

## Highlights

- The primary reasons that African-American voters in California use VBM are to avoid lines, consult reference materials, and take their time in voting.
- The primary reasons that African-American voters in California use polling places are to ensure that their ballot gets counted, out of a desire to represent the African-American community, to uphold a tradition of voting, and out of appreciation for the community/social aspects of voting.
- A majority of African-American voters expressed strong concerns about the intentions behind the proposed Vote Center Model, including suspicions that this plan could be a means of voter suppression, and concerns that this change could make voting less accessible for African Americans.
- African-American voters also expressed concerns that Vote Centers in California would have long lines, large crowds, and offer an unwelcoming, bureaucratic experience.
- Our findings suggest that it will be necessary for state election officials to engage in extensive outreach, communication and community participation in order to possibly overcome the deeply-held concerns expressed by African-American voters regarding Vote Centers.

## Author

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

# The California Voter Experience: Why African-American Voters Choose to Vote at the Polls or Vote-by-Mail, and How They Perceive Proposed Changes to California's Voting System

Californians' use of Vote-by-Mail (VBM) ballots has been steadily increasing since the state allowed voters to sign up for permanent Vote-by-Mail status in 2002.<sup>1</sup> A majority of California voters now choose to vote through the mail or by dropping off their VBM ballot in person. In 2014, nearly 61 percent of ballots cast in the general election, and nearly 70 percent of those cast in the primary, were VBM ballots.<sup>2</sup>

However, not all California subpopulations use VBM at the same rate. Previous CCEP research found that young voters, Latino voters, and voters who are Spanish-speaking have the lowest VBM usage of all voters.<sup>3</sup> Comparable statewide data for African-American voters in California is currently not available.<sup>4</sup>

As the use of Vote-by-Mail in California has grown, there has been much discussion (including at the state legislative level) about further expanding the use of this ballot method in California, while reducing the number of polling places.

To better understand the experiences that California voters have with the different available methods for casting ballots, the CCEP recently conducted a multi-method research study (statewide survey and focus groups) entitled

*The California Voter Experience Study.* We gathered information from a diverse range of voters to understand how different populations in California are experiencing VBM and polling places, and how they perceive the possible introduction of Vote Centers currently being considered by decision-makers in the state.

In this second in a series of research briefs exploring the California voter experience, we examine the following questions regarding the state's African-American voters:<sup>5</sup>

1. Why do African-American voters choose VBM versus voting in person?
2. How do African-American voters react to the possible implementation of a Vote Center Model in California?

We conclude this research brief by providing recommendations on the possible implementation of Vote Centers in California to help ensure equitable access for all voter groups to the state's electoral process. Currently, Vote Center election models are being considered for adoption in several U.S. states. Our research will help inform those deliberations, as well as possible future efforts aimed at bringing Vote Centers to additional states.

## 1. Why do African-American voters choose VBM versus voting in person?

As part of the California Voter Experience Study, we conducted nineteen focus groups with the following electorally underrepresented groups: African-American voters, Latino voters, Asian-American voters, young adult voters, limited English proficiency voters (conducted in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese) and voters with disabilities. Four of these focus groups were conducted with African-American voters (with a range in age, income, education, gender, ballot type use, and voting frequency). These focus groups included 10-12 participants each and were held in Oakland, Sacramento, and Los Angeles (South Los Angeles and Watts areas). Participants resided in a range of communities across each of these regions, including the specific neighborhood where each focus group was located<sup>6</sup>



Across the African-American demographic groups we examined, the most commonly shared reasons for voting in person were:

1. Lack of confidence/trust that their vote would be counted if their ballot were to be sent through the mail.
2. A desire to be seen representing the African-American community when voting.
3. Following a family/community tradition of voting in person.
4. A desire to enjoy the social aspects of voting in person.
5. A desire to set a positive example for their children by taking them to vote, and for others by displaying their “I Voted” sticker.

