

It's history: Voters give Gov. Brown a fourth term; Swearingin trailing in controller's race



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This election is history — and it surely made history: What may be the lowest voter turnout for a mid-term general election in state history, and a record fourth term for Gov. Jerry Brown, who in early returns was easily sweeping aside his Republican challenger Neel Kashkari.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, a Republican making her first try for statewide office, was trailing Democrat Betty Yee for state controller. With 76 percent of the ballots counted, Swearingin was behind Yee 52.1 to 47.9% after leading her in the initial tally released by the Secretary of State's office. In one other statewide contest where Republicans were thought to have a chance -- secretary of state -- Pete Peterson was trailing Democrat Alex Padilla by nearly four percentage points.

Nationally, though, Republicans fared far better. By mid-evening, with returns still coming in, Republicans gained control of the Senate amid a rising tide of discontent over President Barack Obama's leadership. Republicans knocked off three Democratic senators and won four open seats, and appeared to be strengthening their hold on the House, as well.

Locally, voters had many school boards, city councils and other small districts to decide. They also had a handful of runoffs and competitive elections to weigh in on.

In the race for a Fresno County judgeship, which turned contentious and nasty in the final days, prosecutor Lisa

Gamoian was nearly three percentage points ahead of law professor Rachel Hill.

In the Valley, Republicans appeared to be holding on to first-term Rep. David Valadao's 21st Congressional District seat where Democrats thought they had a chance to win it. But in the seesaw battle for the 14th state Senate seat, first-term Republican incumbent Andy Vidak of Hanford regained the lead in late returns from Democrat Luis Chavez, a Fresno Unified school board candidate.

And in what could be a surprising outcome, veteran Democratic Rep. Jim Costa of Fresno was trailing an underfunded Republican challenger, Burrell dairyman Johnny Tacherra, in the 16th Congressional District. Costa was in the same position four years ago but eventually pulled ahead as late tabulations were added.

In the 4th Congressional District, Republican Art Moore's intra-party challenge of incumbent Rep. Tom McClintock appeared to be falling well short. McClintock was leading Moore by more than 20 percentage points.

In the state Assembly, Visalia veterans advocate Devon Mathis was leading Woodlake Mayor Rudy Mendoza in the race to replace Connie Conway, the termed-out Tulare Republican who has led the Assembly GOP caucus. Both men are Republicans. Another South Valley Assembly race had incumbent Democrat Rudy Salas leading Republican Pedro Rios by nine percentage points in what amounts to a rematch of their 2012 race.

In the runoff for state Superintendent of Public Instruction, incumbent Tom Torlakson was leading challenger Marshall Tuck by six points.

It was a mixed bag of results for state ballot measures of interest to the Valley. Propositions 1 and 2 — the state water bond and the rainy day fund — were well ahead in early returns. Voters, however, appeared to be rejecting off-reservation Indian gaming, which could challenge a planned Madera casino sought by the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians.

In Fresno County, Measure Z, the tenth of a cent sales tax measure to fund the Fresno Chaffee Zoo, was leading with 71.3% of the yes votes. The measure requires two-thirds of the vote to pass.

On the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, Kerman dairyman Brian Pacheco was leading Fresno City Council Member Blong Xiong by a wide margin. Riverdale farmer Buddy Mendes, who nearly won the seat in the June primary, held a commanding lead over Fowler City Council Member Daniel Parra.

Meanwhile, in the runoff to replace Xiong on the Fresno City Council, Cary Catalano was leading Esmeralda Soria by just 13 votes with one precinct outstanding.

Current board members in two contested Fresno Unified races held on to big leads as results trickled in. Fresno Unified Trustees Cal Johnson and Valerie Davis claimed more than 57% of counted votes in their respective races by 11 p.m.

