

Special election showdown nears

High number of absentee ballots as Sonoma County voters take up Measure M and eight state initiatives

November 2, 2005

By COREY YOUNG
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Sonoma County's trend of more voters choosing to vote by absentee ballot is expected to continue in next week's special statewide election, but whether the results of a local measure on genetically engineered crops will be known on election night depends, in part, on getting those take-home ballots back quickly.

"It always depends on how close the election is and how many absentee voters drag their feet and don't get their ballots back to us," said Janice Atkinson, Sonoma County's assistant registrar of voters.

The county sent out 127,943 absentee ballots as of last week, Atkinson said. That represents 53 percent of all county voters.

Absentee voting has become the preferred method in Petaluma, where 52 percent of voters cast their ballots in such a manner during last year's presidential election.

But the ease many voters find in taking their time with their ballot at home can be a difficulty for county officials trying to tabulate results on election night.

Last year, a countywide transportation tax on the November ballot barely got the two-thirds vote it needed to pass, and the result wasn't announced until two-and-a-half weeks after the election, due to a large number of last-minute absentee ballots that needed counting.

As of last week, the county registrar of voters office had collected just 35,000 of the absentee ballots it had sent out, Atkinson said.

"There are still 90,000 ballots out there that need to come back in the next two weeks, and the sooner they come back, the more we can count by election night," she said.

The message to voters is: Get those ballots back as soon as possible, she said.

But voters in California face a conundrum when it comes to elections with a high number

of ballot measures: they like to be asked to make decisions on public policy, but not all the time, said David McCuan, a Sonoma State political science professor.

"They get upset that there are so many things they get asked about" -- and as political ads increase in the days before the election and spending rises to a total cost of \$300 million or more, advocates on both sides of the issue risk a voter backlash, he said.

The statewide ballot is made up of eight propositions, four of which are backed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger as part of his "year of reform" agenda.

Those are propositions 74, 75, 76 and 77, which have sparked heavy criticism from politically powerful teachers groups, labor unions and public employees.

But they are receiving backing from Schwarzenegger's supporters, including the Sonoma County Republican Party.

Sonoma County Republicans are doing phone banks, precinct walking and other get-out-the-vote efforts and will continue to do so in the days before the election, said Laurie Robinson, the Sonoma County Republican Party's special election chair.

"We're in full swing and in fact we're intensifying," she said, describing the message as: "Get out and vote for reforming California. It needs to be fixed."

Likewise, local labor groups, unions and others opposed to the governor's plans are gearing up for a final push as well.

An alliance of groups including the North Bay Labor Council, AFL-CIO, Democrats and teachers are opposing the Schwarzenegger agenda in Sonoma County. A major focus of the campaign will be contacting voters this weekend, urging them to vote no on 74 through 76 and reminding them to turn in absentee ballots, said the labor council's Alex Mallonee.

The message to voters is, "Whatever you do, don't stay home, because if you do, some of these propositions may pass," he said. "If people are confused about one or two propositions, that's not a reason to stay home."

Both sides have been gearing up since early September, citing the high number of absentee ballots already in voters' hands as a reason for earlier campaigning.

The first of the Schwarz-enegger-backed propositions, 74, deals with teacher employment and would require a five-year probationary period for educators before they are given permanent status. Currently, the probation period is two years.

Proponents say the measure would make it easier for school boards to dismiss unsatisfactory teachers. Opponents say a five-year period would make it even harder to attract new teachers to the profession and could lead to a "recycling" of cheaper, younger teachers hired and fired before they reach permanent status.

The two sides have also clashed over the language proponents use, with critics saying the yes-on-74 side is falsely implying that teachers have jobs for life and can't be fired when

the current two-year probation is up. The end of probation simply means a hearing is required before teachers are let go, opponents said.

With Proposition 75, which would require public-employee unions to get written permission from members before spending dues on political messages, labor groups have decried the measure as an attempt to muzzle those who criticized the governor's pension reform plan earlier this year.

But union members should have greater say in how their money is spent on politics, proponents argue.

Proposition 76 would make changes to California's budget process, giving the governor "substantial new authority" to cut spending after declaring a fiscal emergency, according to the official legislative analysis.

The measure is needed to better control state spending, supporters say, arguing that if it doesn't pass, Californians will face higher taxes.

Opponents deride the measure as a power grab by Schwarzenegger that will end up cutting money to schools and health care while destroying the "checks and balances" in place as part of the state's budget process.

Proposition 77 would revamp how legislative and congressional districts are drawn in the state, giving power to map new districts to a panel of retired judges instead of the state Legislature.

It makes sense to use politically unconnected judges in drawing new boundaries, rather than the legislators who personally benefit by creating "safe" districts that ensure re-election, proponents of 77 say.

Opponents argue that the actions of a panel of three judges would be even more hidden from the public eye than legislators' efforts, and said the new maps would be drawn in a rush for 2006 elections instead of waiting for new U.S. Census data in 2010.

The back of the ballot includes competing measures on prescription drugs, which both promise drug discount programs for Californians.

But Proposition 78 has been widely derided as a weakly written measure from the pharmaceutical industry, placed on the ballot simply in fear of Proposition 79.

The Sonoma County Council on Aging is backing 79, citing the price controls it will put on companies that produce needed medications.

"It's going to do what the Medicare prescription drug bill did not do, which is finally put some price restrictions on companies that have been price-gouging the poor," said Shirlee Zane, CEO of the Council on Aging.

Proposition 78 offers discounts to families with incomes at or below 300 percent of the federal poverty level. Proposition 79 extends discounts to those at or below 400 percent of

the poverty level and establishes a new advisory board to review access to and prices of prescription medicine.

But opponents say 79 opens the door for lawsuits against drug makers similar to suits that voters in the state prohibited under Proposition 64 last year.

Zane called that "a silly argument" and said 79's true intent is to give seniors and consumers "the bargaining power" to ensure cheaper drugs.

She said 78, which calls for discounts of up to 40 percent on prescription drugs, is a "scam" that lacks any enforcement measures. If drug companies don't want to offer the discounts, they don't have to, she said.

"You have to have teeth in order to enforce anything," she said. "Proposition 78 was a response by the drug industry to try to defeat 79. It's a smokescreen."

Whichever of the competing measures receives the most votes will go into effect.

The ballot is book-ended by propositions 73 and 80. Prop. 73 would require parental notification before a girl under 18 seeks an abortion, and Prop. 80 would give the state more authority to regulate energy providers.

Both supporters and opponents of the eight propositions are encouraging voters to use the Internet and other resources to study up before they go to the polls, noting that some of the measures are complex.

And despite the large ballot, county officials are predicting a healthy turnout of voters.

Drawn by the local fight over Measure M, turnout could be high for a special election, Atkinson said.

"Eeve [Lewis, registrar of voters and Atkinson's boss] is optimistically saying we're going to get a 70-72 percent turnout," Atkinson said. "I think that may be a little high, but then again, she's always been right."

McCuan said higher turnout in Sonoma County, due in part to interest in Measure M, could also mean Democrats and unions have gotten their backers to come out and vote against the Schwarzenegger agenda. Lower turnout benefits the governor, he said.

"The results are going to be determined on turnout," he said.

(Contact Corey Young at cyoung@arguscourier.com)

[return to your story](#)