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Voter's Choice Task Force Report

November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election

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About the California Secretary of State

The California Office of the Secretary of State is committed to adhering to the highest standards of integrity and transparency, supporting businesses, strengthening democracy, protecting individual rights, preserving our state's history, delivering quality services, and providing accessible resources and trusted information.

The California Secretary of State's responsibilities include:

- Serving as the state's Chief Elections Officer
- Implementing electronic filing and Internet disclosure of campaign and lobbyist financial information
- Maintaining business filings
- Commissioning notaries public
- Operating the Safe at Home confidential address program
- Maintaining the Domestic Partners and Advance Health Care Directive Registries
- Safeguarding the State Archives
- Serving as a trustee of the California Museum

Special Note About This Report

Pursuant to California Elections Code Section 4008, the Secretary of State shall establish a taskforce that includes representative of all of the following:

- (1) County elections officials.
- (2) Individuals with demonstrated language accessibility experience for languages covered under the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- (3) The disability community and community organizations and individuals that advocate on behalf of, or provide services to, individuals with disabilities.
- (4) Experts with demonstrated experience in the field of elections.

This Task Force has been appointed by the California Secretary of State. The Task Force is currently comprised of 16 members. Beginning in 2025, the California Secretary of State's Voter's Choice Task Force is charged with reviewing elections conducted under the Voter's Choice Act and providing comments and recommendations to the California State Legislature within six months of the election.

As aggregated data from the state's VoteCal database, as well as data from university reports created through the Voting Rights Project, are made available to the Task Force, additional recommendations will be provided in a supplemental report.

Voter's Choice Task Force Appointees

1. Melvin E. Levey, Merced County ROV
2. Donna Linder, Stanislaus County ROV, Task Force Co-Chair
3. Dean Logan, L.A. County ROV
4. Evelyn Mendez, Sonoma County ROV
5. Matt Moreles, Santa Clara County ROV
6. Bob Page, Orange County ROV
7. Jesse Salinas, Yolo County ROV
8. Art Tinoco, Riverside County ROV
9. Petrina Branch, Attorney, Task Force Co-Chair
10. Camila Chavez, Executive Director of the Dolores Huerta Foundation
11. Leslie Hernandez, Civic Engagement Specialist, AltaMed Health Services
12. Deanna Kitamura, Managing Attorney, Asian Law Caucus
13. Ellen Nash, Chair/President of the San Diego Black American Political Association of California
14. Dora Rose, Deputy Director, League of Women Voters
15. Brittany Stonesifer, Senior Program Manager, Common Cause California
16. Gabriel Taylor, Senior Advocate, Disability Rights CA

Advisory Appointees

1. Carrie Cornwell, Staff Director, CA State Senate Elections and Constitutional Amendments Committee
2. Ethan Jones, Chief Consultant, CA State Assembly Elections Committee

Purpose and History of the Voter's Choice Act

The Voter's Choice Act (VCA), enacted through Senate Bill (SB) 450 (Allen, Hertzberg, et al., Chapter 832, Statutes of 2016), authorized participating counties to adopt a modernized election model designed to increase voter access, convenience, and participation. The model expanded vote by mail, introduced countywide vote centers, and provided multiple ballot return options. The adoption of the bill authorized 14 counties to pilot the new voting model beginning in 2018, allowing all counties to move to the new model in 2020. Twenty-nine of California's 58 counties conducted the November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election using this model.¹

¹ Participating VCA Counties as of November 4, 2025: Alameda, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, Fresno, Humboldt, Kings, Los Angeles, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Merced, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Placer, Riverside, Sacramento, San Benito, San Diego, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Tuolumne, Ventura, Yolo.
<https://www.sos.ca.gov/voter-choice-act/vca-participating-counties>

Legislative analysis of Senate Bill 450 conveys the purpose of the VCA is to increase voter participation. The bill author based the VCA on Colorado's election model given the high rate of participation in that state.² Instead of requiring everyone to vote on Election Day during the hours of 7:00 am and 8:00 pm, voters are given options. All voters receive a ballot in the mail and are provided multiple days and multiple ways to cast their ballot, choosing the most convenient way for them. Because vote centers are staffed for multiple days, proponents of SB 450 pointed to the benefit of having smoothly run in-person voting.

