Voting Methods in California: Disparate Use and Rejection Rates
2022 General Election
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**About the Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID)**

The Center for Inclusive Democracy’s mission is to improve the social and economic quality of life in U.S. communities by producing non-partisan academic research that informs policy and on-the-ground organizing efforts through education and outreach for a more engaged, transparent, and representative democracy. CID conducts pioneering research that explores voting behavior, civic engagement, as well as electoral and economic issues at the intersection of social justice and democracy.

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Executive Summary

The ways in which Californians cast their votes has been changing over the past decade. While in-person voting was a primary way for Californians to vote in the past, vote-by-mail ballots have become increasingly more common due to expanded voting options in the state, particularly in the 2020 general election due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the expansion of vote-by-mail access made permanent and more voters being comfortable going to vote centers or polling places due to lower COVID-19 cases, many policy makers and voter advocates have questioned whether the voting behaviors in the 2020 general election, such as the large number of vote-by-mail ballots, would continue in future elections. To address these questions, CID analyzed voting methods in the most recent general election of 2022.

The vast majority of votes in the 2022 general election were cast via vote-by-mail ballots.

Just over 12% of voters voted in person at a polling place or vote center in the 2022 November election, leaving around 88% of votes cast via vote-by-mail ballots. The most common voting method was returning vote-by-mail ballots through the mail (40.3%), followed by returning them to a drop box (30.6%). Just under 17% of voters returned their vote-by-mail ballot to a staffed polling place or vote center. Combined, just over 29% of voters in the 2022 general election cast their ballots at a staffed vote center or polling place.

Historically underrepresented groups voted in person at higher rates than the general population.

Latino voters and young voters aged 18 to 24, historically underrepresented in the electorate, used vote-by-mail ballots at lower rates than the general population. Over 15% of ballots cast by Latino voters were cast in person, compared to 12.2% of all voters. Latino voters did, however, return their vote-by-mail ballot to a polling place or vote center (19.5%) at higher rates than the general population (16.9%). Nearly 15% of young voters voted in person, notably higher than voters aged 65 and older (8.2%).

Republican voters voted in person at nearly twice the rate of Democratic voters.

Just over 17% of registered Republicans voted in person at a polling place or vote center in the 2022 general election, notably higher than registered Democrats (9.0%). Republican voters also returned vote-by-mail ballots to a polling place or vote center at a rate five percentage points higher than Democrats. While less than one-quarter of Republican voters returned their vote-by-mail ballot to a drop box, over one-third of Democrats did so.

Vote-by-mail rejection rates were highest among Latino and younger voters.

In the 2022 general election, 1.2% of all vote-by-mail ballots were rejected and not counted. Some demographic groups, however, had higher rejection rates than the general population. Young voters aged 18 to 24 had notably high rejection rates (4.3%). In comparison, voters aged 65 and older had a vote-by-mail rejection rate (0.5%) nearly one-tenth of the rejection rate of the youngest voters. Additionally, 1.8% of vote-by-mail ballots cast by Latino voters were rejected, higher than Asian-American voters (1.4%) and the general population.

The most common reason for rejected vote-by-mail ballots was being received after the deadline.

Over 47% of rejected vote-by-mail ballots were received late, while a little over 39% had non-matching signatures and just under 10% missing signatures. Reasons for vote-by-mail rejection varied by group. Nearly 45% of rejected vote-by-mail ballots cast by Latinos had non-matching signatures, five percentage points higher than the general population, while nearly half of rejected ballots cast by Asian-American voters were received late, nearly nine percentage points higher than among Latinos. Almost 55% of rejected ballots cast by youth voters had non-matching signatures, more than twice the rate of voters aged 65 and older. Over half of rejected ballots cast by Democrats were received late, while only around 37% of rejected ballots cast by Republicans were received late. Instead, Republicans had higher rates of non-matching signatures (47.4%) and missing signatures (11.1%) compared to Democrats (33.4% and 9.2%, respectively).
More early voters returned their vote-by-mail ballot through the mail than via a drop box, while drop box voting was the most common method on and around Election Day.

Prior to in-person voting becoming available, most early ballots were returned through the USPS, while a small share was returned to drop boxes. Drop box voting rapidly increased after November 6th, becoming the most common voting method. Vote centers and polling places were utilized heavily on and around Election Day, with returning vote-by-mail ballots to a staffed drop off location being the second most common voting method and voting in person being the third most common.

Summary

The 2022 general election continues the trend of the vote-by-mail ballots being the way most voters cast their ballots. While use of vote-by-mail ballots is high, use of in-person voting locations remains significant (in-person voting and vote-by-mail ballot drop off), underscoring the importance of voting locations in the voting experience of Californians. Voting methods did also vary by demographics, with some historically underrepresented groups, such as Latino and youth voters, opting to vote in person at higher rates. These same groups also had higher vote-by-mail rejection rates than the general population. Understanding how demographic groups vote, as well as why their vote-by-mail ballots are rejected, is a critical element of equity-focused policy conversations surrounding voting options in the state, as well as needed voter outreach and education efforts.

