



Immediate Release

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New Rose Institute Study Analyzes California's Transition to Vote-by-Mail Elections

CLAREMONT, CA – California's transition to a universal vote-by-mail system has transformed how elections are administered in the nation's most populous state. A new report from the Rose Institute of State and Local Government, [*Democracy Delayed: The Operational and Partisan Impacts of California's Election Administration System*](#), examines how the transition has affected election administration. The transition to all vote-by-mail elections began with the 2016 Voter's Choice Act (SB 450), which allowed counties to opt in to all-mail elections. In 2021, AB 37 completed the statewide transition, with all counties formally adopting universal vote-by-mail.

While this transition increased ease of access to voting, it raised concerns over ballot-processing times. California routinely began tabulating ballots at a slower pace, drawing national attention as some razor-thin races took weeks to resolve. One week after the 2024 Presidential election, more than two million ballots remained uncounted, and the results of seven congressional races were still uncertain.

This report explores the effects of this transition at the county level through analysis of Unprocessed Ballot Reports from the California Secretary of State. The results indicated that following initial delays, counties generally became more efficient the longer they used the new system, suggesting that institutional learning plays a key role in improving ballot-processing speed. Notably, these findings indicate that slower processing is not inherent to vote-by-mail elections and that California's overall efficiency may improve in future cycles as counties continue refining their procedures.

Beyond administrative challenges, the report identifies small but meaningful partisan effects, especially in close contests. Across four recent election cycles, eight US House races experienced a change in the leading candidate as ballots continued to be counted. In most of these cases, an initial Republican lead flipped to a Democratic victory. This can be attributed to a measurable advantage among late-tabulated votes. Democratic candidates in these key races maintained a consistent advantage in ballots tabulated 14 or even 21 days after the election was held.

The report also finds that Democrats won large net margins among cured ballots, which are ballots flagged for signature or submission issues and later corrected by voters. In 2024, cured ballots almost certainly played a decisive role in the razor-thin victories of Democrats Adam Gray (CA-13) and Derek Tran (CA-45).

As national control of Congress becomes increasingly dependent on a handful of tightly contested districts, California's election administration procedures have taken on heightened political significance. Looking forward, this report suggests that continued institutional learning may improve processing speed while ensuring vote accessibility for millions of voters. However, the notable partisan effects of these laws will ensure that these procedures may remain in the national spotlight in upcoming election cycles.

This report was authored by Keith Maben '28 with support from Professor Andrew Sinclair, Professor Shanna Rose, and Justin Levitt '06.

About the Rose Institute of State and Local Government

The Rose Institute of State and Local Government was founded at Claremont McKenna College in 1973. A leading resource for information on California state and local governments, the Rose Institute pursues research projects on elections, government institutions, public opinion, and policy. It also maintains extensive state and local demographic, economic, and political databases. For more than 50 years, the Institute has fulfilled its mission to enhance the education of students at CMC, produce high-quality research, and promote public understanding on issues of state and local government, politics, and policy, with an emphasis on California. For more information, visit <https://roseinstitute.cmc.edu/>.

About Claremont McKenna College

Claremont McKenna College is a private, 1,300-student residential liberal arts college located east of Los Angeles in Southern California. Since 1946, the College's mission has been to prepare students for thoughtful and productive lives and responsible leadership in business, government, and the professions. Renowned for its [Open Academy](#) commitments to freedom of expression, viewpoint diversity, and constructive dialogue, as well as expertise in economics and government, Claremont McKenna also features an accomplished faculty of scholars and committed teachers in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Students are drawn to the College's unparalleled offerings, including 11 research institutes and centers; the ability to conduct research one-on-one with faculty; and access to leaders, artists, and visionaries who

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