

EDITORIAL: It's time to brainstorm ways to increase voter turnout



State Sen. Alex Padilla soon will take over as California's new secretary of state and must make boosting the voter rolls and improving voter turnout top priorities.

THE SACRAMENTO BEE/JOSE LUIS VILLEGAS

This year California set a record, but not one that anyone will want to brag about: On Nov. 4, the state counted the lowest voter turnout in recorded history.

Just 42.2% of people registered to vote in the general election actually did so. Another shameful record shattered: For the first time, more voters chose to sit out the election than cast a ballot.

There are myriad theories why this downward trend continues. They include a backlash from negative campaigning, a sense that one's vote doesn't count, a dislike for politicians and politics, and general apathy. But no one really knows for certain.

What we do know, however, is that our election processes need a serious overhaul. Hear that Mr. Secretary of State-elect? When Alex Padilla takes over the job from Debra Bowen, which can't come soon enough, he must make it a top priority to increase the voter rolls (he promised at least 1 million more voters as part of his election campaign) and revamp the state's voting systems.

He can start by dismantling the polls — some of them, anyway.

We know, that sounds counterintuitive to improving voter turnout, but chew on this interesting fact: Voting by mail has been increasing every one of the last 50 years, and by great leaps in the last few. In the June primary election, for

example, almost 70% of the ballots cast were mail ballots. In the 2012 general election, it was about 51%.

It's a cheaper way to go, too. When Yolo County tried out an all-mail election, it saved about 43% compared to a traditional election. Though voters increasingly prefer mail-in ballots, election rules mean that counties still have to staff and pay for the full array of polling places in case people show up on Election Day.

What we don't think is a great idea, though, is shutting down all the polls, in part because of another trend in how Californians vote.

Neal Kelley, Orange County's registrar of voters and the president of the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials, noted that while mail-in ballot use has exploded in his county — 140% in the last decade — many of the voters aren't mailing in their ballots. Increasingly, they are dropping off mail-in ballots at actual polls, allowing them both the leisure to fill out a ballot and the experience of voting on Election Day.

The takeaway from all of these broken records, facts and figures is this: Some hybrid version of mailed ballots and voting centers makes the most sense for elections in the near future, both to save money and to encourage an upward trend in turnout.

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