Among the voters we studied, by far the most commonly cited reason for using polling places was the lack of trust that their vote would be counted if sent through the mail. The overwhelming majority of the African-American polling place users we spoke with said they used the polls because they wanted to make sure their votes were counted. Nearly all of these voters said they had concerns over the reliability of the postal service in getting their ballot to its intended location due to the inefficiencies and errors of the postal system. A smaller subset of these voters also spoke about a concern that their vote could be tampered with or somehow intentionally intercepted in the mail. Voters we spoke with felt that both these concerns were addressed by voting in person. VBM users also reported choosing to drop off their VBM ballot at polling places in order to ensure that their ballots were counted.



Joseph Sohm / Shutterstock.com

When discussing the above concerns, voters also specifically expressed a desire to have control over their ballots until they themselves saw their ballots go into a ballot box (for both polling-place voters and VBM drop-off voters). One Los Angeles voter’s response encapsulates many of the concerns expressed by other voters in the groups. “I feel that when it comes to minorities, especially when you live in a neighborhood like this[...] they may feel that they could just cast those votes aside and it wouldn’t make a difference, so that’s why I like to see it [my ballot] go into the box so at least I feel better about it.”

A majority of African-American focus group participants who spoke about voting in person saw it as an important opportunity to be seen and to represent the African-American community at the polls. Oakland voters spoke about the way casting a vote at the polls made them feel empowered.



“It is about controlling my right to vote... by exercising it from A to Zed,” said one voter. “I feel really powerful when seen in those spaces and in communication and community with black and brown women,” explained another. “To see black women in those spaces and a part of that work is really powerful for me, and I feel like I can connect to that... It is important to me to be seen voting.”

It should be noted that an overwhelming majority of our participants cited U.S. African-American history as one of the main reasons they voted (regardless of balloting method). The history of the African-American voting rights struggle was very salient and connected to the act of voting for them personally (with some variation in the intensity of this feeling by age). Voting was described as an act of responsibility to one’s community and an expression of respect for the sacrifices and work of those who fought for African-American civil and political rights.

Respondents in all the voter groups we studied also spoke about the importance for them of getting their “I Voted” sticker (though this was the least-cited of the five reasons listed above).

The most common reasons given by African-American voters for using VBM ballots were similar to those cited by other groups of California voters in our study:

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

One young African-American voter we spoke with explained, “I vote by mail because that is how my family does it, and I think it is more convenient. I don’t know if there would be long lines or changing polling locations if I voted at the polls[...] I don’t like to wait in long lines, I would probably just give up and leave.”

## 2. How do African-American voters react to the possible use of a Vote Center Model in California?



There is currently discussion in California about possibly implementing a new voting system similar to Colorado's Voter Center Model.<sup>7</sup> The California State Legislature has passed legislation (Senate Bill 450) that would allow counties to adopt a new voting system if they choose to do so (14 counties are eligible to opt in in 2018, the rest may opt-in starting in 2020). SB 450 would replace traditional neighborhood polling places with Vote Centers.<sup>8</sup> At a Vote Center, voters can cast their ballot in-person, drop off their ballot, access same-day voter registration, receive a replacement ballot, as well as additional services. Specifically, the proposed new model, as currently described in the bill, includes the following elements:

- VBM ballots are to be sent to all registered voters.
- At least 1 accessible voting center is to be opened per 10,000 registered voters, with at least two per jurisdiction. Ninety percent of these are to remain open from 7 AM till 8 PM, or for 8 hours total on Election Day and 3 days prior. At least one of these (per 50,000 voters) is to be open 10 days before the election, at least 8 hours a day, up to and including the fourth day before the election (under current law, counties must provide one polling place per 1,000 voters on Election Day, open from 7 AM till 8 PM).
- A minimum of one ballot drop-box location for every 15,000 registered voters is to be open at least 28 days before the election, with at least one ballot drop box per jurisdiction open at least 12 hours a day.
- 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 until 2024, and would have other differences with regard to the establishment of Vote Centers, including a lower number of registered voters per Vote Center than other counties, one for every 7,500 registered voters on Election Day and three days prior.

We asked African-American focus group respondents for their perspectives on the possible implementation of a Vote Center Model in California, as described above. The following are the most common responses voters expressed:

- Strong concern over the motives for this possible change to California's election system.
- Concern/fear that Vote Centers would mean long lines, large crowds, and an unpleasant bureaucratic experience, similar to what people experience at the DMV or other government agencies.
- Concern that Vote Centers might be hard to find or too far to travel to.
- Very few voters would be willing to travel more than 5-20 minutes to use a Vote Center location.

