Improving California’s Vote-by-Mail Process by Reducing Ballot Rejection

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California Voter Foundation
@kimalex3, @calvoterfdn
About the California Voter Foundation (CVF)

• Nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization
• Based in Sacramento, CA
• Working since 1994 to improve the voting process to better serve voters
• Online at www.calvoter.org
• Improving vote-by-mail a priority since 2013
The percentage of California voters casting vote-by-mail ballots has increased from 33 percent in 2004 to 72 percent in March 2020.

Source: California Secretary of State
California has adopted several vote-by-mail reforms in recent years:

Counties must:

✓ Provide voters with prepaid postage ballot return envelopes
✓ Contact voters with missing or mismatched signatures & provide opportunity to submit valid signature.
✓ Use Intelligent Mail Barcodes to enable ballot tracking and verify return date when postmarks are missing
✓ Count ballots received within three days of the election (extended to 17 days for Nov. 2020) if verified received by USPS by Election Day
Voters can:

- Return their ballot to any election site in the state
- Get a replacement ballot if they lose their mail ballot
- Track their ballot status online
- Ask someone they trust to return their ballot for them.
Despite these reforms, tens of thousands of California ballots are rejected every election

... on average, 1.7 percent of vote-by-mail ballots cast in statewide elections between 2010-2020 were rejected, primarily due to late arrival and missing or mismatched voters’ signatures on ballot envelopes.

CVF, in collaboration with Dr. Mindy Romero of USC’s Center for Inclusive Democracy conducted a study of mail ballot rejection in three counties (Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara) supported by grants from Silicon Valley Community Foundation and the County of Sacramento.
Improving California’s Vote-by-Mail Process by Reducing Ballot Rejection: A Three-County Study

Sacramento
San Mateo
Santa Clara

www.calvoter.org/rejectedballots
Over the past ten years, on average 1.7 percent of all California vote-by-mail ballots cast have been rejected.
1.7 percent may not sound like a lot but in California, home to 21 million registered voters, it translates into tens of thousands of ballots going uncounted each election.
CVF’s study looked at November 2018 rejected vote-by-mail ballots in three counties:

Sacramento: 0.8 % rejected
Santa Clara: 0.7 % rejected
San Mateo: 1.0 % rejected
Statewide: 1.0 % rejected
In all three counties, young voters’ ballots were rejected at three times the rate of each county’s overall rejection rate.
Voters age 18-24 had ballots rejected 2-3 percent of the time compared to voters overall at 1 percent or lower.

VBM Rejection Rate by Age Group
2018 General Election

Data Source: County Voter Files
In the three counties studied, young voters were the smallest group by age of vote-by-mail voters.
....and the largest group by age of vote-by-mail voters whose ballots were rejected.
Newly registered voters in the three counties studied also had higher rejection rates - twice those of voters overall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sacramento</th>
<th>San Mateo</th>
<th>Santa Clara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New</strong></td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All</strong></td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: County Voter Files
The top reasons for rejection: Too Late, Signature Doesn’t Match, No Signature

Percent of All Rejected VBM Ballots by Reason for Rejection
2018 General Election

- Signature Doesn’t Match: 39.6% (Sacramento), 9.5% (San Mateo), 4.4% (Santa Clara)
- No Signature: 25.9% (Sacramento), 21.2% (San Mateo), 14.7% (Santa Clara)
- Too Late: 31.0% (Sacramento), 67.9% (San Mateo)
- Other: 3.5% (Sacramento), 3.3% (San Mateo), 7.9% (Santa Clara)

