

2018 Election Observation Report: Primary and General Elections

January 28, 2019 | [California Secretary of State](#) | [@CASOSvote](#)

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Introduction

This report summarizes the work of the Election Observation Program conducted by the Secretary of State (SOS) during the June 5, 2018, Statewide Direct Primary Election (Primary Election) and the November 6, 2018, General Election (General Election).

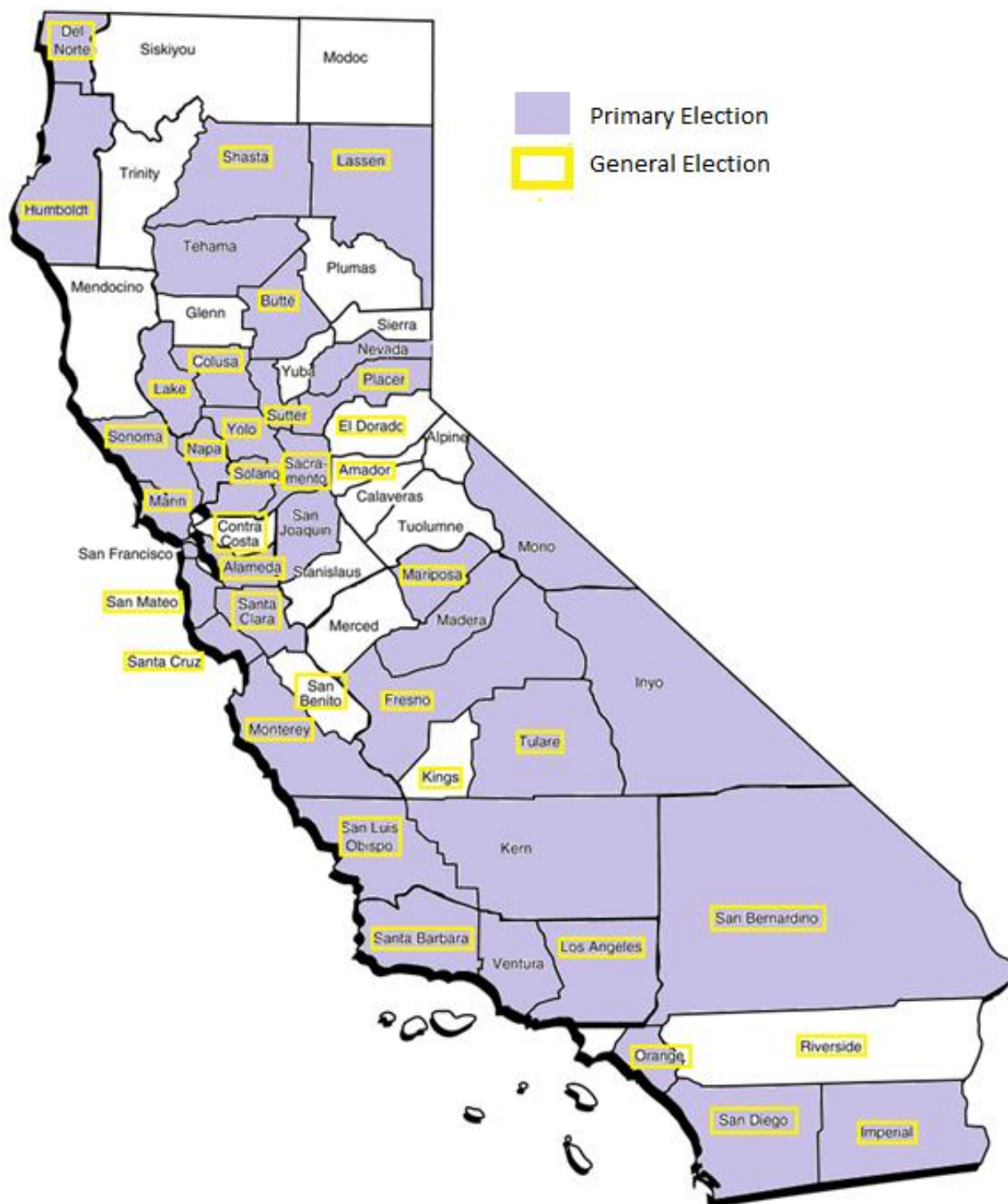
This election season saw over 7.1 million ballots cast in the Primary Election and over 12.7 million ballots cast in the General Election in over 24,000 precincts. SOS observers witnessed first-hand the dedication county elections officials and poll workers showed toward voters throughout the state.

