



Election 2020 Year End Report

An Overview of the 2020 Election Cycle in Nevada County, California

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October 2021

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Overview..... | 3 |
| Historic Snapshot of Nevada County Elections | 3 |
| The Voter’s Choice Act of 2016..... | 3 |
| Historic Registration and Turnout..... | 4 |
| Historic Overview of Vote-by-Mail in Nevada County..... | 6 |
| Provisional Voting Trends | 7 |
| Election Costs | 8 |
| 2020 Election Cycle..... | 9 |
| Voter Registration..... | 9 |
| Voter Turnout | 10 |
| Vote-by-Mail Return Methods..... | 11 |
| In Person Voting..... | 11 |
| Provisional Voting in 2020..... | 12 |
| Staffing the Election | 13 |
| Canvass and Post-Election Audit..... | 14 |
| Voter Education..... | 15 |
| Cybersecurity | 18 |
| Administering Elections During COVID-19..... | 18 |
| 2020 Estimated Elections Costs..... | 20 |
| Key Takeaways from the 2020 Election Cycle | 21 |
| About the Author | 21 |

Overview

This report on the 2020 election cycle in Nevada County is intended to inform the public about the administration of elections in the county and to offer a snapshot in time of the 2020 election cycle, from the perspectives of the Registrar and elections staff.

What follows is an historic overview of voter registration and turnout, vote-by-mail usage, election costs, and other important aspects of county-level election administration. It then offers data specific to the March 2020 Presidential Primary Election and the November 2020 General Presidential Election. Finally, this report offers some key takeaways from the 2020 election cycle.

Historic Snapshot of Nevada County Elections

The Voter's Choice Act of 2016

Before delving into any report about the 2020 elections, it is important to understand the relationship between state election policy, voter behavior, elections costs, and democratic legitimacy. A historic overview of elections and voting in Nevada County helps put the impact of state policy on Nevada County Elections, and the reasons behind local process and budget priorities, into context. It is the hope of this office that this historic look at our elections will provide a balanced, nonpartisan window into this county's 2020 election activities.

The foundation of Nevada County's elections is the Voter's Choice Act¹ (VCA). Nevada was one of the first of five counties to implement the VCA in 2018. There are currently 15 VCA counties², with more anticipated to join after the 2020 election cycle.

VCA counties must mail a ballot to all registered active voters beginning 29 days before an election. Voters have several options for how to return their voted ballot:

1. **US Mail.** Several thousand Nevada County voters rely on the US Postal Service to receive and return their ballots.
2. **Official drop box.** VCA counties must provide at least one drop box for every 15,000 registered voters. Nevada County provides more than the minimum, with most located in grocery stores.
3. **In person.** Officials must establish one vote center for every 50,000 registered voters beginning 10 days before an election, and one vote center for every 10,000 registered voters starting three days before an election.³ Any voter in the county may vote at any vote center location without the need to vote provisionally.

The VCA further requires Nevada County Elections to conduct robust voter education, engage with community partners, and publicly release its election administration plans.

¹ For more about the Voter's Choice Act, please visit our website <https://www.mynevadacounty.com/2320/Voters-Choice-Act> or the Secretary of State's website <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voters-choice-act>. The Voter's Choice Act is codified in Section 4005 of the California Elections Code https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=4005.&lawCode=ELEC.

² As of the 2020 election cycle, the following counties participate in the Voter's Choice Act: Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Madera, Mariposa, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Sacramento, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Tuolumne. Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo were the first to adopt the VCA.

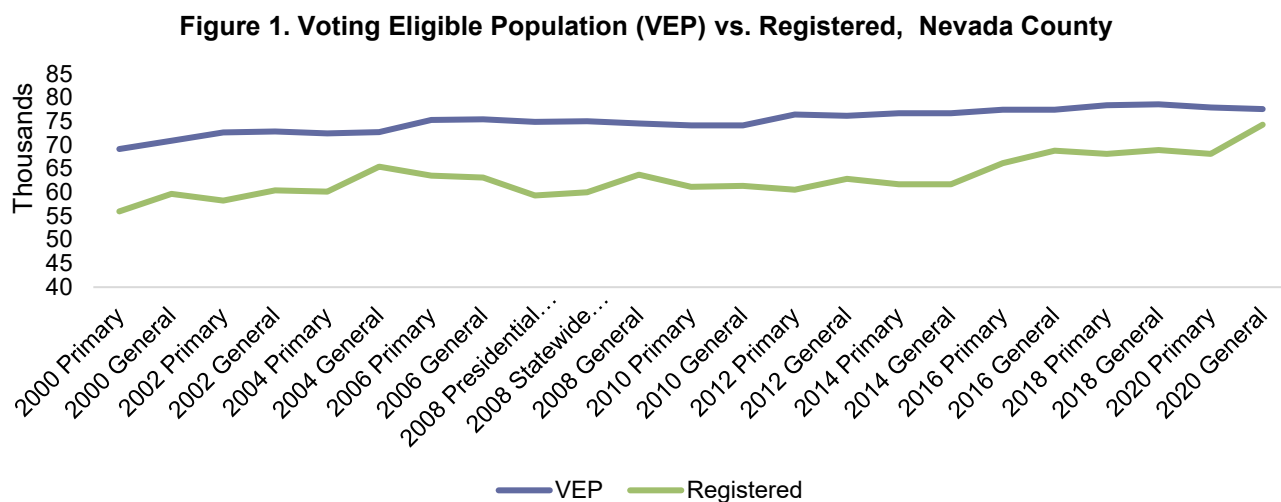
³ Elec. Code § 4005(a)(3)-(4). Please note that the formula establishing the number of vote centers applies only to regularly scheduled elections.

Historic Registration and Turnout

The ability to register to vote and remain an active voter are signs of a healthy democracy.⁴ The decision to vote in an election is likely motivated by the voter's ability to know what's on the ballot and, importantly, believe that their participation is meaningful—even when their preferred candidate loses an election. Local level administration has a huge impact on how voters experience an election and, relatedly, whether voters believe that the outcome of an election is legitimate.⁵

In Nevada County, voter registration has increased over 20 years. Figure 1 compares the number of eligible voters in the county against the number of registered voters, based on the county's reports of registration to the California Secretary of State. The eligible⁶ population has gradually increased from approximately 69,000 eligible residents in the 2000 Primary Election to over 77,000 eligible residents in the 2020 General Election. The number of registered voters in Nevada County has also increased since the 2000 Presidential Primary Election, from 56,000 registered voters to just under 75,000 registered voters in the November 2020 election cycle.

When data from the reports of registration are broken down by party (Figure 2), we note that Republican Party registration in Nevada County has gradually decreased over 20 years, from 46 percent in February 1999 to 33 percent in September 2020. Democratic registration remained fairly flat (between 33 and 35 percent) up until May 2016 when registered Democrats (37 percent) exceeded the number of registered Republicans (35 percent).

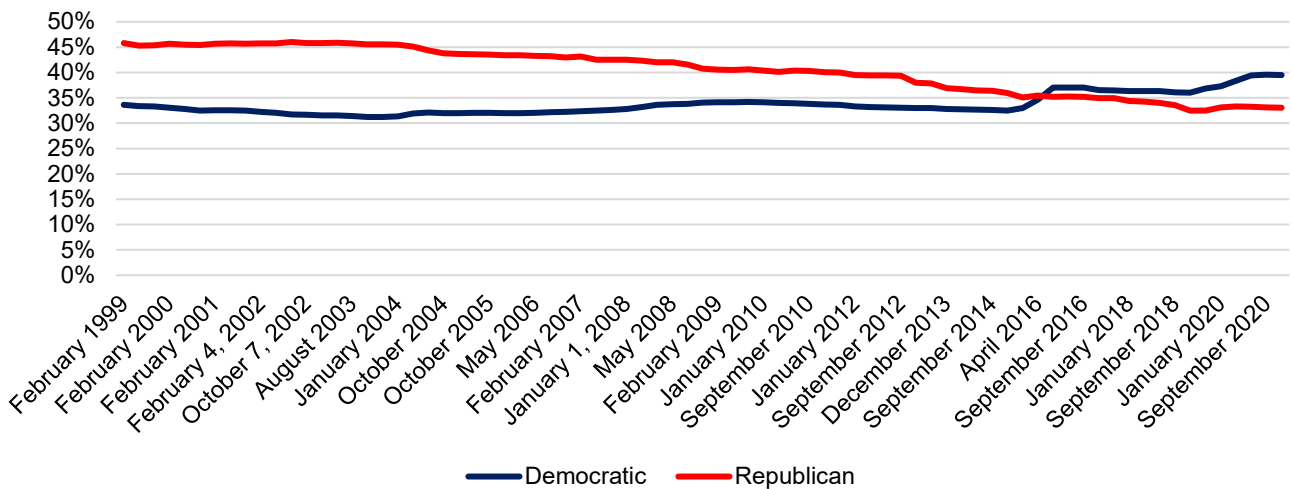


⁴ The Elections Performance Index, which focuses on American election administration in the states, uses registration and turnout as two of 16 indicators of healthy elections. The Elections Performance Index is a project of the MIT Elections Data and Research Lab. For more information, please visit <https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/map>. The Electoral Integrity Project, which focuses on international measures of democratic legitimacy, asks experts for their opinions about a range of topics, including voter registration and election results. The Electoral Integrity Project is an academic study housed at Harvard University. For more information, please visit <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/>.

