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**The Continuing Growth of Mail Ballot Voting
in California in 2008**

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The Field Poll

Abstract

This paper summarizes trends in mail ballot voting and permanent mail ballot registrants in California. It also examines the demographic characteristics of mail ballot voters and permanent mail ballot registrants in 2008.

KEYWORDS: voter turnout, early voting, voting by mail

The Continuing Growth of Mail Ballot Voting in California in 2008

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The Field Poll

The 2008 presidential election saw a record number of voters both in the U.S. and in California voting early or by mail prior to election day. According to estimates of United States Elections Project at George Mason University, nearly 40 million voters across the country voted early or by mail in the 2008 presidential election, accounting for about 30% of the total popular vote nationwide.¹

In California the secretary of state's official *Statement of Vote* pegs the number of Golden State voters who cast their votes using a mail ballot in 2008 at slightly more than 5.7 million, comprising 41.6% of the statewide vote.² This count, however, excludes an estimated quarter million other Californians who voted early at designated early voting stations in various counties, which are grouped together with the precinct vote in the state's official tallies.³

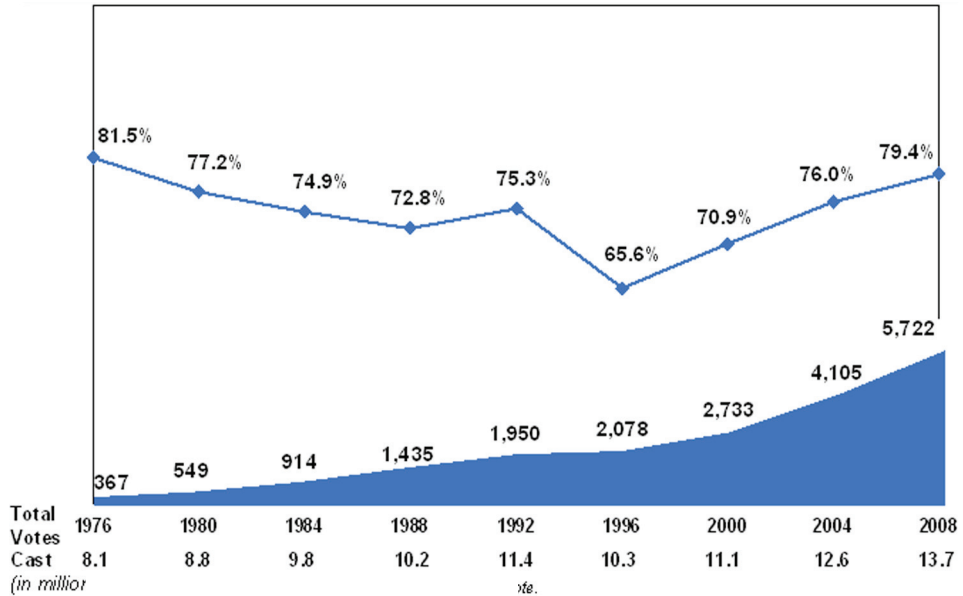
Growth of Mail Voting in California Has Accelerated

The growth of mail ballot voting in California is a long-term trend that began in 1979 when state election laws were changed to allow any voter the right to vote in this fashion. However, the number of Californians choosing to vote by mail has been increasing at an accelerated rate in recent years. For example, the state's official tally of 5.7 million mail ballot voters cast in 2008 exceeded by 1.6 million the state's previous record number of 4.1 million mail ballots cast in 2004, and is more than double the 2.7 million cast in the 2000 presidential election.

The recent rapid expansion in mail ballot voting coincides with the rebound in voter turnout in California's three most recent presidential elections, after an almost continuous 32-year decline. Table 1 shows the trend in voting participation in California presidential elections since 1976 and compares this to the number of mail ballot votes cast in these elections. Californians' accelerated use of mail ballot voting appears to have had a beneficial effect on voter turnout in recent elections. Evidence for this can be found in the higher turnout rates of mail ballot voters compared to other registered voters (see Table 2). According to estimates of the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials, the state's official count of

