

## The California Voter Experience: Vote-by-Mail vs. the Polls

The state of political engagement, as measured by voter turnout, is poor in the Golden State. In 2014, only 31% of eligible voters (adult citizens) took part in California’s general election, and only 18% cast ballots in the primary, the lowest number on record.<sup>1</sup> While the level of participation improved in the June 2016 primary, the eligible turnout rate (the percent of those eligible to vote who voted) of 34% was still below the 39.5% eligible turnout the state saw in the 2008 presidential primary.<sup>2</sup> However, one voter trend that has been steadily increasing in California is the use of Vote-by-Mail (VBM). A majority of California voters now choose to vote through the mail or by dropping off their VBM ballot in person.

To better understand the experiences California’s voters have with the different available methods of casting a ballot, the UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project recently conducted a multi-method research study entitled *The California Voter Experience Study*. In this study, we gathered information from a diverse range of voters to understand how different populations in our state are experiencing some of the recent reforms in our electoral process,

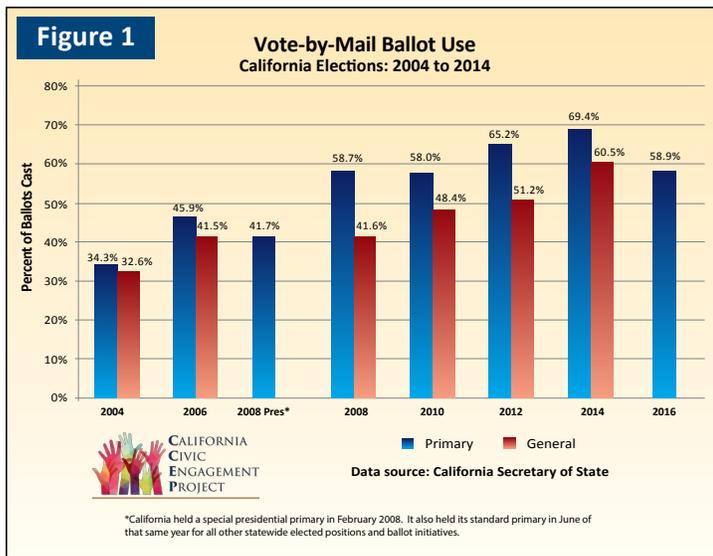
and how they perceive the proposed changes in California’s voting system currently being considered by our state legislators.

In this first in a series of research briefs examining the California voter experience, we answer the following questions:<sup>3</sup>

1. Who uses Vote-by-Mail in California?
2. Why do California voters choose Vote-by-Mail instead of voting in person?
3. How do different groups of voters react to the possible use of a Vote Center Model in California?
4. What can we learn from Colorado’s experience with the Vote Center Model?

We conclude our analysis by providing recommendations on the use of Vote-by-Mail and the possible implementation of Vote Centers in California to help ensure equitable access to the state’s electoral process. This research may also help inform those efforts exploring the adoption of vote centers in other states in the U.S.

### 1. Who uses Vote-by-Mail in California?



Vote-by-Mail (VBM) use in California has steadily risen over the past decade and a half, since the state allowed voters to sign up for permanent Vote-by-Mail status in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

In 2012, for the first time in a statewide general election, a majority of ballots were cast via VBM ballots. By 2014, just over 60 percent of general-election votes, and nearly 70 percent of primary votes were cast via VBM ballots.<sup>5</sup>

