

CHOICE ARCHITECTURE AND VOTER TURNOUT:
A STUDY OF VOTER'S CHOICE ACT IMPLEMENTATION

A Thesis

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by

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Department of Public Policy and Administration

Abstract
of
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US voter turnout has not surpassed 65 percent of registered voters in the last 20 years, which is considered to be low by international standards. State and local public officials have been implementing election administration reforms of varied scopes and approaches since the late 1980s, in hopes of influencing voter turnout. Prior research suggests the impact of choice architecture may be limited, but more study is needed with respect to specific reforms implemented in recent years. In this thesis I investigated whether the 12.3 percent increase in voter turnout in Sacramento County during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election was caused mainly by the Voter's Choice Act reform, or if political context of this election cycle had a greater effect on voter turnout. I also considered voters' reactions to administrative reforms.

To answer the main research question, I conducted an on-site survey of voters in Sacramento County during the 2018 Statewide Primary election. I also performed a comparative analysis of voter turnout in California counties that implemented the VCA reform and other counties that did not. To gauge voters' reactions to reforms I drew upon write-in responses to the survey and interviewed county officials.

After analyzing weighted and unweighted statewide voter turnout data, I concluded that there may have been a limited effect of VCA implementation on voter turnout. However,

survey results showed that a far greater number of voters decided to participate in the election due to factors related to the larger political context.

With respect to administration of VCA reform, I found that given a choice of ballot return methods, a greater number of Sacramento County voters chose direct contact with the county as opposed to returning their ballots through an intermediary. This has interesting implications for the administrative side of the Voter's Choice Act, and such questions as how to improve collection of return ballots at vote centers and how many voter drop boxes to use.

More generally, my thesis suggests that public officials should not count on choice architecture measures to bring about significant changes in voter behavior. Instead, they should focus on the measures' efficiency and cost-effectiveness to provide the best possible service at the lowest cost to taxpayers.

_____, Committee Chair
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation in elections serves as a foundation for the democratic system of governance, yet many US citizens do not vote or play an active role in choosing their leaders on federal, state or local levels (Parkin, 2011). Researchers point out that US voter turnout has not surpassed 65 percent of registered voters in the last 20 years, which is considered to be low by international standards. Yet, US citizens rank in the 60th percentile among the citizens of 81 countries in the frequency of political discussion with people around them. Americans also volunteer for political causes and participate in other types of political activities at rates that are comparable with those of the citizens in other Western democracies (Mutz, 2006).

While differences in turnout may affect national elections, they may be even more important in local elections that generally draw fewer voters. In these races, even small advances or declines in turnout may turn outcomes. State and local public administrators have been implementing election administration reforms of varied scopes and approaches since the late 1980s, partly to achieve cost savings on the county level and partly to make the process of voting more convenient, which in turn would boost voter turnout.

These types of election administration reforms include public policy changes that are within the definition of choice architecture: choice-preserving, but carefully crafted to steer the public toward options that leave individuals and society in general better off. Some examples of choice architecture as related to election administration are the all-mail elections, language assistance to voters with limited English skills, early voting, Election Day registration, pre-paid postage for vote-by-mail ballots, etc. However, researchers point out that one of the key features of choice architecture in public policy is its limited impact on the issue it was designed to address.

California's legislature joined the effort of increasing the convenience of election administration by adopting the Voter's Choice Act in 2016, which constitutes one of the most comprehensive and multifaceted election administration reforms in the country (Padilla, 2019b). Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo counties were the first five counties to implement the Voter's Choice Act in 2018. The Statewide Primary election in June of 2018 became the first election cycle under the new model.

In this thesis I intend to investigate if the 12.3 percent increase in voter turnout in Sacramento County during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election was caused mainly by the Voter's Choice Act reform, or if political context of this election cycle had a major effect on voter turnout. The question this thesis aims to answer is: did the political context of the 2018 Statewide Primary election in Sacramento County have a greater effect on voter turnout than the Voter's Choice Act reform?

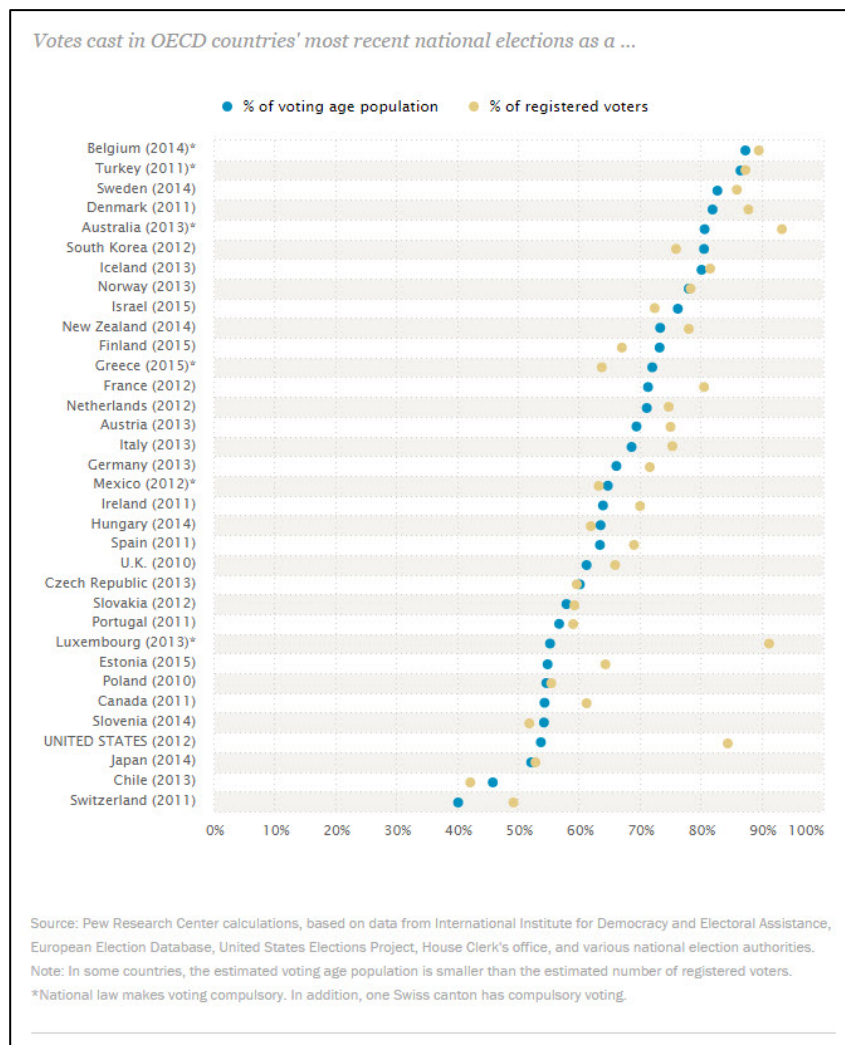
To answer this research question, I conducted an on-site survey of voters in Sacramento County during the 2018 Statewide Primary, a comparative analysis of voter turnout in the counties that implemented the VCA reform and all other counties that did not, and county staff interviews in February of 2019. All of these methods helped me to assess whether the election administration reform or the political context of the election was the driving force behind the increase in voter turnout. Furthermore, I will use the output from the qualitative and quantitative research to shape policy recommendations that will raise the level of understanding of the limitations of choice architecture measures as related to election administration.