⁵ There are several studies that examine the public's attitudes toward elections and voting process. For an overview of public opinions about elections, see e.g., the Survey on the Performance of American Elections <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/survey-performance-american-elections> and "Understanding the Voter Experience: the Public's View of Election Administration and Reform" <https://democracyfund.org/idea/understanding-the-voter-experience-the-publics-view-of-election-administration-and-reform-2/>.

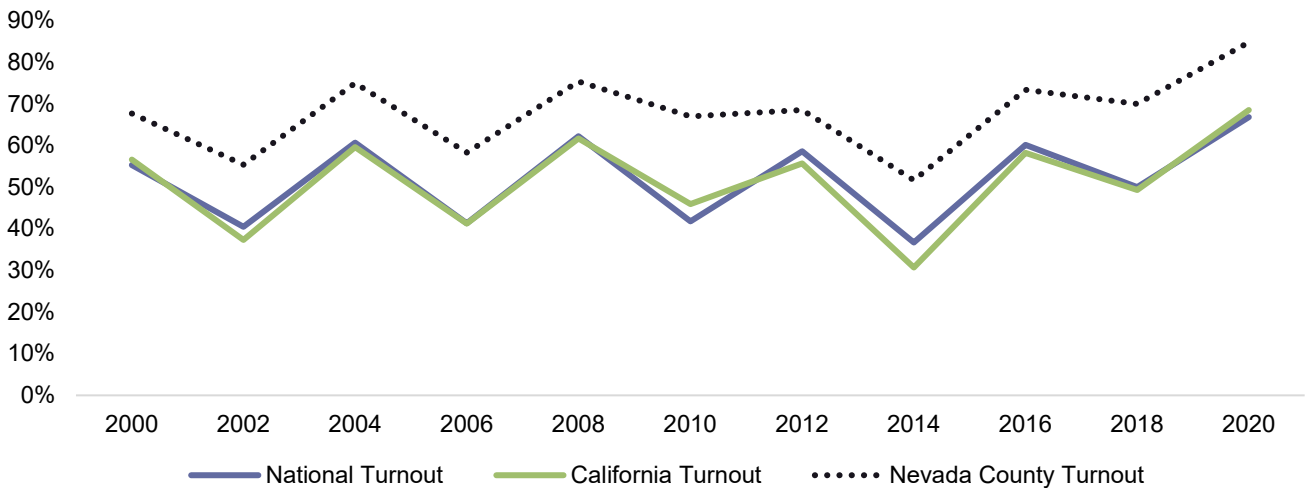
⁶ Eligibility is determined based on age, citizenship, residency, felony incarceration, and (in rare cases), court-ordered restrictions on specific voters.

Figure 2. Registered Democrats and Republicans, Nevada County



Voter turnout in Nevada County has remained constant over a 20-year period, with noticeable upticks in participation in the 2004 (75 percent), 2008 (75 percent), 2016 (73 percent), and 2020 (85 percent) presidential elections (Figure 3). Presidential general elections normally get the highest turnout levels compared to off-year federal elections, as illustrated by the peaks and valleys shown in Figure 3.⁷ Nevada County voter turnout is consistently higher than the state and national averages. For example, voter turnout was 67 percent in Nevada County in 2010, which is 21 points higher than the state average (46 percent) and 25 points higher than national turnout (42 percent).

Figure 3. Turnout Based on Voting Eligible Population



⁷ The number of eligible voters is commonly used as the denominator for calculating national voter turnout levels. Localities most commonly report turnout statistics based on the number of registered voters for a given election, which may create discrepancies between local, state, and national turnout figures.

Historic Overview of Vote-by-Mail in Nevada County

Over the past 15 years, vote-by-mail (VBM) usage has steadily increased and grew when Nevada County implemented the Voter’s Choice Act in 2018 (Figure 4). But even before the adoption of the Voter’s Choice Act, several thousand Nevada County voters have returned their ballots by US Mail. Our county’s culture of voting by mail likely resulted from a sharp increase in the number of Nevada County voters that requested to be placed on the permanent vote-by-mail (PVBM) list after the 2002 election cycle, when the state legislature adopted a no-excuse PVBM policy (Figure 5).

Figure 4. VBM Ballots Issued, Nevada County

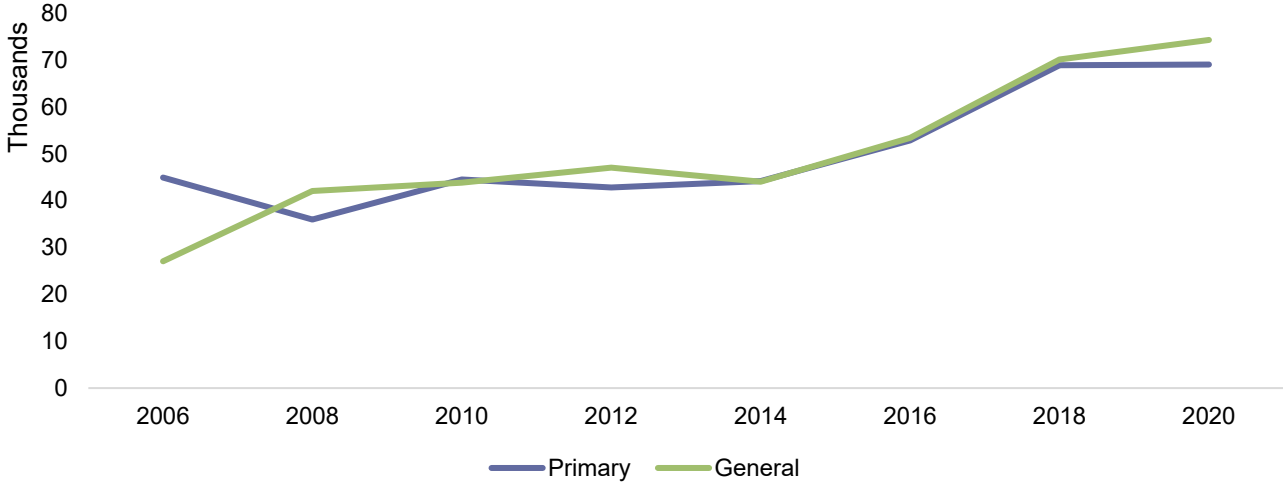
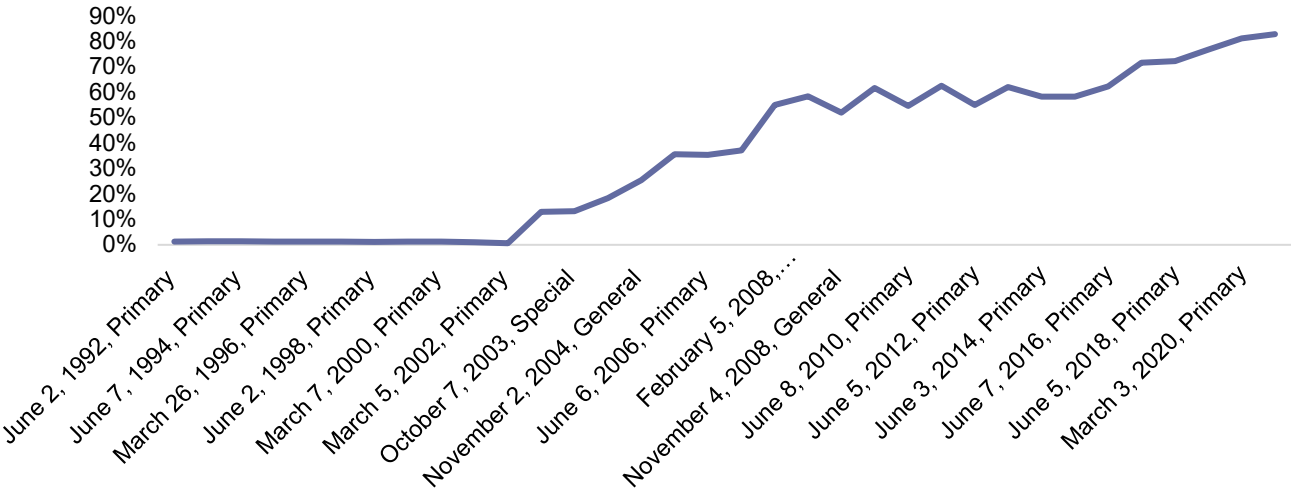


