

## The California Voter Experience Study: A Statewide Survey of Voter Perspectives on Vote-By-Mail and Vote Centers

Over the past fifteen years, Vote-By-Mail (VBM) has become an increasingly popular option for Californians. In 2016, nearly 58% of ballots cast in the general election were VBM ballots—up from 27% in 2002.<sup>1</sup> Encouraged by this rising usage, some counties are now planning to expand access to VBM balloting, and are making plans to switch to a new Vote Center Model. This new model provides for all registered voters in a participating county to be mailed a VBM ballot, while at the same time replacing neighborhood polling places with new Vote Centers.

To better understand how and why California voters choose to cast their ballots (by VBM or polling place), and how they perceive the possible introduction of a Vote Center Model, the UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP) conducted a multi-method research project entitled *The California Voter Experience Study*. The study includes a CCEP statewide survey of 1,100 California voters, including

an oversample of Latinos. Surveys were conducted in both English and Spanish. The sample error for the total survey is +/-2.9%.<sup>2</sup> In this third in a series of research briefs on the topic of voting methods in California, we present our findings from this survey. Specifically, we answer the following questions:

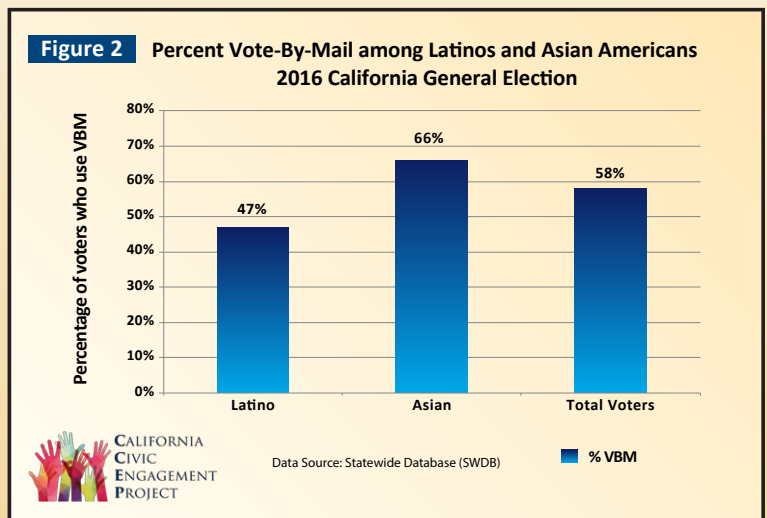
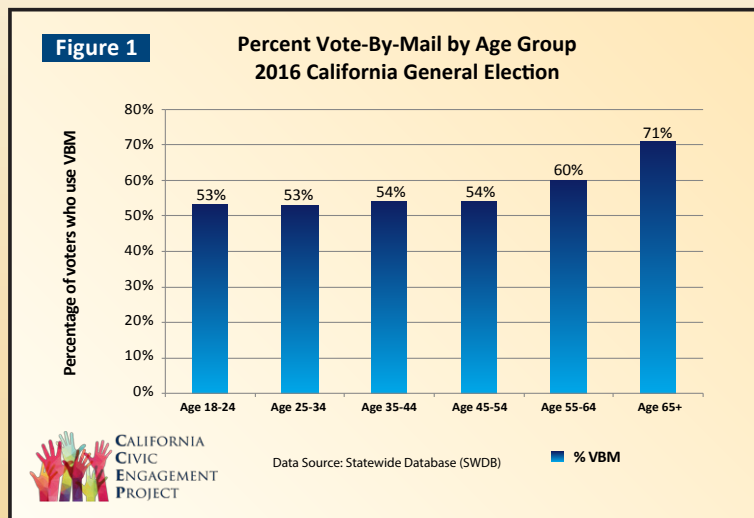
1. Who used Vote-By-Mail in the California 2016 general election?
2. Why do California voters choose to cast a Vote-by-Mail ballot?
3. How do different groups of voters react to the possible use of a Vote Center Model in California?

We conclude our analysis by providing recommendations that we believe can help California election officials successfully and equitably implement the Vote Center Model.

### 1. Who used Vote-by-Mail in the California 2016 general election?

According to the California Secretary of State's office, nearly 58% (8.5 million ballots) of the state's total ballots cast in the 2016 general election were VBM ballots.<sup>3</sup> Yet not all California sub-populations used VBM at the same rates. Previous CCEP research examining VBM use in California from 2002-2014 found that young voters age 18-34 used VBM at lower rates than older voters. Latino voters used VBM ballots less than the general population did, while Asian-American voters used them more (comparable statewide data for African-American voting records in California is currently not available).<sup>4</sup>

These disparities in VBM use persisted into the 2016 election. The following is a breakdown of the findings derived from voter data from California's Statewide Database.<sup>5</sup>



### Highlights

1. A majority of Californians (61%) do not like the idea of Vote Centers replacing neighborhood polling places. This includes a majority of both polling place and VBM voters.
2. A total of 66% of California voters are willing to travel only 15 minutes or less to get to a Vote Center, regardless of their mode of transportation.
3. Just over a quarter of voters who do not typically use the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) to mail a VBM ballot said they did not trust the USPS to get their ballot delivered safely, or in time to be counted.