The remainder of chapter one will discuss the history of voter turnout in the US, California, and Sacramento County in particular, the importance of voter turnout, the definition of choice architecture in public policy, and the particulars of the Voter's Choice Act reform in California.

The importance of voter turnout

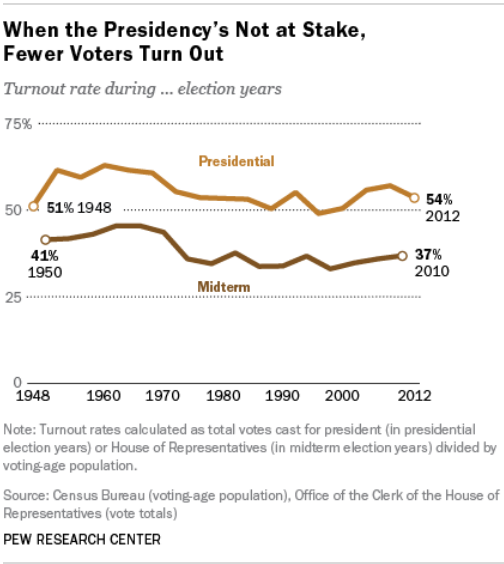
US voter turnout in the past 20 years has been low by international standards, as votes cast by eligible US voters fluctuated between a low of 53.5 percent and a high of 63.7 percent (Wallace, 2016). Only 70 percent of the voting-age citizens in the US were registered to vote in 2016, compared to 91 percent in Canada and the UK (Desilver, 2017).

Figure 1.1. Voter Turnout Rates in Recent National Elections in Democratic Countries



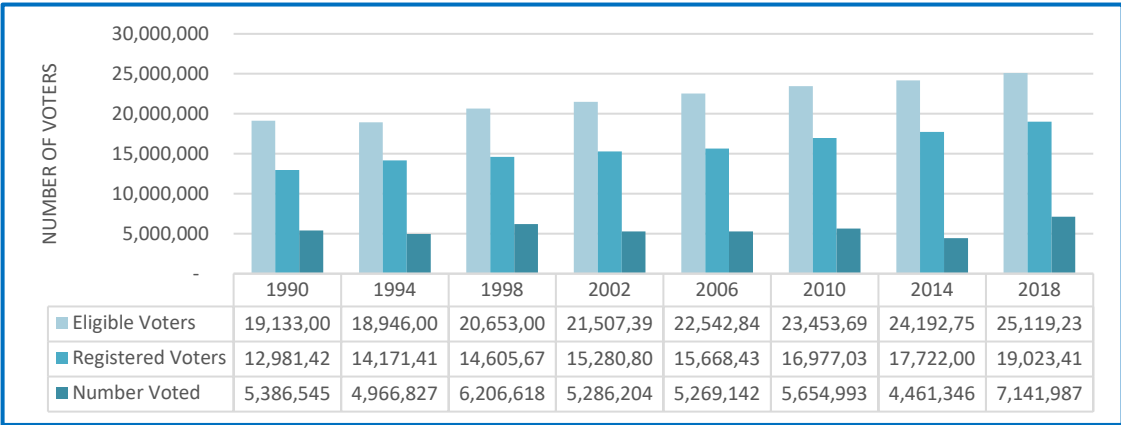
Voter turnout during non-presidential years has been at lower numbers across all states, as seen in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2. Turnout Rates in US Presidential and Midterm Elections



In California’s Statewide Primary in 2014, just 25 percent of registered voters cast ballots. Other statewide primaries in the span of 28 years have seen slightly higher voter turnout numbers, with the highest of 42.5 percent in the June 1998 Statewide Primary election.

Figure 1.3. California Voter Turnout in Statewide Primary Elections, 1990-2018

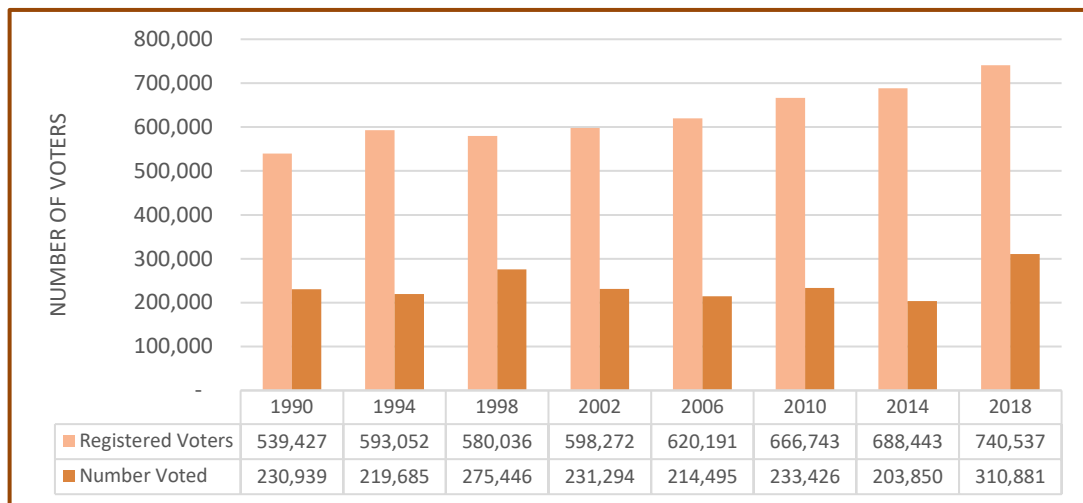


Researchers point out that a possible bias produced by uneven representation at the polls decreases as the turnout increases (Hajnal, 2015). In cases where only a small fraction of the

electorate turns out to vote, bias can be severe. Representation at the local level, public policies and public spending decisions are closely linked to voter turnout.

At the county level, Sacramento County's voter turnout rates in Statewide Primary elections mirror those of the State of California, as seen in Figure 1.4. In the last 28 years, Sacramento County's voter turnout rates fluctuated between a high of 42 and a low of 29 percent.

Figure 1.4. Sacramento County Voter Turnout in Statewide Primary Elections, 1990-2018



As low voter turnout continues to be a problem across the United States, several states have been making changes to election administration procedures since the 1980s in order to nudge voters into action. Some of the examples include a vote-by-mail model where all registered voters receive their ballots by mail; early voting where voters can cast their ballots at polling places for a number of days before Election Day; Election Day registration where eligible voters can register to vote or update their registration at the polling place on Election Day; the Vote center model where voters can vote at any location due to the county-wide voter registration database. California's legislature has joined the choice architecture effort in 2016 by passing

Senate Bill 450, also known as the Voter's Choice Act. Research shows that the effectiveness of choice architecture measures related to election administration may be limited.

Choice architecture defined

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) write that it is wrong to assume that majority of people match the idealized rationality of standard economic models when it comes to making choices that are in their best interest. More frequently, people rely on the automatic way of thinking when they have to act quickly, lack sufficient information, are missing adequate feedback or experience, and are influenced by feelings or moods. Taking into account this bounded rationality, choice architects such as public policy makers, can design choices that alter people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options, but directing them toward options that leave individuals and society in general better off (Thaler, Sunstein, 2008). Public policy nudges can range in scope from strategic road markings to reduce speed to nation-wide campaigns against childhood obesity (Selinger, Whyte, 2011).

