

# Voter's Choice Act Research Brief Series

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## California Voter's Choice Act Implementation Process: Voter Outreach and Education



In 2020, 15 California counties, consisting of half the state's registered voter population, will be conducting elections under the Voter's Choice Act (VCA). Given the significant changes to the election system that voters will be experiencing in these counties, outreach and education about the new voting system's options will be critical to whether voters successfully cast their ballots and whether these experiences are positive.

Beginning in the 2018 election cycle, 14 California counties under the California Voter's Choice Act (VCA) were provided the option of adopting a new voting model (all counties are given this option in 2020) that includes replacing neighborhood polling places with vote centers and mailing Vote-by-Mail (VBM) ballots to all registered voters (Los Angeles County is not required to automatically send all registered voters VBM ballots until 2024). Under the new voting model, vote centers offer a variety of services including in-person voting, accessible voting options, language assistance, mailed ballot drop-off and conditional voter registration. They are distributed throughout the county and available to all voters up to ten days before Election Day.<sup>1</sup>

With the goal of informing VCA implementation in 2020 and beyond, this brief, the fourth in a series, examines two research questions regarding the voter outreach and education process needed to successfully implement the VCA:

- 1. What factors contribute to successful voter outreach efforts in VCA counties?**
- 2. What are the key challenges to conducting voter outreach under the VCA?**

To address these questions, we draw on findings from an extensive study of the five counties (Figure 1) that adopted the VCA in 2018. To better understand the outreach challenges faced by these counties, 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 statewide voter advocacy groups, community groups, and other stakeholders. Lastly, our colleagues at UC Riverside conducted an analysis of VCA-related discussion on the social media platform Twitter.

# 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, access 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 countywide. The expectation is that voters could choose to cast their ballot 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.<sup>2</sup> 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, Calaveras, El Dorado, Fresno, Mariposa, Orange, Santa Clara and Tuolumne (see figure 1, Calaveras not pictured). In total, fifteen California counties will be conducting elections under the Voter's Choice Act in 2020—approximately half the state's current registered voter population.

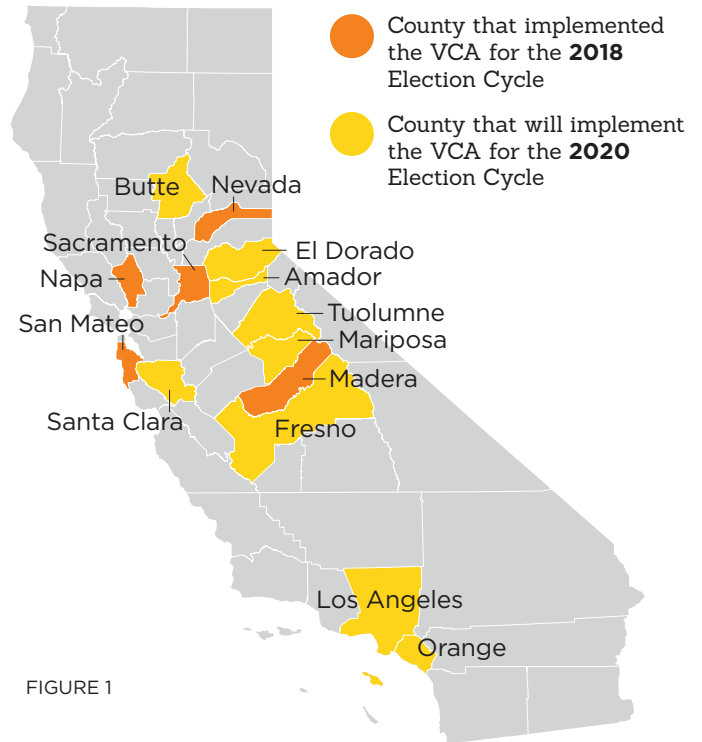


FIGURE 1

## Glossary

- **Conditional Voter Registration (CVR):** CVR allows eligible voters to register or update their voter registration information after the deadline and cast a conditional ballot. 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](#).

# 1. What factors contribute to successful voter outreach efforts in VCA counties?

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Many election officials and community advocates interviewed emphasized the important role that voter outreach and education plays in the successful implementation of the VCA. Voters need to be made aware of both the changes in their county's voting system (e.g. replacement of polling places with vote centers), as well as the new options and services available to them in order to ensure they successfully cast their ballots and have a positive experience doing so. Achieving this awareness requires intensive and ongoing outreach, including direct contact with voters. As one election official summarized,

“You need to stay in contact with voters during the early voting period, or you may actually experience a reduction in voter participation in that election. Unless you constantly stay in touch with your constituents, unless you let them know that there is a change in the election model from a traditional polling place to an all mail ballot election, and you make it an intensive effort to communicate, if you do not do that, you face the risk of the election not being as successful as it could be, and maybe even less engaging than a traditional polling place election.”