- 53% of youth voters (age 18-24) cast their votes with a VBM ballot, up from about 40% in the 2012 general election.
- 60% of votes cast by those age 55-64 were by VBM ballot, while 71% of votes cast by those 65 and older were by VBM ballot.
- The percentage of Latino voters who cast their votes by VBM ballot was 47%, up from 37% in the 2012 general election.
- The percentage of Asian-American voters who cast their votes by VBM ballot was 66%, up from 58% in the 2012 general election.
- Every California region but one showed a 60% or higher VBM use in the 2016 general election. The Los Angeles metropolitan region proved to be the exception, with a VBM use rate of 47.9%. The VBM rate for Los Angeles County was even lower, at 36.5%. The low VBM use rate of Los Angeles County negatively impacted the state's overall VBM rate.

## 2. Why do California voters choose to cast a Vote-By-Mail ballot?

Findings from the CCEP California Voter Experience statewide survey tell us much about why people typically choose either a VBM ballot or a polling place to vote.

### A. VBM Voters

The following are the most common reasons California VBM voters said they chose VBM ballots:

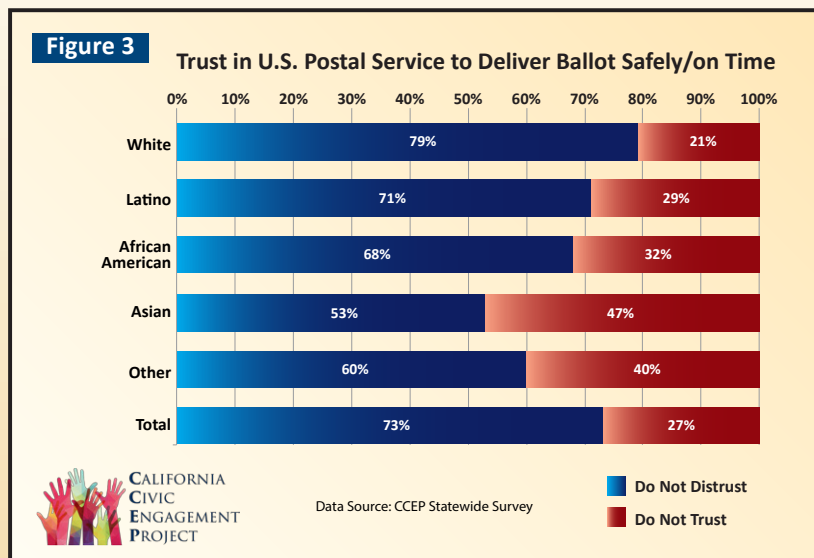
- 72% said it was more convenient than going to a neighborhood polling place on Election Day.
- 67% preferred to fill out their ballots in a place where they could look things up on the Internet.
- 60% did not want to wait in line at the neighborhood polling place.
- 52% preferred to fill out their ballots where they could discuss their choices with family or friends.

### B. Polling Place Voters

Across demographic groups, the most common reasons for voting in person at a polling place were:

- 97% said it was convenient to get to their polling place.
- 91% said that going to the polling place on Election Day was an important part of their voting experience.
- 64% wanted to get the sticker that says they voted.

## Trust in U.S. Postal Service Delivery



Providing VBM ballots to all registered voters is one of the important aspects of the Vote Center Model. Voters will either need to send in their VBM ballots by mail through the U.S. Postal Service, or return them at a drop box or a new Vote Center. It is the act of mailing VBM ballots that appears to be a concern for a noteworthy minority. The following is a breakdown of this analysis.

In the survey, which was completed just prior to the 2016 election, voters were asked how they most often vote. Of all California voters, 40% said they typically mail in a VBM ballot, 11% said that they complete a VBM ballot but drop it off, 43% said they vote at their assigned polling place, and 6% said they vote early (or had recently registered and had no voting history).

Almost three-fourths (73%) of those who do not typically mail a VBM ballot said their decision was not due to a lack of trust in the USPS, while the remaining 27% said they did feel a lack of trust in the USPS.

However, for the 11% of voters who complete VBM ballots, but prefer to drop them off in person, 37% of them said that they do not trust the USPS to get their ballot in safely or on time. And almost three-fourths of this group emphasized that they want to be certain their votes are counted. For voters who typically vote at a polling place, 21% said that they do not trust the USPS to get their ballot in safely or in time to be counted.

When we focus on the significant minority of voters who do not mail VBM ballots, and who said they lack trust in the USPS (27%), the numbers broken down by demographic group are even more striking. A larger proportion of voters of color than white voters expressed this distrust. Twenty-nine percent of Latinos, 32% of African Americans, and 47% of Asian Americans who do not typically use the USPS to mail a VBM ballot said that they did not trust the USPS to safely deliver their ballots, or to deliver them on time. Only 21% of white voters in the same voter type expressed this lack of trust.

