

Article Last Updated: 10/22/2005 11:50 PM

Special election absentee ballots pour in

Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

As the media-saturated Nov. 8 special election nears, thousands of absentee ballots have poured in to the San Bernardino County Registrar of Voters.

By Friday, according to county registrar Kari Verjil, 164,025 absentee ballots have been issued with 22,400 already returned. The ballots must be at the Registrar of Voters by 5 p.m., Nov. 1, to count.

"As far as the county and all other counties, the reports on requests (for absentee ballots) are higher than usual," Verjil said.

Last November, 142,781 absentee ballots countywide were handed in for the general election, and there are currently 750,763 registered voters in the county, Verjil said.

Los Angeles County officials are also reporting a surge in absentee ballot requests.

The high level of interest in the special election is unsurprising because of the framing by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and opponents that four of the initiatives on the ballot are a referendum on the governor, said Ralph Rossum, director of Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of state and local government.

As part of Schwarzenegger's agenda to reform state government, the governor has backed propositions that would increase the number of years a teacher must wait for tenure, force public employee unions to obtain written approval to use a member's dues for political purposes, install a state budget spending cap and hand over redistricting responsibilities to a panel of retired judges.

"I think people are paying less attention to the individual initiatives than the overall election," Rossum said. "(Schwarzenegger) is investing a lot of his personal reputation in their passage. If they don't pass, it won't be a mortal blow, but it will embolden the Democrats to push certain social and economic issues next year." A parental notification proposition, which the governor supports, has received wide attention. But three other initiatives, one energy regulation and two dueling drug discount initiatives, have been overwhelmed by the attention given the governor's proposals.

"In the past, voters showed some discrimination with initiatives," Rossum said. "They don't vote yes or no for all."

Proposition 73:

Proposition 73 requires a doctor to notify the parent or guardian of a girl under the age of 18 at least 48 hours before performing an abortion. A judge can allow doctors to bypass the notification if it's in the best interest of their child. Doctors will also be required to report all abortions, though names will remain confidential.

According to the state, the fiscal impact of passing the proposition could be an increase in state costs of several million per year for health and welfare programs and court proceedings.

Proponents say the initiative gives parents the right to counsel and care for their daughters before and after an abortion and that the court provision gives added protection against disclosure abuse.

Opponents say scared and pregnant teenagers don't need a judge, they need counseling. Vulnerable minors will be forced to have unsafe and illegal abortions. While parents want to know, it's the rights of the minor that should be protected.

Proposition 74:

Proposition 74 increases the probationary period for public school teachers from two to five years. It also makes it easier to dismiss tenured teachers who receive consecutive unsatisfactory performance evaluations. The fiscal impact would vary by district, depending on how it is implemented.

Proponents say the initiative rewards good teachers and weeds out bad ones. It will improve education by ensuring that only the best teachers stay in the classrooms.

Opponents say Proposition 74 won't improve student achievement, punishes all teachers and ignores real education reform. They point out that teachers already can be fired and that this will discourage quality applicants.

Proposition 75:

Proposition 75 forces public employee unions to obtain written annual approval from individual members to be able to use their dues for political purposes. Charities and contributions to other employees are excluded. There would probably be minor costs associated with the proposition.

Proponents say the initiative protects union members from having their dues used for political campaigns even if an individual member disagrees or agrees with the issue or candidate.

Opponents say it's a blatant attack on public employees to try to squelch their collective voice, and it makes labor unions play by a different standard than corporations. Courts have already held that a public employee does not have to join a union and contribute dues for political purposes.

Proposition 76:

Proposition 76 limits state spending to the prior year's level plus the average revenue growth of the three previous years. It also allows the governor in certain circumstances to make midyear cuts, including in school funding.

Proponents say it protects the state in case of future deficits and eliminates wasteful spending, allowing more money for roads, health care and law enforcement. It will also encourage bipartisan budgetary solutions.

Opponents say Proposition 76 sidelines voter-approved education spending guarantees, short-changes education funding by \$4 billion and gives the governor unchecked power over the state budget. Funding for public safety and health agencies will also be endangered.

Proposition 77:

Proposition 77 takes the power for drawing district boundary lines for the state Senate, Assembly, Board of Equalization and House of Representatives from the Legislature and hands it over to a three-member panel of retired judges, who draw the final map. In order to take effect, the map would require approval by California voters. If they reject it, the process would be repeated. Approximately \$2.5 million of one-time funding could be spent on the redistricting plan.

Proponents say it reduces the power of special interests, holding politicians more accountable and will create more competitive seats.

Opponents say Proposition 77 allows less voter participation in redrawing district lines, politicians will still be picking the judges and it will cost millions that could be spent elsewhere.

Proposition 78:

Proposition 78 creates a prescription drug program for certain low- to moderate-income residents. The state will contract with participating pharmacies and manufacturers to establish discounts and rebates. It could cost the state millions of dollars for administration and outreach efforts. The state will also provide advance funding for rebates. The savings for public health agencies is unknown.

Proponents say the initiative will reduce prescription costs for families with an income at or below 300 percent of the federal poverty level.

Opponents say Proposition 78 was created to stop Proposition 79, an enforceable drug plan. Under Proposition 78, drug companies don't have to provide a single discount, and the plan can end at any time.

Proposition 79:

Proposition 79 provides drug discounts for certain residents, including families with an income at or below 400 percent of the federal poverty level. The plan will be funded by state-negotiated manufacturer rebates. The state will have to advance funding for the rebates, and the net savings are unknown.

Proponents say the initiative will provide discounts for millions of residents and provides deeper discounts than the drug companies' voluntary program.

Opponents say Proposition 79 creates a government bureaucracy that will cost taxpayers millions and that it won't receive federal approval because it threatens low-income patients' access to needed drugs.

Proposition 80:

Proposition 80 gives more control over electricity providers to the state's Public Utilities Commission. It would restrict customers from switching from major utilities to other providers. It also requires retail sellers to increase renewable energy resources. The costs for the state could be minor or up to \$4 million.

Proponents say the initiative would end blackouts and market manipulations caused by deregulation and guarantees a reliable electric system. It will also lower costs and give more environmental protection by utilizing more renewable resources.

Opponents say Proposition 80 is a confusing measure that won't lower bills or prevent blackouts. It also limits green energy from solar and geothermal resources. Complex energy policy should be developed with public hearings and not the initiative process.

Edward Barrera can be reached by e-mail at edward.barrera@dailybulletin.com or by phone at (909) 483-9356.