

Voter's Choice Act Research Brief Series

California Voter's Choice Act: The Impact of Collaboration on the Implementation Process



The California Voter's Choice Act (VCA) provides California counties the option of adopting a new voting model that includes replacing neighborhood polling places with vote centers and mailing Vote-By-Mail (VBM) ballots to all registered voters (Los Angeles County will not automatically send VBM ballots until 2024). Under the new voting model, vote centers will offer a variety of services including in-person voting, accessible voting options, language assistance, mail ballot drop-off and conditional voter registration. They will be distributed throughout the county, and available to all voters up to ten days before Election Day.¹

Community consultation is a key element of VCA implementation. The law requires adopting counties to develop an election administration plan (EAP) in consultation with the public and, in particular, with community organizations serving voters with disabilities and those requiring language assistance (see text box, page 3). The law sets clear guidelines on the timing and establishment of advisory committees focused on language accessibility and voting accessibility. The California Secretary of State provides toolkits and technical assistance to counties to assist with public consultation (see the [Secretary of State's VCA Starter Kit](#) for guidelines provided on collaboration). However, while collaboration, broadly defined here as the communication and cooperation between groups, was widely understood to be a crucial element of a successful implementation, the Voter's Choice Act does not specify the degree to which county elections offices and community groups must collaborate with each other, nor does it require any formal structure or level of frequency to this interaction beyond reference in the Election Administration Plan.

In this brief, the second in a series, we discuss findings from an extensive study of the five counties (figure 1) that adopted the VCA in 2018. To understand the VCA implementation process, we conducted 40 confidential in-depth interviews with election officials, statewide voter advocacy groups, and community groups involved in implementing the VCA. Twelve of these interviews were conducted with election officials from VCA and non-VCA adopting counties, some of whom have had an implementation advisory role at the statewide level. Another nearly 30 interviews were conducted with statewide and community voter advocacy groups. We further administered six focus groups with community groups, statewide voter advocacy groups, and other stakeholders, as well as a survey of community-based organizations, and a social media analysis. We also gathered public education and outreach materials used by election officials and stakeholders in VCA counties, as well as those prepared by Los Angeles County in promoting their scheduled VCA adoption in 2020.

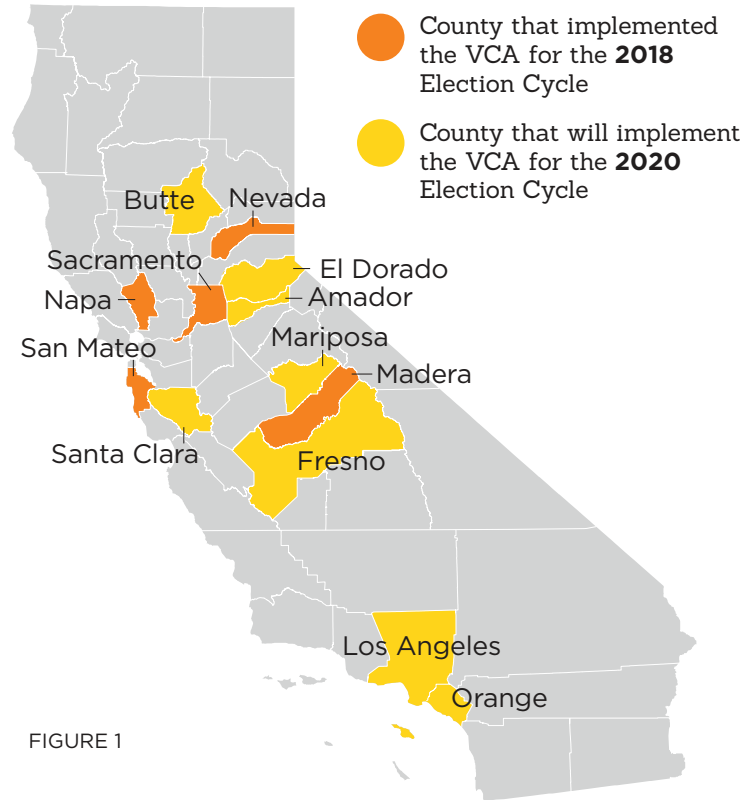
Based on our in-depth interviews and focus groups, this brief presents findings regarding the benefits and challenges of collaboration, and areas for improvement. With the goal of informing VCA implementation in 2020 and beyond, this brief addresses the following questions:

- 1. How did collaboration among various stakeholders influence the VCA implementation process?**
- 2. What are the key challenges to collaborating under the VCA?**

About the Voter's Choice Act

The California Voter's Choice Act provides an optional new voting model to counties. In counties choosing to adopt the new model, every registered voter is mailed a Vote-by-Mail (VBM) ballot, which voters can either mail in, or return at a ballot drop box or a newly-established vote center.

