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## New Report Shows Changing Voting Patterns for California Electorate With Implications for Sept. 14 Recall Election

*USC Center for Inclusive Democracy Study Finds 87.5% of California Voters Used Vote-by-Mail in 2020 General Election; State had One of the Highest Ballot Drop Box Use Rates in the U.S.*

Los Angeles, August 27, 2021 – A [new study](#) from the Center for Inclusive Democracy at the USC Price School of Public Policy found that California voters overwhelmingly used the Vote-by-Mail (VBM) method to cast their ballots during the 2020 General Election, with nearly 40% submitting their VBM ballot via a drop box, a relatively new option for many counties. The study entitled “[California’s Changing Electorate: A 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior](#)” also found in-person voting for Latinos, youth, and first-time voters was much higher across the state when compared to the general voting population, even with the VBM option.

“In 2020, Californians significantly changed the way in which they cast a ballot, and that’s a trend that could continue to some degree in future elections, especially the upcoming gubernatorial recall,” said CID Director Mindy Romero, who is also an assistant professor at USC Price. “Californians voted by mail in extraordinary numbers last November and used convenient ballot drop boxes at surprisingly high rates. As policymakers discuss the pros and cons of making Vote-By-Mail and drop box options permanent, changing voting behaviors and preferences need to factor into those decisions.”

During the 2020 General Election, 87.5% of California voters used VBM ballots, up more than 20 percentage points from the 2018 General Election, where the rate was 67.1%. With VBM ballots automatically mailed to all voters statewide for the first time because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person voting at either a vote center or polling place dropped to 12.6% (2,167,488 votes) from 32.9% (4,086,292 votes) in the 2018 General Election. However, in 2020, the rates of in-person voting were higher for Latinos (15.9%), youth (15.1%), first-time voters (21.2%) and previous polling place voters (24.5%) than the general voting population. Republicans also voted in-person at a higher rate (17.9%) than both Democrats (9.3%) and No Party Preference voters (12.8%).

Of those using VBM in 2020, 37.6% dropped off their VBM ballot at a drop box and 33.5% submitted them by mail. An additional 16.4% of voters submitted their VBM ballot at a vote location drop-off site. Use of drop boxes in counties that adopted the Voter’s Choice Act (VCA)—where drop boxes are required—was 42.9%. Drop box use by voters in non-VCA counties was still robust at 32.4%.

Out of the more than 17.2 million votes cast statewide, 80,363 ballots (0.5%) were rejected. The majority of rejections (76.8%) were attributed to signature issues, such as non-matching signatures or lack of a signature on the submitted VBM ballot. Ballot rejection reasons in 2020 represented a significant shift from previous elections, in which a late ballot was the primary reason.

Latino, young voters, new voters and previous polling place voters had higher rates of VBM rejection than the general population. Democratic and Republican voters had similar VBM rejection rates at 0.4% and 0.5% respectively.

“These findings reinforce the need for voter education leading up to the September 14 recall election,” added Romero. “We need to not only educate voters about how the recall works, but about the importance of filling out the ballot correctly, especially something as simple as remembering to sign the ballot before sending it in.”

The study also included results of a survey examining the experiences of eligible voters (adult citizens) in California. The survey found that less than a third of eligible voters (32.4%) in California were aware of the voting changes in the 2020 General Election, with more than two-thirds stating either there were no changes or they did not know of any. The awareness of voting changes varied by age, race and ethnicity, with Latino, Asian-American and older eligible voters reporting the lowest awareness of voting changes.

Among voters aware of voting changes, traditional media, social media, political campaigns, and family and friends were the top cited sources of information. Eligible voters of color learned of changes primarily through social media, while the most common messenger for non-Latino whites was traditional media such as newspapers and television. Young eligible voters identified social media as their primary information source, while older voters reported relying mostly on traditional media. For those voting in-person, the top reason given for doing so was distrust in mail delivery (28.7%), though 28.3% cited wanting to receive an “I Voted” sticker. Older voters had higher distrust in ballot mail delivery than younger voters.

While dropping off a mail ballot at a drop box was the most common voting method used in the 2020 General Election, almost two-thirds of eligible voters surveyed (including those who did not vote in 2020) said that they would prefer to vote in-person in a future election. More than 40% of eligible voters reported wanting an early in-person voting option as well.

The representative sample survey of 11,423 eligible voter respondents was fielded in June and July 2021. The full study and survey can be found [here](#).

The “[California’s Changing Electorate: A 2020 Post Election Analysis of Voting Behavior](#)” study was funded by a grant from the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.

### **About the Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID)**

Celebrating its 10-year anniversary this year, the [Center for Inclusive Democracy](#) (CID), formerly known as the California Civic Engagement Project, is part of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy and is based in Sacramento. CID conducts a range of national and multi-state research initiatives exploring voting behavior, civic engagement, electoral and economic research, the intersection of social justice and democracy, and more. Its non-partisan research informs and empowers a wide range of policy and organizing efforts aimed at eliminating disparities in social and economic well-being. Now a cornerstone project nested within CID’s larger umbrella, the California Civic Engagement Project continues to produce groundbreaking resources and research for California.

### **About the USC Price School of Public Policy**

CID is housed within the [USC Sol Price School of Public Policy](#) and based in the Price School Sacramento Center. Since 1929, the Price School has defined excellence and innovation in public affairs education and research. Ranked fourth nationwide among 285 graduate schools for public affairs, according to the *U.S. News & World Report*, the USC Price faculty, scholars and students aim to fulfill the School’s mission to improve the quality of

life for people and communities worldwide. The Price Sacramento Center was established in 1971 to ensure that key research finds its needed audience of policy makers and stakeholders in the state capital.

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