

CALIFORNIA

Column: 'No offense, but I never vote.' Stunning apathy in the heart of California's Trump resistance



Early numbers indicate that in-person voter turnout, not including mail-in ballots, was nearly 13% in Los Angeles County. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

By Steve Lopez



Columnist | [X Follow](#)

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Sure, it's just a primary.

And the general election is five months away.

But is that reason enough, in a state that has screamed its political resistance loud and clear, to sleep through an election?

The answer, my fellow Californians, is yes.

Andrew Hernandez, 30, told me he had not voted but he had the materials at home and might still cast a ballot, though he's registered in Sacramento and not Los Angeles.

I asked who was running for governor.

He thought for a moment, as if the answer might bubble up, but there was no fizz.

"I couldn't tell you," he said.

U.S. senator?

Hernandez shook his head.

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About a third of the people I spoke to did vote, or intended to, and did know what was what. So my random and unscientific sampling, of about 20 people, matched some expert predictions that roughly 2 out of 3 registered voters would take a voting vacation Tuesday.

Early numbers indicate that in-person voter turnout, not including mail-in ballots, was nearly 13% in Los Angeles County. In Orange County, the turnout was 13%, a figure that includes mail-in ballots reported by Tuesday evening.

Voter apathy is nothing new in California. L.A. has picked a mayor with 4 out of 5 eligible voters blowing off the election. School board elections have drawn even fewer voters.

But this is the era of President Trump and the California resistance. We are in the middle of a national shouting match about the direction of the country, and there are no good excuses for making excuses about not voting.

“No offense,” a 63-year-old man told me, “but I never vote.”

And why is that?

“I don’t believe in the system,” he said, refusing to give me his name.

“I like Trump,” he said, “but let me tell you something: America’s never going to be great again.”

We have a little bit of everything in California, don’t we?

A young woman named Nina said she intended to vote, and thought she had registered, but discovered on election day that she’s not eligible yet.

Could she name a candidate for governor?

No.

For U.S. Senate?

Negative.

“Actually, I was thinking about voting,” said Kia Zomorodi, 25. “But I didn’t do the research, and it would probably be better if I didn’t vote uninformed.”

He may be right. Zomorodi couldn’t name any candidates on the ballot. Nor could his friend, who said he was registered but did not intend to vote, saying that California leans too far to the left for him.

Fair enough, but I saw quite a few Republicans on my ballot, and several U.S. congressional seats were contested, with Republicans trying to fend off Democrats and maintain control of the U.S. House. And on ballot measures, a vote by a Republican counts just as much as a vote by a Democrat, last I checked.

Look, I can understand why Californians were not expected to rush to their polling places in droves.

The wording of ballot measures can leave you in a fog, mouth open, eyes glazed.

Then you've got all the candidates for judge. Dozens of people you never heard of and hope to never meet want to administer justice. And choosing who among them are best qualified is left to laypeople whose only qualification is having seen a few episodes of "Law & Order."

But let me remind you of the stakes in 2018 and beyond.

Two years ago, a candidate who insisted the first black president was African, mocked women for their looks, boasted about grabbing their privates, belittled his adversaries and was incapable of telling the truth got elected president of the United States. Whether you love Trump or can't believe your eyes and ears, why aren't you voting early and often at every opportunity?

California is home not just to the anti-Trump revolution but also to a growing Latino population at a time when race and immigration are at the center of state and national policy debates. And yet Kevin de León, who has shaken a fist at Trump, doesn't appear to have rallied the troops against incumbent U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

Meanwhile, former L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has gone from shooting for first place in his run for governor to hoping he isn't humiliated by a third-place finish behind Democrat Gavin Newsom and Republican John Cox.

What happened to the emerging Latino vote?

The angry and energized youth vote?

To a top-two primary system that was supposed to jazz candidates and voters from all political parties?

And to the hand-over-heart sense of civic duty?

Was the weather just too nice Tuesday for anyone to be bothered?

“Generally speaking, people are not paying as much attention during primaries, and there's less media attention during primaries,” said Mindy Romero, director of the UC Davis Civic Engagement Project.

Romero, who predicted a fairly normal turnout for this primary, said there's been more political engagement because of the last presidential election and riveting issues such as mass shootings.

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But she said that doesn't necessarily translate into more voters, especially in a warm-up election with lots of candidates on the ballot.

"It's potentially hard to cut through all of that clutter," Romero said. "And on top of that, knowing it's not the final decision makes it less motivating for voters."

Romero said a lot of young people who got politically engaged through social media campaigns after mass shootings aren't necessarily inclined to transfer all that passion into participation in a distrusted electoral process.

"Even habitual voters have trouble seeing the impact of their vote," Romero said. "To me, that isn't apathy. I think people care.... They care about their communities and their kids' lives, and they want good elected officials making good choices. But they feel disconnected from the political process and don't believe the system is there for them."

Andrew Hernandez, the young man who told me he had his voting materials at home but hadn't reviewed them, made that same point.

“I’m not uneducated,” he said, nor is he disinterested in politics.

But he is turned off by televised campaign ads that exaggerate and distort or that “prey on people’s fears.” He’s also a little disillusioned after voting for Hillary Clinton and watching Trump drive her to defeat.

“It goes back to feeling let down and to see a guy in office who doesn’t give a [rhymes with wit] and isn’t a diplomat,” said Hernandez, who expects to be more politically engaged once he gets over his malaise. “I think a lot of kids my age are angry. I can go out and protest, and kids are still going to get shot in schools.”

I understand, but are those reasons to walk away or to storm the gates?

The polls are open for 13 hours on election day, and if it’s too much trouble to squeeze half an hour out of your busy schedule, you can always mail in a ballot.

“I just voted,” Sutton Dewey, 29, told me. He said he had made a statement against the two-party system by voting for third-party candidates.

I asked why he bothered to take the time.

“I felt I wouldn’t have the right to complain if I didn’t vote,” Dewey said.

That’s the spirit.

A middle-aged woman from West Hollywood told me she had already voted and wouldn't have missed this election.

"I voted for Republicans," she said, and she hoped Newsom doesn't become the next governor. "I don't want to live in a sanctuary state."

Adam Fratto of South Pasadena told me he understands the lament that it can be hard to make a difference with a single vote. He quoted a Chinese proverb:

"Heaven is high and the emperor is far away."

Meaning what?

"There are so many layers between us and the people who make the decisions," Fratto said.

But he voted, and he put a lot of thought into it.

He wants Newsom to win, so he voted for Villaraigosa.

What?

If two Democrats make it to the general, Fratto said, Republicans might be less inclined to go to the polls in November.

California, love it or leave it.

But as long as you're here, quit making excuses and vote.

[Update: With more than 97% of the precincts reporting, [less than 21% of registered](#) voters had cast ballots.]

[Complete coverage of the California primary »](#)

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UPDATES:

8:30 a.m.: This column was updated with more turnout figures.

8:55 p.m.: This column was updated with early voter turnout figures.

This column was originally published at 7:55 p.m.

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Steve Lopez is a California native who has been a Los Angeles Times columnist since 2001. He has won more than a dozen national journalism awards and is a four-time

Pulitzer finalist. Lopez is the author most recently of “Independence Day: What I Learned About Retirement, From Some Who’ve Done It and Some Who Never Will.” His book “The Soloist,” inspired by his columns on his relationship with a Juilliard-trained homeless person, was a Los Angeles Times and New York Times best-seller, winner of the PEN USA Literary Award for Non-Fiction, and the subject of a Dream Works movie by the same name. He has also written three novels and two column collections.