While Thaler and Sunstein (2008) do not offer a formula or a specific method for creating and implementing successful nudges, they insist that choice architecture is always choice preserving. They recommend that choice architects design nudges that are inexpensive to use, easy to opt out of, transparent, and function without changing financial incentives. The purpose of the nudge then is to help people satisfy ends they select for themselves, but routinely fail to meet due to the reliance on the automatic way of thinking (Selinger, Whyte, 2011).

Even though behavior change interventions generate fears about the rise of a nanny or big-brother state, public policy makers seem to be prepared to use the power of the state to try to change civic behavior for the wider benefit (John, Smith, Stoker, 2009). The strength of choice architecture in the public sector rests on its consistency with what we know about human decision making: the relative inertia and lack of use of cognitive capacity can be mitigated by providing

default options which lead individuals to act in ways that are comfortable, but also turn out to be beneficial to the society. However, the weakness of nudging may be in its inability to address the large problems, and in its capacity to generate only modest outcomes. John, Smith and Stoker (2009) provide an example of improving energy efficiency by outfitting homes with an indicator of high energy use as a means of immediate feedback. While this is an important nudge in improving energy efficiency, it is certainly not large enough in scale to combat climate change.

When it comes to choice architecture measures in election administration, I review prior research outcomes in chapter 2: the effects appear to be limited for each particular reform. However, there is room for further research of simultaneous administration of several election reforms and on the new choice architecture measures, such as reverse order ballot printing. It appears that California's Voter's Choice Act constitutes a fusion of several election administration reform measures with a simultaneous implementation timeline.

California's Voter's Choice Act

Modeled on the Colorado election administration reform, California's legislature passed Senate Bill 450 in August of 2016. Governor Brown signed it on September 29, 2016. The bill constituted a large administrative reform for California's counties. The counties were free to opt-in starting with the 2018 election cycle. Legislators based this bill on the fact that a majority of California voters were already casting ballots by mail: over 60 percent of all voters statewide used a vote-by-mail ballot during the 2014 General election. Additional support was provided by collecting data through a poll conducted by Public Policy Institute of California. It found that 70 percent of California adults favored receiving a vote-by-mail ballot. Senate Bill's author stated that it "offers the best opportunity to significantly increase voter participation while also saving participating counties money over the current system" (Allen, 2016).

Five counties (Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo) chose to implement the reform for the 2018 election cycle. Table 1.5 provides a comparison of the election administration model prior to 2018 in Sacramento County and the Voter’s Choice Act model that was implemented in 2018.

Table 1.1. Sacramento County’s Election Administration Model Before and After

Implementation of the Voter’s Choice Act

METHOD / ISSUE	ELECTION ADMINISTRATION MODEL PRIOR TO 2018	VOTER’S CHOICE ACT MODEL IN 2018
Vote by mail (AKA absentee voting)	Voters have to register as permanent absentee voters in order to receive their ballots in the mail and to be able to mail them back. Ballot return was either by mail or drop off at the polling site.	All registered voters in the county automatically receive their ballots by mail. Ballot return is either by mail or drop off at any vote center/drop box location.
Early in-person voting	Not available.	Voters have 11 days (including Election Day) to vote on-site at any available vote center in the county.
Vote centers	Not available. 550 polling places were located throughout the county, open only on Election day. Voters had to go to the designated polling place based on their address of residence.	16 vote centers are to be open for 11 days, including Election day; 78 vote centers are to be open for 4 days, including Election day. Voters can cast ballots at any vote center due to the availability of a county-wide database.
Same day registration	Not available. Provisional ballots were available to voters who did not appear in the official voter registration list. Conditional voting was available to voters who missed the registration deadline.	Available at all vote centers.
Drop boxes	Not available.	52 drop boxes are available beginning at 28 days before the election.
Post card mailers	Not required.	Under VCA, two post card mailers (direct contact with voters) are required to be sent to each registered voter. County determines the timeframe of mailings.

Accessibility	Polling places had to be accessible to disabled voters. Ballots and election materials were required to be printed in federally designated languages based on the VRA Section 203 thresholds. In-person language assistance was not required at every polling place. No advisory committee requirement.	Vote centers have to be accessible to disabled voters. Touch screen/reader machines are available to disabled voters. Language assistance is required for all federally designated and Secretary of State designated languages (determined by county for each vote center). County must form disability and language assistance advisory committees.
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Based on the information in Table 1.1, it is my assessment that the VCA reform is the most comprehensive and multifaceted election administration reform to date. Sacramento County’s news website linked the increase in voter turnout to the implementation of the VCA reform: “Final results from the June 5 Statewide Primary Election have been reported and Sacramento County’s first election under the Voter’s Choice Act (VCA) is one for the books” (SacCounty News, 2018). Alice Jarboe, the Interim Registrar of Voters, stated that the implementation took many months of planning by the Department of Voter Registration and Elections staff, and “what resulted, was a very successful election where voter turnout reached 42 percent, significantly surpassing the 2014 Statewide Primary Election of 29.6 percent. Voters in Sacramento County were very receptive to the new voting model and took advantage of the Vote by Mail option, returning a record-breaking amount, higher than the past three Primary Elections” (SacCounty News, 2018). A local newspaper, *The Sacramento Bee*, also explored the causal relationship between VCA implementation and the increase in turnout, stating that voter turnout in the 2018 June Statewide Primary in Sacramento County was “not only a massive improvement over the dismal 2014 cycle, when it fell below 30 percent, but also the highest level for a non-presidential primary in two decades” (Koseff, 2018). According to Paul Mitchell, vice president of Political Data Inc., it looked like the systemic changes in election administration contributed to the increase in voter turnout (Koseff, 2018).

At the same time, polls showed a more energized voter engagement ahead of the spring and summer 2018 primaries across the nation, with Democrats leading the charge. With stories of the Democratic wave in states like Virginia and Alabama, political consultants and observers were expecting an across the board higher turnout in primary elections (Mitchell, 2018). Democrats appeared to be more enthusiastic about the 2018 elections, showing up in greater than usual numbers to protest the policies of President Trump's administration and volunteering for campaigns (Pearce, Burns, 2018). Given this information, the relationship between choice architecture implementation and the increase in Sacramento County's voter turnout may have been spurious, driven by larger political forces affecting a broad array of jurisdictions.

Thesis Framework

A 12.3 percent increase in voter turnout is considered to be significant and may produce an effect on public policy decisions. This thesis will make an attempt to assess whether the higher voter turnout in Sacramento County during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election was influenced by the choice architecture measures under the Voter's Choice Act or by the political context of the election.

As of today, Voter's Choice Act is not the last choice architecture measure to be implemented in California's counties: in August of 2018 Governor Brown signed the Assembly Bill 216 into law. It mandates all California counties to provide pre-paid postage envelopes to vote by mail voters, making the process of casting a ballot by mail free and more convenient starting in 2019. The State of California will be spending an estimated 5.5 million dollars to administer this reform. Governor Brown also signed Senate Bill 25 in September of 2018, to allow Los Angeles County run a three-year experiment with alternate ballot order, where local offices and issues will appear first on the ballot, instead of nominees for federal office, with the goal of adding importance to local candidates and issues as opposed to the already important

federal and state candidates and issues. Both of these measures present great opportunities for researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of choice architecture measures in relationship to voter turnout.

