



## Ensuring Every Vote Counts: California's Signature Curing Process

California State Senate Elections and Constitutional Amendments Committee Hearing  
Testimony of Kim Alexander, California Voter Foundation

March 18, 2025

Chair Cervantes and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on ballot curing.

My name is Kim Alexander and I am president of the California Voter Foundation, a nonprofit organization I re-founded in 1994.

Our nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization has worked for over thirty years to improve the voting process for voters, including addressing the problem of ballot rejection. This is an issue we have worked on since 2012, when we first began to notice large amounts of ballots piling up in election offices, unable to be counted for various reasons.

In short, improving the ballot curing process requires three things: state help to counties; state funding to counties, and consistency in services across counties. I will share specific recommendations later in my testimony, but first want to provide you with an overview of the problem of ballot rejection and then share suggestions to:

1. Reduce the need to cure ballots by reducing ballot rejection;
2. Ensure voters are treated equally when their ballots are challenged, and;
3. Improve the signature curing process.

### ***History of Reducing Ballot Rejection***

CVF published the [first comprehensive report on California's vote-by-mail process in 2014](#) which included an examination of the ballot rejection problem and recommendation for improving the vote-by-mail voting process. We found the top reasons for rejection then, as is the case today, are lateness, and ballot envelope signatures missing or not sufficiently comparing to the voter's signature on file.

In 2015, [the first curing law was enacted](#), AB 477/Mullin, which CVF helped draft based on recommendations from our 2014 report, allowing counties to collect voters' signatures on a separate piece of paper rather than the ballot envelope itself when they forget to sign.

In 2016, another curing law was enacted through the Voter's Choice Act, a new optional voting model counties could adopt where every voter is sent a vote-by-mail ballot. The law included [provisions CVF recommended](#) to require VCA counties to implement curing and give voters with

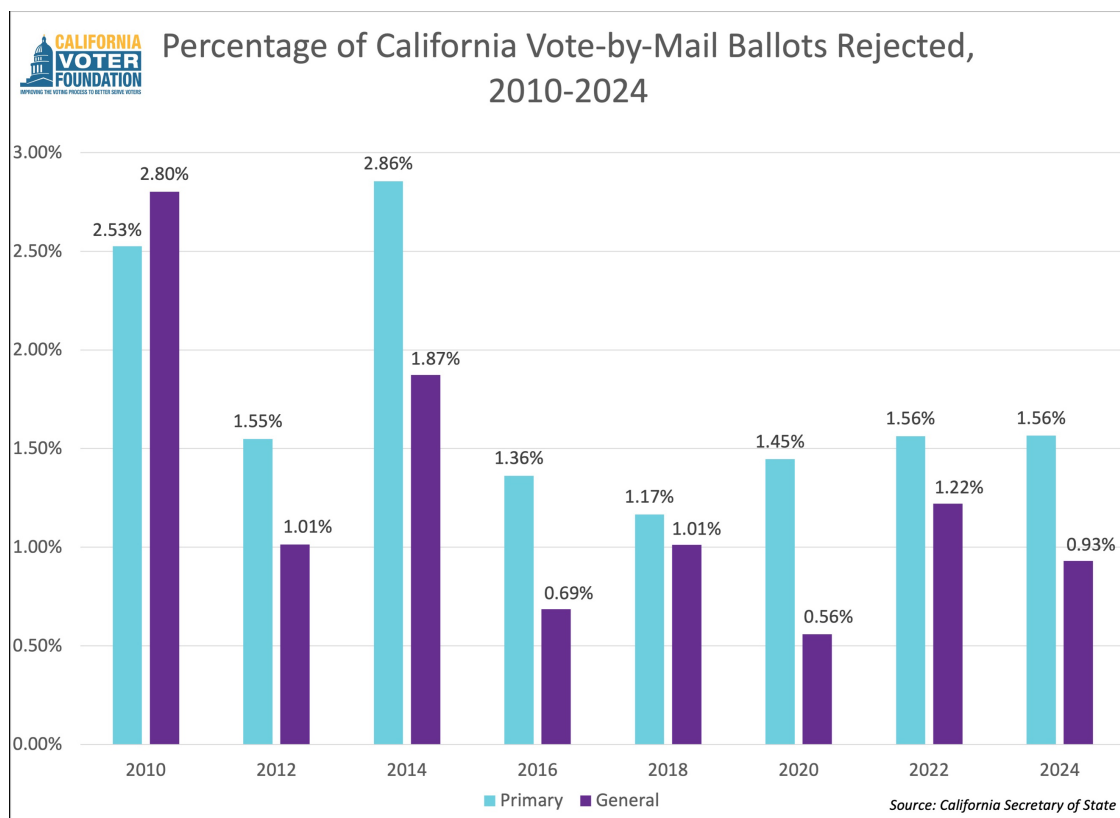
missing or mis-matched signatures an opportunity to provide a valid signature and have their ballots counted instead of rejected.

