



California's Vote by Mail Process

Presidential Commission on Election Administration
Listening Session, James Irvine Foundation, San Francisco, CA
August 6, 2013

Presentation by Kim Alexander, President & Founder
California Voter Foundation

About the California Voter Foundation

Mission: Nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working through research, oversight, outreach and demonstration projects to improve the voting process so that it better serves the needs of voters.



CA Vote-by-Mail Usage:

Usage has grown dramatically in recent years due to changes in CA law (2002) that allow no-excuse and permanent vote-by-mail (VBM) voting:

General Election	# of Voters (millions)	# of VBM Voters	Percent of Voters
2012	13.2	6.8	51
2008	13.7	5.7	42
2004	12.6	4.1	33
2000	11.1	2.7	25

Rise of Permanent VBM Voters:

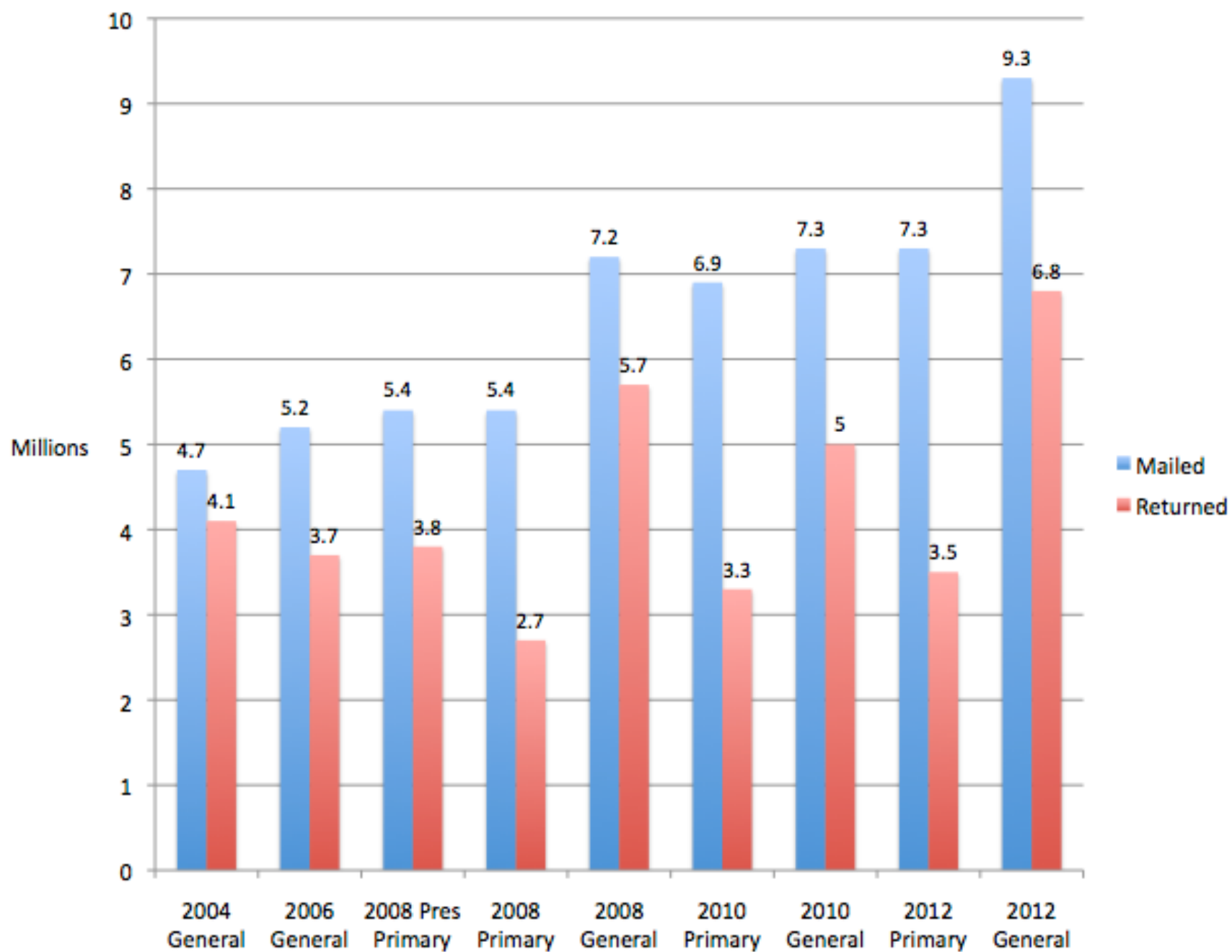
The number of Californians registered as permanent vote-by-mail voters has grown dramatically in recent years:

General Election	# of Permanent VBM voters	% of Registered Voters
2012	7,900,000	43
2008	5,600,000	32
2004	2,700,000	16
2000	281,000	2.7

The Rise of Unsuccessful VBM Ballots

- With expansion of access to vote-by-mail voters has come increased problems.
- Ballots fail to connect with voters for a number of reasons – many have moved, others aren't proactively asking for it so they're not awaiting/looking out for its delivery.

