

Patt Morrison Asks: Balloteer Kim Alexander

Why every day is election day for the president of the California Voter Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan outfit dedicated to fixing the election process.

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The first California election that Kim Alexander cast a ballot in was a pip; voters decided 16 state propositions -- on creating a state lottery, capping welfare, limiting campaign contributions -- and gave their former governor, Ronald Reagan, a second term in the White House.

Most of us think election days roll around too soon, if we remember them at all. For Alexander, every day is election day -- a red-letter day for the president of the California Voter Foundation. It's a nonprofit, nonpartisan outfit dedicated to fixing the election process. Where to start? Hanging chads, crummy turnout, clunky voter databases that any smartphone can leave in the dust, a mishmash of regulations and ravaged budgets. We pay lip service to elections as jewels of democracy, but that's about all we pay for them. Undeterred, Alexander always casts her vote for voting itself.

What's a nice girl like you doing in a mess like this?

I love elections; I grew up with elections. My dad ran for Culver City City Council when I was 7. Election night, we had a big party and my dad was the underdog and someone was on the phone getting the numbers and I [wrote] the numbers on the chalkboard. To me, politics has been about community service.

You also learned about the political version of trick or treat.

Someone showed up at the door with a \$500 [campaign contribution] check. For a Culver City election, that was a lot of money. My dad sent him away. He said: "I don't know that man, I don't want to know him and I don't want him to think I owe him anything." My first lesson in how money in politics works!



Kim Alexander is president of the California Voter Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan outfit dedicated to fixing the election process. (Rik Keller / Handout)

We have former Secretary of State March Fong Eu to thank for banning pay toilets -- and for the California Voter Foundation?

[It was] an offshoot of the secretary of state's office, to raise charitable funds for extra voter outreach. By 1993, it was [defunct], out of compliance with various tax filings. In college I'd worked for Gary K. Hart when he ran for Congress. It was grueling: high stakes, consultants, opposition research -- that stuff is really unpleasant. I wanted to be for all the voters, not just some of the voters. So this opportunity to restart the California Voter Foundation fell into my lap.

Even voter registration has become politicized. Someone on a right-wing website wrote that it is "profoundly ... un-American" to register welfare recipients to vote.

It's unfortunate. In a lot of the world you're automatically [registered] when you become 18 and you're a citizen. Here we have this extra hurdle.

Across the country, voting rights are not shared among all Americans. In California there's a variety of practices between the counties, an unevenness. That's a big problem.

You almost weren't allowed to vote in 2008.

They told me my polling place had moved. I got my sample ballot and went back and said, "This is my polling place." They were turning other people away.

Elections are run as if they're one-day sales. We run polling places for 12, 14 hours, staffed by people with very little training working very long hours on a job they only do once or twice a year. We should have people vote over several days in an environment staffed by well-trained people. I think about elections year-round; most people only think about them for maybe two months. It's hard to sustain the momentum to implement election reform.

What kinds of problems have you encountered at other polling places?

In 2006, when the electronic voting battle was raging, I went in with a crew from [the PBS] "Newshour" to a polling place in Stockton, with cameras. It was complete chaos. [A poll worker] hadn't shown up; they literally had pulled someone in off the street to help. All these security seals on the electronic voting machines, poll workers just tore [them] off, because they didn't know what they were doing.

I went to another polling place in the same county that afternoon without the cameras. I gave them my card and they thought I was some government official. The poll worker opened the machine up at to show me the paper trail spool – exactly the opposite of what they were supposed to do.

The biggest fiasco I witnessed was paperless electronic voting in March 2004. We found out that San Diego County bought its equipment from Diebold before it was even certified by the state or the federal government. The second largest county in the state. They deployed thousands of voting machines and more than half [in] their polling places were not operating at some point during [election] day. People were literally told to go home and come back later when maybe the machines would be working.

Voting is a constitutional right, but some states demand that voters show official IDs, to stop fraud. Critics say that's about suppressing the vote.