The SOS sent 32 observers during the Primary Election and 34 observers during the General Election to polling places throughout California. These observers visited 37 counties during the Primary and 36 during the General Election. The SOS also had observers attend poll worker training with county elections offices throughout the state.

The observers visited over 800 polling places and over 200 vote centers throughout the election season. They talked to poll workers, voters, and elections officials. They observed voting conditions, reported on issues they observed, and recorded observations on how well elections are conducted in our state.

Map of Counties Visited

Below is a map of the counties visited by the SOS observers during 2018. The counties marked in purple were visited during the Primary Election, and the counties with names boxed in yellow were visited during the General Election.



Overview

In the General Election, over four million voters cast ballots at polling places on Election Day. These voters were largely met with responsive poll workers and accessible poll sites. In addition, many of the over 8.3 million vote-by-mail voters took the opportunity to drop-off their ballots at polling places throughout the state on Election Day. Polling places and vote centers (*see below*) were busy, but they were well-organized with few issues reported by observers.

Despite aging voting equipment used statewide in both elections, issues with voting systems seemed to have been kept to a minimum. A large majority of voters cast their ballot with no problems. For issues with registration or equipment, the use of provisional ballots helped California lead the nation in ensuring every voter was able to cast a ballot and have that ballot counted.

Overall, this election season was conducted smoothly with only a few issues. It was also the first election cycle involving vote centers and the outcome was a success (*see below*). This was largely due to the tremendous efforts of elections officials throughout the state. Despite very complicated and contentious ballot races, voters were served with knowledgeable poll workers, hardworking officials, dedicated outreach and education efforts, and third party polling place monitoring programs.

California Voter's Choice Act

The California Voter's Choice Act law was passed in 2016 to modernize elections in California by allowing counties to conduct elections under a new model which provides greater flexibility and convenience for voters. Under this model, vote centers were created to replace traditional polling places.

Vote Centers

In 2018, the five counties of Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento and San Mateo adopted the Voter's Choice Act (VCA). Voters had the freedom to cast a ballot in-person at any vote center in their county instead of being tied to a single polling location. Vote centers look and feel like polling places, but provide additional modern features to make voting easy and convenient.

At any vote center in a participating county, a voter may:

- Vote in-person
- Drop off their ballot
- Register to vote or update their voter registration
- Get a replacement ballot
- Vote using an accessible voting machine
- Get help and voting material in multiple languages

Voter Turnout

This election season was the first time vote centers were implemented. Because of that, some voters were confused about what they were able to do at a vote center opposed to a traditional polling location. In the Primary Election, there were eight observers and in the General Election there were seven observers for all five vote center counties.

During the Primary election, all five counties exceeded the statewide turnout rate of 37.5%. Four of the five counties saw voter turnout that was higher than the county average during statewide gubernatorial primaries during the previous 20 years.

County	June 5, 2018 Primary Election Turnout	Historical Average – Gubernatorial Primaries (1994-2014)
Madera	44.14%	44.75%
Napa	49.24%	46.28%
Nevada	56.94%	50.64%
Sacramento	41.94%	37.47%
San Mateo	44.32%	35.76%

The turnout almost doubled during the General Election, all five counties exceeded the statewide turnout rate of 64.5%. All five counties saw voter turnout that was higher than the county average during statewide gubernatorial general elections during the previous 20 years.

County	November 6, 2018 General Election Turnout	Historical Average – Gubernatorial General Elections (1994-2014)
Madera	67.87%	59.72%
Napa	73.12%	63.85%
Nevada	79.76%	70.37%
Sacramento	68.23%	58.29%
San Mateo	72.63%	59.16%

To learn more about vote centers and the Voter's Choice Act please visit:

<https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voters-choice-act>

Poll Worker Training

All observers attended poll worker training in the counties observed during both the General and Primary Election. Observers responded positively about the training for poll workers. They commended many counties for having helpful and engaging presentations. The presenters were friendly, knowledgeable and encouraged trainee participation.

However, a few observers noted that the training sessions only covered a few of the relevant topics and skipped over important subjects such as aiding voters with disabilities. Training sessions about Election Day should be useful and prepare the poll worker for their duties to best serve all voters.

Help Provided to Counties on Election Day

On Election Day, observers were able to assist county elections officials to identify specific problem(s) experienced by voters so that the problems could be resolved.