For an examination of the reasons why Californians can prefer or need to use one voting method over others, see the companion report titled, Voting Methods in California: Voter Awareness and Reasons for Disparate Use.
Voting Methods in the 2022 General Election

The ways in which Californians cast their votes has been changing over the past decade. While in-person voting was a primary way for Californians to vote in the past, vote-by-mail ballots have become increasingly more common due to expanded voting options in the state. After a slow and steady increase in the share of votes being cast via vote-by-mail ballots since 2010, the 2020 general election saw a notable increase due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure a safe election, California sent every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot in the 2020 general election, a policy that was later made permanent in Fall 2021. The 2022 election cycle occurred with this expanded vote-by-mail access and in an environment less restricted by COVID-19.

With the expansion of vote-by-mail access made permanent and more voters being comfortable going to vote centers or polling places due to lower COVID-19 cases, many policy makers and voter advocates have questioned whether the voting behaviors in the 2020 general election, such as the large number of vote-by-mail ballots, will continue in future elections. In order to address this speculation, CID conducted a statewide analysis of voters’ voting behavior in the 2022 general election. This brief aims to answer the following four related questions:

1. How have the ways in which Californians cast their ballots changed?
2. How did Californians cast their ballot in the 2022 general election?
3. What share of vote-by-mail ballots were rejected and why in the 2022 general election?
4. When did Californians cast their ballot in the 2022 general election?

In this report, we examine voting methods in the 2022 general election broken out by race, ethnicity, age group, party affiliation, and gender. We provide findings for California as a whole, as well as in Voter’s Choice Act counties and non-Voter’s Choice Act counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 - Definition of Voting Methods in the 2022 Election Cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drop Box</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drop Off Location</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mail</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In Person</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study Methodology

The voter files used in this analysis were provided by the California Secretary of State and Political Data, Inc. The voter files provided the individual registrant’s date of birth (used to identify age), party affiliation, voting activity, voting method, gender, and total number of registered voters. Race and ethnicity data were not present for the majority of voters in these files. Registered voters in California have the option to self-report their gender, race, and ethnicity on the voter registration application, but only a small percentage of registrants have typically done so.

Data Limitations: Identifying Race and Ethnicity

Current methods in election science used to identify the race and ethnicity of voters in official voter files are less reliable for some demographic groups, including Indigenous/Native and Asian-American subgroup populations. We identified registrants’ race and ethnicity in county voter files with the R package Who Are You (WRU), which computes the probability of each racial category for registrants using surname, neighborhood demographics (geocoding with census tract data), and other characteristics, such as gender, party, and age. For this report, analysis of the voter file by race and ethnicity is limited to Latino, Asian-American, and Black registrants because imputation for other racial and ethnic groups (including white, non-Latinos) can have a high degree of inaccuracy. However, some error in measurement is present for these groups, particularly for Black registrants, and caution is appropriate when interpreting small effects. Caution is additionally suggested when
interpreting voter data identified for Black registrants at a county level in California. For this reason, we do not report the racial and ethnic composition of voters, as a whole.

The analysis in this report focuses on the voting methods used by Californians across racial and ethnic groups, age groups, party affiliations, and gender. Due to voter file data limitations, we are unable to examine voting methods specific to Californians who are limited English proficient or Californians with disabilities.

Limited demographic information in county and state voter files hinders progress to improve the elections experience for all voters. We encourage elections officials, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss legal and accurate ways to gather more complete demographic data in California during and after the voter registration process.

**Vote-by-Mail Legislation**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the California legislature passed bills directing changes to how the 2020 general election was administered in order to ensure a safe and accessible election. Among various bills, Assembly Bill 860 made significant changes to vote-by-mail (VBM) access by requiring that county elections offices mail all registered voters a VBM ballot in the 2020 general election. In fall 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 37, which expanded vote-by-mail access by making the requirement for county elections offices to send all active voters a vote-by-mail ballot permanent.

**Voter’s Choice Act**

In 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill 450, which allows California counties to choose to adopt a voting system known as the Voter’s Choice Act (VCA). The voting model replaces neighborhood polling places with multi-service vote centers available up to ten days before Election Day. VCA counties send vote-by-mail ballots to all registered voters who can return them by mail, at a vote center, or at a secure ballot drop box. Voters may vote in person by completing a ballot at any vote center in their county.

