



## Whose absentee votes are returned and counted: The variety and use of absentee ballots in California

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### A B S T R A C T

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Absentee voting is becoming more prevalent throughout the United States. Although there has been some research focused on who votes by absentee ballot, little research has considered another important question about absentee voting: which absentee ballots are counted and which are not? Research in the wake of the 2000 presidential election has studied the problem of uncounted ballots for precinct voters but not for absentee voters. Using data from Los Angeles County – nation's largest and most diverse voting jurisdiction – for the November 2002 general election, we test a series of hypotheses that certain types of voters have a higher likelihood that their ballots will be counted. We find that uniform service personnel, overseas civilians, voters who request non-English ballots and permanent absentee voters have a much lower likelihood of returning their ballot, and once returned, a lower likelihood that their ballots will be counted compared with the general absentee voting population. We also find that there is little partisan effect as to which voters are more likely to return their ballots or have their ballots counted. We conclude our paper with a discussion of the implications of our research for the current debates about absentee voting.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a dramatic liberalization of absentee voting laws throughout the United States. For example, in California before 1978, only registered voters who were disabled, ill, or for other documented reasons could not get to a polling place on election day could vote absentee. After 1978, any registered California voter could vote absentee without a documented cause. In the 1978 California general election, 314,258 absentee votes were cast (4.41% of all votes cast), but by the 2004 general election, 4,104,179 absentee votes were cast (32.61% of all votes cast).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the early changes in California's absentee voting procedures and their impact see Patterson and Caldeira (1985).

Nationally, especially after passage of the “Help America Vote Act” (2002), many states liberalized their rules allowing absentee voting. These changes in many states have led to increased use of this voting option nationally: the Annenberg National Election Survey estimated that 20% of ballots cast in the 2004 presidential election were from absentee voters.<sup>2</sup>

Absentee voting, especially the liberalization of voting-by-mail, is not without critics. Some have criticized “by demand” absentee voting (in contrast to “by need” absentee voting) because of fears about voter coercion, the lack of privacy, and the potential for fraud (Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2001). Others have criticized absentee voting as a mechanism that undermines civic values and might lead voters to cast less informed ballots, as early

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/220403early%20voting%2032305pr.pdf>.

voters do not have access to late-breaking campaign information (Ornstein, 2001). There is also a healthy academic debate about whether or not the presence of liberalized absentee voting procedures help fuel a long-term increase in voter turnout (Berinsky et al., 2001; Southwell and Burchett, 2000a). Absentee voting may also help reduce the cost of voting and positively affect turnout (Aldrich, 1993).

A large descriptive literature exists on how absentee voting laws have changed over time and the potential impact of these changes on election outcomes (APSA, 1952; Keyssar, 2000; Martin, 1945; Ray, 1926, 1919, 1918a, 1918b, 1914; Steinbicker, 1938; Winther, 1944). In recent years, research has focused on the factors that lead to increases in absentee voting (e.g. Dubin and Kalsow, 1996a, 1996b; Oliver, 1996; Patterson and Caldeira, 1985), the impact of absentee voting and other electoral procedures on overall voter participation (e.g., Kim et al., 1975; Oliver, 1996, Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, Stein and Garcia-Monet, 1997; Fortier, 2006), the characteristics of absentee voters (Stein, 1998), and the impact on overall turnout of having the entire population of a jurisdiction vote by mail (mail being the method used by the majority of Los Angeles County absentee voters to receive and cast ballots) – as occurs in Oregon (Berinsky et al., 2001; Hanmer and Traugott, 2004; Karp and Banducci, 2000; Southwell and Burchett, 2000a, 2000b, 1997). There are also normative arguments regarding whether absentee voting has other broader impacts on civic values and the political process (e.g., Gans, 2000; Ornstein, 2001).

The process of absentee voting is significantly different from that of precinct-based voting, in large part because absentee voting simply entails many more steps where the process may go awry. Precinct voters do not need to request their ballot, wait for it to be sent by mail, and fill out the outside of an envelope precisely in order for the ballot to be included in the final tally. Once a precinct voter drops her ballot into the ballot box, she has little concern that her ballot will be challenged and go uncounted. As a consequence, the study of absentee voting cannot be directly compared to precinct voting; the types of procedural problems that precinct voters face are not the same as those faced by absentee voters.

The research literature tends to focus on a single aspect of the absentee voting process – the actual casting of ballots using the typical absentee voting method, which is also known as by-mail voting or postal voting. However, as the 2000 general election demonstrated to many Americans, the decision by the voter to cast an absentee ballot is only one aspect of the voting process. After the ballot is cast, there is a second decision that is made primarily by election officials: should the ballot be counted? For a variety of reasons, many absentee ballots are not included in the vote tabulation process. Absentee ballots can be excluded from final tabulation for a variety of reasons: the ballot is returned to the local election official after the deadline for accepting such ballots; the information on the outside of the absentee ballot (which validates its authenticity) is not completed entirely or appears incorrect; voter's eligibility to cast such a ballot is challenged; or the ballot is

spoiled in some way.<sup>3</sup> This second part of the absentee voting process – the decision whether or not particular absentee ballots are included in final election tabulation – has been ignored in the research literature. As increasing numbers of ballots are being cast using the absentee process, it is important to understand how many absentee ballots are not being counted and who is casting these uncounted ballots.