In 2018, [another new law CVF recommended and supported](#), AB 216, was enacted, requiring counties to provide voters with postage-paid mail ballot return envelopes.

We did not only work on the legislative front. In 2017, I submitted a [declaration in support](#) of the ACLU of Northern California’s successful lawsuit, [La Follette vs. Padilla](#), challenging the constitutionality of invalidating tens of thousands of voters’ ballots without warning. In March 2018, Superior Court Judge Richard B. Ulmer, Jr., ruled in favor of the ACLU and ordered counties to stop invalidating voters’ ballots without first notifying them and providing an opportunity to cure their ballot before results are certified. This ruling was codified later that year with the passage of [SB 759](#), [another bill CVF supported](#).

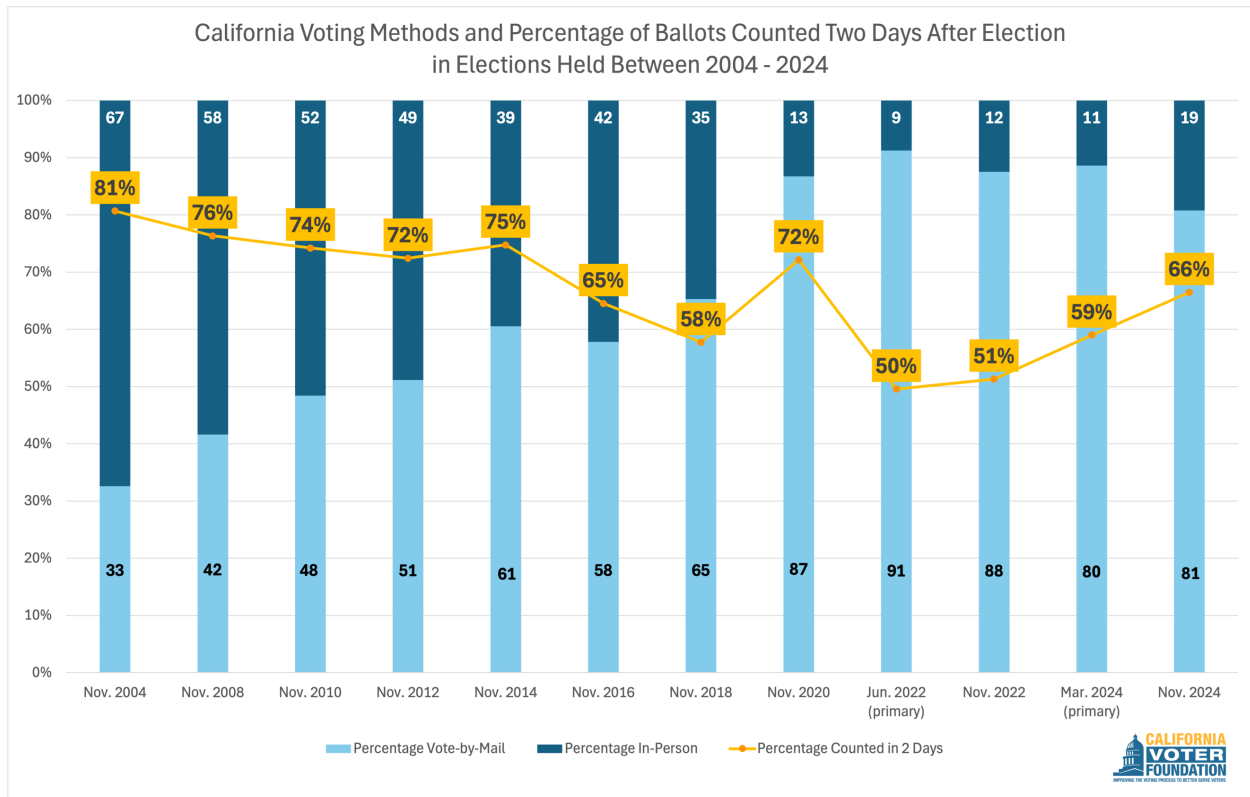
Other reforms to reduce ballot rejection took effect, requiring voters with missing signatures to also be notified and given a chance to cure. To reduce rejection due to lateness, a three-day grace period (now seven) was implemented, allowing ballots to be counted as long as they are postmarked by Election Day. Counties are also required to use Intelligent Mail barcodes to enable ballot tracking and verify the ballot return date when postmarks are missing. Ballot tracking and notifications via email and text became available to voters. Counties must return out of county ballots they receive to those voters’ home counties and they get counted. Design improvements were made to the ballot return envelope. Laws were updated to allow voters to submit a valid signature by text or email.