By the time of the 2022 election cycle, twenty-seven counties had adopted the election model (Figure 1). Five counties (Sacramento, San Mateo, Madera, Napa, and Nevada) first adopted the VCA voting model in the 2018 election cycle. Another ten counties (Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Mariposa, Orange, Santa Clara, and Tuolumne) adopted the election model in the 2020 election cycle. In the 2022 election cycle, an additional twelve counties adopted the VCA election model, including Alameda, King, Marin, Merced, Riverside, San Benito, San Diego, Santa Cruz, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Ventura, and Yolo Counties. In the 2022 election cycle, VCA counties comprised over three-quarters (76.4%) of all registered voters in California.

Note: Two additional California counties adopted the VCA model in the 2024 election cycle: Humboldt and Placer.

Due to Los Angeles County’s large proportion of the total number of registered voters in California’s VCA counties in the 2022 general election (33.6%), its voting data significantly influenced the overall findings for VCA counties presented in this report. For this reason, we present data in this report for VCA counties with and without the inclusion of Los Angeles County.
How Have Californians Voted in the Past?

The use of vote-by-mail ballots has been steadily increasing over the past few elections. **Between the 2010 and 2018 general elections, the share of California voters using vote-by-mail ballots increased nearly fourteen percentage points.** In the 2020 general election, which was held amid the COVID-19 pandemic, vote-by-mail voting increased twenty-one percentage points from the previous general election.

Methods of voting have historically varied by demographic group. While vote-by-mail voting has been increasing over the past decade, Latino voters and young voters aged 18 to 24 have consistently used vote-by-mail ballots at lower rates than the general population. For more information on past voting methods by these groups, see past CID reports.

**FIGURE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Vote-by-Mail Ballots</th>
<th>In-Person Ballots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010 General</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 General</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 General</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 General</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018 General</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020 General</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In-person voting rates in general elections have been declining in recent years, with a steep decline between 2018 and 2020. In the 2010 and 2012 general elections, voting methods were split about half and half between in-person voting and vote-by-mail voting (Figure 2). Between 2014 and 2018, however, the share of votes cast via vote-by-mail ballots increased, ranging from 58.9% in the 2016 general election to 66.1% in the 2018 general election. In-person voting sharply declined in the 2020 general election, which was held in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, to 12.7%, more than twenty percentage points lower than in the previous general election in 2018.

Note: These numbers reflect the latest data from the statewide database at UC Berkeley, California’s official redistricting database, and differ slightly from previous reported methods in CID reports. Additionally, this report focuses on general elections. Historically, vote-by-mail use is often higher in each election cycle’s primary than in the general election. For historical primary election voting methods, see the online appendix.
Voting Methods in the 2022 General Election

California voters have multiple options when casting a ballot. As seen in Table X, Californians can vote with a vote-by-mail ballot that can be returned in three main ways: 1) Returned to a drop box; 2) Returned to a staffed polling place or vote center; and 3) Returned through the mail (United States Postal Service). If voters don’t want to vote with a vote-by-mail ballot, they can also vote at a vote center or polling place, depending on their county’s election model, and complete a ballot in person (see page 6 for voting method definitions).

The use of vote-by-mail ballots continued to be incredibly common in the 2022 general election. Nearly 88% of votes were cast with a vote-by-mail ballot (9,650,195 VBM ballots of 10,987,194 counted votes), with drop box voting being the most common voting method. Voting methods did, however, vary by demographic. Asian-American voters, older voters aged 65 and older, and Democratic voters voted in person at lower rates than the general population. In contrast, Latino voters and Republicans voted in person at higher rates than the general population.

Note: This report focuses on general elections. For voting methods in the 2022 primary election, see the online appendix.

Voting Methods – All Voters

The vast majority of votes in the 2022 general election were cast via vote-by-mail ballots. Just over 12% of voters voted in person at a polling place or vote center in the 2022 general election (Figure 3). With around 88% of ballots being vote-by-mail ballots, returning the vote-by-mail ballots through the mail (40.3%) was the most common method of voting in the midterm election. Nearly one-third of all ballots cast were vote-by-mail ballots returned to a drop box, with another 16.9% being returned to a staffed drop off location at a polling place or vote center. Combining in-person votes and votes cast at a drop off location means that just over 29% of all ballots cast in the 2022 general election were cast at a polling place and vote center.
In VCA counties, a slightly higher share of ballots was cast in person (12.6%) compared to the statewide rate (12.2%), although when excluding Los Angeles County, the share of votes that were cast in person decreased to 9.7%. Returning vote-by-mail ballots via the mail remained the most common voting method in VCA counties (38.7%), VCA counties excluding Los Angeles (41.7%), and non-VCA counties (45.7%). Less than one-quarter of ballots cast in non-VCA counties were vote-by-mail ballots returned to a drop box, notably lower than in VCA counties (32.8%) and VCA counties excluding Los Angeles (31.3%).

Note: For voting methods by county and county type, see online appendix.

