

VIEWPOINT

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OUR VIEW

One more day to vote in this primary

OUR POSITION: *Election "month" ends today.*

You've seen the lawn signs, you've seen the TV ads and now it's time to actually go out and vote!

Right?

Well, only if you're one of those old-fashioned, 20th century traditionalists.

Today is Primary Election Day in Florida, but the reality is the great majority of people participating in this election have already cast ballots.

Charlotte County Elections Supervisor Paul Stamoulis told us he expects about 70 percent of all votes cast will come by absentee-mail or early, in-person voting. It is likely that 30 percent of all votes will have come in the two-weeklong early voting that ended Sunday. Stamoulis expects another 40 percent to come by mail.

Florida's elections supervisors like the vote-by-mail process; it's efficient for them and convenient for voters. Stamoulis' office has been particularly successful at encouraging mail-in voting: Charlotte County is tied for first in the percentage of voters who vote by mail.

Overall this election, Stamoulis expects voter turnout to run as high as 30 percent of Charlotte County's 125,715 registered voters.

Thirty percent is a pathetic

number, in general, for any election in a democratic society and, yes, a sorry reflection of public interest in the underlying process of local government. Most critical races on this ballot are local. (By comparison, the November presidential election four years ago drew more than 74 percent participation here.)

Regardless, Charlotte's Primary Election voter turnout is likely to be well-above the norm for Florida. As Stamoulis pointed out, Charlotte County's turnout is consistently a few points higher than the rest of the state.

One reason is that "senior" citizens tend to exercise their right to vote — and Charlotte County's population is among the oldest in the country.

"They're good voters here," Stamoulis said.

Also, the higher turnout numbers may reflect well on the Supervisor's Office itself. Stamoulis — who was unopposed this year for his third term in office — has been a strong proponent of mail-in balloting. In addition, Charlotte was the only county in Florida to offer early, in-person voting for two weeks, 12 hours a day, including two Sundays. By comparison, Sarasota County's early voting ran Saturday, Aug. 20, through Saturday, Aug. 27, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Lee County was open Aug. 20-Aug. 27, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

As of Monday afternoon, 5,384 people had voted early, in person, in Charlotte County. According to the election supervisor's website, the breakdown was 3,920 Republican, 1,466 Democrat, five Libertarian and 443 other. Those numbers won't change, since early voting is done.

Mail-in ballots are still coming in, though. By Monday afternoon, the "absentee" totals were 8,491 Republican, 4,782 Democrat, 14 Libertarian and 2,106 other. (Note also that Charlotte has a higher-than-usual number of primary races that are open to all parties this year: both nonpartisan races and GOP races in which non-Republicans may participate because no other party is fielding a candidate.)

If you haven't voted yet, please do so today. If you are not sure where you vote, you can call your county supervisor's office or go online, type in your address and find your polling place. The websites are easy enough to remember: Charlotte County is www.Charlottevotes.com, and Sarasota County is www.Sarasotavotes.com.

You can print out a sample ballot beforehand. You can fill it in and take it with you as a cribsheet.

Remember also, you must have a photo ID with a signature. These qualify: driver's license,

passport, credit card, retirement center ID, public assistance ID, student ID, neighborhood association ID, VA card. Just make sure it has a photo.

While you're online in Charlotte County, check out other features. The Supervisor of Elections' website is accessible, easy to navigate and full of information. It is outstanding.

The home page in recent weeks has featured a running tally of early and mail-in votes (raw numbers, not specific results). There are many interesting tidbits.

For instance, the day the most mail-in votes were received by the office was Monday, Aug. 8: 1,831. Second highest was Wednesday, Aug. 3: 1,317. The busiest day for in-person early voting was last Friday, Aug. 26, with 670. Next highest was Saturday, when one fewer voter showed up. The busiest voting location was the Mid-County Library.

Also on the website are maps, statistics, Census data and a demographic analysis. You can view and print out a Voter Guide with how-to information, or a Citizen's Guide with the names and numbers of elected officials, county officials and offices.

You can find a lineup of candidates for each office and biographical/position statements supplied by each candidate.

There are financial reports from candidates and committees. (The county Republican Executive Committee has taken in \$376,068; the Democratic Committee \$157,611.)

Stamoulis said his office sees the website as a conduit for public information. If one person calls with a question, many others may have the same question.

"If it's a good question we put it out there," Stamoulis said.

Overall, he added, the philosophy is, "Educated voters demand good government, and we try to give them the information they need to make good decisions."

Also on the website is information about mail-in voting for the November election. Although commonly known as "absentee" balloting, anyone without excuse can call, walk in, write, email or apply online for a mail-in ballot.

Ballots are sent out roughly 30 days before election day. Return at your leisure.

Also realize that once you receive a ballot you are not obligated to use it. If, for any reason after getting your "absentee" ballot, you decide you still want to vote the old-fashioned way on Nov. 8, just keep the ballot (or fill it in for guidance) and show up in person. That is legal.

Just don't fill it in, mail it back and then try to vote in person. Only one vote per customer.