

In October's issue: Tonight's SoS debate, two reports on vote-by-mail (and a lunch event to discuss them) and an opportunity to learn about how to overcome voting information challenges for limited-English voters and voters with disabilities.

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Future of California Elections Newsletter October 2014



If you would like your organization's work to be highlighted please send relevant articles and announcements to astrid@futureofcaelections.org

SAVE THE DATE!
2015 CONFERENCE
February 2015 - Sacramento
Details on the [Conference 2015 page](#) at the [FoCE website](#)

Want to use the new California Online Voter Registration (COVR) system to reach voters through your website?

Check out the FoCE COVR toolkit at <http://futureofcaelections.org/COVR> and your organization could join the OVR [Wall of Fame!](#)

Secretary of State Candidate Forum

TONIGHT (October 9) in Berkeley

From the ACLU, California Common Cause and the League of Women Voters Educational Fund:

We are pleased to announce that the fall Secretary of State Candidate Forum will be held TONIGHT Thursday, October 9, at 6:30 PM at UC Berkeley's **Chevron Auditorium**. The forum will be moderated by [John Myers](#) of KQED. You can also watch it live on <https://www.youtube.com/user/ucberkeleyevents>! Don't forget to Tweet to #myvotemySOS.

In addition to the upcoming forum, you can also access other resources related to the Secretary of State's race and our forums:

- You can watch the entire Los Angeles forum [here](#).
- No time to watch an entire forum? Hear the candidates pitch themselves to a 13-year-old interviewer and future voter [here](#).
- Read the *Los Angeles Times*' summary of the May 6th San Diego forum.
- Hear what *Fox News* had to say about the San Diego forum.
- Read ACLU's Lori Shellenberger's op-ed in the [U-T San Diego](#).
- Read ACLU's Lori Shellenberger's blog post entitled: "[What's the Matter with Democracy in California?](#)" It tells the real life story of one California woman's struggle to register and vote.
- Read [California Forward](#)'s blog entry.
- Read [California Voter Foundation](#)'s blog entry.
- Check the [ACLU of California's](#) website for updates on the upcoming Secretary of State Candidate forums.
- [Tweet with hashtags #myvotecounts #myvotemySOS](#)

Questions? Contact Dora Rose at drose@acluca.org

MAKE SURE EVERY VOTE COUNTS!

FoCE to Sponsor Luncheon Event

October 14 in Sacramento

[REGISTER HERE](#)

With Election Day less than a month away, new research shows that many California voters are at risk of having their vote-by-mail ballots go uncounted for one of three common errors – returning them too late, returning them without signing the envelope or using a signature that can't be matched against existing records – and members of the Future of California Elections (FoCE) are hosting a luncheon panel in Sacramento October 14 to launch an effort to help policymakers, staff and the statewide election community to educate voters on how to prevent those errors from happening.

“Each statewide election, tens of thousands of vote-by-mail ballots cast go uncounted. In November 2012, approximately one percent of the mail ballots cast were not counted, representing an estimated 66,000 Californians who ended up disenfranchised,” said California Voter Foundation’s Kim Alexander, a FoCE member. “These statistics underline the importance of having every single vote count, especially in close races such as the recent June primary race for Controller that came down to a mere 400 votes,” she added.

“New research shows that the vast majority of vote-by-mail ballots are rejected because of these three errors,” said Jill LaVine, Sacramento County Registrar of Voters. “It’s our hope that by launching this campaign in advance of Election Day, we can reach those voters in Sacramento and across California whose ballots might otherwise go uncounted.”

Central to the session will be the release of a free toolkit for vote-by-mail education, including sample news releases and social media messaging that can be used by election officials, civic engagement groups, news organizations and anyone else interested in helping voters cast timely and valid vote-by-mail ballots.

The luncheon event will be held at noon at the UC Center Sacramento and will feature Ms. Alexander and Registrar LaVine along with UC-Davis’ Mindy Romero of the California Civic Engagement Project, who will be sharing new statewide research on unsuccessful vote-by-mail ballots and Karla Zombro of California Calls. The session will be moderated by the Public Policy Institute of California’s Dave Leshner.

“This luncheon panel is the latest in a series of events that members of the Future of California Elections are hosting to provide public education on issues that strengthen

California’s democracy,” said Astrid Garcia Ochoa, FoCE Deputy Director. “Our members have already done fantastic work helping to educate voters about the new online voter registration system. This vote-by-mail event – and the corresponding toolkit we’ll be releasing the same day – are a continuation of that trend.”

