

Analysis of All Mail Election in Contra Costa County August 28, 2007

Contra Costa County, in California's East Bay, presents an interesting environment to study the impact upon all mail elections and differing ethnic groups. Contra Costa County, like most California counties, conducts most of its elections with a hybrid model of in-person voting places and allowing any voter who wishes to cast a ballot by mail. We will refer to those elections as "polling place elections" even though in some cases more votes may be cast by mail than at polling places. The August 28, 2007 special election was an exception. That election, to decide upon a parcel tax to support the West Contra Costa County Unified School District was conducted entirely by mail.

Overall turnout for the August 2007 all mail election was 29.39% — eight points higher than the 21.39% turnout for the June 2006 polling place primary election. That election featured a hotly contested race between Phil Angelides and Steve Westly for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. This significant increase in turnout in what we would normally expect to be a lower turnout election due to its content and timing is consistent with previous results in Contra Costa County and elsewhere in California. For instance, Contra Costa County held its first all mail election in June 2004, also to adopt a school parcel tax. Turnout was 52.9 percent, higher than the two previous school parcel tax elections which saw 23.2 percent turnout (March 2002) and 52.4 percent in March 2004 (also a presidential primary election.) Seal Beach, California, held a local all mail election in March 2006 and saw a turnout of 35 percent, eight points higher than the previous comparable election. More comprehensive analysis from Oregon and Washington suggests an average increase in turnout from vote by mail across all election types of about 4 percentage points.

There remains a question as to whether mail elections might have different impacts upon participation rates among different ethnic groups or income levels. Contra Costa County includes many small towns, each of which has significantly different demographics in terms of race and the percentage of owner occupancy according to the U.S. Census. The latter provides a rough barometer of both income and mobility, as renters tend to move more frequently. This makes Contra Costa County an idea laboratory to examine this question. We will focus here on the five towns that participated in the August 2007 special election.

For any given election, it is possible to compare the voter turnout in each of these towns and compare it to the voter turnout of all of Contra Costa County. For example, the voter turnout in El Cerrito during the August 2007 all mail special election was 39.21%, while the county as a whole experienced a voter turnout of 29.39%. El Cerrito therefore had a higher turnout level by 9.82 percentage points. However, in the June 6, 2006 primary, which was conducted using a hybrid of mail and polling places, El Cerrito had a turnout of 35.27% compared to the county-wide turnout of 21.39%, a margin of 13.88%. We can therefore calculate the differential between the all mail election and the hybrid election and find that relative to the county as a whole, El Cerrito actually performed better in the June 2006 polling place election by a difference of 4.07 percentage points.

Using similar analysis, we find that in two other polling place elections (the November 2006 election and the presidential primary election of February 2008), El Cerrito surpassed the turnout of the county as a whole by nearly the same margin that it did in the all mail election of August 2006, with fairly small differentials of 0.87% in 2006 and -.27 % in 2008.

El Cerrito has a greater percentage of white people than the four other towns that participated in the 2006 all mail election, and it lies in the middle in terms of owner occupancy.

In conducting the same analysis on the four other towns, no readily discernable trend emerges that might shed light on whether the all mail format of the August 2006 special election made any difference in the relative turnout of one town compared to the county, which might be explained by differences of race or income. More likely, the differences were driven by other factors (such as issues relating to the specific school district election that was at issue in the August 2006 special election.)

The following chart lists the differentials in relative turnout for all five towns:

county	%Latino	%white	%Asian	%black	%owner occupied	6/6/2006	11/7/2006	2/5/2008
						ALL VBM differential	ALL VBM differential	ALL VBM differential
El Cerrito	7.9	57.8	24.4	8.5	61.0	-4.07%	0.87%	-0.27%
Hercules	10.8	28.0	42.7	18.8	84.4	-4.77%	1.90%	-2.79%
Pinole	13.8	54.4	24.0	12.5	74.7	0.55%	4.58%	1.50%
Richmond	26.5	31.4	12.3	36.1	53.3	-10.34%	2.31%	-3.26%
San Pablo	44.6	31.6	18.4	19.9	49.1	-8.43%	5.12%	0.26%

Note that Pinole is the only town that performed better in the all mail election relative to the county as a whole than it did in all 3 polling place elections that were used for comparison, and by relatively small amounts in two of those comparisons. Pinole is heavily owner occupied, but Hercules has even higher rates of owner occupancy and in two of the three polling place elections it did comparatively better than it did in the all mail election.

It is possible that the all mail format made no difference in the relative turnout between different towns and different ethnicities in the August 2006 special election for the West Unified School district parcel tax. It is also possible that there was an impact, but it is masked by other factors (perhaps a stronger voter interest in the school measure in certain towns or neighborhoods). To answer that question, we would need to undertake a much broader analysis, comparing many different elections in many different localities that have differences in all mail format and differences in ethnicity and income level and control for other factors that could influence turnout. Because all mail elections have been relatively rare in California, we don't yet have a sufficient data set to conduct that analysis.