These reforms did help reduce the ballot rejection rate, as CVF’s chart shows.



The trends show that the rejection rate has dropped in the past decade, and is lower in general presidential elections than other elections, with the lowest yet recorded at 0.56% in the 2020 General Election. However, it is still too high, averaging 1.5 percent since 2010, largely due to the higher ratio of vote-by-mail ballots cast since California shifted to universal vote-by-mail in 2020.

The expanded use of vote-by-mail ballots in recent years has also tremendously slowed down the vote counting process. Last November, CVF undertook the [Close Count Transparency Project](#), tracking vote counts in 18 congressional and legislative races “too close to call” through the month-long ballot counting period. We have also collected and preserved snapshots of vote counts over the past two decades and were able to compare how long it is taking to count ballots in the Universal Vote-by-Mail era we are in today with past elections where a greater percentage of ballots were cast as in-person ballots:

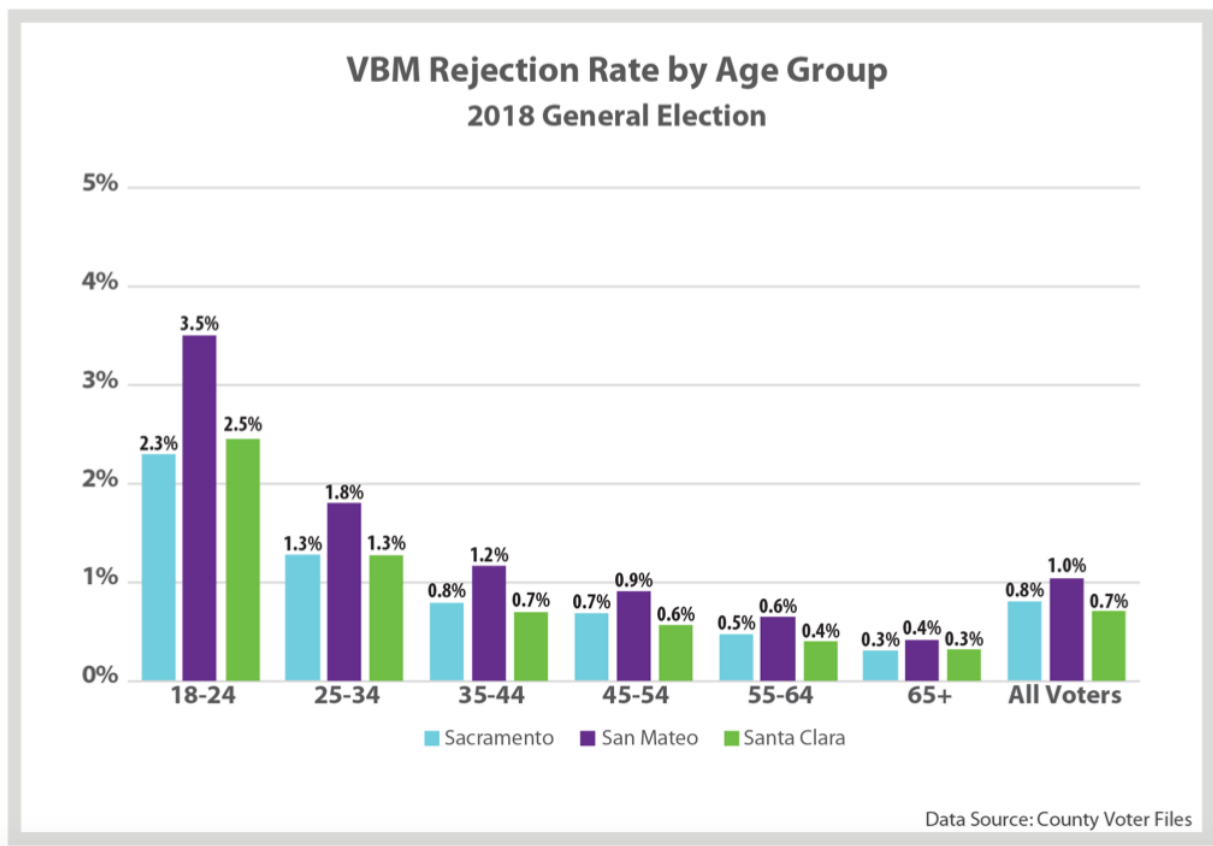


The 2020 General Election, in particular, occurring in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, saw the lowest rejection rate in the past 16 elections and also a faster ballot counting rate than in other recent elections.

This can be attributed to a few factors: first, there was a pandemic and people were limited in their activities; second, the state spent \$35 million educating the public how to cast a vote-by-mail ballot and urging voters to turn their ballots in early; and third, voters did turn their ballots in early, especially compared to subsequent elections where we have seen the ballot counting speed decline since then. The 2020 General Election, while an anomaly given the pandemic, does illustrate how public education and outreach can achieve desired results – faster returns with less errors.

Meanwhile, the ballot rejection rate still remains too high. California and the nation retired the pre-scored, punch card voting system after the 2000 election because [researchers at Caltech-MIT's Voting Technology Project](#) estimated that 1.5 percent of presidential votes cast were going uncounted due to defectiveness with the voting system itself. Yet on average, over the past sixteen California primary and general elections, 1.5 percent of all vote-by-mail ballots cast have been rejected. And when you consider the demographics of whose ballots are being rejected, it is cause for alarm.

In 2020, CVF in collaboration with the Center for Inclusive Democracy (CID), conducted a second study on vote-by-mail, focusing [specifically on ballot rejection](#). We found young voters and first-time voters in the three counties we studied were far more likely to have their ballots rejected than voters generally, a finding that holds true in statewide studies conducted by CID. The bottom line is young voters are less likely to opt to vote by mail, and more likely to make a mistake when they do vote by mail. And generally speaking, people don't like to keep doing things they feel they are not good at.



We also found that the curing rate was a little higher than 50 percent in the three counties we studied.