WHEN: Tuesday, October 14 from 12pm-1:30pm at the UC Center in Sacramento (1130 K Street, Sacramento, CA 95814) ([MAP](#))

RSVP - <http://vbmpanel.eventbrite.com>

Questions?

Contact FoCE's Stefani Jimenez at sjimenez@futureofcaelections.org or [213.346.3274](tel:213.346.3274)

Hope to see you there!

FoCE Member California Voter Foundation Releases Three-County Vote-by-Mail Study

A new report issued by the California Voter Foundation (CVF) finds that the top three reasons why some ballots go uncounted in three counties studied are that they are received too late, lack the voter’s signature, or the signature on the ballot envelope does not sufficiently compare to the one on file. The report is online at www.calvoter.org/votebymail.

“Casting a vote-by-mail ballot has become a popular option for California voters,” said Kim Alexander, CVF president and founder and the primary author of the new report, [Improving California’s Vote-by-Mail Process: A Three-County Study](#). “But with its rise in popularity has come an increase in the number of vote-by-mail ballots cast that go uncounted.”

The three counties profiled – Sacramento, Orange and Santa Cruz – were selected to provide a comparison between counties serving small, medium and large voting populations. CVF studied four statewide elections across the three counties and found that:

- 99.2 percent of vote-by-mail ballots cast were counted and 0.8 percent were not counted;
- Late-arriving ballots comprise 61 percent of the uncounted ballots;

- Ballots lacking a signature make up 20 percent of the uncounted ballots; and
- Ballots sent in envelopes with a signature that did not adequately compare to the one on file comprise 18 percent of the uncounted ballots.

These three reasons – late, no signature, and bad signature – account for 99 percent of the uncounted ballots in CVF’s three-county, four-election study. Overall, California’s mail ballot rejection rate is among the highest of all the states according to the Pew Center on the States’ Election Performance Index.

Additional findings from the three counties profiled include:

- Nearly one in three November 2012 vote-by-mail voters returned their ballots in person rather than through the U.S. Mail.
- Voters residing in all-mail ballot precincts are provided postage-paid envelopes for returning their ballots but would likely be better off paying their own postage, because the postage-paid accounts counties use require extra time for the post office to process, slowing down ballot delivery.
- Postage rates are inconsistent from post office to post office and even from scale to scale within the same post office, making it difficult for election officials and voter educators to correctly instruct voters how much postage is actually needed on a return ballot to ensure timely delivery.
- Online lookup tools to help voters determine the status of their vote-by-mail ballots were available in all three counties but provided inconsistent services and messages that could confuse voters.
- It is likely that the recent rise in the use of provisional ballots can be attributed to the increase in permanent vote-by-mail voters, many of whom move and thus fail to connect with their ballots. In November 2012, four in ten provisional ballots cast in Santa Cruz County and nearly six in ten cast in Orange County were cast by vote-by-mail voters.

The report features the following legislative recommendations:

- Change California law to allow ballots postmarked by Election Day to be counted;
- Require counties to notify voters when their ballots go uncounted;
- Require counties and the Secretary of State to report the number of uncounted VBM ballots each election and why they were not counted;

- Provide the funding counties need to support vote-by-mail programs;
- Enact a comprehensive framework for early voting; and
- Allow voters to return VBM ballots to any election office or polling place in the state.

Administrative recommendations include: expanding statewide standards for signature verification; using barcodes to track vote-by-mail ballots; expanding and improving voter access to online lookup tools; improving voter education to help voters avoid common balloting mistakes; and educating postal workers about the importance of sending election mail through.

“The only thing worse than people not voting is people trying to vote and having their ballots go uncounted,” Alexander said. “Every statewide election, tens of thousands of vote-by-mail ballots arrive in county election offices that cannot be counted. By examining three counties in great detail we found a number of improvements that can be made to increase the vote-by-mail success rate, reduce disenfranchisement and improve turnout.”

FoCE-Sponsored Research of UC Davis' California Civic Engagement Project on Uncounted Mail Ballots

Voting by mail surpassed 50 percent of votes cast in a general election in California for the first time in 2012. A new study shows that nearly 69,000 mailed ballots, or about 1 percent, were not counted, and why they were rejected.

The top three reasons mail-in ballots were rejected: not arriving on time, not being signed or because signatures could not be verified, according to the study to be released Sept. 29 by the California Civic Engagement Project at the University of California, Davis, Center for Regional Change.

