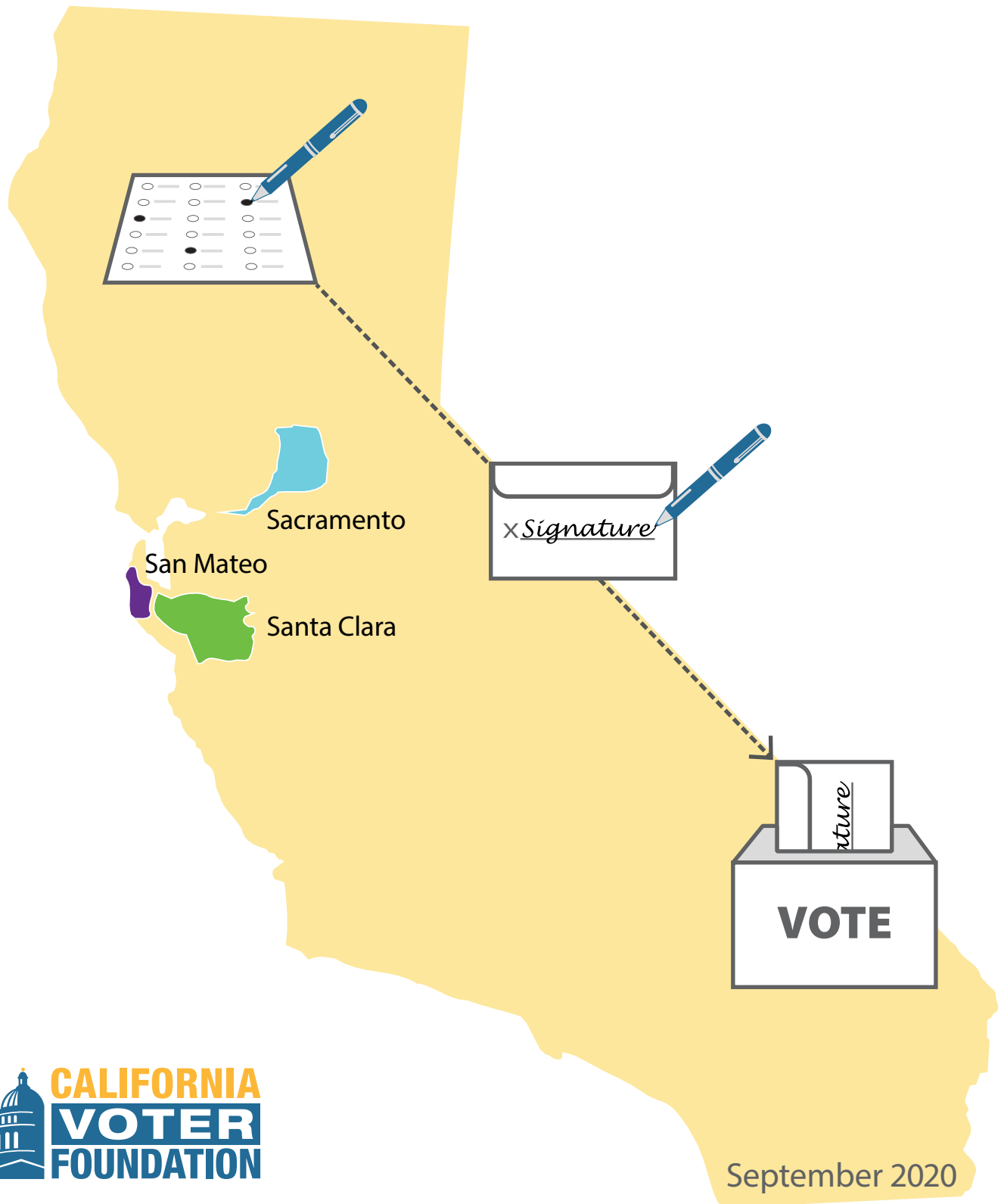


Improving California's Vote-by-Mail Process by Reducing Ballot Rejection: A Three-County Study



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This report is authored by Kim Alexander, president and founder of the California Voter Foundation, and Dr. Mindy S. Romero, founder and director of the USC Center for Inclusive Democracy, with graphic design by Mary Casey and technical support provided by John Jones. Charts included in this report were developed by Jason Mendez.

Methodology

This study was conducted with registered voter file data obtained from Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties' election offices, as well as data obtained from the California Secretary of State's Office. County election offices also provided data on their outreach efforts to voters with missing or mismatched ballot envelope signatures, and additional assistance through interviews and site visits to their offices by study researchers.

The California Voter Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization working through research, oversight, outreach and demonstration projects to improve the election process so that it better serves the needs and interests of voters. Learn more at www.calvoter.org.



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Improving California's Vote-by-Mail Process by Reducing Ballot Rejection: A Three-County Study

I. Highlights and Executive Summary

This report examines the demographics and voting methods of Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara county voters whose November 2018 vote-by-mail ballots were rejected and the reasons for rejection, as well as overall statewide trends in mail ballot rejection.

Key findings:

- On average over the past ten years, 1.7 percent of California ballots cast as vote-by-mail ballots have been rejected.
- The top three reasons vote-by-mail ballots were rejected in the three counties studied are that voters returned them too late to count, they neglected to sign the ballot envelope, or the signature they provided on the envelope did not sufficiently match their voter registration signature on file with their county.
- In all three counties studied, the ballot rejection rate for voters age 18-24 was three times the counties' overall rejection rates. Young voters were the smallest subgroup by age of vote-by-mail voters but the largest subgroup by age of rejected vote-by-mail ballots.
- In all three counties, newly registered voters' ballot rejection rates were much higher than the overall rejection rate - nearly twice the rate in Sacramento and more than twice the rate in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.
- All three counties had similar findings regarding age and newly registered voters but a significant difference in the top reason for rejection, with Sacramento's top reason being non-matching signatures while lateness was the top reason for rejection in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.
- In Sacramento County, 99.6 percent of ballots rejected as "too late" were returned by U.S. Mail; in San Mateo County, 99.9 percent of "too late" rejected ballots were returned by U.S. Mail.
- In Sacramento County, the predominant reason for ballot rejection due to lateness was not because of late arrival from the U.S. Postal Service but because the return ballot envelope was postmarked after Election Day.



- Across four elections in 2016 and 2018, the *percentage* of ballots rejected in the three counties studied remained fairly consistent with the statewide rejection rate, but the *number* of ballots rejected in Sacramento and San Mateo counties rose significantly after those counties implemented the Voter’s Choice Act which led to a greater percentage of their voters casting vote-by-mail ballots.
- The three county election offices’ 2018 voter notification efforts for voters whose ballots were challenged due to missing or mismatched ballot envelope signatures resulted in 54 percent of those ballots being corrected or “cured”, preventing 7,318 ballots from being rejected.

Although many reforms have been implemented in recent years, the problem of vote-by-mail ballot rejection persists. Some recent changes in California law could help reduce rejected ballots in the 2020 Presidential Election. These include providing a longer grace period for accepting ballots postmarked by Election Day, requiring counties to use Intelligent Mail Barcodes on mailed ballots and requiring all counties to provide voters with the opportunity to sign up for mail ballot tracking services. Some additional recommendations included in this report are:

- Expand the number of ballot drop boxes and drop-off locations so voters can return their ballots in person rather than through the U.S. Mail to avoid ballot rejection due to late postmarks or delivery;
- Urge voters to return their ballots early;
- Adopt enhanced statewide signature verification standards to ensure voters’ signatures are evaluated consistently across all counties;
- Emphasize outreach to young voters who are less familiar with voting, the U.S. Postal Service, and using signatures for verification purposes; and
- Send more than the one notice currently required by law to voters with missing or mismatched signatures to help ensure that more voters have their ballots accepted instead of rejected.

II. Introduction: Why Study Rejected Ballots?

This study examines the demographics and ballot return methods of Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara county voters whose November 2018 vote-by-mail ballots were rejected and the reasons for rejection.

Vote-by-mail balloting is expanding in these three counties and other California counties choosing to adopt the Voter’s Choice Act. The Voter’s Choice Act (VCA) is a new voting model that California counties have the option to implement, in which every registered voter is mailed a vote-by-mail ballot to be returned by mail or in



person at a drop box or vote center, with additional in-person voting opportunities and services available at county-wide vote centers over multiple days.

California's election officials, lawmakers and voter advocates have worked in recent years to implement reforms that improve the vote-by-mail balloting process. Nonetheless, the problem of ballot rejection persists as the portion of ballots cast as vote-by-mail ballots continues to grow due to the expanding use of vote-by-mail balloting and expanding adoption of the Voter's Choice Act.

For the November 2020 Presidential Election, due to the coronavirus pandemic and concern for public safety, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued an executive order as well as signed into law legislation that requires California's county election offices to mail every active, registered California voter a vote-by-mail ballot so that all voters can more easily access voting by mail and avoid voting in person and its potential risk to their health and safety and that of others.¹

While vote-by-mail balloting has advantages, especially during a pandemic, it also shifts the responsibility for correctly casting a ballot from poll workers to voters.

By examining the reasons for ballot rejection, and the demographics and voting methods of voters whose ballots are rejected, this study seeks to provide election officials, voters and voter advocacy groups with a better understanding of the groups of voters who are more likely to have their ballots rejected and why. As a result, messaging and outreach strategies can be more precisely targeted, and reforms can be adopted to help more Californians successfully cast vote-by-mail ballots.

Overview - The Growth of Vote-by-Mail in California

The percentage of ballots cast as "absentee" or vote-by-mail ballots has steadily climbed from 2.6 percent in 1962 up to 72.1 percent in the March 2020 Presidential Primary.² Three significant changes to California law can be credited for this increase. First, a change in law in 1979 permitted "no excuse" absentee voting, which allows Californians to vote by mail simply if they prefer to do so. Second, another change in law that took effect in 2002 allows Californians to sign up as "permanent" vote-by-mail (VBM) voters who are automatically mailed a ballot for each election without needing to request one. And third, in 2016 the Voter's Choice Act was enacted, permitting counties to opt into a new voting model in which every registered voter is mailed a ballot and neighborhood polling places are replaced with ballot drop boxes and vote centers that, while fewer in number are open to all voters county-wide and over several days.



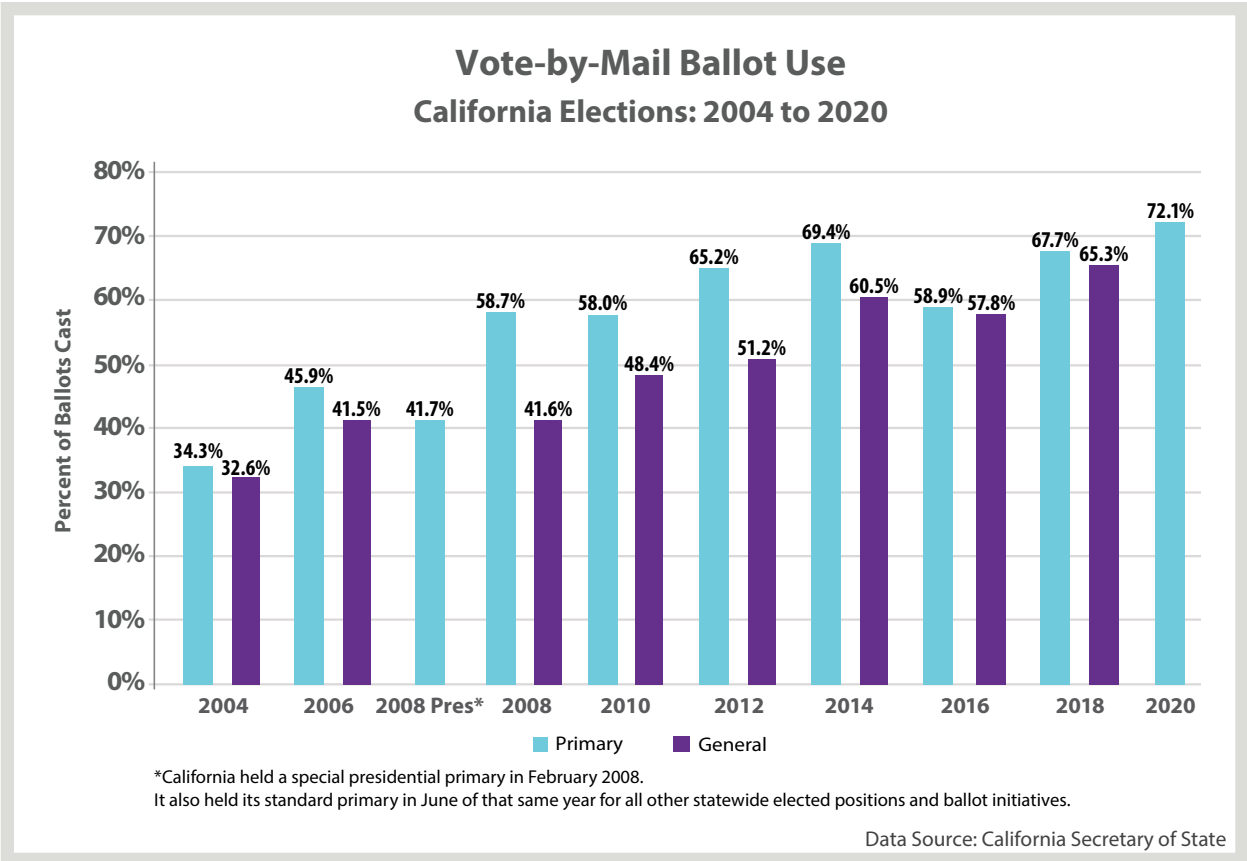


CHART 1: Vote-by-Mail Ballot Use, California Elections, 2004-2020

III. Historical California Ballot Rejection Rates

The California Secretary of State’s office has been tracking county-by-county ballot rejection rates statewide since 2003, but it was not until 2010 that comprehensive data for all 58 counties began to be reported.³

Statewide Percent of Mail Ballots Rejected

Between the 2010 primary and 2020 primary elections, a total of eleven statewide elections were held and statewide ballot rejection rates ranged from a low of .7 percent in the 2016 General Election to a high of 2.9 percent in the 2014 Primary Election. On average, 1.7 percent of all vote-by-mail ballots cast were rejected each election during this ten-year period. The 2018 General Election rejection rate was 1 percent and the 2020 Primary Election rejection rate was 1.4 percent.⁴



