

2016 Election Observation Report: Primary and General Elections

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Introduction

This report summarizes the work of the Election Observation Program conducted by the Secretary of State (SOS) during the June 7, 2016, Presidential Primary Election (“Primary Election”) and the November 8, 2016, General Election (“General Election”).

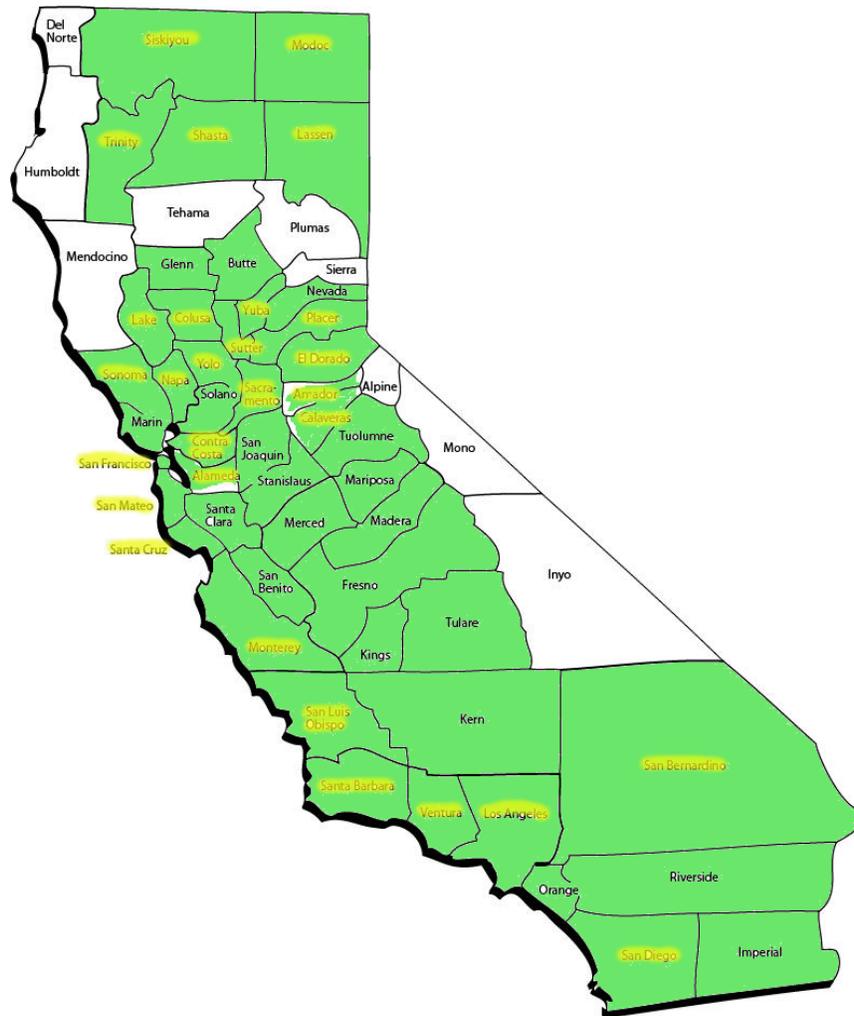
This election season saw over 8.5 million ballots cast in the Primary Election and over 14.6 million ballots cast in the General Election in over 22,000 precincts. SOS observers witnessed first-hand the dedication county elections officials and pollworkers showed toward voters throughout the state.

The SOS sent 22 observers during the Primary Election and 39 observers during the General Election to polling places throughout California. These observers visited 28 counties during the Primary and 49 during the General Election. The SOS also had observers attend pollworker training with county elections offices throughout the state.

The observers visited over 800 polling places throughout the election season. They talked to pollworkers, voters, and elections officials. They observed voting conditions, reported on issues they observed, and recorded observations on how well elections are conducted in our state.

Map of Counties Visited

Below is a map of the counties visited by the SOS observers during 2016. The counties marked in green were visited during the General Election, and the counties with names highlighted in yellow were also visited during the Primary Election.



Overall Election Observations

Overall, this election season was conducted smoothly and with few issues. This was largely due to the tremendous efforts of elections officials throughout the state. Despite very complicated and contentious ballot races, voters were served with knowledgeable pollworkers, hardworking officials, dedicated outreach and education efforts, and third party polling place monitoring programs.

The Primary Election involved relatively new and complicated procedures related to crossover voting and partisan primaries. There was an abundance of candidates vying for office. The long ballot and complex processes made for tough obstacles for elections officials, but those officials

were able to meet these challenges with improved outreach notices and materials, education efforts, pollworker training courses, and community outreach.

