
California: Select Committee On Election Integrity To Investigate June Primary Elections

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Problems Cited In San Diego, Kern, and San Joaquin Counties

"During the June primary, we had polling places that didn't open until several hours after they were supposed to, voting machines that didn't work at all, and thousands of voters who were told to 'come back later' once the problems had been sorted out. Ensuring the integrity of our electoral process isn't solely about making sure electronic voting machines are secure and accurately recording people's votes. It also involves taking care of some basic, fundamental issues that many people just take for granted. These are the types of fundamental, logistical problems we need to begin addressing now to ensure they don't repeat themselves in November." That's the focus Senator Debra Bowen (D-Redondo Beach), the chairwoman of the Senate Elections, Reapportionment & Constitutional Amendments Committee, will bring to the newly-formed Senate Select Committee on the Integrity of Elections that she will chair. The three-member select committee - which includes Senator Roy Ashburn (R-Bakersfield) and Senator Joe Dunn (D-Garden Grove) - intends to hold hearings over the next two months to look at problems that arose during the June 2006 primary election and what can be done to prevent them from recurring in November. "Clearly, the security issues involving electronic voting machines have garnered the bulk of the attention and rightly so, but there are logistical issues we need to deal with as well," continued Bowen. "In San Diego, electronic voting machines with well-known security holes in them were sent home with poll workers days and weeks before the election. Why? Because the county has been sending paper ballots and other election equipment home with workers for years and it saw no reason to change that practice. Elections are different today than they were in the 1950s or even the 1990s, meaning many of the historical practices that elections officials have relied on may need to change to reflect that new reality."

Aside from the voting machine "sleep-over" issues in San Diego, there were widely-reported problems in Kern and San Joaquin counties as well: • In Kern County, improperly programmed voting cards prevented electronic voting machines from operating, requiring some people to use paper ballots to vote. Other voters were simply turned away from the polls altogether when there were no paper ballots available.

• In San Joaquin County, a number of polling places opened up to three hours late when poll workers didn't show up to open the polling site or the voting equipment wasn't properly set up. "I certainly don't condone the idea of sending voting machines that have a documented history of security problems home with poll workers days or weeks before the election, which is what happened in San Diego County last month," continued Bowen. "On the other hand, I sympathize with the logistical problems elections officials face, because there's no way to deliver electronic voting machines, in the case of San Diego County, to 1,700 polling locations just minutes before the polls open on Election Day.

"How do we conquer the logistical challenges of ensuring the voting equipment is accurate and secure, that poll workers are properly trained and show up on time, and that no voter is turned away or told to 'come back later' because the voting machines aren't working or there aren't enough ballots for people?," asked Bowen. "These are the questions I'd like to see the select committee begin to develop answers to. We've done a lot to make it easier than ever for people to vote, but much of that work, not to mention people's confidence in the integrity of the process as a whole, goes down the drain on Election Day when they show up at their polling place only to be turned away because the voting machines don't work or the poll workers didn't show up."

The date and location of the committee's first hearing will be announced in the coming days.