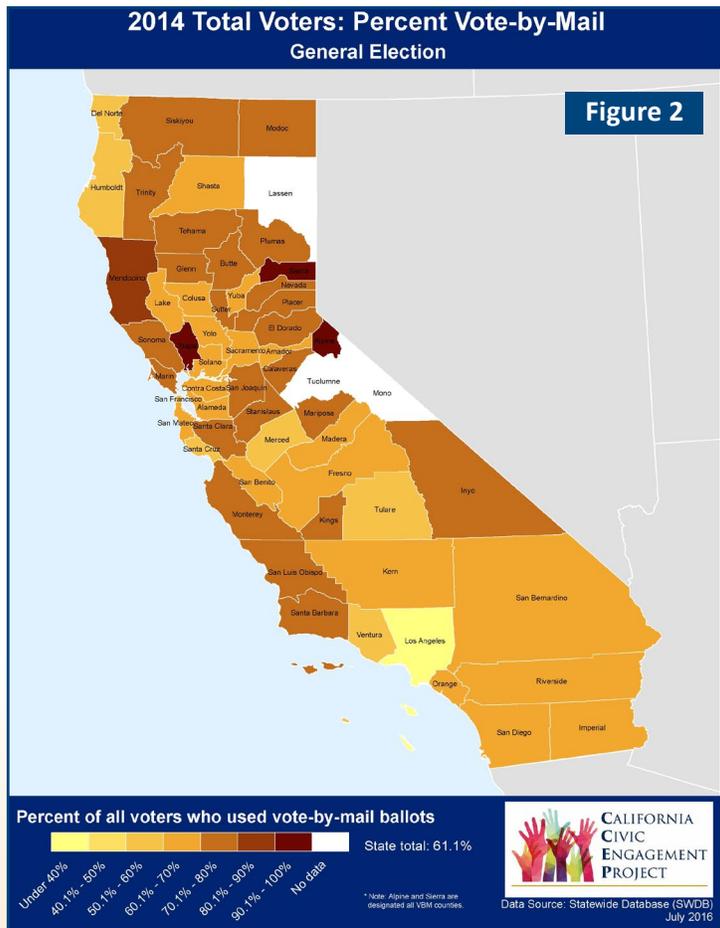
However, not all California sub-populations use VBM at the same rate. Voters over age 55 have the highest VBM usage, while young voters have the lowest VBM rates. For instance, a previous CCEP study found that, in the 2012 general election, 67% of California seniors aged 65 and over used VBM ballots, while only about 40% of voters aged 18-24 did so. Latino voters also used VBM ballots less than the general population; 37% of Latino voters used VBM in 2012, compared to 51% of all Californians. Disparities in VBM use persisted into the 2014 election. (CCEP Issue Brief, *Disparities in California’s Vote-by-Mail Use, Changing Demographic Composition: 2002-2012*).<sup>6</sup>

### Highlights

- In 2014, over 60% of general-election votes and nearly 70% of primary votes cast in California were via Vote-by-Mail.
- Young voters aged 18-34 and Latino voters in California are less likely to use VBM than other voters.
- The primary reasons that Californians use VBM are to consult reference materials, avoid lines and take their time voting.
- People vote in person because they like the social aspects of voting, find it convenient, and want to get their “I Voted” sticker.
- California voters expressed some concerns about a proposed Vote Center Model, including whether there would be long lines, large crowds and an unpleasant bureaucratic experience.
- Latino, young and disabled voters particularly expressed concerns about Vote Centers, suggesting that this model could possibly widen the participation gap if not carefully implemented with their needs in mind.
- Following implementation of the Vote Center Model in Colorado, 93% of votes cast in the 2014 election were via VBM Ballots. Seniors, African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans were more likely to vote in person than did the general population.
- 95% of Colorado voters polled were satisfied with the new Vote Center Model.