This thesis will examine county voter turnout data, survey data, and interviews to gauge whether the political context of the 2018 June Statewide Primary election in Sacramento County was the driving force behind the 12.3 percent increase in voter turnout. It will provide a comparative analysis of voter turnout rates across all counties in California and will use a regression analysis to isolate the demographics of survey respondents who stated that political climate was the reason behind their decision to vote in the June 2018 election. I will analyze qualitative data collected during the interviews of Sacramento County officials to gauge the effectiveness of the reform implementation, and to summarize policy recommendations for the counties opting in to implement VCA in 2020. I will also analyze qualitative data collected during the interviews of San Joaquin County officials to assess the potential barriers to VCA's implementation.

The rest of this thesis is organized into chapters as follows. Chapter two contains a literature review organized thematically that will provide information about what is already known about the effectiveness of choice architecture and strategies to increase voter turnout. This is followed by chapter three which contains the quantitative methodology and results of a comparative analysis of county voter turnout data, as well as the results of a logistic regression of data from a survey conducted for this thesis. Chapter four will contain qualitative data analysis based off interviews of county officials. It will provide information about what questions were asked and how the answers relate to the results found in chapter three. The closing chapter of this thesis, chapter five, will contain the findings based on the results of the quantitative and qualitative data analyses. It will provide policy implications and recommendations for the Voter's

Choice Act implementation in other counties. It will also include a discussion of opportunities for future research to be conducted on the subject of the effectiveness of public policy nudges to increase voter turnout.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Voter turnout continues to be low in all types of elections in the United States as compared to other Western Democracies. Citizens of non-democratic states around the world can only dream of living in a democratic system of government that rests on the freedom of choice and are surprised to learn that voters in the United States do not take full advantage of this right (Lee, 2016). When voters in the US do not exercise their right to choose, they allow others to make decisions for them by default, after which they have to live with the decision of the small minority who made an effort to vote. One example of the effects of voter turnout bias is the turnout of older in greater numbers in low salience elections than younger voters. Older voters end up electing officials and adopting policy measures that may ignore the needs of younger generations or consider them to be of a low priority (Tobgay, 2015).

In the last two decades, many counties and states across the nation have tried to address the problem of low voter turnout by implementing election administration reforms to make the process of voting more convenient for the unengaged voters. Such nudges in public policy have included vote by mail elections, same day registration, voter centers unrestricted by voters' residence, pre-paid postage and secure drop boxes for ballot return, and bilingual and trilingual ballots. Aside from the immediate cost savings to states and counties implementing these reforms, the effects on voter turnout appear to be limited. As California moves forward with the implementation of Voter's Choice Act in its counties, it is important for public policy officials and the general public to have an understanding of the limited effects of choice architecture measures in public policy.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the available literature on the effect of nudges in public policy as related to election administration on federal, state and county levels, and the effectiveness of strategies that may influence voter turnout. The available literature lends expertise to this thesis from past research to help develop an understanding of measures that may increase voter turnout and their effectiveness.

Specifically, I summarize the findings of the relevant literature into two themes that will provide a background to better understand the topic of this thesis. The first theme examines the effectiveness of past efforts to increase voter turnout through different informational means. The second theme discusses academic studies that analyze the effectiveness of efforts to make voting more convenient through various election administration reforms. This review of relevant literature will provide the reader with a detailed summary of past efforts to influence civic behavior through changes in information delivery and election administration, and the effectiveness of such efforts.

Theme 1: Effectiveness of efforts to increase voter turnout through informational means

On the federal level, an effort to make the process of registration and voting easier for the limited English proficient voters took place in 1992. The Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 tried to end the disenfranchisement of minority groups in the United States. However, the Act did not address the issue of the limited English skills of certain voter groups until 1975, and had no specific provisions for population thresholds related to the spoken languages until 1992. Added in 1992, Section 203 of the VRA states that counties with five percent or more of the population or with 10,000 or more residents speaking a language other than English are mandated to provide voter registration materials, ballots, and in-person assistance to voters in the specified language (Jones-Correa, 2005). Language assistance is a required measure under California's Voter's Choice Act of 2016.

Once the percentage and numerical thresholds were in place under Section 203 of the VRA, the research community gained an ability to differentiate between jurisdictions covered and not covered under VRA, as well as to quantify the effect that language assistance may have generated in the covered counties. Namely, Hopkins (2011) and Jones-Correa (2005) conducted regression discontinuity and multivariate logit analyses on this subject, respectively. Both of their studies focused on the assistance to voters in Spanish and came to a similar conclusion that as the voters' English skills improved, the impact of language assistance declined.

Hopkins (2011) studied a population of respondents from the 2004 National Latino Survey who chose to respond to the survey in Spanish and whose counties of residence were known to the researcher. He noted the anticipatory effect of the Spanish-language assistance at the polls as a psychological nuance that is rarely studied but may affect the decision to vote for a citizen with low or no English skills. His regression analysis examined voter turnout in the counties right under the thresholds specified in VRA's Section 203 and compared it to the voter turnout in counties right above the threshold. The effect of the availability of translated materials and language assistance was statistically significant: voter turnout increased by six percent in the counties with the percentage threshold and by seven percent for the counties with the numerical threshold (Hopkins, 2011). However, it was unclear if these findings were generalizable to other ethnic groups.

Jones-Correa (2005) approached the same topic of the effects created by Section 203 of the VRA with an expanded scope, including Asian-Americans and Latinos into separate multivariate logit regression analyses. Her sample came from the Current Population Surveys, and she obtained Section 203 status of counties from the Department of Justice. Her findings related to the Latino turnout were similar to Hopkins', where there was a statistically significant positive relationship between the provision of language assistance and voter turnout (a four

percent increase). However, her findings related to Asian-Americans did not show any positive relationship and in one case (Japanese citizens) showed a strong negative relationship between language assistance and voter turnout. The results for the native-born and naturalized citizens were mixed (Jones-Correa, 2005).

In addition to studying the effects of language assistance, researchers have conducted field experiments to examine other get out the vote efforts that may increase voter turnout. Some of these methods, such as post card mailers, are a required measure under California's Voter's Choice Act of 2016, and participating counties have already made provisions to include them into their election administration process.

One study related to mailers as the get out the vote (GOTV) mobilization effort had an experimental design: it targeted Latino voters in non-salient elections and included treatment and control groups. Abrajano and Panagopoulos (2011) focused on the effects of the non-partisan English and Spanish mailers in Council District 21 of New York on voter turnout. This study relied on the theory that individuals are more likely to vote when they are asked to do so.

Researchers found a positive relationship between GOTV efforts and voter turnout as compared to the control group. Abrajano and Panagopoulos (2011) had an elaborate experiment design which allowed them to assess the impact of the English-language mailers across both English- and Spanish-dominant groups. They found that the English language treatment exerted similar statistically significant effects (increased voter turnout by two percent) for both linguistic subgroups and for both low-propensity and high-propensity voters. However, the Spanish-language treatment elevated turnout by the same percentage only for the Spanish-dominant group and low-propensity voters (Abrajano, Panagopoulos, 2011).