For an examination of the reasons why Californians can prefer or need to use one voting method over others, see the companion report titled, Voting Methods in California: Voter Awareness and Reasons for Disparate Use.

Voting Methods by Race and Ethnicity

Asian-American voters voted in person at lower rates than Black and Latino voters and the general population in the 2022 general election. Less than 10% of Asian Americans voted in person, compared to 12.1% of Black voters, 15.3% of Latino voters and 12.2% of all voters (Figure 4). While Asian Americans (31.7%), Blacks (31.0%), and Latinos (30.8%) all had rates of voting via drop boxes similar to those in the general population (30.6%), Asian Americans voted with a vote-by-mail ballot returned through the mail (44.3%) at higher rates than Blacks (38.6%), Latinos (34.4%) and the general population (40.3%). In contrast, Latino voters returned their vote-by-mail ballots to a polling place or vote center location (19.5%) at higher rates than Black voters (18.3%) and Asian-American voters (14.6%).

Note: See study methodology section for data limitations in the identification of voters’ race and ethnicity.
Asian American, Black, and Latino voters in VCA counties voted via drop box at higher rates than their counterparts in non-VCA counties, who instead voted via the mail at higher rates. Around one-third of ballots cast in the 2022 general election by Asian-Americans, Black, and Latino voters in the VCA counties were vote-by-mail ballots returned to a drop box, compared to less than one-quarter in non-VCA counties (Figure 5). In contrast, over half of votes cast by Asian Americans in non-VCA counties were vote-by-mail ballots returned through the mail, compared to 42.7% in VCA counties and 44.2% in VCA counties excluding Los Angeles. Over 46% of Black voters in non-VCA counties returned their ballot through the mail, compared to 36.4% in VCA counties. Similarly, nearly 42% of votes cast by Latinos in non-VCA counties were returned through the mail, compared to 32.2% of votes cast by Latinos in VCA counties.

Across county type, rates of in-person voting remained relatively similar for Asian-American voters, with 9.8% in VCA counties, 7.8% in VCA counties excluding Los Angeles County, and 7.8% in non-VCA counties voting at a polling place or vote center. Latinos in all twenty-seven VCA counties voted in-person (16.2%) at notably higher rates than those who live in VCA counties excluding Los Angeles County (11.4%) and non-VCA counties (12.3%). Black voters voted in-person at lower rates in VCA counties excluding Los Angeles County (7.8%) than those in all VCA counties (12.6%) and in non-VCA counties (10.5%).

Note: For voting methods by county, county type, and race and ethnicity, see online appendix.
In person voting rates are higher for young Californians, with lower rates for those age 65 and older. Young voters aged 18 to 24 had the highest rates of in-person voting (14.8%), which was similar to other age groups under the age of 65 (Figure 6). Only 8.2% of votes cast by voters aged 65 and older voted in person, by far the lowest rate of all age groups. Instead, over 50% of voters age 65 and older returned their vote-by-mail ballot through the mail, more than ten percentage points higher than those aged 55-64, the age group with the second highest mail voting rate.

Voters aged 18 to 24 voted via mail (32.3%) and drop box (32.1%) at similar rates, while returning vote-by-mail ballots to a drop box was the most common voting method among those aged 25 to 34 (35.6%) and those aged 35 to 44 (34.2%). Mail voting was the most common method among voters aged 45 and older.
Voting via drop box was the most common voting method among young voters in VCA counties, but the second most common when excluding Los Angeles County voters. Over one-third of ballots cast by voters aged 18 to 24 in VCA counties were vote-by-mail ballots returned to a drop box, higher than all other voting methods (Figure 7). When excluding Los Angeles County, however, young voters returned their ballots through the mail (34.0%) at higher rates than drop boxes (32.1%). Voters aged 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 in VCA counties voted via drop box at the highest rates (37.9% and 36.7%, respectively). When excluding Los Angeles County, drop box voting was still the most common method among voters between the ages of 25 and 44.

Older voters continued to vote through the mail at notably higher rates than younger voters, regardless of county type. Nearly 50% of votes cast by voters aged 65 and older in VCA counties were vote-by-mail ballots returned through the mail, which increased to 52.1% when excluding Los Angeles County. Over 56% of older voters voted via the mail in non-VCA counties, nearly twenty percentage points higher than those aged 18 to 24.