Vote-by-mail ballots

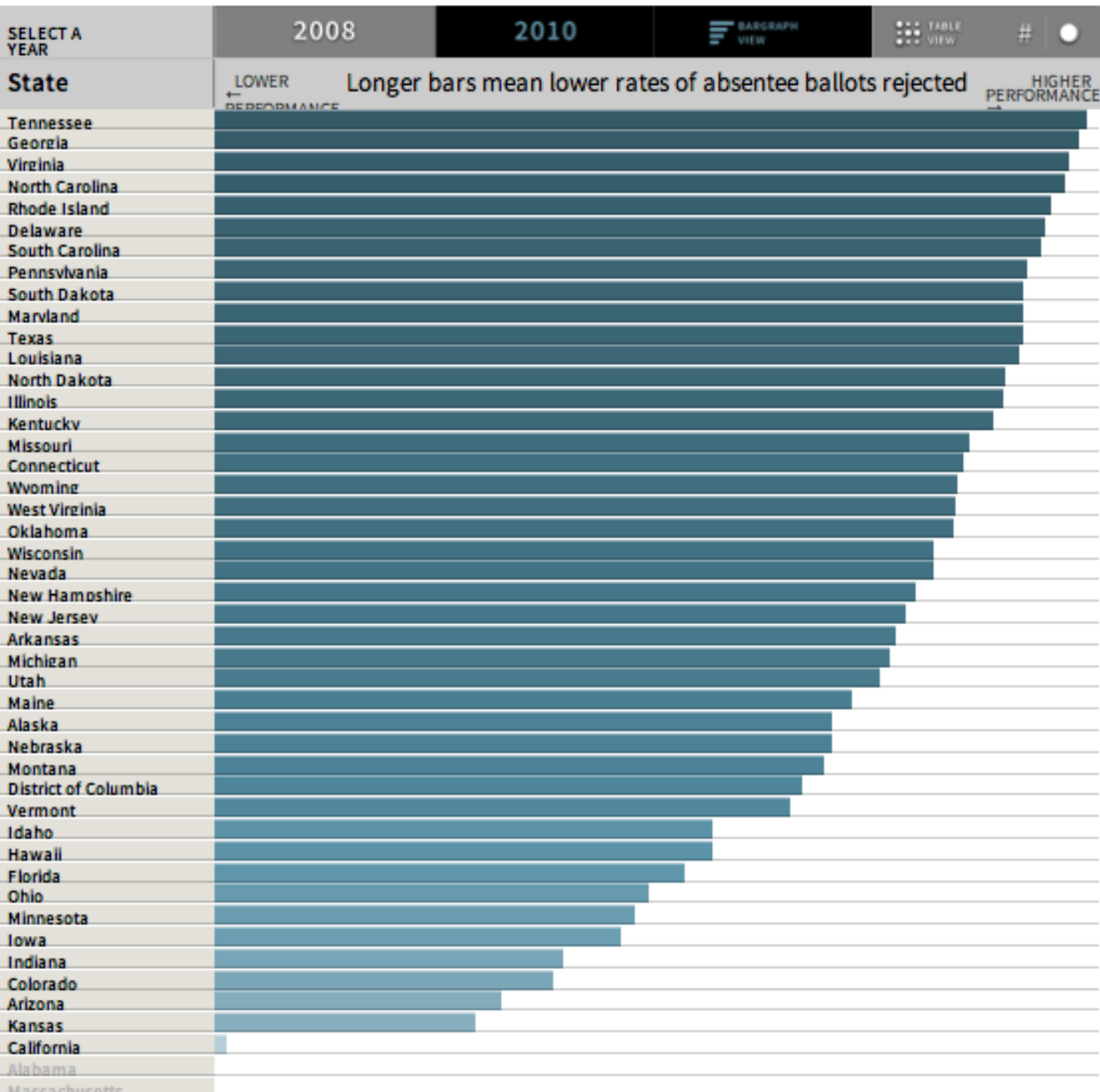


The Rise of Unsuccessful VBM Ballots

- Many ballots are returned but too late to be counted or have other problems like a lacking or not matching signature that prevent election officials from adding them to their tallies.
- California's 2008 unsuccessful Vote-by-Mail ballot rate was 2% – the same percent as prescored punch card voting machines that were eliminated for lack of reliability.