In the General Election, over six million voters cast ballots at polling places on Election Day. These voters were largely met with responsive pollworkers and accessible poll sites. In addition, many of the over 8.4 million vote-by-mail voters took the opportunity to drop-off their ballots at polling places throughout the state on Election Day. Polling places were busy, but they were well-organized with very few issues reported by observers.

Despite aging voting equipment used statewide in both elections, issues with voting systems seemed to have been kept to a minimum. A large majority of voters cast their ballot with no problems. For issues with registration or equipment, the use of provisional ballots helped California lead the nation in ensuring every voter was able to cast a ballot and have that ballot counted.

Help Provided to Counties on Election Day

On Election Day, observers were able to assist county elections officials to identify specific problems experienced by voters so that the problems could be resolved.

Signage and Materials

At some polling locations, the materials included by the county in the precinct setup weren't properly displayed or made available to voters. Observers, in every reported instance, were able to inform the pollworkers what items needed to be on display and available, and the pollworkers were able to locate the materials and resolve the issue.

Accessible Machines

Some locations had issues with the operation and function of their voting equipment, especially their accessible machines. Observers were able to identify the polling places so that pollworkers and counties could resolve these issues throughout the day.

Security and ID Checks

In some locations, polling places were situated in gated communities or in secured-access buildings where ID checks are usually performed in the normal course of business and only certain people are allowed in. Observers reported any such security that persisted on Election Day and worked with county officials to remove the controlled access and ID checks if present.

Lighting

Especially for the General Election in November, in the evening, some polling places lacked sufficient outside lighting for voters to locate and navigate safely to the site. When prompted by observers, counties were sometimes able to coordinate temporary lighting for such polling places.

Further Observations

Complicated Elections and Long Ballots

Cross-over voting, vote-by-mail ballots, and provisional voting, were all issues that voters expressed confusion about during the Primary Election. The ballot itself was quite long, with 34 candidates for just one statewide office, several local races, and a competitive presidential primary for each qualified party.

Voter confusion may have also been exacerbated by the persistent spread of misinformation about the crossover voting and provisional voting spread through social media. While the Secretary of State’s office aggressively engaged traditional print, radio, and television media as well as social media to conduct educational campaigns, the breadth of social media misinformation posed a significant challenge.

In the General Election, there were 17 statewide ballot measures and several local races that made for a record-long ballot. In some jurisdictions this meant there were ballots with over 50 questions for voters to answer. This length likely led to some voter fatigue and was likely a leading reason for voters not completing the entire ballot. Statewide, over 1.3 million people (9% of voters) that voted for President stopped short of voting on every statewide item on the ballot and left some statewide items blank.

The Secretary of State worked with counties during both elections to provide materials and instructions for voters to help navigate these complicated ballots and processes. Designing and distributing flyers and posters in 10 different languages (such as the example featured here) helped to ease the large burden put on voters in this election season.

Example: Instructions for Voters in 10 Languages



Observers noted that pollworker training throughout the state featured discussion and explanation of the more complicated election processes. Pollworkers were largely expected to know what materials and notices needed to be posted and available to voters. There was an overall emphasis on ensuring voting rights were upheld.

Accessible Polling Places

Statewide, ninety-four percent (94%) of the polling sites observed during the election season were noted as being free from any visible access barriers for people with disabilities. The

remaining six percent (6%) of sites were seen as having some potential issues with accessibility that may warrant further efforts at mitigation.

Examples of possible access barriers noted on Election Day:

- Step-up required at polling place entrance
- Accessible entrance is at rear of building
- Narrow entrance, partially blocked
- Uneven pavement
- No curb-cuts for wheelchair access
- No accessible parking spaces available

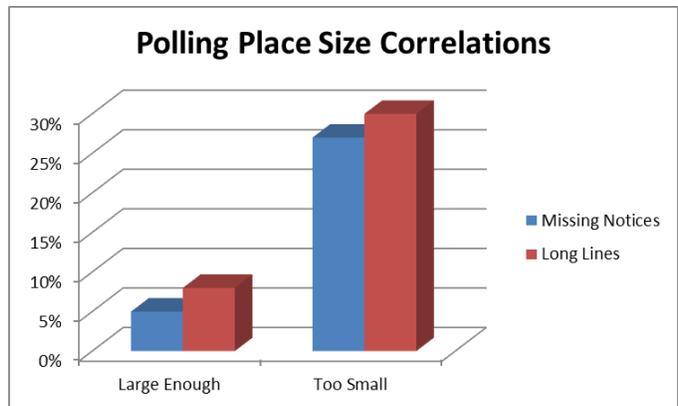
The Secretary of State works with county elections offices and the Department of Rehabilitation to provide training and support for finding accessible polling sites and for mitigating potential barriers. These efforts have resulted a marked increase in the awareness of accessibility issues and a marked increase in their resolution.

