ELECTION CHALLENGE: SAFE, ACCURATE VOTING IN PANDEMIC ERA »

TECHNICAL ISSUE HAS CALIFORNIA UNDER-REPORTING VIRUS CASES »

ACLU FILES NEARLY 400 CASES VERSUS TRUMP »
Despite skeptics in high places — President Donald Trump, for example — of mailing a ballot to every active registered voter in California, local election officials are answering with their own message: All votes will be accurately counted, and rigorous safeguards are in place to prevent election fraud. In fact, Fresno County Clerk Brandi Orth and Tulare County Registrar of Voters Michelle Baldwin say that voters will have more options than ever to ensure their ballot counts. And, because of the coronavirus pandemic, there will be changes in the way in-person voting takes place as well.

**A Ballot for Every Voter**

Fresno County was one of the early adopters of mailing out ballots to all active registered voters. It was one of 14 Voter’s Choice Act counties, meaning it engaged in extra measures to increase access to voting. Those included establishing voting centers and mass-mailing ballots. Madera County adopted those techniques in 2018. (The state designates voters who have moved out of state or have deliverable mail as inactive; they won’t receive voting materials.)

For the 2020 presidential primary in March, Fresno County saw a 42% voter turnout, with 87% voting by mail. For comparison, in the June 2016 presidential primary, 41% of registered voters cast a ballot with 60% coming via mail. Voters can complete the ballots at their convenience and return them by mail without having to add postage (it’s already covered), drop them in one of 60 secure boxes in Fresno County, or turn them in at voting centers, which will open prior to the Nov. 3 general election. As in March, voters can register on Election Day. Spurred by the pandemic, state legislators approved mailing ballots throughout the state, not just those in counties that opted into the special program — like Fresno and Madera counties. Two months from now, on Oct. 5, election clerks throughout California will mail out ballots. And, Orth said that if voters don’t receive their ballot by Oct. 12 to call her office at (559) 600-8683 for a replacement. But, this method has skeptics. Ruth Weiss with the Election Integrity Project says 75% of voters already were receiving a mail-in ballot.

"Any voter in the remaining 25% need only make a phone call to request a ballot for this election up to and including seven days before Election Day if they feel it is unsafe for them to go out to cast a vote in person. Automatic mailing appears to be an unnecessary overreaction to the situation," Weiss told GV Wire by email. In his Thursday KMJ radio commentary, conservative Michael Der Manouel Jr. also said mailing a ballot to every California voter is likely to cause mistakes and fraud.

**Drop Box Preferred**

Orth recommends mailing ballots by Oct. 27, one week prior to the election. A new law this year allows the clerk to accept ballots 17 days later, through Nov. 20, as long as they were postmarked by Nov. 3. However, Orth also is urging voters to return ballots to one of 60 secure drop boxes throughout the county. "The drop box program is the best program going. It was so successful in March, and now with COVID and no contact voting being the way to go, we have added an additional 20-plus drop boxes to be deployed through Fresno County," Orth said. On this issue, Weiss agrees. "If the drop boxes are staffed by two people from the elections office and emptied daily, then that is an excellent option. Otherwise, we recommend..."
Fresnans pet owners pretty much have to solve challenges on their own, according to WalletHub.

Among the nation’s biggest 100 cities, Fresno ranks last in “pet friendliness” the credit score website said Wednesday. WalletHub rated the cities for things like veterinary costs, dog-friendly shops and restaurants, dog parks, pet-friendly rental markets, and animal shelters.

Tampa earned the nod as the nation’s friendliest pet city, followed by Austin and Las Vegas. San Diego, which checked in at No. 10, was the top-rated California city.

WalletHub based the rankings on a city’s actual boundaries, not the metropolitan area.
On Monday, Gov. Gavin Newsom gave his most optimistic report on the state’s virus efforts since a second surge of cases in early June. He noted daily cases had dropped by an average of 2,200 in the last week and the infection rate of 6.1% was significantly lower than the nearly 8% recorded last month. Ghaly acknowledged the rate Newsom highlighted was based on incomplete data and that missing data is being inputted manually. He stressed that looking at one- and two-week trends can help account for missing data from individual days. Ghaly said hospitalization data—which doesn’t run through the same troubled system—has seen signs of improvement. The latest count Tuesday showed 6,302 people were hospitalized, a 12% drop from the high recorded in July. Deaths have now topped 9,500. In California, laboratories send virus testing data and results to a state database that is accessible to county health officials. Counties including Orange and Sacramento have noted the delays, and Placer County posted on its website that its virus cases are likely underestimated as a result.

