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**CENTER FOR
INCLUSIVE
DEMOCRACY**

**California's Changing Electorate:
A 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior**

Executive Summary

August 2021

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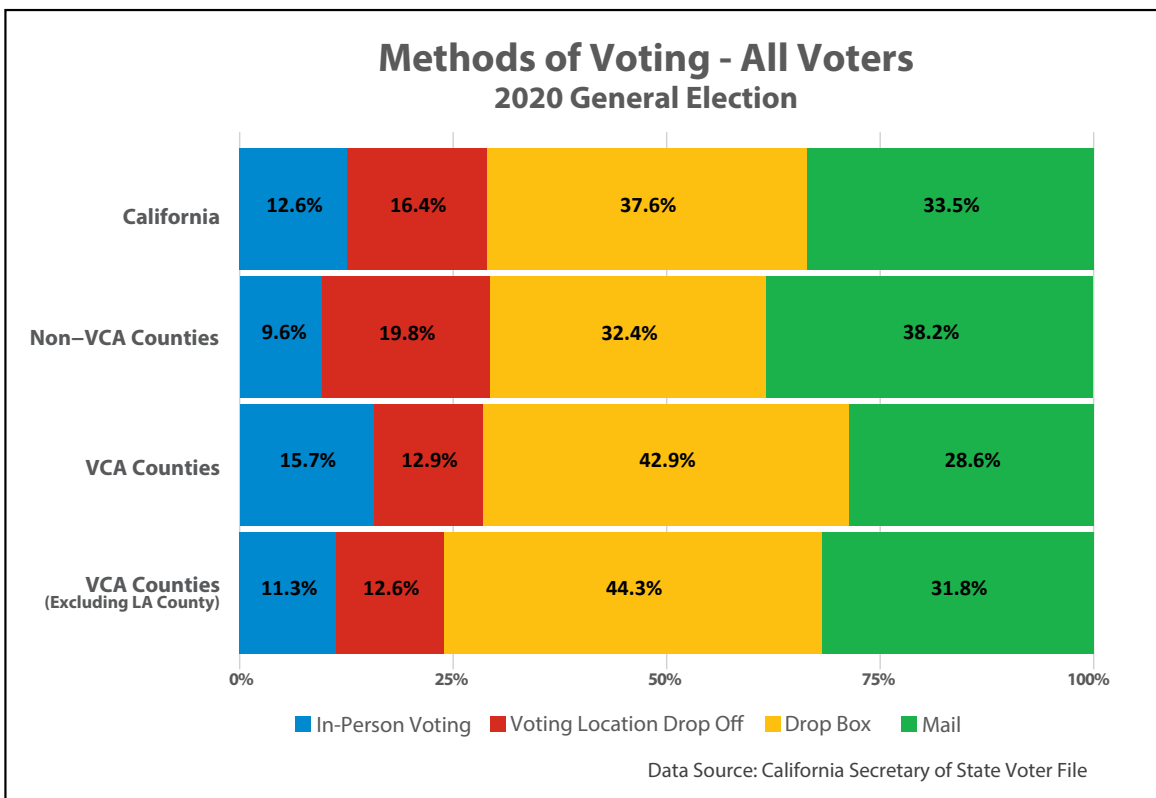
Voting by mail has become increasingly common in California over the last eighteen years. In the 2020 presidential election, California voters had more options for casting their ballot than in prior years. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, California expanded the use of vote-by-mail, requiring county election offices to mail every active, registered Californian a vote-by-mail (VBM) ballot. Voters could choose to return their ballot through the mail, at a ballot drop box, or at an in-person voting location in their county. Voters could also choose to vote in person.

The Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID) at the University of Southern California conducted a statewide analysis of voter behavior in the 2020 general election through an examination of California voter records and through a statewide representative survey of the experiences of eligible voters (adult citizens) in the state.

Key Findings from the 2020 General Election in California

1. Voting Methods

Most voters used vote-by-mail ballots.



A large majority of California voters—87.5%—used VBM ballots in the 2020 general election, a 20 percentage point increase from the 2018 general election (67.1%) and a 17 percentage point increase from the 2020 primary election (70.4%). Nearly 38% of Californians dropped off their VBM ballot at a drop box, while another 33.5% mailed in their ballot. A smaller percentage (16.4%) dropped off their ballot at a voting location site. Voting in person was relatively low, with just 12.6% voting in person, a 20 percentage point decrease from 32.9% in the 2018 general election.

The likelihood of voting in person or voting by mail varied by voter characteristic. Latino, young voters (age 18-24), new voters, and previous polling place voters had higher rates of in-person voting compared to the general population. Conversely, Asian Americans voted in person at lower rates than the general population. Registered Republicans voted

in person at much higher rates than Democratic and No Party Preference voters, while Democrats voted by drop box at higher rates than other voters. Foreign-born voters voted by mail at higher rates than U.S.-born voters. Men voted in-person and by mail at higher rates than women, while women voted by drop box at higher rates than men.

