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- **California**

- A History of Vote-By-Mail (Absentee) Ballot Use in California
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In 1920, California first allowed for vote-by-mail (absentee) voting although universal vote-by-mail voting didn't begin until 1978.<sup>1</sup> Prior to that, vote-by-mail ballots were available only to the ill and disabled, those who lived too far from the polls and other special circumstances. Following legislation that now allows any person to vote by mail, it has become a very popular means to cast a ballot.

In the early years of vote-by-mail adoption, several California counties held elections that were entirely conducted via vote-by-mail. Initially, vote-by-mail voting could not be used in statewide elections or to elect local officials and was generally used for special district measure elections.<sup>2</sup> The first county to conduct the first vote-by-mail election in California was Monterey in 1977 on a flood control measure—this also was the first vote-by-mail only election ever held in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In May 1981, San Diego used vote-by-mail for a proposal to build a \$224 million convention center; in November 1993, Alpine County conducted its first all-mail election for a countywide special election.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the early 1990s, California achieved some success when experimenting with a two-year, all vote-by-mail pilot in Stanislaus County.<sup>3</sup> Stanislaus saved almost half of its usual election expenditure when it used vote-by-mail and increased voter turnout.<sup>2</sup> In the County, turnout was generally six to eight percentage points below the state's average, but upon implementing the all-vote-by-mail pilot, it was 6.8 percent higher than the statewide average in 1993's statewide special election.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, a study conducted by Elizabeth Bergman of California State University found that when mandatory vote-by-mail only system is enforced, the odds of an individual voter California actually voting decreased by 13.2%.<sup>4</sup> Being forced to vote by mail has negative effects on the turnout of urban and minority (Hispanic and Asian) populations—decreases of 50%, 30.3% and 27.3% respectively.<sup>4</sup> Also, party loyalties show Democratic voter odds increase 5.99% over Republicans.<sup>4</sup> Although, these negative effects were able to be overcome when elections officials communicate with voters by sending out at least four pieces of communication.<sup>4</sup>

Legislative changes in 2002 further allowed any voter to request to be placed on a permanent vote-by-mail voter list. Voters on this list are automatically mailed a ballot 29 days before every election.<sup>5</sup> Since that change, the permanent vote by mail list has grown significantly; for example, San Luis Obispo County has grown from 2,500 to nearly 71,000 voters—comprising 46% of the registered voters in that county.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, vote-by-mail has continued to increase in adoption by voters in California. In the past decade, votes cast by mail in Primary elections have increased from 24% to 62% (see Appendix A).

1 <http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/clerk/elections/votebymail.htm>

2 <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/99/notes/v6n3.pdf>

3 [http://articles.latimes.com/1993-10-31/news/mn-51786\\_1\\_stanislaus-county](http://articles.latimes.com/1993-10-31/news/mn-51786_1_stanislaus-county)

4 [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewcenteronthestatesorg/Initiatives/MVW/Bergman\\_Yates.pdf](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewcenteronthestatesorg/Initiatives/MVW/Bergman_Yates.pdf)

5 <http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/clerk/elections/votebymail.htm>

6 <http://www.examiner.com/la-in-los-angeles/california-early-voting-facts>

## Appendix A

VOTE BY MAIL (ABSENTEE) BALLOT USE 1962-2009						
Year	Primary			General		
	Mail Ballots	Ballots Cast	%	Mail Ballots	Ballots Cast	%
1962	Not available			156,167	5,929,602	2.63%
1964	Not available			304,858	7,233,067	4.21%
1966	95,993	5,079,911	1.89%	218,242	6,505,067	3.35%
1968	Not available			334,365	7,363,711	4.54%
1970	100,455	5,011,908	2.00%	204,143	6,633,400	3.08%
1972	204,216	6,460,220	3.16%	405,688	8,595,950	4.72%
1974	159,831	5,128,375	3.12%	Not available		
1976	Not available	366,535	8,137,202	4.50%		
1978	325,518	6,843,001	4.76%	314,258	7,132,210	4.41%
1980	343,875	6,774,184	5.08%	549,007	8,775,459	6.26%
1982	326,213	5,856,026	5.57%	525,186	8,064,314	6.51%
1984	418,109	5,609,063	7.45%	913,574	9,796,375	9.33%
1986	426,133	4,937,936	8.63%	685,574	7,617,142	9.00%
1988	572,057	6,037,463	9.48%	1,434,853	10,194,539	14.07%
1990	808,838	5,386,537	15.02%	1,452,139	7,899,131	18.38%
1992	1,073,071	6,440,287	16.66%	1,950,179	11,374,184	17.15%
1993	Statewide Special Election			1,156,214	5,282,443	21.89%
1994	1,011,563	4,966,827	20.37%	2,009,643	8,900,636	22.58%
1996	1,415,176	6,081,777	23.27%	2,078,065	10,263,490	20.25%
1998	1,566,882	6,202,618	25.26%	2,131,484	8,621,121	24.72%
2000	1,842,891	7,883,385	23.38%	2,732,947	11,142,843	24.53%
2002	1,378,413	5,286,204	26.08%	2,096,094	7,738,821	27.09%
2003	Statewide Special Election			2,775,785	9,413,377	29.49%
2004	2,293,321	6,684,421	34.31%	4,105,179	12,589,683	32.61%
2005	Special Statewide Election			3,183,614	7,968,757	39.95%
2006	2,471,358	5,269,142	46.90%	3,696,940	8,899,059	41.54%
2008	3,777,094	9,068,415	41.65%	Early Presidential Primary Election		
2008	2,671,230	4,550,227	58.71%	5,722,465	13,743,177	41.64%
2009	3,029,736	4,871,945	62.19%	Statewide Special Election		

Data was not collected for elections which indicate "Not Available."