Figure 5. Percent Registered Nevada County Voters on the PVBM List



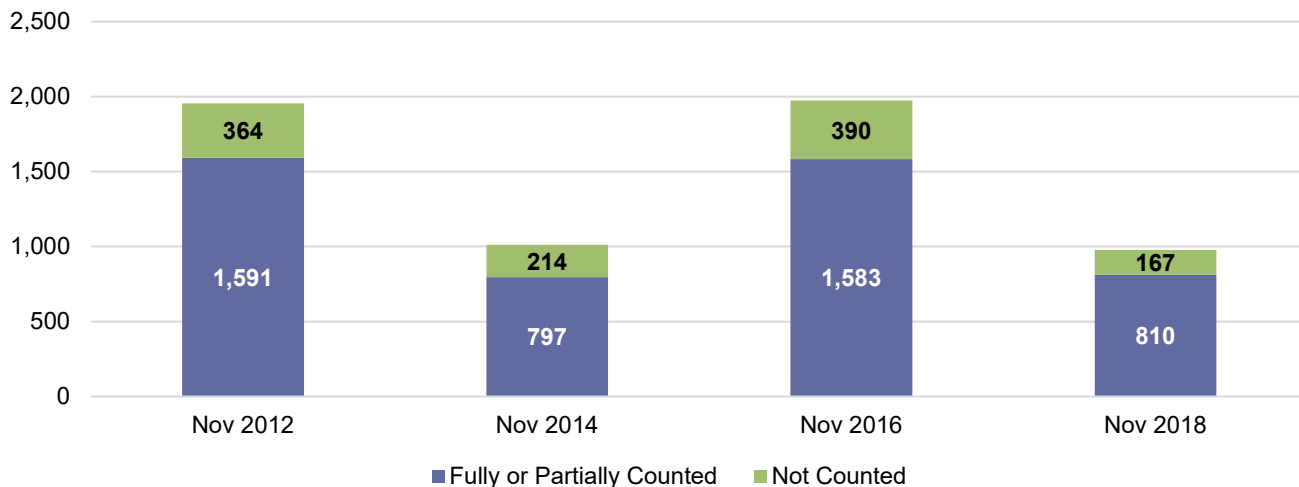
Provisional Voting Trends

California has a long history of offering the opportunity for voters to cast ballots provisionally, even before the practice was codified through the passage of the Help America Vote Act of 2002.⁸ There are two ways to vote provisionally in Nevada County: traditional provisional voting and Conditional Voter Registration. A traditional provisional ballot is typically cast when the voter is not on the roster for some reason, whether that be because the voter's information changed or by administrative error. Other reasons to vote provisionally in Nevada County include voter already voted, or a court order that extends the close of polls past the statutory deadline.⁹

Conditional Voter Registration, which is a form of Same Day Registration, is an in-person service provided to qualified citizens who have a residence in Nevada County and wish to vote but missed the state registration deadline.¹⁰ Voters issued a Conditional Voter Registration ballot provide vote center workers with all information needed for registration; once they vote their ballot, they place that ballot in a yellow envelope for verification and counting during the Post-Election canvass period. A valid Conditional Voter Registration results in the voter being placed on the county voter roll. Nevada County implemented Conditional Voter Registration around the same time it launched vote centers.

The distinction between traditional provisional balloting and Conditional Voter Registrations may not be apparent in the data reported to the US Election Assistance Commission (Figure 6), as the agency does not distinguish between the types of provisional balloting available in California. In the November 2018 election, there were slightly fewer provisional ballots, including Conditional Voter Registrations, issued overall and slightly more counted when compared with the November 2014 election, which was one of the lowest turnout election years nationally. Additionally, in November 2018, over 90 percent of ballots cast provisionally were cast as a Conditional Voter Registration, most of which resulted in a new or updated registration.

Figure 6. Nevada County Provisional Ballots, 2012-2018



⁸ Provisional Voting, California Secretary of State, <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voting-resources/provisional-voting/#mainCont> (last accessed September 6, 2021).

⁹ Cal Elec. Code §§ 14212, 14402.5.

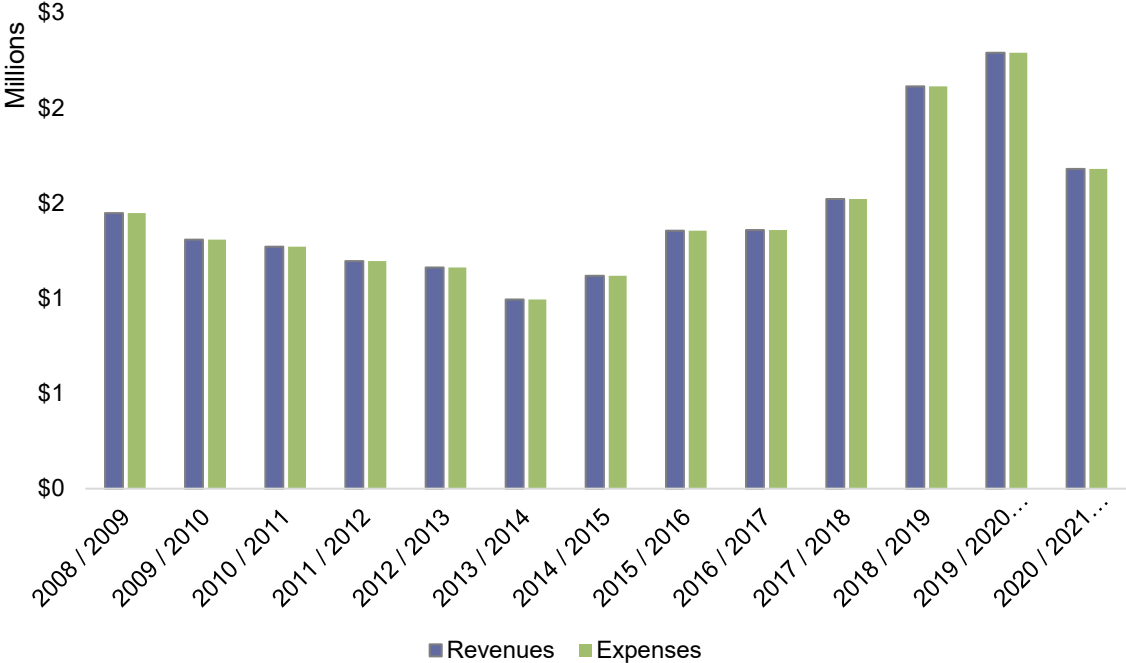
¹⁰ Cal. Elec. Code § 2170.

Election Costs

Nevada County Elections is funded by the County General Fund. The Elections Department generates revenue from elections and campaign services, which include candidate filing fees, special and school district charges, and voter data fees. Nevada County is also eligible for several state reimbursements, the funds of which are returned to the County General Fund.