### Author

Mindy Romero, Ph.D., Founding Director, California Civic Engagement Project



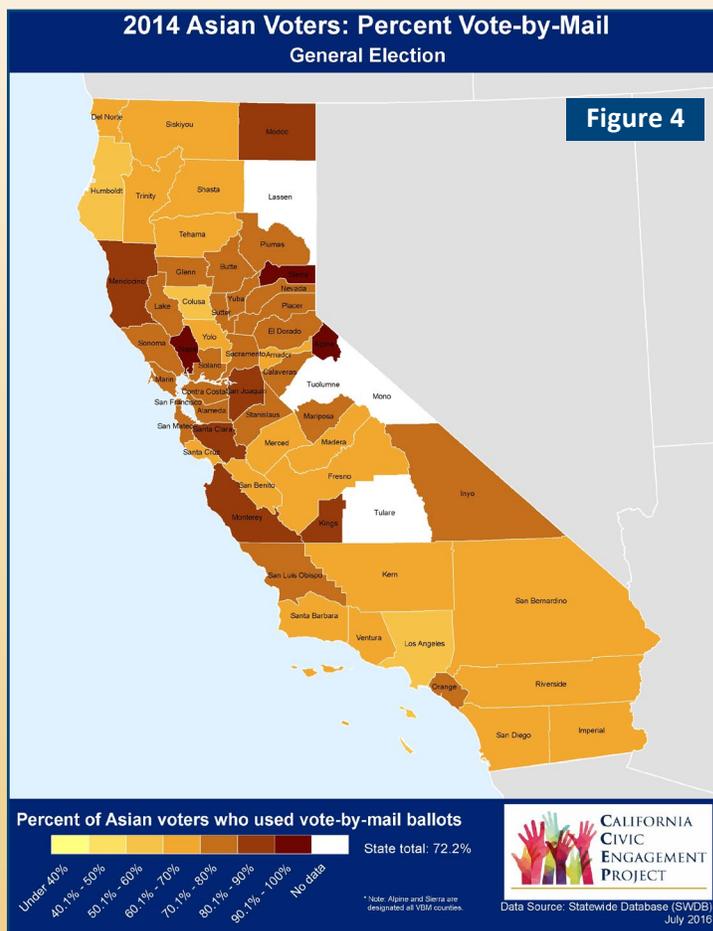
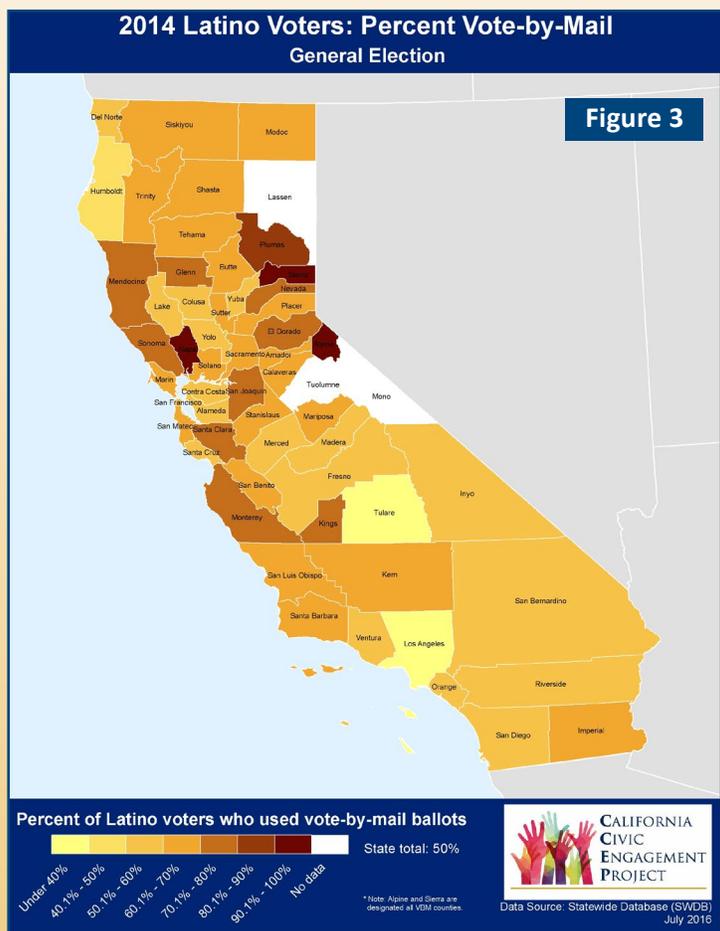
### 2014 VBM Use: County Variation