Data Source: County Voter Files
In Sacramento County, young voters’ ballots were rejected mostly for nonmatching signatures and lateness; older voters for missing signatures.
For San Mateo County’s voters with rejected ballots, younger voters were more likely to get their ballots in late, while for older voters it was lateness and missing signatures.
For Santa Clara County’s voters with rejected ballots, younger voters were more likely to return ballots late. In all 3 counties missing signatures increased with age.
The percentage of ballots rejected in the 2 Voter’s Choice Act counties studied did not change significantly but the number of ballots rejected rose dramatically after implementation of the VCA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>June 2016</th>
<th>June 2018</th>
<th>Change From 2016-2018</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total VBM Ballots Cast</td>
<td>Number Rejected</td>
<td>Cast Plus Rejected</td>
<td>Percent Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento</td>
<td>228,337</td>
<td>3,148</td>
<td>231,485</td>
<td>1.36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Mateo</td>
<td>127,127</td>
<td>2,130</td>
<td>129,257</td>
<td>1.65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Santa Clara</td>
<td>319,803</td>
<td>4,274</td>
<td>324,077</td>
<td>1.32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>5,036,262</td>
<td>69,518</td>
<td>5,105,780</td>
<td>1.36%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>November 2016</th>
<th>November 2018</th>
<th>Change From 2016-2018</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total VBM Ballots Cast</td>
<td>Number Rejected</td>
<td>Cast Plus Rejected</td>
<td>Percent Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento</td>
<td>372,597</td>
<td>1,957</td>
<td>374,554</td>
<td>0.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Mateo</td>
<td>218,289</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>219,214</td>
<td>0.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Clara</td>
<td>534,217</td>
<td>3,765</td>
<td>537,982</td>
<td>0.70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>8,443,594</td>
<td>58,309</td>
<td>8,501,903</td>
<td>0.69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: California Secretary of State web site
Almost 100% “Too Late” returned by mail in Sacramento & San Mateo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sacramento</th>
<th>Mail</th>
<th>VC Drop Off</th>
<th>Drop Box</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Signature Match</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>1,463</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Signature</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Late</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,199</td>
<td>663</td>
<td>828</td>
<td>3,690</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>San Mateo</th>
<th>Mail</th>
<th>VC Drop Off</th>
<th>Drop Box</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Signature Match</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>114</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Signature</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>551</td>
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<tr>
<td>Too Late</td>
<td>1,851</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,853</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,338</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>2,604</td>
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<th>VC Drop Off</th>
<th>Drop Box</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Signature Match</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Signature</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Late</td>
<td>99.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>San Mateo</th>
<th>Mail</th>
<th>VC Drop Off</th>
<th>Drop Box</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Signature Match</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Signature</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Late</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: County voter files
Late Ballots in 3 Sacramento Elections:

- Most ballots rejected due to lateness were **postmarked** after Election Day and could not have been accepted even with a longer grace period.
- Significant percentage not postmarked, had unreadable postmarks.
- Increasing awareness of USPS practices, use of Intelligent Mail barcodes, and reminding voters to date their ballot envelope signature can help reduce ballot rejection due to late, missing or unreadable postmarks.
Signature challenges and cures

• Under California law, if a voter forgets to sign the ballot envelope or the signature does not sufficiently match the voter’s registration signature, the county must notify the voter by mail and provide an opportunity to submit a valid signature so the ballot can be counted instead of rejected.

• In the three counties studied, overall 54 percent of the ballots challenged for signature issues, cast by 7,318 total voters, were “cured” and counted thanks to this outreach.

• Voters who sign up for ballot tracking can be immediately notified if there is an issue with their ballot.
Some reforms CVF recommends:

• Implement statewide regulations to create more uniformity in counties’ signature verification processes (currently underway)

• Require all counties to provide ballot drop boxes voters can use in addition to returning ballots via U.S. Mail

• Require more standardization in coding of rejected ballots and reporting by counties of the numbers of ballots rejected and why

• Notify voters when their ballots are rejected and the reason for rejection.
Tips for Voter Outreach Groups

✓ Reach out to young and newly registered voters in engaging formats such as video and graphics on social media platforms and through trusted messengers and help familiarize them with the VBM process, the U.S. Postal Service and how signature verification works.

✓ Increase awareness about mailbox pickup times and the availability of ballot drop-off locations to help reduce ballot rejection due to late postmarks and delivery.

✓ Urge voters to return ballots early.
Tips for Voter Outreach Groups

✓ Help voters learn what in-person voting options are available in their county.

✓ Urge voters to make their ballot envelope signature look like the one on their license or state ID.

✓ Urge voters to be cautious when sharing election information on social media and encourage use of the SIFT method for detecting disinformation:
  
  • Stop
  • Investigate
  • Find trusted coverage
  • Trace and follow the link.
CVF developed social media graphics to help more voters successfully cast vote-by-mail ballots... (vote-by-mail song too!)

... Voter outreach groups can use and customize these graphics to help reach more voters, available at www.calvoter.org/covg
What do you do with that ballot you got in the mail?

Fill it in (as best you can)
You don't have to vote on every contest. It's OK to skip some and just vote on the ones you care about.

Sign the envelope
Your signature will be compared to the one you provided when you registered. If you don't recall what it looks like, make it look like the one on your license or ID. Remember to date it.

Get it in on time
Ballots must be postmarked or returned by 8 pm on Election Day to be counted. Make sure your votes count by mailing your ballot in early or returning it in person to a voting site, ballot drop box or your county election office.

Learn more at www.calvoter.org
VOTING QUESTIONS?
CONTACT YOUR COUNTY ELECTION OFFICE
WWW.CALVOTER.ORG/COUNTY_CONTACT
DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU CAN CHECK YOUR VOTING STATUS ONLINE?