The VCA allows counties in California to replace Election Day neighborhood poll sites with a reduced number of multi-day vote centers. All vote centers must be open for at least four days starting the Saturday before Election Day, with a portion being opened for eleven days.³ Voters in a VCA county may vote at any vote center in their county, while voters in non-VCA counties must vote at their designated poll site. Initially, only VCA counties were required to mail registered voters in the county a ballot in the mail, but beginning in 2020, all counties are required to mail a ballot at least 29 days before an election.⁴ At all voting locations, whether a neighborhood poll site or a vote center, additional services are provided to support voters. Both offer services such as providing voters the ability to register and vote a conditional ballot, translated election materials and interpretation, accessible ballot marking devices, and the ability to drop off a ballot received in the mail. The VCA requires counties to create an Election Administration Plan (EAP), to conduct outreach and education to voters, and to create a Language Accessibility Advisory Committee (LAAC) and a Voter Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC).

The VCA sets a statutory floor for voter access. Not including special elections, counties must provide 11-day vote centers at a minimum ratio of one per 50,000 registered voters, and 4-day vote centers at a minimum ratio of one per 10,000 registered voters. Also, each county must provide at least two ballot drop-off locations, or one for every 15,000 registered voters, whichever results in more.⁵ In addition to establishing minimum requirements for official ballot drop-off locations and vote centers, the VCA creates a baseline of offerings for accessible voting equipment, voter services, language assistance, outreach, and accessibility. It is especially geared toward communities that have historically faced barriers to voting, requiring counties to account for more than a dozen factors like proximity to public transportation, disability access, low-income communities, low vehicle ownership, and historically low vote by mail use when setting vote center and drop box locations. And through the Election Administration Plan, the Voter's Choice Act makes those obligations public and enforceable by requiring a detailed process of publicly noticed meetings, public comment, draft revision, accessible publication, and state review.⁶

² August 1, 2016 Assembly Appropriations Committee and August 18, 2016, Assembly Floor Analysis.

³ California Elections Code § 4005.

⁴ California Elections Code § 3000.5.

⁵ California Elections Code § 4005.

⁶ Ibid.

The VCA also requires mailed direct contacts to go at least once to voters sharing a surname and address in each requested language. It requires vote centers to post information about available county or Secretary of State language-assistance services and hotlines, and, through 2029, it requires counties with more than 500,000 registered voters to establish a Voter Education and Outreach Advisory Committee and hold at least one dedicated public meeting on voter education and outreach during development of the Election Administration Plan. Just as importantly, it creates a more defined pipeline for community input by requiring Language Accessibility Advisory Committees and Voter Accessibility Advisory Committees to meet before the public planning meeting and requires that meeting to occur before the draft Election Administration Plan is publicly noticed, thus helping to ensure that affected communities have a meaningful opportunity to shape the plan before it is finalized. The VCA also sets a firm 120-day pre-election deadline for final Election Administration Plans, requires counties to post election cost reports within nine months of an election's certification, requires the Secretary of State to submit their final report within six months after each election, and reestablishes a standing taskforce to review each VCA election and report recommendations to Legislature.⁷

New equipment and additional planning are required to implement the VCA which causes the upfront cost to run an election to be significant. The state and counties also incur ongoing costs to implement the various components of the VCA.

Unusual Nature of the November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election

The November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election on Proposition 50 was unusual in several important respects. It was not simply another election conducted under the VCA. Rather, it was a statewide special election called on a compressed timetable, conducted under temporary statutory modifications, and held in a particularly partisan political environment. Those overlapping features matter because the VCA was designed around a model of planning, outreach, access, and predictability. The VCA also supports adaptability in unusual conditions, as seen in the successful administration of the November 3, 2020, General Election, but that adaptability still depends on adequate lead time, planning, and resourcing. The November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election asked counties to operate within that model while also adapting quickly to a one measure statewide special election that drew far more attention, and ultimately far more participation, than is typically associated with special elections. As described below, these conditions pulled in different directions. While VCA implementation depends on deliberate planning and public engagement, this election required rapid decision-making under compressed deadlines. The shortened timeline created distinct, and compounding, implementation challenges. Senate Bill (SB) 280 (Introduced by Senator Cervantes and

⁷ California Elections Code § 4005 and 4008.