While some African-American voters we spoke with were open to the idea of using Vote Centers, a majority of participants expressed strong concerns about the intentions behind the proposed Vote Center Model, including concerns about voter suppression and voting access. Voters cited the significant history of vote suppression among African Americans in the U.S. Many saw this suppression as ongoing (e.g. referring to recent voter ID laws enacted around the country) and were concerned about the reduction in the number of polling places, citing this aspect of the Vote Center Model as a possible step toward reducing access to voting for African Americans. "It upset me when you said instead of 10 polling places there will be one," said one voter. "I don't know what could be a greater invitation to suppression. Voting is already weighted to the working professional [...] The people that are mostly left out of the process are the people who would most benefit from the neighborhood-centric approach."

"I see it as a further disenfranchisement of our communities," commented another voter. "I like being able to see families, see people; you are taking them out of their community, which lessens the chances that they will even know what their community issues are. So if you are taking me from where I am at [...] I'm not even getting a chance to discuss with my neighbors because I may not run into my neighbors, which is something that happens at the polling sites. You run into your neighbors and they say do you know anything about this proposition [...] you lose that. It bothers me that we are removing it from community. I'd be concerned with who is behind it and why do they want this."

Nearly half the African-American voters we spoke with also were concerned that Vote Centers would mean an unpleasant and possibly frustrating voting experience. Despite being offered a description of the voter-friendly services these centers would provide, many envisioned large facilities processing a high number of voters. "They want to herd us in and out to vote like we are at Wal-Mart!" exclaimed one voter.



Joseph Sohm / Shutterstock.com

Many respondents said they expected long lines, despite the availability of early voting, and despite the fact that voting could be spread out over up to 10 days. Indeed, several voters suggested that, in order to encourage voting, the term “Vote Center” not be used, and that it be replaced with a name that did not evoke large and time-consuming bureaucratic processing centers reminiscent of the DMV or Social Security offices. Los Angeles voters also commonly expressed heightened concerns about travel time and the distance to Vote Centers, as well as the possibility of having to vote in other neighborhoods.

“How is this supposed to increase the amount of people who are voting? I don’t see how making less voting centers and making them farther away would help,” remarked one voter. “I live down the street from the school where I vote. I don’t see a person who doesn’t already vote going a farther way to vote than their neighborhood polling location.”

“I think the placement of Vote Centers has to be neutral because of the divisions that exist in Los Angeles,” affirmed another voter. “Some people are not comfortable in other certain neighborhoods, and that can be a deterrent.”

One Los Angeles voter, in particular, was adamant that Vote Centers would mean waiting in long lines. “I don’t care what nobody says, there will be lines, and anything else is lies. They are going to have 50 windows and only 5 of them open. Come on, man!”

## **Conclusion: How Can African Americans be Ensured Equitable Access to California’s Electoral System?**

Our research suggests that other African-American voters in California may react negatively to the proposed election changes, finding them perplexing, and possibly suspecting exclusionary or discriminatory motives behind the reduction in polling places. It is important to note that participants in our other California Voter Experience focus groups, particularly Latinos and voters with limited English proficiency, also had negative reactions to Vote Centers and expressed concerns about their possible implementation in California. If the Vote Center Model is implemented, voters could react differently when they actually interact with Vote Centers. However, early perceptions of Vote Centers could have an impact on the willingness of voters to try using the new model.

### **CCEP Vote Center Recommendations**

Should the Vote Center Model be implemented in California, our findings suggest that it will be necessary for state and local election officials to engage in extensive outreach and communication in order to make this new model accessible and welcoming for African-American voters, and to possibly overcome deeply-held concerns expressed by African-American voters regarding Vote Centers. Earning the trust of African-American voters will be essential in encouraging diverse and representative use of these new centers. Alternatively, this community outreach could occur before the centers are implemented, or in a Vote Center pilot program in one or more select counties so that lessons may be learned before any wider county implementation. Additionally, Vote Center planning committees and staff should be selected to be representative of the communities of voters they serve.