At vote centers, which replace traditional neighborhood polling places, voters can cast their ballots in person, drop off their completed VBM ballots, apply for conditional voter registration, receive replacement ballots, and access additional resources, such as language assistance and accessible voting machines. While there are fewer vote centers than polling places by design, vote centers are open to voters for up to ten days prior to Election Day and available for all voters to utilize county-wide. Voters can choose to cast their vote by mail or drop box, and those desiring an in-person experience (e.g., using an accessible voting system, location convenience or for a sense of community) would have numerous dates to do so rather than just one.



Fourteen of California's 58 counties were eligible to adopt the model for the 2018 election cycle, and five counties did so—Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento and San Mateo. All other California counties are eligible to adopt the model in 2020. In 2020, Los Angeles County will opt in to the model but will not be required to mail all registered voters VBM ballots until 2024.² In addition to Los Angeles County, the following counties have publicly announced (as of this brief's publication) that they will adopt the VCA for the 2020 election cycle: Amador, Butte, El Dorado, Fresno, Mariposa, Orange and Santa Clara (see figure 1). In total, 13 California counties will be conducting elections under the Voter's Choice Act in 2020, comprising approximately half the state's current registered voter population.³

Glossary

- **Conditional Voter Registration (CVR):** CVR allows eligible voters to register or update their voter registration information after the deadline. CVR ballots are counted once the county election official has verified the registration. CVR is also commonly referred to as Same Day Registration.
- **Provisional Ballot:** Any voter whose registration cannot be confirmed while voting in person has the right to vote using a provisional ballot. Provisional ballots are counted if election officials have verified that the voter is registered to vote in the county and has not already voted.
- **Language Accessibility Advisory Committee (LAAC):** VCA-adopting counties are required to establish a county LAAC to advise the county elections office as it relates to access to the electoral process for voters with limited English proficiency. Some non-VCA counties also have a LAAC.
- **Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC):** VCA-adopting counties are required to establish a county VAAC to advise the county elections office as it relates to access to the electoral process for voters with disabilities. Some non-VCA counties also have a VAAC.
- **Election Administration Plan (EAP):** VCA-adopting counties are required to establish an Election Administration Plan, which details how the county intends to meet all requirements of the VCA, including how the elections office will engage the public and conduct outreach. The county must open the EAP for public comment before it is finalized. See the California Secretary of State's [VCA Quick Start Guide](#).

California Voter's Choice Act Requirements on Community Consultation

- VCA county officials are required to draft an election administration plan (EAP) in consultation with the public.
- These draft plans must be developed in consultation with a Language Accessibility Advisory Committee (LAAC) and a Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC).
- These advisory committees must be established by October 1 prior to an election year, and they are required to hold their first meeting by April 1 of the election year.
- VCA county officials are encouraged to develop, recruit, launch, and utilize input from their LAAC and VAAC prior to the public consultation period for the Election Administration Plan (EAP).
- County officials must give public notice and accept public comment for at least 14 days prior to a public hearing on the draft EAP and, upon adopting the final plan, submit the EAP's sections on voter education and outreach to the California Secretary of State.
- The Secretary of State shall "approve, approve with modifications, or reject a voter education and outreach plan" within 14 days of receiving it.
- The county shall post the draft plan, amended plan, and adopted final plan for election administration on its web site, with language translations and in a format that is accessible for people with disabilities.

1. How did collaboration among various stakeholders influence the VCA implementation process?

i. Election Officials Emphasize the Importance of Collaboration

Every VCA county election official interviewed asserted the importance of engaging community groups and other stakeholders in the implementation process, during both the early planning phase, and in particular for the voter education and outreach phase. Some interviewees went further to describe community collaboration as essential to the success of the VCA, particularly regarding educational materials and outreach strategy. As one election official explained, "the counties heavily relied on CBOs, the Community Based Organizations, to get the word out. The counties don't have the amount of outreach staff that would be needed to do it on our own, to go out and hit every group and organization."

