

Challenges mount as rollout of new California voting overhaul nears

September 22, 2017

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Think back a decade: what did your cell phone look like? Now imagine carrying out your normal routine today with that old phone.

That scenario sums up the problem facing California's aging voting system.

Around the state, the machines that handle ballots have grown old as technology has advanced. There are also increasing concerns about security threats and how to get more voters to participate in elections. And the pending rollout of a new law could do away with most neighborhood polling locations and nudge more voters to vote by mail.

In short, many California voters are facing a major shakeup in how they will be casting ballots.

"There is a lot of change going on at once and I do think it's tricky," said Kim Alexander, president and founder of the nonprofit California Voter Foundation.

Alexander said there is a wave of activity going on at the state level: 10 sets of voting regulations are in development by the Secretary of State office and the voting systems certification process — which will allow for new types of voting equipment — is starting up after several years of stagnation. All of this will eventually lead to changes aimed at helping people vote in an easier, modernized and more secure way.

Driving much of the change is the [Voter's Choice Act](#), the 2016 law that gives counties the option to run elections under a new model that would give voters more days to cast ballots and consolidate polling places into regional voting centers. The centers would offer more services, including same-day registration.

Counties in Southern California and across the state are in various stages of responding to the Voter's Choice Act and the new way of voting as they prepare for the 2018 and 2020 elections.

| County | Changes planned for 2018 | Changes planned for 2020 | Cost Issues |
|--------------------------|--|---|--|
| CountyLos Angeles County | Changes planned for 2018New vote by mail ballots expected for 2018 elections. Anticipating new internal vote by mail equipment for 2018 for ballots. | Changes planned for 2020Planning to switch to VCA*. Also planning to roll out new ballot marking devices. | Cost IssuesCost estimates not yet available. The exact number of vote centers and ballot marking devices needed are not yet known. |
| CountyOrange County | Changes planned for 2018Vote by mail | Changes planned for 2020OC had been set to roll out VCA in | Cost IssuesNeeds to replace voting booths. |

| County | Changes planned for 2018 | Changes planned for 2020 | Cost Issues |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| | ballots will feature increased security and comprehensive ballot tracking for voters. New equipment to print vote by mail ballots for 2018. | 2018. OC Board of Supervisors halted VCA roll out. | Registrar says county is close on a budget for those replacements. |
| CountySan Bernardino County | Changes planned for 2018No changes planned for 2018. | Changes planned for 2020Unknown whether County will switch to VCA. San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors to ultimately decide. Registrar says more public discussion is needed. | Cost IssuesExact costs for 2020 changes unknown. Registrar anticipates less equipment would be needed if county switches to VCA, likely the cheaper option. The county's current equipment was purchased in 2004 and will need to be replaced. |
| CountyVentura County | Changes planned for 2018No changes planned for 2018. | Changes planned for 2020Registrar is waiting to decide if county will be switching to VCA. He says new voting equipment is needed either way. | Cost IssuesRegistrar says VCA is expected to have a high up front cost, but potentially may have cost savings down the line. |
| CountyRiverside County | Changes planned for 2018No changes planned for 2018. | Changes planned for 2020Registrar is undecided as to whether she'll recommend VCA to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, but she's optimistic and says VCA would be a good option for her county. She says they need new voting equipment within the next five years. Most of the county's current equipment was purchased in 2005. | Cost IssuesRegistrar says new voting equipment costs will be significant, she anticipates that if the county opts in to VCA the cost would be less expensive. |

By 2018, Los Angeles County plans to upgrade its vote by mail ballots, doing away with the current Scantron-like system that voters have used for years. Instead, a new larger and consolidated ballot sheet will include measures and candidates together on one page.

Orange County is also making changes to its vote by mail ballots for the coming year and replacing aging equipment.

During a visit to the Orange County Registrar's warehouse in Santa Ana earlier this month, a small crew was hauling away ballot mailing machines to make way for new ones.

The aging machines were placed in service starting in 2004, shortly before President George W. Bush was re-elected. Roughly 13 million ballots have passed through the machines.

"You know, there's a little wear-and-tear," Neal Kelley, Orange County's registrar of voters, said with a laugh. "It's been through a lot."

Kelley said his office plans to replace the machines with new equipment by December, in time to be tested and running for midterm primary elections that take place in June.

More importantly for Orange County voters, the upgrade will allow them to track their mail ballots at each step of the mail out and vote count. Officials plan to use a process similar to one used by delivery companies like FedEx that enables customers to track packages online.

Another benefit: increased voter security. Kelley said the new technology will help keep elections secure in an age of digital threats and concerns about possible voter fraud.

"If there were issues with intrusion or something related to hacking ... you would be able to detect it. That's why the equipment is so critical," he said.

But while some election changes are underway, the Voter's Choice Act won't roll out in Orange County. In June, the county Board of Supervisors [voted against](#) adopting the voting center model for elections, although the idea was backed by Kelley.

On top of these changes, several Southern California counties may adopt the optional new system of voting at regional centers by 2020. Counties that opt in would shutter most of their neighborhood polling locations and consolidate in-person voting at the regional centers that would open over several days.

Many Democrats in California, like Secretary of State Alex Padilla, have been strong proponents of the new system. But the reception among county registrars and the public has been mixed.

"There is a lot of anti-Voter Choice Act sentiment here in Ventura County, at this point," said Mark Lunn, the county's clerk, recorder and registrar of voters who will decide whether to switch his county to the new system.

He is holding off for now and watching a few counties in Northern California that are moving ahead with the model of more mail ballots, regional voting centers, fewer polling places and extended days to cast ballots.

"I'm just not sure at this point it's good for Ventura County voters. And I'll do what our voters want us to do, coupled with what I think is the most efficient way to conduct elections here in the county," Lunn said.

In San Bernardino County, Registrar Michael Scarpello said there hasn't yet been a lot of public discussion on the new law. He said he'll be doing his homework to help the public, and ultimately the board of supervisors in his county, decide whether to make the switch.

"I think there's some advantages and there's some disadvantages," he said. "Some people like their local polling place, but then some people really like the idea of receiving a mail ballot and of having the flexibility to go to any polling place instead of an assigned polling place, and to do it over a period of many days."

In L.A. County, election officials support the voting overhaul. They say the changes will help modernize elections and make voting easier for residents.

Details of the rollout in Los Angeles are still being worked out, including the exact number and location of voting centers and the days each center will be open. L.A. election officials also plan to roll out new ballot marking devices by 2020, according to Michael Sanchez with the L.A. County Registrar's office.

But it may take some persuading to get L.A. voters like Echo Park resident Ashley Carey on board. She isn't sure if she's completely happy with the proposed changes.

"A voting center that isn't right next to my house within my neighborhood will definitely not be as convenient for me," she said. That's because Carey doesn't have a car. For the past seven years, she's walked to her polling place.

Mail ballots also aren't Carey's first option when voting.

"I don't have any stamps. I don't know where outgoing mail is in my apartment building," she said.

The changes incorporated in the Voter's Choice Act are similar to ones implemented by states like Colorado, which has some of the highest voter turnout rates in the country.

Colorado's rollout of the voting changes, however, occurred more slowly. It began with just special elections and primary elections, compared to what California is attempting — setting it up in some counties by critical midterm elections next year and during the presidential election in 2020.

Scarpello, the registrar in San Bernardino County, was in Colorado during the early years of the voting center rollout there.

He understands why officials in places like Orange County are hesitant to be among the first to implement a new voting system. "They may feel that there's a little more risk."