When it comes to trusting the USPS with one’s ballot, age also seems to matter. Young people age 18-29 comprised the age group with the highest percentage of voters who expressed distrust of the postal service, with 36% reporting this lack of confidence.<sup>6</sup> Next in line, were voters age 65 and older, 29% of whom expressed distrust in USPS handling of their ballots. Finally, 21% of voters age 30-44 and 24% of those age 45-64 expressed distrust.

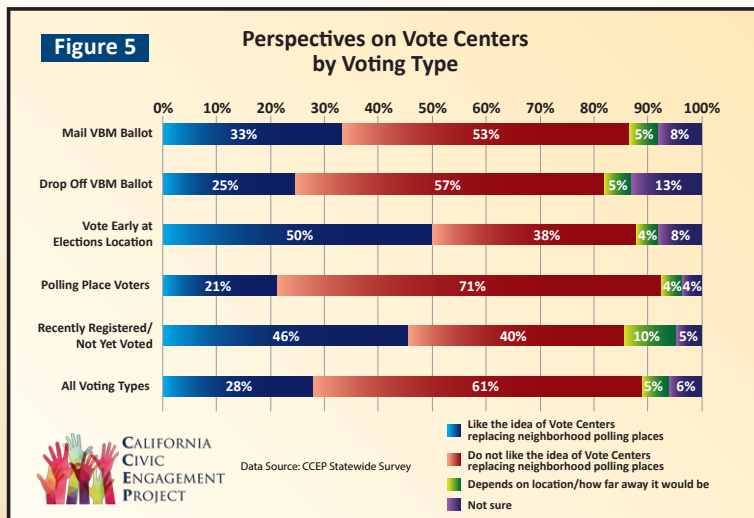
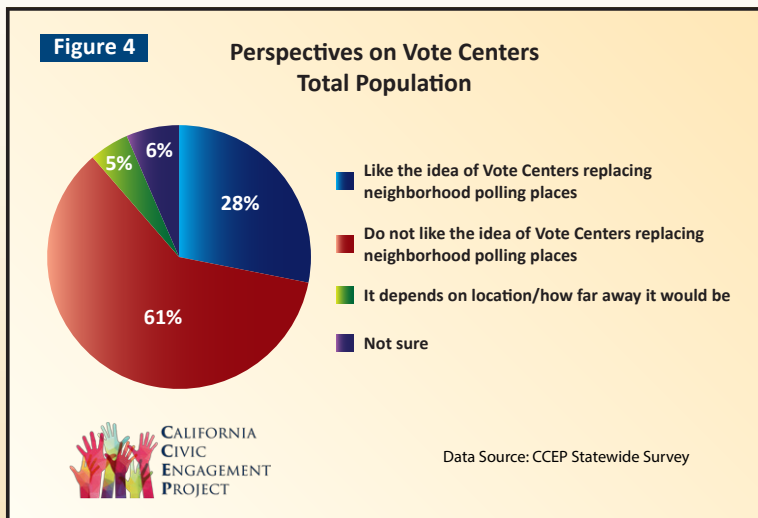
### 3. How do different groups of voters react to the possible use of a Vote Center Model in California?

In 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill 450 into law, which allows counties to choose to adopt a new voting system. Known as the Voter’s Choice Act, this new model enables counties to mail every registered voter a VBM ballot, which voters can either mail in, or return at a ballot drop box or a newly established Vote Center.

At Vote Centers, which replace traditional neighborhood polling places, voters can cast their ballots in person, drop off their voted VBM ballots, access same-day voter registration, receive replacement ballots, and access additional resources, such as language assistance and accessible voting machines. While Vote Centers will be far less numerous than polling places, unlike polling places, they will be open for up to ten days prior to Election Day and available for all voters to utilize county-wide. Of California’s 58 counties, 14 counties are eligible to opt in to this new voting model for the 2018 election, while the remaining counties are eligible to adopt the model in 2020. In 2020, Los Angeles County will be permitted to opt in to the model, but will not be required to mail all registered voters VBM ballots until 2024.<sup>7</sup>

As a part of our research on the voting behavior of California voters, we asked respondents for their perspectives on the implementation of Vote Centers in California. For this survey, we provided respondents with an overview of the main elements of the Voter Center Model (as described in SB 450), using neutral language in an effort to limit response bias.<sup>8</sup>

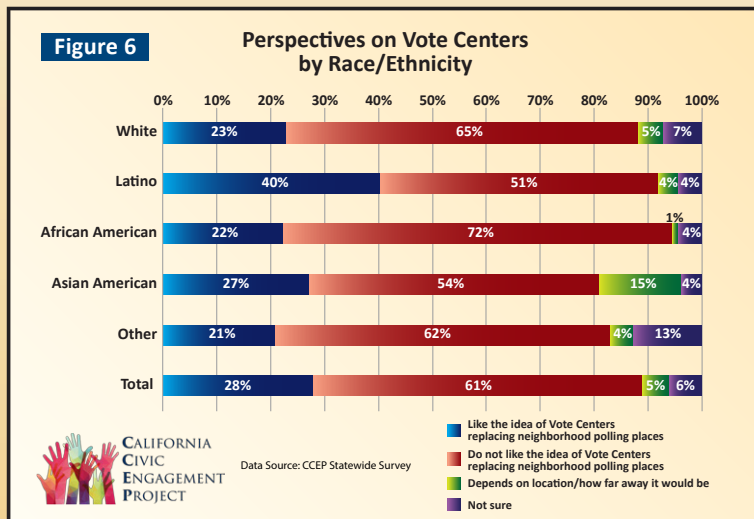
Our research found that a majority of Californians (61%) do not like the idea of Vote Centers replacing neighborhood polling places. However, significantly more polling place voters do not like the idea of Vote Centers than do VBM voters—71% versus 53%, respectively.

