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ELECTIONS

California lawmakers ban most hand-count elections, targeting far-right Shasta County

SEPTEMBER 8, 2023 · 2:41 PM ET



By Roman Battaglia



Election workers Anne Silveria and Tanner Johnson sort ballots during the mock hand count in Redding, Calif., Aug. 17, 2023.

Roman Battaglia/Jefferson Public Radio

Most California elections will be forced to use state-approved machines to count ballots under new legislation that responds to an attempt by right-wing

supervisors in one Northern California county to try and hand-count future elections.

The bill, called AB 969, got a final vote Friday as it easily passed through the California legislature, where Democrats hold a supermajority in both houses. Now it awaits the governor's signature.

"Shasta County is not our own country," said Tim Garman, a Shasta County supervisor who opposed the hand-counting effort. "We don't get to make all of our own laws. There are things we can and cannot do and we've stepped way out of our lane with this."

Garman said the legislation is a sign the state is trying to prevent hand-counting from spreading to other counties. If enacted, the bill would ban hand-counting in established elections with more than 1,000 registered voters, or more than 5,000 registered voters for special elections. Those rules would only be relaxed if a natural disaster or emergency prevents an electronic voting system from working, such as a wildfire or power outage.



The Shasta County Administration Center, where the county Board of Supervisors meets.

Roman Battaglia/Jefferson Public Radio

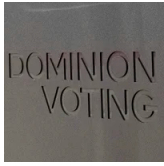
Shasta County is a conservative-leaning county with around 112,000 voters.

In January, the right-wing majority on the county board of supervisors voted 3-to-2 to cancel its contract with Dominion Voting Systems, and move to hand-count ballots.

The decision was based on unproven claims of election fraud, and Dominion has faced a torrent of conspiracy theories about its machines.

AB 969 would also ban counties from terminating a voting system without signing a contract for a new one. The move by Shasta County supervisors in January left them without a way to conduct elections at all for months.

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A California county has dumped Dominion, leaving its election operations up in the air

County election officials have been preparing for hand-counting, which has been found to be more expensive, more time-consuming and less accurate than machines.

"Whoever it is that sold the board the concept that this is a cost-saving measure really was mistaken, frankly. And that's putting it very kindly," said Cathy Darling Allen, the county clerk who has publicly condemned the proposal to hand-count ballots. "If they weren't mistaken they were just lying, and I don't know which is true."

The county last month sent in its plan for hand-counting to be approved by the California secretary of state in time for a local election on Nov. 7. That would have been the first time the county would have used its new hand-counting system. Now, assuming the governor signs the bill, election officials will have to fall back on their electronic voting system, provided by Hart InterCivic.

Because of accessibility concerns and regulations from the secretary of state, the county already has the machines needed to conduct a machine count.



ELECTIONS

Hand-counting ballots may sound nice. It's actually less accurate and more expensive

County Supervisors Kevin Crye and Patrick Jones — who both backed the switch to hand-counting — declined requests for an interview, so it's unknown what their next steps might be. According to Darling Allen, it could be possible for supervisors to require the county to conduct a full hand count of ballots as an audit after the election. In previous elections, the county only recounted 1% of ballots by hand to check for any errors with the machines.

"They can't violate state law, but they can add additional audit requirements, certainly," she said.

Regardless, the county has already faced both literal and political costs because of the attempt to hand-count elections. Crye is facing a recall election, despite taking office just this year. And the county has already paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for a new voting system and hired staff to help with hand-counting. But because of state intervention, the county will still be saving millions more than they expected to pay.

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