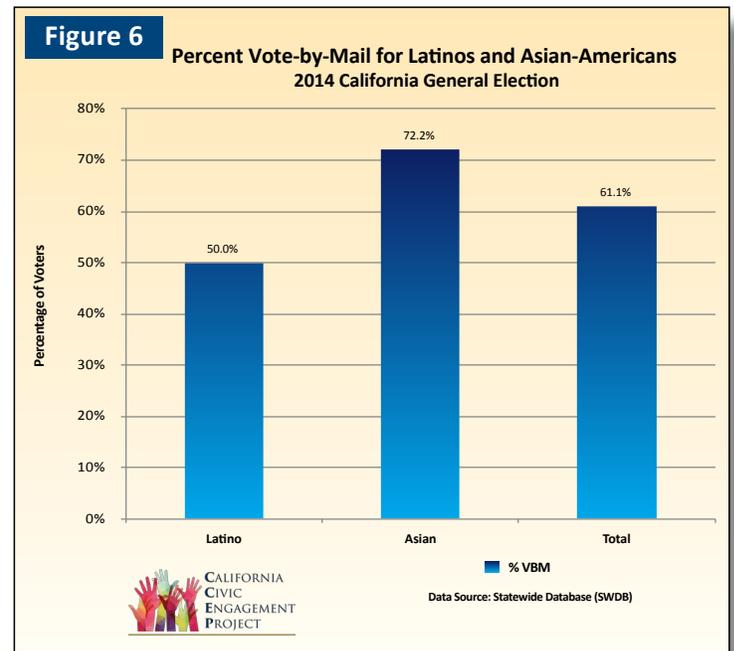
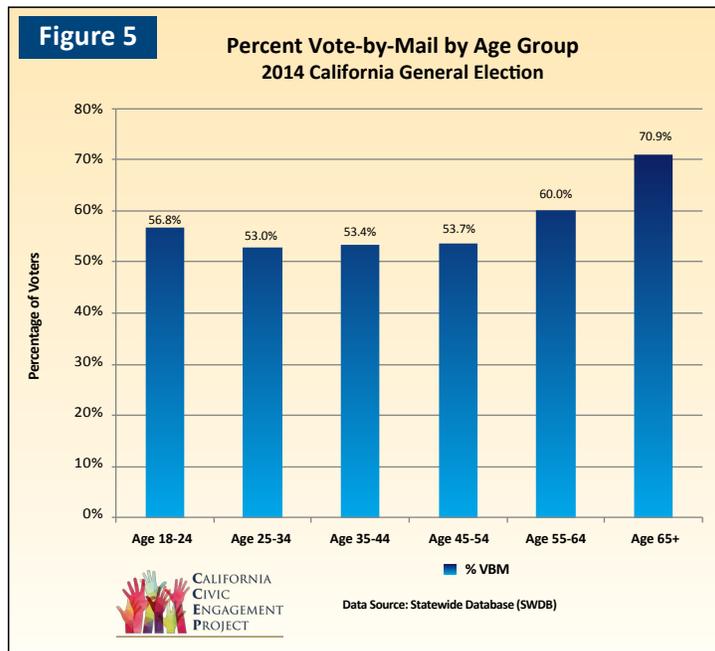
In the 2014 general election, California’s Vote-by-Mail use rate for the total population was nearly 61%. This statewide number was significantly impacted by Los Angeles County’s low use of VBM. In the 2014 general election, only 38.5% of Los Angeles County voters used VBM, meaning that the overwhelming majority of voters chose to cast their ballots at the polls. Further, the 2014 general election was an unusual election due to its historically low voter turnout rates (registered and eligible turnout) and the even lower turnout for historically underrepresented groups such as Latino and youth.<sup>7</sup>

The rest of the state, as a whole, (not including LA County) had a total VBM use rate of 76.3% in 2014. County VBM use rates ranged from a low of 53.4% in Tulare County to a high of 93.8% in Napa County (Sierra and Alpine County elections are designated as all VBM). It should be noted that the total VBM use rate for Los Angeles County was comparably much lower than it was for the rest of the state in the 2012 general election as well. That election saw a VBM use rate of 30% for Los Angeles County.

### 2014 VBM Use: Group Disparities

As in previous elections, California voters’ use of Vote-by-Mail varied among demographic groups in 2014. Whereas the state’s total VBM use rate was 61.1%, 50% of Latino voters used VBM and 72.2% of Asian Americans. The state’s youth voters (age 18-24) used VBM at a rate of 56.8%.





VBM use by age is notably different in the 2014 general election than in 2012. Figure 5 demonstrates that, in 2014, youth did not have the lowest VBM use rates of all age groups. Rather, those aged 25-34 did. Youth had the third highest VBM use rate, behind those aged 55-65 and those aged 64 and older. Looking at historical trends, youth also had higher VBM use than those aged 25-34 in both the 2002 and 2004 general elections. However, all other age groups had higher VBM use rates, in those elections, than youth.

California VBM use by group also varied by county and was impacted by the even lower use of VBM by specific demographic groups in Los Angeles County (compared with the overall VBM use rate of 38.5% in LA County). Only 27.2% of Latino voters in Los Angeles County used VBM, while 51.6% of Asian Americans casting a ballot chose to do so with VBM ballots. Only 32.4% of young voters used VBM ballots. When looking at the rest of the state, Latinos and Asian Americans had much a higher use of VBM, 71.9% and 91%, respectively. Young voters (aged 18-24) in the rest of the state used VBM at a rate of 71.6%.

Los Angeles County's significant impact on statewide VBM use rates is due to the county's large population of voters. Los Angeles County voters made up 20% of the state's entire voting population in the 2014 general election. The county also accounted for about 20% of the state's entire Asian-American and youth voter populations. For Latinos, the percentage was much higher, at 30.5%. This high share of California's Latino voter population means that Los Angeles County's very low Latino VBM use rate significantly factored into the state's overall Latino VBM use rate.

Disparities in VBM use are also present in the rest of California in every election we examined since 2012. In the 2014 general election, Latinos had a lower use of VBM than the total population in every county. In 75% of the state's counties, Asian Americans had a higher VBM use rate than did the total population in 2014.