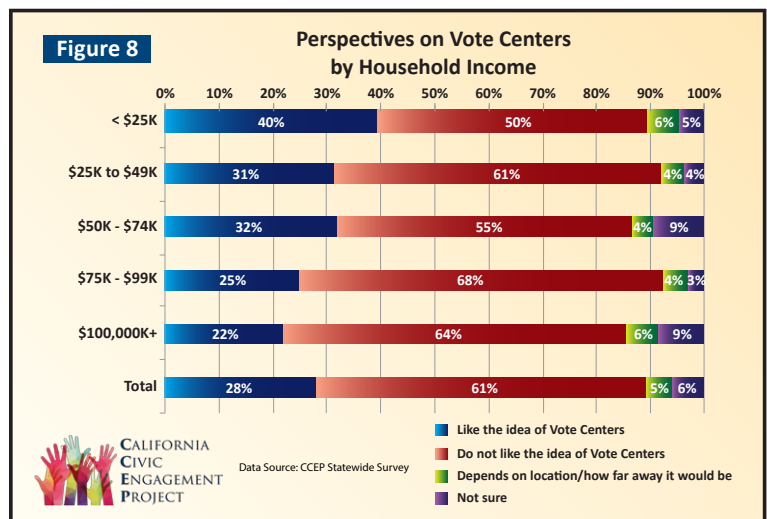
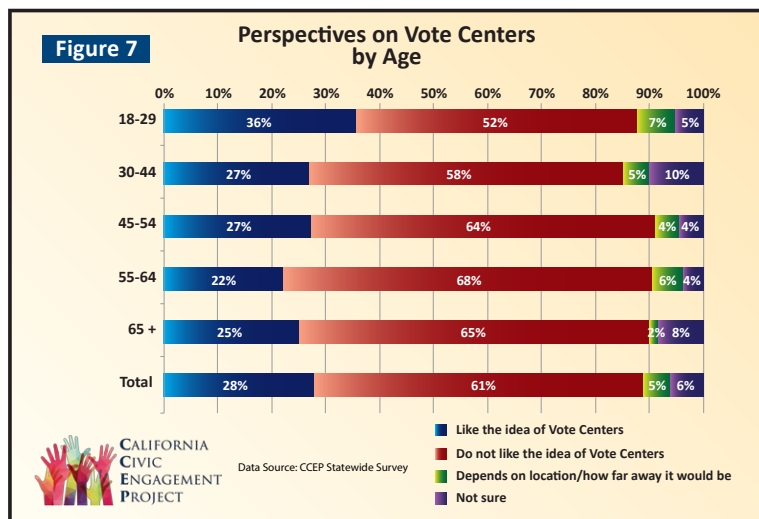


Californians also differ greatly by race/ethnicity in their receptiveness to Vote Centers:

- Only 23% of white voters liked the idea of Vote Centers—65% of whites did not like idea.
- 27% of Asian-American voters liked the idea of Vote Centers—54% did not like the idea.
- 40% of Latino voters liked the idea of Vote Centers—51% did not like the idea.
- Only 22% of African-American voters liked the idea of Vote Centers—72% did not like the idea.