Assembly Member Pellerin), enacted on August 21, 2025, called the election and established temporary rules. From SB 280's enactment to Election Day, counties had fewer than 75 days' notice that they would be administering a statewide special election. More importantly from an implementation standpoint, counties had only 46 days between enactment and the ballot-mailing deadline. The window was even tighter for UOCAVA compliance, which typically requires ballots to be transmitted to certain voters by E-45 (45 days before the election). The compressed timeline would have challenged any election model; for VCA counties it also compressed decisions about the vote center network they use, and the public-facing planning and outreach processes the VCA is designed to support.

Contemporaneous reporting captured just how compressed that window felt on the ground. *The Sacramento Bee* described county officials as heading to "battle stations" and preparing a "speed run" toward November 4th, while *CalMatters* reported that administrators were scrambling to line up ballot printers, vote centers, and workers.⁸ The Secretary of State's office reportedly warned that with less than two and a half months, counties would have difficulty hiring people, training them, and getting everything running properly, and officials anticipated that ordinary statutory deadlines would have to be suspended.⁹ County registrars described the same problem in practical terms: Humboldt County's Registrar said his office would usually have at least five months of lead time for a statewide election and that even that is a "Herculean effort," while Orange County's Registrar said he began ordering paper, envelopes, and toner before the election was formally approved because he concluded he could not wait and still be confident he could pull the election off.¹⁰

For counties using the VCA model, the preparation work included not only complex operational decisions, but also decisions about vote center placement, ballot drop box infrastructure, language access, disability access, and public communications. In a regular statewide election, those activities are spread across a much longer planning horizon. Here, they were compressed into a very short period.

The election was also unusual because SB 280 temporarily gave VCA counties a menu of options that differed from both the standard VCA structure and the already codified baseline requirements to conduct special elections. The California State Legislature waived the statutory deadlines for this election, which differed from those required for a regularly scheduled election. Under ordinary VCA rules, as noted previously, counties must provide at least one vote center per 50,000 registered voters during the 10-day early-voting period and at least one vote center per 10,000 registered voters beginning four days before Election Day, along with ballot drop-off locations at a minimum ratio of one per 15,000

⁸ Kate Wolffe, [CA elections officials head to battle stations, anticipating redistricting vote](#), *Sacramento Bee* (updated Aug. 6, 2025); Maya C. Miller, [Gavin Newsom wants an election in a hurry on his gerrymander. Here's what has to happen](#), *CalMatters* (Aug. 19, 2025).

⁹ Wolffe.

¹⁰ Miller.

registered voters, or two, whichever is greater. Typically, for special elections, the VCA allows counties to operate 10-day early vote centers on a ratio of one per 60,000 registered voters and at least one vote center per 30,000 registered voters on Election Day only. In jurisdictions with fewer than 30,000 registered voters, elections officials must make reasonable efforts to establish these vote centers. Ballot drop-off locations use the standard ratio of one per 15,000 registered voters, with at least one in the jurisdiction conducting the special election.

For the November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election, however, SB 280 allowed counties to use lower vote center ratios than a regularly scheduled election, but higher than the codified special election requirements. SB 280 allowed for vote centers to be established on a ratio of one per 60,000 voters during the earlier, 10-day, period and one per 30,000 voters from E-3 through Election Day.¹¹ Counties were able to choose their framework, resulting in some differences across the state. According to the Secretary of State's election-method statistics, 26 of the 29 VCA counties in this election chose the SB 280 ratios, while Madera and Nevada counties retained the higher standard VCA ratios, and Amador County used the lower VCA special election ratios.¹² The significance of that choice meant that most VCA counties, including the state's largest population centers, approached this election with fewer required in-person voting locations than would have been required under the regular election VCA framework.