It's a solution in search of a problem. There's this myth of voter fraud. You see hardly any instances.

First-time voters [already] have to show ID when they vote. When you sign the poll book, you're doing so under penalty of perjury. I'd like a happy medium where maybe you don't show a photo ID but some [document] with your name on it.

What about online voting?

One of the issues I worked hardest on was to require a paper trail for electronic ballots. When paperless voting was introduced, guess what -- there was no longer an independent audit trail. There's no way we could verify the results independent of the private companies that created the software. I do not favor online voting. The Internet is a great tool -- but not for casting ballots.

Elections are a kind of unfunded mandate: The counties have to pay for what the states and federal governments require.

Absolutely. It's one of the longest-running unfunded mandates out there. So we're stuck with this antiquated voting process because there's no money to improve it, no R&D money, no companies working to build a better voting system. One of the reasons the federal government doesn't pay its fair share is because of the states' rights issue. A lot of states [think] if the federal government paid, then the federal government could attach strings. A lot of states' rights advocates don't want to see that happen. They'd just rather say, "No thank you, we don't want the money, we'll do this our way."

If counties don't comply with the laws, the only [recourse] is to sue them. In Fresno, where they didn't have enough money to staff all their polling places, the registrar went to the Board of Supervisors and said, "We need money for more polling places," and they said, "You're not going to get it." [The registrar] said, "But the law requires us to have so many polling places per thousand [registered voters], and they said, "Too bad." For county governments, elections are one area where they can cut budgets. In other areas, like transportation and housing, they're required to provide funds to get federal or state dollars.

You write songs about the propositions to get people's attention.

I love creating [proposition songs](#). I grew up with "Schoolhouse Rock," so I thought something similar for voters would be a great public service. This last ballot, the marijuana legalization measure was good fodder for a song!

Californians love the idea of direct democracy but get ticked off at all these elections. What is that paradox about?

Californians have a love-hate relationship with the initiative process. We love to complain about it, but don't you dare talk about taking it away. There are a growing number who want reforms. SB 334 on the governor's desk would require donors of \$50,000 or more to be listed in the ballot pamphlet.

Our voter turnout is so crummy that I wrote a [tongue-in-cheek column](#) thanking people for not voting because it made my vote more influential.

I had this conversation with my dad: "Why doesn't Culver City consolidate its local elections with state and federal? You'd have a higher rate of participation." He said: "We only want people who care about Culver City to vote in Culver City elections!"

When you've got ballots [so] long and complicated, I understand why some people are worried that not everybody is wrapping their heads around [issues] as carefully as they might. At the same time, only 1 out of 3 initiatives, on average, passes. When voters are in doubt, they vote no or skip it. Voters are very savvy.

Should we fine people for not voting, as Australia does?

No. People would be compelled to vote for the wrong reasons. We need to make voting as easy as possible, and that starts with registration. We have 6.4 million eligible people in California who are not registered. That's 27% of our voting population. That places us 42nd in the nation. That's appalling.

There's no one shaming politicians into making elections more participatory. [To them] it doesn't matter how many people show up on election day, as long as your guy gets more votes. The campaigns are not interested in maximizing participation. If anything, they want fewer people voting because it costs less money to campaign to fewer people.

If you don't have a participatory election process, then people looking to make their voices heard will find other ways and they will be far more violent and disruptive than putting on an election. It's in everybody's interest to get everyone to participate, particularly those who feel disenfranchised.

It sounds like you have a lot of faith in voters.

I do. I would estimate there's about 3 [million] to 4 million people in this state who never miss an election. They read the ballot pamphlet; they do their homework. Those people are the lifeblood of our election process in California. Then you've got millions of occasional voters who come and go based on what's on the ballot and how exciting the election is.

Elections are exciting for me. It makes me sad that people call those who are really excited about elections and politics political junkies, like it's a bad drug habit. To me it's a way of life.

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This interview is edited and excerpted from a longer taped transcript. An archive of past interviews is at latimes.com/pattasks.

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