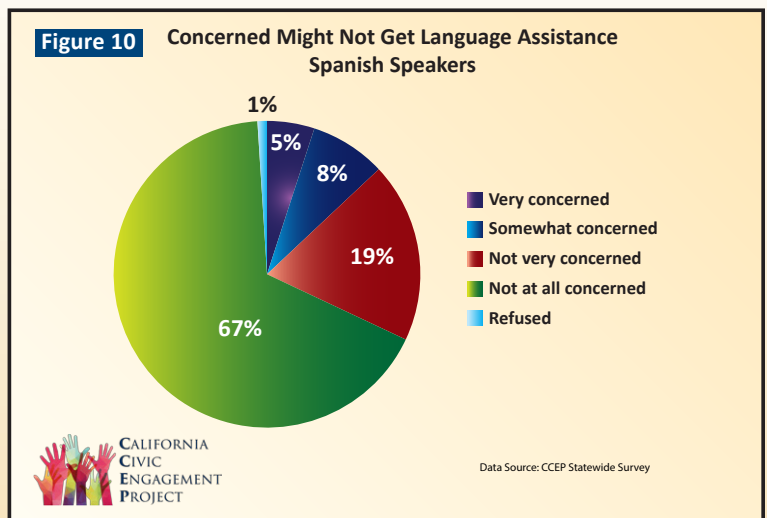
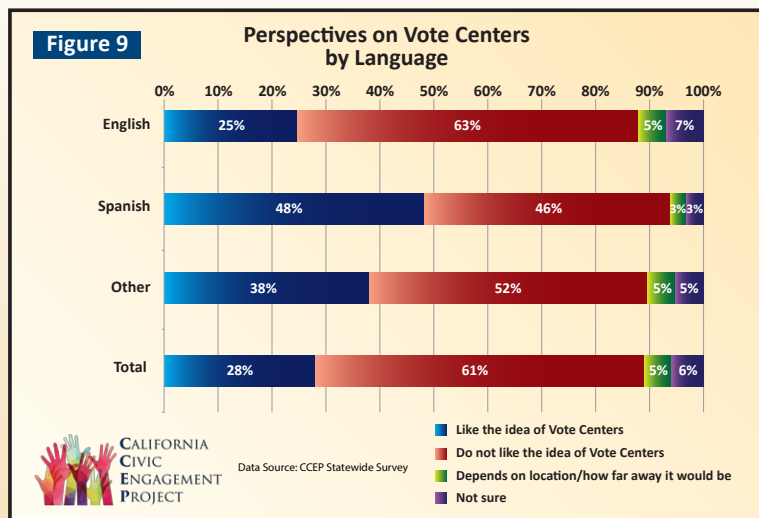
Groups of older voters were less receptive to the idea of a Vote Center—only 25% of voters age 65 and older were receptive to the idea, versus 36% of voters age 18-29. Upon examination of cross-tabulated data, it appears that the greater receptiveness of young voters to the Vote Center model may help explain the fact that a higher proportion of Latinos like the idea of Voter Centers compared to the other race/ethnic groups surveyed. In California, the Latino voter population is younger than both the African-American and Asian-American voter populations.<sup>9</sup>





We also found that a majority of voters with disabilities (64%), and a majority of voters, regardless of income group, did not like the idea of Vote Centers. However, the degree of receptiveness to Voter Centers increases as voters' household income decreases.

- 40% of voters who have a household income of less than \$25,000 liked the idea of Vote Centers - 50.1% did not like the idea.
- In contrast, only 22% of voters with a household income of \$100,000 or greater liked the idea of Vote Centers - 64% did not like the idea.



Californians also differed greatly in their receptiveness to Vote Centers based on the language they most often speak at home, and their concerns about language assistance. Slightly more Spanish-speaking voters were receptive to Vote Centers than English-speaking voters.

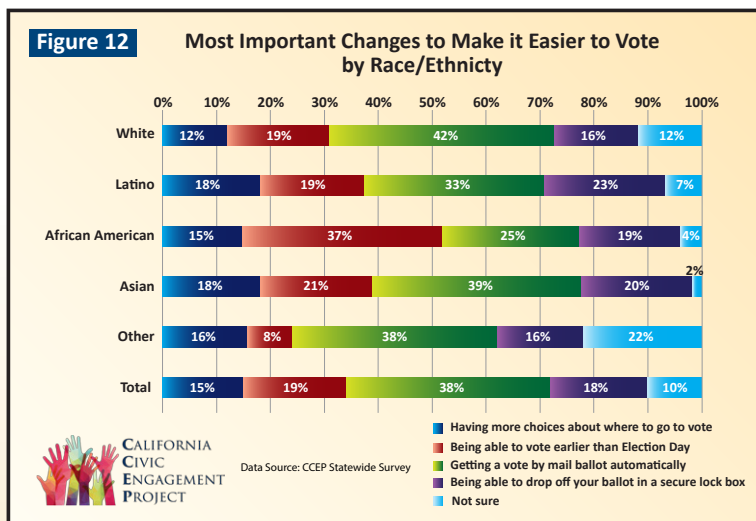
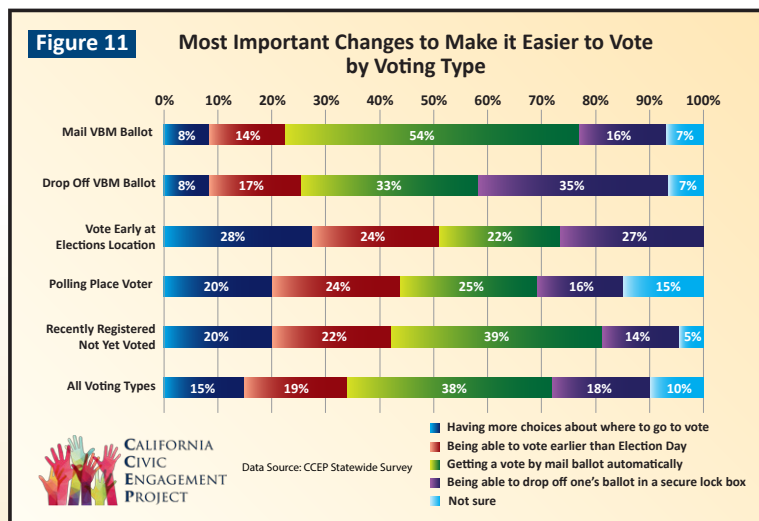
- 48% of Spanish-speaking voters liked the idea of Vote Centers, while 46% did not like the idea.
- 25% of English-speaking voters say they liked the idea of Voter Centers, while 63% did not like the idea.