In 2021, CVF joined with the ACLU and other voter advocacy groups to develop regulations to govern the signature verification process and put safeguards in place to protect voters from disenfranchisement. [These regulations](#) clarify a number of procedures that counties must follow when handling vote-by-mail ballots, and took effect with the 2022 election.

Despite these safeguards and protections, ballot rejection persists. And nonmatching signatures continue to be a leading reason for it. Of the 122,000+ ballots rejected in the November 2024 election, about 71,000 – 58% - were for nonmatching signatures. Lateness was the second highest reason, with 33,000 ballots in that category, and in third place, 13,000+ ballot were sent in envelopes with no signature.

There is no cure for a late ballot, but ballots arriving in envelopes with missing or mismatched signatures can be “cured”.

There are a number of ways to further reduce ballot rejection and increase voter enfranchisement. Here are some suggestions:

**1) Reduce the need to cure ballots by:**

- ⇒ helping voters make fewer mistakes
- ⇒ increasing the percentage of ballots cast as in-person ballots that don't require signature verification
- ⇒ increasing access to early voting for all voters.

First, let's look at how to reduce mistakes. “How do I correct a mistake on my vote-by-mail ballot” is the top search term that brings people to both CVF's web site, [www.calvoter.org](http://www.calvoter.org), and KQED's web site, [www.kqed.org](http://www.kqed.org), during election times. Not knowing what to do about an error stalls out the voting process, contributing to late returns, and undermines voter confidence.

- ⇒ Consistent guidance for how to address or correct a mistake needs to be provided by the Secretary of State and included in election materials sent to voters by the state and each county.

Voters are not election administrators, and there are a lot of things voters can and do get wrong.

- ⇒ When voters make mistakes, we need to tell them, follow up, and make sure they don't keep doing it again.

Some voters receive cure letters, only to learn later that a senior election official approved their signature and their ballot was counted. To avoid unnecessarily alarming or worrying voters:

- ⇒ Supervisors should review a challenged signature before the voter is notified.

We can also reduce the need to cure ballots by increasing the use of voting methods that do not require signature verification in the first place.

A new optional election law, [AB 626](#), was enacted in 2023 and implemented by some counties, which allows voters to return their vote-by-mail ballot as an in-person ballot at a voting site, without placing it in an identification envelope; voters instead simply show up at a voting site, sign the roster under penalty of perjury and feed their ballot into a ballot scanner to have it counted immediately, or place it in a secure ballot box to be counted at the elections office. No signature verifying, envelope opening, or curing needed. Orange County was one of a handful of counties that implemented AB 626 in 2024, and nearly 20,000 of its 2024 General Election voters chose this voting method.

- ⇒ All voters should have the right to cast their vote-by-mail ballots as an in-person ballot;
- ⇒ The state should provide the training, resources and guidance counties need to implement this service consistently and securely; and
- ⇒ Data needs to be compiled on implementation of AB 626.

It would be helpful to know which counties implemented AB 626 in 2024, what procedures they developed and utilized, how many voters exercised this option, and what lessons were learned that could help other counties successfully implement this service too. The Secretary of State’s office could be a helpful partner in assessing and expanding the AB 626 voting method.

Another important change we can and should make is to:

- ⇒ Ensure all voters, and not just those living in Voter’s Choice Act counties, have the opportunity to vote early in person the weekend before Election Day.

A new legislative proposal sponsored by the Secretary of State, AB 1249, is being developed to require all counties to provide early voting opportunities the Saturday before Election Day, benefiting voters and election staff alike. CVF strongly supports this idea. Weekend access to election services will provide voters who have balloting problems or need assistance an opportunity to get help in advance of Election Day. And having an early voting date that is consistent across the state will enable advocacy groups to engage in more effective messaging to voters to encourage use of this service.