Thus, our research focuses on this unanswered question about absentee voting. Which absentee ballots are counted and which are not? To answer this question we use data from Los Angeles County – nation's largest and most diverse voting jurisdiction – for the November 2002 general election to examine both halves of the absentee voting equation. In the next section we discuss the specifics of our absentee voting dataset and in the third section we develop our hypotheses. Then we turn to our empirical results, and we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our research for the current debates about absentee voting.

## 2. Studying absentee voting in Los Angeles County

In the empirical analysis we present below we use the “absentee voter file” (AVF) from Los Angeles County's November 2002 general election. This file has a record for every eligible absentee voter: all permanent absentee voters, all those in vote-by-mail districts, all of the overseas civilians and military personnel voters, and all others who did not cast a ballot in a traditional polling place. The AVF records the process used by each absentee voter to request a ballot; it also records two aspects regarding the resolution of the ballot request: (1) whether the absentee ballot was returned or not, and (2) if it was returned, whether it was included in the vote tabulation. The AVF also records basic voter registration and absentee voting information, like party registration, birth date, and ballot language. We discuss the details of the specific AVF records that are part of our study below.

Los Angeles County, California, is the largest and most complex election jurisdiction in the United States. In the November 2002 general election, there were almost 4 million registered voters in Los Angeles County, and almost 5000 voting precincts. There were almost 1.8 million ballots cast in the November 2002 election, with almost 390,000 of them coming from absentee voters. In Los Angeles County, election officials are required to provide all elections materials in six languages in addition to English: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. This election cost more than \$20 million in administrative costs alone. In California, absentee voters can either mail their ballot to the registrar or hand-deliver

<sup>3</sup> Ballots that are not included in vote tabulation are sometimes called “disqualified” ballots (GAO, 2001). Excluded or disqualified ballots are not included in their entirety in vote tabulation; this is in contrast to “residual votes”, which are ballots on which no votes are counted for specific races because the voter did not make a discernable indication of preference (“undervotes”) or make more indications of preference than allowed (“overvotes”). For studies of the latter “uncounted” votes, see Alvarez and Sinclair (2004), Ansolabehere (2002), and Tomz and Van Houweling (2003).

their ballot to a polling place, and the ballot must be received by 8:00 pm on Election Day. The process of counting and processing absentee ballots are open to observation by interested parties and citizens, as laid forth in California Code Sections 15100–15112.

The complexity of election administration in Los Angeles County makes it an important case for study. With the large number of absentee voting requests and ballots cast, we have sufficient data to study statistically key subpopulations of voters – that in other election jurisdictions might be slivers of the voting population: for example, overseas civilian and military personnel. Thus, the sheer size of Los Angeles County's absentee voting population provides us with more statistical power than we could gain by studying other election jurisdictions. Second, the political and social diversity of Los Angeles County provide us the opportunity to study additional questions about absentee voters. We are interested in examining especially the relative ease with which non-English speaking citizens can use the absentee voting process.

On the other hand, studying only Los Angeles County has limitations. The most important limitation of our analysis is our focus on one large and urban California county. It is possible that our results may not generalize to other counties (in particular those without language diversity or socioeconomic diversity) that are significantly different than Los Angeles. Thus, given the unique characteristics of Los Angeles County and the specific nature of California's election laws (especially those governing absentee voting), we must be cautious about extrapolating from our results to other election jurisdictions. Furthermore, we study one election only – we must also exercise caution when extrapolating our results to elections where the electorate would be significantly different. In presidential elections, for example, the electorate is typically larger and participates in elections less often. We might anticipate that absentee voting would appear more complicated to a voter who voted less frequently, and thus the electorate from presidential elections might have lower return and count rates. Across all elections and all jurisdictions, however, the process of absentee voting is the same – voters request a ballot by mail (or who are permanent absentee voters), receive the ballot, and must then fill it out and return it. Although we do note that our results may not be fully applicable to all other election jurisdictions in the United States, using data from Los Angeles County allows us to study details of absentee voting that we could not study with data from other election jurisdictions.

### 3. Previous research and hypothesis

The many ways in which voters (here California voters) can vote outside the polling place has not been well-studied in the research literature. First, there is a type of absentee voting that is commonly associated with the practice: a registered voter completes an absentee ballot form (provided in their sample ballot, or by third parties like candidates or political organizations) and either sends it to their county election official or drops it off at an election office. These voters receive their ballot later by mail and either return it in the mail, drop it off in-person at an election

office or at a polling place on election day, or have an authorized third party return it for them. In the AVF dataset these voters are separated into two categories – those who have mailed in their sample ballot to request an absentee ballot and those who have “applied by mail” via a third party to request an absentee ballot.<sup>4</sup>

Second, there are permanent absentee voters. After registered voters request this status, they automatically receive absentee ballots in the mail; as long as they return their ballot in all statewide elections they retain their permanent absentee voter status.<sup>5</sup> Under certain conditions voters can be required to vote by mail, at the discretion of the local election official. If voter's election precinct has fewer than 250 registered voters on the 88th day before an election, the precinct can be declared a “mail ballot precinct” and all voters in the precinct are automatically sent absentee ballots.

Third, overseas citizens and military personnel, formally covered by the “Uniformed Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act” (recently updated by the National Defense Authorization Act of 2002 and the Help America Vote Act of 2002), have an expedited and simplified registration and absentee ballot request process. These citizens can use the “Federal Postcard Application,” which simultaneously serves as a voter registration and absentee ballot request, thus simplifying the process for this group. Also, citizens in this same group can request “special absentee voter” status, which because of their location or duties makes it impossible for them to vote absentee during the required period. “Special absentee voters” receive their ballot approximately 60 days before the election; all other requests for absentee ballots made more than 29 days before the election are not processed until the 29th day before the election.