Those who usually speak Spanish at home were asked how concerned they were that they might not be able to get assistance with voting in their native language when at a polling place. This is a small but important voter segment. A lack of language assistance could, in effect, disenfranchise those who belong to it. Thirteen percent of these voters said they were somewhat or very concerned that they might not get this assistance, while 86% were not at all concerned or not very concerned. Among voters who were either not at all concerned, or not very concerned that they might not be able to get language assistance at a polling place, 45% and 58%, respectively, liked the idea of Vote Centers. Of those who were either somewhat or very concerned that they might not be able to get assistance with voting in their native language, 52% and 69%, respectively, did not like the idea of Vote Centers. However, the respondents who said they were somewhat or very concerned about language assistance were too few for our analysis of their opinions on Voter Centers to be statistically reliable.

### A. Most Important Change Delivered by Voter Center Model

The Vote Center Model has many elements that are intended to make voting more accessible for Californians. The CCEP survey asked voters what they felt was the most important change that will be brought about by Vote Centers that will make it easier for them to vote. Answers varied, based on the type of voting practice used (VBM or polling place), as well as by race/ethnicity.

- The largest percentage of all voters (38%) said that getting a VBM ballot automatically was the most important change; only 15% said that having more choices on where to go to vote was the most important change.
- In contrast, a majority (54%) of VBM voters, but only a quarter of polling place voters, said that getting a VBM ballot delivered automatically was the most important element of Vote Centers.
- 42% of whites said that getting a VBM ballot delivered automatically was the most important element of Vote Centers; percentages were lower for voters of color—25%, 33% and 39% for African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans, respectively.
- Slightly larger percentages of voters of color versus white voters said that having more voting options was the most important element of Voter Centers.

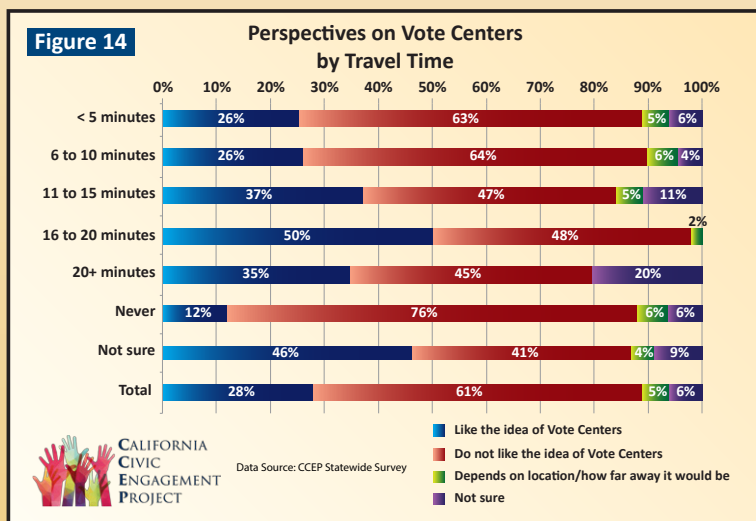
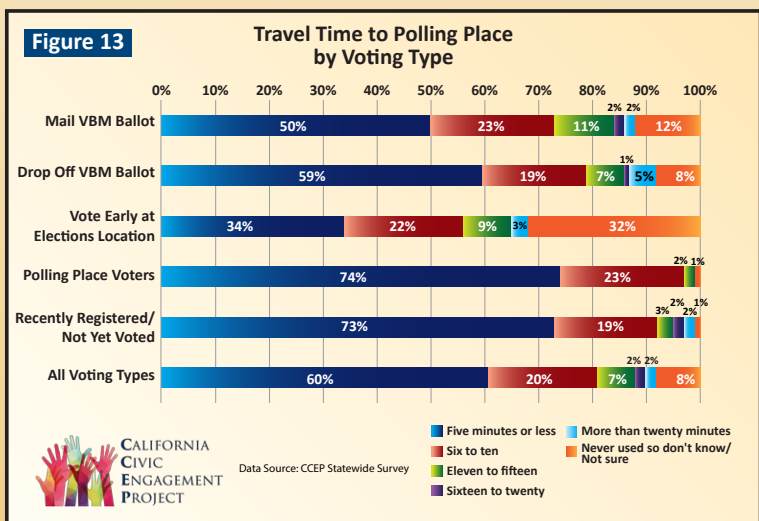


