

Polling places getting lonely on election day

By John Wildermuth, San Francisco Chronicle

With more and more California voters casting ballots by mail, the neighborhood polling place is becoming one of the loneliest spots in town on election day, forcing local and state officials to puzzle out what to do about it.

In the June 2014 statewide primary, 69 percent of the turnout was by mail ballots, triple the 23 percent in 2000. In November's general election, fewer than 40 percent of the ballots were cast in person at the polls.

The break between the two types of voting is even more stark in typically low-turnout special elections.

It's a situation that's frustrating for the poll workers, who have to sit with nothing to do from before the polls open at 7am until after they close at 8pm. It's also expensive for the counties, which not only have to train and pay the poll workers, but also must find and secure potential polling places and shoulder the costs of transporting and storing the voting machines and other equipment.

While tiny rural Alpine and Sierra counties already are all-mail, all the time, don't expect California to go that route anytime soon. As Secretary of State Alex Padilla noted soon after being elected in November, "Many people still prefer to vote at the polls. Including my mother."

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