



**25<sup>th</sup> Annual  
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## **2009 Professional Practices Program**

# **VOTE-BY-MAIL REJECTION REDUCTION PROGRAM A SUCCESS STORY**

**Contra Costa County, California**

**Submitted by:**

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# **CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA VOTE-BY-MAIL REJECTION REDUCTION PROGRAM A SUCCESS STORY**

Since the November 1996 Election, the County Clerk has collected, analyzed and written a report on VBM and provisional balloting after each major election.

In 1996, Contra Costa County's 7<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District contest was decided by 700 votes, out of just over 300,000 ballots cast. A hand recount was requested. Some 25,000 ballots were counted, yielding virtually no change, and the recount was dropped.

In preparing for the recount, the County Clerk noted that Countywide, 3,261 "absentee" or vote-by-mail (VBM) ballots were rejected out of 84,080 VBM ballots cast (almost 4%). The main reason for rejecting such ballots was that they arrived late, after 8:00 p.m. on Election Day (see Attachment A, "Total Disqualified Vote-By-Mail Ballots," and Attachment B, "Vote-By-Mail Balloting Rejection Statistics"). Through the 1990's, California law liberalized the use of VBM ballots, and the political parties discovered that they could use such ballots as a way to enhance their chances for victory by targeting VBM voters in their campaigns.

In a close contest, the rejected VBM ballots could tip the results. In our 1996 Senatorial race, the winner actually did better in the VBM category, and no attempt was made to challenge the rejected ballots. Surprisingly, neither party paid much attention to the rejected ballots.

For the next Election (June 1998 Primary), the Elections Department designed a colorful notification sheet that went out with every VBM ballot. It stated that to qualify, the ballot had to be received at the Elections Office or any Contra Costa County polling place by 8:00 p.m. Election night and that postmarks didn't count. The rejection rate for late ballots went down 25%.

So, for the November 1998 Election, a similar notification sheet was mailed with VBM ballots and included the top reasons VBM ballots were rejected. In addition to late-arriving ballots, the lack of a voter's signature or an incorrect signature could also cause the ballot to be rejected. The results: rejected ballots were reduced by half! (See Attachment C, "Important Information.." notification.)

At the March 2004 Primary Election, late ballots spiked for no obvious reason. The "late" category more than doubled over the previous Election. The Clerk analyzed late VBM ballots by issue type. (See Attachment D, "Vote-By-Mail Ballot Disposition" charts.) He found that late mandatory vote-by-mail precincts jumped from 1% to 11.5% for that Election. (Contra Costa County used a business-reply account to pay the return postage on mandatory vote-by-mail ballots.) A check with the Post Office found that the "business reply" account clerk who handled this mail was absent on the Monday and Tuesday of Election week, had no backup, and the mail just sat!

What could be worse? We require the voter to vote by mail, offer to pay the return postage, and then the ballot is rejected because an accounting postal clerk was absent! The VBM ballots that would have arrived on Monday and Tuesday arrived on Wednesday; too late to count. Knowing this, we met with the Post Office and discussed not only this problem but our whole program to reduce late VBM balloting. The Post Office agreed to monitor business-

**CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA  
VOTE-BY-MAIL REJECTION REDUCTION PROGRAM  
A SUCCESS STORY**

Page 2

reply processing. In addition, we established pre- and post- election meetings with our postal partners as part of our regular election calendar. Another benefit of these meetings was the agreement that the Post Office would allow us to “sweep” all of our Post Office facilities after 5:00 p.m. on Election Day.

What else could we do to reduce rejected VBM ballots? With the tremendous growth of VBM in California, our efforts to reduce the rejection rate for VBM ballots has become more important (VBM comprised over 50% of our vote in the last six major elections in Contra Costa County). With funding from HAVA and our County, we added a major newspaper advertising campaign for the past three General Elections (November 2004, November 2006 and November 2008), which focused on how to successfully return a vote-by-mail ballot.

Our data indicates that a program to reduce rejection rates for VBM ballots seems to improve when coupled with a major newspaper effort. The reduction in our rate of rejection for those three Elections was dramatic. While we accommodated more VBM voters for the November 2008 Presidential Election than ever, our total rejection rate was less than 0.7%. If you compare our base year of November 1996 to November 2008, we experienced an almost ten-fold decrease in the rate of late ballot rejection. (See Attachment E, advertising graphic.) It is unfortunate that HAVA funds can no longer be used for such purposes and local funds for such optional voter education programs are gone.