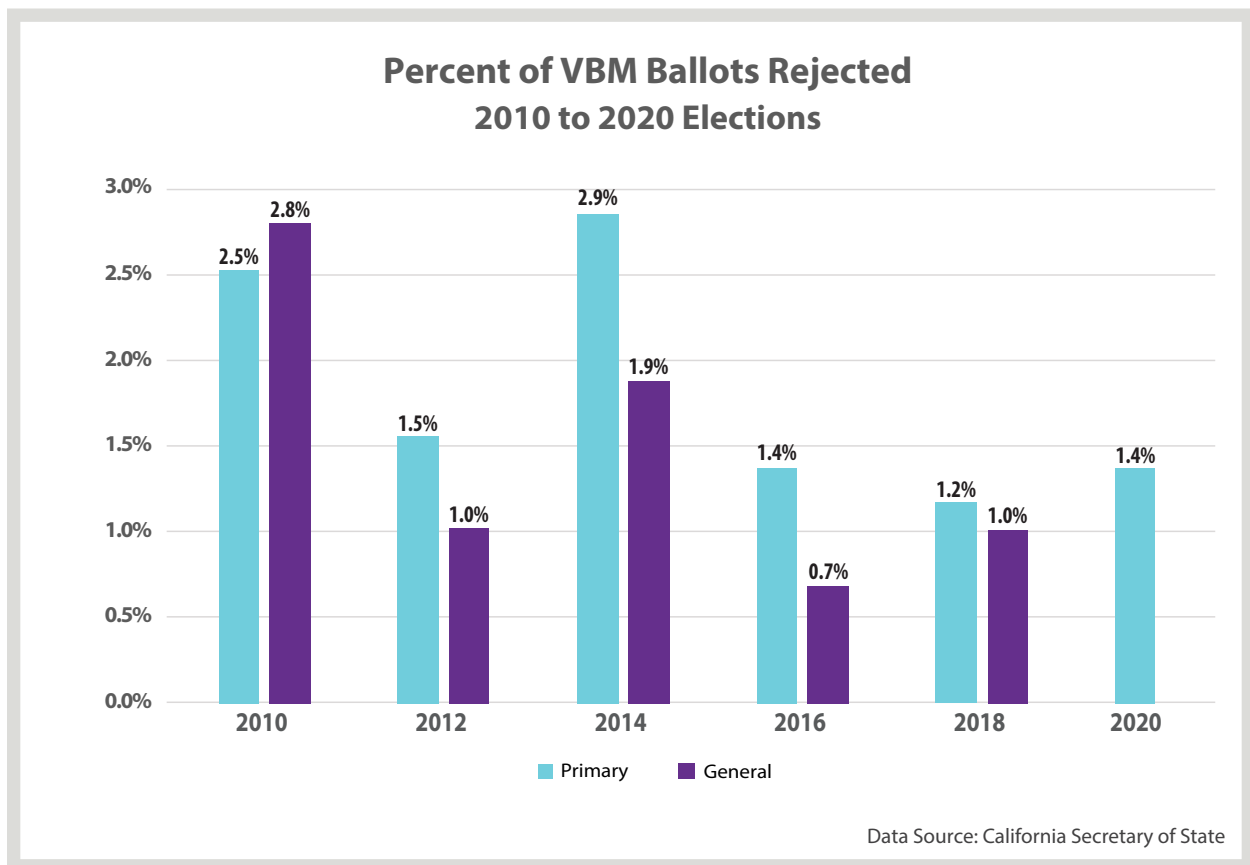


CHART 2: Percent of VBM Ballots Rejected, 2010-2020 Elections

The above chart depicts a noteworthy pattern: California’s mail ballot rejection rate is typically higher in primary elections than in general elections (with 2010 being the exception). While it is unknown why this is the case, one possible explanation is that primary election dates vary from state to state, while general election dates are uniform nationwide and attract national media attention which may have helped voters and postal carriers alike be more conscientious about timely return and delivery of mail ballots. Determining the reasons for this trend requires additional research and analysis.



Number of Mail Ballots Rejected

It is important to consider not just the percentage of ballots rejected but also the number of ballots rejected. California is home to more than 21 million registered voters, and even a small percentage of rejected ballots translates into tens of thousands of voters' ballots going uncounted. A single ballot contains numerous votes, and therefore a single rejected ballot results in multiple lost votes.

The following chart depicts the number of ballots rejected in each election from the 2010 primary to the 2020 primary:

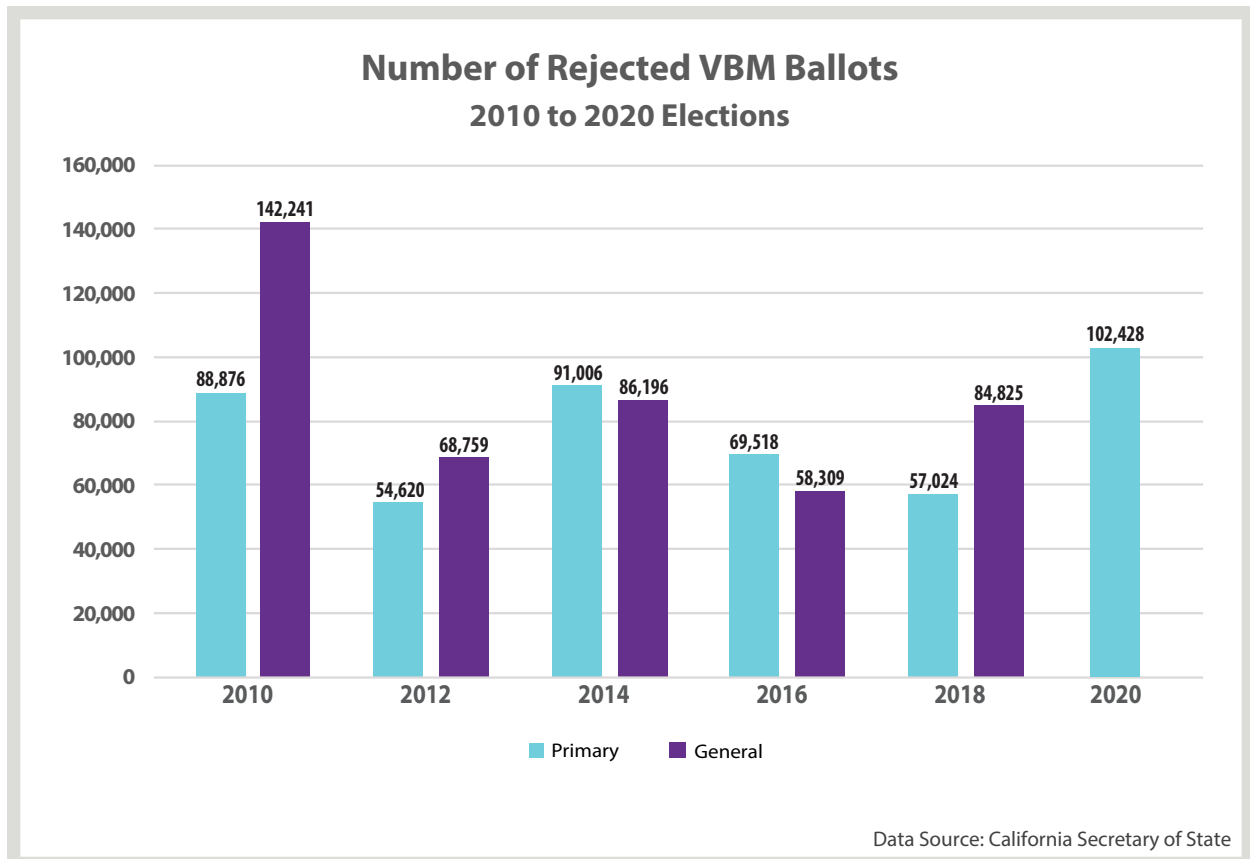


CHART 3 - Number of Rejected VBM Ballots, 2010-2020 Elections

The Voter's Choice Act

In 2018, five counties - Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento and San Mateo - adopted and implemented the Voter's Choice Act (VCA). According to a study conducted by the New Electorate Project, these five counties' voter turnout rates for the general eligible voter population (adult citizens) increased by approximately four percentage points in the 2018 Primary Election and three percentage points in the 2018 General Election.⁵ However, the number of ballots rejected also increased.

Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara's Rates of Rejected Ballots Compared to Statewide Rates

Sacramento and San Mateo were two of the five counties that first implemented the VCA in 2018 and were where over 80 percent of voters who participated in the first VCA election cast their ballots; Santa Clara implemented the VCA in 2020. The study examined all three counties' ballot rejection rates across four elections and compared those rates between pre-VCA elections and post-VCA elections as well as to the statewide average.⁶

	June 2016				June 2018				Change From 2016-2018	Percent Change
	Total VBM Ballots Cast	Number Rejected	Cast Plus Rejected	Percent Rejected	Total VBM Ballots Cast	Number Rejected	Cast Plus Rejected	Percent Rejected		
Sacramento	228,337	3,148	231,485	1.36%	292,777	2,965	295,742	1.00%	-183	-5.81%
San Mateo	127,127	2,130	129,257	1.65%	159,531	2,986	162,517	1.84%	856	40.19%
Santa Clara	319,803	4,274	324,077	1.32%	295,384	3,201	298,585	1.07%	-1,073	-25.11%
Statewide	5,036,262	69,518	5,105,780	1.36%	4,834,975	57,024	4,891,999	1.17%	-12,494	-17.97%

	November 2016				November 2018				Change From 2016-2018	Percent Change
	Total VBM Ballots Cast	Number Rejected	Cast Plus Rejected	Percent Rejected	Total VBM Ballots Cast	Number Rejected	Cast Plus Rejected	Percent Rejected		
Sacramento	372,597	1,957	374,554	0.52%	492,373	3,892	496,265	0.78%	1,935	98.88%
San Mateo	218,289	925	219,214	0.42%	256,053	2,936	258,989	1.13%	2,011	217.41%
Santa Clara	534,217	3,765	537,982	0.70%	486,957	4,000	490,957	0.81%	235	6.24%
Statewide	8,443,594	58,309	8,501,903	0.69%	8,302,488	84,825	8,387,313	1.01%	26,516	45.47%

Source: California Secretary of State web site

TABLE 1: Vote-by-mail ballot rejection in Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, 2016 compared to 2018

In all four elections, the three counties' percentage of ballots rejected was similar to the statewide percentage with the exception of San Mateo, where the rejection rate was considerably higher than the statewide rate in the June 2018 election.

The number of ballots rejected statewide dropped by 18 percent between the June 2016 and June 2018 primary elections, from 69,518 to 57,024. Comparing general elections, the number of ballots rejected statewide rose by 45 percent between November 2016 and November 2018, from 58,309 to 84,825.

- In Sacramento County, the number of ballots rejected declined by 5.8 percent between the June 2016 and June 2018 elections. However, comparing November 2016 to November 2018, the number of ballots rejected rose by 99 percent.
- In San Mateo County, the number of ballots rejected rose significantly in both elections, increasing by 40.2 percent between June 2016 and June 2018, and increasing by 217.4 percent between November 2016 and November 2018.



- In Santa Clara, where the VCA had not yet been implemented, the number of ballots rejected declined by 25.1 percent between June 2016 and June 2018 and rose by 6.24 percent between November 2016 and November 2018.

These findings illustrate how two counties that adopted the VCA in 2018 saw little change in the *percentage* of ballots rejected. However, they did experience a dramatic change in the *number* of ballots rejected, since a greater percentage of all ballots received were cast as vote-by-mail ballots instead of polling place ballots.

IV. Rejection Rates for Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties by Subgroup

The study examined in detail ballots cast and rejected in the November 2018 General Election in Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties based on three characteristics - age, voter status, and return method - and the reasons for rejection. The chart below depicts each county's rejection rate for the election. Section V of this report examines the reasons for rejection among the three counties.

Two of the three counties' November 2018 election rejection rates were below the statewide average for that election. One county's rate, San Mateo, was the same as the statewide average of 1 percent. Sacramento's rate was slightly lower at .8 percent and Santa Clara's was also lower at .7 percent.

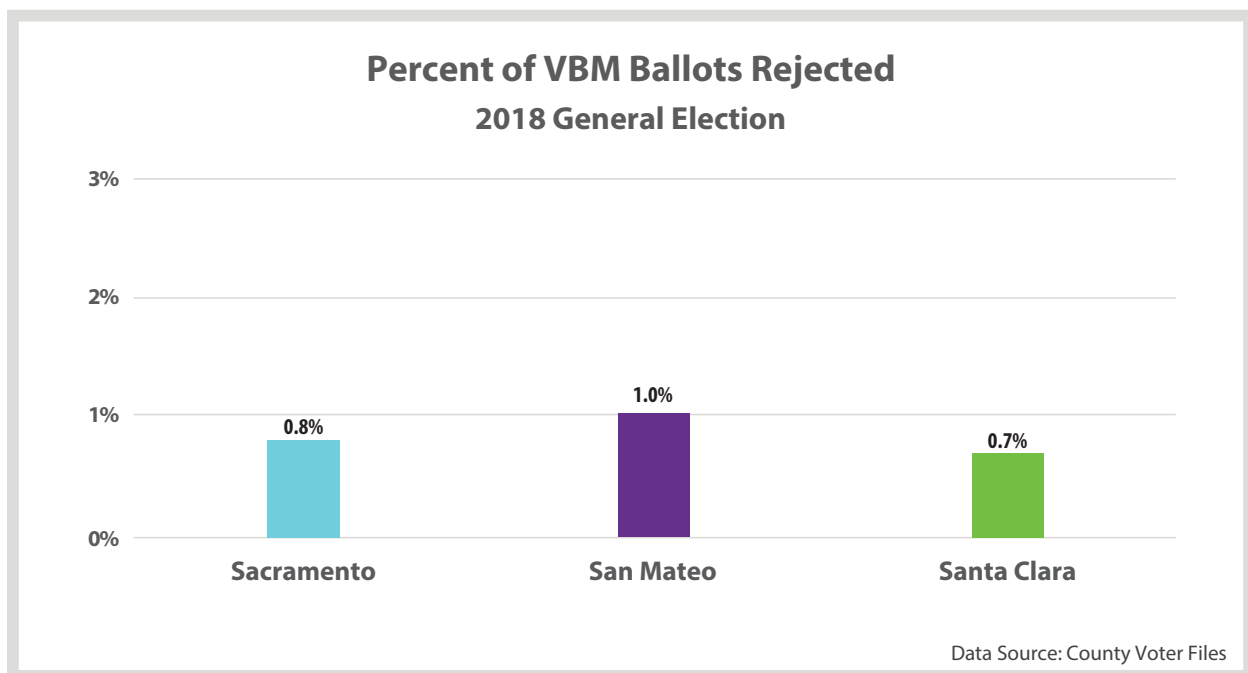


Chart 4: Percent of VBM Ballots Rejected in Three Counties, 2018 General Election

Rejected Ballots by Age

Young voters in all three counties had a higher rejection rate than any other age group. In all three counties studied, the ballot rejection rate for voters age 18-24 was three times the counties' overall rejection rates. In Sacramento County, 2.3 percent of voters age 18-24 had their vote-by-mail ballots rejected, compared to an overall county rejection rate of 0.8 percent. In San Mateo County, 3.5 percent of 18-24 year old voters had their ballots rejected compared to the overall rejection rate of 1 percent. And in Santa Clara County, 2.5 percent of 18-24 year old voters had their ballots rejected compared to an overall 0.7 percent rejection rate.