This study underscores the important distinction between the rate at which a group typically votes and the extent to which it can be mobilized by targeted appeals. Some of the

unexplored gaps include the generalizability of findings to other ethnic groups and whether these effects would be true for higher-salience elections.

Social pressure mailers as a factor in voter mobilization was further studied by Matland and Murray (2016) in a series of field experiments. The researchers were interested in studying whether a set of watchful eyes printed on a postcard mailer would increase voter turnout through implicit social pressure. Matland and Murray (2016) state that most organizations sending out mailers face a dilemma: mailers that fail to include social pressure tend to be largely ineffective in get out the vote efforts, however, messages that include significant social pressure (such as the individual's voting record) lead to the danger of alienating voters and setting off a significant backlash against the organization or campaign that sent the mailer. Researchers chose to take a different approach in this case, and set out to examine the effectiveness of implicit social pressure based on the premise that individuals are more likely to act in a socially approved manner when they believe they are watched (Matland, Murray, 2016).

Researchers selected five different locations that varied by political culture, election turnout, and intensity of the campaigns. At each site, they used three different mailers which included standard civic duty text, but one displayed female eyes, the second one displayed male eyes, and the third one had a flag. After analyzing the results, researchers concluded that the implicit social pressure mailers did not produce an effect that was more significant than that of the placebo mailer (Matland, Murray, 2016). They hypothesized that timing may be central to the effectiveness of the GOTV mailers: time gap between receiving the stimuli and the act of voting appeared to be a significant factor.

Another potentially effective method of mobilizing voters is the use of social media. And even though public organizations typically engage in social media outreach efforts more slowly than private entities, these efforts can still be a very effective way of nudging voters into action.

As rates of American adults using Internet increase, the literature on digital media suggests a positive relationship between Internet usage and political participation (Haenschen, 2016). However, little research exists on the topic of the effectiveness of digital reminders to voters through social media.

A 2016 study by Haenschen presented three experiments in which confederates mobilize members of their networks to vote by tagging them in Facebook status updates. The control group publicized individual's past participation or failure to vote in an ongoing election. While social pressure messaging through postcard mailers resulted in the boost of five to eight percentage points in voter turnout, the experiments with Facebook social pressure messaging produced more substantial gains in turnout, ranging from 15 to 24 percent. The experiment results indicated that the nature of the message itself also mattered – simple encouragement to vote proved ineffective, while messages with elements of social pressure mobilized voters much more effectively (Haenschen, 2016).

Theme 2: Effectiveness of election administration reforms in increasing voter turnout

On the state level, election reforms often focus on cost savings to the counties administering elections, as well as on boosting voter turnout. Currently, at least 22 of the 50 states have provisions in place allowing certain elections to be conducted entirely by mail (Lynch, 2018). For these elections, all voters receive their ballot in the mail and can return it either by mail or by dropping it off at designated locations. All-mail elections are also known as absentee voting for everyone or vote-by-mail (VBM) elections. Since 2017, three of the 22 states (Oregon, Washington, and Colorado) hold all of their elections entirely by mail. The Voter's Choice Act in California makes this option available to all counties as of 2020. However, the VCA in California also includes other elements of election administrations reforms, such as in-person early voting and Election Day vote centers that permit same day voter registration.

In this section, I review available literature on the effectiveness of election administration reforms as related to voter turnout. This review will assist in assessing effective factors of election administration reforms that may support the argument of this thesis.

The limited nature of choice architecture in the field of election administration was examined by Burden, Canon, Mayer, Moynihan (2013) and showed mixed results. The researchers challenged a popular notion that making voting more convenient will encourage more people to cast ballots. They theorized that voter mobilization extends beyond the campaigns or parties to non-strategic means, such as informal sources of stimulation. Local media stories, recruitment by family, friends, coworkers who discuss the election, sheer visibility of polling places, and other election-related activities serve as the nonstrategic informal sources of voter mobilization.

Burden et al. (2013) conducted a series of regression analyses on state and county levels based on voter turnout results from the 2004 and 2008 elections. Multiple data sources and methods showed that despite being a popular election reform, early voting depressed net voter turnout by three to seven percentage points when implemented by itself. It dissipated the stimulating civic effect of the Election Day by decreasing the normative social pressure. On the other hand, Election Day registration where voters were allowed to register and vote on the same day, proved to increase turnout by about three to four percentage points. Overall, the researchers' recommendation to public policy officials considering election reforms was to take into account both the direct and indirect consequences of their actions, and not just the immediate effect of cost savings associated with the reforms (Burden et al., 2013).

Cost savings to the counties became the main rationale behind the introduction of the all-mail election model in the state of Oregon in 1987, after a successful experiment in the early 1980s. The cost of conducting a vote by mail election was estimated to drop by half or two-thirds

as compared to the polling place election model (Southwell, 2009). Additional rationale behind the introduction of the all-mail election model was the conventional wisdom that vote-by-mail elections significantly boost voter turnout (Kousser, Mullin, 2007). Several researchers set out to examine whether this conventional wisdom proved to be true.

Kousser and Mullin (2007) argue that there are many other factors that affect voter turnout in the vote by mail elections. They further argue that prior research studies of elections in Oregon have mostly focused on the subgroups of voters who are especially likely to turn out to vote, regardless of the election administration model. Majority of the studies did not hold the electoral conditions constant, therefore it was difficult to determine whether increases in turnout were driven by the shift to mail ballot elections or due to the changes in political context (Kousser, Mullin, 2007). To set up their own natural experiment, Kousser and Mullin (2007) drew on the data from a large sample of counties in two general elections in California, where county election officials assigned registrants in less populous precincts to vote by mail. Since such assignments were not random, the researchers used matching methods to compare voter participation between two sets of precincts. Their findings indicate that voters in all-mail precincts turned out at a rate that was 2.7 percent less than the turnout rate at regular precincts. These findings run counter to conventional wisdom about the impact of the all-mail election model. For regularly scheduled general elections, a shift from the polling place to the mailbox risks producing a decline in voter turnout (Kousser, Mullin, 2007). However, for local low salience elections, the effect was opposite: all-mail election voters turned out at a rate that was higher by 8 percent than that of the regular precinct voters. Kousser and Mullin (2007) conclude that there are a number of other benefits associated with the all-mail election model, such as cost savings to the county and an improved access for voters with disabilities.

Southwell's (2009) research in the state of Oregon supports the argument that an all-mail election model produces minimal effects on voter turnout during primary and general elections, however, it can be a major stimulus to voter participation during low salience special elections where the context is a single candidate or a single ballot measure. She further argues that the all-mail election model facilitates the participation of likely voters rather than drawing the non-voters into the electorate. Southwell (2009) analyzed 44 statewide elections in Oregon from 1980 to 2007 and found that vote by mail elections do not appear to boost turnout in presidential or congressional elections.