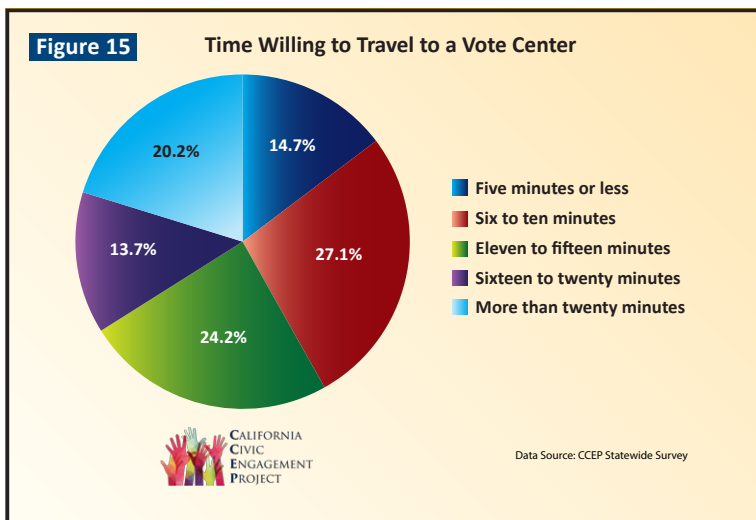
### B. Travel Time

Vote Centers will be less numerous than traditional polling places. This means that many voters may find themselves further away from a place to cast a ballot in person. We asked Californians about the travel time they are currently experiencing when casting a ballot and how they felt about Vote Centers.

- 80% of voters of all voting types typically travel 10 minutes or less to their polling place.
- 74% of polling place voters and 59% of voters who drop off their VBM ballot travel five minutes or less to their polling place.
- The majority of voters who travel 10 minutes or less to their polling place did not like the idea of Vote Centers

When presented with the possibility of using a Vote Center in their county, 66% of California voters were willing to travel only 15 minutes or less to get to a Vote Center, regardless of their mode of transportation. The proportions are much higher for African-American voters and older voters.



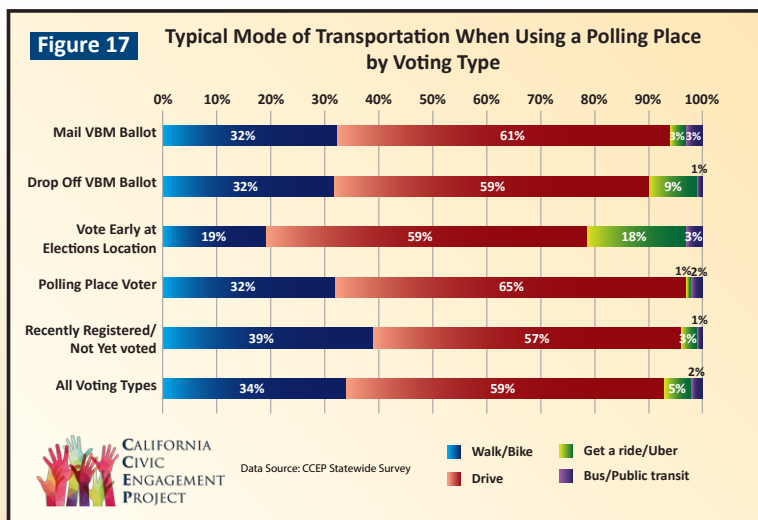
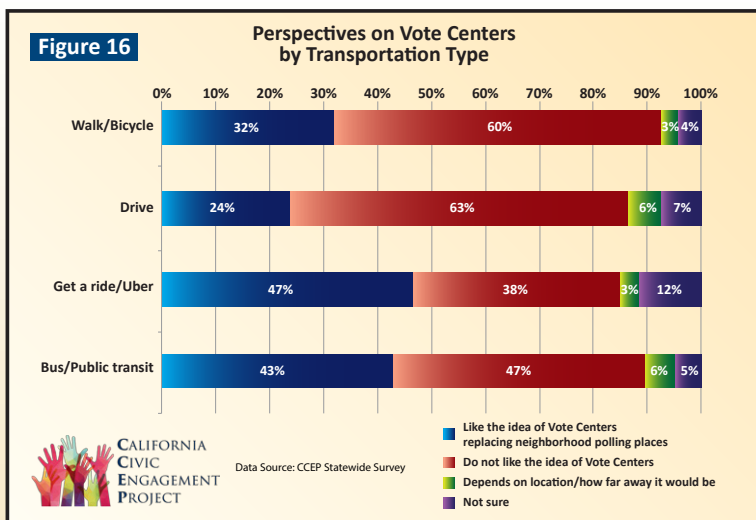


- 89% of African-American voters were not willing to travel more than 15 minutes to a Vote Center.
- 71% of voters age 65 and older were not willing to travel more than 15 minutes to a Vote Center.

**C. Mode of Transportation**

Because the introduction of Vote Centers will likely increase the distance that many voters have to travel in order to cast an in-person ballot, transportation access will be very important to California voters. We asked Californians about how they typically get to their assigned polling place on Election Day, and how they feel about Vote Centers.

- 34% of all voters (of all voting types) walk or bike to their polling place.
- The majority of voters who drive or walk/bike to their polling place (63% and 60% respectively) do not like the idea of Vote Centers.
- 65% of polling place voters and 59% of voters who drop off their VBM ballot typically drive to their polling place.



**Conclusions**

Our research has found that while some California voters are receptive to the adoption of Vote Centers in their counties, a majority do not like the idea of this electoral change. A majority of California voters also expressed an unwillingness to travel more than 15 minutes to use a Vote Center. A majority of voters who use VBM and a majority of voters who vote at polling places also share a lack of receptiveness to Vote Centers. This feeling is present across all race/ethnicity, age, and income groups of California voters.

