



## Voting Safe from Home: Vote-by-Mail Facts<sup>1</sup>

This year all registered, active voters in California will receive a ballot by mail for the November 2020 election. Voters have the option to return that mailed ballot through the mail, by dropping it off at any voting location or at a secure ballot dropbox if the county offers dropboxes, or to instead vote in person at a voting location. [An overwhelming majority of Californians - and Americans as a whole](#) - support vote-by-mail in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, myths and rumors have emerged challenging the integrity of vote-by-mail elections.<sup>2</sup> The League of Women Voters of California has created this explainer to dispel common vote-by-mail myths.

**MYTH: The 2020 Presidential Election is “All Vote-by-Mail” in California and there will be no in-person voting options.**

**FACT: Vote-by-mail is just one voting option to ensure all California voters can cast a safe and accessible vote in the midst of COVID-19.**

Mailing ballots to every registered voter is essential to ensure that Californians are able to cast a safe and accessible ballot in November. Of equal importance is maintaining robust in-person voting options. Voters in need of language assistance, voters with disabilities, those who will not receive mailed ballots because they are housing insecure, unhoused, or displaced due to the pandemic, and voters who need to register and vote on the same day must all be able to access in-person sites to fully exercise their right to vote.

For the November 2020 Presidential Election, due to difficulties securing sufficient numbers of spacious locations that will allow for safe voting, [counties may reduce the number of in-person voting locations](#) they usually provide. However, if the county chooses this option, then all locations are required to be open for early voting starting Saturday, October 31. Counties choosing to use this reduced ratio must also, starting on October 6, provide secure ballot dropboxes in convenient locations. Check [California Counties - Methods of Conducting Elections](#) and this [explanation of election methods](#) to find out more about your county.

---

<sup>1</sup> Information about voting, candidates, and ballot measures can be found on [Voter's Edge](#). California's [Voter Bill of Rights](#) is a plain-language explanation of voting fundamentals. If voters face any obstacles in voting, whether by mail or otherwise, they can report incidents to their local elections office, the California Secretary of State's confidential toll-free Voter Hotline at (800) 345-VOTE (8683), or [Election Protection](#).

<sup>2</sup> See this video [The Myth of Voter Fraud – And the Truth About What's Threatening Our Elections](#) and these noteworthy articles: [Trump's barrage of new claims of voter fraud have been disproved](#) (New York Times 9/30/20); [How Trump's 'Voter Fraud' Lie Is Disenfranchising Americans](#) (Washington Post 10/5/20); [Why Donald Trump's Attacks on Voting Have Ramped Up](#) (Slate 10/6/20); and [Voter fraud myth persists despite constant failure to prove claims](#) (Kansas Reflector 10/6/20).

**MYTH: Expanded vote-by-mail will lead to voter fraud in California.**

**FACT: Voter fraud of any kind, including with mail-in ballots, is extremely rare.**

Californians have had the [option to vote by mail since 1979](#). Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington conduct all elections primarily by mail, with the option to return ballots in-person, and have experienced [essentially no voter fraud](#). Oregon, for example, has documented only about a dozen cases of proven voter fraud out of over 100 million mail-in ballots cast since 2000.<sup>3</sup> See also resources cited in Footnote 2.

**MYTH: Automatic vote-by-mail is unprecedented in California.**

**FACT: Since 2016, counties that have chosen to implement the Voter's Choice Act have automatically mailed ballots to all registered voters in the county.**

All registered voters in counties that have adopted the [Voter's Choice Act](#) (VCA) already receive a ballot in the mail automatically, without any need to submit a special application. California counties holding elections pursuant to the Voter's Choice Act are: Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Madera, Mariposa, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Sacramento, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Tuolumne. Voters in VCA counties have three ways to return their completed ballot: by mail, via drop off at a secure ballot drop box, or by visiting any vote center in the county to either return the ballot or vote in person.

**MYTH: Vote-by-mail ballots are likely to be forged, illegally printed, stolen, or fraudulently signed.**

**FACT: California has procedures in place that prevent forgery, theft, and voter fraud.**

In California, where [72 percent of all ballots were cast by mail](#) in the March 2020 primary election, the state has developed several tools to protect the integrity of elections.

- **Watermarked Ballots.** California uses [watermarks](#) on its ballots that make it very difficult to create counterfeit ballots.<sup>4</sup>
- **Signature Checks.** Signatures on the return envelope are checked against signatures on voter registration cards to ensure they compare. To preserve the secrecy of the vote, the ballot is separated from the envelope before it is counted.
  - Voters with missing signatures or ones that don't compare accurately are notified and given an opportunity to cure the problem so that their ballot may be counted.<sup>5</sup>
- **Unique Barcodes.** Mail-in ballots are also given unique barcodes for each registered voter to prevent duplicate votes and illegally printed ballots from being counted.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The Heritage Foundation, which tracks voter fraud in its [Election Fraud Cases database](#), documented only 207 fraudulent uses of mail-in/absentee ballots nationwide since 1979.