Note: For voting methods by county, county type, and age group, see online appendix.
Republican voters voted in person at nearly twice the rate of Democratic voters. Just over 17% of registered Republicans voted in person at a polling place or vote center in the 2022 general election, notably higher than registered Democrats (9.0%) and no party preference voters (12.0%, Figure 8). Returning vote-by-mail ballots through the mail was the most common voting method across all party affiliations, with 41.4% of Democrats and 38.3% of Republicans using the mail to vote. Over one-third of Democrats returned their vote-by-mail ballot to a drop box, while only one-quarter of Republicans did so.
Republicans in VCA counties voted in person at higher rates than those in non-VCA counties. Around 18% of registered Republicans in VCA counties voted in person, which decreased to 14.6% when excluding Los Angeles County, slightly lower than the rate in non-VCA counties (14.8%, Figure 9). Registered Democrats voted in person at the lowest rate of all party affiliations in all county types, with 9.3% in VCA counties, 6.3% in VCA counties excluding Los Angeles, and 7.8% in non-VCA counties voting at a polling place or vote center. In return, Democrats voted via drop box at the highest rates. Over 37% of Democrats in VCA counties returned their vote-by-mail ballots to a drop box, slightly higher than when excluding Los Angeles County (35.0%), and more than ten percentage points higher than Democrats in non-VCA counties (25.2%).

Voters of all party affiliations in non-VCA returned their vote-by-mail ballots via the mail and to a polling place or vote center at higher rates compared to their counterparts in VCA counties. Nearly one-quarter of Republican voters in non-VCA counties returned their ballot to a drop off location, compared to 19.1% of those who live in VCA counties. Just under half of Democratic voters in non-VCA counties voted via the mail, nearly ten-percentage points higher than Democrats in non-VCA counties.

Note: For voting methods by county, county type, and party affiliation, see online appendix.

Voting Methods by Gender

While voting methods were relatively similar between men and women, men voted via mail and in person at slightly higher rates than women, while women voted via drop box and drop off location at slightly higher rates than men. Just under 41% of men returned their vote-by-mail ballot via the mail, compared to 39.9% of women (Figure 10). Just over 31% of women voted via drop box, slightly more than men (29.8%). Over 13% of votes cast by men were cast in person at a vote center or polling place, nearly two-percentage points higher than women (11.2%), while 17.5% of women and 16.3% of men returned their vote-by-mail ballot to a drop off location.

Note: Gender is determined by matching a voter’s first name to the gender traditionally associated with the first name. This method is known to be generally very accurate in the identification of gender, although limited as it cannot currently identify non-binary and other genders in a voter file.
Men and women in non-VCA counties voted via the mail at higher rates than their counterparts in VCA counties. Over 45% of both men and women in non-VCA counties returned their vote-by-mail ballot via the mail, while 39.2% of men and 38.1% of women in VCA counties did the same (Figure 11). In contrast, drop box voting was higher among men (32.0%) and women (33.7%) in VCA counties compared to those in non-VCA counties (22.9% and 24.1%, respectively).

While in-person voting was higher among men (13.5%) and women (11.6%) in VCA counties compared to men (12.0%) and women (9.8%) in non-VCA counties, in-person voting rates were lower in VCA counties when excluding Los Angeles County (10.4% and 8.8%, respectively).

Note: For voting methods by county, county type, and gender, see online appendix.
Vote-by-Mail Rejection in the 2022 General Election

In every election, a small share of vote-by-mail ballots are rejected and not counted due to various reasons, including being received late and signatures issues. In the 2022 general election, 1.2% (120,935 rejected ballots out of 9,771,130 vote-by-mail ballots cast) of vote-by-mail ballots cast were rejected. Vote-by-mail rejection rates were highest among young voters aged 18 to 24, Latino voters, and no party preference voters. The most common reason for vote-by-mail ballot rejection was being received late, although Latino voters, young voters, and Republican voters had higher rates of signature issues.

Note: In California, a vote-by-mail ballot must be postmarked on or before Election Day and received by the county elections office no later than 7 days after Election Day. Voters have the opportunity to cure a missing or non-matching signature on their rejected VBM ballot.

Vote-by-Mail Rejection Rate – All Voters

Vote-by-mail rejection rates were highest in VCA counties. Throughout the entire state, 1.2% of all vote-by-mail ballots cast in the 2022 general election were ultimately rejected and not counted (Figure 12). VCA counties, both including and excluding Los Angeles County, had a higher rejection rate (1.3%) compared to counties who had not adopted the election model (1.1%).

Note: For rejection rates by county, county type, see online appendix.
The most common reason for rejected vote-by-mail ballots was being received after the deadline. Over 47% of all rejected vote-by-mail ballots in California were rejected because they were received late, by far the most common rejection reason, up from 16.1% of rejected ballots in the 2020 general election (Figure 13). The second most common rejection reason was non-matching signatures (39.1%), followed by missing signatures (9.6%). Combined, signature issues were the reason for nearly half of all rejected vote-by-mail ballots.

Signature issues were more common in non-Voter’s Choice Act counties. While late ballots were still the most common reason for rejected ballots across all county types, non-VCA counties had higher signature issues than in VCA counties. Over 12% of rejected ballots in non-VCA counties had missing signatures, compared to 8.9% in VCA counties. Similarly, 40% of rejected ballots in non-VCA counties had non-matching signatures, slightly higher than in VCA counties (38.8%). When excluding Los Angeles County, however, the remaining VCA counties had higher rates of non-matching signatures (43.7%) and lower rates of late ballots (44.3%) than in non-VCA counties (40.0% and 44.7%, respectively) and statewide (39.1% and 47.2%, respectively).