Media engagement was a key strategy by elections offices to boost voter outreach efforts, including newspaper, TV, and radio placements, while elections offices and advocacy groups used social media advertising to varying degrees for outreach. Throughout the VCA counties, community groups conducted outreach by passing out flyers at events, knocking on doors and other activities. We heard from several community advocates interviewed that they found success with conducting their outreach in partnership with other types of events. As one community-based advocate explained, “What we found with the presentations is that they are something that shouldn't be a standalone. It needed to be attached to some other event...When I said I'm going to have this meeting on the VCA and how it works, only a few people showed up.”

In addition to the use of media, community advocates engaged in targeted one-on-one contact with voters as they found this strategy to be successful. One community advocate explained, “Call banking, door knocking, we really feel like that's the most effective way, particularly for communities of color. To send folks that look like them and can really kind of relate to them and that they can trust. They trust the messengers.”

## **a. Outreach Collaboration with Stakeholders**

Every VCA election official that we interviewed identified the benefits of robust engagement with community groups and other stakeholders during the voter education and outreach phase of implementation. In describing the benefits of working effectively with community and advocacy groups, one election official advised other election officials to:

“Make sure they get everybody on board that they can, whether it's advocacy groups or agencies out there that can help them. Whatever it is, get them on board because they'll help advertise. They'll help get the word out that this is how we're doing elections now, and that will help make it successful.”

## **b. Coalition Building and Recruitment**

Successful VCA implementation is a long process. Sustained collaboration among community groups and election officials needs to be cultivated and requires time, intention and funding. A notable group that worked to support cross-sector collaboration is Future of California Elections (FoCE), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. FoCE focused on developing local VCA coalitions and building collaboration with elections offices in the five VCA counties through its Voter's Choice California (VCC) project. As part of the project, FoCE administered the VCC grants program, which provided funding to community groups to engage in VCA implementation. Funding for this program was provided to FoCE by the Irvine Foundation. Dedicated VCA funding allowed community groups to assign staff to build local coalitions and engage with their elections office to do VCA education and outreach. Additionally, FoCE supported local VCA coalitions by working to seed relationships, providing collaboration toolkits, sharing education materials, and organizing webinars and trainings that highlighted best practices.

In the 2018 election cycle, community advocates leveraged their combined resources and relationships in order to educate voters about the VCA. Formal coalitions developed in Napa, Nevada and Sacramento counties. A coalition also came together in San Mateo County which, shortly before the 2018 Primary Election, transitioned to be an official committee of the San Mateo County Elections Office. Each county's VCA coalition had an affiliation, formally or informally, with the FoCE project and several of the lead community groups had received a VCC grant. For more information on the VCA coalition collaboration, see [CCEP VCA Study Brief Two, California Voter's Choice Act: The Impact of Collaboration on the Implementation Process](#).

## **c. Targeted Outreach Materials**

Coalition members, in collaboration with their county elections office, helped improve existing county outreach materials to more closely meet the local community's needs, while also creating their own materials designed to reach voters, often from historically underrepresented groups and groups needing in-language materials. As one election official noted, "That's an area where the advocates came in really strong. They created pamphlets and things that I thought were very well-designed. And that's an area where counties don't have the time to design well-crafted literature and stuff and so the advocates played a really positive role there."

In particular, community advocates contributed critical resources to translate elections office materials. As one community advocate explained,

"A lot of the community groups in the VCC [Voter's Choice California] did what they could do. Some of them translated materials. Some of them created their own graphics, infographics, memes, things like that, to kind of spearhead some of this stuff. Then there were certain foundations or groups that were doing this statewide for all five counties, to just educate around that as well."

For additional recommendations for voter education and outreach, see [the Future of California Elections' Voter's Choice California report, Strategies for Voter Education and Outreach Under the Voter's Choice Act](#).

## **d. Effective Messaging**

For election officials we interviewed, a key goal for outreach was to encourage voters to cast their ballots during the early voting period, avoiding a rush of ballots at vote centers (cast in person or dropped off) on Election Day. As one VCA county election official explained, "What we all need is to get voters who are not going to send their Vote-by-Mail ballot in the regular way or drop it in their drop box to get them in the vote centers starting on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday before the elections. I don't know that there's a magic bullet to get the message into voters' heads, that you can mail your ballot in and that you can come to vote centers for more days than just Election Day. But I think that's the one area in which we need to focus."