<sup>4</sup> [State: California voters can 'absolutely trust' mail-in voting system](#)

<sup>5</sup> Procedures are outlined in this [Secretary of State Advisory](#).

<sup>6</sup> The [design of vote-by-mail ballots vary](#) across jurisdictions, and distinctive elements allow elections officials to easily spot indications of a fake or counterfeit ballot.

- **Tracking.** All California counties have the [Where's My Ballot](#) opt-in system available to track and confirm the receipt of voted vote-by-mail ballots and to make this information available through texting or emailing the voter, online, or through a toll-free telephone number.
- **Secure Return.** Voters may mail back their ballots or submit them directly to official ballot return sites, including drop boxes, polling places, vote centers, and elections offices. Find voting locations on [Voter's Edge](#) or through the [California Secretary of State](#).
- **Assisted Return.**<sup>7</sup> In California, voters who cannot return their ballot can enlist anyone's assistance to return it, as long as the assistance is not paid for on a per ballot basis.<sup>8</sup> The ballot envelope is required to list the name of the person authorized to return the ballot, their relationship to the voter, and the signature of the authorized person. The ballot must be returned no later than three days after receiving it from the voter or before the close of the polls on election day, whichever time period is shorter.<sup>9</sup>

**MYTH: Vote-by-mail ballots will be sent to non-residents of California, including undocumented immigrants and inactive voters.**

**FACT: Mail-in ballots will be provided only to registered California voters.**

**Undocumented immigrants:** [California does not allow noncitizens to vote in elections](#). To be eligible to register and vote in federal elections, you must be a U.S. citizen. State law requires each person to declare, under penalty of perjury, that they meet all voter eligibility requirements, including citizenship. While clerical mistakes have caused some instances in which [non-citizens were registered](#), these erroneous registrations [have been cancelled by the Secretary of State](#).

**Inactive voters:** In addition, county elections officials are required to report the number of "[inactive voters](#)" - people who have been removed from active status because election-related mail sent to them was undeliverable, usually as a result of changing addresses. Inactive voters [do not receive election-related mail](#), including voter information guides and official mail ballots, and are [subject to cancellation of their voter registration](#) if they do not confirm or update their registration and do not vote in two consecutive federal elections after they are made inactive.

---

<sup>7</sup> While designed to make it more convenient to vote, especially for people with disabilities and the elderly, ballot collection (also referred to by the politically-biased term "ballot harvesting") has raised concerns described in this [Politifact article](#). However, Heritage Foundation tracking study found discloses [no California incidents](#) of ballot collectors altering or destroying ballots before submitting them for processing.

Furthermore, the state's criminal laws protect the process through severe penalties for interference with ballot returns and coercion. Cal. Elec. Code § 3017(e)(3); Cal. Elec. Code § 18573.5.

<sup>8</sup> Cal. Elec. Code § 3017(e)(1).

<sup>9</sup> Cal. Elec. Code § 3011 (9)-(11).

**MYTH: Vote-by-mail favors one political party over another.**

**FACT: Vote-by-mail does not inherently advantage one party.**

[A recent study](#) published by Stanford University examined elections between 1996 and 2018 in Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Utah and California and found that vote-by-mail has “no impact” on the share of voter turnout for either Republicans or Democrats. Among California’s eligible voters, [majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and independents](#) all prefer to vote by mail. Republican and Democratic-led state governments nationwide [have expanded vote-by-mail](#) in response to the COVID-19 epidemic. [No evidence suggests](#) that shifting toward conducting elections primarily by mail would introduce bias in favor of one party over another in California.

## Appendix: Talking Points

### General: The Myth of Voter Fraud

Talking Points	Sources
<p>Among the biggest threats to our democracy are inaccuracies and fear-mongering related to the security of voting by mail. Specific statements by the President have been debunked by fact checkers. More broadly the idea that voter fraud is a problem has been contradicted by many reputable studies and in recent testimony by FBI Director Christopher Wray. The truth is that both mail and in-person fraud are exceedingly rare. While voter fraud is almost non-existent, the impediments erected to voting, in the name of combating fraud, are substantial. These include limitations to early voting, strict voter identification rules, and purging of voter registration roles. California has largely gone in the opposite direction, passing laws that expand access while simultaneously ensuring secure, safe elections.</p>	<p>See this video <a href="#">The Myth of Voter Fraud – And the Truth About What’s Threatening Our Elections</a> and these noteworthy articles: <a href="#">Trump’s barrage of new claims of voter fraud have been disproved</a> (New York Times 9/30/20); <a href="#">How Trump’s ‘Voter Fraud’ Lie Is Disenfranchising Americans</a> (Washington Post 10/5/20); <a href="#">Why Donald Trump’s Attacks on Voting Have Ramped Up</a> (Slate 10/6/20); and <a href="#">Voter fraud myth persists despite constant failure to prove claims</a> (Kansas Reflector 10/6/20).</p>