A final category of absentee voters in California is those who, because of illness, disability, or physical handicap, are

<sup>4</sup> See “A Guide to Absentee Voting in California, 2001”, California Secretary of State, Elections Division, [http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/Outreach/absentee/links/absgde\\_long.pdf](http://www.ss.ca.gov/elections/Outreach/absentee/links/absgde_long.pdf) for additional details about absentee voting in California. In the 2002 election there was another category of absentee voters: those who voted in a special pre-election period, in-person, using electronic touchscreen voting systems. We consider these as early voters, and they are not included in our analysis. For research on early voting, see Stein and Garcia-Monet (1997) and Stein (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Also, voters who obtain a court order showing necessary cause for their registration information to be kept confidential are categorized as a type of permanent absentee voter until the election official is informed that it is no longer necessary to keep voter's identification confidential. These voters are denoted in this way in our dataset and are dropped from the analysis. This special class of absentee voters is covered in California Election Code Section 2166, which reads in part (Section 2166(a)): “Any person filing with the county elections official a new affidavit of registration or reregistration may have the information relating to his or her residence address, telephone number, and email address appearing on the affidavit, or any list or roster or index prepared therefrom, declared confidential upon order of a superior court issued upon a showing of good cause that a life threatening circumstance exists to the voter or a member of the voter's household...”. Such registered voters will “Be considered an absent voter for all subsequent elections or until the county election official is notified otherwise by the court or in writing by the voter” (Section 2166(b)(1)).

unable to vote at a precinct polling place and who have missed the application deadline for requesting an absentee ballot. These citizens can request an absentee ballot in writing which can be provided to an authorized representative of the citizen who presents the written application to an election official. The voter, or their authorized representative, can return the absentee ballot to an election official or to any polling place in the election jurisdiction.

These various categories of absentee voting – which exist alongside poll site voting in all states but Oregon – show how voters make a series of choices about whether they want to vote and how they want to vote. Research on absentee voting has traditionally focused on the behavioral decision by registered voters of whether to cast their ballot in the polling place or by some absentee method, and has focused on the relative differences between absentee voters, precinct voters, and non-voters, usually employing survey data. There has been little attention focused on the different types of absentee voters or on the important political and procedural questions of whose absentee ballots are returned and then counted.

The latter is a critical question, highlighted by studies of voting in the wake of the 2000 presidential election (e.g., Alvarez and Sinclair, 2004; Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2001; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2003). Despite conventional wisdom, casting an absentee ballot is not the same as casting a vote at the polls as the voter does not place their ballot in a box or in the memory of an electronic voting machine. Instead, they mail their ballot or deliver it to an election official, and are rarely certain how the ballot is adjudicated. To give but one example of the difference, absentee ballots can be rejected because of a signature mismatch; at a traditional polling site, signatures on the precinct roster are not necessarily checked, and if then, only after the precinct ballots have been dropped into the ballot box and are no longer associated with information that would link a particular ballot to a particular voter.

Absentee ballots can be challenged and not counted in the certified results for a variety of reasons. The most likely reason why a ballot is rejected is that it is received after the close of the polls. For example, in California absentee ballots have to be received by the election officials by the close of the polls on Election Day. However, even if a ballot is received in time, it can be challenged for other reasons. When the election official receives a ballot, all of the information on the outside of the ballot that authenticates the ballot is examined. A voter is required to sign the ballot envelope and provide other information, such as their address. If the signature does not match or is missing, or the other information does not match what is on file, the ballot is also rejected.<sup>6</sup>

Voting for certain absentee populations is also more difficult. Recent studies by the US GAO (2001) show that casting a meaningful absentee vote can be very difficult for individuals who are UOCAVA voters. One key problem is ballot transit time; a 2001 GAO study found that transit

times for first class mail can range from as little as 5 days to as much as a month (GAO, 2001). Additionally, all voters – including UOCAVA voters – make errors in completing the forms required for an absentee ballot request. As the GAO noted,

Military and overseas voters do not always complete absentee voting requirements or use federal forms correctly. The basic steps that absentee voters must take to register and request an absentee ballot are similar for all states. Nevertheless, absentee voting schedules and requirements vary from state to state. In addition, counties vary in how they interpret and implement state requirements... varying state and county requirements resulted in confusion among voters about residency requirements and about the deadlines for registering to vote, requesting a ballot, and returning the voted ballot. County officials said that problems in processing absentee voting applications arise primarily because voters do not fill in the forms correctly or do not begin the voting process early enough to complete the multiple steps they must take (GAO, 2001, pp. 40–41).

In a recent significant study, similar to ours, Imai and King (2004) examined late overseas absentee ballots received in the 2000 Florida election after November 7, 2000, which county canvassing boards deliberated over between November 17 and November 26.<sup>7</sup> They examined 3739 overseas ballots, of which 2490 were accepted and counted by canvassing boards; thus, 33% of the overseas ballots received in Florida after November 7, 2000 were invalidated for various reasons.

Importantly, Imai and King studied the 2490 overseas absentee ballots received after November 7, 2000 that were accepted by canvassing boards and included in their county tabulations. Based on their understanding of the Florida regulations for what constitutes an acceptable overseas ballot, they found that 680 (27%) of the accepted overseas absentee ballots were flawed. Had these 680 ballots not been accepted, then 52% of the late overseas absentee ballots would have been rejected in the 2000 Florida election.