In shaping messages, both election officials and community advocates experienced challenges with messaging, including how to simplify messages around a reform that consists of many components. As one election official lamented,

“The vote early messaging is something we’re still going to work on. It wasn’t that effective. We were trying to find different angles like, ‘Hey, make sure your ballot is included in the 8:00 PM election night results. Or ‘get it in, get it counted early.’ Oh we also said, ‘Stop some of those soliciting calls to return your ballot.’ We’re trying to come up with different ways that might encourage people to actually vote early.”

Ultimately, lessons learned on messaging will be applied to future election cycles by both advocates and election officials. One community advocate explained, “There’s a recalibration that’s happening in the messaging that everybody’s going to be using, I think, for the next round. We’re going to also recalibrate ourselves. We come at this voter engagement with so much information to voters that sometimes the reaction is to shut down. And for traditionally underrepresented voters that may not be accustomed to voting, it may all feel just too much to even deal with.”

One set of messages that were reported to be seen as successful by many interviewees was the More Days, More Ways slogan that several statewide and VCA coalitions utilized. A key component of its success was its consistent use across county outreach efforts. A community advocate noted, “All marketing material, whether it was print, advertising online, or any sort of information online, like websites from community organizations, they all tried to have the same message emphasized, which was more days and more ways to vote. ‘The More Days, More Ways’ slogan was all over the county.”

## VCA Social Media Outreach Analysis

Our colleagues at UC Riverside examined the Twitter behavior of individuals and organizations who have been actively involved in the public education of the California Voter’s Choice Act (VCA). The goal of their analysis is to begin to understand how organizations and individuals involved in the implementation of the VCA discussed the topic on social media.

A total of 62 social media accounts were included in this analysis with a total of 1,966 tweets. Of these tweets, nearly 67% (1,321) were retweets. These tweets were further filtered by those tweets that were retweeted between 10-50 times (a total of 302). In these tweets, the hashtag #MoreDaysMoreWays (or #MoreDays) appeared 54 times, and #VotersChoiceAct 19 times. Three Twitter handles @VotersChoiceCA, @SacramentoVote, and @NicolasHeidorn tweeted (or retweeted) 16, 28, and 32 times, respectively. Overall, 72% of tweets go unfavorited, and 27 tweets were “liked” over 18 times: The influence of the tweets that only originated within the sample group of 62 was also examined. With one exception, the top Twitter influencers (Twitter accounts with at least 10 total retweets from an original tweet) were a combination of nonprofit groups, and official state and county accounts, such as @SacramentoVote, @smcvote, @cavotes, @LACountyRRCC, and of course the @VotersChoiceCA account.

Particular VCA-related topics were disproportionately retweeted compared to others. Tweets related to information about how to vote and when vote centers are open were retweeted the most, while the topics of registration and voting turnout, and VCA voting choices were comparatively less likely to be retweeted.

Please note that the population of Twitter users examined in this study consists of known key players involved in the public education of the VCA. The examined population does not include those individuals who could have been active in discussing and promoting the VCA on social media but who were not known to the study researchers. While the study’s findings are informative, they are not necessarily generalizable to the full universe of VCA-related tweets during the 2018 election cycle.

## 2. What are the key challenges to conducting voter outreach under the VCA?

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While there were substantial outreach efforts in each 2018 VCA county, we heard from many interviewees that there remained notable unmet outreach needs. Several community advocates interviewed explained that, particularly with regard to underrepresented groups, the reach of their efforts, and those of their county elections offices, did not extend as far as they thought was needed due to significant challenges present in connecting with voters.

### a. Significant Resources and Commitment Required for Election Officials

Most election officials emphasized that the voter outreach phase of VCA implementation required not only significant staff resources to achieve effective engagement, but also a sincere and sustained commitment to educating voters in their county. As one VCA election official said,

“Counties need to be open to a higher level of community engagement than they are used to, particularly around voter education.”

At the same time, several election officials interviewed also acknowledged that the level of engagement required by the VCA is typically 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.

See [the Secretary of State’s VCA Quick Start Guide for more information on the VCA’s requirements for community engagement](#).

### b. Demographic and Geographic Reach of Outreach Efforts

Among election officials and community advocates, there were differing views on the reach of their county’s overall (individual and collaborative) outreach efforts. We heard from one county election official who had confidence that their offices’ outreach efforts were successful.

