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CALIFORNIA STATE HEARING**

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California Election Participation



Testimony Submitted on Behalf of:

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Introduction

I am the Director of the California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP), a non-partisan research center at UC Davis that examines civic and political behavior in California and the U.S. In this written testimony, I address the questions submitted by the Little Hoover Commission. In doing so, I will share highlights from CCEP research on how California voters use Vote-by-Mail (VBM), and how they view the possible switch to a Vote Center Model by county election offices.

Overall, our findings show that it is important to consider how different populations in our state might react to this possible new election model. Our research suggests that while many voters may react positively, some groups in our state could possibly be confused or discouraged by the proposed election system changes.

In 2014, Colorado instituted election model reforms similar to those we are currently contemplating in California. The experience of Colorado voters suggests that consistency from election to election and from county to county is crucial for avoiding voter confusion and frustration. Thus, here in California, we believe that targeted and sustained education efforts will be essential to minimize disruptions to the voting process should SB 450 become law. These outreach efforts will also be critical to ensuring that all voters know about and have confidence in the new election model.

Please note that our center does not take positions in support of or in opposition to legislative bills or state laws. Our research is nonpartisan, and should be of interest to lawmakers across the political spectrum.

1. What concerns, if any, do California voters have regarding the vote-by-mail experience, and how do these concerns vary among population groups?

Vote-by-Mail (VBM) use in the Golden State has steadily risen over the past decade and a half, since the state allowed voters to sign up for permanent VBM status in 2002.¹ In 2012, for the first time in a statewide general election, a majority of votes were cast with VBM ballots.² During the 2014 election, 70 percent of the ballots cast in the primary and 61 percent of those cast in the general election were VBM ballots. Two years later, 58.9 percent of the total ballots

¹ California Assembly Bill 1520 (2001) gave Californians the ability to register as a permanent Vote-by-Mail voters. Registered voters with this status receive a VBM ballot in every election without needing an excuse or having to request such a ballot.

² Mindy Romero. (2014) Disparities in California's Vote-by-Mail Use Changing Demographic Composition: 2002-2012. Retrieved from: <http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep-issue-brief-one-disparities-in-californias-vote-by-mail-use-changing-demographic-composition-2002-2012>.

counted in the 2016 primary election were Vote-by-Mail.³ In the 2016 general election, 57.8 percent of the total ballots counted were Vote-by-Mail. This meant that nearly 8.5 million VBM ballots were cast in the 2016 general election; the highest number of VBM ballots cast in any California general election.⁴

However, not all populations in California use VBM at the same rate. Our research into voter behavior in the state suggests that different populations in California view and experience the VBM process differently. For example, Latino voters are less likely to use VBM ballots than general population voters. The difference is significant: in 2012, 37% of voting Latinos used VBM, compared to 51% of all Californians. We also found age disparities among VBM users. For instance, voters aged 18-34 had the lowest VBM rate, while voters over the age of 55 had the highest. Here, too, the differences are striking: in the 2012 general election, 40% of young voters (age 18-24) casting a ballot did so using a VBM ballot, while 67% of voters age 55 and older used VBM ballots.⁵ The 2014 and 2016 elections revealed similarly strong disparities in VBM use by age.

Our study also uncovered different reasons for VBM ballot use or non use among different groups of voters. Some Latino voters noted that work hours can make voting at the polls inconvenient. Other Latino voters reported being more likely to use VBM in order to consult with family members when making their voting decisions. Meanwhile, Latinos who prefer voting at the polls proved more likely than other groups to cite the social aspect of voting as a reason for voting in person.⁶

Other groups also shared valuable information about their voting experience. Young voters, for example, including those who use VBM, indicated a preference for going to the polls for their first voting experience. Many voters with disabilities stressed that they voted at the polls due to a strong desire to be seen representing the disabled community, noting that they highly value their right to cast a private ballot at a polling place.⁷ Finally, a significant number of the African-American voters we spoke with wondered whether they could trust that their votes would be counted if they were sent through the mail; almost all of them were concerned about whether the postal service could deliver their ballots to their correct locations on time.⁸

³ Mindy Romero. (2016). The California Voter Experience: Vote-By-Mail vs. the Polls. *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: The California Voter Experience Study, Issue 1*. Retrieved from: <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu/issue-briefs/>

⁴ See California Secretary of State's 2016 General Election Statement of the Vote <http://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/sov/2016-general/sov/2016-complete-sov.pdf>

⁵ Mindy Romero. (2014) Disparities in California's Vote-by-Mail Use Changing Demographic Composition: 2002-2012. Retrieved from: <http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep-issue-brief-one-disparities-in-californias-vote-by-mail-use-changing-demographic-composition-2002-2012>.

