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## Absentee voting raises turnout, but carries risks

By Fred Ortega Staff Writer

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More and more people are voting from the comfort of their homes, a development that has major implications for everything from local bond measures to the race for president, experts and election observers say.

Absentee ballots accounted for roughly 42 percent of all votes cast in both the recent Measure A election in Glendora and the Wal-Mart-inspired recall election in Rosemead, according to results from both races. These figures reflect statewide trends that some experts say have the absentee vote approaching the 50 percent mark.

"There is no question that the use of both absentee and early voting is increasing at local, state and national levels," said Michael Alvarez, a professor of politics at Caltech.

"Voters like it because it is more convenient. Election officials like it because it makes their life easier. And parties and candidates like it because it is becoming a part of their targeting and micro-targeting strategy."

Most agree the convenience of absentee voting is a benefit to the democratic process because it increases overall turnout. But concerns have been raised that absentee voters are more susceptible to fraud or coercion than those casting ballots in the privacy of the voting

booth.

Further, some experts caution people voting early at home may miss out on important developments or debates that might occur as Election Day approaches.

Some of the early election tactics used in the Glendora campaign led to accusations that proponents of Measure A were illegally trying to influence voters. NJD Ltd., which proposed the measure to allow construction of an 18-hole golf course on its hillside land in exchange for a 338-unit housing development on the Glendora Country Club, admitted its campaign workers provided \$10 gift cards to residents to encourage them to turn in their absentee ballots.

The company denied its staffers told people how to vote, or even identified themselves as Measure A supporters, saying it was simply trying to increase voting for a special election they said the city purposefully scheduled a month before the November election to suppress turnout.

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absentee ballot applications on top of the city's 2,700 permanent absentee votes, in the end the tactic appears to have backfired. Only 624 of the more than 4,900 absentee ballots counted so far supported the developer's measure.

By lobbying voters to choose absentee, campaigns have the advantage of presenting only their information to voters and getting them to vote before they hear from the opposition, said Fred Register, a Pasadena campaign consultant.

"But in small, local elections \ that is harder to do because people are usually already well informed about local issues," he said.

Register said absentee-voter drives give campaigns plenty of time to target their own supporters and get them to the

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polls. In a Pasadena City College bond measure campaign he ran several years ago, Register targeted students, faculty and alumni early to persuade them to vote by mail.

"That way you have those votes in the bank, so to speak," he said.

Absentee votes also played a big part in the Rosemead recall, in which incumbent Councilmen Jay Imperial and Gary Taylor held on to their seats by garnering 60 percent of the mail-in vote.

"We circulated absentee-ballot applications to anyone who would take them, and encouraged them to use them," said Fred Herrera of the Neighbors Against the Rosemead Neighbors Against the Recall. "We even offered to pick people up at their homes so they could turn in their absentee ballots themselves at City Hall."

The ongoing battle over Measures N and P in Arcadia has included mailers sent to voters encouraging them to vote absentee.

"Anywhere from 25 to 40 percent of the ballots cast can be absentee - it causes every campaign to talk to voters earlier," said Harvey Englander of Save Arcadia, which is supporting the measures.

Both Save Arcadia and Rosemead Neighbors Against the Recall were corporately sponsored, by Westfield Santa Anita and Wal-Mart, respectively. Like the NJD-backed campaign in Glendora, these well-funded "Astroturf" groups - as opposed to community-based "grass-roots" groups - have been quick to adopt absentee voting tactics to get their message out to the voters first.

"Information technology has blossomed in the campaign world, and today groups have so much information about who voters are, where they live, how they vote and how often they vote," said David Menefee-Libey, a professor of politics at Pomona College. "In the old days, people had to concentrate their efforts on Election Day. Absentee votes allow campaigns to spread out their turnout efforts over many weeks."

But voting early could mean missing out on crucial information, Menefee-Libey said. He gave the ongoing scandal over former Florida Congressman Mark Foley as an example.

"People might have already voted in congressional races before taking \ into account," he said. "At the same time, the scandal could die down closer to Election Day and people who voted at the height of the scandal might vote differently."

With early balloting, campaigners can also check with election officials to see who has turned in absentee ballots, allowing them to concentrate their efforts on people who have not yet voted, Alvarez, the Caltech professor, explained.

"That is very valuable in turn-out-the-vote efforts," Alvarez said. But he added that "people have raised concerns of coercion and intimidation associated with the absentee process."

During a mayoral election in Inglewood in the 1980s, for example, a judge overturned the results of the election because campaign workers were coercing residents to vote a certain way.

"But for that to happen, it has to be done on a scale that is large enough to allow for discovery," said Fredric Woocher, an election lawyer who worked on the case. "For me, the benefits of allowing more people to vote in ways that are more convenient outweigh the risks of the system being abused."

Staff Writer Kenneth Todd Ruiz contributed to this story.

[fred.ortega@sgvn.com](mailto:fred.ortega@sgvn.com)

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