Findings from the CCEP statewide survey are consistent with those from the CCEP focus groups, which were conducted with underrepresented groups, as part of the *California Voter Experience Study*. The focus groups provided for a lengthy discussion (typically 2 hours each, for 20 focus groups across the state) that explored voters’ experiences and opinions on this topic. A majority of the participants expressed concerns about the switch to the Vote Center Model in the state, including concerns about travel time and available transportation. In particular, many African-American voters in our focus group study questioned the reason for the change to Vote Centers, while some directly asked whether possible exclusionary or discriminatory motives were behind the reduction in polling places. Many Latino voters, voters with limited English proficiency, and some Asian-American voters also expressed concerns about the possible implementation of Vote Centers in California (see CCEP California Voter Experience Study Issue Brief 1 and 2 for detailed focus group findings).<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that voters whose counties adopt the new model might react differently when they actually interact with Vote Centers, and experience some of the many benefits they offer. However, initial perceptions of Vote Centers could have an impact on the willingness of voters to use the new model once available. These perceptions will need to be addressed and alleviated by election officials and local elected leaders should the Vote Center Model be adopted in a county. Voters’ initial lack of receptiveness may change if and when they are persuaded that the Voter Center Model offers advantages over the current voting system. CCEP research suggests that targeted and sustained education efforts will be critical to helping California voters know about, have confidence in, and successfully utilize the new election model. This is essential to minimizing the risk that voters could be discouraged from casting their ballots and ensuring that voters experience the new model positively.

## CCEP Vote Center Recommendations

As the Vote Center Model is implemented in California, 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 all voters, and to help voters overcome any concerns they may have regarding these new centers. Specifically, earning the trust of African-American voters will be essential in encouraging diverse and representative use of these new Vote Centers.

Based on our statewide survey findings, and those from the *California Voter Experience Study* focus groups, the CCEP presents the following recommendations:

1. County election officials should work closely with community advocates to develop and implement outreach plans, and to address concerns about voting expressed by all voter groups.
2. The State of California should provide appropriate funding for county election offices to effectively implement Vote Centers in counties that choose to enact this model, including funding state-level and county-level outreach programs to promote voter education about this model.
3. To avoid voter confusion, the adoption of the new Vote Center Model should be carried out in a uniform and consistent way across all counties that implement it, to the greatest extent possible.
4. In regions where the Vote Center Model is not adopted by every county, county election officials should engage in robust voter education to make clear to voters which counties are using the model, and which are not. This is especially important in areas where counties that use the model are located close to counties that do not use the model, since such proximity could confuse some voters.
5. From the planning stages onward, county election officials should engage in ongoing community dialogue with historically underrepresented groups to gather feedback on how the Vote Center Model is being experienced at the community level.
6. State and county outreach programs should be independently evaluated in order to measure their impact on voter awareness and turnout, especially for historically underrepresented groups.

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## Notes

1. See the California Secretary of State's 2016 general election voter participation report: <http://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2016-general/sov/03-voter-participation-stats-by-county.pdf>
2. The CCEP's California Voter Experience survey is a statewide survey of 1,100 California voters, with 38% of respondents interviewed on land lines and 62% interviewed on cell phones. The survey included an oversample of Latinos (417) and was conducted by bilingual interviewers in either English (932) or Spanish (168), according to respondent language preference. The sample error for the total survey sample is +/-2.9% and is +/-4.4 for the Latino subsample. Survey design was informed by findings from the 20 CCEP focus groups held on the same topic, and conducted with voters from historically underrepresented groups across California. Dr. Romero worked with Dr. Hugh M. Clark of CJI Research Corporation on the sample design, questionnaire drafting, and supervision of data collection. See the CCEP website for more information on the methodology, including the survey questionnaire, of *The California Voter Experience Study*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/59ae50828419c2d149a57209/1504596099823/CCEP+CVE+Methodology+%281%29.pdf>
3. See above, note 1.
4. 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>
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-Latino, 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, according to the Statewide Database, some counties have historically 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.htm>
6. The age bracket used to define youth in the analysis of voter records from the Statewide Database was age 18-24. However, due to sample size limitations, the measure of youth in the statewide survey was age 18-29.
7. For more information on California Senate Bill 450, see: [http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=2015201605B450](http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=2015201605B450)
8. See above, note 2.
9. For example, in the 2016 general election, 14.8% of Latino voters were age 18-24 compared with 7% of non-Latino voters.
10. 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> See the 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*, at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/57ffe6ff7e0abb9f7b5f3e6/1476388465082/UCDavisCCEPCVEBriefTwo.pdf>

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*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 in 2011. The CCEP conducts research to inform policy and on the ground efforts for a more engaged and representative democracy, improving the social and economic quality of life in communities. The CCEP engages in pioneering research to identify disparities in civic participation across place and population. Its research informs and empowers a wide range of policy and organizing efforts in California aimed at reducing 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 national and California media, visit our website at <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu>

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