One election official characterized collaboration with community groups and other stakeholders as the foundation of their success in preparing voters for the shift to VCA elections.

"I'm talking about city councils, board of supervisors, elected officials, community-based organizations, businesses... Everybody needs to know that you're a VCA county. You're not a traditional polling place. In order to get that word out, you need to use your partnerships and collaboration model to meet, to exchange ideas, to get out information, to request information, and get out your election administration plan. So, that was key. It was really very, very important."

For another county, engagement with community stakeholders largely took place in advance of the decision to adopt the VCA. As one election official said, "to make sure, that at a minimum, stakeholders weren't opposed to it." Once implementation started, this official reported that community collaboration in their county was very limited.

In the 2018 election cycle, Future of California Elections (FoCE), a nonpartisan nonprofit organization, supported VCA implementation statewide through their Voter's Choice California (VCC) project. Each county VCA coalition had an affiliation, formally or informally, with the FoCE project. VCC worked to support county elections offices and community organizations that were transitioning to the new voting model under the VCA. To that aim, the VCC Steering Committee launched local coalitions, worked to strengthen cross-sector collaboration, and developed resources (e.g. checklists of EAP legal requirements and guides for effective community engagement). FoCE staff supported VCC work by managing statewide monitoring of the VCA and highlighting best practices across counties. FoCE staff also hosted two VCC debriefs, the Primary Election Debrief in 2018 and the General Election Debrief in 2019, the later was co-hosted with the California Secretary of State VCA Task Force.

Election officials interviewed also noted the importance of having the partnership and guidance of the election community beyond their own counties. These included their peers in other counties, as well as the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials (CACEO) meetings, the California Secretary of State's Office through the CACEO Voter's Choice Act Working Group, the Voter's Choice Taskforce, and opportunities such as the Secretary of State VCA Task Force's Debrief of the 2018 Primary Election.

The latter daylong gathering brought together community organizations and election administrators from across the state to discuss promising practices and challenges experienced during the June 2018 Primary Elections in VCA counties.

ii. Community Advocates Leverage their Combined Resources and Relationships

During the 2018 election cycle, formal coalitions developed in Napa, Nevada and Sacramento counties, which were known as the Voter's Choice Napa Committee, Future of Nevada County Elections Coalition and Sacramento Voter's Choice Act Coalition, respectively. A coalition also came together in San Mateo County which, shortly before the 2018 Primary Election, transitioned (at the request of the coalition members) to be an official committee of the San Mateo Elections Office. This committee is named the Voter Education and Outreach Advisory Committee (VEOAC). In contrast, community collaboration in Madera County took on a less formalized approach. Community groups and other stakeholders came together to share information about the VCA and to support each other's outreach efforts without functioning as a formal coalition. These groups were initially convened as the Community Election Working Group by the county's elections office to discuss the upcoming adoption of the VCA. Those attendees who indicated their interest in engaging with VCA implementation were guided by the elections office toward opportunities that included the county's LAAC, VAAC and serving as vote center workers.

Currently, counties that are adopting the VCA in 2020 are in differing stages of developing their VCA outreach efforts, including the two largest adopting counties. In preparation for Los Angeles County's adoption of the VCA in 2020, the elections office is utilizing its long established and active Community Voter Outreach Advisory Committee (CVOC) to guide outreach and education activities. Additionally, the County established the Voting Solutions for All (VSAP) Advisory Committee and VSAP Technical Advisory Committee to collaborate in planning and executing the change to the new Vote Center model. Orange County is also currently utilizing its long established and active voter outreach committee called the Community Election Working Group (CEW).

Members of community groups interviewed as part of this study suggested a number of elements that helped make county VCA coalitions impactful during implementation. These include the following factors:

- *Relationship Building*
- *Logistical and Creative Improvements*
- *Leveraging Resources and Expertise of Voter's Choice California*

a. Relationship Building

A common theme heard from community coalition members was that working in coalitions facilitated stronger relationships with fellow coalition members, county elections offices and statewide advocacy groups. These relationships strengthened the implementation of the Voter's Choice Act in 2018, and will likely aid election administration efforts in future election cycles as well.

