

Counting S.F. ballots will take a record amount of time

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(11-06) 21:03 PST SAN FRANCISCO -- San Francisco's election for mayor went surprisingly smoothly Tuesday, if you don't count the two weeks or more it's likely to take to tally all the ballots and come up with a final result.

Scores of extra election workers were on hand Tuesday evening to begin counting the tens of thousands of ballots cast at the polls in a painstaking, state-mandated manner that could drag on until Thanksgiving.

"It's going to be a challenge," admitted John Arntz, the city's election director. "But we have an absolute mandate from the secretary of state to do this in a certain way."

That means that not a single ballot cast anywhere in the city Tuesday showed up in the vote totals released Tuesday night, which included only 48,104 absentee and early votes at City Hall. As the votes are tallied, the latest results will be released each day at about 4 p.m. until the count is complete.

Arntz hopes to have 65 percent of the absentee ballots and 75 percent of the polling place ballots counted by Friday.

The record slow count can be blamed on a long-running battle between the secretary of state's office and Election Systems and Software, which manufactures the city's voting equipment.

A 2006 test by the state showed that the ES&S equipment used in San Francisco was unable to read some ballots that were marked in anything other than dark pencil or black or dark-blue ink. When the city was unable to bring in a replacement system in time for Tuesday's election, Secretary of State Debra Bowen reluctantly certified the ES&S machines, but with conditions that slowed the vote-counting process dramatically.

In years past, voters marked their ballots in ink and then fed them into a machine at the polling place that electronically tallied the results and stored them in the machine's memory pack. When the polls closed, one team of deputies picked up the ballots at each polling place and took them to Pier 29 for preliminary processing. Another team grabbed the memory packs and took them to a nearby modem center, often a police station, where those results could be electronically transmitted to the election center in the basement of City Hall.

"Our primary focus was capturing those memory packs and getting that information," Arntz said. "That's

how we could get the results to make public on election night."

But if the machines couldn't be trusted to read the ballots properly, there was no way to tell if the information in the memory packs was accurate, so Bowen banned the use of the packs. Instead, each ballot had to be individually inspected to ensure that pencil or the proper ink was used. Then the ballots had to be put through one of the four vote-counting machines at City Hall.

So instead of dealing with one memory pack from each of the city's 580 precincts, with the votes already counted, election officials will be forced to hand-check more than 100,000 ballots, then run them through the counting machines.

That completely changed the Elections Department's emphasis. The actual ballots still went from the polling places to Pier 29, where election officials checked them in and ensured that the ballots from every precinct were accounted for. But they quickly had to send those bags of ballots to City Hall.

"Our focus now is to get those ballots to City Hall so that we have votes to start counting," Arntz said.

The first smattering of ballots wasn't expected to arrive at the election headquarters until 10 p.m. Election officials planned to work through the night - and through future nights - to get the votes counted.

The city's problems didn't end there.

Under San Francisco's ranked-choice voting system, voters can - but don't have to - list three choices for mayor. But because of concerns about the voting machines' reliability, Bowen ordered that any ballot which didn't include three choices for mayor had to be kicked out by the vote counting machines. Election officials not only had to examine each of those ballots, but they also had to physically remake all of them, transferring the choices on the original ballot to a new ballot, which would then be counted.

That takes time. And because an astounding 94 percent of the absentee ballots processed by Monday had to be remade because voters didn't list three choices for mayor, it has taken a lot of time.

"I was amazed by how many of absentee ballots were" kicked out, Arntz said. "If that 94 percent holds with the polling place ballots, we're buried, man."

At polling places throughout the city, under-voted ballots were spit back by the machines, so that voters had to either fill out the list for mayor or ask the poll workers to override so their ballot could be tallied.

"There's probably a whole lot more interaction than usual between voters and poll workers today," Arntz said Tuesday.

Although results will be updated daily, Arntz expects to have a preliminary vote tally by Nov. 16 and all the votes, including the expected 5,000 to 6,000 provisional ballots, counted by Nov. 21, the day before Thanksgiving.

If none of the mayoral candidates has 50 percent plus one of the votes when every ballot is tallied, the city will then run the ranked-choice system, eliminating the lowest-ranking candidates and reshuffling their second- and third-place votes until someone has a majority.

But even that final total doesn't mean it's over for city election workers. Because of the concerns about the ES&S machines, Bowen has ordered the city to hand-count 10 percent of the city's precinct votes and 25 percent of the absentee votes to crosscheck the results of the vote-tallying machines. In a typical election, only 1 percent of the precincts are hand-counted.

The tallies, rechecks and hand counts all have to be finished in time to meet the state's Dec. 4 deadline for the final statement of the vote.

"It's tight," Arntz said. "We'll max out, easy."

The expected low turnout probably saved the city some of the estimated \$300,000 added cost of Bowen's requirements. Although the city was ready to run the election office 24 hours a day last week, it only took a 14-hour schedule to keep up with the absentees.

Counting the votes

In San Francisco, the tough part of the election comes after the polls close. Most of the times and dates are estimates provided by the Department of Elections:

Tuesday night: After the polls closed at 8 p.m., the city stopped counting absentee ballots that arrived in the mail on Tuesday or were turned in at the polls. The count will resume after the polling place ballots are tallied.

Ballots were taken from polling places to Pier 29 for preliminary processing. From there, they were to be taken to City Hall. Counting is scheduled to run 24 hours a day until completed.

Today and beyond: At 4 p.m. daily, the latest vote counts will be released, with final results expected by Nov. 21. The daily counts will be available on the Elections Department's Web site, www.sfgov.org/site/elections.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/11/07/MNHUT7FPT.DTL>

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