Note: In the 2020 general election, VBM ballots postmarked on or before Election Day and received by county elections officials no later than 17 days after Election Day were counted (changed from 3 days in previous elections). Rejection reasons categorized as other include: voter already voted, ballot missing from envelope. Multiple ballots returned in one envelope, missing or incorrect address on envelope, and no ID provided.

For rejection reasons by county, county type, see online appendix.

For survey data on California eligible voters’ awareness of the state’s vote-by-mail receipt deadline, see the companion report titled, Voting Methods in California: Voter Awareness and Reasons for Disparate Use.
The Latino vote-by-mail rejection rate was fifty percent higher than the general population. Around 1.8% of vote-by-mail ballot cast by Latino voters in the 2022 general election were rejected, notably higher than the general population rate of 1.2% (Figure 14). The Asian-American and Black vote-by-mail rejection rates (1.4% each) were also higher than the general population, although the difference was much smaller.

Note: See study methodology section for data limitations in the identification of voters’ race and ethnicity. For rejection rates by county, county type, and race and ethnicity, see online appendix.
Latinos had higher rates of signature issues than Asian Americans, Blacks, and the general population. Nearly 45% of rejected vote-by-mail ballots cast by Latinos were rejected for non-matching signatures, notably higher than Asian Americans (38.7%), Blacks (28.6%) and all voters (39.1%, Figure 15). In contrast, it was more common, although to a small degree, for ballots cast by Black voters to be rejected for missing signatures (11.1%) than those cast by Latinos (10.0%), Asian Americans (9.2%) and the general population (9.6%). In contrast, almost half of rejected vote-by-mail ballots cast by Asian Americans were received late, nearly nine percentage points higher than those cast by Latinos.

Note: See study methodology section for data limitations in the identification of voters’ race and ethnicity. For rejection reasons by county, county type, and race and ethnicity, see online appendix.
Vote-by-mail rejection rates decreased as age increased, with youth voters having by far the largest vote-by-mail rejection rate. Around 4.3% of vote-by-mail ballots cast by voters aged 18 to 24 were rejected, 1.7 percentage points higher than those aged 25 to 34 (2.6%), the age group with the second highest rejection rate (Figure 16). Vote-by-mail rejection rates decreased with every age group increase, with voters aged 65 and over having a rejection rate (0.5%) nearly one-tenth of the rejection rate of the youngest voters.

Note: For rejection rates by county, county type, and age group, see online appendix.
The majority of rejected ballots cast by youth voters aged 18 to 24 had non-matching signatures, notably higher than any other age group. Only 35.5% of rejected vote-by-mail ballots cast by voters aged 18 to 24 were received late, lower than all other age groups (Figure 17). Instead, nearly 55% of rejected ballots cast by youth voters were not counted due to non-matching signatures, more than ten percentage points higher than those aged 25 to 34, the group with the second highest non-matching signature rates, and more than twice the rate of older voters aged 65 and over. Youth voters did, however, have one of the lowest rates of missing signatures (6.8%), while older voters aged 65 and over had the highest rates of missing signatures (19.4%).

Note: For rejection reasons by county, county type, and age group, see online appendix.
Republican voters had the lowest vote-by-mail rejection rates across all party affiliations. Just 1.0% of vote-by-mail ballots cast by Republicans were rejected, while 1.2% of vote-by-mail ballots cast by Democrats were not counted (Figure 18). No party preference voters, however, had notably higher rejection rates (1.6%) than both Democrats and Republicans.

Note: For rejection rates by county, county type, and party affiliation, see online appendix.

Vote-by-Mail Rejection Reasons – Party Affiliation
Republican voters had notably higher rates of signature issues than Democratic voters, while the majority of ballots cast by Democrats were received late. Nearly sixty percent of rejected vote-by-mail ballots cast by Republicans had signatures issues, with 47.4% having non-matching signatures and 11.1% missing signatures (Figure 19). In contrast, 33.4% of rejected ballots cast by Democrats had non-matching signatures and 9.2% were missing signatures. Instead, over half of rejected ballots cast by Democrats were received after the deadline, seventeen percentage points higher than among Republicans.

Note: For rejection reasons by county, county type, and party affiliation, see online appendix.

**Vote-by-Mail Rejection Rate – Gender**

![Figure 20: Vote-by-Mail Rejection Rates by Gender](image)

Women had lower vote-by-mail rejection rates than men in the 2022 general election. Of vote-by-mail ballots cast by women, 1.1% were ultimately rejected and not counted (Figure 20). In comparison, 1.3% of vote-by-mail ballots cast by men were rejected.

