

# Examining San Mateo County’s Adoption of the California Voter's Choice Act: 2018 Election Cycle

## Executive Summary

The 2018 Election Cycle saw the first statewide elections held under the California Voter's Choice Act (VCA). Under the VCA, counties are directed to mail every registered voter a Vote-by-Mail (VBM) ballot (Los Angeles County will not automatically send all registered voters VBM ballots until 2024), which the voter can mail in, drop off at a secure Ballot Drop Box Location, or drop off at any newly established Vote Center in their county. At Vote Centers, which replace traditional neighborhood polling places, voters can cast their ballots in person, drop off their completed VBM ballots, access conditional voter registration (CVR), receive replacement ballots, and access additional resources, such as language assistance and accessible voting machines. The new voting model aims to make the voting process more convenient for voters while possibly reducing the cost of conducting elections and increasing voter turnout. Of the 14 California counties eligible to adopt the model in 2018, San Mateo County was among the five that chose to do so.

The report provides an analysis of the impact of the VCA on San Mateo County voters in the 2018 Primary and General Elections. The goal of this research is to generate insights to help San Mateo County election officials and community groups, as well as those in other California counties, understand the challenges and opportunities introduced by this new voting model, informing its effective implementation.

### Key Findings from San Mateo’s VCA Implementation in the 2018 Election Cycle

#### Voters widely used Vote-by-Mail ballots and relied on Vote Center services

- San Mateo County voters overwhelmingly cast their ballots using VBM ballots—93% in the Primary and 88% in the General.
- Voters used San Mateo County Vote Centers for services including voting in person, dropping off VBM ballots, receiving language assistance, replacing damaged or lost ballots or envelopes, and, if not yet registered, conditionally registering to vote and casting a ballot.
- Under the VCA, Vote Centers and ballot drop off locations are open up to ten days prior to Election Day. In San Mateo County, voter participation was low at Vote Centers and Ballot Drop Boxes during the initial days of early voting, but increased sharply two to three days prior to Election Day and on Election Day. Voters who cast ballots in person did so primarily on Election Day itself.

#### Vote Center use varied by group

- A greater share of Latino and youth voters used Vote Centers to vote in person or drop off their VBM ballots than did Asian Americans or those age 65 or older (see table).
- Conversely, while the majority of voters in each demographic group mailed in their VBM ballot, Latinos and youth mailed in their VBM ballots at lower rates.
- Voters who previously used polling places were more likely to vote in person or drop off their ballot at a Vote Center than voters who had previously voted by mail.

Patterns identified for the method of voting in the 2018 Primary and General Elections, including how early ballots are cast, could change in future elections as more voters become aware of and familiar with the new options available to them.

Percent of voters who used Vote Centers to vote in person or drop off ballots		
	Primary Election	General Election
All voters	21.2%	24.7%
Youth (ages 18-24)	27.5%	29.5%
Voters age 65+	15.0%	15.7%
Latino voters	29.8%	35.7%
Asian-American voters	17.7%	22.3%
Voters who previously used polling places	38.4%	47.4%

Data Source: San Mateo County Voter File, Political Data, Inc.

## Voter turnout increased, including among underrepresented groups

Deriving a causal connection between the VCA and voter turnout calls for caution, as we have only one election cycle to examine.

- Overall, San Mateo County voter turnout was historically high in the 2018 Primary and General Elections. Latinos, Asian Americans and youth (ages 18-24) saw significant increases in turnout over previous midterm elections, although these increases cannot be causally attributed to the VCA.
- The share of Asian-American and youth voters among all voters increased in 2018 over the 2010 Primary and General Elections. However, the share of Latinos among all voters slightly decreased in the same period. Underrepresentation remains a challenge: Latinos, Asian Americans and youth continued to experience much lower voter turnout than the general population in San Mateo County (as is also the case at the state and national levels).
- Voters who previously voted by mail had a much higher turnout rate than voters who previously used a polling place. New registrants also turned out at lower rates than the general registrant population. These data suggest that additional outreach is needed to help increase the turnout of previous polling place voters and potential voters under the new model.

## Mailed VBM ballots were more often rejected

Voters had multiple options for casting VBM ballots, including mailing them, dropping them off at a Ballot Drop Box or Vote Center. These voting methods corresponded to differences in likelihood of rejection.

- The majority of rejected VBM ballots were returned through the mail, while very small numbers of VBM ballots dropped off at a Ballot Drop Box Location or Vote Center were rejected.
- Late ballots continue to be the most common reason that VBM ballots are not counted in San Mateo County. The vast majority of rejected VBM ballots were rejected because they arrived more than 3 days after Election Day (the statutory limit when postmarked by Election Day). The next most common reasons for ballot rejection were lack of a signature and non-matching signatures.
- Disparate rates of VBM ballot rejection by demographic group (including age and race) continue under the VCA model. These disparities, along with lower turnout of new registrants and voters who previously used a polling place, demonstrate that challenges remain with regard to seeing a fully representative electorate in San Mateo County. Understanding how different voter groups cast their ballots and engage with the new voting model will inform efforts to increase their likelihood of voting in San Mateo County and other counties that adopt the VCA.

## Most Vote Center users had positive experiences

An exit survey of Vote Center visitors shed light on how voters experienced the new Vote Centers throughout San Mateo County. Note that the survey did not capture experiences of voters who did not access Vote Centers (including any who found them difficult to access).

- Vote Center users were very positive about the county's decision to use the new voting model.
- Overall satisfaction with Vote Centers was high. Most visitors reported liking the location, hours, availability of parking and staff assistance. Over 90% were satisfied with the process of casting their ballot.
- Over 81% of visitors traveled to a Vote Center by car and, for nearly 60% of visitors, their trip was less than 5 minutes.
- A majority of Vote Center users in the 2018 General Election were not aware of the new voting model. Greater percentages of Asian Americans (58.2%) and youth (64.5%) who used Vote Centers had not heard of the new model.
- Overall, the most common dislikes were the waiting time (17.8%) and lack of available parking (12.0%). Some voters were also dissatisfied with the voting process they experienced (8.4%). Election Day Vote Center visitors registered more concerns about these elements than pre-Election Day visitors.

## Conclusion

After only one election cycle, we have gained insights into how voters are initially experiencing Vote Centers throughout San Mateo County. Going forward, significant challenges remain for voter outreach efforts in San Mateo County. Voter education should account for groups' differing experiences under the VCA. Strategies to help voters take greater advantage of early voting opportunities, with particular attention and outreach to groups with lower turnout, are some of the future voter-centric adjustments that will aid San Mateo County in its ongoing VCA implementation. Continued efforts to understand how voters experience and engage with the VCA (and how voters' reactions may change over time) by the county elections office and community groups can guide their work toward the shared goal of a fully participating electorate.