## 2016 VBM Use

Over 5 million VBM ballots were cast in the June 2016 California primary election. This is the highest number of VBM ballots cast in a California primary election. Figure 1 shows that 58.9% of the total ballots counted in the 2016 June primary were Vote-by-Mail. This percentage is much lower than the 69% VBM use rate in the 2014 June primary and marks the first time since 2004 that we have seen a decline of a full percentage point or more in the VBM use rate from one primary to another (with the exception of the special 2008 presidential primary). This lower VBM use rate could be a product of a number of factors including the late surge in voter registration prior to the May 23 registration deadline for the June primary. Not all registrants signing up last minute as permanent Vote-by-Mail (PVM) voters (or updating their PVM registration) may have received their VBM ballots in time for the election and would have thus had to vote at a polling place. We also know that many who registered to vote as No Party Preference (NPP) who were signed up to vote by mail were forced to vote in person because they had not requested a crossover ballot prior to the election (for those wanting to vote Democratic, American Independent or Libertarian). This lower VBM use rate could also have possibly been due to an increase in the number of voters from populations that are more likely not to use VBM. Note: we will release a complete analysis of the 2016 VBM data (by voter subgroup) in our final California Voter Experience Study report.

## 2. Why do California voters choose VBM versus voting in person?

As part of the California Voter Experience Study, we conducted focus groups with the following electorally underrepresented groups in California: Latino voters, Asian-American voters, young adult voters, limited English proficiency voters (conducted in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese) and voters with disabilities. Each focus group included 8-10 participants and they were held in the Los Angeles, San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, and Central Valley areas.<sup>8</sup>

Across demographic groups, the most common reasons that California voters gave for using VBM ballots were:

- to be able to take their time in voting
- to be able to consult family, friends and reference materials as they complete the ballot
- to avoid lines and save time

Across demographic groups, the most commonly shared reasons for voting in person were:

- appreciation for the social aspects of voting in person
- polling place location is close and convenient
- they want to get their “I Voted” sticker

Our research shows that specific groups of voters have some differences in their attitudes toward VBM ballot use.

### Latino and young voters

- Latino VBM users noted that work hours can make voting at the polls inconvenient.
- Some Latino voters placed a greater emphasis on their preference to consult with family when making their voting decisions as a reason for using VBM ballots.
- Latinos who prefer voting at the polls were 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, often discussed their preference for going to the polls for their first voting experience.

### Voters with disabilities

- Voted at the polls due to a strong desire to be seen representing the disability community.
- Expressed that they highly value their right to cast a private ballot at a polling place.

## 3. How do voters react to the possible use of a Vote Center Model in California?

The state of Colorado enacted legislation in 2013 mandating that every registered voter be mailed a VBM ballot for most elections, and instituting a Vote Center Model that did away with traditional neighborhood polling places. At Colorado Vote Centers, all eligible voters in a county can register to vote; update voting information; cast their ballots; and drop off completed Vote-by-Mail ballots. This legislation also authorized same-day voter registration, shortened state residency requirements for voter registration, and allowed Colorado voters to cast a ballot up to ten days before Election Day at any Vote Center or ballot drop-box in their county.<sup>9</sup>

There is currently discussion in California about possibly implementing a new voting system similar to Colorado’s Voter Center Model. Supporters of a California Voter Center Model have introduced legislation (SB 450) that would allow counties to adopt this new voting system if they chose to do so. Specifically, the proposed new model, as currently described in the bill, includes the following elements<sup>10</sup>:

- VBM ballots being sent to all registered voters
- A minimum of one ballot drop-box location for every 15,000 registered voters open at least 28 days before the election, with at least one ballot drop-box per jurisdiction open at least 12 hours a day
- At least 1 accessible voting center per 10,000 registered voters, with at least two per jurisdiction, and 90% of which must be open from 7 AM till 8 PM or for 8 hours total on Election Day and 3 days prior, at least one (per 50,000 voters) of which must be open 10 days before the election, at least 8 hours a day, up to and including the fourth day before the election.
- Voting can occur at any open vote center in a participating county
- Los Angeles County would not be required to mail every registered voter a Vote-by-Mail ballot and would have other differences with regard to the establishment of Vote Centers.