That departure from the ordinary VCA model is important because the VCA's vote center ratios were not arbitrary. The vote center ratios reflect legislative balancing among access, cost, and administrative feasibility, informed by stakeholder input and negotiation. They were part of a statutory design intended to expand flexibility without abandoning access. The VCA replaced neighborhood polling places with a countywide model in which every voter receives a ballot by mail, can return it in multiple ways, and can obtain in-person services over multiple days at accessible vote centers located with attention to transportation, language needs, disability access, and historically underrepresented communities. In other words, the VCA is not simply a vote-by-mail system with fewer physical locations; it is an access model that depends on planning, outreach, and an adequate in-person network. Reducing the number of required vote centers in a statewide special election therefore raised a serious policy question: whether the reduced minimums would still preserve the level of access the VCA was meant to provide – especially if voter interest or in-person demand proved higher than expected.

Chart 1. Select Special Requirements for the November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election Under Polling Place and VCA Models

¹¹ SB 280, sec. 3(c); see also Cal. Elec. Code § 4005(b).

¹² California Secretary of State, [November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election Method and Location Statistics by County - Estimates as of 10/7/25](#).

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	Polling Place Model	VCA Model
Vote by Mail	All voters receive a ballot in the mail (as of 2020)	All voters receive a ballot in the mail
In-Person Voting	Precinct polling places open on Election Day	Minimum: One vote center for every 60,000 voters for 11 days (including Election Day) and one voter center for every 30,000 voters for four days (including Election Day)
In-Person Voting	In-person voters must go to a designated neighborhood poll site although those with comprehensive electronic voting rosters can vote anywhere in the county	In-person voters can go to any vote center in the county
Official Ballot Drop Boxes	Minimum: One official ballot drop box for every 30,000 registered voters	Minimum: One official ballot drop box for every 15,000 voters and at each vote center
Toll-Free Language Hotline		Language hotline availability and hotline phone number posted at voter centers
Election Administration Plan	Voter Education and Outreach Plan	Plans must include a voter education plan and a description of how media will be used to promote elections. Also requires public meetings, draft postings with feedback.
Community Committees		Language Accessibility Advisory Committee, Voter Accessibility Advisory Committee, and Voter Education and Outreach Advisory Committee (in large counties)

Before the election, advocacy organizations raised concerns that the temporary modifications authorized by SB 280 could have disproportionate effects on voters who rely

more heavily on in-person and community-based election services. In comments submitted during consideration of the bill and in correspondence with the Secretary of State and the Governor's office, advocates argued that reduced vote center minimums, compressed implementation timelines, and uncertainty about the scope of available outreach funding warranted caution in a statewide special election. They emphasized that voters with disabilities, limited-English-proficient voters, younger voters, voters experiencing homelessness, and Black and Latino voters may depend more heavily on accessible in-person voting options, language assistance, and targeted outreach. Those concerns are relevant to evaluating whether temporary departures from the ordinary VCA framework preserved the level of access the VCA is designed to provide, particularly for voters who depend most on the VCA's access innovations and protections. This is not unique to VCA elections; however, disparities in access to reliable, plain-language information tend to widen in off-cycle elections, and compressed timelines can amplify those disparities regardless of voting model.

Language access also warrants separate attention. SB 280 temporarily altered the usual translation process by removing the ordinary requirement that the Secretary of State consult with advisory bodies and nonpartisan organizations with expertise in language needs and by shortening the public examination period for translated materials, reducing the usual opportunities for expert input and public review. Advocacy groups took the position that the Proposition 50 ballot title and summary and ballot label should be translated in all languages covered by Elections Code Section 14201, in addition to applicable federal requirements, while the Secretary of State later concluded that SB 280 did not expand the office's translation obligations beyond the languages otherwise required under Elections Code Section 9054. Without resolving that dispute, the episode highlights an operational concern: in a compressed statewide special election, ambiguity about the scope of translation obligations and reduced opportunities for expert review may diminish the accessibility and transparency of the election process for voters who rely on in-language materials.