⁶ Mindy Romero. (2016). The California Voter Experience: Vote-By-Mail vs. the Polls. *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: The California Voter Experience Study, Issue 1*. Retrieved from: <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu/issue-briefs/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mindy Romero. (2016). 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. *CCEP Policy*

2. What concerns, if any, do California voters have about the vote center option, and how do these concerns vary among population groups?

The California State Legislature passed legislation (Senate Bill 450) that allows counties to adopt a new voting system if they choose to do so (14 counties are eligible to opt in the 2018 election, the rest may opt in starting in 2020). Subsequently signed by Governor Brown, SB 450 replaces traditional neighborhood polling places with Vote Centers (VC). At a VC, voters can cast their ballots in-person, drop off their ballots, access same-day voter registration, receive replacement ballots, and access additional services.⁹

In our research, we asked voters what they thought of the possible implementation of VCs in California. Overall, the most cited concerns were that VCs would have long lines and large crowds, generating an unpleasant DMV-like bureaucratic experience. Voters felt it could be hard for last-minute voters to find drop-off locations, and most said they were not willing to travel more than 5 to 15 minutes to a VC location.¹⁰

Geographic groups also voiced specific concerns. Voters in Los Angeles and the San Francisco-Bay Area were concerned about distance and travel time to VCs, and about whether VCs would be near public transportation. Many Central Valley and rural voters worried that a lack of transportation options could make VC access difficult, while others said they did not want to travel to VCs outside their own small towns or cities to cast ballots.¹¹

Young voters were especially concerned with the environment inside VCs. They said they want to experience a welcoming and professional atmosphere with clear signage and good language access, in an easy-to-navigate, safe, and aesthetically pleasing location. Seniors and voters with disabilities expressed concern over the training of VC staff, the need for improved and more accessible voting machines, and the disadvantages of needing to travel long distances to vote.¹²

Other groups were concerned about the motives behind the creation of VCs in California. Many Latinos with Limited English Proficiency expressed concern that VCs could cause members of their community to be disenfranchised.¹³ At the same time, many African Americans were

Brief Special Series: The California Voter Experience Study, Issue 2. Retrieved from: <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu/issue-briefs/>

⁹ For more information on California Senate Bill 450, see:

http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450

¹⁰ Mindy Romero. (2016). The California Voter Experience: Vote-By-Mail vs. the Polls. *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: The California Voter Experience Study, Issue 1.* Retrieved from: <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu/issue-briefs/>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

concerned that VCs could be a means of voter suppression, and could reduce voting accessibility for the African-American community.¹⁴

3. Have implementation efforts in other states demonstrated any potential unintended consequences for which California’s election officials should plan?

California’s new Vote Center Model was largely modeled after Colorado’s Voter Center Model, implemented statewide in 2014.¹⁵ Many supporters of VCs report that the state’s eligible turnout rate showed a 3% increase in turnout over its previous midterm election, up to 54.7 percent in 2014. However, many factors could have affected the turnout rate in that election, including the state’s high-profile senate race. Furthermore, the increase in voter turnout in 2014 marks a continuation of a two-decade upward trend in the state’s turnout. Indeed, Colorado’s midterm election turnout has been steadily on the rise since 1994 (U.S. Elections Project).

In Colorado, 93% of all votes cast in the 2014 general election were via VBM ballots (two-thirds of VBM ballots were dropped off in person), while only 7% of ballots were cast in person on or before Election Day at a Vote Center (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2016). However, not all population groups in Colorado used VBM ballots at the same rates. According to research conducted by Dr. Robert Stein for the Pew Charitable Trusts, over 90% of white voters turned in VBM ballots. Meanwhile, non-white voters had a somewhat higher propensity than white voters to vote in person at a vote center. However it is still too early to conclusively know the impact of these reforms, since there has only been a limited number of statewide elections since they were implemented.¹⁶

4. As California counties begin to implement new voting procedures, are there any relevant lessons from other states’ experiences that could assist in mitigating voter concerns?