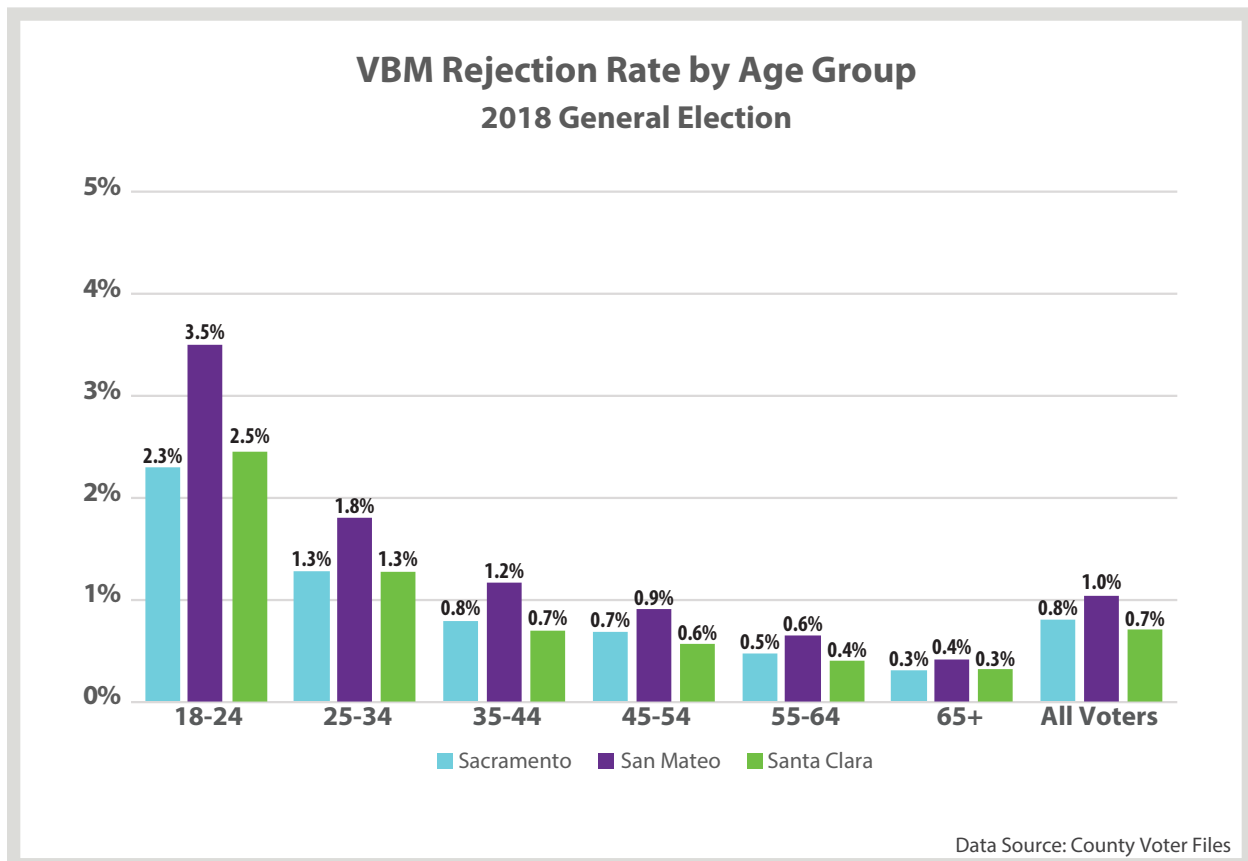


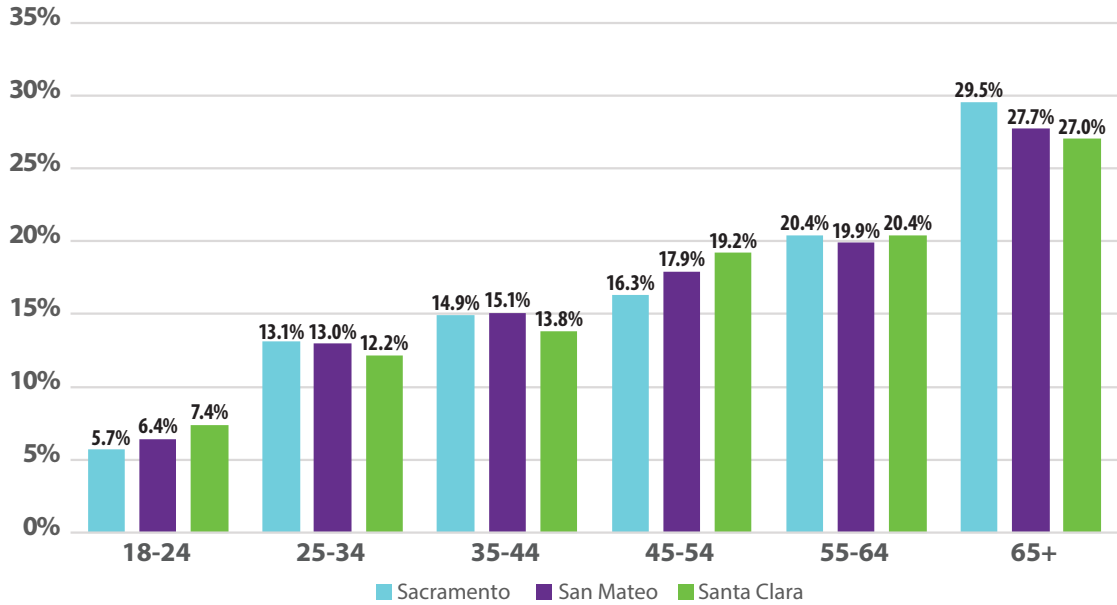
CHART 5 - VBM Rejection Rate by Age Group, all three counties

In all three counties, young voters, age 18-24 were the smallest age group of vote-by-mail voters. Voters age 18-34 were the largest age group of voters whose ballots were rejected.

- In Sacramento County, voters age 18-24 comprised 5.7 percent of all VBM voters and 17.5 percent of all rejected ballots;
- In San Mateo County, voters age 18-24 comprised 6.4 percent of all VBM voters and 21.6 percent of all rejected ballots;
- In Santa Clara County, voters age 18-24 comprised 7.4 percent of all VBM voters and 25.5 percent of all rejected ballots.



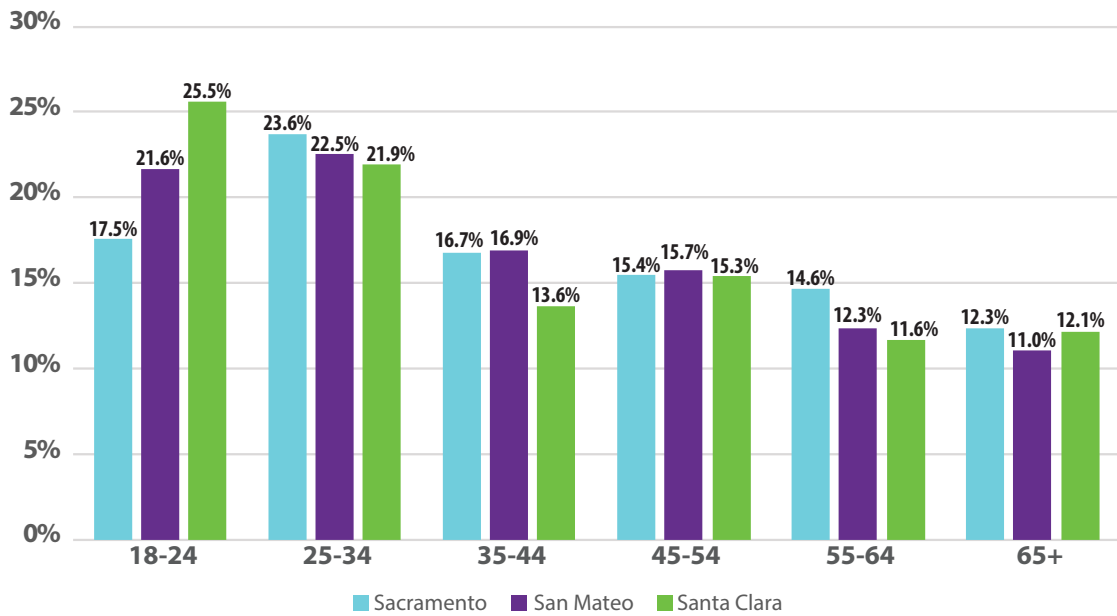
Percent of All VBM Ballots by Age Group 2018 General Election



Data Source: County Voter Files

Chart 6: Percent of All VBM Ballots by Age Group, 2018 General Election

Percent of All Rejected VBM Ballots by Age Group 2018 General Election



Data Source: County Voter Files

Chart 7: Percent of All Rejected VBM Ballots by Age Group, 2018 General Election



At the other end of the age spectrum, older voters age 65+ comprise the greatest percentage of VBM voters and are the least likely to see their ballots rejected:

- In Sacramento County, voters age 65+ comprised 29.5 percent of all VBM voters and 12.3 percent of all rejected ballots;
- In San Mateo County, voters age 65+ comprised 27.7 percent of all VBM voters and 11 percent of all rejected ballots;
- In Santa Clara County, voters age 65+ comprised 27 percent of all VBM voters and 12.1 percent of all rejected ballots.

These findings indicate that young voters are having the greatest challenges of any age group with successfully casting vote-by-mail ballots. Some possible explanations for why this is the case are that young people are simply less familiar with both the voting process and the U.S. Postal Service and therefore more likely to make mistakes. They also are likely to have less experience with making or using a signature than older voters or may have a signature on file with the DMV from an early age or through pre-registration at age 16 or 17 several years prior to when they cast their first ballot. Section VI of this report examines ballot rejection by age and reason for rejection.



Rejected Ballots by Voter Status

The study looked at the percentage of vote-by-mail ballots cast by newly registered voters compared to all voters, as well as the percentage of VBM ballots rejected by newly registered voters compared to all voters.⁷ In the three counties examined, the percent of newly registered voters' ballots rejected was much greater than the percent they comprised of all voters:

- In Sacramento County, newly registered voters comprised 4.9 percent of all VBM voters but 9.2 percent of all voters whose ballots were rejected;
- In San Mateo County, newly registered voters comprised 5.1 percent of all VBM voters but 10.9 percent of all voters whose ballots were rejected; and
- In Santa Clara County, newly registered voters comprised 4.3 percent of all VBM voters but 9.4 percent of all voters whose ballots were rejected.

Newly registered voters' ballot rejection rates were also higher than the three counties' overall rates of rejection. In Sacramento County, .8 percent of all ballots were rejected but 1.4 percent of newly registered voters' ballots were rejected. In San Mateo County, 1 percent of all ballots were rejected while 2.2 percent of newly registered voters' ballots were rejected. In Santa Clara County, .7 percent of all ballots were rejected but 1.5 percent of newly registered voters' ballots were rejected.

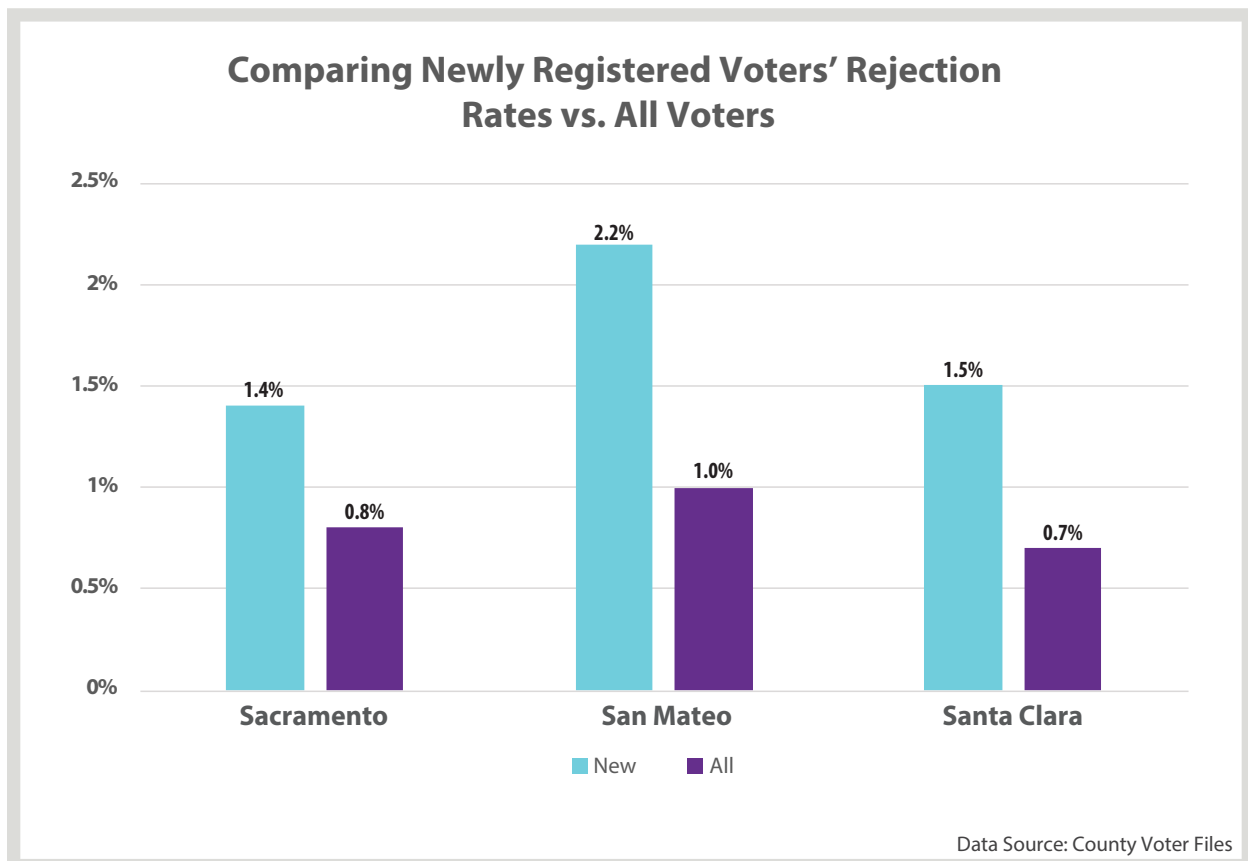


Chart 8: Comparing Newly Registered Voters' Rejection Rates vs. All Voters

As with young voters, these findings indicate that newly registered voters have less familiarity with the voting process and stand a greater chance of making mistakes and having their ballots rejected when they cast vote-by-mail ballots.

Rejected Ballots by Return Method

California voters have several options for returning vote-by-mail ballots. They can return them through the U.S. Mail, or in person to a ballot drop-off location, their county election office, or a polling place or vote center.

As VCA counties in 2018, Sacramento and San Mateo provided dozens of vote centers and drop off locations for voters starting four weeks prior to Election Day. In Santa Clara County, voters could return their ballots to polling places on Election Day or use drop boxes that were also provided by the county.