The stronger relationships and collaborative efforts afforded by the coalitions allowed counties to take on a broader range of voter education and outreach efforts, as well as reach a more diverse audience. Several coalition members described how their coalition brought together organizations that did not necessarily work on voting issues in the past, and helped members build their capacity to include voter education and outreach in their work.

As one member described,

“We had something absolutely wonderful that came out of the coalition and will still be coming out of this coalition, and that is working with our communities, with our different skills, our different needs, working together in, I think, a way that we've never been able to do before.”

Overall, coalitions saw important benefits from community collaboration efforts: closer coordination of outreach efforts with administrative work, faster turnaround on materials to share and translate in their outreach efforts, and an infusion of community-level expertise into outreach efforts, particularly for non-English speaking populations.

Some interviewees also discussed the helpful involvement of VCC Steering Committee members in their coalitions. VCC steering committee organizations, including statewide groups such as the League of Women Voters (LWV), Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAAJ), American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Disability Rights California (DRC), engaged in local coalitions and provided local organizations with customized technical assistance including hard-to-access resources such as legal guidance.

Through their involvement with the VCC, many local groups gained additional skills and, in some cases, the confidence to engage with their election officials on the VCA.

b. Logistical and Creative Improvements

Through collaboration with each other, community advocates were able to share creative ideas, create better educational materials, avoid logistical redundancies, and leverage the resources and expertise of higher-level agencies and organizations. Community coalitions with diverse expertise and specializations provided a space for communal brainstorming and information sharing and helped ensure efforts weren't duplicated. The diversity of the coalition members also enabled community efforts to tailor their campaign effectively to specific populations.

As one community advocate stated,

“Just having a team where you can call up the right person for the right issue, and speaking with that authority... made all the difference.”

The coalitions were also able to leverage their collective power to quickly address issues. As one community advocate explained, “Monitoring this as a collective, rather than individuals, made all the difference so we could learn about issues that arose as quickly as possible. And then, instead of addressing it as individuals coming to the county offices, we could go through it as a group. If need be, we could go to the board of supervisors and try to get them involved. That made all the impact, when they have that kind of show of force from a diverse range of voices.”

c. Leveraging the Expertise and Resources of Voter's Choice California

To varying degrees, the VCC Steering Committee facilitated the sharing of resources and dialogue between county elections offices and community members in each of the 5 counties. Among FoCE's key goals for the VCC project were ensuring local advocates were engaged, informed, and heard in the county elections office, while at the same time ensuring county elections offices could connect with the community expertise of their nonprofit constituents.

As one interviewee affiliated with VCC explained, “We would try to ensure that the public's feedback was meaningful. That their voice was being heard. We would try to facilitate their connection and their relationship to the elections office because we have that kind of know-how and relationship already with elections offices in a lot of these places.”

A community VCA coalition member described,

“The VCC was really important to us, because they did follow through with several things that we wouldn't necessarily have understood, like the implementation plan that [the registrar] had to follow. They were really on top of that in terms of, by this date they were supposed to have this done, and by this date they were supposed to have that done, and there were times when they didn't have it done. So they were kind of the watchdogs on that, and I appreciated that because there's no way, I think, that we could have done that. So that was important to have a statewide organization helping us.”

At the state level, the VCC was able to identify what each VCA county was doing with regard to outreach materials creation, and then export the best practices, while promoting idea sharing between counties. Through their work with county coalitions and election officials, the VCC was effective in creating a common branding and marketing approach to outreach, and in distributing these across the five counties to augment county-specific work. Further, the VCC collaboratively created tool kits with local VCA coalitions that were then shared as resources for all VCA counties, where Registrars (or election officials) were able to tailor the materials to fit local needs (see [VCC Voter Education Materials](#)).