Signage

During both the Primary and General Elections there were issues about signage either being too small or not visible. Many observers also noted the “No Electioneering Beyond this Point” signs were not 100 feet away or posted. Observers were able to inform the poll workers about signage problems and how to properly display them.

Street Parking and Public Transportation

Several locations did not have enough on-street parking available. Therefore, many voters parked illegally with their emergency blinkers on and ran inside to vote or drop off their ballot. Many observers also noted that public transportation was not walking distance on Election Day for several locations.

Voter Privacy

Observers reported multiple locations had no privacy booths. Voter privacy is not only a courtesy, it is a legal requirement. When prompted by observers, counties were sometimes able to coordinate temporary privacy for such polling places.

Further Observations

Observers also noted more observations but were unable to take action to fix the problem(s) on Election Day. However, after the election, SOS contacted all observed counties and informed them about what they can improve on for future elections. The Secretary of State's office will continue to share observations and work with counties so corrective actions may be taken.

Poll Workers

Of the polling places observed, two percent (2%) during both the Primary and General Election had an inadequate number of staff. During the Primary Election one percent (1%) of polling places was observed as having unhelpful, unknowledgeable, and/or unfriendly poll workers. While during the General Election the percentage increased to six percent (6%).

Counties generally have an idea of how frequent poll workers drop out on or before Election Day and take steps to ensure adequate coverage. Some counties overbook high-risk polling places, some counties rely heavily on veteran volunteers with a good track record, and some counties have specific plans to combat attrition through contacts and reminders. A better understanding of the reasons for such attrition may help a county determine best practices, and so efforts to survey and seek feedback from successful poll workers as well as dropouts may yield valuable and sharable insight.

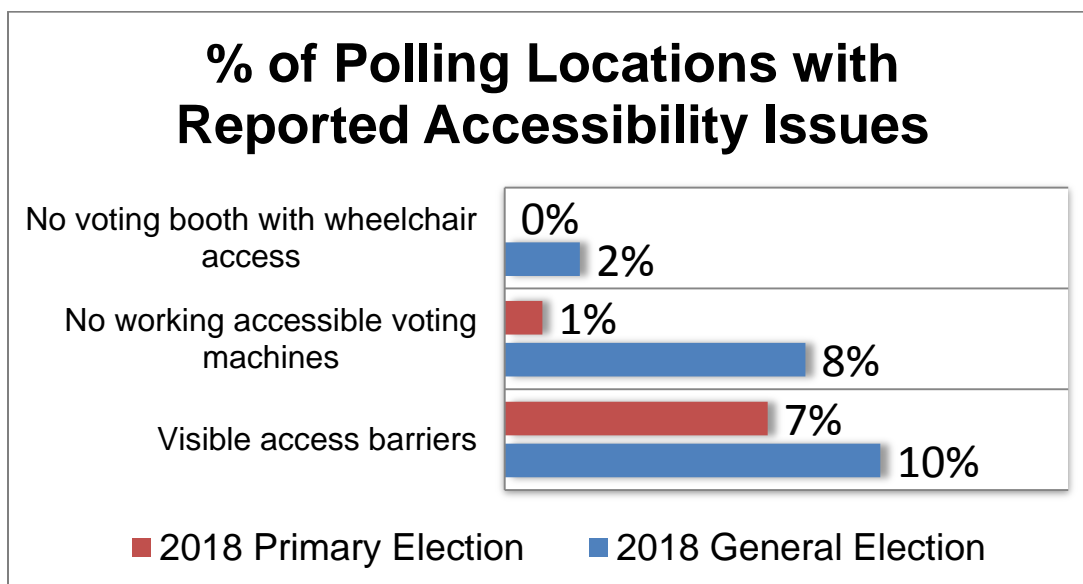
Bilingual Poll Workers

One of the biggest issues during this election season was ensuring there were enough bilingual speakers present and clearly identified. Twenty-six percent (26%) of polling places observed on Election Day (Primary) either did not have a bilingual poll worker present and/or was not clearly identified. This number increased to thirty-five percent (35%) during the General Election.

Elections Code §12303(c) requires county elections officials to make reasonable efforts to recruit bilingual poll workers for any precinct in which 3% or more of the voting-age residents are members of a single language minority. Bilingual poll workers must be wearing a name tag, button, sticker, lanyard, or other mechanism clearly identifying which language(s) they can provide assistance (Elections Code §12303). Increasing the number of bilingual poll workers (if applicable), ensuring bilingual poll workers are clearly identified, and improving the quality of services should continue to be a priority.

