

2000–2001 YOLO COUNTY GRAND JURY

FINAL REPORT

A report for the citizens of Yolo County, California

June 29, 2001

Woodland, California



Yolo County Elections

REASON FOR REVIEW

The Grand Jury reviewed the Elections Office to determine whether Yolo County elections are conducted fairly and accurately, focusing on how, if at all, Yolo County is protected from the kinds of mistakes and problems seen in Florida in the November 2000 election.

BACKGROUND

The Elections Office is responsible, under state and federal election laws, for registering voters, selecting the equipment and ballots used in elections, finding polling places, recruiting and training pollworkers, counting votes, and reporting results to the public. The office is directed by the Clerk-Recorder, assisted by a deputy clerk recorder and six full-time election workers. In the days before and after elections, when more people are needed, part-time workers swell the staff of the office.

The city clerks in Davis, West Sacramento, Winters, and Woodland work closely with the Elections Office year-round and share responsibility for elections in their cities.

Some statistics may help illustrate the scope of the Elections Office's job. In November 2000, 83,385 people had registered to vote in Yolo County. Of that number, 61,950, or 74.2 percent of registered voters, voted in the November 2000 election, and 15,668, or 18.7 percent of them, voted by absentee ballot. To prepare for that election, 64,355 ballots were printed.

Most of the Elections Office budget comes from the county general fund, supplemented by reimbursement from the state for certain state-mandated costs and reimbursement from municipalities and districts for the costs of their elections.

FINDINGS

1. To increase enfranchisement, California law encourages people to register to vote when they apply for or renew a driver's license.
2. California law allows for provisional voting: voters who, on arriving at their polling place, find their names are not on the rolls may vote provided they meet certain criteria. Their seated ballots are segregated from the ballots of registered voters whose names do appear on the rolls, and they are counted only if the Elections Office determines that the voters were in fact eligible to vote.
3. To reduce the likelihood of fraudulent voting, the Elections Office compares absentee and provisional voters' signatures with scanned images of the signatures on their registration cards, as required by state law.
4. The Elections Office must adhere to the strict procedures of the federal Voting Rights Act before removing a voter from the rolls. California law requires counties to notify each other when voters move, but there is no federal law that requires this kind of notification between states.
5. During a 30-day canvass period following each election, the Elections Office performs a hand

count of random samples of ballots, following a formula dictated by state law, to verify the accuracy of the election-night machine count. The canvass period is also when the legitimacy of provisional votes and absentee votes not counted on election night is verified and those ballots are counted.

6. Yolo County uses the Datavote voting machine, which uses a staple-like tool to punch holes through ballots, leaving no partially punched holes.

7. Ballots are imprinted with each issue and candidate, eliminating the confusion that occurs in counties that print only reference numbers on their ballots.

8. Because the Datavote punches cleanly and because Yolo County uses ballots that identify candidates and propositions, voters can clearly see how they voted when they remove their ballots from the machine.

9. Between elections, voting machines are stored by Sequoia Printing Company, which cleans and inspects the machines and certifies that they are functioning properly before each election.

10. Converting to touchscreen voting would cost Yolo County at least \$3 million, and there are unresolved concerns about the security and practicality of this technology.

11. Finding a sufficient number of polling places is a chronic problem, particularly for countywide elections in which turnout is expected to be high.

12. Recruiting a sufficient number of pollworkers is a chronic problem. State law requires three pollworkers present at all times at each site, so the county assigns four workers per site to allow for the breaks workers will need during a workday that can exceed 15 hours.

13. Current pay for pollworkers ranges from \$60 to \$75 per election, depending on the level of responsibility they undertake. Pollworkers are also paid \$10 for attending a training class prior to the election, and they may be reimbursed for their mileage.

14. On election night, ballots arrive at the Elections Office escorted by sheriff's deputies. Boxes of ballots are time-stamped and logged in on arrival. All ballot handling and vote counting is done by at least two people working together in public view. A continuous video feed of the count can be viewed on election night on the Office's web site (www.yoloelections.org).

15. To help its staff keep abreast of new laws, technological advances, and general trends, the Elections Office belongs to a state association of election officials and registrars. All staff attend a conference on new laws each year. The Office also belongs to a national organization that sponsors university classes that allow election officials to become certified.

16. City clerks in Davis, West Sacramento, Winters, and Woodland are in frequent contact with each other and have good working relationships with Elections Office staff, although they complain about sometimes receiving incomplete or inaccurate information from the Office.

17. Storage and work space is inadequate.

18. According to Elections Office staff, their funding is sufficient.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Yolo County's Datavote system is accurate and reliable.
2. There is no pressing need for Yolo County to replace its Datavote machines with newer, more technologically advanced equipment. Since research and development of new technologies is underway, it makes sense to wait until there are more and better choices available.
3. Given the long workday, increasing pay for pollworkers is probably not in itself a solution to the shortage of volunteers.
4. The Grand Jury is impressed with the extensive continuing education Yolo County provides for its Elections staff.
5. Although instances of human error are unavoidable, the Grand Jury believes the Elections Office is assiduous in its efforts to ensure fair, accurate elections in Yolo County.