Since the 2008-2009 fiscal year (FY), elections budgets have typically fallen between \$1 million-\$1.5 million annually (Figure 7). Costs include staff salaries in addition to other elections-specific costs for VBM and in person services. There was a \$600,000 bump in expenses in FY 2018-2019 for one-time Voter’s Choice Act implementation costs and other onetime expenses. Expenditures also increased in FY 2019-2020 to nearly \$2.3 million, in part to cover the cost of new voting equipment following statewide decertification of voting systems. Costs associated with the implementation of the Voter’s Choice Act and with the costs of new voting equipment have been largely reimbursed by the state. As of this writing, over \$700,000 in state reimbursements has been returned to the County General Fund. After the November 2020 election, which introduced further costs related to COVID-19, we expect that the future costs of elections will decrease.

Figure 7. Budgeted Elections Revenues vs Expenses, by Fiscal Year



2020 Election Cycle

Voter Registration

Our voter registration data reflect the high public interest in the November 2020 election. Registration was already on the rise, but we note a significant spike in the weeks leading up to the November 2020 election (Figure 8). During the March Primary, registration increased from 67,119 to 68,151—an increase of over 1,000 voters from the 60-day report of registration to the 15-day report of registration. In the November 2020 Election, registration increased by 3,427 from the 60-day report of registration to the 15-day report of registration. Increases in Republican and Democratic Party registration account for these increases (Table 1). These data indicate a strong public interest in the 2020 elections cycle.

Figure 8. Nevada County Reports of Registration (ROR), 2020 Elections

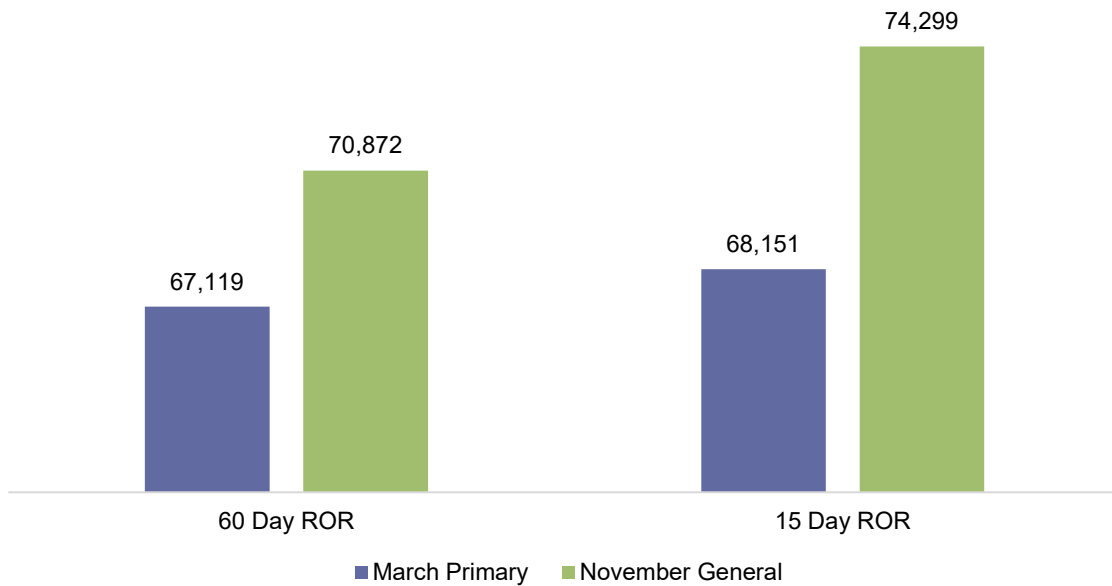


Table 1. Voter Registration in Nevada County, by ROR

| Report of Registration | Democratic | Republican | American Independent | Green | Libertarian | Peace & Freedom | No Party Pref/Other |
|------------------------|------------|------------|----------------------|-------|-------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Jan 2020 | 25,024 | 22,207 | 2,654 | 755 | 929 | 198 | 15,352 |
| Feb 2020 | 26,151 | 22,696 | 2,587 | 664 | 907 | 193 | 14,953 |
| Jul 2020 | 27,206 | 22,926 | 2,548 | 592 | 872 | 193 | 14,651 |
| Sept 2020 | 28,040 | 23,482 | 2,680 | 607 | 919 | 214 | 14,930 |
| Oct 2020 | 29,330 | 24,549 | 2,817 | 620 | 960 | 223 | 15,800 |

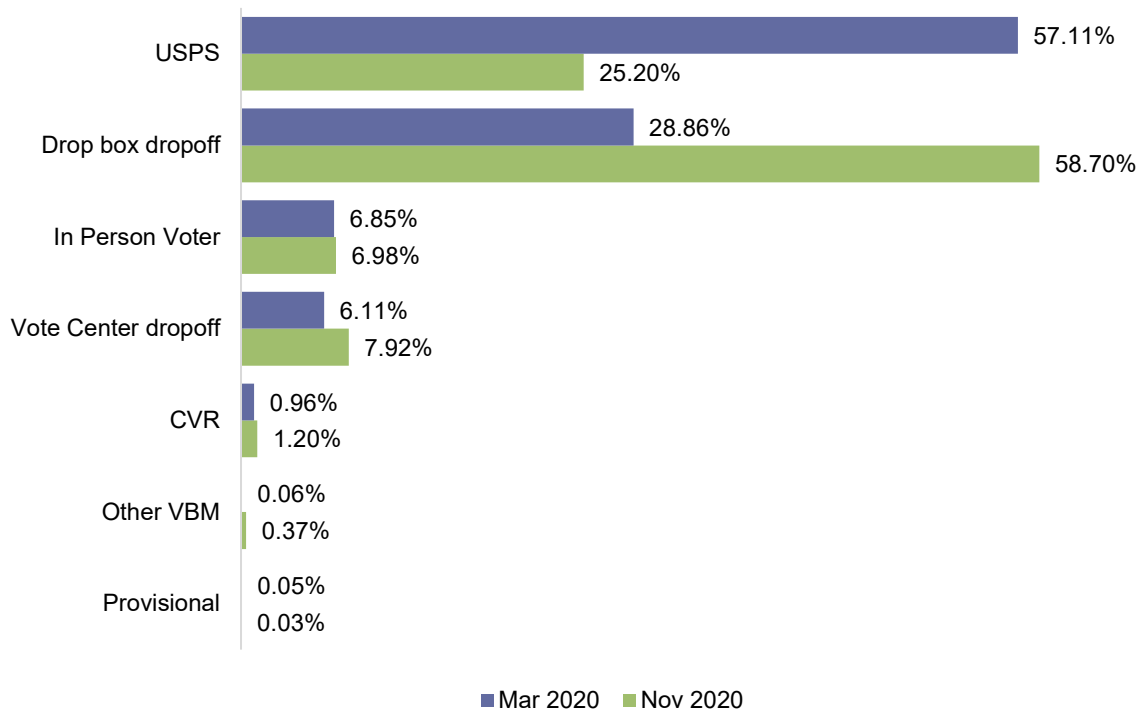
Voter Turnout

Overview

Nevada County consistently boasts some of the highest turnout in California. In the March Primary, Nevada County had the third highest turnout statewide.¹¹ In the November General, turnout was the highest that it has ever been. Approximately 88 percent of Nevada County registered voters cast a ballot in the election—the fourth highest turnout county in November.¹² High interest in the election outcome, and the fact that all registered active voters get a ballot in the mail, may explain these data.

Of the total number of ballots returned in the November election, just under 92 percent were returned by mail, drop box, or at a vote center (Figure 9). About 7 percent of voters cast a ballot in person, while others cast a Conditional Voter Registration, provisional ballot, or returned a ballot by some other method. Less than one percent of vote-by-mail ballots were rejected, mostly due to missing or mismatched signatures. Similarly, in the March Primary, just over 92 percent were returned by mail, drop box, or at a vote center, while around 7 percent of voters cast a ballot in person. As is noted below, voter behavior shifted away from US Mail in the November 2020 election—mail usage went from 57 percent in the March Primary to 25 percent in the November General. By contrast, drop box usage rose sharply, from almost 29 percent in March to over 58 percent in November.

