

Editorial: A California plan to boost voter turnout

By The Bee Editorial Board

Voter turnout is so abysmal in California that something has to change.

So while it may not be the ultimate or perfect solution, legislators ought to seriously consider Secretary of State Alex Padilla's proposal to overhaul how Californians vote.

California Secretary of State Alex Padilla is backing Senate Bill 450, which mirrors Colorado's successful effort to boost voter turnout. | Paul Kitagaki Jr. Sacramento Bee File Photo

Padilla does not envision a statewide edict. Instead under Senate Bill 450, counties would be allowed to use a new election system starting in 2018. If all goes well, it could be expanded.

Under the plan:

- All voters would be sent a ballot that they could return by mail, or drop off at secure 24-hour boxes or at new voting centers.
- The new centers would be open at least eight hours a day for 10 days before Election Day.
- On Election Day, voters could cast ballots at any voting center. There would be fewer of these larger centers — one for every 15,000 registered voters or so — instead of numerous polling places scattered across counties.



This plan would adapt elections to how most Californians already prefer to cast ballots — by mail, which 61% used last November.

The proposal also has the advantage of actually having been tried in another state — Colorado, where Padilla observed it in action last month. Colorado's voter turnout has outpaced California's even more since its system went into wide use in 2012.

In California, policymakers and reformers have been wringing their hands over declining turnout in statewide elections, particularly in non-presidential years. It hit an all-time low for midterms last November, barely topping 42%. In the primary last June, turnout was a record-low 25%.

While the state is trying to make it easier to register to vote — online registration started in 2012 and same-day registration is set to start as soon as 2016 — some experts say those changes are unlikely to significantly boost turnout.

The mechanics of voting need to be modernized. Political consultant Paul Mitchell estimates the new system could increase turnout by 10% statewide and more in places, such as Los Angeles, where fewer voters now vote by mail.

County election officials would have to agree to put in the new system.

More mail balloting and fewer voting precincts should save money, but if necessary, the state should chip in so that a broad selection of counties can test the new system. Fresno County, with its anemic voter turnout, should be a prime

candidate for state funding — if state monies are allocated.

Padilla's office says that while this bill doesn't include any state funding, it expects to seek some in a future budget. Surely, making it easier to vote is worth a little money.