While not as large in numbers, our reduction in the rejection rate for “no signature” ballots has also been dramatic. Once we became aware of the large number of voted ballots that are returned without the required voter’s signature, we developed a system to capture such ballots the day they are received. We are usually able to return the ballot to the voter that same day with explicit instructions as to what is required to have the ballot counted (voter’s signature is needed and the ballot must be returned by 8:00 p.m. Election Day).

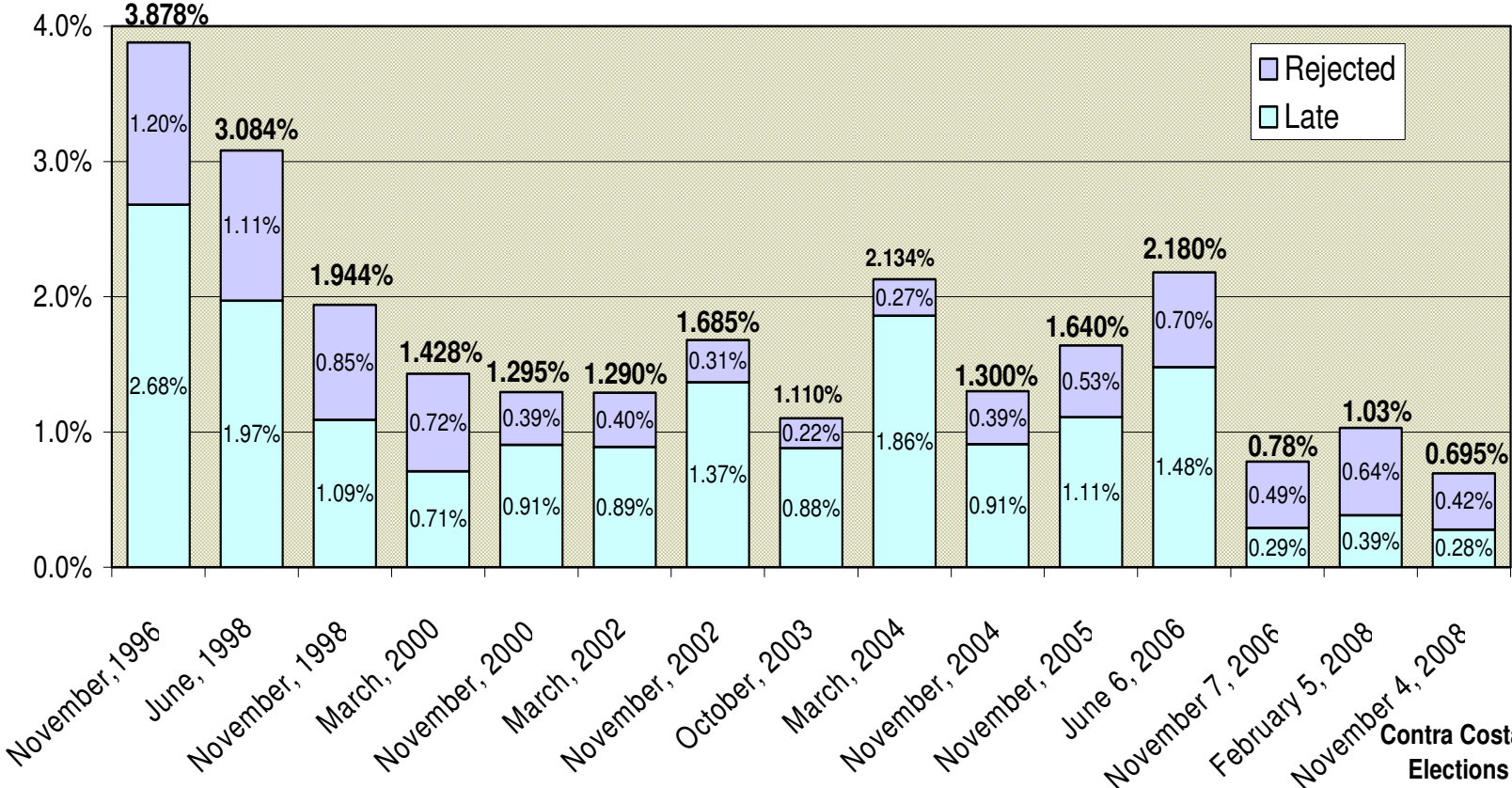
The Contra Costa County Elections Office continues to review and analyze VBM data to inform and improve the success rate of our voters. We believe that with more use and more familiarity of the VBM process, our voters will “get it right” with proper education. There is no doubt that the collection, analysis and remediation practices from our program have been a big success.