As a part of our research on the voting behavior of California voters, we also asked respondents for their perspectives on the possible implementation of a Vote Center Model. The following are the most common responses heard across all groups:

- Early voting would be a welcome addition, but voters still might procrastinate and vote on Election Day.
- Vote Centers might mean long lines, large crowds, and an unpleasant bureaucratic experience similar to what people experience at the DMV or other government agencies.
- Drop-off locations for last-minute voters might be limited or hard to find.
- Very few voters would be willing to travel more than 5-15 minutes to use a Vote Center location.

Among specific groups, there were additional reactions to the prospective Vote Center Model that are worth noting.

#### Urban and rural voters

- Los Angeles voters commonly expressed heightened concerns about travel time and distance to Vote Centers.
- San Francisco Bay Area voters stressed the importance of Vote Centers being located close to public transportation. Some respondents from the Bay Area also expressed a concern that it may be confusing to vote if there is uneven adoption of the new model across the many densely populated counties in the Bay Area that are in close proximity.
- Central Valley voters often cited concern that a lack of transportation options could make it difficult to access Vote Centers.
- Many rural voters noted a very strong preference not to have to travel to another town in order to be able to cast a vote at a Vote Center.
- Some rural voters reported that they would feel insulted or indignant if they were to lose their local polling place.

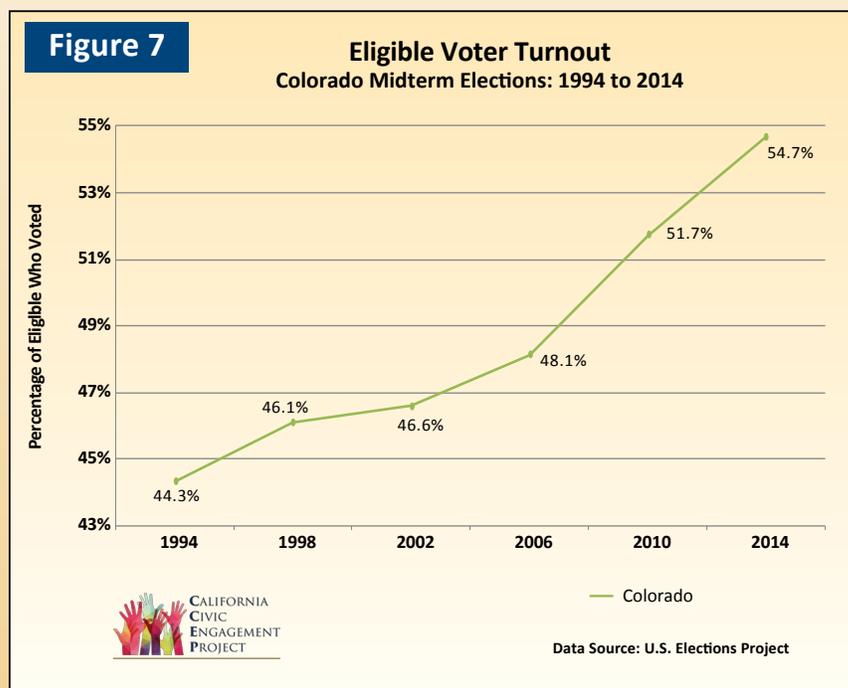
#### Young voters and Latino voters

- Young voters and Latino voters said that experiencing a welcoming atmosphere at a Vote Center would be an important factor in encouraging them to use the centers. These voters also reported that other aspects of the Vote Center environment would be important to them, such as professionalism, clear signage, good language access, easy ways to get in/out, safety, and an aesthetically pleasing environment.
- Latino voters, particularly Latinos with Limited English Proficiency, who obtained language assistance during the voting process, had more initial negative reactions to the new Vote Center Model compared to members of other ethnic or racial groups we interviewed.
- Many Latinos with limited English proficiency whom we spoke with asked why this change was being made. They were concerned that some members of their community would be disenfranchised, and generally were more wary of the intention behind the election model.

#### Voters with disabilities and seniors

- Voters with disabilities who vote in person expressed concerns about possibly having to travel long distances to get to a Vote Center. They also worried about transportation options, the training of vote center staff, and the need for improved and more accessible voting machines that would allow them to cast their votes privately.
- Senior voters also had concerns about distance; some of those we spoke with are accustomed to voting in person at locations very close to their residences.