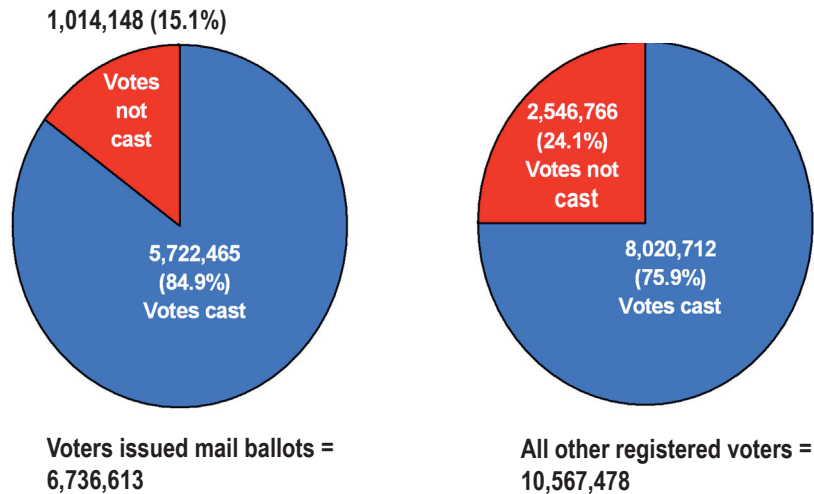
*Mark DiCamillo is Director of The Field Poll.

Table 1. Comparing Voter Turnout in California Presidential Elections to the Official Tallies of Mail Ballot Votes Cast, 1976–2008



Source: California Secretary of State, Statements of Vote.

Table 2. Comparing Voter Turnout among Californians Issued a Mail Ballot to All Other Registered Voters



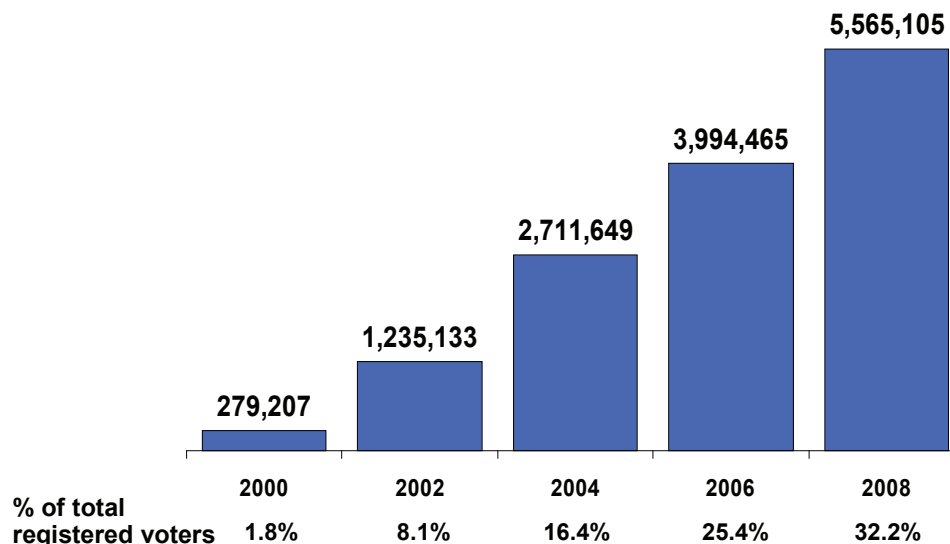
Source: Estimates of the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials.

5.7 million mail ballots cast represents a turnout rate of 84.9% of the estimated 6.7 million registered voters issued mail ballots in the 2008 election. This is nine percentage points higher than the 75.9% turnout of other registered voters not issued a mail ballot.

Permanent Mail Ballot Registration Rising Rapidly

Another change in state election law, which first became effective in the 2002 election cycle, offered all California voters the option to have their election ballots permanently sent to them by mail rather than having to request a mail ballot for each individual election. In the relatively short period since the introduction of permanent mail ballot registration in California, the number of registered voters who have signed up for this alternative has skyrocketed (see Table 3). In the first year of its introduction in 2002, slightly more than 1.2 million voters had signed up to become permanent mail ballot recipients. Since then the number of permanent mail ballot registrants has increased almost five-fold to 5,565,105 and now includes nearly a third (32.2%) of all registered voters. The explosive growth of permanent

Table 3. Growth in Permanent Mail Ballot Registration in Status of California Voters, 2000-2008



Source: California Secretary of State, California Assn. of Clerks and Election Officials.