But in other area races, political newcomers looked to be the ones capturing seats. Early numbers showed both State Center Community College incumbents Dorothy "Dottie" Smith and Isabel Barreras trailing their opponents Miguel Arias and Bobby Kahn. And in Central Unified, where incumbents seemed to have an early edge, challengers Ruben Coronado and Richard Atkins took the lead later in the night. In the race between incumbent Diana Milla and her opponent Rama Dawar, Dawar was ahead by just one vote at 11 p.m.

In the Madera County District Attorney's race, challenger David Linn unseated incumbent Michael Keitz by 17 percentage points. In the race to replace Sheriff John Anderson, who is retiring, Chowchilla Police Chief Jay Varney defeated Undersheriff Michael Salvador by a large margin.

On the Madera County Board of Supervisors, Brett Frazier coasted to victory over Mona Diaz. Both were seeking to replace Manuel Nevarez, who did not seek re-election.

In the South Valley, Tulare County Supervisor Mike Ennis was well on his way to a new term, leading Porterville City Council Member Virginia Gurrola by a nearly two-to-one margin. And in Kings County, Craig Pedersen ✓ was leading Justin Bond by more than 10 percentage points for a seat on the Board of Supervisors.

Republicans gain control of Congress

Republicans swept to control of the Senate for the first time in eight years.

The GOP will hold at least 52 seats in the Senate that convenes in January after knocking off three incumbent Democratic senators and winning four open seats previously held by Democrats.

Republicans did not lose a single contest for a seat the party held going into Tuesday's elections.

Sen. Mitch McConnell, in line to be Senate majority leader, said "voters are hungry for new leadership."

House Speaker John Boehner struck a note of caution. He said Republicans are "humbled" by the results of the mid-term elections. In a statement, he says it's "not a time for celebration."

Boehner said instead, it's time for government to start "implementing solutions to the challenges facing our country." He says those challenges begin with what he calls a "still-struggling economy."

President Obama's low approval ratings were a drag on Democrats, as were voter concerns about the Islamic State group, the Ebola outbreak and job losses.

Swearingin watches returns

At an election party for Swearingin Tuesday night in Fresno, cheers erupted from supporters when returns from the Secretary of State's office showed Swearingin gaining on Yee. As the evening wore on, however, Yee's lead grew. Swearingin said she would live with whatever the outcome is.

"I'd be very honored to serve as the next state controller," she said. "If I'm not successful tonight, I've got some awesome responsibilities here in the city of Fresno and I'll very much enjoy completing my term as mayor."

Turnout mixed in Valley counties

With few burning issues on California's statewide ballot driving voters to the polls, turnout was expected to hit a historic low for a mid-term general election. Still, Valley elections officials said polling places appeared to be busy with voters dropping off mail ballots or signing in to cast their ballots in the booth.

Shortly before 10 p.m., Madera County's clerk/recorder/registrar of voters Rebecca Martinez said voter turnout was higher than the 36% of 52,000 registered voters who voted in the June primary election. "We have two huge races, sheriff and DA, that a lot of people are interested in."

Tulare County Registrar of Voters Rita Woodard said polls were busier than expected Tuesday.

"We had lines at Caldwell and Akers in Visalia at the Methodist church," Woodard said.

Polling places were especially busy in Porterville and Dinuba, apparently due to a Board of Supervisors election in Porterville and City Council elections in Dinuba, she said.

Turnout will probably be about 50%, normal for an off-year election, Woodard said.

Fresno County Clerk Brandi Orth said voting went well at polling places, including 10 drive-through sites. But it could be days or weeks before Fresno County's turnout is known, since provisional ballots and mail ballots turned in at the polls Tuesday won't be counted until later. Orth said the number of mail and provisional ballots yet to be counted may

not be known until Wednesday morning. Trucks carrying those ballots turned in at polling places on Tuesday were arriving at her office's loading dock late Tuesday evening.

This report compiled by Douglas E. Beeman with contributions from staff writers Andrea Castillo, Hannah Furfaro, Lewis Griswold, Carmen George, Tim Sheehan and the Associated Press.

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