Accessible Polling Places

Overall, observers noted that during the election season counties did well ensuring most locations were compliant with accessibility codes.



If a polling place is designated as inaccessible because it cannot be made accessible with mitigating measures, poll workers will need to direct voters with disabilities to a nearby accessible polling place or provide curbside voting (*see below*). Therefore, poll workers must be prepared to provide voters with disabilities from other precincts the opportunity to cast provisional ballots.

The Secretary of State works with county elections offices and the Department of Rehabilitation to provide training and support for finding accessible polling sites and for mitigating potential barriers. These efforts have resulted in a marked increase on the awareness of accessibility issues and a marked increase of their resolution.

Curbside Voting

A large majority of observers noted that curbside voting was not available at many polling places. If a polling place is not fully accessible on Election Day (Election Codes §14282), then curbside voting should be offered. If curbside voting cannot be made available, other alternatives for accessible voting need to be in place.

Procedures for curbside voting include:

- Taking the voter list, ballot marking pen, and ballot (in a secrecy sleeve) outside to the voter.
- Removing the receipt stub before giving the ballot and stub to the voter.
- Allowing the voter to mark the ballot in private.

- Taking the voted ballot in the secrecy sleeve and marking pen back into the polling place and inserting the voted ballot into the ballot box or scanner.
- Properly recording the voters who have been assisted in marking their ballots.

(Election Codes §14283)

Notices and Materials

During both the Primary and General Election, several observers reported the Voter Bill of Rights posters, election date, and polling place hours weren't posted at several polling sites. All materials and notices provided to each county needs to be properly displayed and easily accessible to all voters and voters with disabilities on Election Day.

Election Day posting requirements include:

- Flags (and how to properly hang them and ensure they are easily visible to guide voters to the polling place),
- Voter Bill of Rights posters (which the law requires to be “conspicuously posted both inside and outside every polling place”),
- Updated rosters or voter lists, election date and polling place hours,
- The correct number of translated sample ballots for all precincts at the polling place in all required languages,
- A sign identifying which languages voting assistance is provided in at that polling place or Vote Center,
- Instructions on how to cast a provisional ballot,
- Instructions for mail-in registrants and first-time voters,
- Information on electoral procedure (notices specified in Section 9083.5)
- For partisan primary elections, posters and/or other materials describing the partisan primary election process, and
- Information on federal and state laws regarding fraud and misrepresentation (e.g., a sign warning against tampering with voting equipment).

(Election Code §§ 2300(d)(2), 14105, 14105.1, 14105.2, 14105.3, 14200-14202, 18564)

Polling Place Size

Based on the locations the observers visited, two percent (2%) of the locations during the Primary Election were noted as being too small to fully accommodate a polling place. This number increased to five percent (5%) during the General Election.

All polling locations should be the appropriate size. When a location is too small it creates longer lines, increases noise levels, and decreases privacy.

Possible Best Practices

Observers made note of the activities and procedures they believed to be well executed, impressive, or ingenious. These practices and procedures should be looked at and emulated where appropriate.

Hands-On Training and Presentations

In several counties, poll worker training courses involved hands-on exercises with voting equipment, voter rolls, and various Election Day procedures. Many observers expressed how helpful hands-on training was for themselves and those around them. Also, many noted the PowerPoint presentations used were both informative and engaging.

Electronic Polling Place Lookup

In many jurisdictions it is common for voters to show up at an incorrect polling location. At polling sites containing multiple precincts, directing voters to the appropriate ballots often involves learning where they live and determining which precinct they belong to.

The Secretary of State developed the “My Voter Status” website. Californians have access to check their voter status, find their polling place or vote center, and much more.

A voter can:

- Check if they are registered to vote.
- Check where they are registered to vote.
- Check their political party preference.
- Check their language preference for election materials.
- Check the status of their vote-by-mail or provisional ballot.
- Find their polling place.
- Find information for upcoming local and state elections.
- Find contact information for their county elections office.
- Choose how they want to receive their state and county voter guides before each election.

To learn more about “My Voter Status” please visit: <https://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov>

More Information

For more information about California Elections, please visit the Secretary of State's Election Website at <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections>.