A parallel concern applies to disability access: while SB 280 did not waive the relevant consultation requirements, the compressed timetable made it substantially more difficult to replicate the VCA's ordinary consultative process for voters with disabilities, limiting the opportunity for community feedback and elections office ability to be as responsive as they might have liked.

Voter education and outreach funding presents a related concern. California has historically provided limited and inconsistent funding for voter education and outreach, with allocations varying significantly between elections, and disparities in access to reliable, plain-language election information have consistently been greater during off-cycle elections. Targeted state funding for VCA voter education and outreach has been limited and inconsistent; for example, dedicated funding was last available in 2022 and was insufficient to cover even the minimum required direct contacts in many counties. That issue was compounded by the unexpected nature of the special election, the

compressed timeline, and the complexity of the ballot question itself. SB 280 allocated funding to each county for the actual and reasonably necessary costs of the election and required any savings to be rolled over to future elections. Whether that allocation reached county-level outreach efforts in meaningful amounts, and whether it supported in-language and community-based voter education targeted toward underrepresented communities, is an important question for this Task Force to examine in evaluating the November 2025 experience.

Those access concerns did not arise in a low-turnout vacuum. Nor did turnout resemble a typical special election. Policy changes over time have significantly increased the percentage of eligible voters that are registered to vote. For this statewide special election, registered voter turnout reached 50.16% of California's registered voters.¹³ About 42% of eligible Californians voted, exceeding a 2005 initiative special (35%) and 2009 initiative special (21%), nearly matching the 2022 midterm (41%) and 2003 gubernatorial recall (43%), and trailing only the 2021 recall (52%) among those comparisons.¹⁴ Counties administered a high-salience statewide contest under compressed timelines and modified rules.

Election observers' accounts and the public record from Election Day document congestion at numerous vote centers. Multiple reports described long lines and extended wait times at some vote centers in major counties operating under the reduced SB 280 ratios, including Los Angeles and Sacramento. *CalMatters* reported "Secretary of State Shirley Weber said there was "huge turnout" in person Tuesday night, with long lines wrapping around buildings at many polling sites."¹⁵ The November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election combined compressed planning time, reduced required in-person capacity in most VCA counties, and unexpectedly high turnout, and those conditions coincided with long lines at some vote centers. Long lines at particular vote centers also occur in regular statewide elections, especially at high-traffic locations such as college campuses. The available public record does not, by itself, establish causation; county-level deployment and wait-time data are needed to assess whether and where capacity constraints were materially different under the November 2025 conditions. Additional county-level data, including actual resource deployment decisions, staffing levels, wait-time logs, and information about when and where in-person demand was concentrated would help us to understand more about how, or if, capacity constraints impacted the

¹³ Compare these numbers to the registered voter turnout figures as follows: 2025 with 50.16%, 2021 Recall with 58.45%, 2009 Special with 28.40%, 2005 Special with 50.14%, and 2003 Recall with 61.20%. However, it ought to be noted that policy changes have occurred since 2003 to expand the franchise to more voters, which can impact these numbers.

¹⁴Public Policy Institute of California. [Key takeaways from the Proposition 50 election](#) (Nov. 12, 2025)

¹⁵ Connor Sheets, Andrea Flores & Clara Harter, [Long lines at polling centers as time runs out to vote on Prop. 50](#), *Los Angeles Times* (Nov. 4, 2025); [Recap: Prop 50 passes, NBC News projects, with long lines reported at vote centers](#), NBC Los Angeles (Nov. 4, 2025); Maya C. Miller, [Gavin Newsom's Proposition 50 just passed. Here's what happens next](#), *CalMatters* (Nov. 5, 2025); ABC7. [Long Line Seen at Corona Vote Center as Projection Announced](#) (Nov. 4, 2025); MSNBC, [California Prop 50 voters commit to long lines at the polls to be heard on redistricting](#), (Nov. 4, 2025), video; NBC Los Angeles (NBCLA). [Long Lines at Some Vote Centers. What Does It Say About Prop 50?](#) (Nov. 4, 2025), video.

voting experience in California and how we might better anticipate and address the issue in the future.

