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Volunteers to join Election Day fray

They will join usual
group of poll helpers
to watch over
electronic process

CHRIS BAGLEY
STAFF WRITER

Lucky Harutunian will leave her house in Murrieta before dawn June 6 and drive the quarter-mile to Fire Station No. 1 on Juniper Street. She'll prepare the polling station for voters, then check their names against the printed index when they arrive.

Ken Minesinger will spend most of the day in Moreno Valley, teleconferencing hourly with other Republican lawyers across the state and fielding the occasional call from party activists who have fanned out across Riverside County.

Dave Lander will leave his Temecula office in the afternoon, then drive up to Riverside and watch as stacks of memory cards come in from nearly 500 precincts across the western half of the county. He expects to spend part of the evening squinting through a glass pane at a computer whose tiny silicon chips are tallying votes from those precincts and another 100 in the desert area.

The three are among several thousand part-time and volunteer workers who on Election Day will exhort Riverside County voters to the polls, assist them, observe them and thank them with little stickers.

Their activities are probably as old as the secret ballot, though the process has also taken on a new twist this year in Riverside County. Citing persistent suspicions over the reliability and security of touch-screen voting machines, several dozen volunteers have signed on to an effort to monitor the voting and counting procedures.

Working the polls

Harutunian, a retired kindergarten teacher, is one of about 2,000 citizens who will work in the polls on Election Day.

"It's the most inspiring thing to see, these kids all grown up and voting," Haru-

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tunian said.

On a Thursday evening earlier this month, Harutunian and three dozen other poll workers gathered in Murrieta's City Council chambers for a two-hour training session with employees of the Riverside County Registrar. In interviews afterward, several, like Harutunian, spoke of inspiration and civic duty. None spoke of money; the county pays each a stipend of \$85 for the 15-hour shift.

Harutunian has worked Fire Station No. 1 in several recent elections. She said she's come to know several of the other regular poll workers. The ones with more experience end up helping the others, she said: Two hours of training and a 60-page manual can still leave a bit of confusion among rookies.

Workers like Harutunian are typically assigned to polling places in teams of five. About 1,850 people have signed up for a shift. Riverside County Registrar Barbara Dunmore said she's seeking about 550 more to ensure that each of the county's 587 precincts is fully staffed.

Watching the polls

As many as 6,000 volunteers are expected to work the election. Most will be out on behalf of the two main political parties.

Save R Vote, an independent watchdog group, plans to send 40 to 50 volunteers to polling stations, mostly in Southwest County, to monitor the voting and counting for irregularities. Such monitoring isn't entirely new — political parties have done it all along, though their activities have been largely focused on concerns raised by their own voters.

Save R Vote, a project organized by the Temecula-area chapter of Democracy for America, isn't affiliated with a political party, though the national organization was spawned by the presidential candidacy of Democrat Howard Dean two years ago.

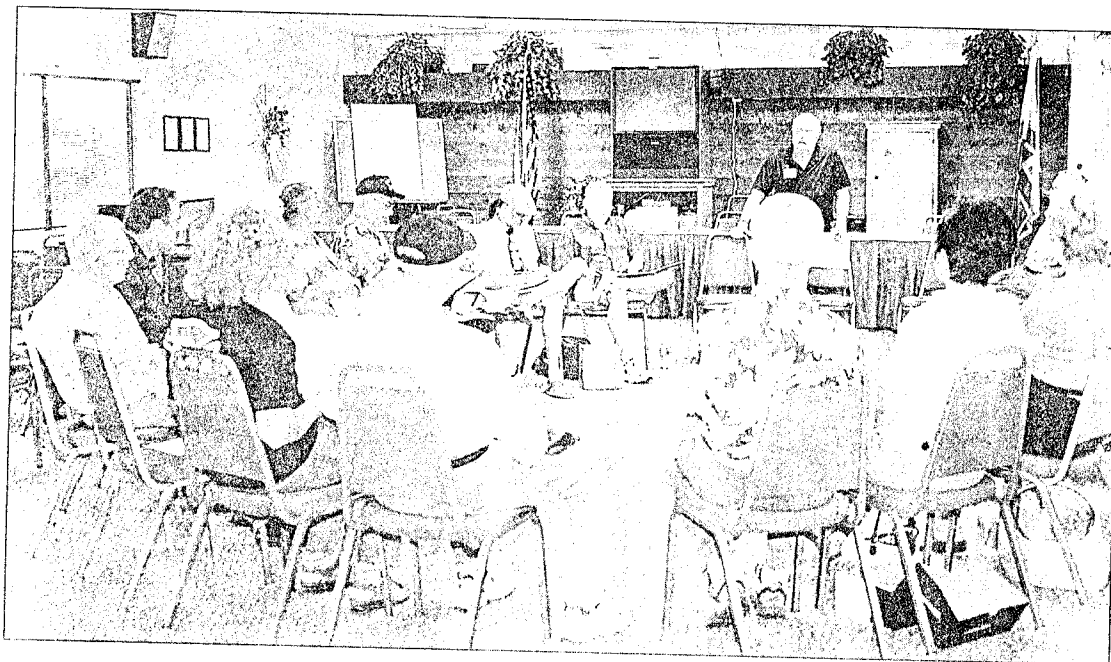
Many of the volunteers said they signed up after reading reports of errors and glitches among touch-screen voting systems around the country. Some said they fear outright manip-