FoCE's management of the VCC project allowed for greater coordination of strategies and resources in the field and minimized the burden on any individual organization. As an interviewee affiliated with the VCC described, "It really helped to both collaborate in order to talk about what was happening in different counties, but also to split up the work. So we could be assured that the different counties were being supported. And not be too stressed in terms of our own capacity or our own time."

iii. Outcomes of Collaboration between Community Advocates and Election Officials

Of the coalition members interviewed, most asserted that they were able to have influence, to varying degrees, over the following elements of a county's VCA implementation process as a result of working together:

- *Influence on Education and Outreach*
- *Influence on Vote Center and Drop Box Administration*
- *Oversight of County's Overall Implementation Process*

a. Influence on Education and Outreach

Coalition members reported that collaborating with their county elections office and with fellow members led to improved voter outreach materials so that they would more closely meet the local community's needs, such as fliers with improved translation, less text and more visuals. Further, some coalitions successfully encouraged their county elections office to distribute these translated outreach materials in the General Election earlier than they had for the Primary.

b. Influence on Vote Center and Drop Box Administration

Coalition members reported that, in some cases, they were able to have an influence on vote center and drop box placement after leveraging their collective power, at times after indicating they would take their needs to their County Board of Supervisors. Several coalition members described how they reported the need for additional signage, or for existing signage to be more visible at vote centers and drop boxes, and elections office staff were responsive and made immediate changes. In another example, one county coalition suggested putting county workers outside vote centers to collect ballots intended for interior drop boxes so that voters were not discouraged by seeing long lines. The county implemented this idea, with positive results. Several interviewees noted that counties with election staff who were very open and responsive facilitated feedback around the accessibility of vote centers and drop boxes.

In some cases, coalition members were able to support the election staff and leverage their own relationships with people who had facilities to offer as vote centers. Their relationships in the community helped recruit facilities to be used as vote centers and helped negotiate terms of use, such as hours of operation.

c. Oversight of County's Overall Implementation Process

Working together, the collective strength of community coalitions enabled them to have a certain degree of oversight regarding VCA implementation. Community coalitions, often in partnership with members of the VCC, worked to stay on top of county implementation plans, contacting county offices to address gaps or discrepancies. As one community coalition interviewee noted,

"I think it's all about strength in numbers. The non-profit industry is a big footprint in terms of the people we serve [and] also our staff and what we contribute locally, and so I think we were really able to influence the way that it was, the plan was developed and ultimately the way the election was administered."

2. What are the key challenges to collaborating under the VCA?

i. Election Officials Perspectives on Challenges

From the perspective of election officials, there were a number of challenges to the collaborative process that, if addressed, could result in a more effective implementation. These challenges include:

- *Timing of VCA Requirements*
- *Limited Resources*
- *Relationships between Election Officials and Community Groups*

a. Timing of VCA Requirements

Several election officials interviewed described how it was challenging to solicit meaningful collaboration with the community while operating under the required deadlines involved in the VCA implementation process, including finding appropriate voting and drop off locations and creating the EAP, VAAC and LAAC.

One election official explained that, “Election administrators have very strict unforgiving and statutory deadlines. Most stakeholder groups don’t operate in that type of environment, so the need for immediate decisions, immediate answers, and timely responses often played a significant role in limiting the ability for collaboration.”

However, while many advocates and election officials agreed that starting collaboration earlier would be helpful, one election official noted that they faced challenges engaging the community far in advance of the election, explaining,

“Once we made the decision [to implement], I’ll be very honest, collaboration was limited. Again, for the same reason that I mentioned earlier, folks aren’t as engaged in the election process four, five, six, seven, eight months in advance of an election as they are say 45 days before an election. It makes collaboration difficult.”

b. Limited Resources

For the 2018 election cycle, the California Secretary of State provided \$200,000 for outreach (allocated for the 2018 election by Senate Bill 117).⁴ However, a few county election officials interviewed expressed some frustration with their overall resources compared to the size of the outreach needed in their county. One election official explained that their staff numbers were too small to be “running around the whole county,” and that they needed to rely on community groups to do the bulk of the needed outreach work. Another county election official noted that they would like to contract with community-based organizations in their county to do VCA outreach and education, including efforts such as voter registration drives.

c. Relationships between Election Officials and Community Groups

Several election officials interviewed suggested that election officials should embrace collaborating with both community organizations and city clerks. As one election official said, “I think the election officials need to be more open and inviting in the collaboration process...it needs to be a two-way street. I think, to be honest with you, there are more issues that come on the election official side, because they’re not as open and collaborative as the organizations are.”

