



COALITION OF BAY AREA ELECTION OFFICIALS

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Vote By Mail Voting is Safe & Secure

Since 2002, there has been an increasing trend for voters in California to cast their ballots by mail. Over the last twenty years, the percentage of voters who vote by mail has steadily grown from 27.08% statewide during the 2002 General Election to 65.31% during the 2018 General Election.

During the pandemic, after the Governor's Executive Order and state legislation required counties to send all registered voters ballots in the mail, the 2020 General Election 86.72% of California's voters voted by mail. At last year's Gubernatorial Recall Election, the VBM rate eclipsed 90% with 91.01% of voters voting by mail. Today, AB37 has now made it a permanent requirement for all future elections to send registered voters a ballot in the mail at least 29 days before Election Day.

Vote by Mail (VBM) is Convenient

Voters have found VBM voting convenient. They won't need to take time off from work to vote or work their vacation schedules around Election Day. They can review the candidates and measures on their ballots at their leisure with their voter information guides, then take their time casting their votes in the comfort of their homes. Voters who have already decided who and what they want to vote for can immediately cast their ballots as soon as they receive them, or they can wait until Election Day to send in their ballots or return them to a VBM drop box.

The Essentials: Sign, Seal, and Deliver

Voters are reminded to sign their VBM return envelope before sending or delivering it. It must be signed in order to be counted, so we can confirm the voter's identity. VBM ballots can be returned on or before Election Day. VBM ballots must be postmarked by Election Day (postage paid) or dropped at a secure VBM ballot drop box or voting location by 8 PM on Election Day. Voters can also drop them off at any voting location throughout the state by 8 PM on Election Day to be timely received and county election staff will forward them to the respective counties.

Recent state legislation has allowed for any voter to request a remote accessible VBM ballot. This technology was originally designed to give military and overseas voters access to their ballots as well as to assist with accessibility to voters with disabilities. Now all voters can request access to their ballot on a secured platform on the internet. This is not internet voting, but rather the ability to access, mark, and print a ballot, then sign the return envelope and send it to the election office for the same required signature verification and processing steps.

VBM Safeguards & Security

There are many checks and balances related to VBM voting for increased security and accountability. VBM ballot return envelopes are assigned unique ID numbers, including re-issued ballots, to ensure that voters only vote once. Voters can track their VBM ballot to know when their VBM ballots are mailed, received, and processed by the county election office by signing up at the Secretary of State's office (<https://wheresmyballot.sos.ca.gov>). It's a great way for voters to know when to expect their ballots and when the elections office receives your voted ballot.

Election officials retrieve VBM ballots with strict chain of custody procedures and two person teams when picking up ballots from the post office or a VBM ballot drop box. Daily pick-ups are scheduled to retrieve VBM ballots and get them processed in a timely manner. Every effort is made to securely deliver your ballot to the election office.

VBM ballot envelopes are required to be signature verified, where the signatures on the envelopes are compared to the signatures on file when voters registered to vote. Signature comparison is

performed with the human eyes of trained staff. Over the years, county election staff have undergone signature comparison training by forensic document examiners to gain knowledge and expertise on how to properly validate signatures for this purpose.

In the event that voters failed to sign the return envelope or whose signatures do not compare to what is on file, state law requires the county election office to send a letter to these voters and give the opportunity to “cure” their VBM signature challenge. It should be mentioned that state law allows county election staff to use voters’ signatures from previous registration cards, so that multiple signatures on file can be used for comparison purposes. With the advent of online voter registration, voters’ signatures on file with the DMV are transferred to the election office for voter registration purposes. Voters who registered to vote online can refer to the signature on their drivers’ licenses or California ID card for reference.

Some new voters may be required to provide a copy of their drivers’ licenses or some acceptable form of ID when voting by mail. This is a requirement for those voters who did not provide their driver’s license or last 4 of their SSN when registering to vote. This “first time federal voter” requirement has been in place since HAVA in 2002 and also applies to the same voters should they vote at the polls.

Reasons Why Voters May Receive Multiple Ballots

There are a couple of reasons in which voters may receive multiple VBM ballots in the mail. Very often it is tied to some re-registration activity. For instance, if a voter re-registers after the county election office has prepared the initial mailing of VBM ballots, the system will void the first ballot issued and generate a replacement ballot, but two ballots would be in the mail. The initial file is generated about a month in advance of the mailing date, so the ballot printer and mailing house have ample time to print ballots, address the envelopes, and assemble the packets for all voters in a county, whether there are fewer than 50k voters or over a million.

There are valid reasons to re-register: if you’ve moved, you got married and have a name change, or you want to change your party preference in order to vote in a political party’s presidential primary election. In these cases, if you re-registered after the initial mailing file was prepared, you will receive another ballot. Note that only the first ballot we receive will be counted and any later ballots we receive will be sorted out as duplicates.

Voters may be unaware that their voter registration is being updated when they file a change of address form with the post office or DMV. Simply doing any business with the DMV could cause an inadvertent re-registration of their voter record. Longstanding federal regulations have required this in order to assist in the maintenance of voter records.

Nevertheless, in this new era where all active registered voters are mailed VBM ballots, voters are encouraged to contact their local election offices should they unexpectedly receive more than one ballot, or if they receive a ballot for a voter who no longer lives there. While county election offices perform all the voter maintenance activities they can to clean the voter rolls, there will be instances for one reason or another that leaves some voters on the active voter rolls. Voters can do their part in helping maintain clean voter rolls when they receive unexpected election mail.

Conclusion

VBM voting has greatly matured over the past 20 years, both with legislation ensuring every active registered voter is provided a ballot in the mail and the many safeguards built into the systems to ensure that voters’ VBM ballots are processed and counted safely and securely. For more information, contact your local county election office.