Impact of the Voter's Choice Act on Flexibility, Accessibility, and Security

The VCA model gives voters flexibility in choosing when and how they want to cast their ballot. All voters receive a vote by mail ballot and every voter has the option to vote in person at any vote center within the county where they are registered. Voters can drop off their vote by mail ballot at any official ballot drop box, vote center, or USPS Collection Box in the state. Ballots are timely and valid if deposited by 8 p.m. on Election Day or postmarked by the USPS on or before Election Day and received by the seventh day following the election. And because the number of vote centers and drop boxes are calculated according to the number of registered voters in each county, there are a plethora of options for voters to choose from.

Should voters choose to visit a vote center, the VCA model allows them to customize their voting experience by choosing a vote center at a venue that meets their needs best. In some counties, early in-person voting is available at designated locations as early as 29 days before the election. By law, some vote centers open ten days prior to Election Day, and all voter centers are open from the fourth day prior all the way through Election Day. This is in contrast to counties with the polling place model, where in-person voting sites are typically open only on Election Day. In addition, VCA counties have the option of scheduling mobile or flex vote center events at locations that serve voters who otherwise might face obstacles to voting in-person (i.e. assisted living facilities, remote geographic locations, facilities that provide day service to individuals with disabilities, or locations serving individuals experiencing homelessness). The increased number of days available to vote in-person allow voters with disabilities to vote in locations and on days that work best with their transportation and scheduling options. The weekend days give flexibility to voters who may work during the week. Importantly, vote centers give counties an added layer of resiliency when conducting elections. Emergency events such as a power outage, health emergency, or disaster affecting one vote center can be mitigated because voters can go to any center and vote a regular ballot, with some locations open for a total of 11 days.

The Voter's Choice Act has enhanced methods of making voting more accessible. Counties that have opted into the VCA Model are required to conduct voter education and outreach by creating a Language Accessibility Advisory Committee (LAAC) and a Voter Accessibility Advisory Committees (VAAC). The LAAC and VAAC allow community members to share feedback and input on language and accessibility issues. Advisory Committees also collaborate with county election administrators on voter outreach and education activities and materials highlighting accessibility and language access. VCA counties are also required to conduct Voter Language Workshops in languages mandated by federal and

state voting rights laws. These workshops allow community members to provide feedback and share input and suggestions on how to reach the communities that primarily speak the required languages in their county. Accessibility workshops also allow counties to demonstrate the use of accessible voting equipment and services, and to disseminate information on accessibility and language services during the voting period.

The VCA expands language services beyond the minimum precinct-level requirement under state law, making language access more broadly available throughout the county. Election materials are translated into all languages required for each county. At vote centers, signage must also be translated into those required languages so as to inform voters of their rights and to allow voters fair participation in the election process. VCA counties further support language access through placement of bi-lingual election workers at vote centers and through relay-based call centers with multi-lingual operators.

Vote centers are a keystone for enhanced accessibility for voters. Counties are required to place vote centers in proximity to public transportation and disability access (such as Los Angeles County routes that are supported by ACCESS transportation services for community members with disabilities). Prior to a facility being used as a vote center, an accessibility survey is conducted to ensure any features that will prevent accessibility are remedied or addressed. Inside the vote center, accessible voting equipment and ballot marking devices – with features such as tactile navigation tools like sip and puff, pointers, screen contrast, and adjustable font size – are required. These devices can also allow for touchscreen and audio assistance or switch the language in which the information is presented.

The VCA model allows for enhanced election security measures. In addition to the standard election security protocols that call for the use of tamper-evident seals, chain-of-custody procedures, routine back-up systems, and audit trails, the Voter's Choice Act allows for additional checks. Official ballot drop boxes provide a secure, accessible method for voters to return their completed vote by mail ballots. Drop boxes are secured, often installed in public facilities, and use tamper-evident seals and multiple locking mechanisms. Vote center staff can confirm registration and ballot status in real-time through electronic pollbooks or rosters at any vote center in the county, including the Registrar of Voter's office. This system is used to maintain eligible voter files, check in voters as they vote and prevent voters from voting twice.

