Yes, there’s a lot happening today in the national election. Lost in the shuffle though are three big initiatives before some California voters that could have a big impact on the state’s transit and development future.

1. Measure RR to restore BART: this is an unusual transit measure because it’s one of the first I’ve seen that makes no promises about expanding transit service. Instead, it seeks to issue bonds solely for maintenance of the aging San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system. The bond issue will require two-thirds approval, which is a high hurdle. But failure to pass means that BART will continue to have reliability issues and won’t be able to increase train frequencies to meet growing ridership. It’s a nod to the reality of what happens to rail lines with too much neglect, as Washington DC is now experiencing.
2. Measure M to boost transit (and transportation) in Los Angeles: the County of Los Angeles is going back to the voters for another transportation sales tax measure. If it passes, without a sunset date like 2008’s Measure R, it will solidify Los Angeles as a national leader in building rail transit and will transform the city for the rest of this century. That will be a total and major shift for the region that once sold the image of car-oriented suburbia to the world.
3. Santa Monica’s LV measure to prevent new housing: this is more of a bellwether initiative that could be a harbinger of a broader backlash against pro-housing policies throughout the state. Santa Monica is a wealthy coastal community that recently got a multibillion, taxpayer-funded rail line delivered to its shores. But homeowners there have already helped squash one big development project next to a rail station, and this initiative would prevent any substantial new housing from being built, under the guise of direct democracy. Its effect would be to depress transit ridership on the new rail line, greatly escalate home prices and rents by artificially restricting supply, and continue the trend of core urban residents forcing new arrivals to the sprawl periphery in search of affordable homes, far from well-paying jobs. While Santa Monica is only one community, the success of the initiative could be a prelude to further anti-housing measures in greater Los Angeles and the state.

So while the nation will be focused on bigger elections, these three will in their own way have a significant effect on the future of California’s cities, environment and economy. Another reason to stay tuned!