Vote-by-Mail Use in California

Mindy Romero, Ph.D.
Director
History of VBM Use in California
Vote-by-Mail Ballot Use
California Elections: 2004 to 2020

Percent of Ballots Cast

2004: 34.3% Primary, 32.6% General
2006: 45.9% Primary, 41.5% General
2008: 41.7% Primary, 41.6% General
2008 Pres*: 58.7% Primary, 58.0% General
2010: 48.4% Primary, 51.2% General
2012: 65.2% Primary, 69.4% General
2014: 60.5% Primary, 58.9% General
2016: 57.8% Primary, 67.7% General
2018: 65.3% Primary, 67.7% General
2020: 72.1% Primary

Data source: California Secretary of State

*California held a special presidential primary in February 2008. It also held its standard primary in June of that same year for all other statewide elected positions and ballot initiatives.
Percent Vote-By-Mail among Latinos and Asian Americans
2016 California General Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of voters who use VBM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Voters</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: Statewide Database (SWDB)
Why do California voters choose Vote-By-Mail instead of voting in person?
VBM Voters

• 72% - more convenient than going to a neighborhood polling place on Election Day

• 67% - preferred to fill out their ballots in a place where they could look things up on the internet

• 60% - did not want to wait in line at the neighborhood polling place

• 52% - preferred to fill out their ballots where they could discuss their choices with family or friends
Polling Place Voters

• 96.9% - polling place was convenient to get to

• 90% - going to the polling place on Election Day was an important part of their voting experience

• 64.4% - wanted to get the sticker that says they voted – I voted!
Some Group Differences: Focus Groups

VBM
• Latinos noted that work hours can make voting at the polls inconvenient

• Latinos’ preference to consult with family when making their voting decisions

Polls
• Latinos more likely than members of other groups to cite the social aspect of voting as a reason for voting in person

• Young voters, including those who use VBM, preferred going to the polls for their first voting experience
Polling Place Voters

Voters With Disabilities
• Strong desire to be seen representing the disability community
• Highly value the right to cast a private ballot at a polling place

Also...
• Language assistance
• Accessible voting machine
• VBM assistance
African-American Voters

Most commonly shared reasons for voting in person were:

• Lack of confidence/trust that their vote would be counted if their ballot were to be sent through the mail

• A desire to be seen representing the African-American community when voting

• Following a family/community tradition of voting in person

• A desire to enjoy the social aspects of voting in person

• A desire to set a positive example for their children by taking them to vote, and for others by displaying their “I Voted” sticker
Trust in Postal Delivery

Of voters who do not typically use the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) to mail a VBM ballot...

- 27% said they did not trust the USPS to get their ballot delivered safely, or in time to be counted
- 29% of Latinos, 32% of African Americans and 47% of Asian Americans surveyed did not trust the USPS
- 36% of those age 18-29 expressed a lack of trust
- 29% of age 65 + expressed lack of trust
Trust in U.S. Postal Service to Deliver Ballot Safely/on Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Do Not Distrust</th>
<th>Do Not Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: CCEP Statewide Survey

Do Not Distrust
Do Not Trust
VBM Rejection Rates in California
VBM Rejection Rates

• 2010-2018 – CA rejection rates have fluctuated

• 2018 – 1% of all VBM ballots were rejected = nearly 85,000
Percent of VBM Ballots - Rejected
2010 to 2018 Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>General</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Number of Rejected VBM Ballots
2010 to 2018 Elections

- **2010:**
  - Primary: 88,876
  - General: 142,241

- **2012:**
  - Primary: 54,620
  - General: 68,759

- **2014:**
  - Primary: 91,006
  - General: 86,196

- **2016:**
  - Primary: 69,518
  - General: 58,309

- **2018:**
  - Primary: 57,024
  - General: 84,825

Legend:
- Blue: Primary
- Orange: General
VBM Rejection Rates

• Disparities in VBM rejection rates by:
  • Race/ethnicity
  • Age
  • Military status
  • Language preference
  • Vote method
  • Nativity
  • Geography

• Top three rejection reasons: Late, signature doesn’t match, and no signature
• Also - differences in reasons for rejection by voter group and county
VBM Rejection Rates in VCA Counties

CVF/CCEP Rejected Ballots Study Preliminary Findings
VBM Rejection Rates

This study is examining November 2018 rejected vote-by-mail ballots in three counties:

• Sacramento (0.8 % rejected)
• Santa Clara (0.7 % rejected)
• San Mateo (1.0 % rejected)
VBM Rejection Rates

Youth (age 18-24) are overrepresented among rejected VBM ballots

Sacramento – 20.5% versus 6.7%
Santa Clara - 25.5% versus 7.4%
San Mateo 21.6% versus 6.4%
Percent of Rejected Ballots by Age Group
2018 General Election

Sacramento | Santa Clara | San Mateo
---|---|---
18-24 | 20.5% | 22.9% | 25.5%
25-34 | 21.6% | 22.2% | 22.5%
35-44 | 16.3% | 15.3% | 15.2%
45-54 | 16.9% | 15.7% | 15.3%
55-64 | 13.9% | 12.3% | 11.6%
65+ | 11.2% | 11.1% | 11.2%
Percent of VBM Ballots by Age Group
2018 General Election

Sacramento
Santa Clara
San Mateo

18-24: 6.7% 7.4% 6.4%
25-34: 13.0% 12.2% 12.9%
35-44: 14.5% 13.8% 15.0%
45-54: 16.7% 17.8% 19.2%
55-64: 20.8% 20.4% 19.8%
65+: 28.2% 27.0% 28.3%
CVF/CCEP Rejected VBM Ballot Study

Sacramento’s late ballots in three elections:

• Most ballots rejected due to lateness in recent elections are postmarked after Election Day and could not have been accepted even with a longer grace period for arrival.

• Significant percentage of ballots are not postmarked or have unreadable postmarks.

• Increasing awareness about USPS pickup practices and dating one’s signature on the ballot envelope could help reduce ballot rejection due to late postmarks and missing or unreadable postmarks.
Conclusion

• 2020 Primary - 72% VBM - Will be higher in the General Election

• Historic patterns of disparate VBM use

• Important reasons why people vote choose to vote in person

• Greater numbers of rejected ballots in 2020

• Disparities in VBM rejections rates

• New research on how voters will vote this November – May 21 presentation
Thank you!

Mindy Romero, Ph.D.
Director, California Civic Engagement Project
USC
msromero@usc.edu
@mindysromero

View my Tedx Talk on the Power of the Youth Vote!