However, these interviewees also acknowledged that the level of engagement required by the VCA is often new for county elections offices and that gaining the skills to do this engagement requires a strong commitment by election officials, one that extends beyond time and resources alone. One election official noted that colleagues considering implementation need to be open to a much higher level of community engagement than they are used to experiencing, particularly around working with their communities on voter education. At the same time, several election officials emphasized that they would like to see more patience from community groups and more understanding that the work of carrying out an election, while implementing a new election system, is a significant task to be completed with limited resources. As one county election official noted, “Ultimately, the County Registrar is held responsible for the decisions that are made.”

ii. Community Advocated Perspectives on Challenges

From the perspective of community advocacy groups, there are a number of challenges to a collaborative process that, if addressed, could result in a more effective implementation. Similar to the perspective of election officials, community advocates see these challenges also including:

- *Timing of VCA Requirements*
- *Limited Resources*
- *Relationships between Election Officials and Community Groups*

a. Timing of VCA Requirements

Many community advocates interviewed cited the short timeline of VCA implementation for the Primary Election as inhibiting the collaborative process between them and county election officials.

One VCA coalition member noted that during the 2018 General Election, the county had more time to incorporate feedback from the coalition, as opposed to the Primary Election. Both county election officials and community advocates suggested that the collaborative process could be improved by developing a coalition engagement plan that includes a clear timeline for community feedback, far in advance of the deadlines.

Several coalition members noted the importance of being included in the EAP and vote center/drop box feedback process early, because once these plans are set in motion they became “hardened” and more impervious to community input.

b. Limited Resources

While considered necessary for effective VCA implementation, a number of community advocates also described the time and resources they spent on the VCA implementation process as a drain on their organizations’ limited capacities. Specific efforts cited included:

- *Time and resources spent making sure that counties complied with the VCA’s accessibility protections*
- *Time spent organizing stakeholders to arrange VCA outreach events*
- *Community coalition members stepping in to help improve county-run outreach events*
- *Community coalition members attending county-organized outreach events to provide language assistance, but finding some county events to be poorly attended*
- *Community coalition members needing to revise county-translated materials themselves due to perceived inaccuracies by county-hired translators*

As one community interviewee noted, “I think the other problem the county has is they just don’t have a lot of staff in the registrar’s office, so we became kind of deputized county workers advancing some of their needs, but also being their eyes and ears to review their documents and distribute them.”

It should be noted that there were a limited number of community grants made to nonprofits in the five VCA counties. The grants provided partial support for their VCA implementation work. FoCE secured \$348,000 in funding from the James Irvine Foundation to establish a VCC Grants program. The grants ranged from \$2,000 to \$40,000. In addition to the VCC Grants program, many VCC steering committee members also had existing Irvine grants that they leveraged to support their VCA work. Additionally, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation provided \$84,000 to seven organizations working on VCA implementation in San Mateo County. Further, the California Endowment made small grants to support the VCA efforts of some community groups. However, in total, the available funding was limited and by most interviewee accounts, was not sufficient to compensate for the amount of time their organizations spent on VCA implementation. Voter education and outreach under the VCA model requires more intensive staff time. Time spent on VCA work was often beyond the amount of time the nonprofit organizations initially expected.

With regard to funding, one election official suggested that more transparency about which organizations received non-governmental funding would have allowed for greater collaboration, and would have brought a level of accountability and transparency to the implementation process in their county.

c. Relationships between Election Officials and Community Groups

Several community advocate interviewees indicated that what often appeared to them as a hurried EAP process leading up to the Primary Election resulted in an inadequate amount of time and space for community input. Some interviewees indicated that what they saw as a county’s attempt to get the EAP done quickly and to minimize the number of operational changes they would need to make sometimes resulted in election officials appearing not very open, at least initially, to community input. However, some interviewees noted that relationships improved as time went on and that counties became more willing to engage in open dialogue with community groups. For one county coalition, they believed this change occurred after they “established credibility” during the Primary Election, resulting in their input being taken more readily in the 2018 General Election cycle.

For some interviewees, another challenge in their relationship with county elections offices was their uncertainty around the legal parameters of the VCA—what the coalition was able to legally influence

and what is outside of their influence according to the law. For some, this uncertainty impacted the type of requests they made of election officials and their degree of pushback when faced with a county's rejection of their stated needs. Regarding working with county LAACs and VAACs, several community advocate interviewees noted that cross-membership between VCA coalitions and county LAACs and VAACs enabled better information dissemination from the county elections offices to the coalition, bringing the two more in step with each other.