The most common flaw found in these ballots was that many had no visible proof of having been mailed by Election Day. Under Florida law, overseas absentee ballots in the 2000 election needed an indication (e.g., a postmark or dated signature) to demonstrate it was mailed before November 7, 2000; 756 ballots did not, and 344 of the counted ballots had this problem. The second type of flaw involved ballots that did not have a witness signature or the witness's complete address; 527 ballots had this flaw and 96 of the counted ballots were flawed in this way.

The third most significant flaw in the late overseas absentee ballots was that 327 were received after November 7, 2000 with a domestic postmark, and 183 of these ballots were counted; Florida law stated that absentee ballots that are mailed from within the United States or

<sup>6</sup> See Hall (2002) for a detailed discussion of the ballot reconciliation and certification process used in Los Angeles.

<sup>7</sup> The same data that Imai and King used were reported on by Barstow and Van Natta, 2001.



territories must be received before November 7, 2000. Next, in Florida overseas absentee voters can submit two ballots, and only the second ballot is to be counted; the researchers found 19 instances where both ballots were counted. Last, 69 ballots were received after November 17, 2000, which was the last day overseas absentee ballots could be received (10 days after the election), and 5 of these ballots were counted. From Imai and King's examination of the late overseas absentee ballots from Florida, we see that these ballots contained an extremely high number of errors. Many voters cast ballots that probably should have been rejected.

The Imai and King study is significant substantively, as it documents major problems with the absentee voting process for this one category of absentee voters. Overseas citizens and military personnel can, just because of the vagaries of both overseas and domestic mail systems, think they voted when in fact their ballot was not counted. Their study is methodologically important as well, because they analyze the actual absentee ballots themselves; they know which ballots were counted and which were not. Unfortunately, beyond the Imai and King study, little is known about the resolution of absentee ballots more generally, and about overseas citizen and military absentee ballots specifically. The only attempt at a national study was conducted in 2001 by the GAO, and they prefaced their study by noting that "many counties could not provide data on how many absentee ballots they had received from military and overseas voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act and how many of these ballots they had disqualified" (GAO, 2001, p. 52). Based on partial data, the GAO estimated that 8.1% of military and overseas absentee ballots were disqualified in 2000 in small counties, relative to a disqualification rate of 1.8% for other absentee voters.<sup>8</sup>

There are other voting populations that are vulnerable to problems with the absentee voting process. In Los Angeles County, there are six language minorities – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese – and under the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its amendments, the county is required to serve these voters in their native language. However, many of these voters also are not used to participation in democratic elections and, even with the outreach efforts of the county and groups assisting language minority voting populations, many find the absentee voting process difficult to navigate. In fact, one of the most common reasons why voters contact the Korean American Coalition's election hotline is to learn more about the election and the general aspects of the voting process (Hall 2002, 2003).

There is a research that has studied the political participation by non-English proficient citizens. In particular, language proficiency has been shown to be a critical predictor of participation in recent research (e.g., Citrin

and Highton, 2002, Tam Cho, 1999).<sup>9</sup> A lack of English proficiency can clearly make the process of voting – and in particular absentee voting – more costly and complicated for a citizen (Downs, 1957, Tam Cho, 1999). Asian language minorities – of which there are five in Los Angeles County – have an especially difficult time developing biliterate skills because almost all have non-Roman alphabetic writing systems (Loo, 1985). This leads us to expect that registered voters who lack English proficiency will also have difficulty navigating the absentee voting process, and that they will be less likely to return their absentee ballots and to have their ballots counted.

Thus, based on the previous studies on absentee voting, we have three hypotheses that we test in this paper. First, we expect that overseas voters will be less likely to return their absentee ballots and will be more likely to have their ballots challenged upon return. This hypothesis is based on the results from the GAO report (2001) and Imai and King (2004). Second, we also expect to find that voters who use a non-English ballot will be less likely to return their ballots and will be more likely to have their ballot challenged upon return. We base this hypothesis on the special problems this class of voters faces regarding the basic accessibility of the electoral process, and on past research (Tam Cho, 1999) that demonstrates that language proficiency is an important predictor of political participation. Last, we expect to find that absentee voters who have applied for an absentee ballot specifically in this election, relative to those who are permanent absentee voters or are in vote-by-mail precincts, will be more likely to return their absentee ballots. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that registered voters who have taken the active step of requesting a ballot for the current election are likely to be more interested in the election and hence more motivated to cast their ballot. We test these hypotheses below using both bivariate and multivariate statistical techniques.

#### 4. Empirical results

We begin with a set of descriptive statistics that summarize the absentee voter file from the 2002 November election in Los Angeles County and the 2000 census data (United States Census Bureau, 2002), merged into the file by ZIP code.<sup>10</sup> We then turn to some multivariate presentations of the data that test our hypotheses regarding whose

<sup>8</sup> GAO, 2001, page 54. The GAO was unable to provide a national estimate for military and overseas absentee ballot disqualification rates for the larger counties due to unavailability of necessary information from such counties.

<sup>9</sup> Lien (1994) indirectly studied language use in the home for Asian-Americans and Mexican-Americans and the impact it had on a variety of political participation measures, as in her analysis language use in the home was one of four measures that were collapsed into a single variable called "ethnic ties". In her analysis, she found that "ethnic ties" do not impact voter turnout for either Asian- or Mexican-Americans; additionally, "ethnic ties" do not impact non-voting participatory activities for Asian-Americans, but stronger "ethnic ties" have a negative and statistically significant impact on non-voting participatory activities for Mexican-Americans.

