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Vote count is closely watched in Brown-McClintock race

bwalter@sacbee.com

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Anyone doubting that every vote counts should have spent a few hours this week with election officials in Auburn. Or Placerville. Or Nevada City.

There wasn't a hanging chad in sight.

But both sides of the too-close-to-call race for the 4th Congressional District scrutinized virtually every uncounted ballot in the contest between Republican Tom McClintock and Democrat Charlie Brown.

"It can be a mind-numbing process," said Brown volunteer Steve Barber of Granite Bay.

Barber was among a handful of volunteers watching election workers in Auburn as they duplicated ballots that were damaged or cast in the wrong precinct. The duplication is painstakingly slow: One election worker reads from a damaged ballot, such as one with coffee stains, while another person fills in a fresh one by hand. A third employee observes the process.

McClintock continued to hold a slim lead Thursday – 815 votes – in the race to represent the 17,000-square-mile district that includes all of seven counties and slivers of Sacramento and Butte.

But with perhaps 40,000 votes still on the table, the attention has shifted to elections offices in Placer, El Dorado and Nevada counties.

That's where election workers have been certifying late mail-in ballots and duplicating damaged ballots, and where they are about to tackle 7,000 provisional ballots.

Provisional ballots can be from permanent vote-by-mail voters who misplaced their ballots or people who moved within the county and did not re-register.

Historically, about 90 percent of provisional ballots are accepted and counted, several county registrars said.

The smallest counties – Modoc, Sierra, Plumas and Lassen – mostly have finished their certifying and counting, and vote counts are being released daily from El Dorado and Nevada counties.

But Placer, with perhaps 20,000 late mail-in and provisional ballots, will not report its count until it is complete. Ryan Ronco, the county's assistant registrar and recorder, said he hopes to finish the count before Thanksgiving.

Meanwhile, because the initial results were so tight, all nine counties must recount – by hand – Election Day votes from 10 percent of their precincts. Some of the smaller counties have completed their recounts; the others will begin shortly.

Thursday's turnout of observers in Auburn was small and unobtrusive. The only real excitement came from a gas leak that forced an evacuation of the Auburn county government complex on Richardson Drive for a couple of hours.

That was a marked change from earlier in the week, said Brown volunteer Junko Baker of Auburn, when about 50 observers packed the small room – more tables and chairs than standing room – in the back of the Placer elections office.

Most were volunteers from the Brown or McClintock camps, but some had interest in other races or were merely curious.

The big crowds watched election workers take late mail ballots out of envelopes and stack them according to precincts. The observers also were tallying the votes from the easily visible ballots.

Jon Huey, McClintock's deputy campaign manager, said his volunteers have been on the mark with their unofficial tallies.

"Our tallies have been very accurate in Nevada County, and we know what to expect here (in Placer)," he said.

He wouldn't talk about numbers, but said, "We are doing substantially better than on Election Day," when McClintock outpolled Brown by 2,043 votes in Placer County.

Brown's campaign manager, Todd Stenhouse, said he didn't put much stock in on-site tallies and remained confident that Brown would prevail "provided that every legal vote is counted."

As if to illustrate that point, Thursday featured a brief dispute over seven ballots in Nevada County.

The McClintock camp initially challenged the ballots – which came from overseas – because they were marked for either Democrat (six) or Republican (one), instead of for a candidate.

But McClintock spokesman Bill George said later Thursday that the challenge had been dropped and the ballots would be counted.

That kind of scrutiny is the point of the army of observers.

Both Huey and Stenhouse praised the poise and cordiality of election workers in every county seat.

"They are doing heroic work under difficult conditions," Stenhouse said. "They truly are operating under a magnifying glass."

Huey agreed. "We have no complaints. The process seems to be working well in all the counties, and the workers have been very friendly and helpful, despite being under enormous pressure."

Placer elections chief Jim McCauley said his crew welcomes the scrutiny.

"The more the public is included in the details of the process, the more the mystery of elections goes away," he said.

Call The Bee's Bob Walter, (916) 478-2860.