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California's General Election: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Will the unofficial election results change after election night? When will all November 4 election results be final?

A: Election results will change throughout the 28-day canvass period as many more vote-by-mail ballots, provisional ballots cast at polling places, and other ballots are tallied. Depending on the volume of these types of ballots, it may take the full 28-day canvass period for county elections officials to verify voter records and determine if ballots have been cast by eligible voters. How often results are updated will vary based on the process each county elections office uses to tally and report votes. State law allows county elections officials until December 2 to complete their official canvass and certify final election results to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State will then compile and report all statewide results by December 12.

County officials sometimes update their own websites before reporting to the Secretary of State. For county contact information go to www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_d.htm.

While the Secretary of State cannot certify the winner of a contest before all ballots are counted by county elections officials, news media and campaigns sometimes choose to "call an election" sooner. The Secretary of State's election results website at <http://vote.sos.ca.gov> will be updated as county elections officials report results.

Q: What is the Secretary of State's voter turnout prediction?

A: The Secretary of State does not predict voter turnout and discourages voters from focusing on such predictions. Some media and polling organizations survey potential voters and analyze historical voter participation statistics at www.sos.ca.gov/elections/sov/2012-general/04-historical-voter-reg-participation.pdf in an effort to project future turnout. In the last 30 years, voter turnout in non-presidential general elections has ranged from 50 to 61 percent of registered voters.

Q: How many Californians are eligible to vote?

A: There are 17,803,823 Californians registered to vote in the November 4 election. Reports of Registration going back to 1910 are at www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_u.htm.

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Q: Are vote-by-mail and provisional ballots always counted – even in “landslide” elections?

A: Yes, every valid ballot returned to county elections officials by 8:00 p.m. on election day is counted in every election, regardless of the ballot type or the margin in any particular contest.

Q: How many Californians vote by mail?

A: Since 1979 any Californian has had the option of voting by mail without having to provide a reason or an excuse. Voting by mail has become more popular over the years and more than half of the ballots cast in the last general election were sent in by mail. Go to www.sos.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm for historical vote-by-mail statistics in statewide elections.

Q: Can a vote-by-mail voter opt to vote in person at a polling place?

A: Yes, a vote-by-mail voter can bring his or her unvoted ballot to the polling place and turn it over to a poll worker, who will then void the ballot and provide a new one. If the voter doesn't have the vote-by-mail ballot, a provisional ballot will be provided.

Q: What happens if a vote-by-mail voter does not receive a ballot in the mail?

A: A vote-by-mail voter who did not receive a ballot in the mail can contact the county elections official to request a ballot or go to any polling place in the county on election day and cast a provisional ballot.

Q: What is provisional voting?

A: Provisional voting ensures that no properly registered voter is denied the right to cast a ballot. If, for any reason, a voter's name is not on the polling place list, the voter has the right to cast a provisional ballot in the county where he or she is registered. The provisional ballot will be counted after county elections officials have confirmed the voter is registered to vote and the voter did not already cast a ballot elsewhere in the election.

Q: How do county elections officials count vote-by-mail and provisional ballots?

A: Vote-by-mail ballots that are received by county elections offices before election day are typically counted on election day. Many more vote-by-mail ballots are dropped off at polling places or arrive at county elections offices on election day. In some counties, elections officials begin processing vote-by-mail ballots up to seven business days before the election, though no results can be released until all polls close on election day.

Counting several million vote-by-mail and provisional ballots is a labor-intensive process. For each ballot, a county elections official must compare the voter's signature on the outside of the envelope to the signature on the voter's original registration application to ensure the signatures match. To preserve secrecy, the ballot is then separated from the envelope and added to the pile of ballots to be tallied.

Q: How many statewide measures are on the ballot? How many votes are needed to pass a statewide ballot measure?

A: There are six statewide propositions on the November 4 ballot: two legislative measures, three initiatives and one referendum. An impartial analysis of each measure, the potential costs to taxpayers and more information are in the Secretary of State's Official Voter Information Guide that is mailed to each voting household and available at <http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov>. Each measure requires a simple majority of the public's vote to be enacted.

Q: Can workers take time off to vote on election day?

A: The polls are open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on election day. State law allows workers up to two hours off to vote, without a loss of pay, if they do not have enough time to do so in their non-work hours. The law requires workers to give their employers two working days' notice before the election if they will need to take time off to vote.

Q: Can businesses or campaigns offer coupons or gifts to people who prove they voted?

A: No, no one may offer incentives to people for agreeing to vote for or against a particular person or measure. This is illegal under state and federal law.

Q: What if voters still have questions on election day?

A: California voters may call the Secretary of State's toll-free voter hotline at (800) 345-8683, which will be answered live throughout election day and the day before. Voters can get the address of their polling place, ask election-related questions, or confidentially report potential election fraud or voter intimidation.

Keep up with the latest California election news and trivia by following @CASOSvote on Twitter. To subscribe to state election news via email, RSS feed or Twitter, go to www.sos.ca.gov/multimedia.

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