The Pew survey of registered Colorado voters found that in 2014, 95% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their voting experience following the implementation of the Vote Center Model. One reason for the success of this new voting model in Colorado could be the phased approach to implementation that was used: 85% of Colorado voters used VBM ballots in 2012, so the new model aligned with an already existing trend in voter behavior. Further, it

¹⁴ Mindy Romero. (2016). 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. *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: The California Voter Experience Study, Issue 2*. Retrieved from: <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu/issue-briefs/>

¹⁵ For details of this Colorado election reform, see: https://www.electioncenter.org/events/2014/DenverWorkshop/Colorado_2013_Election_Reform.pdf

¹⁶ Mindy Romero. (2016). The California Voter Experience: Vote-By-Mail vs. the Polls. *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: The California Voter Experience Study, Issue 1*. Retrieved from: <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu/issue-briefs/>

should be noted that 78% of Colorado voters said they traveled less than 10 minutes to get to a Vote Center or drop box location.¹⁷

Colorado election officials and voting educators who were interviewed about their 2014 experience with the Vote Center Model shared one especially valuable lesson: having consistency from election to election and from county to county is important for avoiding voter confusion and frustration (California Common Cause, 2016).¹⁸ For counties that might adopt California's proposed Vote Center Model, one potential benefit will be that their voters would have the option to vote where they work, live or socialize. In some areas of the state (i.e. the Bay Area), residents often engage in all these activities across county lines. If voters hear different messages on how to vote in counties with different voting systems, voter confusion and error could increase.¹⁹

5. What key elements, such as outreach and education are required for successful rollout?

Our research indicates that successful Vote Center implementation will depend on five main factors. First, the State of California should provide the appropriate funding needed for county election offices to be able to implement this new voting model. Second, adequate funding must be provided to support state and county outreach programs. Third, these programs should address the concerns of underrepresented groups, facilitating ongoing community dialogue between county election officials and underrepresented groups, to obtain feedback on how VCM is being experienced in underrepresented communities. Fourth, these programs should be evaluated to measure their impact on voter turnout and awareness, and on underrepresented populations. Fifth and finally, the adoption of the new VCM should be as uniform as possible across the state's counties.²⁰

6. Provide an update on the status and focus of the UCOP-sponsored research project to study California's electorate and monitor the participation gap.

California's population continues to become more diverse, with racial and ethnic minority groups now becoming the majority population in California. However, these groups still only make up a minority of the state's actual, voting electorate. In an era of rapid change, it is important to ensure that all Californians have equal access to the electoral process, and that voting reforms and other electoral innovations continue to guarantee and promote this access.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See the 2016 California Common Cause report, *Full Service Voting: Optimizing the Voter Experience*. <http://www.commoncause.org/states/california/research-and-reports/optimizing-the-voter-experience.pdf>

¹⁹ Mindy Romero. (2016). The California Voter Experience: Vote-By-Mail vs. the Polls. *CCEP Policy Brief Special Series: The California Voter Experience Study, Issue 1*. Retrieved from: <http://ccep.ucdavis.edu/issue-briefs/>

²⁰ Ibid.

For this, serious research into changing voter patterns and behaviors is crucial.

To this end, in my capacity as Director of the CCEP at UC Davis, I am helping to lead a new and valuable research project sponsored by the Office of the President of the University of California that aims to provide clear, objective answers to questions about our state's evolving electoral landscape. Called *The New Electoral Study*, the project will explore the steps needed for California's new election reforms to narrow the wide electoral participation gap present by race/ethnicity, immigrant status, and income in the state.

This multi-campus collaboration will harness the University of California's expertise in studying turnout patterns in voter databases, understanding the obstacles to participation among racial and ethnic minorities and immigrant groups, and designing randomized turnout experiments to test different strategies aimed at mobilizing underrepresented groups. The project will train undergraduate and graduate research assistants at multiple campuses. It will also contribute to the academic study of mobilization mechanisms, offering valuable lessons to other states that are closely watching the California experiment. Finally, participants will use the unique opportunity provided by the UC Center Sacramento to collaborate with the Secretary of State and other policymakers to design and adopt broadly effective methods of mobilizing members of California's changing electorate.

The project is formerly being launched this month with a day-long convening of the UC research team in Sacramento. As part of the research team, I will spend the afternoon meeting with legislators, key staff, and members of the Secretary of State's office. Our goal is to learn about the questions they would like to see answered over the next 2-3 years. Following this meeting, we will assemble research teams to work individually or jointly on the first set of projects covered in the *New Electorate Study*.