■ Executive Summary

California's elections are free, fair, and secure. As technology and knowledge evolve, however, the state can take steps to improve its election infrastructure. California should adopt an open source elections system, require the use of "risk-limiting audits" as soon as funding allows, improve the training of election officials, and delineate standards for compliance audits.

The Commission held a hearing on this topic in 2018 and in 2019 released a letter to the Governor and legislative leadership to consider important questions related to election security, such as the need for funding to improve equipment.

This report builds on the Commission's past work and adds specific policy recommendations. The Commission outlines potential improvements in four broad areas of election security:

Open Source Elections System

The state currently relies on for-profit producers of election equipment. An open source system would be more transparent, save money, increase versatility for counties, and align with a state goal to use open source software across government.

Such a system must be accompanied by policies to ensure its proper use, and its adoption must not be rushed.

The Commission recommends that the state invest in a publicly owned, open source elections system.

Risk-Limiting Audits

The state's current requirement for a manual tally of 1 percent of precincts as a way to check results is outdated. It does not require all types of ballots to be audited; it does not require scrutiny of close races; and it does not ensure that an incorrect result will be corrected.

There is an alternative: a "risk-limiting audit." Such an audit reviews randomly selected ballots until the risk limit – a pre-determined chance that a wrong outcome will not be discovered – is reached. These audits have a high chance of correcting a previous count that is wrong.

However, risk-limiting audits might increase costs for counties.

The Commission recommends that the state require risk-limiting audits as soon as needed funding is available.

Training

Most chief election officials have many duties, and thus have vastly different levels of expertise in elections administration. Additionally, elections rely on thousands of relatively inexperienced poll workers. Often it is difficult for county election officials to find enough poll workers.

The Commission recommends that the state create a training program for county elections officers and for lower-level elections workers. The state should also create incentives for people to become poll workers. The Secretary of State should provide staff to jurisdictions that lack enough trained poll workers.

Compliance Audits

California's elections code outlines security procedures, but lacks any system to ensure compliance.

The Commission recommends that the state create a framework for mandatory compliance audits.