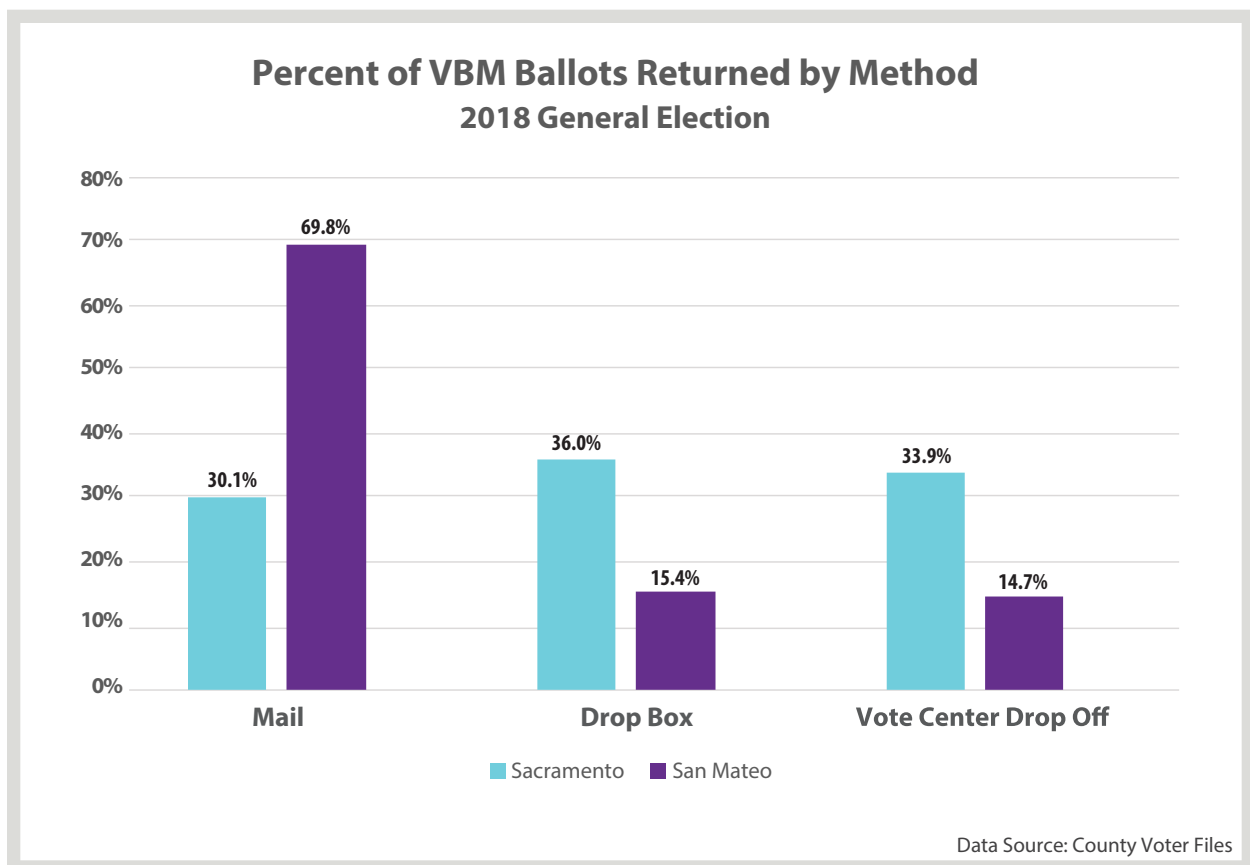


Chart 9: Percent of VBM Ballots Returned by Method (Sacramento and San Mateo counties)

The study found that Sacramento County voters were fairly evenly split between the three methods of return: 30 percent chose to return their ballots through the mail, 36 percent through drop boxes, and 34 percent returned their ballots to vote centers. In San



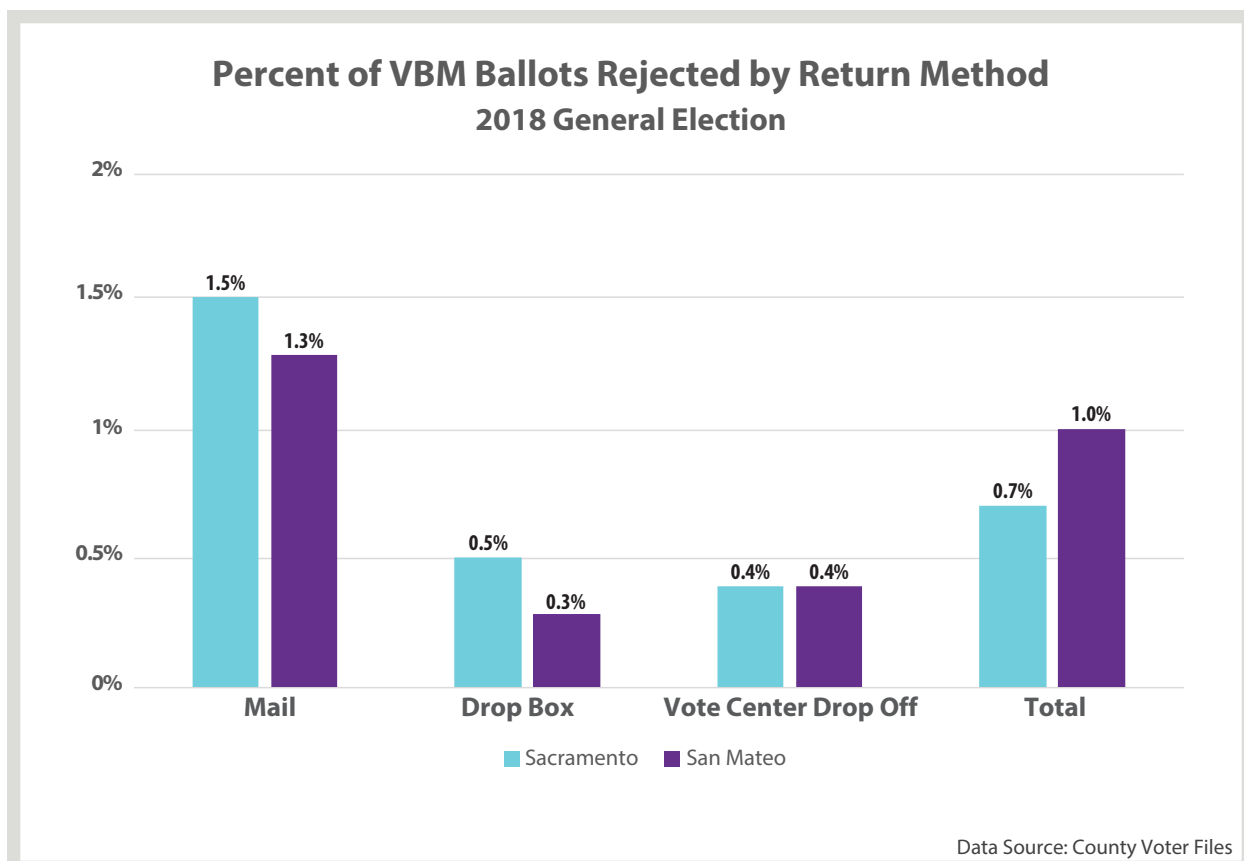


Chart 10: Percent of VBM Ballots Rejected by Return Method (Sacramento and San Mateo counties)

Mateo County, the overwhelming preference of voters was to return their ballots through the mail, with nearly 70 percent doing so, while the remaining 30 percent were evenly divided between drop box and vote center returns. (Santa Clara County’s voter file did not provide a breakdown of the method of ballot return for the November 2018 election.)

Voters in Sacramento and San Mateo counties who returned their ballots to drop boxes and at vote centers were much less likely to have their ballots rejected than voters who returned ballots through the mail. In Sacramento, ballots returned by mail were rejected at twice the rate of the county’s overall rejection rate.

Voters who return ballots at drop boxes and vote centers by 8 pm on Election Day do not risk having their ballots rejected due to lateness; voters who return ballots to vote centers can also reduce the risk of their ballots being rejected if they are assisted by an election staffer who can review their envelope and make sure it is signed before it is dropped into the ballot box.



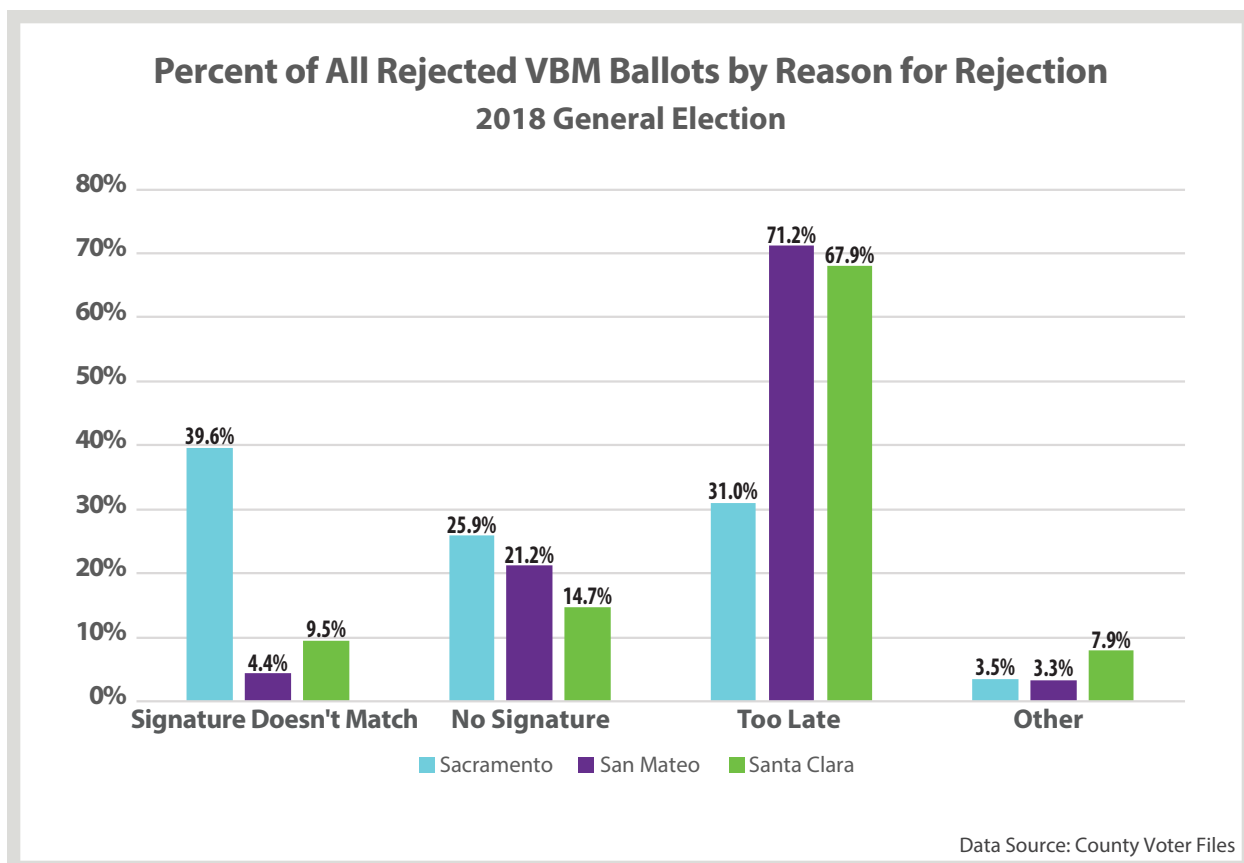


Chart 11: Percent of All Rejected VBM Ballots by Reason for Rejection

V. Reasons for Rejection in Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties

The study found that the top three reasons vote-by-mail ballots were rejected in the three counties studied are that voters returned them too late to count, they neglected to sign the ballot envelope, or the signature they provided on the envelope did not sufficiently match their voter registration signature on file with the county.

These were also the top three reasons for ballot rejection in a prior, 2014 three-county study conducted by the California Voter Foundation as well as a 2014 statewide study conducted by the Center for Inclusive Democracy.^{8,9} As with these prior studies, this study found that while these were the three primary reasons for rejection, the number one reason for rejection varies from county to county.¹⁰

In Sacramento County, the top reason for rejection was “Signature doesn’t match”, while in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, the top reason for rejection was “Too late”.

Sacramento County rejected far more ballots for non-matching signatures - 39.6 percent - compared to San Mateo (4.4 percent) and Santa Clara (9.5 percent). This was also the case in the California Voter Foundation’s 2014 study, when “Signature doesn’t match” accounted for 34 percent of rejected Sacramento County ballots across four elections,



while the other two counties in that study had far lower rates of rejection for this reason (Orange County at 6 percent and Santa Cruz County at 15 percent).¹¹

The likely reason for this relatively higher rate of rejection for non-matching signatures in Sacramento's November 2018 election was a change in the office's leadership that took place immediately after Election Day, and a procedure that had been in place in prior elections, requiring a second review by election staff or an election supervisor of challenged signatures, was not in effect.¹²

These varying rates in signature rejection raise concerns about whether California voters have an equal chance of having their ballots counted regardless of where in the state they live and vote. Currently, California's guidelines for signature verification are not very detailed. New statewide regulations are in development which may help bring greater uniformity to California counties' signature verification processes and criteria.¹³

While lateness, missing signatures and non-matching signatures are the top reasons for rejected ballots, there are a few others, including:

- Empty envelope: counties report receiving ballot envelopes with no ballot inside.
- Ballot or envelope is for the wrong election: every election, county election offices receive ballot envelopes for past elections, possibly from voters who did not realize they used an old envelope, or who perhaps mistakenly believed that they must turn in old ballots to avoid being purged from the list of active voters.
- Voter already voted: some voters vote in person and then later also mistakenly turn in their vote-by-mail ballot, which gets rejected. Voters have the right to obtain replacement ballots but if they submit more than one vote-by-mail ballot both ballots may be rejected under California law.¹⁴
- Voter deceased: if a voter is issued a ballot and a family member returns the ballot noting the person is deceased, or the ballot is returned as non-deliverable and the elections office is notified by the state or county that the voter is deceased, the ballot may be marked as rejected.
- Multiple ballots in one envelope: sometimes voters place more than one ballot in an envelope, which voids all ballots in that envelope.
- Wrong person: sometimes members of the same household mix up their election materials and return their ballot in another household member's identification envelope.

One challenge in studying the reasons for ballot rejection is the lack of uniformity in how counties identify and code rejected ballots. Counties do not use the same terms to identify the reasons for rejection. Even the term “lateness” or “too late” does not fully explain the reason that a ballot was rejected.

Lateness could mean that the ballot was postmarked by Election Day but was not received within the three-day grace period post-Election Day. Lateness can also mean that the ballot was not postmarked by Election Day and therefore cannot be counted, even if it was received within the three-day grace period. Study researchers investigated late ballots in three elections in Sacramento County to gain a better understanding of why some ballots are rejected for being “too late”.

A Closer Look at Late Ballots in Sacramento County

In Sacramento County, the predominant reason for ballot rejection due to lateness was not because of late delivery but because the ballot envelope’s postmark date was after Election Day. Postmarks on rejected vote-by-mail ballot envelopes in Sacramento County for three elections were reviewed:

- 1,514 “too late” ballot envelopes from the June 5, 2018 election;
- 1,175 “too late” ballot envelopes from the November 6, 2018 election; and
- 1,499 “too late” ballot envelopes from the March 3, 2020 Primary.¹⁵

This research revealed that:

- 12 percent of the June 2018 late ballots had missing or unreadable postmarks;
- 31 percent of the November 2018 late ballots had missing or unreadable postmarks; and
- 14 percent of the March 2020 late ballots reviewed had missing or unreadable postmarks.

Of the ballots that had readable postmarks:

- 99 percent of the June 2018 late ballots were postmarked after Election Day, with 93 percent of them postmarked on June 6, one day late.
- 99 percent of the November 2018 late ballots were postmarked after Election Day, with 76 percent postmarked November 7, one day late.
- 89 percent of the March 2020 late ballots reviewed were postmarked after Election Day.



The study found the most common postmark date for 2018 Sacramento ballots rejected for lateness was the day immediately following the election. It is not known whether this was due to voters placing ballots inside mailboxes that had already been picked up, ballots being received by post offices on Election Day but not being postmarked until the following day, voters placing ballots in the mail after Election Day, or some other reason. Given the prevalence of lateness as a leading reason for ballot rejection, this subject would benefit from further research.

