

HEARING OVERVIEW

The Issue

The purpose of this Joint Oversight Hearing is to investigate and discuss the causes and ramifications of the exceedingly low voter turnout in Los Angeles County during the 2014 Primary and General Elections. While turnout throughout the state was historically low, Los Angeles County was last among all 58 California counties in terms of registered voters who participated.

According to the Secretary of State, while only 25.17% of all registered California voters cast a ballot in the June 3, 2014 Primary Election, turnout among Los Angeles County's registered voters was a mere 16.97%. Similarly, for the November 4, 2014 General Election, statewide turnout of registered voters was 42.20% while turnout in Los Angeles County was only 31.01%.

Possible Explanations

Theories abound as to why the statewide turnout of registered voters was so low for both 2014 elections. One of the more popular theories among the press and other observers is that the statewide ballot lacked the kind of high profile, competitive contest that would motivate voters to participate in greater numbers. After all, for the November 6, 2012 General Election (a presidential election featuring incumbent President Barack Obama and challenger Mitt Romney), turnout among registered California voters was 72.36%. In fact, with the exception of the November 5, 1996 election (65.53%), every presidential election in California since 1912 has seen turnout among registered voters over 70%. This theory does not however, explain why Los Angeles County's turnout was so much lower than the statewide average.

While multiple factors may have contributed to the low voter turnout in Los Angeles County, one in particular has been the subject of much recent discussion: the County's low rate of vote by mail participation relative to other counties. Los Angeles County ranks near the bottom among all counties in the percentage of its registered voters who vote by mail on a permanent basis. The statewide average for the June 3, 2014 Primary Election was 46.23% while Los Angeles County was only at 29.64%. The statewide average for the November 4, 2014 General Election was 47.24% while Los Angeles County was at 31.74%. This is significant as voters who use mail ballots make up an increasingly larger portion of the overall turnout, especially in low turnout elections. For instance, 60.52% of all voters statewide in the November 4, 2014 General Election used a vote by mail ballot while only 37.99% of Los Angeles County voters did so. In fact, no other county had less than a 50% vote by mail rate for that election.

Other factors such as poverty and language diversity may also have contributed to Los Angeles County's low turnout. According to a 2013 study by the Public Policy Institute of California (http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_1013SBR.pdf), 8.1 million Californians or 22% of the population lived in poor families in 2011 as defined by the California Poverty Measure (CPM). According to the study, the CPM provides a multi-faceted picture of how California families are faring by taking into account variation in the cost of living across California and the impact of social programs designed to

alleviate hardship. That same study also found that 26.9% of Los Angeles County residents lived in poor families – the highest rate among all counties.

Los Angeles County is required to provide election materials in 10 different languages in compliance with federal and state laws: Chinese, English, Hindi, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai and Vietnamese. While this is more than any other California county is required to provide, it represents only a few of the many languages spoken in Los Angeles County households. According to the Los Angeles Unified School District, 93 languages other than English are spoken in their schools.

Ramifications

While numerous and varied, the most obvious ramification of Los Angeles County's low 2014 voter turnout may be that the voters of the most populous county in the state were underrepresented in deciding the outcome of all statewide races and ballot measures.

To illustrate, even though Los Angeles County has over one million more registered voters than the Bay Area, more votes were cast in the Bay Area than in Los Angeles County last November. Specifically, the nine Bay Area counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma combined had a total of 3,600,538 registered voters out of which 1,791,687 cast votes in the November 4, 2014 General Election. For the same election Los Angeles County had 4,897,915 registered voters but only 1,518,385 cast votes.

In a more general sense, it is often argued that full voter participation produces governments with more stability, legitimacy and a genuine mandate to govern while making it more difficult for extremist or special interest groups to win elections or to influence mainstream candidates.

City of Los Angeles Municipal Elections Reform Commission

Faced with voter turnout even worse than Los Angeles County, the City of Los Angeles created a Municipal Elections Reform Commission to review laws for effectiveness, hold public hearings, and make recommendations intended to increase turnout and participation in municipal elections. Turnout for the March 5, 2013 City of Los Angeles Primary Election was 20.8 % of the registered voters while the May 21 Runoff Election turnout was only slightly better at 23.3%.

The Commission's recommendations culminated in the City Council placing Charter Amendments 1 and 2 on the March 3, 2015 City of Los Angeles Primary Election ballot. These measures would amend the city charter to change the dates of Los Angeles City elections and Los Angeles Unified School District elections to consolidate them with state and federal elections held in June and November of even-numbered years.

Other recommendations proposed by the Commission included creation of early voting locations, use of plain language in voting materials, outreach to under-represented voter groups, promotion of vote by mail enrollment, and others.

Recent Legislative Action Related to Voter Turnout

The Legislature has enacted several significant bills aimed at eliminating barriers to voter participation in recent years including, but not limited to, all of the following:

- SB 29 (Correa) of 2014 provides that vote by mail ballots postmarked by election day shall be accepted by elections officials up to three days after the election.
- SB 35 (Padilla) of 2012 adds the California Health Benefit Exchange to the list of public assistance agencies required by the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (NVRA) to provide voter registration opportunities.
- SB 113 (Jackson) of 2014 permits pre-registration of 16 year-olds upon the completion of a new statewide voter registration database.
- SB 397 (Yee) provided for online voter registration which began in 2012.
- SB 589 (Hill) of 2013 lets voters find out from elections officials if their vote by mail ballot was rejected and why.
- AB 1343 (Fong) of 2011 requires a voter's name to be deleted from the permanent vote by mail voter list if he/she fails to return a vote-by-mail ballot for four consecutive statewide general elections, instead of two consecutive statewide general elections.
- AB 1436 (Feuer) of 2012 permits an eligible person to register to vote and vote at the office of the county elections official at any time, including on Election Day, as specified. Contingent upon the completion of a new statewide voter registration database.
- AB 2080 (Gordon) of 2012 deleted the requirement that a voter be ill or disabled to have a specified designee return their vote by mail ballot for them.

Additional Attachments

Attached you will find additional documents related to the subject of this hearing including voter registration and participation data for California (Secretary of State), information related to the City of Los Angeles Municipal Elections Reform Commission (including Charter Amendments 1 and 2), and selected press articles related to low voter turnout.