clear that he was not challenging Orange County’s count. Just, like, everyone else’s.

“Our job has changed,” said Bob Page, O.C.’s registrar of voters, as primary day bustle kicked on March 5. “It’s much more incumbent upon us to be communicators outside the office, to be fully transparent, to answer all the questions. Since 2020, we’re seeing more and more questions.”

And more and more changes.

Transparency

There were but a handful of outside observers keeping eagle eyes on the painstaking process that unfolds in O.C.’s enormous election central headquarters on South Grand Avenue on Tuesday — but that’s still more than there used to be.

Once, those observers could hover over the shoulders (and breathe down the necks) of election workers, say, duplicating damaged ballots (so those ballots could be read by scanners and counted in this great exercise we call democracy).

Since COVID, though, that’s a no-no. Workers are roped off so bodies can’t press in close — but cameras are fixed on their hands, projecting every twitch to giant TV monitors. This allows a much crisper and more detailed view as damaged originals and duplicates are placed side by side and scrutinized to ensure they’re identical.

“The bottom line is, we want to make sure every



PHOTOS BY PAUL BERSEBACH — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

People work on mail-in ballot processing at the Orange County registrar’s office in Santa Ana on Tuesday.

vote counts,” Page said.

For this election — where turnout appears to be an anemic 22% of eligible voters — the registrar hired about 1,600 temporary workers. The vast majority of them — 1,100 — manned neighborhood vote centers.

Military style

There’s a military-style process and chain of command when it comes to those ballots.

Ballots dropped off at one of the 122 ballot boxes countywide were collected by two-person teams outfitted with GPS trackers and cell phones. The teams had to submit photos back to election central documenting their work.

Once at election central, signatures on the ballot envelopes were compared to the electronic signatures on file with the registrar and the DMV. Susana Rodriguez is in charge of that piece of the puzzle.

“The starting assumption is that ‘this is the voter,’” she said as workers compared John Hancock on computer screens behind her. “We’re checking the slant of the signature, how they dot their ‘i’s and cross their



Orange County Registrar Bob Page talks about operations at the registrar’s facility in Santa Ana on Tuesday. On Wednesday, there were 200,000 ballots left to count.

‘T’s, the looping, the spacing, the size. Is it cursive or printed?”

If there are problems, the registrar gets in touch to give voters an opportunity to fix them. In the November 2022 election, Orange County accepted 98.2% of mail ballots, according to data from the Secretary of State. That was slightly less than the state average of 98.8%.

Then ballots and en-

velopes were separated and prepared for scanning. Tim Patterson oversees the scanning piece. The windowed scanning room has 21 workstations, where workers fed 30,000 to 40,000 ballots into the scanners each day in the few days before the election. They don’t listen to music. They don’t much talk.

Votes cast in live and in person at the 183 polling centers countywide en-

dured a similar regimen. Folks signed in electronically. Their signatures were scrutinized. They colored their rectangles, fed their ballots into scanners, heard the “ding!” as votes were saved to electronic drives.

After polls closed Tuesday night, teams of two delivered the drives to regional collection centers. Then teams of two transported those drives to election central in Santa

Ana — escorted by sheriff’s deputies.

Results

The registrar has been scanning mail ballots since they started coming in weeks ago, but wasn’t allowed to tally results until polls officially closed at 8 p.m. Tuesday. That happened quickly: Early mail results were released around 8:05 p.m.

Tallies from voting center electronic drives started emerging around 9:30 p.m., and were updated every half-hour or so until midnight.

At about 12:15 a.m. Wednesday, when the registrar posted the “What’s left to process” report, there were about 200,000 ballots left to count.

Teams were back in the office at 8 a.m. Wednesday to keep plowing through them. Daily updates will be posted at 5 p.m. until all votes are tallied.

And this is how the nuts and bolts of democracy work.

“We give everyone the opportunity to have their voices heard,” said a proud Rodriguez.

“It feels great to actually make a difference,” said Patterson.

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2024 ELECTIONS

State \$6.38B mental health bond measure still too close to call

Proposition 1 is a two-pronged measure backed heavily by Gov. Gavin Newsom and a host of Southland elected officials

By City News Service

A statewide ballot measure that would overhaul California’s mental health care system, primarily through the issuance of nearly \$6.4 billion in bonds, remained too close to call on Wednesday evening as ballot-counting continued from Tuesday’s election.

Proposition 1 is a two-pronged measure backed heavily by Gov. Gavin Newsom and a host of Southland elected officials, including Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and county Supervisors Hilda Solis and Janice Hahn. Backers of the measure say it will dramatically increase access to treatment beds and supportive housing, but opponents claim it would slash funding for already successful programs.

As vote-counting continued Wednesday, the tally was a virtual dead heat, with 50.2% voting in favor and 49.8% opposed. The “yes” camp was leading by roughly 12,000 votes, out

of nearly 3.8 million ballots tallied.

According to Newsom’s office, the proposition, if approved by a majority of the state’s voters, would create 11,150 behavioral health treatment beds across the state, along with housing and 26,700 outpatient treatment slots. Roughly \$1 billion of the bond measure would be earmarked specifically for veterans.

It would do so through two methods, primarily the issuance of \$6.38 billion in bonds but also through a re-apportionment of funds generated by the Mental Health Services Act, which was passed by voters 20 years ago and imposed a 1% income tax on people earning more than \$1 million per year. Funds from that measure are largely directed to counties for mental health programs, but Proposition 1 would give the state control over much of the funding.

Newsom contends that Proposition 1 would fulfill a vision that began a half-



RICH PEDRONCELLI — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Gov. Gavin Newsom has thrown a lot of support behind the state’s Proposition 1.

century ago for a comprehensive statewide mental health treatment system that never came to fruition.

“We can make history,” Newsom said earlier this year during a Los Angeles event to begin the campaign in support of the proposition. “We can’t make up the last 50-60 years, but we can finally fulfill that vision that was set forth a half-century ago. This ini-

tiative, Proposition 1, promotes a number of things. It does not, however, promote the following — and that’s the status quo. If you’re for the status quo, vote no on Proposition 1.”

Bass also insisted that the measure would correct years of failure to address the mental health crisis in the state, while also helping alleviate the state’s rampant problems with home-

lessness.

“Think of how much money would be saved when Proposition 1 is passed and there’s actually facilities for folks, we get people off the streets,” Bass said. “We know that addiction and mental illness is a contributing factor to homelessness. ... We cannot separate these problems, and it is not enough to get a bed for a person. We can get people off the street, we have demonstrated that people are willing to come off the street. But you have to address why they were unhoused to begin with. And you have to have a comprehensive approach, and Proposition 1 is a step forward in that direction.”

Opponents of the measure, a group known as Californians Against Proposition 1, deride the measure as “huge, expensive and destructive,” saying it would cost taxpayers more than \$9 billion over the life of the bonds, while ordering the redirection of \$30 billion in existing mental

health services funds in the first decade, “cutting existing mental health services that are working.”

“Prop. 1 breaks promises made by the voters when they first passed the Mental Health Services Act in 2004,” according to the opposition group. “The idea then was to create permanent, dedicated funding for long-neglected mental health services, including prevention, early intervention, programs for youth, programs for struggling and under-served populations, including racially and ethnically diverse groups and LGBTQ people. The MHSA is a proven model, offering ‘anything it takes’ to help individuals who need a range of services.”

“Now, Prop. 1 would sharply reduce that funding, end its dedication to mental health programs and take a hatchet to dozens of programs across the state that cannot survive without MHSA funding. It orders counties to do more with less.”