## California: Statistics on Use of Vote-by-Mail

Talking Points	Source
72% of all ballots were cast by mail for the CA presidential primary in March 2020, the highest share ever recorded.	<a href="#">Answering Questions About Vote-By-Mail In California Amid COVID-19, Attacks By Trump</a>
Nearly three-quarters of likely California voters support vote-by-mail in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak.	<a href="#">Do Californians support mail-in voting? Survey says: Yes</a>

## Public Health and VBM

Talking Points	Source
In Wisconsin, which held its primary election in April 2020, COVID-19 positive test rates in the weeks following the election were approximately twice as high (5.6% v. 2.6%) in counties that experienced congested polling places. Counties with relatively more vote-by-mail voters had lower rates of positive COVID-19 tests.	<a href="#">Protecting Public Health in the 2020 Elections</a>
Communities of color experience higher rates of COVID-19 and are also more likely to face longer lines and extended wait times on Election Day that could further spread the virus.	<a href="#">Toolkit: Protecting Public Health in the 2020 Elections</a>
Older adults, who are more likely to be recruited as poll workers during elections, experience higher rates of severe illness and death. COVID-19 clusters are disproportionately more likely in non-white, uninsured, and high-poverty parts of counties, but these populations are also more likely to need in-person voting.	<a href="#">COVID-19 &amp; the Election: In a Public Health Emergency, We Need to Be Guided by Experts</a>

## Voter Fraud Statistics

Talking Points	Source
There have been no reported incidents in California of ballot collectors altering or destroying collected ballots before submitting them to the state for processing.	<a href="#">What is ballot harvesting, and why is Trump tweeting about it during an election-year pandemic?</a>
A database managed by the Heritage Foundation lists only 1,285 cases out of hundreds of millions of votes cast. The number of cases related to absentee ballots is even less — 204 in the past 20 years, compared with a quarter-billion votes cast by mail	<a href="#">Let's put the vote-by-mail 'fraud' myth to rest</a>

during that time.	
In five all-mail elections in Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, the rate of potential improper voting (double voting, voting on behalf of deceased people) ranged from 0.0014 percent in Colorado in 2016 to 0.004 percent in Washington in 2018	<a href="#">Minuscule number of potentially fraudulent ballots in states with universal mail voting undercuts Trump claims about election risks</a>

### Mechanisms in CA to Prevent Voter Fraud

Talking Points	Source
The biggest protection in California is the signature comparison requirement. A voter must sign the outside of their ballot's envelope. That signature is then compared with the voter's signature on file from when they registered to vote. Election workers are trained by law enforcement agencies to detect when a signature on the ballot envelope does not compare with signatures in a voter's file. Discrepancies trigger a review that could end with a voter proving his or her identity — or being reported to law enforcement for possible ballot tampering.	<a href="#">Minuscule number of potentially fraudulent ballots in states with universal mail voting undercuts Trump claims about election risks</a>
All-mail states have implemented a range of other safeguards to ensure ballots are secure at all times, including dropboxes under 24-hour surveillance cameras, rules that two people be present with any ballot from the moment of receipt or collection, and detailed logs and reconciliation rules that require votes to be accounted for, down to the ballot.	<a href="#">Minuscule number of potentially fraudulent ballots in states with universal mail voting undercuts Trump claims about election risks</a>

### Voting Options

Talking Points	Source
When likely voters were asked whether they would turn out if voting by mail was their only option, nearly identical percentages of Democrats (2.8%) and Republicans (2.7%) responded that they wouldn't vote in this type of election.	<a href="#">Republicans and Democrats in California prefer a mail ballot, but safe, accessible options are important</a>
54% of whites and Asian Americans prefer to vote by mail in November, while 48% of African Americans and Latinos prefer to cast their ballots by mail. If any voting options are made completely unavailable to eligible voters, such changes could have a disparate impact across racial and ethnic groups.	<a href="#">Republicans and Democrats in California prefer a mail ballot, but safe, accessible options are important</a>

Greater proportions of voters with limited English proficiency and voters with disabilities prefer to vote in person, compared with eligible voters overall. 37% of respondents who reported that they spoke a language other than English at home indicated they preferred to vote in person. 63% of voters with disabilities indicated they would like to use an accessible voting machine if they voted at a polling place or vote center.

[Republicans and Democrats in California prefer a mail ballot, but safe, accessible options are important](#)