Number of Infections Is Thought to Be Higher Than the Reported Cases

Los Angeles County health officials said the state convened an emergency call Monday night to discuss the issue. Now, a team from the county is reaching out to more than 80 labs to obtain test results for the past...
TAXPAYERS HELPED MAKE IT, SO WHY DOES REMDESVIR COST $3,200 A PATIENT?

Valley hospitals can barely keep the potential life-saving COVID-19 drug remdevisir in stock. And, when they can get it, the cost is $3,200 per patient. Fresno-based Community Medical Centers was completely out of remdevisir for 24 hours a few weeks ago. Visalia-based Kaweah Delta Medical Center — which is in one of the hardest-hit counties in the state — says it routinely runs out of the drug. Now, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra is asking the federal government for help. Becerra wants third-party manufacturers to scale up production and distribution and ensure that the drug is available to all those in need at a reasonable price. Becerra and 33 other attorneys general sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services asking for that help. The drug's maker, Gilead Sciences, says it is manufacturing the treatment in record time. Originally, the drug took up to a year to make. That's been cut to six-to-eight months. The Wall Street Journal reported that the United States is "the only developed country where Gilead will charge two prices"— one for government buyers ($390 per dose) and one for non-government buyers like hospitals ($520 per dose). The typical remdevisir treatment course consists of...
NEW YORK — The day after Donald Trump’s election in November 2016, the American Civil Liberties Union posted a message to him on its website: “See you in court.” As president, Trump hasn’t personally squared off against the ACLU from the witness stand, but the broader warning has been borne out. As of this week, the ACLU has filed nearly 400 lawsuits and other legal actions against the Trump administration, some meeting with setbacks but many resulting in important victories.

Among other successes for the ACLU, it prevailed in a U.S. Supreme Court case blocking the administration from placing a citizenship question on the 2020 census. It also spearheaded legal efforts that curtailed the policy of separating many migrant children from their parents. “The assault on civil liberties and civil rights is greater under this administration than any other in modern history,” said the ACLU’s president, Anthony Romero. “It’s meant we’ve been living with a three-alarm fire in every part of our house.”

Since the day Trump took office, the ACLU — according to a breakdown it provided to The Associated Press — has filed 237 lawsuits against the administration and about 160 other legal actions, including Freedom of Information Act requests, ethics complaints and administrative complaints.

Of the lawsuits, 174 have dealt with immigrant rights, targeting the family separation policy, detention and deportation practices and the administration’s repeated attempts to make it harder to seek asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border. The other lawsuits address an array of issues high on the ACLU’s agenda: voting rights, LGBT rights, racial justice and others. In one long-running case, the ACLU succeeded in blocking the administration’s policy of barring young immigrant women in government custody from getting abortions. “Donald Trump has provided a full employment program for ACLU lawyers on all of our issues,” Romero said.

Many of the ACLU’s recent lawsuits remain unresolved. Of those that have been decided, Romero said, the ACLU has won far more often than it has lost, though a precise breakdown was unavailable. Among the setbacks, ACLU national legal director David Cole said, one of the most disappointing involved Trump’s efforts to ban foreign nationals from several predominantly Muslim countries. Lawsuits by the ACLU and its allies successfully blocked implementation of the first two versions of the ban, but the Supreme Court allowed a third version to go into effect in 2018.

By a similar 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court also allowed the implementation of the Trump administration policy barring transgender people from enlisting in the military. Lower courts had supported efforts by the ACLU and other groups to scrap the ban. Another LGBT rights case recently ended in a major victory for the ACLU and its allies when the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in June that gays, lesbians and transgender people were protected from employment discrimination under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. One of the ACLU’s clients, Aimee...
VIRUS TESTING IN THE US IS DROPPING, EVEN AS DEATHS MOUNT

August 5, 2020 | AP News

U.S. testing for the coronavirus is dropping even as infections remain high and the death toll rises by more than 1,000 a day, a worrisome trend that officials attribute largely to Americans getting discouraged over having to wait hours to get a test and days or weeks to find out the results.