Based on these findings, and those from the full set of California Voter Experience focus groups, the CCEP presents the following recommendations:

1. County election officials should work with community advocates to develop implementation and outreach plans that specifically address concerns expressed by underrepresented groups.
2. If the Vote Center Model is enacted, the State of California should provide appropriate funding for county election offices to effectively implement it.
3. To the extent possible, the adoption of a new Vote Center Model should be uniform across the state’s counties to avoid voter confusion.
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 wherever the close proximity of counties could lead to voter confusion.
5. County election officials should conduct ongoing community dialogue with African-American voters and members of other historically underrepresented groups from the planning stages onward 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-level 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 African Americans and other historically underrepresented groups.

*Coming soon*

- *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: California Voter Experience Study, Issue 3, Vote-by-Mail Use by Asian-American Californians*
- *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: California Voter Experience Study, Issue 4, Statewide Survey Findings*

## Notes

1. 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 it.
2. Data for California's total VBM use rates were acquired from the California Secretary of State.  
See: <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/historical-absentee/>
3. See the California Civic Engagement Project - *The California Voter Experience Study*, Issue 1, July 2016.  
<http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep/UCDavisCCEPCVEBrief1.pdf>
4. See the CCEP website for more information on the methodology of *The California Voter Experience Study*.
5. Data utilized for our Vote-By-Mail research were acquired from the Statewide Database (SWDB). 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. Due to differences in data collection methods, caution should be utilized when directly comparing California Secretary of State voter data publications with SWDB data. 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. See the CCEP website for more information on the methodology of *The California Voter Experience Study*.
7. 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)
8. If SB 450 is adopted, the Counties of Calaveras, Inyo, Madera, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Sacramento, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Shasta, Sierra, Sutter, and Tuolumne may opt in after January 2018, and, except as provided in Section 4007, on or after January 1, 2020, any other California county may opt in. For more information on this bill see:  
[http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201520160SB450](http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450)

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

**Research assistance by Greg Keidan**



*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. Krystyna von Henneberg, Shakari Byerly, Deanna Kitamura of Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Los Angeles, and Rosalind Gold and Ofelia Medina of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund.

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

### **CCEP Advisory Committee**

#### **Kim Alexander**

President and Founder  
California Voter Foundation

#### **Matt A. Barreto**

Professor of Political Science  
Professor of Chicana/o Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles

#### **Jonathan Fox**

Professor  
School of International Service  
American University

#### **Luis R. Fraga**

Arthur Foundation Endowed Professor of  
Transformative Latino Leadership  
Professor of Political Science  
University of Notre Dame

#### **Lisa Garcia Bedolla**

Chancellor's Professor of Education and Political Science  
University of California, Berkeley

#### **Bruce Haynes**

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology  
University of California, Davis

#### **Jongho Lee**

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science  
Western Illinois University

#### **Peter Levine**

Associate Dean for Research and Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship  
& Public Affairs Jonathan Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service  
Tufts University

#### **Matt Mahan**

Cofounder and CEO  
Brigade

#### **James Muldavin**

Executive Director  
California Center for Civic Participation and Youth Development

#### **Karthick Ramakrishnan**

Professor of Public Policy  
University of California, Riverside

#### **Ricardo Ramirez**

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science  
University of Notre Dame

#### **Jason Reece**

Director of Research  
Kirwan Institute

#### **Cruz Reynoso**

Professor of Law Emeritus  
University of California, Davis

#### **Dan Schnur**

Director  
Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics  
University of Southern California

## **UC DAVIS**

### **CENTER FOR REGIONAL CHANGE**

#### **About the Center for Regional Change**

The CRC is a catalyst for innovative, collaborative, and action-oriented research. It brings together faculty and students from different disciplines, and builds bridges between university, policy, advocacy, business, philanthropy and other sectors. The CRC's goal is to support the building of healthy, equitable, prosperous, and sustainable regions in California and beyond. Learn more! Visit the CRC website at: <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu>

**For more information about this research study and the California Civic Engagement Project, contact CCEP Director Mindy Romero at [msromero@ucdavis.edu](mailto:msromero@ucdavis.edu).**

**Visit our website at: <http://regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ccep>**

Last revised 9/15/2016