Figure 9. 2020 Nevada County Turnout by Return Method



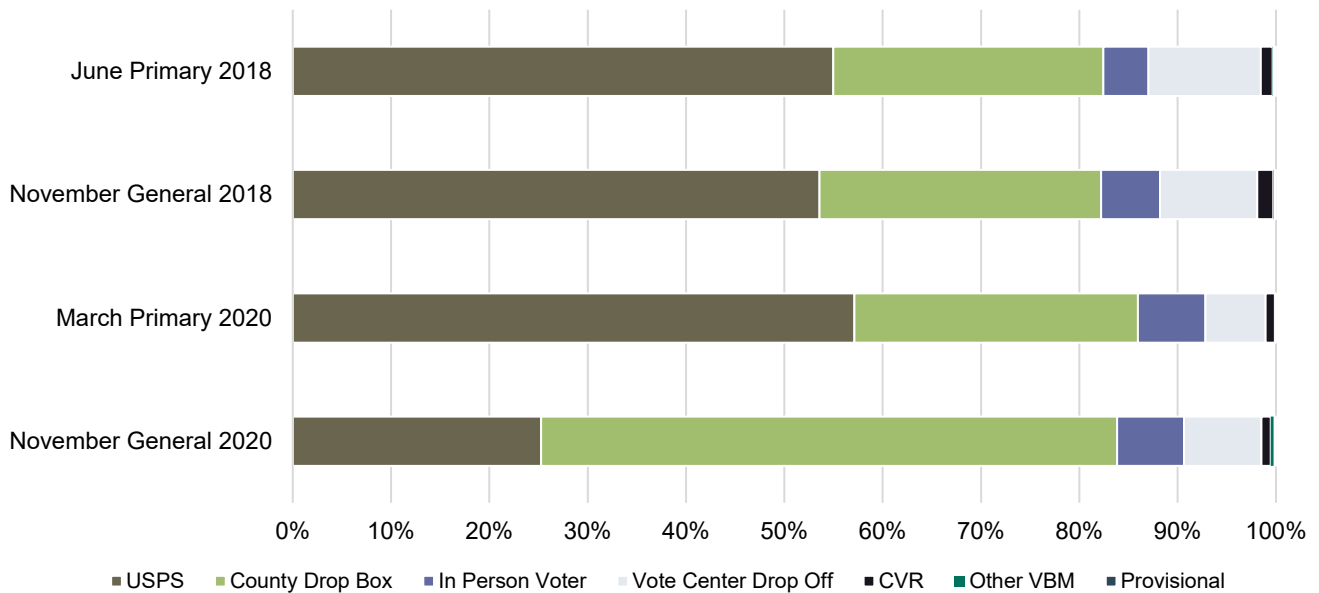
¹¹ Ranking is based on turnout reported by counties to the California Secretary of State. For a complete picture of voter turnout in statewide elections, see Statewide Election Results, California Secretary of State, found at <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/prior-elections/statewide-election-results> (last visited June 8, 2021).

¹² The denominator used here is registration, as opposed to voting eligible population. Using registration as the denominator creates slight differences in turnout calculations between the state and counties.

Vote-by-Mail Return Methods

Nevada County voters have relied heavily on US Mail services to get their ballots to our office on time (Figure 10). In the November election, our data indicate high voter concern about using the mail to return a ballot. Unlike past elections under the Voter’s Choice Act, use of vote-by-mail drop boxes increased dramatically, with nearly 60 percent of vote-by-mail voters returning their ballot by drop box in November.

Figure 10. Ballot Return Methods, by Election

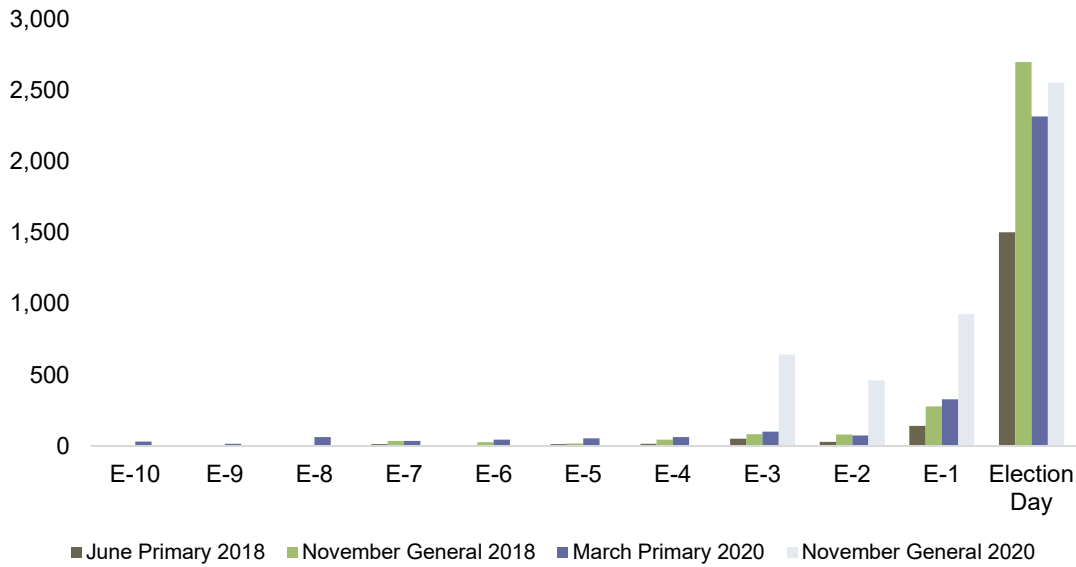


In Person Voting

Nevada County offers in person voting options at its headquarters starting 29 days before an election—the same day that ballots are put in the mail. Our office then opens vote centers for in person voting on staggered schedules beginning 10 days before an election.

Since the adoption of the Voter’s Choice Act, between five and eight percent of voters who participate in an election have cast a ballot in person. In person voting in the March and November elections was consistent with in person turnout in past elections, with about seven percent of voters who voted showing up at vote centers. Of the people who choose to vote in person, most vote on Election Day (Figure 11).

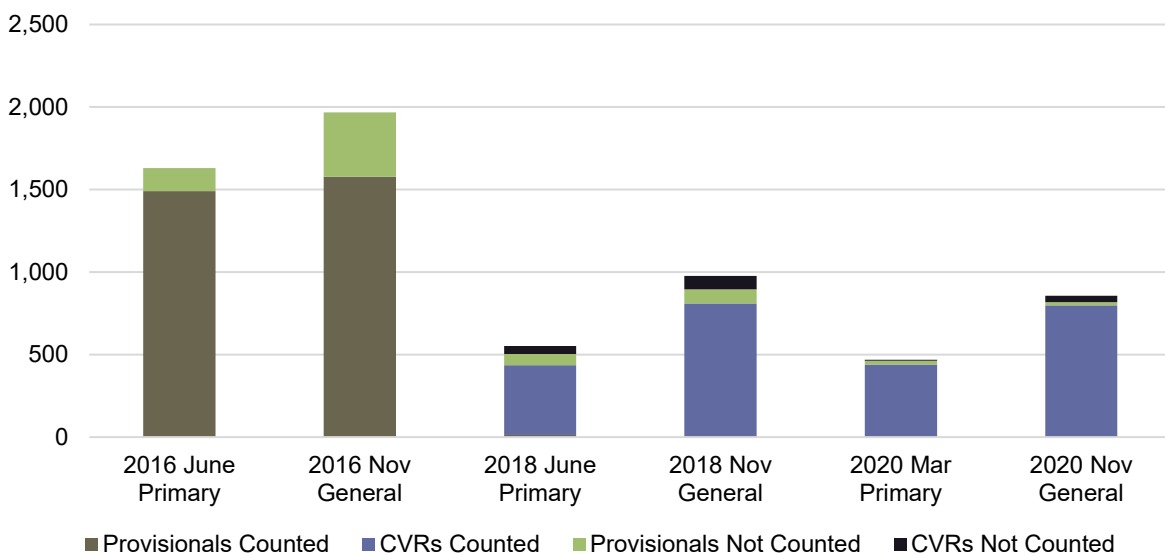
Figure 11. Number of Voters Served at Vote Centers, by Day



Provisional Voting in 2020

There are more provisional ballots cast in general elections, as is expected given the increased interest in November elections. Almost 440 people cast a valid Conditional Voter Registration in Nevada County in the March Primary, and nearly 800 people cast a valid Conditional Voter Registration in Nevada County in the November 2020 General Election (Figure 12). Since becoming a Voter’s Choice Act county, the total number of all provisionals administered has decreased anywhere from 50 to 70 percent in comparable elections.

