

Mail-in Ballot Processing by Election Judges

Over a period of 2 weeks prior to the August 10, 2010 Mail-in Primary Election, five League members served as part of an 11-person team of Election Judges to count mail-in ballots: Ross Park, Marilyn Sandstrom, Trish Pegram, Ann Flatten, and Ellen Park. By law, at least two political parties have to be present (unaffiliated judges are considered as a different party). We put in time ranging from one day to 6 during the two weeks prior to Election Day: the clerk's office is very flexible, and we could choose our own hours and days.

Once your ballot was received at the Clerk's office, either by post or drop-off, the envelopes were date stamped, placed in batches of 25, and then scanned for signature verification by County Clerk employees using the registered voter database. As judges, we logged in the batches, and then each of us took a batch to be processed. Envelopes, and later, ballots, were counted at each step of the way to ensure none was lost or misplaced, and that a record was kept should any inconsistency show up later. The envelopes were then opened for the first time, by the judges. We made sure the ballot number inside matched the ballot number on the envelope; separated the ballots from the envelopes so that voters remained anonymous; checked ballots for readability; removed stubs, and saved every piece of paper in the batch: ballots, stubs, envelopes, and notes inserted by voters. Every voter error or questionable mark was checked by at least two judges of different affiliations to determine "voter intent". Ballots deemed unreadable by the Accuvote machine, but whose intent could be determined, were duplicated by a team of two judges of different affiliations. Switched ballots were attempted to be sorted out (2 or more people in same household using each others' envelopes) and if not, rejected. The ballot number on the ballot must match the ballot number on the envelope. All rejected ballots resulted in an attempt to reach the voter. The most experienced judge was the team leader, and she verified that the counting of ballots remained accurate and consistent up to and including the time they finally went through the electronic Accuvote machine, which tallied votes and retained the results in memory. (We were not able to see the tally results until they were posted at 7 pm on Election Day.) The ballots were then placed in a sealed box. Ballots, envelopes, stubs, ballots are retained for 18 months by the Clerk's office.

Libertarian Party ballots were set aside and results tallied manually at the end of the election period, because there are so few, and the Accuvote machine was not programmed for them, at least for the Primary.

This is a very redundant (in a good way), transparent but labor-intensive process; it is believed that mail-ins encourage more people to vote. There was indeed a high turnout for this Primary.

Here are the data comparing the turnout from the last four primary elections:

August 2010: 31.5%
August 2008: 9.1%
August 2006: 6.6%
August 2004: 18.2%

These percentages are, by law, calculated by dividing the number of ballots actually cast by the total number of registered voters in the jurisdiction. Rejected ballots are not counted.

Turnout by party is as follows:

Democratic Party: 40.0%

Republican Party: 47.2%

Libertarian Party: 21.8%

These percentages are calculated by dividing the ballots returned by the ballots issued for each party separately. Based on the above noted percentages, the Clerk's office is sure that the mail-in option has increased voter turnout for this year's primary, although other factors, such as the number of contested races, may have differed in each primary, something which the Clerk's office has not had time to sort out.

The County Clerk is looking for judges of all affiliations to count early and mail-in ballots in the General Election, and the League encourages us to do that. Contact Donna Elder at ELECTIONS@co.laplata.co.us to let her know that you would be available for all, or part of, the 2 week period prior to the election.

-Ellen Park