<sup>10</sup> Two groups of absentee voters have been dropped from the analysis. First, as discussed earlier, are the early, touchscreen voters. The second group are those we do not have birth date information, comprising 72,421 observations. Finally, note that 44 individuals whose records were duplicated have been eliminated from the analysis as well.

absentee ballots are returned and counted. A set of characteristics emerge which are indicative of low return and count rates from these analyses. In [Table 1](#) we provide descriptive statistics regarding the relative frequencies of each type of absentee voter. “Sample Ballot” absentee voters are ones who applied for their absentee ballot using the form provided in their sample ballot materials that were mailed to their registration address. These absentee voters make up the largest group, at just over 40% of the absentee voter file. “Permanent” absentee voters are those who have requested permanent absentee voting status. In the 2002 general election, these voters made up almost 31% of those in the absentee voting file. Next were those in the “apply-by-mail” category; these registered voters requested an absentee ballot using some application (most likely provided by a political campaign, party, or interest group), and comprise 23.2% of those in the absentee voter file. This is an interesting group of voters; they have been contacted specifically in an effort to increase their participation by the party paying for mailings so that this group could vote absentee. In fact, in many states (including California), candidates can ask local election officials for lists of people who have requested absentee ballots; thus this “tactic could make a critical difference in a tight election year, especially given the fact that absentee voters are highly likely to cast their ballots” ([Lieb, 2004](#)). [Patterson and Caldera \(1985\)](#) find some effects of partisan mobilization in absentee voting rates in Republican counties in Iowa and California in the 1982 election for governor, but only in counties with otherwise high Republican support. They conclude that efforts to increase absentee voting may be effective, but that the rates of ballots cast do not favor the Republican party.

These three types of absentee voters make up almost 96% of the absentee voter file in this election in Los Angeles County. The remaining 4% are almost entirely those who have been classified as “vote-by-mail” voters. The remaining voters are those who have requested an absentee ballot in-person (“Walk-in” absentee voters, who are 0.29% of the absentee voter requests), who are “Overseas” (0.30%), or who requested an absentee ballot due to their inability to get to the polling place because of hospitalization or other infirmity (the “Hospital” classification, 0.14% of absentee voters).

The absentee voter file also contained other valuable information about each individual registered voter: whether they asked for their absentee ballot in English or another available language, their party registration (Democratic, Republican, Third, or decline-to-state), their address (including their ZIP code), and their birth date. In [Table 2](#) we

**Table 1**  
Types of absentee ballots

Type	Percent	Number
Sample ballot	40.68	157,919
Permanent	31.63	122,787
Apply by mail	23.20	90,056
Vote by mail	3.76	14,605
Walk-in	0.29	1141
Overseas	0.3	1182
Hospital	0.14	555
Total	100	388,245

provide the basic descriptive statistics for the registered voters in the absentee voter file.

The overwhelming tendency of absentee voters was to request an English ballot – only 3.94% requested a non-English ballot. The partisan registration of absentee voters in this election was mainly Democratic (about 53%); Republicans were a third of the file (33%). Only 2.8% of the absentee voters were third party registrants, and over 11% recorded no party affiliation when they registered. The age distribution of the absentee voters in [Table 2](#) documents a clear skew towards the older age categories. Only 4.3% of the 18–24 years old voters requested absentee ballots, and a scant 10% of the 25–34 years old voters did as well. However, 25% of those aged 35–49 requested ballots, 30% of those aged 50–64 requested absentee ballots, and 32% of those over the age of 65+ did as well.

Next we turn to the question of absentee ballot resolution. For every individual in the November 2002 absentee voter file we know (1) whether the individual returned their ballot, and (2) if they returned their ballot, whether it was challenged or counted. We give the simple statistics for the entire absentee voter population in [Table 3](#).

In this particular election, almost one-quarter (24.75%) of the absentee ballots requested were not returned by voters. Once returned, an additional 4% were returned and challenged (thus not counted). The way in which these challenged ballots were adjudicated could have a significant impact on many races. The percent of returned absentee ballots that are not counted is 5.47% in this election, a margin large enough to possibly affect many election outcomes.

The next two tables provide descriptive information regarding whether individual ballots are returned and are counted, based on ballot request mechanism and voter characteristics. In [Table 4](#), we give the ballot resolution statistics for the eight different types of absentee voters. This table shows the percentage for each type of absentee voter who (1) did not return their ballot, (2) returned their ballot and their ballot was counted, and (3) returned their ballot but it was challenged and not included in the vote tabulation. The voters most likely not to return their ballot were those in vote-by-mail precincts (59.88%), overseas voters (49.41%), and permanent absentee voters (34.84%). Voters who are hospitalized, who requested an absentee ballot

**Table 2**  
Some characteristics of absentee voters

Characteristics	Percent
Language	
English	96.06
Non-English	3.94
Party registration	–
Democratic	53.15
Republican	32.59
Third party	2.82
Decline-to-state	11.44
Age	
18–24	4.29
25–34	9.53
35–49	24.80
50–64	29.75
65+	31.63

**Table 3**  
Absentee ballot resolution

Resolution	Percent	Number
Not returned	24.75	96,075
Returned and not challenged	71.35	277,017
Returned and challenged	3.90	15,153
Total	100	388,245

in-person, or who used a sample ballot are much more likely to return their ballot. The absentee voter categories who are less likely to return their ballot are also more likely to have that ballot challenged – overseas voters have almost 10% of their ballots challenged and not counted. Those in vote-by-mail precincts also have high challenge rates (8%). At the other end of the distribution are walk-in and sample ballot absentee voters, with about 2% of each of their returned ballots challenged.