Additionally, hundreds of ballots that were reviewed for this study were missing postmarks or had unreadable postmarks, making verification based on postmark date difficult.¹⁶ For this reason it is important for the elections community to remind voters to date the signature on their ballot envelope so it can be verified as cast by Election Day and still counted if the postmark is missing or unreadable.¹⁷

During the pre-March 2020 Primary Election research, the California Voter Foundation shared its findings with Sacramento County election officials identifying six zip codes in three communities with high rates of missing postmarks, enabling the county to contact their U.S. Postal Service representative and request that this problem be addressed pre-Election Day. Other counties can similarly study ballots with missing postmarks to identify specific post offices to contact and request more careful handling of vote-by-mail ballots.

For the November 2020 Presidential Election, Governor Gavin Newsom's executive order directing counties to mail every registered voter a ballot also requires counties to use Intelligent Mail Barcodes on all vote-by-mail ballot mailings and return envelopes.¹⁸ This will enable election officials to verify whether a ballot was received by the U.S. Postal Service by Election Day and not have to rely solely on postmarks to verify timely return.¹⁹

VI. Reason for Rejection in Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties by Subgroup

Reason for Rejection by Age

As previously mentioned, the percentage of voters casting vote-by-mail ballots is greatest among older voters while the percentage of voters whose mail ballots are rejected is greatest among younger voters. Taking a closer look at the reason for rejection by age shows that voters in different age groups face different challenges.

In Sacramento County, young voters age 18-24 were most likely to have their ballot rejected due to a mismatched signature, followed by lateness. Voters age 25-34 also had a high rate of non-matching signatures. These factors may be due to young voters' likely lack of familiarity with using the U.S. Postal Service as well as the possibility that their signature was not fully formed at the time they registered to vote.²⁰ Older voters, age 55-64 and age 65 and over are more likely to neglect to sign their ballot envelope than voters in other age groups and to have their ballots rejected for this reason.

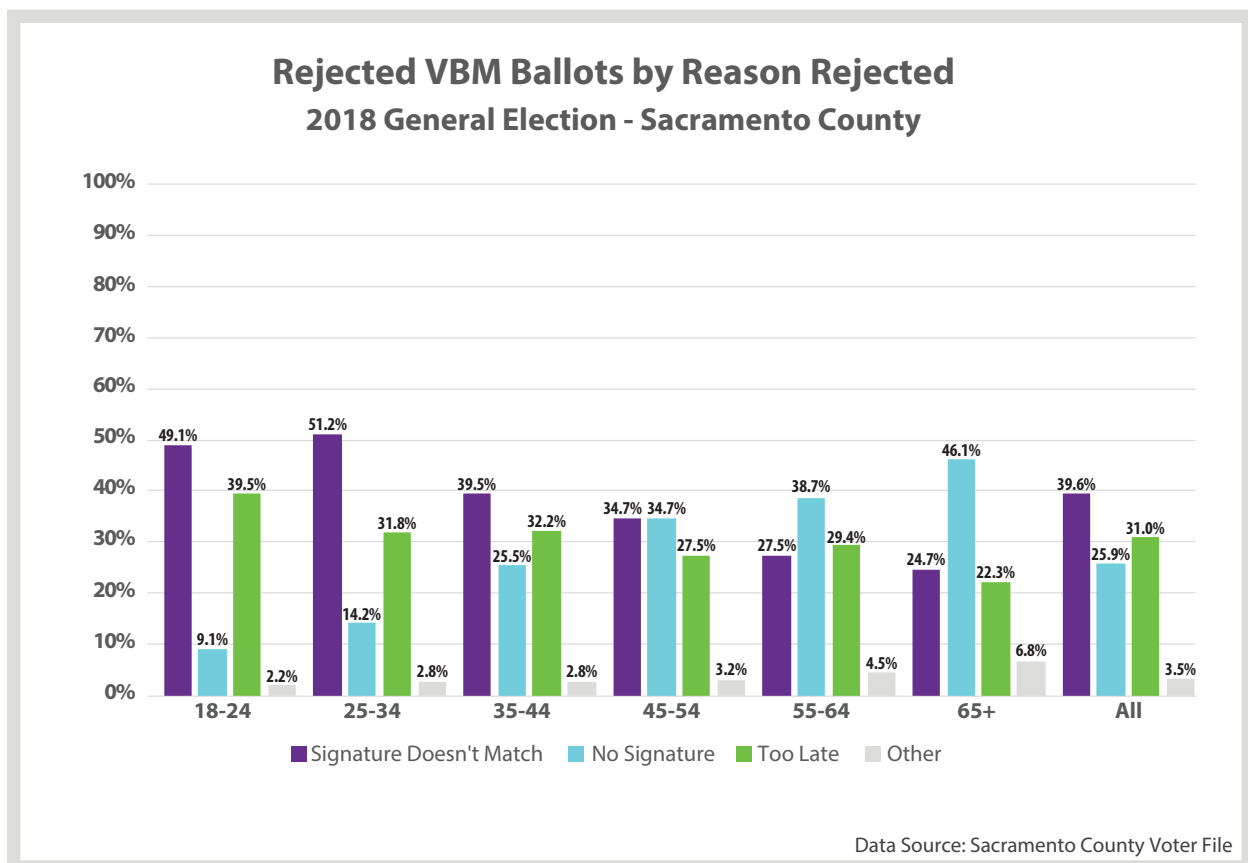
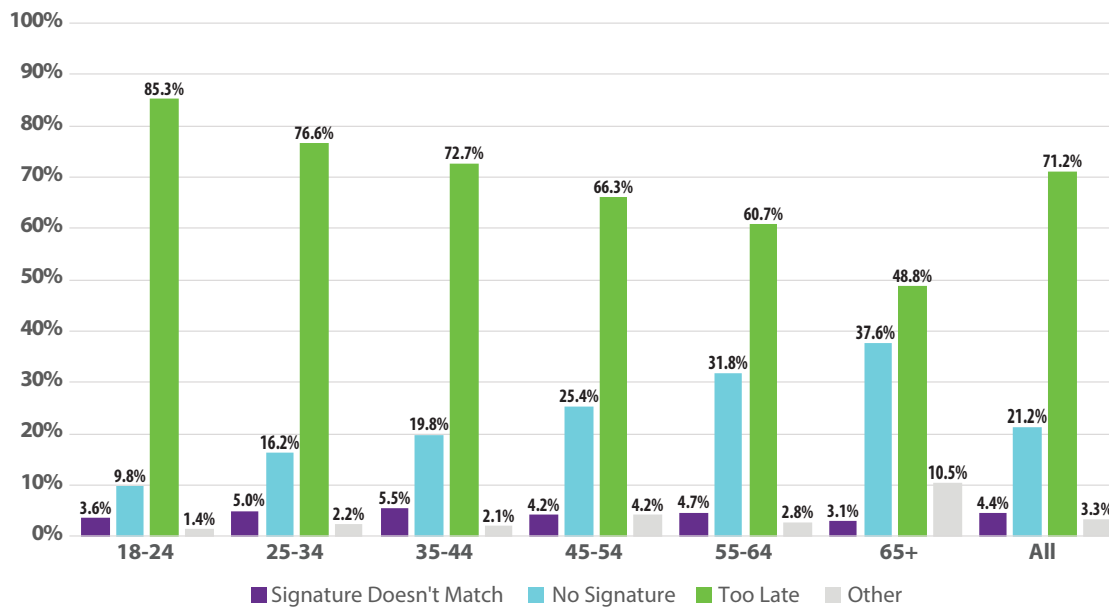


Chart 12: Rejected VBM Ballots By Reason Rejected - Sacramento County by Age



Rejected VBM Ballots by Reason Rejected 2018 General Election - San Mateo County



Data Source: San Mateo County Voter File

Chart 13: Rejected VBM Ballots By Reason Rejected - San Mateo County by Age

In San Mateo County, where lateness was by far the greatest reason for rejection, the study found that for young voters age 18-24 and age 25-34, lateness was the most significant cause for ballot rejection. As was the case in Sacramento, older voters in San Mateo County were more likely to forget to sign their ballot envelope than younger voters, but lateness was still the top reason for older voters' ballot rejection in San Mateo.



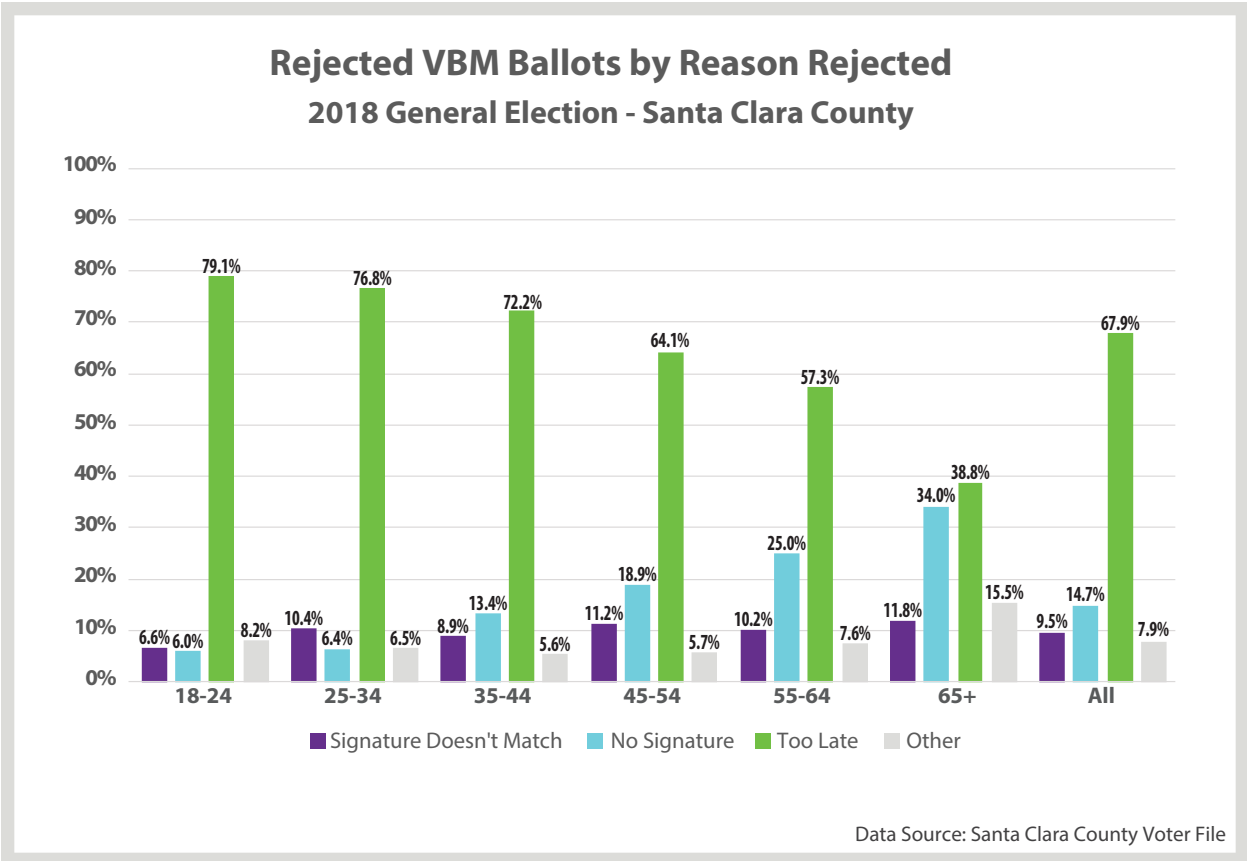


Chart 14: Rejected VBM Ballots By Reason Rejected - Santa Clara County by Age

Similar to San Mateo County, Santa Clara County’s youngest voters also had ballots rejected most frequently due to lateness, while older voters were more likely to have their ballots rejected for missing signatures than younger voters, though lateness was still the leading reason that some older voters’ ballots were rejected.



Reasons for Ballot Rejection Among Newly Registered Voters

In comparing the reasons for rejection of newly registered voters' ballots to all voters in each county, the study found that:

- In Sacramento County, newly registered voters were slightly more likely than voters overall to have their ballots rejected for nonmatching signatures or for arriving too late, and less likely to have their ballots rejected for not signing the ballot envelope.
- In San Mateo County, newly registered voters were more slightly more likely than voters overall to have their ballots rejected for nonmatching signatures or for arriving too late and much less likely to have their ballots rejected for not signing the ballot envelope.
- In Santa Clara County, newly registered voters had a slightly lower rate of rejection for nonmatching signatures than voters overall, and a slightly higher rate of rejection for missing signatures or lateness.

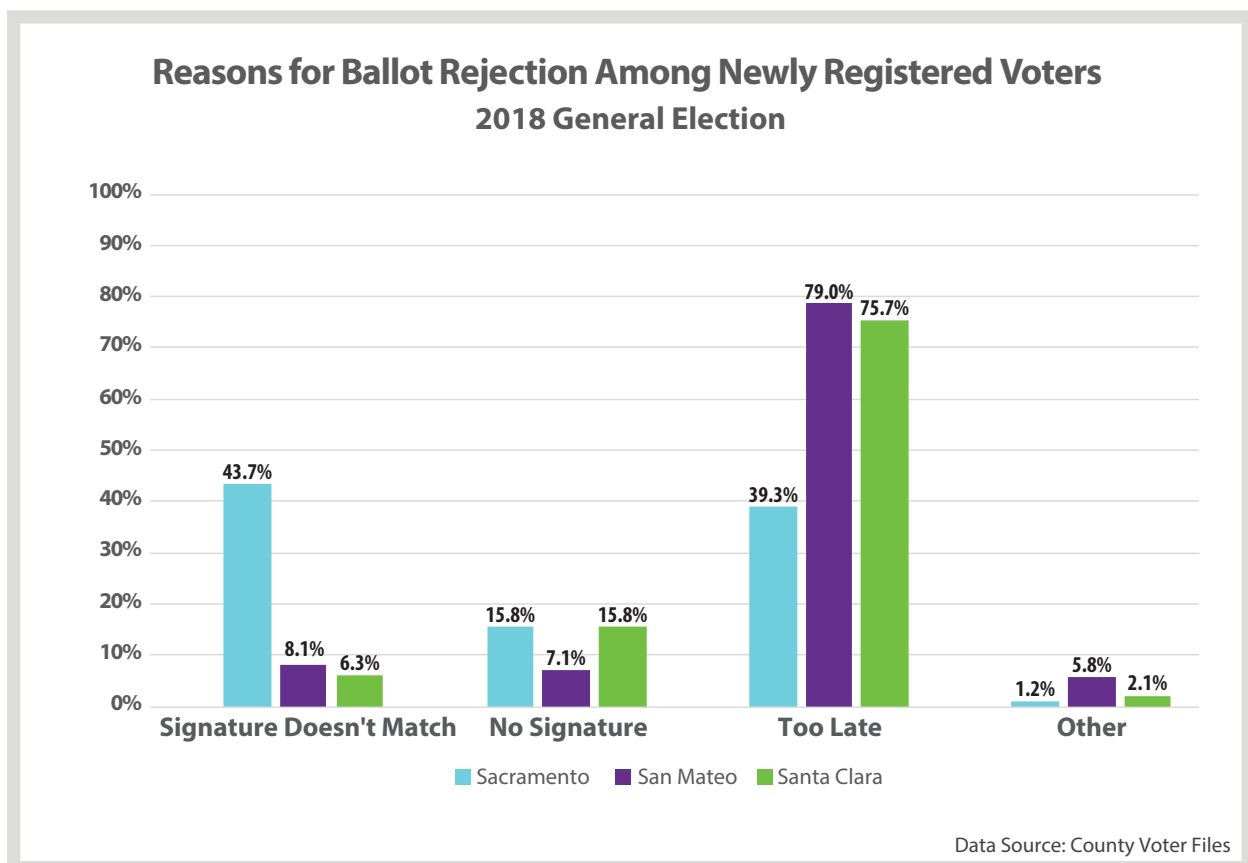


Chart 15: Reasons for Ballot Rejection Among Newly Registered Voters

Reason for Rejection by Return Method

The study looked at the reason for rejection by ballot return method in Sacramento and San Mateo counties where this data was made available.