However, stakeholders expressed notable concern about the effectiveness of most VCA county LAACs. Several interviewees (from different counties) noted that LAAC meetings were not well attended and they typically worked independently of county VCA coalitions with little cross communication. As one county LAAC member interviewed explained,

“I will say that the LAAC, from what I could tell, was not a particularly empowering experience for the people on that body. So, members of the LAAC were supposed to provide feedback to the elections office about how to reach language minority communities in the county, and I just don't think the elections office really gave the LAAC an opportunity to feel like their feedback was valued and heard.”

It should be noted that many interviewees expressed the need to have more representation on county VCA coalitions from groups that are not typically engaged in the voting landscape, for example, representatives of businesses, churches, city government, and county agencies. In particular, most VCA coalitions did not have city representation. As one coalition member reported, city councils in their county appeared not to have heard about various aspects of the VCA implementation process. One notable exception was in Sacramento County where the Sacramento Mayor's office played a leading role in the convening of county stakeholders, as well as the EAP and outreach phases.

There was also some recognition that, in future elections, coalitions should conduct more outreach to local political campaigns (for candidates and measures) to inform their VCA messaging. Given the significant amount of voter outreach these campaigns conduct, not connecting with them was seen, at least to some degree, as a lost opportunity to educate voters about the VCA. At the same time, there was on-going uncertainty with some coalition members as to the level of appropriateness in outreaching to political campaigns given the coalitions' non-partisan commitment.

Applying the Study's Findings

i. Relationship Between County and Community Organizations

Based on their experiences in the county VCA implementation process, election officials and community advocates interviewed suggested county elections offices should do the following:

- *Meet with community groups well before the Election Administration Plan is developed to ensure the initial plan more closely meets the community's needs before it is published and before the public comment period.*
- *Have an experienced facilitator involved in initial meetings who can bring together the county, community groups, and other stakeholders to identify a shared purpose and corresponding goals.*
- *Ensure frequent and regular communications between the elections office and community partners on the ground.*
- *Develop a systematic process that gives time for community advocates to provide feedback on educational materials to the county elections office.*
- *Be publicly transparent about each step of the VCA implementation process.*
- *Publicly report the specific community feedback that was incorporated into their VCA implementation process.*
- *Facilitate better alignment between the input of community coalitions and the work of county LAACs and VAACs.*
- *Establish relationships with city governments regarding the VCA implementation process, particularly with regard to outreach efforts.*

There was general consensus from election officials and community advocates interviewed that effective VCA implementation in a county requires election staff that are sincerely invested and experienced in a high level of community engagement and input. For the above action items, such a level of commitment could be expected to play a key role in the likelihood of each item's successful execution.

ii. Increasing the Effectiveness of County Coalitions

Based on their experiences working in and with VCA coalitions, interviewees suggested county VCA coalitions should consider the following actions to help ensure an effective VCA implementation:

- *Work to be more effective in communicating with community organizations who are not involved in the leadership of a VCA coalition, but attend meetings sporadically.*
- *Broaden engagement by increasing the number and type of organizations involved in the coalition, particularly from underrepresented communities in a county.*
- *Build stronger partnerships with cities, county agencies, and other stakeholders to support voter education.*
- *Work with Future of California Elections' VCC project to facilitate bridging the gap between the counties, Secretary of State, and local organizations, facilitating conversations between these groups.*
- *Improve collaboration with language minority groups in counties where those populations are harder to reach.*
- *Create more structured roles and responsibilities in a county coalition that also considers the voluntary nature of members.*
- *Where funding allows, identify a lead organization or paid lead staff person to manage the recruitment, work and communication needs of the coalition.*
- *Hold a post-election convening to debrief on what actions worked and what did not work.*
- *Consider cross-county collaboration on outreach efforts where counties are geographically adjacent and share a media market.*

iii. Summary

Overall, our results point to ways that counties and community groups could see successful collaboration under the VCA going forward. For community groups, forming a collaborative coalition helped facilitate working with their county elections office, while for others the coalition's focus was less about the benefits of working with their elections office and more about the benefits collaboration provided from working with each other. A key take-away from our findings is that there are potentially substantial advantages for counties if their elections offices formalize relationships with their VCA coalition.

