



ALEX PADILLA
California Secretary of State

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CONTACT:

SOS Press Office

(916) 653-6575

What to Expect During the California Vote Count Process

SACRAMENTO, CA – On November 3, 2020 California county elections officials will work through the night counting ballots. In California, the vote count process does not end on Election Night. Due to state laws that ensure voters' rights, ballots will continue to arrive and be counted after Election Day.

“California elections officials prioritize the right to vote and election security over rushing the vote count,” said Secretary of State Alex Padilla. “By law, county election officials have 30 days to count every valid ballot and conduct a post-election audit. Every vote-by-mail ballot goes through signature verification. Several safety nets to protect voting rights, including Same Day Voter Registration and provisional ballots, require additional processing time by elections officials, but we’d rather get it right than get it fast.”

“To prepare our election for the COVID-19 pandemic we have taken several steps to protect voters. Every active, registered voter was mailed a ballot. We also extended the time for vote-by-mail ballots to arrive to county elections offices. Ballots postmarked on or before Election Day can arrive up until November 20 and still be processed and counted.”

“On Election Night, we will have a good picture of most contests, but the outcomes of close contests may take days or weeks to settle. This is normal. Baseless accusations of fraud during the thorough and transparent vote count process only serve to undermine confidence in our democracy. As California’s Chief Elections Officer, voting rights and election integrity are my top priorities,” Padilla added.

Who counts ballots in California?

California counties handle the printing, mailing, and processing of ballots. The Secretary of State’s office does not process ballots in any way.

What are the first results we will be seeing on Election Night?

The first election results are typically ballots received before Election Day. For this election, county elections officials were allowed to begin opening and processing vote-by-mail ballot envelopes up to 29 days before Election Day, but those results cannot be accessed or shared with the public until all polls close on Election Day.

Typically counties can't begin processing vote-by-mail ballots until 10 business days before an election, but urgency legislation allowed them to begin processing ballots earlier this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and increased volume of vote-by-mail ballots.

Why do some counties show no precincts have reported, yet some votes have been counted?

Many county elections officials choose to tally and report these early voted ballots before results come in from precincts, which are sometimes far away from county headquarters. Early voted ballots simply appear as raw vote totals because, in this initial stage, the ballots are not attributed to individual precincts.

Why have some counties not reported any results immediately after the polls close?

Each of the 58 county elections offices processes ballots differently, and the distances poll workers must travel from polling places to county offices vary greatly. State law requires county elections officials to send their first batch of results to the Secretary of State's office no more than two hours after they begin tallying votes after polls close on Election Day. County elections officials continue to report results periodically on Election Night until all precinct vote totals have been reported. County elections officials will continue to count ballots up to 30 days after Election Day.

When are vote-by-mail ballots counted?

Vote-by-mail ballots that are received by county elections officials before Election Day are typically counted on Election Day. Many more vote-by-mail ballots are dropped off at polling places, drop box locations, or arrive at county elections offices on Election Day. Due to urgency legislation For this election vote-by-mail ballots postmarked on or before Election Day and received by county elections officials no later than 17 days after Election Day must be processed.

Depending on the volume of these types of ballots, it takes up to 30 days for county elections officials to verify voter records and determine if ballots have been cast by eligible voters. The frequency of updated results will vary based on the size of each county and the process each local elections office uses to tally and report votes.

How and when are provisional ballots counted?

In California, provisional ballots serve as a fail-safe method of ensuring all voters who show up to the polls can cast a ballot.

All provisional ballots are carefully checked by county elections officials to confirm that the person who voted provisionally is both registered and that they did not cast a ballot by mail or at another polling location on Election Day. Due to the additional human review and verification needed for provisional ballots, they are typically counted after Election Day and vote-by-mail ballots.

How and when are Same Day Voter Registrations processed?

[Same Day Voter Registration](#), also known as Conditional Voter Registration in state law, is a safety net for Californians who miss the deadline to register to vote or update their voter registration information for an election.

Eligible citizens who need to register or re-register to vote within 14 days of an election can complete this process to register and vote at their county elections office, polling place, or vote center. Their ballots will be processed and counted once the county elections office has completed the voter registration verification process.

How will we know how many ballots remain to be counted?

Two days after the election, counties must provide the Secretary of State an estimate of their remaining unprocessed ballots report. The Secretary of State’s office will post this “unprocessed ballots report” online and provide daily updates as new estimates are provided from the county elections offices.

When will the vote counting period end and election be certified?

Election results will change throughout the canvass period as vote-by-mail ballots, provisional ballots, and other ballots are processed. Depending on the volume of these types of ballots, it may take up to 30 days for county elections officials to verify voter records and determine if ballots have been cast by eligible voters. The frequency of updated results will vary based on the size of each county and the process each county elections office uses to tally and report votes. County elections officials must report their final results to the Secretary of State for the Presidential contest by December 1 and all other state and federal contests by December 4. The Secretary of State will certify the results on December 11, 2020. The Electoral College will convene on December 14, 2020.

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