

Uncounted ballots make for nervous candidates

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- Assembly Speaker John Perez, D- Los Angeles, right, talks with Assemblyman Reginald Jones-Sawyer, D-Los Angeles, as the Assembly debated a compromise plan, carried by Perez, to deal with the state's prison crisis, in Sacramento, Calif., Wednesday, Sept. 11, 2013. The bill, SB105, a plan asking federal judges to extend the deadline for releasing thousands of inmates, combined with Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to lease cells in private prisons and county jails if the court sticks to its year-end deadline to reduce the inmate population, was approved 75-0 and sent to the Senate.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli) Photo: Rich Pedroncelli, Associated Press

Assembly Speaker John Perez, D- Los Angeles, right, talks with...

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With at least 750,000 ballots uncounted across California, Tuesday's primary election isn't over yet.



Candidates in tight elections can't do anything but nervously wait as county election officials work their way through the stacks of untallied votes, most of them vote-by-mail ballots turned in at the polls.

In Napa County, for example, veteran District Attorney [Gary Lieberstein](#) had 50.14 percent of the vote on election night, just 22 votes more than he needs to avoid a November runoff election. But [John Tuteur](#), the county clerk and registrar, doesn't expect to have the bulk of his 8,600 outstanding ballots counted until early next week.

"I've been screamed at over the years," Tuteur said. "The district attorney really wants to know, but I told him, 'Gary, you're not going to know until I finish.' "

Scoping it out

The official figures on uncounted ballots won't be released by the secretary of state's office until Friday, but candidates and their campaign teams already are trying to get a sense of what ballots are out and where they will come from.

"[John Pérez](#) already is calling around," said [John Arntz](#), San Francisco's election's chief, who expects to have most of his 25,000 uncounted ballots tallied by Friday.

Pérez, a Democratic assemblyman from Los Angeles, is part of the four-way battle for state controller, the tightest race on the statewide ballot.

Republican [Ashley Swearingin](#), the mayor of Fresno, was the top finisher Tuesday night with 24.4 percent of the vote. Pérez is now second with 21.7 percent, followed by [Republican David Evans](#) with 21.6 percent and San Francisco Democrat Betty Yee at 21.4 percent.

Under the state's top-two primary rules, Swearingin and Pérez would move to a general election showdown in November if the results hold. But with Evans only 1,924 votes out of that second spot as of Thursday afternoon, and Yee just 6,527 back, there are more than enough uncounted ballots to scramble the final results.

East Bay race

It's a similar situation in the Bay Area, where at least 300,000 ballots remain to be counted.

In the East Bay's 15th Congressional District, Democratic Rep. [Eric Swalwell](#) of Dublin finished on top Tuesday with 49.2 percent of the vote. But the contest for runner-up continues for Democratic state Sen. [Ellen Corbett](#) of San Leandro and Republican former schoolteacher [Hugh Bussell](#) of Livermore.

Bussell holds a 610-vote lead, but there are about 72,000 uncounted ballots in Alameda County and 50,000 in Contra Costa County, which the district straddles. It's likely to be days before there's a final result.

San Mateo County still has to count about 22,000 ballots, said [David Tom](#), the county's elections manager.

Few go to polls

Much of the delayed count can be blamed on the growing popularity of voting by mail. In Contra Costa County, for example, election officials estimated that about 80 percent of the ballots came via the post office.

The problem, though, is that ballots that show up right before the election or are turned in at the polls have to be put aside to be tallied after election officials deal with votes cast at polling places.

"It takes time to check signatures" on vote-by-mail ballots, said Tuteur, who has a five-member staff in his Napa elections office.

But with the final voter turnout expected to be near an all-time low for a statewide primary and the percentage of vote-by-mail ballots at a record high, Tuesday was a quiet day for poll workers across the state.

"We had one precinct that only had four people come in to vote on Tuesday," said [Jill LaVine](#), the Sacramento County registrar. "And only one of them showed up before 5 p.m."