

Election 2014: Mail ballots change the way campaigns are run

By John
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Congressional District 21 candidates David Valadao and Amanda Renteria.

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It's the final weekend ahead of Tuesday's election, which means it's the political equivalent of football's two-minute drill.

Campaigns are in overdrive. Candidates are making their last pitches to voters.

But just as play-calling has evolved on the gridiron, campaigns are changing their approaches. They had to thanks to the ever-increasing numbers of voters who are casting their ballots by mail. Election officials began mailing those ballots out Oct. 6, and they began coming back a few days later, first in a trickle but lately in ever-increasing numbers.

In Fresno County, more than 28% of the 209,968 mail ballots issued had been returned as of midday Friday. That means the county's voter turnout was already at 14.2%.

In the competitive District 1 supervisor battle between Brian Pacheco and Blong Xiong to replace retiring Phil Larson, 12.2% of the 71,765 voters have already cast ballots.

Those early returns have changed the way campaigns are run.

“You have to be willing to look at everything different,” says Sacramento-based political consultant Tim Clark, who is running Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin’s state controller campaign, as well as a few others. “This year, I feel like I’ve been back to school. I’ve had to tear everything apart.”

Clark points out that 48% of voters cast mail ballots in 2010. This year, it will be 60%, if not more. Because voters can cast mail ballots starting around Oct. 7, everything in a campaign needs to be accelerated. The old days of just eight to 10 years ago — when the final weekend was a blitz of advertising, campaigning and phone banking — is disappearing fast.

But not gone. There are still a few candidates planning old-school barnstorming.

Get out the vote in 21st

Amanda Renteria, a Democrat who is trying to oust incumbent Republican David Valadao of Hanford in the 21st Congressional District, organized a 24-hour campaign blitz in a pickup truck that was to start in Sanger and go until 9 p.m. Sunday.

Renteria was looking to make 16 campaign stops across all areas of the 21st District, which covers all of Kings County and parts of Kern, Tulare and Fresno counties.

“If you’re a waitress working at a Denny’s at 3 a.m. Sunday morning, you just might meet Amanda Renteria,” campaign manager Michael Trujillo says.

Renteria is looking to inspire registered voters to head to the polls Tuesday. Democrats hold a 17-percentage-point voter registration edge in the 21st District, but Democratic candidates have struggled to get them to cast ballots.

Valadao will also be working to get voters to the polls — but not with a campaign tour.

“Team Valadao is working around the clock to turn out voters throughout the 21st Congressional District,” campaign spokesman Tal Eslick says. “David doesn’t need to tour the Central Valley, he’s lived here his whole life. This is his home.”

Other competitive races

The 21st Congressional District is one of a handful locally that are considered competitive. Others include the Pacheco-Xiong Fresno County supervisor race, the Fresno City Council District 1 race pitting Cary Catalano and Esmeralda Soria, and the bitter fight for a Fresno County Superior Court bench seat where Lisa Gamoian and Rachel Hill are vying to replace retiring Judge Robert Oliver.

In these races, turnout is the key, experts say. That’s why the campaigns are pushing as much to make sure supporters cast ballots as to actually win votes.

Catalano, for instance, has around 50 people working from Saturday through Tuesday. For the past week, his supporters have been working the phones, which will continue along with other final efforts to reach voters.

Xiong and Pacheco are also doing final precinct walking and phone banking, though Pacheco has his usual plan to attend church and then rest Sunday — as he always does — and not make any final pushes on Tuesday. Xiong is pushing straight through.

These final efforts could be critical because there is speculation that voter turnout could be at or below historic lows. Clark says the latest tracking shows it could be around 38.5%.

Consistent voters, Clark says, often are those who vote by mail and return their ballots almost immediately after

receiving them. In a low-turnout election like this year is expected to be, connecting in late September and early October with those reliable voters is critical.

“You can be out of the game in the first week (of mail voting) if you don’t plan,” he says.

But that is now past history, and at this point it is pretty much “knock and drag” — campaign slang for knocking on doors and dragging those voters to the polls or to the mailbox to drop in their mail ballot.

Says Catalano: “As the campaign season is coming to a close, all of the hard work over the past 15 months is starting to pay off.”

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