Note: For rejection rates by county, county type, and gender, see online appendix.
Over half of rejected ballots cast by women were received late, notably higher than among men. Just under 44% of rejected ballots cast by men were received after the deadline, over seven percentage points lower than among women (Figure 21). Instead, men had higher rates of non-matching signatures (42.6%) than women (34.8%), while rates of ballots with missing signatures were similar between women (9.8%) and men (9.6%).

Note: For rejection reasons by county, county type, and gender, see online appendix.
When Did Californians Cast Their Ballots?

While many votes are cast on Election Day, Californians have the opportunity to vote in the days and weeks leading up to Election Day. Since 2020, vote-by-mail ballots are sent to every registered voter 29 days prior to Election Day. Voters can return those ballots via the mail or drop box before the Election Day. In Voter’s Choice Act counties, voters can cast an in-person ballot or return their ballot to a vote center up to 10 days prior to election.

In the 2022 general election, early voting was dominated by mail voting, although some voters did return their vote-by-mail ballots to drop boxes in the weeks leading up to November 8th. On Election Day, drop box voting was the most common method, followed by returning vote-by-mail ballots to drop off locations. When and how voters cast their ballots varied by demographic. Young voters aged 18 to 24 had low rates of early voting and a similar number of young voters cast ballots in person on Election Day as did via the mail. Low numbers of Asian-American voters voted in person on Election Day, while large numbers of Latino voters cast in-person ballots on Election Day.

The following analysis details an estimation of when votes were cast in the 2022 general election. In-person vote dates are derived from a date that represents when the vote was entered into the county’s system and there may be some lag from actual voting dates. Vote-by-mail ballot dates are the dates the ballot was received by the county, not when it was returned to a drop box, drop off location, or through the mail by the voter.

Note: For voting methods by date in Voter’s Choice Act counties and non-Voters Choice Act Counties, see the online appendix.
More early voters returned their vote-by-mail ballot through the mail than via a drop box, while drop box voting was the most common method on and around Election Day. Prior to in-person voting becoming available, most early ballots were returned through the USPS, while a small share was returned to drop boxes (Figure 22). Drop box voting rapidly increased after November 6th, becoming the most common voting method. Vote centers and polling places were utilized heavily on and around Election Day, with returning vote-by-mail ballots to a drop off location being the second most common voting method and voting in person being the third most common.
In-person voting was the least common voting method on Election Day among Asian-American voters. While in-person voting was the third most common voting method among the general population, fewer Asian-American voters voted in person around Election Day than via mail, drop off location, and drop box (Figure 23). Like the general population, drop box and drop off location voting were the most common voting methods among Asian Americans on and around Election Day, while mail voting was more common than drop box voting among early Asian-American voters.

Note: See study methodology section for data limitations in the identification of voters’ race and ethnicity.
Black voters utilized vote centers and polling places on and around Election Day at about the same rate as the general population. While drop box voting was the most common voting method among Black voters in the 2022 general election, in-person voting and returning vote-by-mail ballots to drop off locations spiked more after November 6th compared to the general population (Figure 24). In contrast, rates of mail voting around Election Day were notably lower than in-person voting, unlike all voters. Prior to Election Day, Black voters had voting pattern similar to those in the general population, with mail voting being more common than drop box voting.

Note: See study methodology section for data limitations in the identification of voters' race and ethnicity.
Latino voters voted utilized vote centers and polling places on and around Election Day at a higher rate than the general population. While drop box voting was the most common voting method among Latino voters in the 2022 general election, in-person voting and returning vote-by-mail ballots to drop off locations spiked more after November 6th compared to the general population (Figure 25). In contrast, rates of mail voting around Election Day were notably lower than in-person voting, unlike all voters. Prior to Election Day, Latino voters had similar voting pattern as the general population, with mail voting being more common than drop box voting.

Note: See study methodology section for data limitations in the identification of voters’ race and ethnicity.
Very few young voters aged 18 to 24 cast their ballot early. Between October 11 and November 6th, mail voting and drop box voting among young voters had notably lower peaks compared to the general population (Figure 26). Mail and drop box voting increased slightly the week before Election Day. On Election Day, nearly the same number of young voters cast their ballot via the mail and in person, while notably larger numbers of young voters returned their vote-by-mail ballot to a drop box or drop off location.
Returning vote-by-mail ballots to a drop off location was the most common voting method among Republicans on Election Day, while Democrats returned their ballots to drop boxes. Republican voting methods notably differed from Democratic voting methods on Election Day (Figure 27 and 28). Registered Republicans voted via drop box, drop off location, and in person at similar rates, while registered Democrats voted via drop box at much higher levels than drop box and in person voting. In-person voting was the least common voting method among Democrats on November 8th, but it was tied for second most common among Republicans. Additionally, prior to Election Day, Republicans returned their vote-by-mail ballots to drop boxes at lower levels than Democrats.
While voting methods among men and women prior to Election Day were similar, Election Day voting methods differed between men and women. More men cast their ballots in person than via the mail on Election Day, while women cast their ballots in person and via the mail at similar rates (Figures 29 and 30). Drop box voting, however, was the most common voting method among both men and women on Election Day, with returning vote-by-mail ballots to a drop off location being the second most common.

