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Smaller Riverside County turnout credited for speedy election results



For the first time in years, Riverside County wrapped its election night tally within three hours of closing the polls. / Richard Lui, The Desert Sun

For the first time in years, Riverside County wrapped its election night tally within three hours of closing the polls.

The county's fifth and final election night update came at 10:52 p.m., reflecting 37,689 ballots that were cast by mail and at the polls Tuesday.

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Registrar of Voters Kari Verjil credited the speedy results to the smaller ballot and generally low turnout at the county's polls. Officials also used more off-duty sheriff's vehicles to drive ballots from the Coachella Valley to Riverside.

It's a stark contrast from the 2010 and 2012 general election votes, when Riverside County was the last county in California to report its results to the Secretary of State.

"This is a smaller election. We're always going to finish faster in these smaller elections," Verjil told The Desert Sun Wednesday. "I wish voter turnout was higher. But I'm pleased that we were able to expedite the turnout."

Tuesday's election count isn't done yet.

County election officials are still processing about 3,800 by-mail, damaged and provisional ballots. These ballots take more time to process, so updated results aren't expected until Friday.

In the previous two large elections, when the high-profile races for the White House and Congress were being decided, Riverside County was processing more than 100,000 ballots for days after polls closed.

California stopped the widespread use of electronic voting machines in 2007. Since then, Riverside County's sluggish results have been a source of frustration for prominent Democratic and Republican leaders.

After several internal reviews and amid widespread calls for change, county executives replaced former registrar Barbara Dunmore with Verjil in 2011.

"This is a uniquely Riverside challenge," Nicole Winger, a spokeswoman for the California Secretary of State's Office, said in 2012 about the slow results.

"Every county in California uses paper ballots and optical scan machines. Every county has vote-by-mail voters and every county in California is using one of several certified voting systems. ... Counties make it work."

Tuesday's election was faster than other comparable odd-year local elections.

Riverside County finished the November 2009 count at 1:05 a.m. the following Wednesday. The November 2011 vote wrapped at 11:20 p.m., according to the registrar's office.

Verjil said her office has five more ballot scanners than it did for the 2011 election.

She hopes to get two more machines before the 2014 gubernatorial election, which will be bigger than Tuesday's vote.

"They're hard to find because they don't make them anymore," Verjil said.

"Until a new secretary of state is in office, we're going to be using the same voting system. There are no new voting systems for us to purchase at this time."

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