Operating fewer vote center locations, when compared to the polling place model, also allows for increased physical security. Typically, electronic poll books are locked in secure storage areas when not in use. Network access is used for electronic pollbooks or rosters, but always on a closed network (direct connection through the vote center location or through a closed cellular or wi-fi connection). Limited voter information is communicated through secure connections and encrypted files and all devices are restricted to only what is required, with any unnecessary features disabled. The increased cyber protection prevents unauthorized access to election systems. As is the law in California, voting

systems are never connected to the internet and are secured according to the strict provisions of the California Voting Systems Standards. All counties, regardless of voting model, partner with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to review protocols and share information to ensure the safety of voters and staff.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The Voter's Choice Act continues to provide voters more days, and more ways, to vote. The accessibility provided by the VCA, through its focus on language services and disability access, is a highlight of the voting model and a critical aspect of its performance. The resiliency of the model was tested during the November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election. Though vote centers represent a significant effort – requiring resources to secure, staff, and equip locations – VCA counties did have to find fewer sites, and those centers could serve every voter in their respective counties. However, at some vote centers where in-person demand was particularly high, there were reports of long lines and extended wait times. The short notice of the election made it difficult to conduct some of the outreach and education activities that are often important to voter engagement. Heightened media attention may have increased general awareness, but it is not a substitute for targeted, accessible, in-language, and community-based voter education.

Funding provided by the state to the counties, in the form of a pre-imburement, was critical in allowing county election officials to successfully administer the election on such a compressed timeline. Securing vote center locations, hiring staff, procuring needed supplies, and getting ballots and election materials into the hands of the voters in approximately 45 days created a financial burden that counties, most of which had already approved budgets for their fiscal years, would have been hard pressed to manage. By providing funding for the administration of the election, the state alleviated a major concern on the part of county officials.

Ultimately, the November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election is best understood not as a routine VCA election, but as an election conducted under unusual and temporary conditions that complicate any straightforward assessment of the VCA model itself. Counties were required to administer a prominent statewide contest on an accelerated timetable, under modified vote center requirements and altered language-access procedures, while questions remained about how to preserve outreach, accessibility, and public confidence. The election produced substantial participation, but turnout alone does not fully answer whether all voters were served equally well. For that reason, the November 4, 2025, Statewide Special Election experience should inform concrete standards for future VCA special elections so that compressed timelines do not become a recurring occasion to dilute the access protections that the VCA was designed to provide, particularly for voters who depend most on in-person access, language assistance, disability

accommodations, and targeted voter education and outreach.¹⁶ These standards include exploring minimum notice periods before ballot-mailing deadlines, preserving translation and disability-access consultation requirements, and reviewing vote center baseline, or minimum, ratios so that they are calibrated to realistic turnout expectations in high-salience contests.

Notwithstanding the challenges of the election being called so close to Election Day, turnout for the election was substantial and, in many areas, notably high. In some locations, that demand coincided with long lines and extended wait times for in-person voting services. For reference, the turnout compared favorably with figures for the 2021 Gubernatorial Recall, as well as special elections in 2009 and 2005, and the 2003 Gubernatorial Recall. Once this Task Force is able to review data from VoteCal and the university reports from the Voting Rights Project, we may be able to draw additional conclusions about opportunities to improve voter engagement and further reduce barriers to in-person service during future statewide special elections.

¹⁶ It ought to be noted that SB 280 waived the following existing statutory requirements: *EC 9040 (a) Every constitutional amendment, bond measure, or other legislative measure submitted to the people by the Legislature shall appear on the ballot of the first statewide election occurring at least 131 days after the adoption of the proposal by the Legislature; and EC 12000 For each statewide election, the Governor shall issue a proclamation calling the election. The proclamation shall be issued by the Governor under his or her hand and the Great Seal of the state no later than the 148th day prior to the election and shall state the time of the election and the offices, if any, to be filled.*