"California has one of the highest mail ballot rejection rates in the country," said study author Mindy Romero, director of the California Civic Engagement Project. "Although 1 percent may not seem very high, that's tens of thousands of people whose votes were not counted. And these votes could make the difference in close elections."

"This is the first statewide study of why some mail-in ballots are rejected," Romero said. "People have taken the time to study the issues, fill out the ballot and mail or deliver it. They trust it is going to be counted."

Three reasons account for the majority of ballot rejections:

- Nearly half of the ballots (48 percent) were discarded because they arrived late.
- Almost one quarter (23 percent) were not counted because the signature did not match a signature on record, usually from the voter registration record or the Department of Motor Vehicles. This could be due to a person's signature changing over time, poor quality signatures, or the way machines used to match signatures are calibrated.
- Failure to sign the ballot accounted for 17 percent of rejections.

Current state law does not require counties to contact voters to inform them that their ballots were not counted, either before or after the election.

Voting by mail makes voting more convenient, but vote-by-mail ballots, whether mailed or dropped-off, go through more complicated processing and there is no statewide standard for how signatures are verified, according to the study.

"We worked statewide with counties and they all have different systems," Romero said. Statewide standards and actions are needed, she said.

Senate Bill 29, signed by Governor Brown, will permit counting of ballots received up to three days after the election. Late ballot issues could also be addressed through education emphasizing that ballots must be received, not just postmarked, by election day, Romero said.

Signatures are verified either manually or by devices whose settings are not standardized statewide. The study suggests the machines be regulated and certified by the Secretary of State.

"These findings suggest a need to develop consistent and transparent procedures for California counties with regard to vote-by-mail ballot processing and reporting," Romero said. "Now that a majority of California voters use vote-by-mail ballots, such procedures, fiscally supported by the state, would likely help ensure continued public confidence in the increasing use of an important voter option in California."

The brief can be downloaded [here](#).

This study was conducted in partnership with Future of California Elections (FoCE) and supported by a grant from The James Irvine Foundation.

Greenlining Institute to Co-Host Webinar on Overcoming Voting Information Challenges for Limited-

English Proficient Voters and Voters with Disabilities

When it comes to access of information about voting, voters with limited English proficiency and voters with disabilities actually have a lot in common. Essentially, they both struggle to obtain timely access to accessible information about voting, and small changes to the way our elections are run would significantly improve access for both groups.

In 2012, The Greenlining Institute launched a series of community input sessions aimed at evaluating what communities of color think of California's official voter information guide: what works, what doesn't, and what else do people need to make informed decisions? We specifically recruited Asian, black, and Latino infrequent and frequent voters to participate in community input sessions on the state voter information guide. Our sample included individuals that don't speak English very well and people with disabilities, too. We led participants through a series of focused group discussion questions and did some hands-on activities with them to see how well they could find and understand key information in the voter guide.

From these sessions, we learned many things, but two themes that have stayed with us are:

- 1) Limited-English voters and people with disabilities reported having the most difficulty obtaining voter information in the language or format they needed before an election (in some cases, information by mail would arrive after the election or not come at all after it had been requested);
- 2) Almost everyone we spoke with said the official state voter information guide was "too complex," "confusing," and full of "legalese." They want to see information that is more clear, concise, and easy to understand. They also asked for more visuals.

Since then, we have been working with the Secretary of State's office to identify tangible solutions to these two main problems, with a particular emphasis on limited-English communities. In the process, we couldn't help noticing how many of the solutions we were asking for, with slight modifications, could also be really useful in reaching people with disabilities.

So, we joined forces with the Disability Organizing Network, California Foundation for Independent Living Centers, and Disability Rights California to convene a set of dialogues about the intersection of race and disability when it comes to voting. You might have even seen us at the DO Network Election Summits in Oakland and Pasadena this past month.

Join us on October 16th from 10am-11:30am Pacific for a webinar on "Overcoming Voter Information Challenges for Limited-English and Disabled Voters." We'll outline some of the challenges identified by limited-English and disabled voters, and share what we're doing to improve voter information and information delivery for these voters. Topics will include the Secretary of State's new policy for tracking language preference data, use of plain language, and translation issues. [Click here to register for this free webinar.](#)

Disabilities affect people of all races, ethnicities, genders, and languages. In fact, African Americans have the highest reported rates of disability (20.5 percent). Meanwhile, 13 percent of Latinos report having a disability, and 12 percent of Asians.

Questions? Contact Greenlining's Michelle Romero at micheller@greenlining.org



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