- Registration Status
- Ballot Status and Tracking

Find out more about California Secretary of State online tools for voters at our website: www.calvoter.org/votertools
STOP (fakers count on you to react)
INVESTIGATE (the source and date)
FIND (trusted coverage)
TRACE (follow the link)

Be Informed #TrustedInfo2020 #SIFT

CALVOTER.ORG
everybody vote early!

by mail or drop-off carefully at the polls

CALVOTER.ORG

www.calvoter.org
Ask for a “hand cancel” postmark at your post office to guarantee your ballot envelope’s postmark date.
Contact Your County Election Office
Online Voter Tools - Check Your Status
Voting FAQ
California Map Series
Proposition Song
California Online Voter Guide

Is your voter registration record up to date? Do you need to register or update your registration? Visit CVF’s Online Voter Tools - Check Your Status page to learn how to verify your registration address or register online.

VOTER’S EDGE

July 27, 2020: Rejected Ballots - a preview of CVF’s study findings and recent news coverage
**Contact Your County Election Office**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alameda</th>
<th>Orange</th>
<th>Placer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>Plumas</td>
<td>Riverside</td>
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<td>Amador</td>
<td>Sacramento</td>
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<td>Butte</td>
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<td>Colusa</td>
<td>San Luis Obispo</td>
<td>San Mateo</td>
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<td>Contra Costa</td>
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<td>Glenn</td>
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<td>Humboldt</td>
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**CONTACT YOUR COUNTY ELECTION OFFICE**

County election offices are responsible for managing elections in California.

Scroll down to find your county's contact information.

Your county election office can answer questions about registration status, sample ballots/voter information guides, polling place, drop box and vote center locations and voting by mail. County election offices are typically open for in-person or phone assistance on weekdays during business hours; some offer expanded hours during election times.

If you do not know which county you live in, use the League of California Cities’ City and County Directory to find out.
Example of County Election Offices listings at Calvoter.org

- **Riverside County**
  Rebecca Spencer, Registrar of Voters
  2724 Gateway Drive
  Riverside, CA 92507-0918
  Phone: 951-486-7200 or 800-773-VOTE
  Fax: 951-486-7272
  Email: rovweb@co.riverside.ca.us
  online voter lookup: registration status | vote-by-mail ballot status | sample ballot | polling place

- **Sacramento County**
  Courtney Bailey-Kanelos, Registrar of Voters
  7000 65th St.
  Sacramento, CA 95823
  Phone: 916-875-6451, Toll Free: 800-762-8019
  Fax: 916-875-6516
  Email: voterinfo@saccounty.net
  online voter lookup: registration status | vote-by-mail ballot status | sample ballot | vote centers & drop boxes
Home → Voter Resources

Online Voter Tools - Check Your Status

California voters have access to numerous online tools provided by government agencies to help facilitate the voting process.

The statewide tools require a voter to enter sensitive information in order to access. County-based lookup tools typically require less data to access.

CVF urges California voters to exercise caution when using online voter tools and avoid entering sensitive personal information when connected to public WiFi in places such as airports, hotels, and cafes.

California Secretary of State online tools for voters:

- **My Voter Status**, [voterstatus.sos.ca.gov](http://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov): an all-in-one lookup tool that verifies whether you are currently registered to vote and at what address, whether you are a vote-by-mail voter and ballot status. If you voted by mail or cast a provisional ballot, this is where you can verify if your ballot was counted.

- **Where’s My Ballot**, [wheresmyballot.sos.ca.gov](http://wheresmyballot.sos.ca.gov): voters in all 58 counties can use this free service to track their mail ballot’s delivery and return and verify it has been accepted.
Voting FAQ

We hope you will find answers to your voting-related questions in the Frequently Asked Questions below. If not, please contact us and we'll do our best to answer your question as quickly as possible.

- **Vote-by-Mail Voting**
  - How do I vote by mail?
  - Will my Vote-by-Mail ballot be counted?

- **Election Day Voting**
  - Where do I go to vote? How do I find my polling place?
  - Do I have to show ID when I vote?
  - What time do the polls open and close?
  - What do I do if I am going to be out of town on Election Day?
  - I've moved since I registered -- can I still vote?
  - Is my employer required to give me time off to vote?
  - Whom do I contact about voter fraud or other voting concerns?

- **Political Districts**
  - How do I find out which political districts I live in?
California Online Voter Guide

2020 Presidential General Election
November 3, 2020

Important Dates:

- **October 5** - Vote-by-Mail ballots sent to all active registered voter; first day of early voting
- **October 19** - Voter registration deadline
- **October 20 - November 3** - Conditional, "same day" voter registration available at vote centers and county election offices
- **October 27** - last day to request a vote-by-mail ballot be sent by mail; voters advised to return ballots by mail by this day
- **Tuesday, November 3** - Election Day - polling places, ballot drop boxes and vote centers are open statewide 7am - 8 pm
The California Voter Foundation relies on donations to support our work helping voters. Please give to CVF! Contributions are tax-deductible.

www.calvoter.org/donate
For more information, contact:

Kim Alexander
916-441-2494, kimalex@calvoter.org
@kimalex3, @calvoterfdn
facebook.com/calvoterfdn

www.calvoter.org