Perhaps equally important to our measured success is the realization that by collecting and analyzing our own data, we are better prepared to anticipate and to design programs to partner with our voters to improve the election process. We continually look for other situations where data collection and analysis can identify areas for improvement within the organization.

Stephen L. Weir  
Contra Costa County Clerk-Recorder  
May 21, 2009

SLW:ceb  
Attachments

**Total Disqualified Vote-By-Mail Ballots  
 Contra Costa County  
 (Late and Rejected)**



**Contra Costa County  
 Elections Office**

**CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA  
VOTE-BY-MAIL REJECTION REDUCTION PROGRAM  
A SUCCESS STORY**

**VOTE-BY-MAIL BALLOTING  
REJECTION STATISTICS<sup>1</sup>  
TOP THREE CAUSES SUMMARY**

**ATTACHMENT B**

	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>		<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
<b><u>November 2008:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		234,043		<b><u>November 2002:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		95,029	
	Total Rejected:		1,625	0.69%		Total Rejected:		1,601	1.69%
	Late:	665	0.28%			Late:	1,304	1.37%	
	No Signature:	96	0.04%			No Signature:	84	0.08%	
	Bad/Wrong Signature:	858	0.37%			Bad/Wrong Signature:	213	0.22%	
<b><u>June 2008:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		118,092		<b><u>March 2002:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		58,519	
	Total Rejected:		1,909	1.61%		Total Rejected:		755	1.29%
	Late:	1,136	0.96%			Late:	541	0.92%	
	No Signature:	41	0.03%			No Signature:	76	0.13%	
	Bad/Wrong Signature:	730	0.55%			Bad/Wrong Signature:	122	0.21%	
<b><u>February 2008:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		171,326		<b><u>November 2000:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		117,392	
	Total Rejected:		1,742	1.02%		Total Rejected:		1,525	1.30%
	Late:	658	0.39%			Late:	1,075	0.92%	
	No Signature:	148	0.09%			No Signature:	207	0.18%	
	Bad/Wrong Signature:	936	0.55%			Bad/Wrong Signature:	149	0.13%	
<b><u>November 2006:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		161,537		<b><u>March 2000:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		80,091	
	Total Rejected:		1,226	0.76%		Total Rejected:		1,144	1.43%
	Late:	471	0.29%			Late:	571	0.71%	
	No Signature:	145	0.09%			No Signature: <sup>2</sup>	158	0.20%	
	Bad/Wrong Signature:	602	0.37%			Bad/Wrong Signature:	77	0.10%	
<b><u>June 2006:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		113,361		<b><u>November 1998:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		95,890	
	Total Rejected:		2,459	2.17%		Total Rejected:		1,864	1.94%
	Late:	1,682	1.48%			Late:	1,046	1.09%	
	No Signature:	288	0.25%			No Signature:	309	0.32%	
	Bad/Wrong Signature:	480	0.42%			Bad/Wrong Signature: <sup>3</sup>	105	0.11%	
<b><u>November 2004:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		158,993		<b><u>June 1998:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		70,845	
	Total Rejected:		2,073	1.30%		Total Rejected:		2,185	3.08%
	Late:	1,447	0.91%			Late:	1,399	1.98%	
	No Signature:	53	0.03%			No Signature:	331	0.47%	
	Bad/Wrong Signature:	446	0.28%			Bad/Wrong Signature:	114	0.16%	
<b><u>March 2004:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		98,433		<b><u>November 1996:</u></b>	Total Submitted:		84,080	
	Total Rejected:		2,075	2.11%		Total Rejected:		3,261	3.88%
	Late:	1,826	1.86%			Late:	2,254	2.68%	
	No Signature:	15	0.02%			No Signature:	468	0.56%	
	Bad/Wrong Signature:	203	0.21%			Bad/Wrong Signature:	247	0.29%	

<sup>1</sup>Only includes major reasons ballots are rejected

<sup>2</sup>Began aggressive collection and return of absentee ballots without signature

<sup>3</sup>Included statement on the need for signatures to look similar

### IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE RETURN OF ABSENTEE BALLOTS

**ABSENTEE BALLOTS ARE MEANT TO BE RETURNED BY MAIL.** The deadline for the return of absentee ballots is 8:00 p.m. Election Day. Ballots received after 8:00 p.m. will not be counted. The Elections Office has more time to process the returned absentee ballots if they are returned before Election Day. If they are not going to be returned by mail, they must be returned as follows:

- **IN PERSON, RETURNING YOUR OWN BALLOT**—not your spouse’s or anyone else’s ballot.