## 4. What can we learn from Colorado's experience with the Vote Center Model?



It is too early to conclusively state the impact of Colorado's election reforms after only one statewide election. The state's eligible turnout rate showed a 3% increase in turnout over its previous midterm election, up to 54.7% in 2014. However, many factors could have affected the turnout rate in that election, including the state's high-profile senate race. Furthermore, the increase in voter turnout in 2014 marks a continuation of a two-decade upward trend in the state's turnout, as shown in Figure 7. Colorado's midterm election turnout has been steadily on the rise since 1994 (U.S. Elections Project).<sup>11</sup>

Ninety-three percent of all votes cast in Colorado's 2014 general election were via VBM ballots (two-thirds of VBM ballots were dropped off in person), while only 7% of ballots were cast in person on or before Election Day at a Vote Center (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2016).<sup>12</sup>

However, not all population groups in Colorado used VBM ballots at the same rates. According to research conducted by Robert Stein for the Pew Charitable Trusts, over 90% of white voters turned in VBM ballots. But

Figure 8 shows that non-white Colorado voters (Latinos, African-Americans, Asians, Native-Americans and multi-racial responses combined due to sample size) were somewhat more likely to vote in person at a Vote Center than whites. People who did not participate in the 2012 presidential election, but who voted in 2014, were more likely to have cast their ballot in person than to have used a VBM ballot.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 8** 2014 Colorado Vote-by-Mail Use

Method of Voting	White	Non-White	Refused	Total
In-Person at VSC	7.8% (96)	13.5% (27)	4.8% (6)	8.3% (129)
By Mail	92.2% (1,139)	86.5% (173)	95.2% (118)	91.7% (1,430)
Total	100% (1,235)	100% (200)	100% (124)	100% (1,559)

Data Source: Pew Charitable Trusts 2014 Survey of Colorado Voters. Survey Respondents: 1,559

The Pew survey of registered Colorado voters found that in 2014, 95% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their voting experience following implementation of the Vote Center Model. One reason for the success of this new voting model in Colorado could be the phased approach to implementation that was used: 85% of Colorado voters used VBM ballots in 2012, so the new model aligned with an already existing trend in voter behavior. Further, it should be noted that 78% of Colorado voters said they traveled less than 10 minutes to get to a Vote Center or drop box location.

Interviews with Colorado election officials and voting educators revealed that one lesson learned from Colorado's 2014 experience with the Vote Center Model is that having consistency from election to election and from county to county is important for avoiding voter confusion and frustration (California Common Cause, 2016).<sup>14</sup> For counties that might adopt California's proposed Vote Center Model, one potential benefit will be that their voters would have the option to vote where they work, live or socialize. In some areas of the state (i.e. the Bay Area), residents often engage in all these activities across county lines. If voters hear different messages on how to vote in each county, voter confusion and error could increase.

## Conclusion: How Can We Ensure Equitable Access to California's Electoral System?

Our research suggests that while many voters in our state may react positively to the proposed election changes, some groups may find them confusing or discouraging. Voters expressed an unwillingness to travel more than 5-15 minutes to use a Vote Center. We also know from previous CCEP research that there are disparities in California's mail ballot rejection rates. Voters who were young, utilized non-English language ballots, or who were serving in our military or residing overseas all experienced higher VBM ballot rejection rates in the 2012 General Election.<sup>15</sup> Should the Vote Center Model be adopted in California, we believe that targeted and sustained education efforts will be critical to helping California voters know about, have confidence in, and successfully utilize the new election model. This is essential to ensuring high and more representative voter turnout.

### CCEP Vote Center Recommendations

1. County election officials should work with community advocates to develop implementation and outreach plans specifically targeted to the concerns expressed by underrepresented groups.
2. The State of California should provide appropriate funding for county election offices to be able to effectively implement the proposed new voting model, if enacted.
3. To the extent possible, the adoption of a new Vote Center Model should be uniform across the state's counties.
4. In regions where there is not uniform adoption of the Vote Center Model, robust voter education by county election officials should occur to indicate which counties are using the model. In particular, this education should occur where the close proximity of counties could lead to voter confusion regarding the Vote Center Model.
5. County election officials should conduct ongoing community dialogue with traditionally underrepresented groups to gather feedback on how the Vote Center Model is being experienced at the community level.
6. The State of California should provide appropriate funding for state and county level outreach programs.
7. State and county outreach programs should be evaluated in order to measure their impact on voter awareness and turnout, especially for underrepresented groups.