The Rise of Unsuccessful VBM Ballots

- California's Vote-by-Mail error rate in 2010 was even worse, 2.8 percent, and rated as the highest in the nation according to Pew Center for the States' Election Performance Index.
- The state's 2012 error rate dropped to 1%, a significant drop but still much higher than most states.



The Rise of Unsuccessful VBM Ballots



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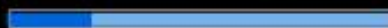
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California News

California's uncounted mail-in ballots reach 1 million

Tuesday, November 13, 2012



00:26 / 02:07



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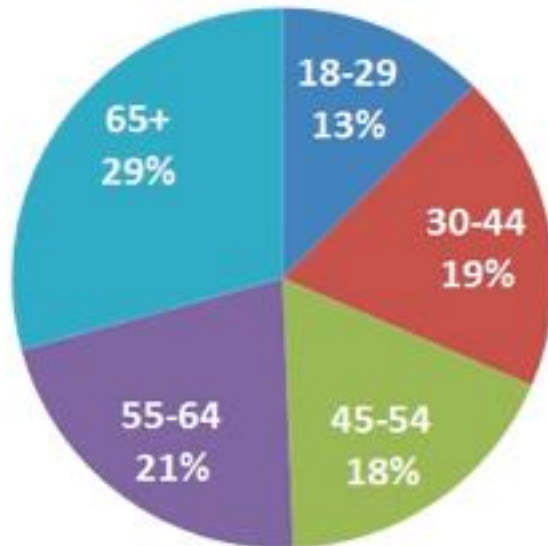


Who are the unsuccessful VBM voters?

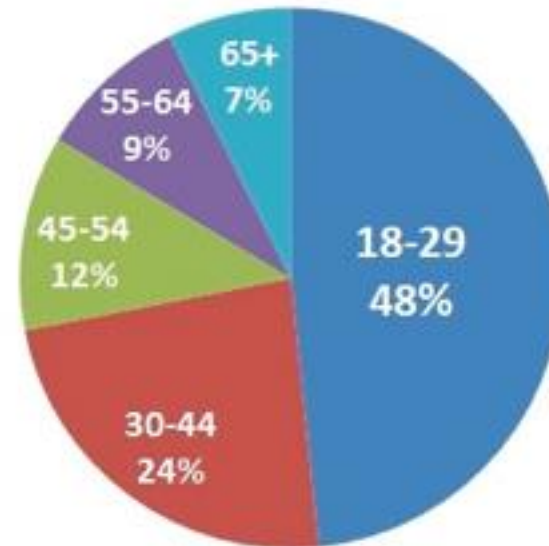
- Preliminary research indicates those who returned their ballots too late to count are disproportionately younger than successful VBM voters.
- More county-by-county research is needed to understand the demographics of unsuccessful VBM voters and the mistakes they make.

Political Data, Inc. 18-county research:

MAIL VOTERS BY AGE



LATE BALLOTS BY AGE



Reasons why VBM ballots are rejected:

- Received too late to count (under current law, must be received by close of polls on Election Day; postmarks don't count)
- Signature problems:
 - No signature
 - Signature did not match
 - Wrong person signed
- Other – wrong envelope, deceased, voted twice, unauthorized return

Ways to increase CA's VBM Success Rate:

Legal:

- Change the law to allow VBM ballots postmarked by Election Day to be counted (SB 29/Correa) (11 states allow ballots postmarked on or the day before Election Day to be counted – AK, DC, IL IA, MD, NY, ND, OH, UT, WA & WV)
- Change the law to allow counties to use additional signatures on file to match VBM envelope signatures (AB 1135/Mullin)

Administrative:

- Follow up with unsuccessful VBM voters to help them vote successfully the next time

Ways to increase CA's VBM Success Rate:

- Improve data sharing between counties through implementation of a new statewide voter registration database (VoteCal)
- Standardize and improve instructions; reduce text, add more images
- Coordinate with USPS offices (failure to do so in June 2010 caused over 12,563 Riverside VBM ballots to be received too late to count; it took a court order to get them counted)

Educational:

- Let voters look up online if their ballot was counted
- Educate voters about common mistakes so they will avoid making them

How can the Federal Government help?

- Establish official election material as “postage paid” and pay the cost of mailing VBM materials and ballots
- Ensure USPS’ services do not further erode and negatively impact the the VBM process.
- Empower the EAC to operate effectively and compile and share VBM best practices.
- Promote implementation of “administrative only” use of sensitive voter data like phone and email address & remove potential barrier to VBM use, especially for military voters.

In closing....

The only thing worse than people not voting is people trying to vote and not being able to do so. California and the nation's voter participation rate could increase significantly by reducing the VBM error rate.

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