In Sacramento County, 99.6 percent of ballots rejected for being too late were returned by U.S. Mail; in San Mateo County, 99.9 percent of rejected “too late” ballots were returned by U.S. Mail.²¹

- In Sacramento County all but five of the 1,145 ballots rejected for being too late were returned by U.S. Mail; and
- in San Mateo County all but two of the 1,853 ballots rejected for being too late were returned by U.S. Mail.

Sacramento	Mail	VC Drop Off	Drop Box	Total
No Signature Match	509	491	463	1,463
No Signature	500	124	330	954
Too Late	1,140	4	1	1,145
Other	50	44	34	128
Total	2,199	663	828	3,690

San Mateo	Mail	VC Drop Off	Drop Box	Total
No Signature Match	63	30	21	114
No Signature	348	116	87	551
Too Late	1,851	1	1	1,853
Other	76	6	4	86
Total	2,338	153	113	2,604

Sacramento	Mail	VC Drop Off	Drop Box	Total
No Signature Match	34.8%	33.6%	31.6%	100%
No Signature	52.4%	13.0%	34.6%	100%
Too Late	99.6%	0.3%	0.1%	100%
Other	39.1%	34.4%	26.6%	100%

San Mateo	Mail	VC Drop Off	Drop Box	Total
No Signature Match	55.3%	26.3%	18.4%	100%
No Signature	63.2%	21.1%	15.8%	100%
Too Late	99.9%	0.1%	0.1%	100%
Other	88.4%	7.0%	4.7%	100%

Source: County voter files

Table 2: Ballot Rejection by Return Method and Reason for Rejection



In Sacramento, ballots rejected for nonmatching signatures were evenly divided in method of return, with about one-third returned through each method. In San Mateo, more than half the ballots rejected for nonmatching signatures were returned through the mail. For ballot envelopes missing a signature, in Sacramento more than half were returned through the U.S. Mail while in San Mateo nearly two-thirds were returned through the mail.

VII. Curing Challenged Ballots

A leading reason that some vote-by-mail ballots are rejected is due to problems with voters' signatures on their ballot envelopes. Some voters do not sign the envelopes, or the signature they provide does not sufficiently match the voter's signature on file. Nonmatches can occur when a voter's signature has changed over time, when one member of a voter's household (typically a spouse or parent) signs an envelope for another household member, or when ballot envelopes, which are uniquely printed for a specific voter, are mixed up among voters in the same household.²²

Prior to 2018, California law did not require counties to notify voters with missing or mismatched signatures (though some counties have voluntarily conducted outreach to voters with signature problems for years).

Since 2008, voters have had the right to find out through online lookup or by phone whether their vote-by-mail ballot was counted and if not, why not.²³ California law did not, however, make any provisions for voters to address issues that would keep their ballots from getting rejected before the results were finalized and certified.

In 2015, lawmakers enacted AB 477, which gives voters the right to submit a missing ballot envelope signature separately from the envelope and have their signature attached to the ballot envelope, a process that more easily facilitates correcting or "curing" missing signatures. In 2016, lawmakers enacted SB 450, the Voter's Choice Act, which includes a provision requiring participating counties to conduct outreach to voters with missing signatures so their ballots can be cured instead of rejected.

While progress was made on missing signatures, no legislative reforms were enacted to address mismatched signatures until 2018, after the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California won a lawsuit challenging California's law permitting ballots to be rejected for mismatched signatures without first notifying voters.^{24 25}

This decision was codified in October 2018 through the enactment of SB 759 prior to the November election, requiring all counties to contact voters with mismatched signatures and provide an opportunity to submit a valid signature. In 2019, lawmakers enacted SB 523, requiring all counties, and not just VCA counties, to contact voters with missing signatures. As of January 2020, all California counties must contact every voter with missing or mismatched signatures and provide an opportunity for voters to submit a valid signature in time for their ballot to be counted before the results are certified.



2018 Ballot Cure Rates in Sacramento, San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties

As described above, California laws for signature curing were evolving in 2018. For the June 2018 Primary Election, Sacramento and San Mateo counties were both required under the VCA to contact voters with missing signatures. Although Santa Clara was not required to conduct this outreach at that time since it was not yet a VCA county, it did so voluntarily. Under court order, all counties were also required to conduct outreach for mismatched signatures beginning with the June 2018 Primary.

The study asked county election offices to provide the total number of letters sent to voters whose ballots were challenged due to missing or mismatched envelope signatures and the number of ballots cured as a result.

June 2018 Primary						
	Missing Signature Letters Sent	Voter Responded	Cure Rate	Mismatched Signature Letters Sent	Voter Responded	Cure Rate
Sacramento	1,798	973	54.1%	756	505	66.8%
Santa Clara	541	253	46.8%	525	251	47.8%
Election Totals	Voters Contacted	Responses	Cure Rate			
Sacramento	2,554	1,478	57.9%			
San Mateo	1,353	805	59.5%			
Santa Clara	1,066	504	47.3%			
Totals	4,973	2,787	56.0%			
November 2018 General						
	Missing Signature Letters Sent	Voter Responded	Cure Rate	Mismatched Signature Letters Sent	Voter Responded	Cure Rate
Sacramento	2,192	1,234	56.3%	2,269	707	31.2%
Santa Clara	878	370	42.1%	820	617	75.2%
Election Totals	Voters Contacted	Responses	Cure Rate			
Sacramento	4,461	1,941	43.5%			
San Mateo	2,411	1,603	66.5%			
Santa Clara	1,698	987	58.1%			
Totals	8,570	4,531	52.9%			

Source: County election office reports

Tables 3 and 4 - June and November 2018 cures



- Across the three counties in two elections - the June 2018 Primary and the November 2018 General elections - a total of 13,543 voters were contacted regarding missing or mismatched signatures by their county election offices and 7,318 responses from voters were provided, resulting in an overall cure rate of 54%.

Within each county, the cure rate varied between elections and types of cures. In Sacramento County, 54 percent of missing signatures and 67 percent of mismatched signatures were cured in the 2018 Primary Election. But it was a different story in the 2018 General Election: while 56 percent of missing signatures were cured, the rate of mismatched signature cures fell considerably, to only 31 percent, contributing to that county's high rejection rate for signature mismatches.

In Santa Clara County, 47 percent of missing signatures and 48 percent of mismatched signatures were cured in the June 2018 Primary Election, while in November, 42 percent of missing signatures and 75 percent of mismatched signatures were cured, a considerably higher rate compared to June. According to the county's staff, the enactment of SB 759 provided additional time for the county to cure ballots with signature problems, enabling the elections staff to mail a second notice to voters who did not respond to the first notice. This was credited for this increase in the county's mismatched signature cure rate.

In San Mateo, 60 percent of missing and mismatched signatures were cured in June 2018 and 67 percent were cured in November 2018.²⁶

For more background on signature verification, curing and recommendations, see the Stanford Law School Law and Policy Lab's 2020 report, *Signature Verification and Mail Ballots: Guaranteeing Access While Preserving Integrity*, featured in Appendix B of this report.

VIII. Recommendations

There have been numerous changes in California law to reduce rejected ballots, including requiring postage paid return envelopes, providing a three-day grace period for accepting ballots that are postmarked by Election Day, allowing voters to return their ballot to any county in the state, allowing voters to designate anyone they wish to return their ballot on their behalf, requiring counties to reach out to voters with missing or mismatched signatures and extending the time available to cure signature issues.

For the November 2020 Presidential Election, a number of additional safeguards have been put in place through legislation and executive orders: extending the ballot return grace period and allowing ballots that are postmarked by Election Day to be counted up to 17 days after the election, requiring counties to use Intelligent Mail Barcodes on vote-by-mail ballots that will enable them to verify the date a ballot was received by the U.S. Postal Service when postmarks are missing or unreadable, and requiring counties to give

voters the ability to track their ballot and get notified via email, text and/or phone if their ballot is not received or is challenged.

Some additional reforms California can enact include:

1. Implement statewide regulations and update them on a biannual basis to create more uniformity in counties' signature verification processes. These regulations are currently in development following the enactment of AB 1970/Lo of 2016. According to the Secretary of State's staff, new statewide regulations for signature verification are expected to be in place before the November 2020 election. These regulations, once adopted, should be reviewed and revised on a regular basis.
2. Require that more drop boxes and ballot drop-off locations be made available to avoid late postmarks and/or late delivery by USPS that result in ballot rejection. Require every county to offer at least one external, secure, 24-hour ballot drop box.
3. Improve California's paper and online voter registration form by letting applicants know that their signature on the form will be used to verify their ballot envelope signature when they cast a vote-by-mail ballot.
4. Continue improving coordination with the U.S. Postal Service, Secretary of State and California counties to arrange for timely pickup and delivery of ballots around election time and on Election Night.
5. Require the Secretary of State through VoteCal, the statewide voter registration database, to uniformly report the number of ballots rejected and reasons for rejection. Currently, the Secretary of State reports rejected ballot numbers on the agency's web site, but counties do not provide this data in a uniform way.
6. Standardize the codes used in counties' election management systems to more uniformly designate the reasons that a ballot is rejected. Currently counties use a variety of codes and terms to describe the reasons for ballot rejection. This lack of standardization makes it challenging to analyze rejection trends statewide.
7. Require counties to report in the certification of election results the number of ballots challenged, cured, rejected and the reasons for rejection.
8. Require the Secretary of State or counties to notify voters when their ballots are rejected for any reason and the reason for rejection.
9. Advocate for sufficient funding for the U.S. Postal Service to facilitate timely delivery and return of vote-by-mail ballots and related materials, and provide ongoing funding to counties to support vote-by-mail balloting, education, services, outreach and notification to voters with challenged and rejected ballots.
10. Develop legislation to address outstanding policy issues relating to vote-by-mail balloting including: the use of signature verification software; issues with signatures collected through the Department of Motor Vehicles; and signature verification training.



Advice to Voters

- Verify your registration status and voting address at voterstatus.sos.ca.gov. Update your registration if you've moved or changed your name to make sure you receive your vote-by-mail ballot.
- Sign up for BallotTrax at WheresMyBallot.sos.ca.gov to track your ballot's journey.
- Don't mix up your ballot envelope with other voters' envelopes. It is an identification envelope coded for each individual voter. Sending your ballot in someone else's envelope can lead to ballot rejection.
- Remember to sign and date your ballot envelope before returning it (the date is used to verify you submitted your ballot by Election Day, which will allow your ballot to be counted if it is returned by U.S. Mail and the postmark is missing or unreadable).
- If you are unsure what your registration signature looks like, check your driver's license or state ID if you have one and make your ballot envelope signature look like that signature (for voters who register online or through the DMV, this is the signature that's on file with their county elections office).
- Don't sign a ballot envelope on behalf of someone else. It is illegal to do so even if the person has given you permission.
- Only ballots postmarked by Election Day or returned in person by 8 p.m. on Election Day will count. **Mailing a ballot on Election Day does not guarantee it will be postmarked by Election Day.** Return ballots in person to a drop-off location, voting site or your county election office if you are voting close to Election Day to avoid being disenfranchised due to a late postmark or late U.S. Postal Service delivery. Or go to a U.S. Post Office during business hours and have your ballot hand-canceled to ensure it is postmarked in time to be counted.
- If you can't return your ballot in person, ask someone you trust to return it on your behalf.

Suggestions for Voter Education and 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 vote-by-mail process, the U.S. Postal Service and how signature verification works.²⁷
- Increase awareness about mailbox pickup times and the availability of ballot drop-off locations to help reduce ballot rejection due to late postmarks or late delivery.
- Urge voters to return ballots early.
- Help voters learn what in-person voting options are available in their county.
- Urge voters to be cautious when sharing election-related information on social media and encourage use of the SIFT method for detecting disinformation: Stop; Investigate; Find trusted coverage; Trace and follow the link.



Suggestions for County Election Offices

- Send follow-up notices to voters with missing or challenged signatures as well as postage-paid return envelopes and notices written in voters' preferred languages.
- Improve ballot envelope design by using the model return envelope developed by the Secretary of State and Center for Civic Design.²⁸
- Make sure the election office phone number is included in the election materials sent to voters and on the ballot return envelope and invite voters to call with any questions or concerns.
- Visit U.S. Post Office facilities on Election Night (as many counties already do) and collect ballots that otherwise might not be postmarked until the following day and thus rejected.
- Provide information on county election websites about how vote-by-mail ballots are processed and signatures verified.
- Place instructions on ballot drop boxes reminding voters to sign and date their ballot envelopes and ensure ballot drop off locations are accessible until 8 pm on Election Day when voting locations officially close.
- Train poll workers to ask voters if they remembered to sign and date their ballot envelope and to look for signatures and dates on ballot envelopes when voters drop them off at voting sites while the voter is still present.
- “Marry up” envelopes - if two voters in the same household have accidentally switched ballot identification envelopes, unite the envelopes with the correct ballots so they can be counted rather than rejected (as several counties reportedly already do).

IX. Conclusion

Casting a vote-by-mail ballot is a popular option, and for some Californians a necessary method of voting. Others prefer to vote in person or need to do so to utilize additional services and support provided at polling places and vote centers. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, giving all voters the ability to cast vote-by-mail ballots ensures that voters have options. California's lawmakers have worked in recent years to improve the vote-by-mail process and reduce the rejection rate. But more must be done to ensure voters are not disenfranchised without their knowledge and are equitably treated when they cast vote-by-mail ballots in California's 58 counties.

An analysis of California's March 2020 Primary Election conducted by the Associated Press found that over 100,000 ballots were rejected in that election, with the leading reason for rejection being lateness.²⁹ In other 2020 state primaries, as reported by National Public Radio, tens of thousands of ballots were rejected for lateness.³⁰ Given these reported delays with delivering and returning mail ballots, voters need more



support in getting their ballots in early, signed and dated; while there are safeguards in place to contact voters with missing or mismatched signatures, these too rely on timely mail delivery.

While a one or two percent rejection rate may not sound like a lot to some, it translates into tens of thousands of ballots that go uncounted each election and is far too high for a voting process. California has a history of providing access to voting by mail, and in 2020 implemented reforms that can help address issues identified in this report. Support for continuing research on mail ballot rejection and related issues in all counties could help to identify more solutions, enabling California to set an even higher bar for the state's vote-by-mail system and promote greater confidence in the reliability of the state's voting process.