In contrast to the election reform in Oregon, where the entire state switched to all-mail elections at once, the state of Washington authorized counties to hold all-mail elections in 2005 at their discretion. Gerber, Huber and Hill (2013) analyzed the effects on voter turnout in the state of Washington, and found that they differed depending on the type of election. This is similar to the findings of Southwell (2009) and Kousser and Mullin (2007). Using both aggregate and individual-level data, Gerber et al. (2013) found that voter turnout in the counties implementing the all-mail election model during the presidential midterm, and odd-year elections increased by 2 to 4 percentage points. Researchers hypothesized that the positive increase happened partially due to the staggered nature of the election administration reform in Washington state, as opposed to the uniformed switch in the state of Oregon. In addition, researchers found that the increase in turnout was more pronounced among registrants who were not habitual voters, which suggests that this reform may help reduce the differences in participation between high- and low-participation groups (Gerber et al., 2013). They concluded by stating that positive turnout effects of all-mail elections may outweigh the loss of the social experience of the polling places.

A similar increase in voter turnout was studied by Stein and Vonnahme (2008) in the state of Colorado. While other states attempted to boost voter turnout through simplifying voter

registration and increasing opportunities to vote by all-mail and early voting, state of Colorado took a different approach by addressing the convenience of voting. In 2003, Larimer county in Colorado replaced precinct-based polling places with Election Day Vote Centers (EDVC). Some of the characteristics of the vote centers were as follows: 1) non-precinct based (which means any voter can vote at any location); 2) fewer in numbers and more centrally located to major population centers; 3) relied on county-wide voter-registration database.

Stein and Vonnahme (2008) argue that the two attributes of the vote centers (accessibility to all voters and centralized locations) reduced the opportunity cost of voting, which is what the early voting reforms and all-mail voting model failed to accomplish. By reducing the opportunity cost of voting (benefits forgone by not pursuing a more valued activity), Election Day Vote Centers boosted the overall voter turnout by two to three percentage points. Researchers also noted that this electoral reform positively impacted turnout among infrequent voters (Stein, Vonnahme, 2008).

Takeaways from the literature review

As one can discern from studies discussed above, many factors can influence voter turnout. Over the last three decades, researchers have explored and analyzed many of these factors. The available literature provides some data and explanation suggesting that implementing choice architecture in public policy generates only modest outcomes. Federal, state, and local governments may adopt measures that nudge people to vote; however, the effect appears to be limited. Language assistance on the federal level, Election day registration and early voting on the state level, and all-mail elections and Elections Day Vote Centers on the county level have produced limited effects in terms of increasing voter turnout that did not exceed eight percentage points. Similar results were obtained by researchers studying get out the vote efforts, where neither primary language mailers, nor the implicit social pressure mailers achieved any significant

effects on voter turnout. The only GOTV method with a level of effectiveness greater than ten percent constituted the use of social media, where voters received targeted messages listing the history of their participation in elections. This method is unlikely to be adopted by California counties; therefore, I consider it to be impractical for use in public policy in this state.

One notable feature of studies reviewed in this chapter is that each examined only one factor of influence, whether it was an election administration reform, an informational effort to make the process of voting easier, or a get out the vote experiment. As I stated in chapter 1, California's Voter's Choice Act is a multifaceted and comprehensive reform that incorporates many of the above-mentioned factors of influence. Implementing VCA in Sacramento county in 2018 meant adopting several election reform measures simultaneously, along with informational and get out the vote efforts. None of the existing studies examine the effects of a simultaneous implementation of several reforms on voter turnout. This topic presents rich material for future research as larger California counties move to implement VCA in 2020.

Another concern about previous studies on voter turnout is omitted variable bias, especially with respect to electoral context. Researchers state that there are many factors that can influence an individual's decision to vote in any particular election. One of the more salient factors is the context of the election, which is usually related to political issues on the federal, state or local level. None of the studies in this literature review have directly measured the effect of political context on voter turnout. However, political context can be a major factor influencing voter behavior, especially during the time of significant partisan division that United States is experiencing today.

My study compares the effects of the VCA reform implementation in Sacramento County and the effects of political context on voter turnout, and fills the gap in the literature in this thesis. The importance of this research lies in the hypothesis that election administration reforms may

have a minimal or no effect on voter turnout, and therefore this causal relationship may be spurious. If that is the case, the general public and county officials need to be aware of the limited nature of choice architecture effects when making assumptions that a more convenient election administration process guarantees a boost in voter turnout.

CHAPTER III

QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

This thesis utilizes quantitative and qualitative data to study the effects of political context on voter turnout during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election in Sacramento County. As discussed in the review of relevant literature, many factors can affect voter turnout, and political context is one of the factors that often gets overlooked. Investigating the effect of political context on voter turnout is an important contribution to the field of research, as it can provide some insights into voter behavior. I approach this investigation through two different methods: a comparative analysis of voter turnout in all of California's counties in June of 2018, and an analysis of data from the voter survey that I conducted for this thesis.

In this chapter, I explain the comparative analysis approach, provide a comparative analysis of voter turnout across all counties, summarize the onsite survey design, point out the study's limitations, and discuss survey findings. Chapter four will provide a qualitative analysis of survey comments and interview responses of election administration officials from the Sacramento and San Joaquin counties. In chapter five, I bring it all together with a summary of key findings, policy implications, and recommendations for further research.

Comparative Analysis of Voter Turnout in California's Counties

When five counties in California set out to implement provisions of the Voter's Choice Act in 2018, the expectation was that removing barriers and making the process more convenient for voters would boost voter turnout (Padilla, 2019b). As compared to the rest of California's counties, voters in Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo counties saw the following changes before and during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election cycle: all registered voters received two postcards reminding them of the upcoming election and their options for returning ballots; all registered voters received their ballots by mail; ballot return

options included secure drop boxes, mail, and vote centers; voters could cast their ballots at any vote center in the county; voters could register and vote on the same day at any vote center; vote centers were open for 11 days including holidays and week-ends; voters could elect to use touch screen technology instead of a printed ballot; and language and disability assistance was available at every vote center.

With this type of a comprehensive reform in place, it appears that the expectation of a higher voter turnout in the participating five counties was justified. However, when factoring in the political context with a reported higher level of engagement among the Democrats, it would be justified to also expect an across the board increase in voter turnout in all of California's counties. Table 3.1 provides a comparison in voter turnout in the five VCA-implementing counties. The lowest increase in voter turnout was in Madera County (7.8 percent), and the highest increase was in San Mateo County (16.9 percent). The mean increase for the five counties implementing provisions of the VCA in 2018 was at 11.8 percent.

Table 3.1. Voter Turnout Comparison in Counties Implementing the VCA, 2014 and 2018 Statewide Primary Elections

County	Registered Voters in June 2014 Statewide Primary	Total Voted in June 2014 Statewide Primary	Total Voted as a Percentage of Registered Voters in the County	Registered Voters in June 2018 Statewide Primary	Total Voted in June 2018 Statewide Primary	Total Voted as a Percentage of Registered Voters in the County	Percent Change
Madera	52,817	19,206	36.4	54,848	24,211	44.1	7.8
Napa	71,241	28,179	39.6	76,211	37,525	49.2	9.7
Nevada	61,711	27,596	44.7	68,126	38,792	56.9	12.2
Sacramento	688,443	203,850	29.6	741,260	310,881	41.9	12.3
San Mateo	354,994	97,447	27.5	388,456	172,168	44.3	16.9

In order to assess whether political climate was a factor behind the increase in voter turnout, I provide a similar comparison for the rest of California's counties – those that did not implement the VCA in 2018. As shown in Table 3.2, 46 out of 53 counties not implementing the

VCA saw an increase in voter turnout ranging from 0.6 percent in Kings County to 22.9 percent in San Francisco County. Seven counties saw a decrease in voter turnout ranging from 1.5 percent in Imperial County to 13 percent in Alpine County. All seven counties with the decrease in voter turnout (Alpine, Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Imperial, Lake, Siskiyou) are less populous, with the highest number of registered voters at 58 thousand in the Imperial County. Majority of voters in five of these seven counties were registered with the Republican party, which was reportedly less energized to turnout to vote in the June 2018 Statewide Primary as compared to the Democratic party (Desilver, 2018). This factor may explain the decrease in turnout in five of the counties.