However, all the above action items need resources to be fully and successfully realized. The VCA does not provide direct funding to counties for their collaborative work as it is an opt-in model and not a state mandate. The VCA also does not require County Boards of Supervisors to provide specific funding to elections offices for the community engagement requirements of the law, nor for the VCA's voter outreach needs. While two VCA county elections offices were provided additional support from their Boards of Supervisors specifically for their outreach budgets in 2018 and the California Secretary of State provided a total of \$200,000 for outreach to all five VCA counties, election officials interviewed often noted their limited resources and staffing, and their need for additional support.

At the same time, many community advocates interviewed also highlighted the insufficient funding that was available to them for their involvement in VCA efforts. Available funding for both elections offices and community groups will likely be a significant factor in the effective implementation of the VCA during the 2020 election, particularly for counties in their first election cycle of VCA implementation.

Notes

1. For more information on California Senate Bill 450, The Voter's Choice Act, see:
http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450
2. See above, Note 1.
3. See the California Secretary of State Report of Registration - February 10, 2019:
<https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/report-registration/ror-oddyear-2019/>
4. For more information, see Senate Bill 117 at:
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB117

Available Resources for the VCA Implementation Process

California Secretary of State: VCA Quick Start Guide

<https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/vca/2020/toolkit/sos/quick-start-guide-1.0.pdf>

California Secretary of State: VCA Starter Kit

<https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/vca/2020/toolkit/sos/vca-starter-kit-1.0.pdf>

Voter's Choice California: Strategies for Voter Education and Outreach Under the Voter's Choice Act VCC

<https://voterschoice.org/wp-content/uploads/VCA-Report-1.pdf>

Voter's Choice California: Resources

<https://voterschoice.org>

The New Electorate Study: How Did the Voter's Choice Act Affect Turnout in 2018?

<https://newelectorateproject.org>

The Voter's Choice Act Research Team

California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP)

Mindy Romero, Director

Laura Daly, Research Associate

We thank our colleagues, Harthick Ramakrishnan, Loren Collingwood, and Francisco Pedraza, at the Center for Social Innovation, UC Riverside (CSI-UCR) for their partnership and contributions to the VCA Implementation Study.

For more information about this research study visit the study's webpage at <http://ccep.usc.edu/vca-study-resource-center>, or contact Mindy Romero, CCEP Director, at msromero@usc.edu.

This research is supported by The James Irvine Foundation.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the study's advisory committee for providing careful review of and feedback of this brief's contents. We would also like to thank Catherine Hazelton and Fontane Lo for their insight and contributions to the study's research design and publications.

Study Advisory Committee Members

Courtney Bailey-Kanelos, Sacramento County Registrar of Voters

Elba Gonzalez-Mares, Executive Director, Community Health Initiative (CHI)

Joe Holland, Santa Barbara County Clerk, Recorder, Assessor and Registrar of Voters

Jim Irizarry, San Mateo County Assistant Assessor-County Clerk-Recorder and Chief Elections Officer

Dean Logan, Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk

Rebecca Martinez, Madera County Clerk, Recorder, and Registrar of Voters

Fred Nisen, Supervising Attorney for Voting Rights, Disability Rights California

Astrid Ochoa, Executive Director, Future of California Elections (FoCE)

James Schwab, Chief Deputy Secretary of State, California Secretary of State Alex Padilla

Cha Vang, Executive Director, Hmong Innovating Politics (HIP)

James Woodson, Manager of Policy and Strategic Projects, California Calls



USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy

USC Price School of Public Policy California Civic Engagement Project

USC Price School of Public Policy California Civic Engagement Project The California Civic Engagement Project was established at UC Davis in 2011 and moved to the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy in Sacramento in 2018. The CCEP conducts research to inform policy and on-the-ground efforts for a more engaged and representative democracy, improving the social and economic quality of life in communities. The CCEP is engaging in pioneering research to identify disparities in civic participation across place and population. Its research informs and empowers a wide range of policy and organizing efforts in California aimed at reducing disparities in state and regional patterns of well-being and opportunity. Key audiences include public officials, advocacy groups, political researchers and communities themselves. To learn about the CCEP's national advisory committee or review the extensive coverage of the CCEP's work in the national and California media, visit our website at <http://ccep.usc.edu/>.