2. Vote-by-Mail Ballot Rejection Rates and Reasons

Vote-by-mail ballot rejection rates varied by voter characteristic.

A small proportion of ballots cast in California elections are rejected and not counted. In the 2020 general election, 80,363 VBM ballots, or 0.5% of those cast, were rejected. Rates of VBM ballot rejection varied by voter characteristic. Latino voters, young voters, new voters, and previous polling place voters had higher rates of VBM rejection than the general population, while rates for Asian-American voters were similar to the general population. Men had higher VBM rejection rates than women. Rejection rates did not differ between foreign-born and U.S.-born voters. In terms of party affiliation, registered Republicans had a slightly higher VBM rejection rate than registered Democrats, while voters with no party preference had a rejection rate higher than both Republicans and Democrats.

Signature issues caused most rejections of vote-by-mail ballots.

Reasons for VBM ballot rejection also varied by voter characteristic, although overall, most (76.8%) rejected ballots were rejected due to signature issues. These signature issues included non-matching signatures (over 59% of all rejected VBM ballots) and missing signatures (17.3%). Another 16.1% were rejected for being received late and 7.1% were rejected for other reasons. Latino and previous polling place voters had higher rates of non-matching signatures than the general population. Asian-Americans and Latinos voters had higher rates of ballots with missing signatures than the general population. Young voters (ages 18-24) had higher rates of non-matching signatures than older voters (ages 65 and over), while older voters had higher rates of late VBM ballots than young voters. Foreign-born voters had higher rates of missing signatures than U.S.-born voters, while U.S.-born voters had higher rates of late and non-matching signature ballots.

3. Voter Information Sources and Behavior in the 2020 General Election

Most eligible voters were unaware that voting options had changed.

The CID Voter Experience Survey asked eligible voters about their awareness of changes to voting options in 2020. When asked, "Did your county change the options for how and where you could cast your ballot in the November 2020 general election?" only 32.4% of all eligible voters answered Yes, indicating that less than one-third of eligible voters knew their voting options had changed. Black voters, voters ages 25-34, and voters with disabilities were more likely to be aware that voting options had changed in 2020, while Asian-American and Latino eligible voters were less likely to know about changes when compared to all eligible voters.

Where eligible voters heard about voting options varied by race/ethnicity and age.

Eligible voters were asked to identify where they heard about the new voting options in their county. Common sources of information about new voting options included social media, traditional media (newspapers or television news), friends or family, and political campaigns or candidates. However, eligible voters of color (Black, Latino, and Asian American) and younger eligible voters were much more likely to learn about voting method changes through social media, while non-Latino whites and older voters most commonly cited traditional media. In addition, political campaigns were more frequently identified as an information source by Black, white non-Latino, and younger eligible voters than by eligible Asian-American voters and voters ages 55 and older.

Voters learned about their specific voting site from county-produced materials.

County information guides, county websites, and VBM were the top three cited information sources for where voters learned about their specific in-person voting location. The highest percentages of Latino and non-white, Latino voters indicated identifying their in-person voting location through their county voter information guide, while Asian Americans most commonly found information through their county websites, and Black voters indicated their VBM packets. Further, voters over the age of 45 and voters with disabilities were more likely to find this information in their voter information guides.

Driving was the most common way that voters reached an in-person voting location.

For voters who voted in person or dropped off their vote-by-mail ballot, driving was by far the most common way to get there. Walking or bicycling was generally the second most common mode of transportation. Black voters drove to their vote center less commonly than other groups and took public transit more commonly than others. Voters ages 18-34 were more likely than other age groups to use a rideshare company to get to a vote center. Voters with disabilities also took public transportation or a rideshare at higher rates than voters overall.

Among those who voted in person, reasons for doing so varied by voter characteristic.

When asked why they voted in person at a voting location in the 2020 general election, voters identified a range of reasons. Overall, voters' most common reasons were that they did not trust the mail to deliver their ballot, wanted to receive an "I Voted" sticker, wanted to register to vote or update an existing registration record, and wanted to be seen representing their community. While Latino, Asian-American and Black voters cited wanting an "I Voted" sticker as their top reason for voting in person, white non-Latino voters cited not trusting the mail to deliver their ballot. A higher proportion of Black voters than other groups said they wanted to be seen representing their community while voting. Notably, among voters ages 55 and older, the top reason by far was distrust in the mail to deliver their ballot, a reason given by about half of survey respondents in these age groups. Voters younger than 55 and voters with disabilities were more likely than others to report using a voting location to register to vote, use an accessible voting machine, receive language assistance, or fill out a replacement ballot.