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Table 4. Comparing Differences between Mail Ballot and Precinct Voters in the 2008 General Election with Differences between Permanent Mail Ballot Registrants and Other Registered Voters in California

	<u>% of 2008 voters</u>		<u>% of registered</u>	
	Mail ballot voters	Precinct voters	Permanent mail ballot voters	All other registered voters
Region				
Los Angeles County	14	32	10	32
San Francisco Bay Area	27	19	29	17
Central Valley	18	14	18	14
All other	41	35	43	37
Age				
18 – 29	14	19	13	19
30 – 49	33	38	29	39
50 – 64	19	20	29	27
65 or older	34	23	29	15
Gender				
Male	46	49	44	48
Female	54	51	56	52
Race/ethnicity				
White non-Hispanic	70	65	74	61
Latino	15	23	14	24
Black/Asian/other	15	12	12	15
Party registration				
Democrat	41	46	42	44
Republican	37	30	38	29
Non-partisan/other	22	24	20	27
Political ideology				
Conservative	33	30	32	29
Middle-of-the-road/other	42	37	44	47
Liberal	25	33	24	24

Sources: Regional voting percentages from the California Secretary of State’s Statement of Vote. All other estimates come from statewide surveys conducted by The Field Poll in 2008.

mail ballot recipients is a major factor behind the accelerated use of mail ballot voting in recent elections

Demographic Differences between Mail Ballot and Precinct Voters Mirror Those between Permanent Mail Ballot Registrants and Other Registrants

There were significant demographic differences between Californians who cast their ballots by mail in 2008 and those who voted at their local precincts. These differences generally mirror those observed between registered voters who are permanent mail ballot registrants and those who are not. Compared to other voters, both mail ballot voters and permanent mail ballot registrants in 2008 were more likely to reside in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area or the Central Valley (and much less likely to live in Los Angeles County), were older, and included more women and white non-Hispanics (see Table 4).

Conclusion

With each passing statewide election an ever-growing number of California voters are casting their ballots by mail rather than voting at precincts around the state. While the growth of mail ballot voting in California is a long-term trend, the number of mail ballot voters has been increasing at an accelerated rate in recent statewide elections. According to the state's official *Statement of Vote*, more than 5.7 million Californians voted by mail in the 2008 presidential election, exceeding by 1.6 million the state's previous record of 4.1 million mail ballot voters in the 2004 presidential election.

One of the key factors behind the recent surge in mail ballot voting was a change in state law that first became effective in the 2002 election allowing any voter the option to have their ballots permanently sent to them by mail about three weeks prior to the election. In the relatively short period since the introduction of permanent mail ballot registration, the number of Californians who receive their ballots in this manner has skyrocketed and now includes nearly a third of the state's total registered voter population.

There were significant demographic differences between voters who cast their ballots by mail in 2008 and those voting at the precincts. These differences largely mirror those observed between registered voters who are permanent mail ballot registrants and those who are not. Compared to other voters, both mail ballot voters and permanent mail ballot registrants in 2008 tended to be older, included more

white non-Hispanics and women, and were more likely to live in the San Francisco Bay Area or the Central Valley.

Sources

California Association of Clerks and Election Officials. 2008. “*Vote-by-Mail by County.*” *November 4, 2008 Presidential Election*, updated December 22, 2008.

California Secretary of State. “*Statement of Vote*” (for November presidential elections 1976–2008), <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections_elections.htm>.

The Field Poll. 2008. “*Demographic Characteristics of California Registered Voters and Likely Voters in the 2008 Election,*” unpublished estimates based on statewide Field Poll surveys conducted in 2008.

Notes

¹ United States Elections Project, “*(Nearly) Final 2008 Early Voting Statistics,*” George Mason University, <http://elections.gmu.edu/Early_Voting_2008_Final.html>, January 11, 2009.

² California Secretary of State, “*Statement of Vote*” (for November presidential elections 1976–2008), <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections_elections.htm>.

³ United States Elections Project, “*(Nearly) Final 2008 Early Voting Statistics.*”