Figure 12. Provisionals and CVRs Cast and Counted in Nevada County, 2016-2020



When Nevada County began administering elections under the California Voter’s Choice Act, the number of traditional provisional ballots cast in the county decreased significantly. This is because a) because

the Voter's Choice Act requires county election officials to establish vote centers, which must be capable of providing real-time updates to the registration and vote history record, b) gives the vote center worker access to the county voter roll, and c) due to the real time updates to the voter file, does not require a voter to surrender a vote-by-mail ballot.

Staffing the Election

Staff Overview

Elections are powered by a group of dedicated staff. Permanent and temporary staff, and vote center workers, ensure that any voter who wishes to participate has all the information and tools needed to make informed choices. Nevada County Elections has four full time employees, 15 temporary employees performing office and warehouse duties, and can have anywhere from 5-10 vote center workers per site. All county employees undergo criminal background checks, and all elections staff take an oath to defend the US and California Constitutions.

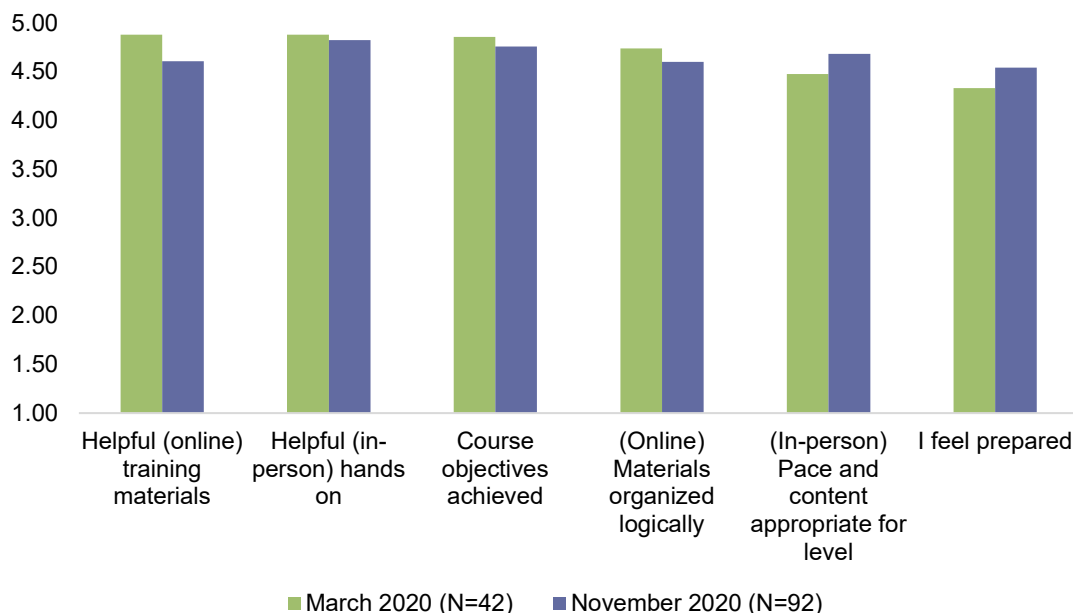
To serve voters in the March Primary, Nevada County hired about 60 vote center workers. Many of those workers were unable to return for the November General due to the threat of COVID-19 or some other reason. However, enthusiasm to serve in the election was at an all-time high. For the November 2020 Election, Nevada County Elections hired approximately 90 vote center workers out of almost 400 applicants. The influx in applications was due in large part to the willingness of Nevada County residents to serve the community, as well as a successful statewide effort to recruit new workers.

Training Vote Center Workers

All vote center workers are required to come to a class before serving in any election. Vote center training is interactive and includes time to practice on the equipment. While in the past all training had been conducted in person, in November we included a set of online modules to complement a shorter in person session.

Surveys of our vote center workers in 2020 indicate that classes were mostly effective with room for improvement. While survey respondents felt mostly prepared for the election, they would have liked more hands-on time and more particular instruction on special circumstances. Some people felt overwhelmed by the nature of the 2020 election cycle, but especially in November as news, and mis- and disinformation about the election increased.

Figure 13. Effectiveness of Training Materials



Canvass and Post-Election Audit

Canvass

Election canvass is a normal part of every election. Among other things, it requires election officials to audit in person election conduct, account for all elections materials (including unused ballots), conduct a manual tally of one percent of precincts, and continue the process of counting all validly cast ballots, as allowable under state law. This process is open to the public. Under state law, election officials have up to 30 days to complete canvass and certify election results. In Presidential General Elections, the statement of results must be complete 28 days after the election, which effectively pushes the canvass deadline back by two days.¹³

By Election Night on November 3, 2020, staff verified, counted, and reported around 30,000 validly cast ballots—more than any other past election. As is normally the case, ballots continued to be received in our office as staff verified and counted the remainder of ballots. Under California law, any mailed ballots that are postmarked on or before Election Day may still be counted if received by county election officials three days after the election. During the November election, officials could count any properly postmarked ballot if received 17 days after the election—the increased time for receipt was provided by state law due to concerns around mail delivery. Election officials may also continue to count ballots that were dropped off in other counties by the close of polls on Election Day. Election offices have eight days from the time they receive an out-of-county ballot to get the ballot to the correct jurisdiction.

¹³ Cal. Elec. Code §§ 15374-75, 15400-01.

Post-Election Audit

Under California law, all counties must conduct an audit of the vote count. All counties conduct a one percent manual tally¹⁴, and some also conduct a Risk Limiting Audit.¹⁵ The audit is a normal part of the elections canvass and gives election officials and the public confidence that the vote count is accurate.

Nevada County conducts a one percent manual tally, a process that is open to the public. At or near the start of the canvass period, which begins two days after the election, staff will randomly draw enough precincts to conduct a one percent tally of all contests appearing on every ballot. Our office determines how many ballots need to be counted manually and locates one or more scanned batches of ballots that will be used for the manual tally. Using reports generated by the voting system, teams of four people will conduct the manual tally and compare that tally against the voting system reports.

In both the March and November elections, staff conducted a one percent manual tally of all votes cast, both by mail/drop box and in person. As is the case in past years, the one percent manual tally showed no anomalies. This means that the hand count conducted by our staff matched what appeared in the reports generated by the voting system. As a result of the manual tally, we were able to verify with confidence that the voting system accurately counted voters' ballots, as voters intended for their votes to be counted.

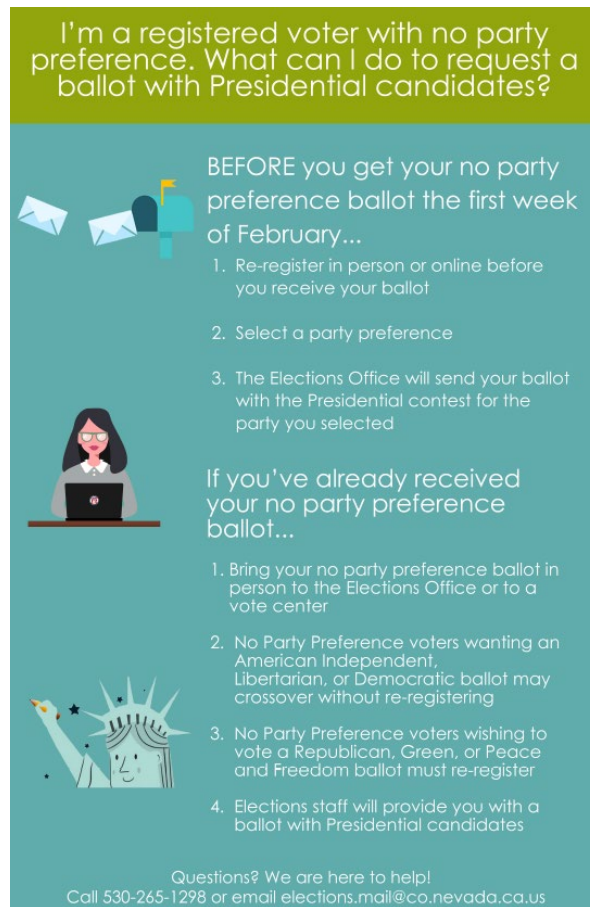
Voter Education

Clear and concise communication about elections process continues to provide challenges for election administrators, including Nevada County, and the 2020 election cycle was no exception. For example, California's partially closed primary offers so-called "crossover" voting, which is a complex process to explain. The Top Two primary system adds further complexity by asking voters to understand the difference between party nominated and voter nominated contests in presidential election cycles. The majority of the phone calls we received during the March Primary were voter questions about crossover voting. Our office responded by providing voters with educational materials and public service announcements. The laws also pushed the presidential primary earlier in the year—the last time California was a Super Tuesday state was February 2008. The result of increased attention to the 2020 primary election was a flood of election information that might not have applied to California voters, increased misinformation or disinformation on the voting process on social media, and unrealistic expectations about how soon election results could be finalized.

