

The County Of Nevada



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March 11, 2019

Gregory J. Diaz: Some thoughts about voting

Something new has cropped up in our county, echoing actions elsewhere. Groups are trying to persuade voters not to Vote by Mail in our March 26, 2019 Special Vacancy Election for State Senator-SD1.

The Nevada County Tea Party is one of those. In fact, the Tea Party urges voters not to even open ballots they receive in the mail until they are inside a Vote Center. They argue that voting by mail is not safe.

Their true intent: make it more difficult for folks to vote.

Let me make it clear: in Nevada County your vote — your ballot — is safe. Whether you vote in person at one of our Vote Centers or mark your ballot in the privacy of your home and then drop it in the U.S. Mail or an official ballot dropbox or return it directly to the Nevada County Elections, that vote will be counted by your Elections Department exactly as you — and only you — cast it.

As your Registrar of Voters for more than a decade, let me say it's okay by me if you choose to not even sneak a peek at your ballot until you reach the "safety/sanctity" of the Vote Center of your choice. Vote Centers are for voting, of course, but primarily to clear up problems an individual may have voting or registering to vote.

But if those trying to curtail mail-in balloting succeed in our county, prepare to face long lines. You might have to walk away without voting because you can't wait out the long line — work, school, must drop your child off for child care.

Perhaps that's what those promoting this effort count on. I call it suppressing the vote.

The tactic, and similar ones, aims to turn away voters who do not intensely follow politics, or who simply wish to vote hassle-free. Vote suppressors are scared, I think, because our Vote-By-Mail model dramatically increases voter participation. Increasing turnout assures that our government represents a large and diverse populace — politically and otherwise.

We see major efforts elsewhere to hinder qualified citizens from registering to vote and to cast ballots, especially in states such as Texas and Alabama.

We're not immune in California from shady efforts to harm our democracy. But we're fighting back, with vigor.

New election laws and procedures, spear-headed by our Secretary of State, Alex Padilla, are designed to alleviate concerns, as voters now have tools available on our election website to look-up and verify the status of their ballot. If any ballot is missing a signature or we find a signature mismatch, we notify the voter immediately and we cure the defect if we can. In Nevada County, we make sure, every valid ballot is counted.

One claim from those who oppose the very successful voting system we have in Nevada County concerns “ballot harvesting.” This has occurred in other states. In North Carolina this year a Republican candidate for Congress beat his Democratic opponent by more than 900 votes. The winner? Not so fast.

Turns out the Republican hired someone to go around and collect Mail-in ballots from unsuspecting, unsophisticated, registered voters. They failed when the audacious scheme was uncovered by newspaper reporters. The Republican quit. A new, expensive election will take place soon. Chalk one up for a free press.

But it raises a question: Could vote harvesting take place here? Could someone steal ballots from mailboxes, dropboxes, or dupe some folks to hand over unmarked ballots?

Short answer: yes. However, a ballot cast without a registered voter’s verifiable signature would be rejected by our system. The voter would be contacted by us and shortly thereafter the District Attorney and the California Secretary of State would investigate.

Of course, you can help stop this chicanery at its roots. When you get your ballot, mark it up thoughtfully in the sanctity of your home, seal it, sign it, and post it. Postage is provided.

If more convenient for you, California law allows you to designate another person to deliver your ballot to a Vote Center or a drop box for you. You need to acknowledge that delegation on the return envelope. If a stranger offers to carry your ballot to a Vote Center for you, refuse. And do one other thing: report that to the Elections Department right away.

Because voter participation increased dramatically with our VBM model, groups like the Nevada County Tea Party and the so-called Election Integrity Project are ramping up efforts to actively suppress voting.

The primary mission of your Nevada County Elections Department is to protect the integrity of our elections. Our office and its processes are completely open to the public and we welcome everyone to come and observe how elections are conducted and how you are protected from fraudsters. We encourage and support voting and voters.

Last year we successfully introduced a new voting system called Voters Choice Act. That act made it easy to Vote by Mail. We also established Vote Centers to make it easy to register, even on election day, and to resolve problems voters might have.

A record number of Nevada County citizens cast votes in last fall’s election; 94% of them chose to Vote by Mail.

Here’s another small thought that has nagged me over the years: Why would someone risk trying to violate our voting system? Nearly impossible to do, and then there are those penalties — including jail time.

Not worthwhile, seems to me.

Gregory J. Diaz is Nevada County Clerk-Recorder and Registrar of Voters.