**2) Ensure voters are treated equally when their ballots are challenged.**

We see big variations in county rejection rates. Thanks to excellent ballot rejection data compiled by the Secretary of State, we know that the 58 counties’ November 2024 rejection rates ranged from a high of 2.54 percent in Imperial County to a low of 0.17 percent in Amador County.

Below are the counties with the ten highest rejection rates in the last election:

County	Percent Rejected	Number Rejected
Imperial	2.54%	924
San Benito	2.49%	615
Del Norte	2.41%	222
Trinity	1.91%	106
Modoc	1.75%	65
Colusa	1.72%	125
Tehama	1.72%	392
Yuba	1.66%	427
Yolo	1.58%	1,290
Lake	1.57%	376

And the ten counties with the lowest rejection rates:

County	Percent Rejected	Number Rejected
San Francisco	0.53%	1,878
Solano	0.48%	757
Lassen	0.46%	51
Santa Clara	0.45%	3,013
Alpine	0.40%	3
Mendocino	0.38%	143
Santa Cruz	0.38%	444
Sutter	0.31%	111
Inyo	0.18%	13
Amador	0.17%	34

We also see quite a lot of variation in ballot rejection rates for signatures not matching. San Francisco had one of the lowest rates of rejection for mismatched signatures – just 14 percent of its rejected ballots were rejected for this reason. In other counties, by comparison, signature rejection comprised 60, 70, even 80 percent of the ballots rejected. What accounts for these variations?

California developed robust, detailed regulations to protect voters from disenfranchisement due to non-comparing signatures. Here is what the regulations require:

*“A signature that the initial reviewer identifies as possessing multiple, significant, and obvious distinctive differing characteristics from the signature(s) in the voter’s registration record shall only be rejected if two different elections officials unanimously find beyond a reasonable doubt that the signature differs in multiple, significant, and obvious respects from all signatures in the voter’s registration record.”*

We need to make sure these regulations are being consistently followed in all 58 counties.

### **3) Improve the signature curing process**

Here are some recommendations to improve the signature curing process:

1. Ensure counties are fully complying with signature verification regulations;
2. Give counties the funding they need to facilitate signature curing;
3. Require signature curing technology to be tested and certified like other voting equipment and make sure it is deployed fairly by establishing uniform standards and regulations for its use;
4. Improve the ability of counties to verify signatures by giving them access to DMV signatures;
5. Shift from a bottom-up to top-down statewide voter registration database and enable counties to more easily access other counties’ correspondence with voters that can provide additional signatures to compare;
6. Develop new state regulations for turning in a ballot as an in-person voter and for texting or emailing in a signature to cure a ballot;
7. Require counties to have written procedures in place to govern the signature curing process;

8. Create a standardized statewide form for submitting a ballot cure signature;
9. Hold annual trainings as required by state regulations to ensure senior election staff are informed how to compare signatures and aware of state laws and requirements;
10. Add to the ballot return envelope guidance to voters to make your signature look like your driver's license or California ID signature if you have one;
11. Urge voters to turn in ballots earlier through voter education and outreach (if there is a problem, voters are more likely to address it before elections results are known); and
12. Require counties to reach out to voters for a new signature if their ballot is rejected.

### **Outcomes**

Over the past 16 years, more than 1.5 million California voters' ballots have been rejected. Every one of these ballots is precious. Each holds as many as 20-30 votes, possibly more. It represents someone's wishes. It is sacred.

If we implement these reforms, and fund elections sufficiently to give all counties the equipment, personnel and support they need to do their jobs as required by state law, we will enjoy the following outcomes:

- A better and more equitable voting experience for voters;
- Less ballot rejection;
- More enfranchisement of California voters;
- More success for young and first-time voters, giving them more incentive to keep voting;
- Less work for election officials;
- Faster election results; and
- Increased trust in the election process.

Thank you for taking into account the experiences the California Voter Foundation brings to this issue. We are committed to continue working with California lawmakers and election officials to ensure all California voters enjoy an equal opportunity to have their votes counted and their voices heard.