¹⁴ The one percent manual tally confirms that the voting equipment correctly counted the ballots processed in that system. Election officials randomly select precincts to audit and hand count one percent of ballots cast in those precincts. The one percent manual tally must be conducted for both in person voting and for vote-by-mail ballots. For the laws governing the one percent manual tally, see [Elections Code section 15360](#).

¹⁵ A Risk Limiting Audit is a statistical method of auditing an election that confirms that the originally reported outcome is correct. In California, local election officials may opt into a Risk Limiting Audit and may only audit contests that are wholly contained within a county. For the laws and regulations governing this process, see [Elections Code Division 15, Chapter 4, Article 5.5](#) and [California Code of Regulations Title 2, Division 7, Chapter 2](#).

Figure 14. Crossover Voting poster used in the March 2020 Primary Election



For the November General Election, our office quickly had to shift the way Nevada County Elections conducted in person voting and how to communicate changes due to the public health crisis presented by COVID-19 and efforts made by various actors to undermine the democratic process. The Nevada County Elections Office had to address increasing concerns about the following topics:

- Public health/COVID 19
- Reliability of the US Postal Service
- Misinformation and disinformation around voter fraud
- Elections cybersecurity
- Safety and security of drop boxes
- Civil unrest and political extremism
- Wildfires and Public Safety Power Shutoffs

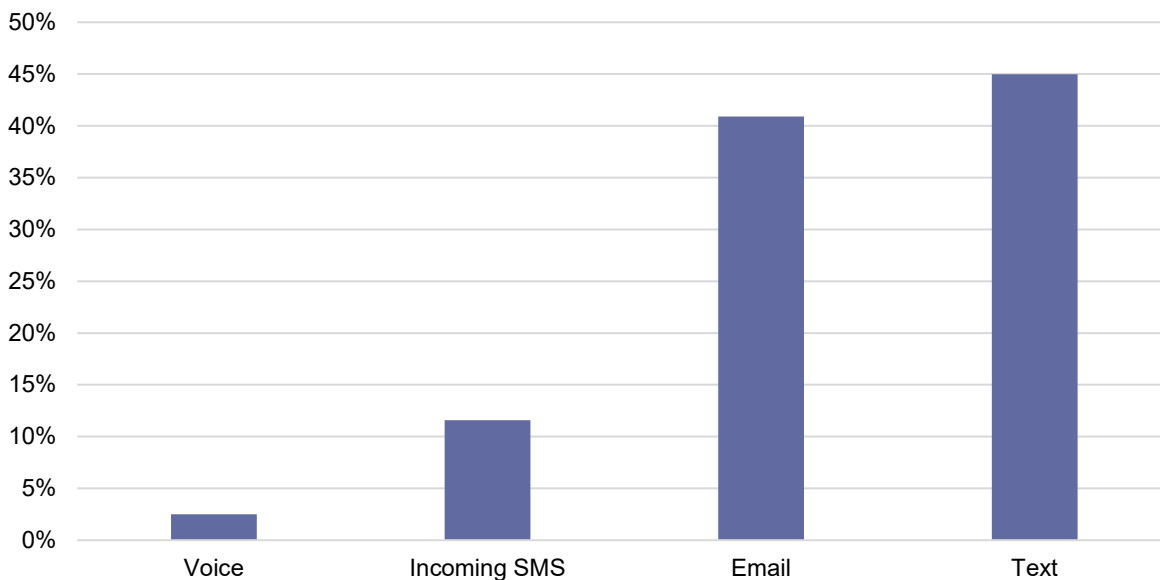
The persistent and growing threat of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information may continue to diminish confidence in electoral outcomes for years to come. Misinformation is the unintentional spread of factually incorrect information. Disinformation is the deliberate effort to mislead others with false information. Some examples of the misinformation and disinformation around the 2020 election includes, and were not limited to, claims that the US Postal Service was closing mailboxes to prevent people from voting safely by mail, that certain voting machines were “flipping” or deleting votes, or that election

officials were counting unverified ballots.¹⁶ The scope and reach of wrong information about election process made the job of administering elections extraordinarily difficult and, for some election officials, dangerous.¹⁷ Mal-information, relatedly, is information that is based in reality and used to inflict harm on individuals. Sadly, several elections officials are the targets of mal-information, in addition to the in-person threats of harm. Because the problems presented by wrong and false information will persist into the future, Nevada County Elections must do more to address these problems head on and engage the public well in advance of elections.

Because of the complexities surrounding the November 2020 election, Nevada and other counties increased partnerships across several sectors to better communicate with voters. Our collaborators included the California Secretary of State, the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials, the the Town of Truckee, state and local advocates, federal and local law enforcement, Pacific Gas & Electric Company, the Multi-State/Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Centers, and neighboring counties.

In an effort to increase voter confidence in the election and ensure voters that the US Postal Service was delivering their ballots to the counties, the State of California required all counties to offer a ballot tracking service from a company called BallotTrax—better known to the public as wheresmyballot.com. Approximately a fifth of Nevada County voters signed up for the service in November. Of the over 73,000 messages that were sent to Nevada County voters, 45 percent were sent to the voter via text message and another 41 percent were sent via email (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Percent BallotTrax Messages in Nevada County, November 2020, by Method



¹⁶ For an in-depth look at the breadth and impact of election mis- and disinformation, see “The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election,” Election Integrity Partnership, June 15, 2021, found at <https://www.eipartnership.net/report> (last visited September 6, 2021).

¹⁷ There was a significant increase in threats against elections officials, due in large part to the political climate of the November 2020 Election. The problem is so pronounced that the Department of Justice has launched a task force to address threats against all election workers. See “Justice Department Launches Task Force To Combat Threats Against Election Workers,” Department of Justice, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/blog/justice-department-launches-task-force-combat-threats-against-election-workers-0> (last visited September 6, 2021).

While it is not clear at this time whether signing up for the wheresmyballot.com service resulted in increased voter confidence amongst Nevada County's electorate, our office has learned that it is a service that most voters who sign up appreciate and will continue to use as long as it is available.

Cybersecurity

Nevada County undertakes takes several steps to ensure that voter rolls are up-to-date and secure from any cyber intrusions. The 2020 election cycle required our team to collaborate closely with the California Secretary of State and the Nevada County Information and General Services department to ensure that any Internet use was conducted safely and securely. Much of the information Nevada County uses to maintain the voter rolls comes electronically through a secure connection to VoteCal, the statewide voter registration database. Nevada County takes all steps necessary to ensure that there is no breach of the system, including membership in the Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center.¹⁸ Cybersecurity training is also required for county officials to better issue spot and report potential problems.

Every vote center is connected to VoteCal via a secure private network so that workers may update voter history in real time and prevent anyone from voting more than once. Online access at vote centers is restricted to ensure that workers can only connect to VoteCal. No vote center worker may use county resources to access any part of the Internet other than what is required to process voters.

Additionally, no voting systems can connect to the Internet or wirelessly transmit data.¹⁹ California has one of the most rigorous certification processes in the country, requiring an independent third party to ensure that systems comply with state standards. Certification includes conducting source code reviews and evaluations, hardware and software security penetration testing, and strict chain of custody.²⁰ No California county may use voting equipment that has not undergone the state testing and certification process.²¹

Administering Elections During COVID-19

The state went on lockdown the day before the Nevada County Registrar certified the March 2020 Primary. Several states across the nation followed California's lead, with some postponing their primaries. Wisconsin was forced to conduct a primary on schedule after a series of legal challenges that prevented the state from postponing. Election officials across the country watched as the State of Wisconsin tried to navigate COVID-19 challenges like retaining election workers and voting locations. Predictably, while the election went on as planned, long lines, frustrated voters, and the spread of COVID-19 at polling places were at the forefront of concerns heading into November.

