

San Francisco Chronicle

# FRIDAY

EAST BAY





**Chip Johnson**

## History has antidotes for modern voting madness

**F**or first-time voter Emma Sandoe, the controversy around the stalled Oct. 7 recall of Gov. Gray Davis appears to be the work of someone who's lost their marbles.

Literally.

Sandoe, 18, turned a summer internship at Fremont's Museum of Local History into a research project on the early elections held in the five townships that now make up a city of more than 200,000 people.

She dug up old political buttons, pins and posters, borrowed punch-card ballots from the Alameda County Registrar's office and found a wooden ballot box used in a Washington Township election in the 1880s.

And after looking at voting methods and equipment, Sandoe, who graduated from Fremont's Washington High School in June, came to the same conclusion most Americans did after the 2000 U.S. presidential election: The nation's current voting methods are unreliable and screwed up.

"Until we can update the whole (voting) system, if we just simplified things, the old-fashioned way would work wonders for everyone," Sandoe said.

"We need less candidates, fewer ways of voting and simple 'yes' or 'no' choices for ballot measures," she added.

What Californian wouldn't have paid for a primary election to thin this herd of 133 candidates, a group that includes Hollywood actors, career politicians, has-beens, never-weres and wannabes?

In her research project, which will be on display at the museum through the end of the year, Sandoe explored several old methods of voting — including a small "ballot" box that held black and white marbles.

A vote was cast by dropping through a hole the colored marble that corresponded with the candidate.

The candidate with the most marbles won the election, which has become a rare occurrence in U.S. elections at all levels around the country.

Sandoe also has displayed punch-card ballots, complete with hanging chads, from a group of fourth-grade students who visited the exhibit and filled out old ballots. The paper trail includes a 1952 Oakland Tribune article complaining about how color-coded ballots in the 1880s and '90s offered no real privacy.

The museum display, titled "Democracy on Exhibit," includes a half-moon-

► **JOHNSON:** Page E2

# Exploring how state lost its voting marbles

► **JOHNSON**  
From Page E1

shaped rubber stamp, just one design among scores of marks that were accepted as legal signatures in the 19th Century, when illiteracy was widespread.

Sandoe's exhibit also offers visitors a chronology of election results dating back to Fremont's incorporation in 1956 — when 71 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the first city council election.

The display also highlights

## The art of voting

"Democracy on Exhibit" will be on display at the Fremont Museum of Local History, 190 Anza St., through December. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays, and the second Saturday and Sunday of the month. Admission is \$2 for adults, \$1 for seniors and children under 12.

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Old methods included a small "ballot" box that held black and white marbles. The candidate with the most marbles won.

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some of the characters and politicians whose work helped establish the city. Among them is John Charles Fremont, the city's namesake.

After exploring the West in the 1840s, Fremont settled in California, where he became wealthy during the Gold Rush and was elected in 1850 as one of the state's first two U.S. senators.

Six years later, he was the Republican party's first presidential nominee. He lost that election, but was later appointed a general by President Abraham Lincoln, leading the Union Army's Western troops during the Civil War.

Along the way, Fremont made and lost a fortune in the booming railroad industry, and died penniless in New York in July 1890.

If Sandoe ran the polls in the city named after the Union general, she would immediately get rid of punch-card ballots because of the hanging chad problems that dogged Florida voters in the last presidential election.

Those hanger-ons also emerged as a problem during the elementary school kids' mock vote using ballots leftover from past elections.

"When the kids did their vote, they left some hanging chads," Sandoe said.

Sandoe won't be around to aid the Alameda County Registrar in coming elections or serve as a docent to the display because she is headed to the University of California at San Diego, where she will enter as a

freshman this month.

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