X. Appendices

A. Key Changes in Vote-by-Mail Laws to Help Reduce Ballot Rejection

In recent years, California lawmakers have enacted numerous changes to the law to address the most common reasons for ballot rejection - late arrival, missing signatures and mismatched signatures - to reduce ballot rejection:

- [SB 1725 of 2006](#) - requires counties to provide voters with the ability to track and confirm the receipt of their vote-by-mail ballots through their county's election web site or a toll-free telephone number.
- [SB 183 of 2011](#) - requires counties to accept rather than reject ballots that voters have drawn on and/or provided personally identifiable information (the so-called "Doodle Law").
- [AB 1135 of 2013](#) - allows counties to use, in addition to the most recent voter registration application signature, signatures from other documents on file, such as a vote-by-mail ballot request or an older voter registration signature, to verify vote-by-mail envelope signatures, giving county election officials additional tools for signature verification.
- [SB 29 of 2014](#) - requires counties to accept ballots that are postmarked by Election Day, rather than received by 8 pm on Election Day, and gives voters a three-day grace period for their ballots to be accepted as long as they are postmarked by Election Day. Also requires counties to count ballots in envelopes with missing or unreadable postmarks if the voter signed and dated their envelope (under penalty of perjury) by Election Day.
- [AB 2530 of 2014](#) - prohibits counties that use signature verification technology from rejecting a voter's ballot envelope signature unless the elections official has first visually examined it and verifies the signatures do not sufficiently match.
- [AB 477 of 2015](#) - allows counties to collect voters' signatures missing from ballot envelopes on a separate piece of paper and allows ballots to be "cured" and counted up to eight days after Election Day.³¹
- [SB 365 of 2015](#) - provides for the use of vote-by-mail ballot drop-off locations in statute and directs the Secretary of State to develop regulations that establish best practices for their use.³²
- [AB 1970 of 2016](#) - requires the Secretary of State to promulgate regulations establishing guidelines for county elections officials relating to the processing of vote-by-mail ballots.
- [SB 450 of 2016](#) - enacts the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), which allows counties to adopt a vote center voting model, under which counties replace neighborhood polling places with county-wide vote centers, mail every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot and provide ballot drop-off locations. Among its provisions, SB



450 requires VCA counties to contact voters with missing signatures on their vote-by-mail ballot envelopes and provide them an opportunity to submit a valid signature, so their ballot is counted instead of rejected; and requires the Secretary of State to report to the Legislature and post on the agency's Internet web site, to the extent possible, ballot rejection rates and the reasons for ballot rejection by categories of race, ethnicity, language preference, age, gender, disability, permanent vote-by-mail status, historical polling place voters, political party affiliation, and language minorities. Two other SB 450 provisions were also included in [AB 1921 of 2016](#), permitting voters to return their vote-by-mail ballots to any voting location in the state and requiring counties to send out-of-county ballots to their home counties to be counted instead of rejected; and allowing voters to designate anyone they wish to return their ballot for them.³³

- [AB 840 of 2017](#) - requires unsigned ballot statements to be signed under penalty of perjury and allows voters to submit them via email.³⁴
- [AB 216 of 2018](#) - requires county election officials to provide vote-by-mail voters with a return envelope for their ballot with the postage pre-paid.³⁵
- [SB 759 of 2018](#) - requires counties to conduct outreach to voters whose vote-by-mail ballot envelope signatures are challenged for not sufficiently matching their voter registration signature and provide them with an opportunity to submit a valid signature so that their ballot can be counted instead of rejected.³⁶
- [SB 523 of 2019](#) - requires counties to conduct outreach to voters with missing ballot envelope signatures and requires mismatched and missing signature notices be sent to voters at least eight days prior to certifying election results and give voters up to two days prior to certification to submit a valid signature. Also specifies that information about voters whose signatures are challenged or missing is confidential.³⁷

In addition to these new laws, executive orders issued by Governor Gavin Newsom as well as legislation have been implemented to address potential voting challenges resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, which are in place for the November 2020 Presidential Election only:

- [Executive Order N-64-20](#) - issued May 8, 2020, requires all counties to send every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot for the November election.
- [Executive Order N-67-20](#) - issued on June 3, clarifies that counties are to send mail ballots to active, registered voters, and, among other provisions, requires all counties to use the Secretary of State's vote-by-mail ballot tracking system to give voters the ability to track their ballots, as well as Intelligent Mail Barcodes on all vote-by-mail ballots to enable counties to verify ballot return dates when postmarks are missing or unreadable.

- [AB 860 of 2020](#) - signed into law on June 18th, 2020, this bill codifies the executive orders' provisions and makes further, temporary changes that permit counties to begin processing vote-by-mail ballots beginning 29 days before the election, and requires counties to accept vote-by-mail ballots up to 17 days after Election Day if they are verified as received by the U.S. Postal Service by Election Day. [SB 423](#) was also signed into law and like AB 860, codifies executive order provisions pertaining to in-person voting options and ballot drop-off locations.³⁸



B. Related Studies and Research

Relevant research conducted in recent years examining California's vote-by-mail process and ballot rejection rates is featured below:

1. Research conducted by the Center for Inclusive Democracy (formerly the California Civic Engagement Project):
 - [Examining San Mateo County's Adoption of the California Voter's Choice Act: 2018 Election Cycle](#) (October 2019)
 - [The California Voter Experience Study: A Statewide Survey of Voter Perspectives on Vote-By-Mail and Vote Centers](#) (September 2017)
 - [The California Voter Experience: Why African-American Voters Choose to Vote at the Polls or Vote-by-Mail, and How They Perceive Proposed Changes to California's Voting System](#) (September 2016)
 - [The California Voter Experience: Vote-by-Mail vs. the Polls](#) (July 2016)
 - [Disparities in California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Youth, Language Preference and Military Status](#) (October 2014 Issue Brief #3)
 - [California's Uncounted Vote-By-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing](#) (September 2014 Issue Brief #2)
 - [Disparities in California's Vote-by-Mail Use Changing Demographic Composition: 2002-2012](#) (March 2014 Issue Brief #1)
2. [Signature Verification and Mail Ballots: Guaranteeing Access While Preserving Integrity](#), a case study of the Every Vote Counts Act, conducted by Stanford Law School Law and Policy Lab, 2020.
3. [June 2018 Primary Election Report and November 2018 General Election Report](#), by the Center for Election Innovation for the California Secretary of State, on Voter's Choice Act implementation.
4. [Asian Americans face higher than average vote-by-mail ballot rejection rates in California](#), an August 2017 Issue Brief by Asian Americans Advancing Justice - California.
5. [Improving California's Vote-by-Mail Process: A Three-County Study](#), published by the California Voter Foundation, August 2014.
6. [Election Administration and Voting Survey, 2018 Comprehensive Report](#), a report to 116th Congress, published by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, June 2019 (rejected ballot data featured on page 14).



7. [Historical Vote-by-Mail Ballot Statistics](#), a section of the California Secretary of State's "Vote By Mail - Other Elections" web page provides a chart showing [Historical Vote By Mail Ballot Use in California](#) since 1962, and two downloadable Excel spreadsheets, [Registered Permanent Vote-By-Mail Statistics 1992 to 2020*](#) and [Vote-By-Mail Statistics 2003 to 2020*](#) which provides the number of ballots rejected as reported by California's 58 counties since 2003.



C. Resources to help voters learn if their ballots are counted:

1. [Where's my Ballot?](http://wheresmyballot.sos.ca.gov/) (<http://wheresmyballot.sos.ca.gov/>) - A service offered by California's Office of Secretary of State and provided by BallotTrax, allows voters to sign up and be notified by phone, text and/or email of their ballot's location as it is being delivered to voters and returned by voters; notifies voter's if their ballot is challenged due to a signature problem or other issue.
2. [My Voter Status](https://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov/) (https://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov) - a service offered by California's Office of Secretary of State, allows voters to, after submitting personally identifiable information, verify if their recently cast mail or provisional ballots were counted or rejected.
3. [Online Voter Tools - Check your Status](https://www.calvoter.org/votertools) (<https://www.calvoter.org/votertools>) - resource page from the California Voter Foundation linking voters to online voter lookup tools and voting site locators.
4. [Contact Your County Election Office](https://www.calvoter.org/county_contact) (https://www.calvoter.org/county_contact) - resource page from the California Voter Foundation providing phone numbers, and web site, email, street and mailing addresses for all 58 county election offices and direct links to county online voter lookup tools where available, many of which, after submitting personally identifiable information, provide a history of the voter's record of election participation and ballot status.



D. California Voter Foundation's 2020 Election Social Media Graphics

1. Vote-by-Mail social media graphic:



What do you do with that ballot you got in the mail?

CALIFORNIA VOTER FOUNDATION
Learn more at www.calvoter.org

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.

MY VOTE!

2. Check your Status social media graphic:



DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU CAN CHECK YOUR VOTING STATUS ONLINE?

- ✓ Registration Status
- ✓ Ballot Status

Find out more about California Secretary of State online tools for voters at our website:
www.calvoter.org/votertools

CALIFORNIA VOTER FOUNDATION

3. California Voter Foundation web site slider image:



VOTING QUESTIONS?

CONTACT YOUR COUNTY ELECTION OFFICE



E. Sacramento County 2019 Ballot Return Envelope Redesign (Before and After Images)

In 2019, the California Voter Foundation participated in Sacramento County's Election Advisory Committee and worked with fellow participants to make improvements to the county's vote-by-mail ballot return envelope. A summary of the changes is listed below as well as "before" and "after" images of the back of the envelope.

Summary of changes:

- Text in red was changed to black (the red contrasted poorly against the pink envelope).
- Words in ALL CAPS were changed to regular case font except for DECLARATION OF VOTER.
- The county's phone number and web site address were added so voters with voted ballots in hand could get assistance locating places to return them if they did not have their election materials handy.
- In the prior design, the Witness to Signature section was boxed and the "Someone else returning your ballot" section was highlighted with a black box. These features detracted from the most important instruction on the back of the envelope which is for the voter to sign it. Now the only boxed item is the signature box which hopefully will draw attention to this feature and reduce the number of voters who neglect to sign their envelopes.
- The amount of text was reduced which allowed the font size to be increased.
- The text about authorizing someone else to return one's ballot was edited to make it less confusing.
- The notice about returning your ballot to the Elections Office or a ballot drop off location was removed; it was confusing that it was called a "vote by mail ballot" but the text didn't actually say you could mail it.
- The date was removed from the signature line, which in the prior design meant the voter would try to write the date in where the hole is located. Now it is its own line. The date is important because if the envelope is not postmarked the handwritten date is used to verify if the voter mailed the ballot by Election Day; if it's not there and there's no postmark and the ballot comes in after Election Day it cannot be counted even if it's received within the grace period.

NOTICE: Return your VOTE BY MAIL BALLOT to the Elections Office or authorized ballot drop off location for Sacramento County.

AVISO: Devuelva su BOLETA DE VOTO POR CORREO a la Oficina de Elecciones o una ubicación de entrega de boleta autorizada para el Condado de Sacramento.

DECLARATION OF VOTER

I declare under penalty of perjury that: I am a resident of the precinct in Sacramento County, California from which I am voting; I am the person whose name appears on this envelope; I have not applied for and do not intend to apply for a vote by mail ballot from any other jurisdiction for this election.

DECLARACIÓN DEL VOTANTE

Yo declaro bajo pena de perjurio que: soy residente del recinto electoral en el Condado de Sacramento, California en el que estoy votando; soy la persona cuyo nombre consta en este sobre; no he solicitado, ni solicitaré una boleta de voto por correo para esta elección de ninguna otra jurisdicción.

IMPORTANT: Voting more than once in one election is a crime.
IMPORTANTE: Es un delito votar mas de una vez en una elección.

Your signature in your own handwriting is required below in order for your ballot to be counted.

Se requiere su firma de su propio puño y letra a continuación para que su boleta sea contada.

Power of attorney is not acceptable.
No se acepta poder notarial.

**SIGN
HERE
FIRME
AQUÍ**

Your Signature or Your Mark* _____ Date _____
Su firma o Marca* _____ Fecha _____

Residence Address _____
Residencial _____

City or Town, State, Zip Code _____
Ciudad o Pueblo, Estado, Código Postal _____

Complete below only if someone else is returning your ballot for you.
Complete la información siguiente únicamente si otra persona esta entregando su boleta por used.

*If voter is unable to sign, he or she may make a mark which shall be witnessed by one person.
*Si el votante no fuera capaz de firmar, puede hacerlo con una marca en presencia de un testigo.
Witness to Signature of mark _____
Testigo de la veracidad del marca _____

I authorize the following person (Print Name): _____
to return my ballot to the Election Official who issued the ballot, to the precinct board at a polling place or Vote Center or to a Vote By Mail Ballot Drop Box location within the state.

Yo autorizo a la siguiente persona (Nombre en letra de molde): _____
para devolver mi boleta al Funcionario de Elecciones que emitió la boleta, a la junta del recinto en un lugar de votación o al Centro de Votación o a una ubicación de buzón de entrega de boleta de voto por correo dentro del estado.

I am authorized to return this ballot. Estoy autorizado para entregar esta boleta.

Signature of person returning ballot _____ Relationship _____
Firma de la persona que entrega la boleta _____ Relación _____

2018 Sacramento County Ballot Return Envelope (back)

DECLARATION OF VOTER

I declare under penalty of perjury that: I am a resident of the precinct in Sacramento County, California from which I am voting; I am the person whose name appears on this envelope; I have not applied for and do not intend to apply for a vote by mail ballot from any other jurisdiction for this election.

DECLARACIÓN DEL VOTANTE

Yo declaro bajo pena de perjurio que: soy residente del recinto electoral en el Condado de Sacramento, California en el que estoy votando; soy la persona cuyo nombre consta en este sobre; no he solicitado, ni solicitaré una boleta de voto por correo para esta elección de ninguna otra jurisdicción.

You must sign in your own handwriting. Your signature must match the signature on your voter registration card. Voting twice in an election is a crime. Power of attorney is not acceptable.

Voter, sign and date below / Votante, firme y coloque la fecha abajo

X ○ ○

Date / Fecha (MM/DD/YYYY) _____

Print name / Imprimir nombre _____

Print your voter registration address / Imprime tu dirección de registro de votante _____

If you are unable to sign, make your mark and have a witness sign below: / Si usted no puede firmar, haga una marca y haga que un testigo firme abajo:

Witness, sign here / Testigo, firme aquí _____

(916) 875-6451 www.elections.sacounty.net

Debe firmar de puño y letra. Su firma debe coincidir con la firma en la tarjeta de inscripción del votante. Votar dos veces en una elección es un crimen. No se aceptan poderes notariales.

I authorize the person below to return my ballot: / Autorizo a la persona abajo a devolver mi boleta:

Their name / Su nombre _____

Their signature / Su firma _____

Relationship to voter / Relación con el votante _____

2020 Sacramento County Ballot Return Envelope (back)



F. Secretary of State Chart of March 2020 Ballot Rejections by County and Reasons for Rejection

This chart was received via email from the California Secretary of State's office, July 16, 2020 with the explanatory information below included:

“The following county report on vote-by-mail (VBM) acceptance and rejection data is from VoteCal (the statewide voter registration database) and county elections officials. In California, county elections officials are responsible for the processing and counting of ballots. All of the reasons for rejection in the chart below were assigned to ballots by county elections officials.