Table 3.2. Voter Turnout Comparison for Counties Not Implementing the VCA, 2014 and 2018 Statewide Primary Elections

County	Registered Voters in June 2014 Statewide Primary	Total Voted in June 2014 Statewide Primary	Total Voted as a Percentage of Registered Voters in the County	Registered Voters in June 2018 Statewide Primary	Total Voted in June 2018 Statewide Primary	Total Voted as a Percentage of Registered Voters in the County	Percent Change
Alameda	803,728	207,088	25.8	854,217	339,627	39.8	14.0
Alpine	766	533	69.6	735	416	56.6	-13.0
Amador	21,200	9,898	46.7	21,875	13,168	60.2	13.5
Butte	119,081	41,214	34.6	116,743	55,946	47.9	13.3
Calaveras	27,263	12,614	46.3	28,449	15,994	56.2	10.0
Colusa	7,653	3,608	47.1	8,433	3,638	43.1	-4.0
Contra Costa	528,162	151,788	28.7	602,219	239,628	39.8	11.1
Del Norte	12,398	5,950	48.0	14,141	5,472	38.7	-9.3
El Dorado	106,944	42,865	40.1	115,431	57,464	49.8	9.7
Fresno	412,181	107,805	26.2	440,617	136,388	31.0	4.8
Glenn	11,978	5,647	47.1	12,299	5,124	41.7	-5.5
Humboldt	75,411	28,506	37.8	75,978	32,128	42.3	4.5
Imperial	58,197	17,476	30.0	68,147	19,443	28.5	-1.5
Inyo	9,509	3,916	41.2	9,683	5,919	61.1	19.9
Kern	334,435	72,330	21.6	364,280	117,364	32.2	10.6
Kings	47,420	15,152	32.0	51,546	16,799	32.6	0.6
Lake	33,987	15,548	45.7	32,805	14,119	43.0	-2.7
Lassen	13,433	5,873	43.7	14,156	6,386	45.1	1.4

Los Angeles	4,857,424	824,070	17.0	5,149,461	1,490,502	28.9	12.0
Marin	148,762	60,800	40.9	155,591	86,971	55.9	15.0
Mariposa	10,574	4,907	46.4	10,584	6,190	58.5	12.1
Mendocino	47,400	16,420	34.6	47,487	22,896	48.2	13.6
Merced	94,779	23,819	25.1	91,970	32,797	35.7	10.5
Modoc	5,454	2,902	53.2	5,134	2,968	57.8	4.6
Mono	5,802	3,210	55.3	6,169	3,458	56.1	0.7
Monterey	164,032	53,271	32.5	180,266	67,000	37.2	4.7
Orange	1,411,232	340,187	24.1	1,482,036	635,224	42.9	18.8
Placer	200,829	70,016	34.9	223,963	109,097	48.7	13.8
Plumas	12,030	5,225	43.4	12,152	6,664	54.8	11.4
Riverside	887,643	198,102	22.3	984,214	346,472	35.2	12.9
San Benito	23,778	7,574	31.9	28,718	12,587	43.8	12.0
San Bernardino	851,326	160,742	18.9	901,081	281,045	31.2	12.3
San Diego	1,544,841	420,700	27.2	1,683,430	673,640	40.0	12.8
San Francisco	434,922	129,399	29.8	481,977	253,583	52.6	22.9
San Joaquin	293,837	80,851	27.5	334,771	107,960	32.2	4.7
San Luis Obispo	150,302	62,310	41.5	166,592	87,470	52.5	11.0
Santa Barbara	193,900	73,136	37.7	206,110	92,919	45.1	7.4
Santa Clara	805,922	264,133	32.8	846,228	369,332	43.6	10.9
Santa Cruz	141,105	49,143	34.8	152,497	72,382	47.5	12.6
Shasta	98,772	30,327	30.7	99,731	46,829	47.0	16.3
Sierra	2,209	1,413	64.0	2,155	1,560	72.4	8.4
Siskiyou	24,833	11,504	46.3	27,311	11,796	43.2	-3.1
Solano	201,728	54,406	27.0	220,857	83,757	37.9	11.0
Sonoma	241,005	98,728	41.0	270,740	134,458	49.7	8.7
Stanislaus	211,330	55,835	26.4	236,613	89,836	38.0	11.5
Sutter	42,218	15,346	36.3	44,625	21,138	47.4	11.0
Tehama	30,492	13,016	42.7	32,523	14,733	45.3	2.6
Trinity	7,062	3,847	54.5	7,735	4,314	55.8	1.3
Tulare	137,306	43,873	32.0	161,740	57,886	35.8	3.8
Tuolumne	29,880	12,330	41.3	30,932	16,139	52.2	10.9
Ventura	427,349	103,370	24.2	433,496	169,281	39.1	14.9
Yolo	101,854	33,557	32.9	111,128	48,202	43.4	10.4
Yuba	27,122	8,788	32.4	32,745	12,301	37.6	5.2

However, even with the seven counties showing a decrease, the mean increase in voter turnout for the 53 counties not implementing the VCA in 2018 is still at a robust 8.1 percent. The

difference between the two means (counties that implemented the VCA versus counties that did not implement) is 3.7 percent, as shown in Table 3.3 below.

Table 3.3. Comparison of the Two Means (Counties Implementing and Not Implementing the VCA in the June 2018 Statewide Primary Election)

	Number of voters:	Mean change:
Increase in voter turnout in 5 counties implementing the VCA in June of 2018:	207,299	11.8%
Increase in voter turnout in 53 counties not implementing the VCA in June of 2018:	2,473,342	8.1%
	Difference in means:	3.7%

Based on the presented data, it can be argued that the 3.7 percent difference in the increase in voter turnout in the five counties adopting the reform is the effect of the Voter's Choice Act implementation. This finding supports the conclusion I reached in chapter two of this thesis stating that choice architecture measures related to election administration have a limited effect, with the highest effect of eight percent reported in previous studies and experiments.

In order to test whether the mean change results for the counties are statistically significant, I administered the paired samples *t* test. It compares two means from related units. The purpose of the test is to determine whether there is statistical evidence that the mean difference between paired observations is significantly different from zero. The difference between the means is statistically significant if the *p*-value is less than or equal to the significance level, in which case the decision is to reject the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis is that there is no difference in the means. As shown in Table 3.4, the results are statistically significant with a ninety five percent confidence level. The *p*-value is less than five percent, therefore we reject the null hypothesis and support the statement that the means are different.

