

Mailed ballots suggest low turnout in California

SACRAMENTO – California appears on track for another low-turnout election as elections clerks and analysts report that the number of voters mailing in their absentee ballots has declined compared with previous election cycles.

Many political observers expected low voter interest this year in a cycle with a governor's race devoid of drama, no U.S. Senate race, and no high-interest ballot initiative. Primary turnout already hit a record low this year when just one in four registered voters cast ballots in June.

"We are not seeing the same call volume in 2010, the same web hits and the same number of questions – and that's matching returns," said Neal Kelley, the Orange County registrar of voters and president of California Association of Clerks and Election Officials.

In 2010, the last non-presidential statewide election, 2.9 million vote-by-mail ballots had been returned by this point, according to an analysis by the firm Political Data Inc. This year, that number is just 2.2 million, even though the number of absentee voters has grown by 3 million.

These aren't necessarily signs of widespread voter apathy, according to some officials who expect more absentee voters to drop their ballots off at polling stations instead of mailing them.

"More and more voters are getting the message that the mail is taking longer," said Kim Alexander, president of the California Voter Foundation.

Hotly contested local, legislative and congressional races could boost voter participation in parts of the state come Election Day.

California's lowest general-election turnout in the past century was in 2002, when half of registered voters cast ballots.