

“Voter Participation and Engagement: Strategies for Bridging Gaps and Ensuring Accurate Registration.”

Thursday, November 16th beginning at 1:30 pm in State Capitol, room 437

Good afternoon Madam Chair, Honorable Assemblymembers, and voters.

My name is Cathy Darling Allen, I am the 5 times elected County Clerk and Registrar of Voters in Shasta County, CA. I am also the chair of the board for the California Voter Foundation, a non profit that has worked on behalf of all California voters for over 25 years here in Sacramento. It is my great honor to serve the voters of the great state of California, and my community, and to be here with you all today.

Unlike other testimony you may hear today, my perspective is not focused on closing the gaps in participation based on demographic information, but rather on the expanding gap in participation that can be directly tied to mis- and disinformation, which is interfering with the rights of voters in California to both register and cast votes. This is a significant problem that I see in my community, and I believe it is occurring in other rural counties in California.

Shasta County has been in the news quite a lot this year, mainly due to a series of ill advised decisions made by our Board of Supervisors. In January, they voted to terminate the voting system contract held by the county; soon after they began to advocate for a hand count scheme that they stated would address the ‘concerns’ they had. Later this year they made decisions questionable enough in other sectors that a Sacramento Bee editorial recently called for the state to take over governance of the county in order to protect the citizens.

There are ongoing, active efforts in our county that have the effect of discouraging voters from showing up. These efforts come from members of the community, but unfortunately they are also coming from inside our county administration, and they involve chaotic Board meetings, and multiple statements by the Chair of our Board of Supervisors directly to the media. Most recently he told a national media outlet that fraud has been present in Shasta County elections for decades. This is of course a categorically false allegation – but unfortunately he is hardly alone in advancing this false narrative. I believe it is a coordinated attack to continue the very effective, relentless negative messaging that continues to undermine every voters’ confidence in the process. Across the nation.

I believe that deliberately spreading false information about elections and how they are conducted in California is a dangerous and destructive effort to dissuade all voters from having their voices heard. Voters are hearing this message from candidates and elected officials at all levels in California’s rural communities; from presidential candidates all the way down to school board.

It is past time that California’s elected officials stand up and call out these efforts in a nonpartisan and measured way, so that all voters can cast their vote with confidence, armed with the knowledge that local election officials around California and the country are ready to facilitate and administer elections during the 2024 cycle. We are ready to do so with staffs of amazing public servants behind us, who are ready and willing to defend the process and every vote cast. Most importantly, they stand at the ready to serve every voter in California. We also need the help and the support of the Legislature to continue to do this work, especially in the increasingly dangerous environment we are working in. Late last week I had line staff ordering and researching how to use Narcan in order to safely process potentially

contaminated mail that contained ballots. We are squarely in harm's way, without reasonable compensation, time to complete effective training or experience to support our staff.

My office has been fighting this fight for the past three years, since 2020 and the false allegations of a 'rigged' general election in November of that year. More recently, we have been accused of lying, committing fraud and assorted other crimes by other elected leaders within our community. Just as we see at the federal level, there is no truth to these allegations: no criminal charges, no data, no proof is presented. But the tactic of repeating the same false information seems to be working in dissuading voters from showing up to vote. The goal seems to be to dissuade voters from casting their ballots, their trust in the results, and their trust in democracy. Either way, governance and my constituents suffer.

Another contributing factor that results in reduced voter participation is the overly complex nature of election administration in California. This makes it harder to talk about and makes it harder for new voters to know all the nuances and layers of requirements involved in casting a ballot. We try to facilitate this for voters by mailing each one a ballot, but voters have a lot of questions – and even if the detail they are wondering about is included in the voter information guide we send to voters, they may not find it. I do not pretend to have an answer to this dilemma but failing to understand how everything works can be a barrier to participation for all California voters.

While we have been going through a challenging period in Shasta County, we have felt very helpful support from within the election community. A letter was sent to our Board from a group of advocate organizations, many of whom are represented here today by folks on the agenda. We are so grateful for their attention and advocacy. The separate letter and support from SoS Dr Shirley Weber was so very helpful and appreciated as well. Sometimes it feels like we are alone on an island protecting the voters in Shasta County – it is always a good day when we are reminded that we are not alone in that effort.

Whatever the reason, rural counties seem to be seeing a larger prevalence of this kind of manipulation of the public and discouragement of voter participation. The size of these counties also means we need more support and resources: we just don't have the depth of staff and experience that larger counties may have. Voters in every county in California need the support of the Legislature and I am extremely grateful that our voters are protected by AB 969.

Thank you.