Note: Gender is determined by matching a voter’s first name to the gender traditionally associated with the first name. This method is known to be generally very accurate in the identification of gender, although limited as it cannot currently identify non-binary and other genders in a voter file.
Summary

In recent years, the ways in which Californians cast ballots have significantly changed. Between the 2010 and 2018 general elections, the share of votes cast via vote-by-mail ballots (regardless of return method) increased nearly fourteen percentage points. In the 2020 general election, the first in which every registered voter in California automatically received a vote-by-mail ballot, vote-by-mail voting surged to over 87% of all votes cast. While the 2020 general election was a unique election cycle due to the COVID-19 pandemic, vote-by-mail ballots continued to be the primary voting method in the 2022 general election.

Just over 12% of voters in the 2022 general election voted in person, with the remaining 87.8% of voters casting a vote-by-mail ballot. Voters could return their vote-by-mail ballot via the mail, drop box, or at a staffed drop off location. Returning a vote-by-mail ballot through the mail (40.3%) was the most common voting method in the 2022 general election, followed by returning them to a drop box (30.6%) and a drop off location (16.9%).

Voting methods continue to vary across demographic groups. Asian-American voters voted in person (9.4%) at lower rates than Latino voters (15.3%) and instead returned their vote-by-mail ballot through the mail (44.3%) at a rate nearly ten percentage points higher than Latino voters (34.4%). Young voters aged 18 to 24 voted via the mail (32.3%) and drop box (32.1%) at very similar rates, while older voters aged 65 and older voted via the mail (51.5%) at notably higher rates than drop boxes (27.3%). Republican voters voted in person (17.2%) at nearly twice the rate of Democratic voters (9.0%).

In every election, a small share of vote-by-mail ballots are rejected and not counted. Around 1.2% of all vote-by-mail ballots cast in the 2022 general election were rejected, with the most common reason for rejection being late ballots (47.2%) followed by non-matching signatures (39.1%). Vote-by-mail rejection rates and the reasons for those rejections did vary across demographics. Youth voters aged 18 to 24, Latino voters, and no party preference voters had high vote-by-mail rejection rates. Latino voters, young voters, and Republican voters in particular had high rates of signature issues resulting in rejected ballots.

While many votes are cast on Election Day, Californians have the opportunity to vote in the weeks leading up to the election through vote-by-mail ballots sent to all registered voters 29 days prior to the Election Day and at vote centers in Voter’s Choice Act counties open up to ten days prior to the Election Day. Early voting in the state is primarily conducted through the mail, with small numbers of voters returning vote-by-mail ballots to drop boxes. On Election Day, drop box voting is the most common voting method, followed by drop off location and in-person voting. Some demographic groups do not follow these trends. For example, very few young voters aged 18 to 24 voted early and voting at a drop off location was the most common Election Day voting method among Republicans.

Examining voting methods in the 2022 general elections provides the opportunity to understand if the voting behaviors seen in the 2020 general election amid the COVID-19 pandemic will continue in the state. Vote-by-mail ballots represented the overwhelming majority of votes in the 2022 midterm election, continuing an upward trend seen over the past few years. While in-person voting comprised 12.2% of the votes cast in the election, another 16.9% of voters utilized staffed vote centers and polling places to drop off their vote-by-mail ballots. Combined, just over 29% of voters in the 2022 general election cast their ballots at staffed vote center or polling place, underscoring the remaining importance of voting locations in the voting experience of Californians. Considering the varying using of voting methods across groups and counties should be a critical element of equity-focused policy conversations surrounding voting options in the state, as well as needed voter outreach and education efforts.
Notes

1. Because the California Election Code does not require registered voters to identify their race or ethnicity, the California voter file provides an incomplete flag for this information. While self-reported ethnicity data is generally reliable as an identifier, low self-reporting rates result in an incomplete VoteCal dataset. Further, the voting behavior and demographic characteristics of California registrants who answered this question are different than the ones who don’t (self-selection bias), resulting in an unrepresentative sample of the total electorate.


3. For more information on AB 860, see https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB860

4. For more information on AB 37, see https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB37

5. For more information on the California Voter’s Choice Act, see: http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450

6. For more information on when vote-by-mail ballots are mailed, see https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/table-7-when-states-mail-out-absentee-mail-ballots

7. For more information on the California Voter’s Choice Act, see: http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450