

COUNTY OF EL DORADO

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The Facts about Mail and Absentee Ballots

There has been a lot of incorrect information spread about mail and “absentee” ballots. Below are the facts.

Myth: “Absentee” ballots are ballots requested by a voter.

FACT: An absentee ballot has become an outdated term. It existed many years ago because people would have to stipulate they would be absent from home and therefore need a ballot mailed to them to be able to vote. Since no-excuse mail voting was allowed decades ago the term “absentee” was changed to vote-by-mail ballot and is only in the California elections code once.

Myth: Mail ballots and “Absentee” Ballots are different and therefore mail ballots are more prone to fraud or not counted.

FACT: The only difference between a mail ballot and an “absentee” ballot is that an “absentee” ballot is requested and mail ballot is sent. That’s it. The ballots are exactly the same, mailed in the exact same envelope, and undergo the EXACT same security parameters as an absentee ballot. Every mail and absentee ballot is issued and tracked the same and must be signature verified to be accepted and counted. As a matter of fact, when mail ballots are returned we cannot tell the difference between them and an “absentee” ballot. In California there are no longer “absentee” ballots.

Myth: Mail ballots are new.

FACT: Mail ballots have been around in California for DECADES. Mail ballots have been used by election officials to provide balloting to people who live in small precincts or remote areas of their counties. Those voters are in an area too small or too remote to feasibly put a voting location, so they are automatically mailed a ballot. The California Secretary of State’s Office created a fascinating history of mail ballots dating back to 1863:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/vQIilVsZ0FNiLg>

Myth: Mail ballots are sent to EVERYONE: deceased; out of state; out of country; illegal; not registered.

FACT: Mail ballots are only mailed to **eligible, registered voters**. We work very hard to update our voter records. When receiving information from many sources, we actively remove deceased and imprisoned voters, and update records of voters who have moved either in-county, out of county but in-state, or out of state. We rely on many sources and make these changes daily as we receive them. In counties, like El Dorado where nearly 80% of voters were already absentee/mail, it makes good fiscal sense and serves voters far better to become a Vote Center county where the remaining 20% are also mailed a ballot and all voters have the option to instead vote in person. We do not always receive timely information about deceased voters, and with the number of people moving those records can takes weeks or months to reach us.

Myth: Mail ballots are more prone to fraud.

FACT: Every mail ballot returned is checked against YOUR signature that YOU provided when registering just like an absentee ballot. In addition, election staff undergo hours of signature verification training regularly to ensure they can identify a fraudulent signature while Government Code specifies the verification process (California Code of Regulations Title 2. Administration Division 7. Secretary of state CHAPTER 8.3. SIGNATURE VERIFICATION, BALLOT PROCESSING, AND BALLOT COUNTING). If someone were to try to commit fraud, they would have to submit hundreds to thousands of fake registrations and signatures, obviously throwing off the registration to population numbers. If a ballot is mailed to a deceased voter, or to a location where the person moved, that ballot either comes back to us or the person receiving it can contact us.

Myth: There is something wrong when a voter is mailed more than one vote by mail ballot, and that voter can vote more than once.

FACT: There are many valid reasons for a voter to be issued more than one vote by mail ballot: the voter changed their registration information after their ballot was mailed, triggering a replacement ballot to be sent; a voter calls our office because they have not received their ballot yet, so a replacement is sent then the original shows up in the mail, etc. There are systems and processes in place to ensure only one ballot is accepted from a voter and counted. Every ballot received back is tracked and only the first one received is accepted for tabulation if the signature matches. We can identify and track anyone who submits more than one ballot and stop it from being counted. We then use that information to determine if there was intentional fraud.

Myth: Ballots mailed to voters who have moved can be voted by others living at that address.

FACT: Election mail is not forwardable and as such, is returned as undeliverable to the elections office if the postal service knows they are not at the address. This allows us to update the voters' records to indicate the ballot came back to us as undeliverable, moved, etc. and receive third-party change of address information if a forwarding request is on file with the postal service. Furthermore, if there is no formal notification they have moved, and a person at that address decides to commit a felony, the signature verification process described earlier will detect forgeries returned by someone other than the voter. They would have to be an expert at forgery to vote it and send it back.

Myth: Mail ballots don't let me vote in person. I need to tear up my mail ballot when I vote in person.

FACT: You are welcome to tear up your ballot and vote in person, but we are also happy to simply stamp it SPOILED for you when you come in. We issue you a new ballot in person because we account for EVERY ballot we issue. Tearing up your ballot wastes taxpayer money because the ballot you are issued at a polling place or vote center is the same ballot you received in the mail. Vote in person if you like to, many of us do.

Myth: There are people who register and return hundreds of mail ballot and the elections department doesn't know.

FACT: We track population and eligible voter population in El Dorado County. We know how many people are eligible to vote based on annual census data. If the number of registered voters increases to or above that number, we begin investigating. Additionally, for someone, or a group of people, to perpetrate that fraud. They would have to complete hundreds or thousands of registrations (without us noticing) using a variety of signatures, then replicate all of those signatures in every election when they mail the hundreds or thousands of ballots back. There are too many security processes in place for this scheme to work on a scale large enough to affect the outcome of an election.

Myth: There is no way for me to know if my ballot was received and counted.

FACT: You can sign up at the website below to receive text, email, or phone updates of when your ballot is received and counted. Or you can call our office anytime. Ballots put in drop boxes are generally processed and counted within 48-72 hours of when you drop it, and you can check that yourself. <https://california.ballottrax.net/voter/>

FACT: With the recent Caldor fire thousands of displaced residents were able to vote because they had already received a mail ballot before evacuation. We were also able to use mail/absentee ballots as a tool to go to evacuation centers, parking lots, fields, RV parks, and to Nevada because the mail ballot can be issued to people who cannot get to a vote center. People who were evacuated and went to stay with friends and relatives throughout the country could take their mail ballot with them or request a replacement that we mailed directly to their new location. Additionally, we issued hundreds of mail/absentee ballots to firefighters who were in our county fighting the fires. Even with the evacuations and displaced voters we still had a 71.5% turnout -- among the highest in the state.

Here is one last fact: 94% of all ballots cast in the last several elections in El Dorado County were by mail. Approximately 6% were voted in person. El Dorado County has consistently had the highest number of absentee/mail ballot registrations as well as the highest turn election turnout.

If you are concerned about mailing your ballot you can drop it any County collected drop box, vote center, or our office. Or, go to any vote center or our office and vote in person.