Any day before the Election to the Elections Office at 524 Main Street, Martinez.  
Monday through Friday between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

- **AUTHORIZATION IF VOTER IS ILL OR DISABLED**

Same return time as above except that the authorization portion at the top of the return envelope must include the name of the person returning the ballot and the signature of the voter authorizing them to return it. It may be returned by the spouse, parent, grandparent, grandchild, brother or sister. If you are not ill or disabled, you must return it yourself by mail or in person and you cannot authorize your spouse or anyone else to return it for you.

*See other side for more information* 

### IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR SIGNATURE

**YOUR ABSENTEE BALLOT RETURN ENVELOPE MUST HAVE YOUR SIGNATURE ON IT.** An absentee ballot return envelope without your signature will not be counted.

- Your signature on the return envelope must look similar to the original signature on your voter registration card. Your signature should be written and not printed, **unless** you printed your signature on the original registration card.
- If you are ill or disabled and unable to sign your signature on your return absentee envelope, you must make an “x” and have it witnessed by two other people. A person with power of attorney cannot sign for you. Power of attorney is not valid for voting purposes. If there is no “x” with two witnesses, your ballot cannot be counted.

### TOP FOUR AVOIDABLE REASONS FOR DISQUALIFICATION

#1. **Absentee ballot arrives after 8:00 p.m. Election Day.** Postmarks do not count.

#2. **No signature.**

#3. **Unauthorized return.** You are responsible for your own ballot. Drop it in the mail or return it yourself. If you are ill or disabled, you may authorize a relative to return it for you by signing the authorization box on the return envelope.

#4. **Ballot is returned to the Elections Office in a plain envelope.** You must sign the return envelope with the penalty of perjury statement on it for it to count. If you lose the return envelope that was sent to you, call us at (925) 646-4160, and we will send you another one in the mail. You can always go to a polling place on Election Day and get a new return absentee envelope and drop it off at the polling place. If you use a blank return envelope at the polls, print your name, address and write your signature on it.

*See other side for more information* 

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A SUCCESS STORY**

**ATTACHMENT D**

**VOTE-BY-MAIL BALLOT DISPOSITION  
DISQUALIFIED AS LATE BY ISSUE TYPE**

<b>Issue Type</b>	<b>MARCH 2, 2004</b>		<b>NOVEMBER 2, 2004</b>	
	<b>Late</b>	<b>%*</b>	<b>Late</b>	<b>%*</b>
Mail	659	1.92%	710	1.21%
Mail Precinct	548	11.49%	107	1.04%
Military	3	7.89%	18	5.10%
Overseas	2	4.08%	57	4.59%
Permanent AV	611	1.05%	538	0.62%
Other	3		17	
<b>TOTAL LATE</b>	<b>1,826</b>	<b>1.86%</b>	<b>1,447</b>	<b>0.91%</b>

\* Percentage of total ballots returned in each category.

**VOTE-BY-MAIL BALLOT DISPOSITION  
DISQUALIFIED AS LATE BY ISSUE TYPE**

<b>Issue Type</b>	<b>FEBRUARY 5, 2008</b>		<b>NOVEMBER 4, 2008</b>	
	<b>Late</b>	<b>%*</b>	<b>Late</b>	<b>%*</b>
Mail	112	0.57%	211	0.75%
Mail Precinct	79	0.68%	55	0.29%
Military	5	4.13%	12	2.63%
Overseas	8	1.46%	45	2.44%
Perm, VBM	477	0.33%	314	0.17%
Other	7		28	
<b>TOTAL LATE</b>	<b>658</b>	<b>0.39%</b>	<b>665</b>	<b>0.28%</b>

\* Percentage of total ballots returned in each category.