In Table 5, we present ballot resolution rates for the variables we have for each citizen in the absentee voter file: language, partisanship, and age. Again, we look first at ballot returns and then at whether the ballot is challenged and not counted. Beginning with ballot language, we see that non-English absentee voters are slightly more likely to not return their ballot, and marginally more likely to have their ballot challenged if returned. Amongst the partisan groupings, about one-third of third party or decline-to-state absentee voters did not return their absentee ballots, between 5 and 10 percentage points higher than for either Democrats or Republicans. Furthermore, third party and decline-to-state voters are marginally more likely to have their absentee ballots challenged and not included in the tabulation than are Democrats or Republicans. Younger voters are also more likely to fail to return their ballot and once returned, less likely to have their ballot counted compared to older voters.

Thus far we have only examined simple summary statistics. We cannot say with much certainty whether some absentee voter types are more or less likely to return their absentee ballots (for example) than others without using more detailed statistics, so we now turn to two bivariate logit analyses to better examine our hypothesis. We are interested in modeling the two-part process we have been calling ballot resolution: (1) whether an individual returns their absentee ballot or not, and then (2) whether the returned ballot is challenged or counted.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> We present our results here as two separate logits for ease of interpretation. These results might be estimated more efficiently in a multivariate logit model where we specify a dependent variable with three possible values; an indicator of 1 if the ballot was returned and counted, 2 if the ballot was returned but not counted, and 3 if the ballot was not returned. Our results presented here in the first analysis collapse outcomes denoted by 1 and 2 together against outcome 3 and the second analysis compares only outcomes 1 against outcome 2. A simple way to intuit that the two analyses evaluate an identical set of relationships is to consider the structure of the process – first the voter will either return or not return the ballot and then only if the ballot is returned can it be counted. Regardless of estimating two bivariate logits or a single multivariate logit the substantive interpretation of these results is identical as long as the IIA assumption is valid (Alvarez and Nagler, 1997).

**Table 4**  
Ballot resolution by absentee voter type

Ballot type	Percent not returned	Percent not challenged	Percent challenged	Total
Sample ballot	14.64	82.60	2.76	157,919
Permanent	34.84	60.42	4.74	122,787
Apply by mail	23.02	73.06	3.92	90,056
Vote by mail	59.88	31.36	8.76	14,605
Walk-in	9.20	88.34	2.45	1141
Overseas	49.41	41.12	9.48	1182
Hospital	1.80	93.51	4.68	555

We consider the components individually – we first analyze the factors which determine whether or not an individual returns the ballot and then in a second analysis (consisting only of those voters who have already returned their ballot) we analyze the factors which determine whether or not a ballot is counted. We include indicator variables for the various types of absentee voters: UOCAVA, sample ballot, in-person, hospital, and permanent absentee voters. We also include an indicator variable for whether or not the absentee voter requested an English language ballot, for partisanship (Democrat, Republican, and decline-to-state), and for voter's age.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we include ZIP code statistics, such as the percent white, percent black, the median income, and the percent of residents who have been living in the U.S. since 1995. These ZIP code statistics are included as control variables.

In the first analysis the dependent variable is coded as 1 if the ballot is returned and in the second analysis the dependent variable is coded as 1 if the ballot is counted (and this estimation is performed only upon those ballots which are actually returned). These results are included in Table 6; the most interesting aspect of performing the analysis in this manner is to note that our predictive probabilities state that on average 75% of all ballots that are requested will be returned and that of the set of ballots which are returned, on average 5%, will not be counted.

The table is organized with each independent variable in a column followed by the estimated model coefficient for the event coded as 1. Besides each coefficient is the estimated standard error. Interpreting these results is a bit complicated; when looking at the coefficients it is important to remember that their directionality is in reference to the outcome coded as 1, in the first analysis that is when the ballot is returned and in the second analysis that is when the ballot is counted. Therefore, a positive coefficient in either of these two columns implies that as the independent variable increases, the absentee voter is more likely to return their ballot or to have their ballot counted.

Considering the coefficients in this light, note that UOCAVA voters, permanent absentee voters, and all age groups except the excluded category (age 65 and older) are less likely to return their ballots. Furthermore, voters

<sup>12</sup> Note that any observation with a missing data point is dropped from the analysis; for example, we have approximately 72,000 observations that do not have an age data point. As a consequence these observations are dropped from the estimation, but this should not affect the estimation process.

**Table 5**  
Ballot resolution by absentee voter characteristics

Characteristic	Percent not returned	Percent not challenged	Percent challenged	Total
English	24.65	71.45	3.89	372,945
Non-English	27.01	68.86	4.13	15,300
Democratic	25.52	70.49	3.99	206,352
Republican	20.89	75.47	3.63	126,540
Third party	29.58	65.84	4.58	10,947
DTS	30.96	64.94	4.10	44,406
Age 18–24	42.00	51.55	6.45	16,675
Age 25–34	36.61	58.68	4.71	37,017
Age 35–49	27.84	68.11	4.05	96,277
Age 50–64	20.53	75.99	3.49	115,488
Age 65+	20.37	76.04	3.58	122,788

who have requested a non-English ballot are also less likely to return their ballot (since the English coefficient is positive, the non-English coefficient will therefore be negative). Surprisingly, the percent of residences who have lived in the same house since 1995 is related to a lower return rate. This would suggest that voters who live in ZIP codes with a more mobile population are more likely to return their ballots. One possible explanation of the sign of this coefficient is that it may be correlated with latent variables associated with permanent absentee ballots mailed to voters no longer residing at that address.

