

Hey! It's 9:40 p.m. on Election Night, Where Are The Election Returns?

On the evening of the 2004 Primary Election, an irate Davis voter emailed me to reprimand me. This is the message he sent:

The election returns from the Yolo County Elections Office (for the Davis City Council) is horrible! At 8:15 pm you reported only 1 precinct reporting ... the same (1 precinct) at 9:40 pm. Where were the returns and why were they not reported promptly? This has been the worst reporting of election returns ever. How will you revamp the system to ensure prompt reporting in the future?

I answered him promptly, but not too diplomatically, I'm afraid. As I have thought about our interchange since then, I have wondered whether there aren't plenty of folks who wonder why election results take several hours to be posted to the Internet and to DCTV.

I thought it might be helpful to briefly outline the election night procedures followed by our faithful corps of poll workers and by the folks here at Elections Central in Woodland.

The polls open at 7 a.m. on every election day. Our poll workers arrive about an hour before that to set up equipment and to begin the complex accounting procedures that they will observe throughout the day. Their first job is to ensure the fairness and integrity of the election by attending carefully to the flow of people and ballots in the polling place, and we have an abundance of requirements that must be meticulously followed, noted, and verified.

At a few minutes after 8:00 p.m., we are able to display the tallies for absentee ballots. By law, we can pre-process these ballots and prepare them for counting in the weeks before election day. Those results will sometimes be the only ones posted for some time.

When our poll workers close the doors after the last voter leaves at or after 8:00 p.m., they pack up equipment, review and verify their accounting, and execute a number of accounting forms and oaths meant to lock down a paper trail for security. These activities normally take about an hour. In small polling places with simple ballots, for instance in rural areas and towns without many ballot races and variations, experienced poll workers might be done much quicker than that. We have well-trained poll workers who use a very nifty resource book that walks them through closing procedures, but there is plenty of opportunity for glitches as they hand-count hundreds or thousands of used and unused ballots and roster signatures and get dozens of different items signed, sealed and ready for delivery.

We encourage our poll workers to give all the requirements their best

effort, and to turn things in to us in any state if they can't "balance the books" by 9:00 p.m. In addition, we have super-experienced "roving inspectors" who spend election day going from one polling place to another troubleshooting. When they identify polling places where difficulties might arise, they arrange to be there to help out when the polls close. Still, many polls are not able to return ballots boxed for counting to us before 9:15 or even later. Please note: We are asking our poll workers to do complex accounting at the end of a 14 hour day. We value accuracy over speed, and ballot security over almost anything. And your ballots are never in the custody of fewer than two people who have sworn an oath to protect them.

After finishing their accounting and packaging, at least two poll workers must accompany the ballots and other accounting materials to a "drop off" point in central Davis or West Sacramento. Woodland and rural ballots come directly to our building in central Woodland. At the drop off points, Elections Office employees and Yolo County Sheriff's deputies log-in the ballots, secure the boxes and aggregate them for transport (with a Deputy to guard them) to the Yolo County Elections Office in downtown Woodland. This process takes at least 30 to 40 minutes, and sometimes more. Although we try to be speedy, we try even harder to be accurate and secure.

When ballots arrive at the County Administration building loading dock, teams of workers log them in on a time sheet, and from that point they are logged and timed every time they change hands. They are transported from the loading dock by elevator to our basement counting facility by teams of workers. The ballots then go to teams of workers who open the packages and check the ballots to be sure that they are intact, clean, and correctly positioned to go through one of the five industrial-sized Kodak optical scanners that we use to count the votes. The top achievable speed for us with all 5 scanners fully functioning is approximately 3,500 ballots per hour. Teams of workers feed the ballots into the scanners and other teams check the problem ballots to determine whether they should be counted or set aside for further review. After the ballots are read, they repackaged by yet another team, and finally sealed and placed in secure storage. All this is done in the presence of public observers and a team of Sheriff's Deputies.

As soon as the voted ballots are read, our computer can compile the results and those results can be posted to the Internet and to DCTV by the Davis Community Network volunteers who work at our office on election night.

We maintain a complete record of how long it takes each precinct's voted ballot cards to go from our drop off location through the counting process and of every person who handles them. As you can see, many variables can affect the time for the progress of the voted ballot cards from your precinct to our counters. They are stopped for logging every time they change hands. They are subjected to lock and key security at various points. They are aggregated before transport to Woodland. They are transported over freeways and over central city streets in West Sacramento, Davis and Woodland, and our Sheriff's Deputies do not exceed

the speed limit. Although rare, if delays or problems at the polls, the drop off point, the loading dock or in our building occur, that translates into a little more time before you see the results.

If and when Yolo County goes to a different voting technology, this process will not go much faster. By law, we may not transmit votes over the Internet in this generation of technology, nor can we use phone lines. Even if votes are aggregated in the memory cards of computers at polling places, we will still have complex accounting procedures to establish records of who voted where and what ballot they received, and our poll workers will be responsible for double-checking and swearing to the integrity of procedures. And memory cards will still be aggregated under the gaze of Sheriff's Deputies and transported under guard to our office in Woodland. The record of chain of custody will be carefully created and witnessed, no fewer than two sworn election workers will ever handle any vote record, and counting and other procedures will always be open to public inspection.

That's why it usually takes hours to post election results. We are always looking for ways to increase efficiency, and we have found a number of ways over the years. But we will never, ever sacrifice the integrity of a single vote to post results faster. That would be too high a price to pay to get home a few minutes earlier, or to satisfy our anxious curiosity.