Voters varied in reasons for selecting specific voting locations or drop off site.

Voters were asked why they chose the specific in-person voting location in the general election. A majority of all voting groups selected voting locations that were close to home. A significantly higher percentage of white, non-Latino's indicated that they were assigned to a voting location by their county election office. Black voters, voters with disabilities, and voters ages 18-44 selected locations close to work or school at a higher percentage than the state, overall.

4. Voters' Preferences on How and Where to Vote in Future Elections

A majority of eligible voters want the option to vote early at an in-person voting location.

When asked, a majority of eligible voters (including those who didn't vote in 2020) said their preferred way to cast a ballot in future elections would be early voting in-person at a voting location sometime in the ten days before the election. This was also the most common selection for Black, Asian-American, Latino, white, and eligible voters with disabilities. It was also a common response for eligible youth voters.

Eligible Voters differ by age on which in-person services they would likely use in the future.

Eligible voters were asked what features they would likely use if they voted at an in-person voting location in the future. Older eligible voters more often than younger eligible voters reported that they would not vote in person, but the majority of respondents reported that they would use voting locations in the future, most commonly for voting in person, dropping off their VBM ballot, or registering to vote. Greater percentages of younger eligible voters said they would use language assistance or register to vote compared to those ages 55 and older. Eligible voters of color identified accessible voting machines and language assistance as features of voting locations they would likely use in the future.

Summary

In the 2020 general election, California mailed all voters a VBM ballot due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and voters overwhelmingly used VBM ballots to vote, primarily mailing them or placing them in a drop box. Latino voters, young voters, previous polling place voters, new voters, and registered Republicans voted in-person at higher rates than the general population. Among the small percentage of VBM ballots that were rejected after being cast, rejection rates were higher in some demographic groups including Latino voters, young voters, new voters, and previous polling place voters. Historically, late ballots have been the primary reason for VBM ballot rejection, but in the 2020 general election, signature issues were the most common reason (election law was changed for the general election to allow VBM ballots to be accepted up to 17 days post Election Day).

According to our survey, most eligible voters were not aware of the changes to available voting methods in California for the 2020 general election. Latino, Asian-American, and older eligible voters reported the lowest awareness of the voting model changes. Among the one-third of eligible voters who had heard of the voting model changes, eligible voters of color and young eligible voters more commonly learned of the changes through social media, while for non-Latino whites and older eligible voters traditional media such as newspapers and television was a more typical information source.

Among voters who visited voting locations, over two-thirds drove there. Black voters were more likely to use public transportation than other groups and young voters used rideshare companies to get to their voting location at higher rates than older voters. The top reason for voting at an in-person location was because of distrust in the mail to deliver their ballot. Older voters had higher distrust in the mail to deliver their ballot than younger voters. Most voters stated they would use at least one of the many features at voting locations in the future, commonly including voting in person, dropping off their VBM ballot, and registering to vote.

Recommendations

1. Educate voters proactively and through information sources they trust.

Surveyed eligible voters shared where they find information about registration and voting—including reporting if they did not know such information.

- Many voters need active outreach. Less than one-third of eligible voters knew their voting options had changed. Eligible Black voters, voters ages 25-34, and voters with disabilities were more likely to be aware that voting options had changed in 2020, while eligible Asian-American and Latino voters were less likely to know about changes when compared to all eligible voters.
- Official materials should be easy to use. High use of materials from county elections offices, particularly by voters of color and seniors, underscores the need for plain and accessible language, quality translation, and readability by voters with disabilities.
- Friends and family are a key information source, particularly for Latino voters and young voters. Latino and younger eligible voters turn to friends and family for information at higher rates than other groups do. Older eligible voters rely more on the county voter information guide.

2. Consider group differences in voter preferences on how and when to vote in future elections.

Understanding eligible voter preferences for how and when to vote can help prioritize messages about voting options.

- Dropping off a mail ballot at a drop box was the most common voting method used in the 2020 general election. However, almost two-thirds of eligible voters surveyed (including those who did not vote in 2020) said that they prefer to vote in person in a future election.
- Black, Asian-American, Latino, youth, and eligible voters with disabilities also more frequently prefer in-person voting in future elections.
- Many in-person voters want an early voting option. Over 40% of eligible voters prefer to vote early (up to ten days before Election Day), rather than on Election Day itself.

A large percentage of California's eligible voters said they prefer to vote in person in future elections (future behavior could differ from current preferences). Many with a preference to vote in person want to do so prior to Election Day. Ensuring all Californians know all their options for voting requires aggressive outreach and education. Many eligible voters do not know where to get information about their voting options. These survey findings provide important information to adjust planning and outreach to account for significant differences in group preferences and informational resources.