Looking at the characteristics that are related to lower count rates, UOCAVA voters, permanent absentee voters, non-English voters, and all age groups have a lower likelihood of having their ballot counted once returned. These are all conclusions consistent with our initial hypothesis. In terms of ZIP code coefficients, the percentage of black residents in a ZIP code is related to a lower count rate. Unlike the return rate coefficients, the percent of residents who have lived in the same house since 1995 are not related to lower count rates. This result is consistent with the explanation that these ZIP code statistics are correlated

**Table 6**  
Logistic regression coefficients, return = 1, count = 1

Variable	Return coefficient	Count coefficient
UOCAVA	-.69* (.06)	-1.1* (.11)
Sample ballot	.77* (.01)	.67* (.02)
In-person	1.39* (.10)	.88* (.19)
Hospital	2.93* (.32)	.23 (.20)
Permanent	-.53* (.01)	-.29* (.02)
English	.14* (.02)	.16* (.04)
Democrat	.21* (.02)	.25* (.05)
Republican	.31* (.02)	.25* (.05)
Decline	-.04 (.02)	.11* (.05)
Age 18–24	-1.3* (.02)	-1.17* (.04)
Age 25–34	-1.00* (.01)	-.66* (.03)
Age 35–49	-.61* (.01)	-.37* (.02)
Age 50–64	-.17* (.01)	-.09* (.02)
Per. white	.005* (.0003)	.001 (.001)
Per. black	.003* (.0003)	-.004* (.001)
Median income	0* (.000)	0* (.000)
Per. same house '95	-.003* (.001)	.01* (.001)
Constant	.87* (.04)	2.03* (.10)
Observations	388,245	292,170

with permanent absentee ballots mailed to voters no longer residing at the same address.

A quick look at the coefficients from the “return” logit estimation indicates that Republican registrants are more likely to return their ballots than Democrats. Recall the party registration coefficients for the “count” logit estimation are all positive, the model implies that the major party registrants are more likely to have their ballots counted than third party registrants. Here Republican and Democratic registrants have almost identical coefficient values. Again, UOCAVA voters, permanent absentee voters, and voters from all age categories are related to lower count rates.

The advantage of performing this two stage analysis is that it lets us estimate an interesting counterfactual. First, consider a situation that is admittedly farfetched. Suppose all absentee voters who requested a ballot returned their ballot and that ballot was counted, then the profile of absentee voters would look something like the profile of those voters who simply requested an absentee ballot. Note, however, the percentages of requests, returns and counts by party in Table 7. The party breakdown for those voters who return their ballot differs from those voters who requested an absentee ballot: the percentage of decline-to-state partisans who will return drops by a percentage point and the percentage of Republicans increases by a percentage point. The party breakdown for count rates remains the same. Thus, while there are differences that we note in the coefficients in the tables above, it is also the case that these differences are slight and are unlikely to make a difference in determining election outcomes.

To examine further the partisan breakdown of absentee ballot return and count rates, we perform a series of counterfactuals (King et al., 2000; Tomz et al., 2003). We are interested in knowing whether registrants from any particular parties might be more likely to return their ballots or have their ballots counted, relative to voters from other political parties, controlling for all of the factors included in our analysis. If our results show that there are systematic differences by partisan ballot requests, we might then infer that the use of absentee ballots could affect the partisan balance of the electorate, and thus affect the election outcome. Our counterfactual begins by estimating the request rates, by party registration (the same information that is provided in the first column of Table 7). This is our baseline that we use to evaluate alternative scenarios, in which we vary the partisan ballot return rate in particular ways. There are four alternative scenarios we look at in this analysis, each involving a differing mix of partisan ballot requests, and for each alternative partisan mixture of ballot requests we compute the estimated percentage of absentee ballots in this election that would not be returned

**Table 7**  
Partisan request, return and count summary

Party	Request Percent	Return Percent	Count Percent
Democratic	53	53	53
Republican	33	34	34
Decline-to-state	11	10	10
Third	3	3	3



and those that would not be counted upon return. The first two scenarios involve increasing the Democratic ballot request rate by 10 percent (from 53% to 63%); in the first of these the increased Democratic request rate comes entirely from decline-to-state registrants (who fall from 11% to 1% in this scenario), while the second has the increased Democratic request rate coming from the Republicans (who fall from 33% in the baseline case to 23% in the hypothetical scenario). The other two scenarios see a 20% increase in Democratic ballot requests or a 30% increase in Democratic ballot requests; in these two cases, all of the changes are coming from a reduction in Republican ballot requests. We present the results of these four counterfactual analyses in Table 8.

In Table 8, the first column gives the actual partisan breakdown of requested ballots and then the outcome from that breakdown – the percent not returned and not counted – calculated by fixing each independent variable at its mean and using the coefficients we estimated in the logit models. Again, the first column is our baseline case. Moving from left-to-right, each following column represents a different possibility for the partisan breakdown of requested absentee ballots with the percentage of Republican or decline-to-state registrants decreasing. The two rows at the bottom of each column give the estimated return and count rates associated with these changes are displayed below each counterfactual. The important conclusion to draw from this analysis is that the estimated ballot non-return and non-count rates, again shown in the final two rows of each column, are essentially unchanged as we move from scenario to scenario. In the final scenario, we increased the hypothetical Democratic ballot request rate by 20% and reduced the Republican return rate from 33% to 3%. Only then do we see the estimated ballot non-return rate change from the baseline, and there it only increases by a single percentage point. Thus, we conclude that although there are partisan differences in the rate of returned and counted absentee ballots, these differences appear to lack partisan political consequence based on our analysis.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Increasingly, Americans are taking advantage of the convenience offered by absentee voting, especially voting by mail. Absentee voting is undoubtedly an easier way for many citizens to participate in the electoral process, and election administrators increasingly favor it because it reduces the number of citizens using traditional polling

places to vote. There have been a number of studies that have looked at the recent rise in absentee voting. This literature has focused on the impact of voting by mail, either by looking at the effects that absentee voting has on voter turnout or the effects it has on the composition of the electorate. Our study is different, as we have a unique dataset that allows us to study whether absentee votes were counted across key subpopulations of voters.