Polling Place Size

The size of a polling place seemed to be correlated to proper setup.

Seven percent (7%) of locations visited were noted as being too small to fully accommodate a polling place.

Of those sites, twenty-seven percent (27%) either had missing or difficult to find notices and materials, such as the required Voter Bill of Rights poster, compared to five percent (5%) of “large enough” sites with missing or difficult to find materials.



Thirty percent (30%) of the sites that were noted as being too small were seen as having long lines on Election Day, compared to just eight percent (8%) of “large enough” sites that were noted as having long lines.

Pollworker Recruitment and Training

Of the polling places observed, five percent (5%) during the Primary Election and three percent (3%) during the General Election had some pollworkers fail to show up on Election Day. Another five percent (5%) of polling places were observed as having unhelpful or unknowledgeable pollworkers.

Pollworkers dropping out on or before Election Day seems to be a statewide issue. Counties generally have a good idea of how frequent a problem this is for them and take steps to ensure adequate coverage. Some counties overbook high-risk polling places, some counties rely heavily on veteran volunteers with a good track record, and some counties have specific plans to combat

attrition through contacts and reminders. A better understanding of the reasons for such attrition may help determine best practices, and so efforts to survey and seek feedback from successful pollworkers as well as dropouts may yield valuable and sharable insight.

Ninety percent (90%) of polling places observed on Election Day had bilingual pollworkers. Counties have taken seriously their responsibility to serve non-English speakers, and are continuously making efforts along this course. Increasing the number of bilingual pollworkers and improving the quality of services is something that should continue to be a priority.

Possible Best Practices

Observers made note of the activities and procedures they believed to be well executed, impressive, or ingenious. These practices and procedures should be looked at and emulated where appropriate.

Greeting Voters

Where multiple precincts were present in a polling place, observers noted a smoother voting process at the sites with a pollworker stationed at or near the entrance, greeting voters, directing voters to the appropriate tables, and answering questions. Many counties used pollworkers as greeters in this way.

In Tulare County, one observer was very impressed by the county's use of bilingual pollworkers as greeters at each polling place entrance. By positioning bilingual pollworkers in this role, it allowed for language assistance to be advertised and provided up-front, which helped ensure that those who could use such assistance were aware of its availability.

Information Kiosks

Some counties used self-supporting stands or kiosks at polling places to display information for voters such as the Voter Bill of Rights and polling place hours.

Observers noted that this practice was used to great effect in Mariposa County. Due to the style and placement of their information "totems," voters were clearly given the opportunity and encouragement to read the provided information.

Also noteworthy were the printed-on-cardboard self-supporting stands from Los Angeles County which featured information in 10 different languages and were provided at each polling place in the county. As a reusable medium that's easy to setup by pollworkers, such stands make for a good investment.

Hands-On Training

In several counties, pollworker training courses involved hands-on lessons with voting equipment, voter rolls, and various Election Day procedures.

One observer noted that Santa Barbara County’s training was especially impressive. In their training, they broke up a class of 80 into groups of 4-5 people, rotating different job roles for Election Day, going through scenarios, and practicing hands-on with equipment. They had a lead instructor and several rovers available to help guide and teach pollworkers.

Another observer was impressed with San Bernardino County’s training, which ran half of the class as a video-based lecture with an instructor for answering questions and the second half of the class as a hands-on session with the voting equipment. The videos were singled out as especially well-made and exhaustive.

Parking Spaces

Observers noted that Solano County’s use of “Voter Parking Only” signs helped ensure that parking was available to voters on Election Day. Kings County was observed providing specific parking spaces in some locations for curbside voting.

Such efforts show a good customer-service mindset, and undoubtedly help make the voting experience smoother and more accessible for voters in those counties.

Electronic Polling Place Lookup

In many jurisdictions it is common for voters to show up at an incorrect polling location. At polling sites containing multiple precincts, directing voters to the appropriate ballots often involves learning where they live and determining which precinct they belong to.

The Secretary of State developed a web-based tool for looking up polling place information that was used statewide by voters. The SOS also packaged the tool into a mobile “Vote California App” that was downloaded over 10,000 times in the days before the election.

Observers noted use of tablets and polling-place-lookup apps helped quickly direct voters to the appropriate polling places, reduce the number of provisional ballots issued, and speed up check-in at some locations hosting multiple precincts. Such practices in Sacramento County and Napa County were highlighted by observers as especially impressive.

More Information

This report was prepared by staff in the Elections Division of the California Secretary of State.

For more information about this report or about the Election Day Observation Program, please contact Jon Ivy, Voter Access Coordinator, at [the Elections Division phone line, 916-657-2166](tel:916-657-2166), or at jivy@sos.ca.gov.

And for more information about California Elections, please visit [the Secretary of State's Election Website at http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/](http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/).