The California Secretary of State quickly convened a task force made up of state and county officials, advocates, and experts to better understand local election official concerns and meet challenges collaboratively. The Secretary of State required most counties to continue to offer in person services but also supported several legislatively approved adjustments that would allow election officials to conduct in person voting safely. The state helped by providing personal protective equipment, establishing an election worker portal, connecting local election officials with the state's public utilities, providing support

¹⁸ The Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center provides election officials with elections security training, information, and resources. To learn more, visit <https://www.cisecurity.org/ei-isac/>.

¹⁹ Elec. Code § 19205

²⁰ California's voting system standards are contained in state regulations, at <https://admin.cdn.sos.ca.gov/regulations/elections/california-voting-system-standards.pdf>.

²¹ Elec. Code § 19202

to secure voting locations, and updating guidance on election observation. The state further provided counties with communications toolkits and access to other state resources.

One of the more difficult problems to address was how to accommodate in person voters and observers safely. Due to our efforts and to the diligence of our workforce, there was no evidence that elections activities spread COVID-19 in the county. Our biggest concern was for vote center workers, who were strictly prohibited from turning voters away and were likely to be exposed to maskless voters. We updated most vote centers so that there was enough space for people to practice social distancing and provided every location with plenty of masks, gloves, and other personal protective equipment. Our office included as much information as possible about COVID-19 in voter publications and provided specific training to election workers so that we could curb the spread of illness.

Figure 16. Postcard used in the November 2020 General Election

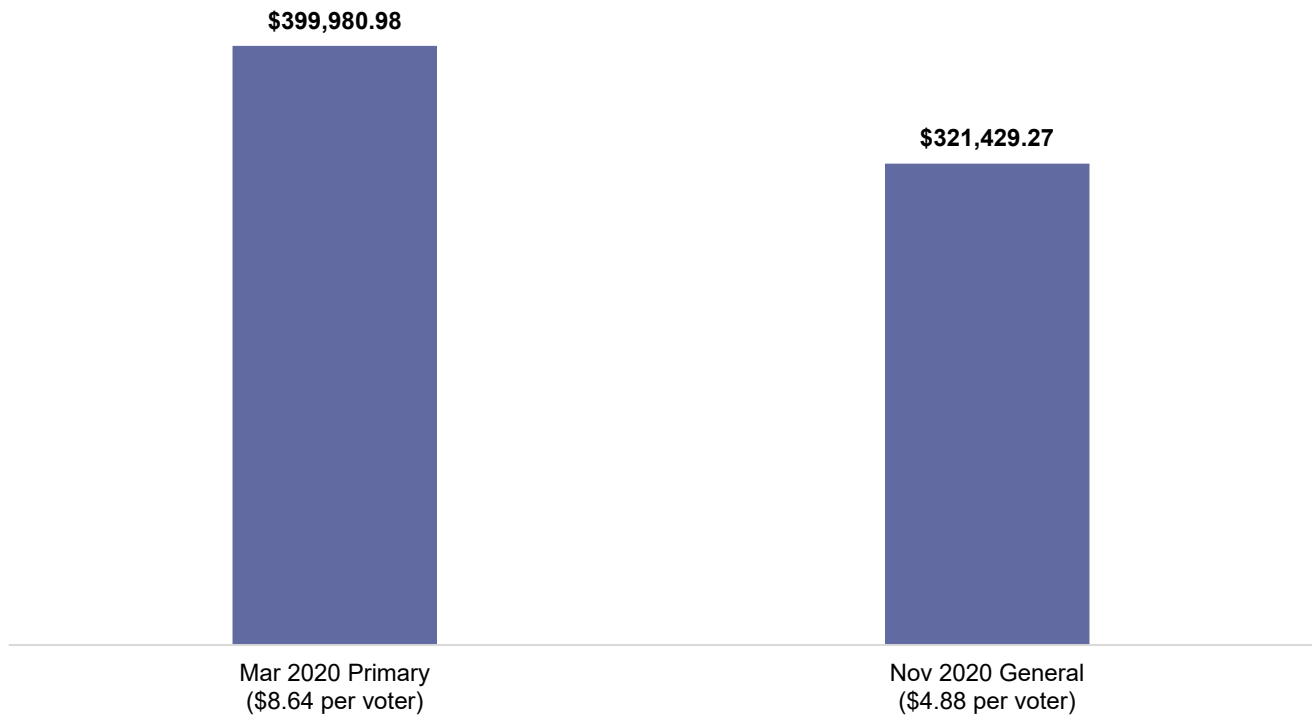


The Elections Office strictly enforced the mask rule and other COVID-19 protocols on elections observers. Our office was pleased to work with observers on these requirements and the vast majority of them followed the rules. Observers who did not follow the rules were asked to comply or be turned away. Due to spacing issues, the Elections Office had to limit the number of people in the vote-by-mail envelope and ballot processing areas. To accommodate observers and media, we allowed only two observers in the office at any time, set up live streaming cameras in key areas of the back office, and provided space for media to wait on election results in our lobby.

2020 Estimated Elections Costs

During the 2020 election cycle, most costs went to specific departmental expenses for election materials, e.g., ballot stock, envelopes, election worker stipends, printing, and advertising. There was an uptick in supplies and election workers needed due to COVID-19. However, state reimbursements and revenue expected from special districts helped to offset election costs. Figure 17 reflects the cost of the 2020 election cycle per voter, taking state reimbursements and revenue into account. Based on our estimates, reimbursements and revenue help keep the cost per voter down in Nevada County.

Figure 17. Cost of 2020 Elections, Nevada County



A more detailed accounting of costs under the Voter's Choice Act is provided for on the Nevada County Elections website <https://www.mynevadacounty.com/3245/Election-Costs>.

Key Takeaways from the 2020 Election Cycle

- Increases in Nevada County voter registration and turnout were driven by interest in the 2020 election cycle and facilitated by the adoption of the Voter's Choice Act. Our office anticipates that registration and voting will continue to be high in Nevada County, based on historic trends.
- Adoption of the VCA in 2018 and a culture of voting by mail made most of Nevada County's voters well-prepared to navigate a complex and fraught election cycle. However, public trust in the US Mail decreased, leading to an increase in drop box usage.
- Overall, the need to cast any ballot provisionally in Nevada County, whether a traditional provisional ballot or a Conditional Voter Registration, has decreased since the Voter's Choice Act was implemented in the county. Because of the vote center model, there are very few reasons for casting a traditional provisional ballot.
- Despite all the contingency plans put into place for wildfire, PSPS outages, public health, and heightened cybersecurity risk, the biggest threat to voters was the widespread prevalence of misinformation and disinformation—especially as it appeared in social media platforms. Nevada County Elections must address these problems head on to combat misinformation and disinformation in future elections.
- While it remains unclear whether tools like wheresmyballot.com or processes like the required post-election manual tally of votes helped to allay concerns about the election, our office believes that these activities help bolster trust in our elections.
- Nevada County must make every effort to obtain reimbursements for elections in order to keep costs low. As many other counties do, Nevada County relies on state-based reimbursements to lessen the impact of elections on the county general fund.

About the Author

Natalie Adona is the Assistant Clerk-Recorder/Registrar of Voters for Nevada County. She is a Deputy Member of the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials (CACEO) and the County Records Association of California (CRAC). She currently serves as the Chair of the CACEO Constitution and Bylaws Committee and the Co-Chair of the state Ballot Design Advisory Committee.

Prior to joining the Nevada County Clerk-Recorder's office, she was the Senior Research and Learning Associate for the Elections Program at [Democracy Fund](#), a private philanthropy based in Washington, DC. Natalie's professional interests over the last 15 years center on elections and voting, including public opinion surveys on the topic. She is the co-author of "[Understanding the Voter Experience](#)" (2018) and the co-author/co-Principal Investigator of "[Stewards of Democracy](#)" (2019). Natalie began her career as a poll worker trainer in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2008 and 2009 and as a student researcher at the Election Administration Research Center at Cal. She has also worked for several elections and voting rights organizations, including MAPLight.org, Project Vote, and the Fair Elections Center.

Natalie holds a B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley, a J.D. from the American University Washington College of Law, and a M.P.A. from AU's School of Public Affairs.