

## Absentee ballots may decide elections

**With a growing number of voters mailing it in, primaries could be over before polls open**

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER

Absentee ballots for Charlotte and Sarasota counties are being mailed to voters daily, and when they return from northern homes scattered through states like Michigan and New York, they could almost single-handedly crown a victor in local primaries.

A growing number of voters in Southwest Florida are casting their vote through mail to avoid crowds at voting sites and support an area candidate even if they're out of town. Given the population of retirees and seasonal residents, candidates said, absentee voting is playing an increasingly vital role in local races and has changed the way they campaign.

In fact, between early voting and absentee ballots, county primary elections could be decided before voters go to the polls Aug. 24.

"Clearly, voting by mail has become very significant in the primary and general elections," Charlotte County Supervisor of Elections Paul Stamoulis said. "We expect more than half of the votes to be in by election day. There's really no downside to it."

Charlotte mailed 19,100 absentee ballots in the initial batch sent out July 23. The county continues to mail dozens more daily by request, and Stamoulis predicted the number of county votes tabbed through the mail will rise each coming election.

Last primaries, the county sent out about 16,000 absentee ballots, making up 46 percent of the entire votes cast. Another 29,000 county residents voted through mail for the November 2008 general election, which drew more voters due to the presidential race. That figure represented 34 percent of all county votes.

In Sarasota, the county mailed 18,536 absentee ballots earlier this week, an increase over the primaries in 2008. During that election, 23 percent of all voters did so by mail, while another 26 percent cast votes from their homes in November 2008.

Until the late hours of election night, department workers throughout the Suncoast will be busy sorting through mail tubs stuffed with returned ballots. The deadline for requesting an absentee ballot is five days before election day. Early voting in both counties is from Aug. 9 to Aug. 22.

"Absentee ballots are a great tool," said Sarasota County Commissioner Nora Patterson, who's running for re-election in District 4. "People don't just use absentees if they're out of town. It's also just convenient. It makes you start the campaign process a little earlier, and we've been trying to get in touch with voters for several months."

Local candidates said people who specifically request a mail ballot are more likely to vote than the average resident, and they make a point to target that growing segment. So this year, along with posting bright signs along commuter corridors throughout the area, candidates are mailing thousands of postcards to snowbirds and retirees.

Absentee voting also saves local governments money, with each mail vote carrying a total cost of about \$2, compared with \$7 at the polls. On the other hand, they increase the cost to candidates .

Charlotte County School Board District 4 candidate Ian Vincent said he was surprised by the number of voters having absentee ballots sent to a local address. Voters are no longer required to give a reason to vote by mail.

"The guy in Ohio or lady in Wisconsin doesn't see my signs, and they don't go to the forums," he said. "The reality is if these people have a ballot sitting in their home, they're probably going to vote. Running a campaign is a lot like running a small business; you have to weigh the things that will give you bang for the buck. I felt like those absentee voters were people we had to get support from."

Candidates said the Internet makes it easier for them to gain long-distance support by drawing voters to campaign websites and answering questions through e-mail.

Election workers will begin tabulating votes from absentee ballots and early voting before election day, but they can't release figures until all votes have been counted.

"It's almost like there are three elections these days," Charlotte County Commission District 4 candidate Stephen R. Deutsch said. "When I first started voting, you almost needed a doctor's notice for an absentee ballot, and now many counties are encouraging it. It's very possible an election may be decided before election day, but you just have to keep working."

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**SUN PHOTO BY JOSH SALMAN, [jsalman@sun-herald.com](mailto:jsalman@sun-herald.com)** Absentee coordinator Dawn Ayala, left, and Charlotte County Supervisor of Elections Paul Stamoulis sort through returned absentee ballots at the Punta Gorda office.