

Election Day History in California

By

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Election Day in California stands at the intersection of history, law, and civic evolution, a reflection of how voting rights, electoral methods, and social change have reshaped who votes and how votes are cast. The journey from restricted 19th-century ballots to a state-wide, mail-ballot-based system reveals the long arc of enfranchisement, adaptation, and efforts to make democracy more inclusive for all Californians. Over decades, structural reforms, legal protections, and administrative innovation have transformed Election Day from a public spectacle into a flexible civic process and for many, a matter of returning a ballot by mail rather than standing in line at a polling place.

In California's early elections, during the mid-to-late 19th century, the right to vote was limited: the electorate consisted primarily of "white male citizens," under the original 1849 state constitution. Women, non-white residents, many immigrants, and non-citizens were systematically excluded from the franchise. Voting was often conducted in an open, public manner: early U.S. elections including those on the frontier and in newer states like California frequently employed viva-voce voting or party-printed ballots distributed by local political organizations. These "party tickets" listed the candidates of a given party and often featured symbols or designs to help guide voters who lacked literacy or were unfamiliar with English. The ballots and the voting process carried deep social and communal overtones: political gatherings, public declarations, and social pressure shaped participation, and the public nature of voting made vote-buying, coercion, and intimidation possible in ways unimaginable under modern secret-ballot rules.

Over time, growing recognition of the need for electoral integrity and privacy led to sweeping reform. The "Australian ballot" a standardized ballot printed by government rather than by parties gradually replaced party tickets, helping to insulate voters from undue influence. States also began instituting secret voting, and by the early 20th century, many jurisdictions had shifted to privacy-protected ballots rather than public or party-controlled ballots. In California, these broader national trends slowly reshaped voting norms, even while suffrage itself remained restricted.

The question of who could vote changed dramatically with electoral reform and suffrage movements. In 1911, Californians approved 1911 California Proposition 4, which granted women the right to vote in state elections, making California one of the earliest large states to embrace female suffrage. This represented a major shift in the electorate's

composition. Nine years later, the national Nineteenth Amendment enshrined women's suffrage across the United States a milestone that reshaped American democracy and, in California, expanded participation significantly. Yet even after formal enfranchisement, social, economic, and discriminatory barriers especially for racial minorities, immigrants, and economically disadvantaged citizens continued to limit equal access to the ballot.

The mid-20th century and beyond saw the removal of many institutional obstacles to voting. The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) helped dismantle practices that suppressed minority voting, and in California, reformers also addressed structural inequities in local electoral systems. The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2002 made it easier for minority groups to challenge electoral systems (particularly "at-large" elections) that diluted their voting power enabling more representative districts and expanding minority influence in local governance.

As the electorate expanded and became more diverse, California's administrators and legislators sought to modernize election procedures to accommodate increasingly mobile, working, and busy populations. In 1978 California dropped the requirement for a voter to have a reason to request an absentee ballot, effectively making "vote by mail" available to all registered voters without excuse a significant democratization of access. By 2002 more than a quarter of voters cast ballots by mail. Over the decades, mail voting increased steadily: from under 5 % of ballots in the early 1960s to a sizable proportion of voters by the early 21st century.

Further modernization came with the California Voter's Choice Act (VCA), enacted in 2016. Under VCA, participating counties may allow voters to choose whether to vote by mail, drop their ballot at secure drop-boxes, or vote in person at any vote center in their county allowing voting over an extended period (rather than only on a single Election Day) and giving voters flexibility in time and place. In 2018, five counties piloted the VCA; by 2020 the number of counties using the VCA tripled, and by 2024 VCA counties comprised most of the state's registered voters.

The shift to mail ballots and vote centers has had a profound effect on how Californians vote. In 2020 during a global pandemic the state issued mail ballots to all registered voters, and voter turnout surged to historic levels. Recognizing the benefits of expanded access, in September 2021 the state legislature passed, and Governor Gavin Newsom signed legislation making vote-by-mail ballots permanent for every active registered voter. The law formalized what had been an extraordinary concession, embedding mail-ballot access as the standard mode of participation.

The expansion of voting methods has not only broadened access it also reflects California's recognition that many voters cannot easily vote in person due to work, family, health, disability, or mobility concerns. To support civic participation, the state requires employers to provide time off for voting under certain conditions: workers who lack sufficient time outside of their shift to vote may assume two hours of paid leave to cast a ballot.

Yet challenges remain. Even with universal mail ballots and flexible voting options, disparities in turnout and access persist especially among disabled voters, newer citizens, and communities with lower income or limited access to postal or internet services. Advocacy continues for further reforms: expanded accessibility, ballot-tracking, voter education, and robust poll-worker training.

The evolution of Election Day and voting in California from limited, public, and exclusionary ballots to inclusive, flexible, and widely accessible voting reveals more than administrative adaptation. It tells a story about civic identity, social justice, demographic change, and the ongoing work required to make democracy live up to its promise. For millions of Californians, voting is no longer a noisy public spectacle, but a personal act made possible by law, infrastructure, and historical struggle.

In crafting policies, laws, and election practices, California continues to balance the demands of a vast, diverse population with the foundational ideal that every eligible citizen should have an opportunity to be heard. The history of Election Day in the state shows that expanding access through suffrage, mail ballots, early voting, flexible vote centers, and workplace protections can make participation more equitable. Yet this history also reminds us that rights once hard-won must still be defended and adapted, and that ensuring meaningful participation requires constant effort.