*Coming soon*

CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: California Voter Experience Study, Issue 2, Vote-by-Mail Use by Asian-American Californians

## Notes

- 1 See the California Secretary of State's 2014 general election voter participation report: <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/prior-elections/statewide-election-results/general-election-november-4-2014/>
- 2 For the California county reporting status as posted by the California Secretary of State's website, see: <http://vote.sos.ca.gov/returns/status/>. See California Secretary of State's general election voter participation report: [http://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2008-primary/04\\_voter\\_stats\\_by\\_county\\_feb08.pdf](http://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2008-primary/04_voter_stats_by_county_feb08.pdf)
- 3 See the CCEP website for more information on the methodology of California Voter Experience Study.
- 4 California Assembly Bill 1520 (2001) gave Californians the ability to register as a permanent Vote-by-Mail voters. Registered voters with this status receive a VBM ballot in every election without needing an excuse or having to request such a ballot.
- 5 Voter data were acquired from the Statewide Database (SWDB). Due to differences in data collection methods, caution should be utilized when directly comparing California Secretary of State voter data publications with SWDB data. Latinos and Asian Americans are distinguished in the statewide database voter data from the general population by the use of Spanish and Asian surname lists which identify registrants with commonly occurring Spanish and Asian surnames. Surname matching is not reliable for white, non-Hispanic, and African-American populations, and thus, voter data is not available for these groups. Please note that historically, some counties have reported forced mail ballots in these data as absentee, while other counties have allocated them to the poll vote. For more information on methodology and limitations, please see: <http://statewidedatabase.org/metadata.html>
- 6 Voter data were acquired from the Statewide Database. For more information, see footnote five. See the *California Civic Engagement Project Issue Brief, Disparities in California's Vote-by-Mail Use Changing Demographic Composition: 2002-2012*: <http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep-issue-brief-one-disparities-in-californias-vote-by-mail-use-changing-demographic-composition-2002-2012>.
- 7 See the CCEP website for more information on the *California Voter Experience Study*.
- 8 See CCEP Policy Brief: Issue Ten - *California's Latino and Asian American Vote: Dramatic Underrepresentation in 2014 and Expected Impact in 2016* <http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep/ucdaviscepolicybrief10>
- 9 For details of this Colorado election reform, please see: [https://www.electioncenter.org/events/2014/DenverWorkshop/Colorado\\_2013\\_Election\\_Reform.pdf](https://www.electioncenter.org/events/2014/DenverWorkshop/Colorado_2013_Election_Reform.pdf)
- 10 For more information on California Senate Bill 450, see: [http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201520160SB450](http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450)
- 11 See U.S. Elections project 2014 voter turnout data: <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>.
- 12 See <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/03/colorado-voting-reforms-early-results>.
- 13 Pew Charitable Trusts shared their 2014 Colorado survey data with the CCEP. When non-white responses are broken out by sub-group we see the following VBM use rates: Asian-Americans (91.7%), African Americans (77.8%), Latinos (85.9%) and Native Americans (83.3%). However, the respondent size for each of these groups alone results in a high error rate. Examining non-white respondents combined reduces the error rate to an acceptable level. For survey methodology, please see: <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/03/colorado-voting-reforms-early-results>
- 14 See the 2016 California Common Cause report, *Full Service Voting: Optimizing the Voter Experience*. <http://www.commoncause.org/states/california/research-and-reports/optimizing-the-voter-experience.pdf>
- 15 See CCEP Issue Brief: *Disparities in California's Uncounted Vote-by-Mail Ballots: Youth, Language Preference and Military Status* <http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep/UCDavisVotebyMailBrief3.pdf>

**Author: Mindy Romero, Ph.D., Founding Director, UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project**



*Research for a Stronger, More Inclusive Democracy*

### About the California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP)

The California Civic Engagement Project was established at the UC Davis Center for Regional Change to inform the public dialogue on representative governance in California. The CCEP is working to improve the quality and quantity of publicly available civic engagement data by collecting and curating data from a broad range of sources for public access and use. The CCEP is engaging in pioneering research to identify disparities in civic participation across place and population. It is well positioned to inform and empower a wide range of policy and organizing efforts in California to reduce disparities in state and regional patterns of well-being and opportunity. Key audiences include public officials, advocacy groups, political researchers and communities themselves. To learn about the CCEP's national advisory committee, or review the extensive coverage of the CCEP's work in the national and California media, visit our website at <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ccep>

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following people for their help in making this brief possible by providing their careful review and feedback on our research: Dr. David Campbell, Dr. Krystyna von Henneberg, Greg Keidan, Deanna Kitamura of Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Los Angeles, Rosalind Gold and Ofelia Medina of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund. We also thank the Greenlining Institute and California Foundation for Independent Living Centers for their help with our focus group recruitment and site logistical arrangements.

**This research is supported through a grant from The James Irvine Foundation.**

## CCEP Advisory Committee

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California Voter Foundation

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