ulation of results, though tampering hasn't been documented conclusively in any state.

"It seems that things have been manipulated one way, and if the other party is in power, things could be manipulated the other way," said Sue Frommer, a Temecula resident who is volunteering with the group.

The counties of Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange and 19 of the other 55 in the state — representing about one-third of its voters — will use touch-screen computers as their main voting device next month. Other counties will use various systems of paper ballots that are marked with ink and then scanned electronically.

Michelle Anderson, a Temecula mother, said she will monitor polls next month as a volunteer to help document any complaints or irregularities that arise.



EDWARD HANNIGAN / FOR THE CALIFORNIAN

Tom Courbat, standing, addresses a training group of citizen poll observers known as Save R Vote, in preparation for the June 6 election.

"If one side feels the right group didn't get in because there were voting problems, it's contentious," said Anderson, one of 40 or 50 Southwest County residents who are working with the Temecula-area chapter of Democracy for America. "There's so much good from everyone knowing and understanding that the votes are counted correctly."

Counting on the machines

Members of Anderson's group, members of small political parties and Democrats —

including Lander, the Temecula attorney — also plan to stand by at the Registrar of Voters office in Riverside, where computers will tabulate the results.

Tom Courbat, who is leading Save R Vote, said he doesn't think that will buy the monitors a lot of confidence; they'll be separated from the computers by a glass wall and won't necessarily be able to scrutinize the way they're operated. Dunmore said the barrier is necessary to keep unauthorized people from accidentally or intentionally interfering with the process.

Minesinger, a Republican attorney who is heading up his own local party's poll-monitoring project, said he

has no particular concerns over the county's computerized voting system.

"A lot of people have talked about it, but most of (our concern) is people being turned away at the polls" because of mistakes with provisional ballots or absentee ballots, Minesinger said.

The attitudes square roughly with results of a survey conducted in October 2004 by The Field Poll. Among California Democrats who planned to vote in the next month's elections, only 15 percent said they felt "very confident" that touch-screen systems would count votes properly, compared with 41 percent who felt "not

at all confident." Among Republicans in the state, 33 per-

cent felt very confident, while 25 percent lacked confidence.

No large polling firms have conducted surveys since then, but even skeptics say they have gained some faith in touch-screen systems. That's because California law now requires all such voting systems to produce a paper record of each vote that can be used to check the accuracy of each machine.

Working the voters

Regardless, both major parties will have hundreds of activists out.

Republican volunteers will monitor indexes of voters at the polls in an effort to call members who haven't yet voted. Minesinger said the party aims to put as many as 6,000 volunteers on the job, though he conceded that number might be difficult to reach in an off-year primary.

Minesinger and three other Republican attorneys will be at

party headquarters in Moreno Valley, coordinating responses to any party voters who are unable to file provisional ballots or are otherwise obstructed at the polls, he said.

Shirley Walton, chairwoman of the Riverside County Democratic Central Committee, said she expects to rope 400 to 600 Democratic activists into similar "get out the vote" activities. Of the county's 740,400 registered voters, just less than 35 percent are Democrats, while just more than 46 percent are Republicans, according to a tally by Dunmore's office last week.

"We're making an all-out effort to get out the vote," Walton said. "We're a little less in number than the Republicans, so we need everyone out at the polls."

Contact staff writer **Chris Bagley** at (951) 676-4315, Ext. 2615, or cbagley@californian.com. To comment on this article, go to www.californian.com.