“While the Secretary of State's office has worked, and continues to work, with county officials to create more uniform assignment of vote-by-mail ballot rejection reasons, each county may interpret definitions differently. For example, we found that some counties marked vote-by-mail ballots as rejected due to the “voter already voted” even when a voter had surrendered their vote-by-mail ballot and voted in-person (never casting the original now “rejected” vote-by-mail to begin with).

“If you have specific questions about a county's data or processing procedures, please reach out directly to the county for explanation and context. The vote counting process in California is a transparent process that is observed by the public and campaigns. This report provided below follows this general perspective by providing a transparent look at the data collected by the state in regards to vote-by-mail ballot acceptance and rejection data.

“California is making a few changes to this November's General Election to help ensure that lawfully cast vote-by-mail ballots are counted. With the signing of AB 860, vote-by-mail ballots that are postmarked on or before Election Day will now be counted if they arrive to county elections officials up to 17 days following the election.

“The Secretary of State's “Where's My Ballot?” vote-by-mail ballot tracking tool will also be expanded statewide. Voters who sign-up for the tool will receive automatic notifications and reminders about their vote-by-mail ballots by text message (SMS), email, and/or voice call. For example, voters enrolled in this program will automatically get messages if they must take action (such as providing an updated/missing signature) so that their vote-by-mail ballot can be counted. They will also get reminders to return their vote-by-mail ballots.”

Secretary of State Chart of March 2020 Ballot Rejections by County and Reasons For Rejection

COUNTY	VBM ACCEPTED	VBM REJECTED							Total Rejected VBM ballots
	Total Accepted VBM ballots	Accepted % of Voter-returned Ballots	No voter signature	Non-matching signature	Ballot missing from envelope	Multiple ballots returned in one envelope	Ballot was not received on time	Voter already voted / Otherwise rejected*	
Alameda	335,260	99.66%	712	266	14			150	1,142
Alpine	508	97.88%		3			8	0	11
Amador	15,020	99.63%	38	10			8	0	56
Butte	65,971	98.31%	148	257	3		725	0	1,133
Calaveras	17,663	98.43%	55	61	5		122	39	282
Colusa	3,618	98.77%	9	8			28	0	45
Contra Costa	246,393	98.55%	346	746	17	9	2,477	26	3,621
Del Norte	5,266	98.74%	9	10	5		13	30	67
El Dorado	70,562	98.86%	235	57	1	6	515	2	816
Fresno	170,731	99.01%	463	1,051	3	4	185	0	1,706
Glenn	5,865	98.49%	24	28	2		28	8	90
Humboldt	30,892	99.53%	33	89				24	146
Imperial	17,187	98.52%	84	105				70	259
Inyo	5,152	99.23%	2	5	1	1	29	2	40
Kern	115,660	98.13%	190	654	17	18	958	373	2,210
Kings	17,562	97.94%	60	112		2	135	60	369
Lake	13,015	99.16%	21	24		1	41	23	110
Lassen	6,458	99.85%	2				8	0	10
Los Angeles	1,142,286	98.47%	2,756	267	458	70	13,198	994	17,743
Madera	28,440	97.98%	124	259	6	3	165	29	586
Marin	83,966	97.86%	72	287			1,473	4	1,836
Mariposa	7,133	98.55%	32	21			52	0	105
Mendocino	24,608	98.63%	25	49	2		209	58	343
Merced	33,082	97.44%	203	192	1		470	3	869
Modoc	2,446	99.23%	6	7			6	0	19
Mono	2,973	98.97%		14	1		15	1	31
Monterey	71,346	99.41%	86	165	14	4	149	3	421
Napa	46,113	98.87%	176	76			249	24	525
Nevada	42,385	99.42%	51	152	1		12	30	246
Orange	635,616	98.53%	821	929			7,675	81	9,506
Placer	113,679	98.82%	97	358	16	1	886	0	1,358
Plumas	8,207	100.00%						0	0

*note: May include ballots that were voided/suspended and not returned by voter



Secretary of State Chart of March 2020 Ballot Rejections by County and Reasons For Rejection
(continued)

COUNTY	VBM ACCEPTED	VBM REJECTED							
	Total Accepted VBM ballots	Accepted % of Voter-returned Ballots	No voter signature	Non-matching signature	Ballot missing from envelope	Multiple ballots returned in one envelope	Ballot was not received on time	Voter already voted / Otherwise rejected*	Total Rejected VBM ballots
Riverside	368,530	98.11%	934	709	25	3	5,287	153	7,111
Sacramento	366,352	98.76%	727	759	21	3	2,722	371	4,603
San Benito	15,015	98.09%	53	55	3		151	31	293
San Bernardino	261,742	98.32%	713	599	43	28	2,848	251	4,482
San Diego	652,477	99.05%	415	1,332		6	4,481	9	6,243
San Francisco	198,511	95.48%	130	136	11		9,115	15	9,407
San Joaquin	113,522	98.40%	322	185	7		1,324	11	1,849
San Luis Obispo	88,062	99.25%	118	105	1		442	0	666
San Mateo	194,606	97.88%	869	1,169	11		2,099	72	4,220
Santa Barbara	97,381	98.44%	277	237	15		1,007	6	1,542
Santa Clara	428,201	98.59%	236	235	9		5,531	125	6,136
Santa Cruz	70,652	98.81%	108	95	16	1	632	0	852
Shasta	46,304	99.05%	25	47	8		307	55	442
Sierra	1,385	99.35%		4		1	4	0	9
Siskiyou	12,083	98.19%	10	89			106	18	223
Solano	79,300	99.44%	134	251	41	4		16	446
Sonoma	151,832	98.41%	406	969	40	1	1,031	7	2,454
Stanislaus	89,669	98.19%	127	321	4		939	264	1,655
Sutter	21,184	99.34%	34	44			59	3	140
Tehama	14,582	98.87%	14	88	7		56	2	167
Trinity	3,705	98.51%	6	1			40	9	56
Tulare	55,154	98.35%	72	161	1		682	7	923
Tuolumne	20,338	99.43%	22	22			12	60	116
Ventura	164,413	99.09%	242	189	6		1,044	27	1,508
Yolo	46,472	98.10%	31	394			473	3	901
Yuba	12,350	97.76%	92	70		4	99	18	283
Total	6,958,885	98.55%	12,997	14,528	836	170	70,330	3,567	102,428

*note: May include ballots that were voided/suspended and not returned by voter



Endnotes

1. Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-64-20 on May 8th and Executive Order N-67-20 on June 3rd and signed into law Assembly Bill 860 on June 18th, 2020 which codifies several provisions of the executive orders and allows ballots received up to 17 days after Election Day to be counted as long as they are verified to have been postmarked or verified received by the U.S. Postal Service by Election Day.
2. Casting a ballot by mail in California was referred to as “voting absentee” until 2008, following the enactment of AB 1243/Karnette of 2007 which changed the Elections Code to describe absentee voting as “vote-by-mail”.
3. An Excel chart displaying county-by-county rejected ballot data for elections dating back to 2003 can be accessed on the Secretary of State’s “Vote-by-Mail - Other Elections” page under the heading “Historical Vote-by-Mail Statistics”, at the url: <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/vote-by-mail/vbm-statistics.xls>.
4. The ballot rejection rate is calculated by adding the number of VBM ballots counted to the number of VBM ballots rejected and then dividing the rejected number by the combined total of counted and rejected VBM ballots. An alternative approach to calculating ballot rejection, used by the Election Assistance Commission and some other researchers, calculates the rejection rate by adding the number of all counted ballots, not just VBM ballots, to the number of VBM ballots rejected and then dividing the rejected number by the combined total of all counted and rejected ballots.
5. See the New Electorate Study: “How Did the Voter’s Choice Act Affect Turnout in 2018?” Authored by Eric McGhee et al, May 2019, https://drive.google.com/file/d/158V4q_5nS8_O6cRw0RkdnHYs_9rvobOh/view.
6. The data for this comparison was obtained from the Secretary of State’s web site, not the counties’ voter files; as a result the ballot rejection percentages presented in these tables differ slightly from other charts in this report.
7. Voter data provided by county election offices indicated each voters’ registration date and those voters who registered to vote after the June 2018 Primary election and before the November 2018 General Election were designated as “newly registered voters” although it is possible that some of these voters were previously registered in another county.
8. “Improving California’s Vote-by-Mail Process: A Three-County Study”, https://www.calvoter.org/sites/default/files/cvf_vbm_study.pdf.
9. According to the Center for Inclusive Democracy’s (formerly the California Civic Engagement Project) September 2014 report, “California’s Uncounted Vote-By-Mail Ballots: Identifying Variation in County Processing”, with 54 of 58 counties reporting 2012 General Election rejected ballot data, “In 51.2% of counties, most mail ballots were rejected due to lateness. In 32.6% of counties the most common rejection was for bad signatures. No signature was the most common reason for rejecting ballots in 14% of counties (two counties reported ties).” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/5881a1622994ca06fb1484ac/1484890469869/CCEP+VBM+Issue+Brief+2+Revised+%281%29.pdf>.
10. A review of the March 3, 2020 Primary election’s rejected mail ballots conducted by Michael Blood for the Associated Press found that statewide, 102,428 ballots were rejected, and that 70,330, or 69 percent, were rejected due to lateness; nearly 13,000 were rejected for missing signatures and more than 14,000 were rejected for mismatched signatures (“California rejected 100K mail-in ballots because of mistakes”, published July 13, 2020, <https://apnews.com/a45421048cd89938df7c882891a97db5>.)



11. “Improving California’s Vote-by-Mail Process: A Three-County Study”, page 26.
12. Sacramento County implemented a second review process for challenged signatures for the March 2020 election and reported fewer ballots challenged for non-matching signatures in that election (759) compared to November 2018 (1,463).
13. AB 1970 of 2016 requires the Secretary of State to promulgate regulations establishing guidelines for county elections officials relating to the processing of vote-by-mail ballots and provisional ballots. These regulations are currently in draft format and, according to the Secretary of State’s staff, are expected to be in place prior to the November 3, 2020 Presidential Election.
14. According to Election Code 3014, “If it is determined that a voter has attempted to vote twice, both ballots shall be void.” (http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=3014.&lawCode=ELEC).
15. These 1,499 ballots represent 55% of the 2,722 late ballots Sacramento received in the March Primary; post-election review was halted due to shutdowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic.
16. According to the United States Postal Service web site, “A postmark is an official Postal Service imprint applied in black ink on the address side of a stamped mailpiece. A postmark indicates the location and date the Postal Service accepted custody of a mailpiece, and it cancels affixed postage.” Accessed at https://about.usps.com/handbooks/po408/ch1_003.htm.
17. This provision is included in California Election Code 4103(b)(1), enacted with the passage of Senate Bill 29 in 2014. Voters are required by law to sign and date their ballots under penalty of perjury.
18. Governor Newsom’s Executive Order N-67-20 is at <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/6.3.20-EO-N-67-20.docx.pdf>.
19. Additional guidance on the use of Intelligent Mail Barcodes for the November 2020 election provided by the Secretary of State to counties on July 14, 2020 clarifies that print vendors that are unable to comply with this requirement could seek a waiver. This memorandum online at <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ccrov/pdf/2020/july/20151jl.pdf>.
20. Elections observers have discussed for some time whether the absence of a statewide mandate requiring teaching students how to write in cursive is contributing to young voters’ challenges in successfully casting vote-by-mail ballots.
21. Ballots rejected as “too late” received via drop boxes or vote centers are typically from voters who slid the ballot under the door of the voting location after 8 p.m. on Election Day.
22. While it is possible that some signatures may not match because a fraudulent attempt has been made to vote on someone else’s behalf, such instances are reportedly rare and when they occur, they are referred to county district attorneys for investigation.
23. See Appendix A for a detailed list of recent laws enacted to address ballot rejection.
24. CVF President Kim Alexander filed a declaration in support of the ACLU’s lawsuit that included 2016 election ballot cure results in four counties, online at https://archive.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/advocacy/2017-18/Kim_Alexander_Declaration_ACLU.pdf.
25. In his decision, Superior Court Judge Richard Ulmer said the state violated due process clauses of the federal and state constitutions because voters were being disenfranchised without notice or an opportunity to be heard. For more information about the ACLU’s lawsuit, LaFollette vs. Padilla, see this March 6, 2018 news release: <https://www.aclunc.org/news/judge-rules-state-must-fix-faulty-signature-law>.
26. San Mateo figures are from the Center for Inclusive Democracy’s October 2019 report, “Examining San Mateo County’s Adoption of the California Voter’s Choice Act: 2018 Election Cycle,” which indicates the figures include ballots challenged for missing and mismatched signatures as well as challenged due to “soiled and ID required”. This report does not specify whether letters were sent, but states that the challenges were resolved.



27. See “Voter Messaging in the Time of Covid 19 - Survey Fact Sheet” published August 2020 by the Center for Inclusive Democracy at the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/5f3307ec6569af05af274bb7/1597179885893/CID+Voter+Messaging+in+the+Time+of+COVID-19+-+Fact+Sheet+-+FINAL.pdf>, and “Reaching Low Propensity Voters in the November 2020 Elections,” published August 4, 2020 by California Common Cause and the Center for Social Innovation at UC Riverside, <https://www.commoncause.org/california/resource/reaching-low-propensity-voters-in-the-november-2020-elections/>.
28. For more information see <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/vote-mail/#design>.
29. “California rejected 100K mail-in ballots because of mistakes,” by Michael Blood, The Associated Press, July 13, 2020, <https://apnews.com/a45421048cd89938df7c882891a97db5>.
30. “Signed, Sealed and Undelivered: Thousands of Mail-in Ballots Rejected for Tardiness,” by Pam Fessler, National Public Radio, July 13, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/13/889751095/signed-sealed-undelivered-thousands-of-mail-in-ballots-rejected-for-tardiness> and “More than 550,000 Primary Absentee Ballots Rejected in 2020, Far Outpacing 2016”, by Pam Fessler, National Public Radio, August 22, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/22/904693468/more-than-550-000-primary-absentee-ballots-rejected-in-2020-far-outpacing-2016>.
31. CVF’s AB 477 letter of support is online at https://archive.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/advocacy/2015-16/CVF_AB_477_Support_Letter.pdf.
32. CVF’s SB 365 letter of support is online at https://archive.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/advocacy/2015-16/CVF_SB_365_Support_Letter.pdf.
33. CVF’s position letters on SB 450 are online at https://archive.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/CVF_SB_450_amendments_letter.pdf and https://archive.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/advocacy/2015-16/2016_06_23_SB_450_Concerns_Letter.pdf.
34. CVF’s letter opposing AB 840 due to provisions in it that weaken California’s post-election verification law is online at https://archive.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/advocacy/2017-18/AB_840_CVF_Oppose_Letter_to_Gov_Brown.pdf.
35. CVF’s AB 216 letter of support is online at https://archive.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/advocacy/2017-18/CVF_AB_216_Support_Letter.pdf.
36. CVF’s SB 759 letter of support is online at https://www.calvoter.org/sites/default/files/cvf_sb_759_support_ltr_to_gov_brown.pdf.
37. CVF’s SB 523 letter of support is online at https://www.calvoter.org/sites/default/files/sb_523_cvf_support_letter_to_gov_newsom.pdf.
38. CVF and Verified Voting’s position letter on AB 860 is online at https://www.calvoter.org/sites/default/files/cvfvvf_ab_860_letter-of-concern.pdf.



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