An Associated Press analysis found that the number of tests per day slid 3.6% over the past two weeks to 750,000, with the count falling in 22 states. That includes places like Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri and Iowa where the percentage of positive tests is high and continuing to climb, an indicator that the virus is still spreading uncontrolled. Amid the crisis, some health officials are calling for the introduction of a different type of test that would yield results in a matter of minutes and would be cheap and simple enough for millions of Americans to test themselves — but would also be less accurate.

“There’s a sense of desperation that we need to do something else,” said Dr. Ashish Jha, director of Harvard’s Global Health Institute. Widespread testing is considered essential to containing the outbreak as the U.S. approaches a...
BERLIN — British scientists say there are more emperor penguin colonies in Antarctica than previously thought based on evidence of bird droppings spotted from space. A study published Wednesday by scientists at the British Antarctic Survey counted 61 emperor penguin colonies dotted around the southernmost continent, 11 more than the number previously confirmed. Scientists used images from Europe’s Sentinel-2 satellite mission to look for smudges on the ice that indicated large amounts of guano, or penguin poop. The majestic emperor penguin breeds in remote areas where temperatures can drop as low as minus 50 degrees Celsius (minus 58 degrees Fahrenheit). Researchers have long relied on aerial photographs and satellites to spot colonies of the flightless marine birds. Peter Fretwell, a British Antarctic Survey geographer and the study’s lead author, called the latest count “good news” but noted that the newly spotted colonies were small.

Some of the newly discovered colonies are located far offshore, on sea ice that has formed around grounded icebergs and which is particularly at risk of disappearing. Yan Ropert-Coudert, an ecologist who wasn’t involved in the latest study, said that while satellite images are a powerful tool for tracking penguin colonies, large-scale explorations and counts on the ground are also needed whenever possible. Reliable assessment of local and global populations are necessary for conservation bodies to decide what actions are needed to protect the species, said Ropert-Coudert, who heads the biological sciences section of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research.
OUTBREAK HITS NORWAY CRUISE SHIP, COULD SPREAD ALONG COAST

August 3, 2020 | AP News

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — A Norwegian cruise ship line halted all trips and apologized Monday for procedural errors after a coronavirus outbreak on one ship infected at least 5 passengers and 36 crew. Health authorities fear the ship also could have spread the virus to dozens of towns and villages along Norway’s western coast.

The confirmed virus cases from the MS Roald Amundsen raise new questions about safety on all cruise ships during a pandemic even as the devastated cruise ship industry is pressing to resume sailings after chaotically shutting down in March. In response to the outbreak, Norway on Monday closed its ports to cruise ships for two weeks. The Hurtigruten cruise line was one of the first companies to resume sailing during the pandemic, starting cruises to Norway out of northern Germany in June with a single ship, then adding cruises in July to the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard.

The 41 people on the MS Roald Amundsen who tested positive have been admitted to the University Hospital of North Norway in Tromsoe, north of the Arctic Circle, where the ship currently is docked. The cruise line said it suspended the ship and two others — the MS Fridtjof Nansen and the MS Spitsbergen — from operating for an indefinite period.

A LOOK AT SOME DEADLY EXPLOSIONS INVOLVING AMMONIUM NITRATE

August 6, 2020 | AP News

The investigation into an explosion in the harbor of Lebanon’s port city of Beirut is focusing on how 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, a highly explosive chemical used in fertilizers, came to be stored at the facility for six years, and why nothing was done about it. The explosion Tuesday blasted a crater into the port and hit the city like a freight train, killing more than 100 people and injuring thousands. Buildings were damaged for miles around the city. Some other recent deadly explosions involving ammonium nitrate:

Aug. 12, 2015: A massive warehouse explosion rocked the port city of Tianjin, China, killing 173 people and injuring nearly 800. Investigators found the warehouse held illegal stores of ammonium nitrate, which caught fire and caused a series of blasts.

April 17, 2013: A fire intentionally set at the West Fertilizer Co. facility in West, Texas, caused ammonium nitrate...