

# Paul Mitchell: The dirty secret of vote counting

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By Paul Mitchell

## Courtesy of Paul Mitchell

Paul Mitchell

If there's one thing elections officials pray for, it's wide margins on Election Day.

A clear and convincing election result allows final tallies to be announced. Winners receive congratulations, losers give concession speeches and everyone else returns to work.

But that's not what's happening this year.

In the state controller's race, we find an incredibly close result that has changed leads repeatedly throughout the counting period. Republican Ashley Swearngin is solidly in first place, nearly guaranteed a spot in the runoff.



But the vote differential between second and fourth is a mere four-tenths of a percent, with hundreds of thousands of votes to count. This easily could go to a recount if the margins remain this narrow.

With the spotlight on and representatives of each campaign lurking over their shoulders, elections officials are engaged in the painstaking process of validating ballots mailed in during the last days of the election or dropped off at polling locations. They are reviewing tens of thousands of provisional ballots used by voters who couldn't get regular ballots at their polling places.

California doesn't have the infamous hanging-chad or butterfly ballot, but there are damaged ballots and signatures that don't match. Ballots are dropped off in the wrong county or mailed in the wrong envelope. Voters show up the day after the election and try to hand in their absentee ballot. Piles of ballots are marked "too late" because the mail arrived after Election Day.

The issue of signatures not matching is becoming an increasingly important wrinkle as more voters cast ballots by mail. Elections officials are reviewing more than 400,000 signatures of the 2 million early absentee voters in the June 3 election who signed registration 25 years ago. Similarly, few new online registrants realize that the signature on their registration form is actually their DMV signature, which could also be decades old. If non-matches can't be resolved before Election Day, those ballots are invalidated.

This can be even more problematic among foreign-born voters, particularly of Asian, Armenian, Russian, Greek or Middle Eastern descent, who may have signed their voter registration cards using the English alphabet, but later revert to signing their names with their native language and alphabet.

In another example, almost every county registrar can show you a pile of ballots received after Election Day that cannot be processed.

In 2012, my firm, Political Data Inc., did an analysis of these ballots from 18 counties, extrapolating that

30,000-plus voters statewide had their ballots invalidated because they were received too late to be counted. Nearly half of these voters were under 30 years old, 14 percent were Asian-American and 17 percent were Latino.

Top-dollar political consultants don't spend their time attending panel discussions about late ballots, the size and color of the absentee ballot voters receive, or how registrars retrieve ballots dropped off in the wrong county or at remote post offices.

The top-two primary system increases the likelihood that we are going to see contests up in the air weeks after the election. And the implementation of same-day registration in 2016 will add more steps for county registrars, slowing the process even further.

Groups like the California Voter Foundation and Future of California Elections toil in relative obscurity working on these changes to our elections, doing analyses of the best practices for processing ballots and ultimately ensuring that every Californian's vote matters.

Few Sacramento insiders can tell you anything about signature verification, the wording of registration forms and ballots, and the processes for sending and returning absentee ballots.

But whether the controller's candidates know it or not, these issues are taking center stage. Either by the secretary of state or a drawn-out legal battle, they could decide who survives the count.

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*Paul Mitchell is vice president of Political Data Inc., a bipartisan firm which provides voter information to political campaigns, pollsters and researchers in California.*

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