“We really got out there. It took a form that I think was pretty extensive, and it hit all geographical areas of the county. Demographically, I think it was more focused in areas of communities that traditionally did not participate in the electoral process, so we had a heavy emphasis in getting a lot of flyers out to those community-based organizations that worked in those areas. You couldn’t escape the information we were sharing, because if you turned on your TV, we’d be there, if you turned on your radio, we’d be there. I don’t care where you lived. You were going to hear it. If you passed by a bus, you’d see it.”

However, several election officials and community advocates interviewed discussed the difficulty in effectively reaching all voter groups in their counties, particularly communities of color, people with disabilities, youth and low-income communities. For many community advocates, taking the time to connect with voters, one-on-one, was the most impactful approach. As one community coalition leader explained,

“Traditionally underrepresented voters often need more support in getting that information and the mechanisms for that outreach varied. I think the most effective was the knock on the door and the personal conversations. That is not anything innovative but from the conversations I had with our network, that’s what they still found to be most effective and making sure that voters had the information that they needed especially because the *Voter’s Choice Act* provides more options for voting.”

In addition, a community coalition leader noted that there was also some recognition that perhaps traditional voter groups (those with high likelihoods of voting) also might not have received the level of outreach that they needed,

“One interesting thing that we learned and got feedback on is that some people felt like the normal, engaged voter didn’t know about the VCA. And that we should have also focused on that as well.”

### **c. Limited Resources for Elections Offices and Community Advocates**

For the 2018 election cycle, the California Secretary of State provided \$200,000 for outreach (allocated for the 2018 election by Senate Bill 117). 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.

Due to limited resources, some county election officials sought to leverage the time and expertise of community groups. As one election official explained, “The counties heavily relied on CBOs—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.”

However, local community groups were generally understaffed and underresourced for the significant work that was needed for effective outreach to voters. A limited number of community grants were made in the 2018 election cycle to nonprofits in the five VCA counties. These grants were one-time expenditures with no commitment made to provide funding to support future election cycles. The grants provided partial support for recipients 2018 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.

In the 2020 election cycle, nonprofits have found it challenging to acquire funding for VCA voter education from foundations. FoCE was unable to reopen their VCC grants program.

**In the 2020 election cycle, VCA county elections offices will have outreach-related funding available to them from two external sources:**

**Help America Vote Act (HAVA) funds provided by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) for various purposes, including county efforts to implement the Voter’s Choice Act (VCA). These funds may be used by counties for voter outreach efforts and the purchase of voting equipment.<sup>3</sup>**

**California Assembly Bill 74 (budget bill) provides \$3 million (\$1.5 million for the next two years) to counties as reimbursements specifically for voter outreach purposes.<sup>4</sup>**

## Applying the Study's Findings

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**Counties adopting the VCA for the first time should not underestimate the degree of voter outreach and engagement that will be needed to successfully implement the new model.**

**Outreach was and remains a significant challenge for the five counties that adopted the VCA in the 2018 election cycle. To meet this need, election officials and community groups interviewed suggest the following action steps:**

- *Connect with community groups early, long before the voting period begins, to ensure they are aware of the County's adoption of the VCA and are prepared to participate in voter outreach efforts;*
- *Broaden engagement by significantly increasing the number and type of organizations involved in a county's VCA efforts, particularly from communities underrepresented among likely voters in a county;*
- *Consider conducting VCA outreach efforts at already existing community events, instead of at only VCA specific meetings;*
- *Community groups should consider developing a VCA community coalition early in the VCA implementation process in order to help build a strong voter outreach effort;*
- *Community groups should engage in targeted one-on-one contact with voters as part of their VCA outreach efforts;*
- *Election officials and community groups should collaboratively conduct wide-reaching outreach efforts to inform voters of vote center and drop box locations;*
- *County elections offices need to provide extensive staff time and resources towards voter outreach and education.*



## Notes

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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](http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450)
2. See above, Note 1.
3. For more information on the Help America Vote Act, please see:  
<https://www.eac.gov/about/help-america-vote-act/>
4. For more information on California Assembly Bill 74, please see:  
[https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200AB74](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB74)

## Available Resources for the VCA Implementation Process

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### 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>

### League of Women Voters of California VCA Toolkit for Community Organizers

Voter's Choice California - Voter's Choice Act Implementation: Building a VCA Coalition

### 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

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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](mailto:msromero@usc.edu).

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\*A former associate of the CCEP as of July 2019.

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### **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 <https://ccep.usc.edu/>.