The first step in the absentee voting process is the return of the ballot. We found that overseas citizens, permanent absentees, and those citizens who requested a non-English ballot were substantially less likely to return their absentee ballot. That these groups are less likely to return their ballots indicates that they face significant hurdles as they attempt to participate in the political process. Although we do not have information in our dataset that will allow us to better understand why these two groups are less likely to return their ballots, we speculate that the overseas voters are undoubtedly facing the sorts of difficulties highlighted in studies following the 2000 presidential election: the significant amount of time that it can take for voting materials to be mailed and to be returned. Language minority voters, by contrast, may find casting their absentee ballot difficult because of a lack of understanding about the balloting process.

The second step, whether or not the absentee ballot gets counted once it is returned by the voter, also produced an intriguing result. We found that overseas voters were substantially more likely to have their absentee ballot challenged and not counted than other types of absentee voters. Again, we do not have specific information about why overseas ballots were more likely to be challenged, although we speculate that they are challenged because they arrive after the official deadline in California – the close of polling on Election Day. The GAO study (2001) found that, in counties that provided disqualified ballot data for military and overseas citizens, approximately 40% of the disqualified ballots arrived after the legal deadline for

**Table 8**  
Counterfactuals by hypothetical partisan request breakdowns

Democratic increase	10%	10%	20%	30%
At expense of:	Decline-to-state	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans
<i>Party request percentage</i>				
Democratic (53)	63	63	73	83
Republican (33)	33	23	13	3
Decline-to-state (11)	1	11	11	11
Third (3)	3	3	3	3
<i>Estimated non-return and non-counted rates</i>				
Percent not returned (23)	23	23	23	24
Percent not counted (5)	5	5	5	5

Note: the baseline estimated rates are given in the first column in parentheses, using the full sample of data and the coefficients from Table 6. The remaining four columns provide the counterfactual analyses, with the top panel giving information about the estimated partisan ballot request rates (the counterfactual changes), while the bottom two panels provide the estimated ballot non-return and non-counted rates for the given scenario in that column.

<sup>13</sup> In our dataset we note whether or not the voter requested an absentee ballot via the county mailer or another mailer and have no information as to whether or not the non-county mailer originated from a party, an interest group, or even a “get out the vote” campaign. However, we do interact the non-county requests with partisan registration but conclude that the signs of these interaction terms are not informative with regard to mobilization. We then interact party registration with permanent absentee voters. This permits us to notice whether or not the partisan permanent absentee voters (who have likely received partisan mailers encouraging absentee voting) have increased return and count rates. We find they do not. This analysis is available upon request from Sinclair.

absentee voting. In some states, such as Florida, consideration is made for the ballot transit problems encountered by UOCAVA voters. There, the deadline for receipt of absentee ballots is 10 days after the election. It is possible that if all states enacted similar policies this might encourage more UOCAVA voters to return ballots.

It is also likely that overseas absentee ballots are being challenged due to other defects, like missing information on the return envelope. Language minority voters may also be making errors on their absentee ballot return envelope that result in the ballot being challenged. Unfortunately, the database we provided does not indicate why ballots were challenged.<sup>14</sup> Future research should seek to clarify the reasons for absentee ballot challenges, by type of absentee voter.

Also, we were encouraged to find that there seems to be no clear partisan advantage in the absentee requests, return and count rates in our analysis. It seems that voters from no single party are returning their ballot or having their ballot counted at a significantly higher rate than voters from any other party. This implies that regardless of the concerns we have about return and count rates for specific ballot types, the fact that some absentee ballot methods produce lower return and count rates does not appear to affect election outcomes.

But as we discussed earlier, we are cautious in generalizing our results in this paper as we are only studying one election in one California county. It will be interesting to study other elections in Los Angeles County, as well as other states and counties, using the actual absentee voter files. These databases provide a wealth of important information, especially concerning the administrative issues of who returns their absentee ballots and whose absentee ballots are counted. The 2000 presidential election generated enormous interest in the basic questions of election administration in the United States. Most of these studies, like the Caltech/MIT study that estimated that as many as 6 million votes were “lost” in the election, have studied polling place and voting system problems. As increasing number of Americans participate using the absentee voting process, we clearly need to better understand how the absentee voting process works, who uses it, and what problems certain types of voters might encounter as they attempt to participate using the absentee voting process.

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<sup>14</sup> The absentee voting file from the 2002 November election does have a field that indicates the date of ballot return; 90.5% of the challenged UOCAVA absentee ballots arrived after the legal deadline for absentee voting. However, there are some apparent inaccuracies with data entered into this field, as it appears that there are 1114 absentee ballots with return dates after the close of election that were returned and not challenged. Discussions with Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder staff indicated that this discrepancy most likely arises from inaccuracies in data entry.

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