

Voting by Mail

It's as easy as mailing a letter

Many people don't realize that voting by mail is fast and easy. Any registered voter can vote by mail: you don't need a medical excuse, nor do you need to be out of town on election day.

Voting by mail is the same as voting by absentee ballot. Rather than go to the polls to cast a ballot on election day, you may request an absentee ballot, which you fill out and return to your county elections official. You don't need a reason to vote by mail. Any registered voter may apply for an absentee ballot.

Applying is easy - just fill out and return the application printed on your Sample Ballot or apply in writing to your county elections official. The telephone number and address of your county elections official is in the Government Section of your phone book. Look under "Elections," "Registrar of Voters," "County Clerk," or "Voting."

If you apply in writing you must include your name and residence address as stated on your registration card, the address to which the ballot is to be mailed, and the name and date of the election in which you would like to vote absentee. You must also sign and date your application.

Elections officials process applications 29 days to 7 days before an election. You may request an absentee ballot more than 29 days before an election, but not fewer than 7 days in advance. If an illness, disability, physical handicap, or condition prevents you from going to the polls on election day, you may still vote absentee. In this case, you may request an absentee ballot and then authorize someone to bring it to you and return it to the polls. Remember, the earlier you request a ballot, the more time you'll have to complete and return it.

Voting and returning your ballot

Once you receive your ballot, follow the instructions that accompany it. Call your county elections official if you have any questions, as failure to correctly complete the ballot could invalidate your vote. In addition, you must sign the absentee ballot return envelope. To ensure that no one else votes your ballot, the elections official will compare this signature to the one on your voter registration card to confirm that you are the authorized voter. The envelope and ballot are separated before your ballot is counted to preserve the secrecy of your vote.

You may either mail your ballot, bring it to the county elections office, or bring it to any polling place within the county. Your ballot will not be counted if it is received after the polls close regardless of when it was mailed. Remember to put the correct postage on the envelope if you mail your ballot - the post office won't deliver it if you forget.

Elections officials must receive your voted ballot no later than the close of the polls on Election Day. In California, polls close at 8 pm.

If you are ill or disabled and cannot return your ballot yourself, you may designate a spouse, child, parent, grandparent, sibling, or a person residing in the same household to return your voted ballot for you. This person may return the ballot in person to the county elections official or to a polling place in your county, or may mail it to the county elections official. Contact your county elections official for more information.

Lost ballots

Don't worry if you lose or do not receive your ballot. You can replace a lost absentee ballot, but you must sign a statement under penalty of perjury that you did not receive the first absentee ballot. The elections official records all absentee ballot requests and gives this list to each polling place to ensure that each voter casts only one ballot. If you vote twice, even by mistake, neither ballot will count.

Even if you receive your absentee ballot, you can change your mind and vote at your polling place. However, you must bring your unvoted ballot to the polling place and give it to a polling place worker. If you don't have your unvoted ballot, you will be allowed to vote a "provisional" ballot, which will not be counted until elections officials have determined that you did not also vote by absentee ballot.

You voted - now what?

Once elections officials have determined that the signature on the absentee ballot return envelope matches the signature on the voter's registration form, and that the voter has not voted at a polling place, the ballot and envelope are separated. The ballot is then placed anonymously with other ballots to preserve the voter's right to secrecy. If a voter's right to cast an absentee ballot is challenged, and that challenge is upheld, the ballot remains uncounted in the envelope, and the reason is indicated on the envelope.

The first results you hear reported on election night usually reflect votes cast by absentee voters. These are not, however, complete totals because they represent only those absentee ballots that were returned before election day. Elections officials can process (i.e. check signatures) ballots received before election day as many as seven days before an election.

Absentee ballots are also returned on election day, either to a polling place or to a county elections office. These ballots are usually the last ballots counted because they must have their signatures checked to ensure that a voter did not also vote at a polling place. In fact, these absentee votes are not likely to be reported in the vote totals until several days after the election.

For more information...

If you want more information on absentee voting, check out the California Elections Code. Start with sections 3000,3100, and 3200, which cover absentee voting in general, special absentee voting, and permanent absentee voting. For penalties related to absentee voting read sections 18371,18402, 18520-18540,18560-18564,18569, and 18576-18578. The California Codes are also on the Internet at <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw.html>.

Questions

Do I have to apply for an absentee ballot for each election if I have a medical disability?

No. Any voter may apply for permanent absentee voter status. You must complete an application, which is available from your county elections official, to become a permanent absent voter. Permanent absentee voters will retain this status as long as they vote in all statewide primary and general elections. If you fail to cast a ballot in a statewide general election, you will be removed from the permanent absent voter list and will need to reapply in order to restore this status.

Can a voter ever be required to vote by mail?

Yes. There are certain circumstances under which this can occur. An elections official can declare a precinct a *mail ballot precinct* if it has fewer than 250 registered voters on the 88th day before an election. All voters in such a precinct will automatically receive absentee ballots.

Also, the governing board of a local agency can declare certain elections *all mail ballot elections*. In this case, all voters who wish to vote in an election must vote by mail. This generally applies only to very small elections or elections in specified districts throughout the state.