



DEBRA BOWEN

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The November Election: Frequently Asked Questions

SACRAMENTO – As the November 6 general election nears, California Secretary of State Debra Bowen is providing answers to the most frequently asked questions.

Q: When will the election results be final?

A: The Secretary of State starts providing unofficial election results at vote.sos.ca.gov after polls close and county elections officials report their first batches of data. The Secretary's election results website includes pending results for all state and federal contests, and will be refreshed as often as county elections officials provide updated data. In close contests, a clear winner may not be apparent for many days, as county officials verify and count millions of unprocessed ballots that include vote-by-mail ballots, provisional ballots cast at polling places, and others. By law, counties have 31 days (until December 7) to complete their official canvass and certify final election results to the Secretary of State, and they often need that full month to finish the work. The Secretary will then compile and report all results 38 days after the election (December 14). While the Secretary of State cannot announce the winner of a contest before all ballots are counted, news media sometimes choose to "call an election" sooner. County elections officials sometimes update their own websites before reporting to the Secretary of State. For county contact information go to www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_d.htm.

Q: What is the Secretary of State's voter turnout prediction?

A: The Secretary of State does not predict voter turnout and discourages voters from focusing on such predictions. Voter turnout for general elections in presidential election years since 1980 has ranged from 65.5 percent to 79.4 percent of registered voters. In an effort to project future turnout, some media and polling organizations survey potential voters and analyze historical statistics available at www.sos.ca.gov/elections/sov/2010-general/04-historical-voter-reg-participation.pdf.

Q: How many Californians are eligible to vote?

A: There are 18,245,970 Californians registered to vote in the November election. Reports of Registration going back to 1910 are at www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_u.htm.

Q: Can Californians register to vote on Election Day?

A: No. The last day to register to vote was October 22. There is no Election Day registration for the November 6 election. A new law permitting Election Day registration will not take effect for several years.

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Q: How many Californians vote by mail?

A: Vote-by-mail voting has steadily increased in popularity in the years since California law was changed to allow any registered voter to vote by mail. Go to www.sos.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm for historical vote-by-mail statistics in statewide elections.

Q: Are vote-by-mail and provisional ballots always counted – even in “landslide” elections?

A: Yes, every valid ballot returned to county elections officials by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day is counted in every election, regardless of the ballot type or the margin in any particular contest.

Q: What is provisional voting?

A: Provisional voting ensures that no properly registered voter is denied the right to cast a ballot. If, for any reason, a voter's name is not on the polling place list, he or she has the right to cast a provisional ballot. The provisional ballot will be counted after county elections officials have confirmed the voter is registered to vote and the voter did not already cast a ballot elsewhere in the election.

Q: How do county elections officials count vote-by-mail and provisional ballots?

A: Counting several million vote-by-mail and provisional ballots is a labor-intensive process. For each ballot, a county elections official must compare the voter's signature on the outside of the envelope to the signature on the voter's original registration record to ensure the signatures match. To preserve secrecy, the ballot is then separated from the envelope, and added to the pile of ballots to be tallied. In some cases, county elections officials begin processing vote-by-mail ballots up to seven business days before the election, though no results can be released until all polls close on Election Day. With more and more people voting by mail, elections officials often need the full amount of time allowed by law to complete this manual process.

Q: How can a voter find out if his or her ballot was counted?

A: Under federal law, a voter who casts a provisional ballot is entitled to find out from the county elections office whether the ballot was counted and if not, why not. Under state law, a voter who casts a vote-by-mail ballot can find out if the ballot arrived at the county elections office. County elections officials may provide this information through websites, by telephone, or both. To access a county's website or phone number for checking ballot status, voters can go to www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ballot-status.

Q: What types of statewide measures are on the ballot and when could they go into effect?

A: There are 10 statewide initiatives and one referendum on the November 6 ballot. All state ballot measures require a simple majority of the public's vote to be enacted. If approved, the measure takes effect the day after the election, unless the measure's language specifies otherwise.

Q: In some contests, why are two candidates from the same political party on the ballot?

A: The June 5, 2012, primary election was the first statewide election conducted under California's Top Two Candidates Open Primary Act, which applies to legislative and congressional candidates. Only the top two vote-getters in each primary contest moved on to this general election. In some cases, the top two vote-getters were members of the same political party and will both appear on the ballot.

Q: Can voters ask for assistance when voting?

A: Yes, voters who need assistance when voting are urged to ask a poll worker or county elections staffer for help. Also, if a voter makes a mistake on his or her ballot, the voter can notify a poll worker, who will void the incorrect ballot and provide a new one. Vote-by-mail voters may also request a new ballot if they return their original ballot to an elections official prior to the 8:00 p.m. closing of the polls on Election Day.

Q: Can a vote-by-mail voter opt to vote in person at a polling place?

A: Yes, a vote-by-mail voter can bring his or her unvoted ballot to the polling place and turn it over to a poll worker, who will then void the ballot and provide a new one. If the voter doesn't have the vote-by-mail ballot, a provisional ballot will be provided.

Q: What happens if a vote-by-mail voter does not receive a ballot in the mail?

A: A vote-by-mail voter who did not receive a ballot in the mail can contact the county elections official to request a ballot or go to any polling place in the county on Election Day and cast a provisional ballot.

Q: Can businesses or campaigns offer coupons or gifts to people who prove they voted?

A: No, no one may offer incentives to people for agreeing to vote for or against a particular person or measure. This is illegal under state and federal law.

Q: Is there a toll-free hotline for voters who still have questions on Election Day?

A: Voters may call the California Secretary of State's toll-free voter hotline at (800) 345-VOTE (8683), which will be answered live throughout Election Day and the day before. Voters can get the address of their polling place, ask election-related questions, or confidentially report potential election fraud or voter intimidation.

Keep up with the latest California election news and trivia by following [@CASOSvote](#) on Twitter.

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