Table 3.4. Comparison of *t*-Tests Paired Two Samples for Means

5 Counties Implementing the VCA in 2018			53 Counties Not Implementing the VCA in 2018		
	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>		<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	75255.6	116715.4	Mean	77076.75472	123743.5849
Variance	6164544836	15418877702	Variance	18436075831	57904571643
Observations	5	5	Observations	53	53
Pearson Correlation	0.995597588		Pearson Correlation	0.996220304	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0		Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	4		df	52	
t Stat	-1.989900735		t Stat	-3.204322987	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.058731998		P(T<=t) one-tail	0.001157063	
t Critical one-tail	2.131846786		t Critical one-tail	1.674689154	

In addition to examining the difference in the means, it is also important to examine the weighted averages, as not all counties are equal in total size of voter population. A one percent increase in voter turnout in a less populous county does not equal a one percent increase in the county that is more populous. Therefore, I provide a comparison of weighted totals for voter turnout in each county. To determine the weighted totals for each county, I multiplied the “Total Voted” number by its percentage of total voters in the state in the appropriate year. The weighted increase is the difference between the two weighted totals (2014 and 2018). Tables 3.5 and 3.6 present weighted data for the June 2018 Statewide Primary election.

Table 3.5. Weighted Voter Turnout Data for Five Counties Implementing the VCA in the June 2018 Statewide Primary Election

County	Total Voted in June 2014 Statewide Primary	Weighted Total	Total Voted in June 2018 Statewide Primary	Weighted Total	Weighted Increase
Madera	19,206	8,268	24,211	8,207	(61)
Napa	28,179	17,799	37,525	19,716	1,918
Nevada	27,596	17,070	38,792	21,070	4,000
Sacramento	203,850	931,441	310,881	1,353,223	421,781
San Mateo	97,447	212,849	172,168	415,036	202,187

Weighted total increase:	629,826
Weighted mean increase:	125,965
Weighted percent increase:	2.82

Table 3.6. Weighted Voter Turnout Data for 53 Counties Not Implementing the VCA in the June 2018 Statewide Primary Election

County	Total Voted in June 2014 Statewide Primary	Weighted Total	Total Voted in June 2018 Statewide Primary	Weighted Total	Weighted Increase
Alameda	207,088	961,267	339,627	1,615,048	653,781
Alpine	533	6	416	2	(4)
Amador	9,898	2,196	13,168	2,428	232
Butte	41,214	38,074	55,946	43,825	5,751
Calaveras	12,614	3,566	15,994	3,582	16
Colusa	3,608	292	3,638	185	(107)
Contra Costa	151,788	516,427	239,628	804,000	287,573
Del Norte	5,950	794	5,472	419	(375)
El Dorado	42,865	41,185	57,464	46,235	5,050
Fresno	107,805	260,503	136,388	260,455	(48)
Glenn	5,647	715	5,124	368	(347)
Humboldt	28,506	18,214	32,128	14,453	(3,761)
Imperial	17,476	6,846	19,443	5,293	(1,553)
Inyo	3,916	344	5,919	491	147
Kern	72,330	117,266	117,364	192,864	75,598
Kings	15,152	5,146	16,799	3,951	(1,195)
Lake	15,548	5,419	14,119	2,791	(2,628)
Lassen	5,873	773	6,386	571	(202)
Los Angeles	824,070	15,221,670	1,490,502	31,106,136	15,884,466
Marin	60,800	82,859	86,971	105,908	23,049
Mariposa	4,907	540	6,190	536	(4)
Mendocino	16,420	6,043	22,896	7,340	1,297
Merced	23,819	12,717	32,797	15,061	2,344
Modoc	2,902	189	2,968	123	(66)
Mono	3,210	231	3,458	167	(64)
Monterey	53,271	63,609	67,000	62,854	(755)
Orange	340,187	2,593,997	635,224	5,649,822	3,055,825
Placer	70,016	109,883	109,097	166,650	56,767
Plumas	5,225	612	6,664	622	10
Riverside	198,102	879,654	346,472	1,680,805	801,151

San Benito	7,574	1,286	12,587	2,218	932
San Bernardino	160,742	579,152	281,045	1,105,943	526,791
San Diego	420,700	3,967,155	673,640	6,353,846	2,386,691
San Francisco	129,399	375,315	253,583	900,370	525,055
San Joaquin	80,851	146,523	107,960	163,195	16,672
San Luis Obispo	62,310	87,026	87,470	107,127	20,101
Santa Barbara	73,136	119,894	92,919	120,890	996
Santa Clara	264,133	1,563,794	369,332	1,909,918	346,124
Santa Cruz	49,143	54,132	72,382	73,357	19,225
Shasta	30,327	20,615	46,829	30,705	10,090
Sierra	1,413	45	1,560	34	(11)
Siskiyou	11,504	2,966	11,796	1,948	(1,018)
Solano	54,406	66,348	83,757	98,225	31,877
Sonoma	98,728	218,482	134,458	253,136	34,654
Stanislaus	55,835	69,879	89,836	113,001	43,122
Sutter	15,346	5,279	21,138	6,256	977
Tehama	13,016	3,797	14,733	3,039	(758)
Trinity	3,847	332	4,314	261	(71)
Tulare	43,873	43,145	57,886	46,917	3,772
Tuolumne	12,330	3,408	16,139	3,647	239
Ventura	103,370	239,510	169,281	401,234	161,724
Yolo	33,557	25,241	48,202	32,532	7,291
Yuba	8,788	1,731	12,301	2,119	388

Weighted total increase:	24,976,817
Weighted mean increase:	471,260
Weighted percent increase:	10.56

As indicated in tables 3.5 and 3.6 above, the largest weighted increases in voter turnout in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election took place in Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Riverside, Alameda, San Bernardino, San Francisco, Santa Clara, Contra Costa, and Sacramento counties. The weighted data also indicates that the mean increase in voter turnout in the five counties implementing the VCA was significantly lower than the mean increase calculated using the unweighted data: 2.82 percent and 11.8 percent respectfully. The difference in weighted and

unweighted means was also significant for the 53 counties not implementing the VCA: 10.56 percent and 8.1 percent respectfully. Assigning weights to voter turnout data reversed the significance of the increase in voter turnout in the two groups of counties, those implementing the VCA (lower weighted mean) and those not implementing the VCA (higher weighted mean). The nine counties (Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Riverside, Alameda, San Bernardino, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Contra Costa) are also the most populous in the state, and all but two of them have a majority of their voters registered with the Democratic party (Padilla, 2019c). It is possible to conclude that the increase in voter turnout in these counties propelled the overall increase in voter turnout in the state, which can lead to a conclusion that factors outside of the Voter's Choice Act influenced voter turnout across the state.

The weighted increase in voter turnout in Sacramento County was also quite significant: at 421,781 voters or 9.45 percent of all California voters, it was lower than the increase in San Francisco County (525,055 voters or 11.7 percent), but higher than in Santa Clara County (346,125 voters or 7.76 percent). Sacramento County had the largest weighted increase in voter turnout among the five VCA-implementing counties.

The next section of this chapter focuses specifically on the Sacramento County voters. It examines voter behavior during the first election cycle under the Voter's Choice Act based on voter survey responses. It sheds some light on the successes and challenges of the VCA implementation in the most populous county of the five VCA-implementing counties.

Onsite Voter Survey: Data Sources

This section of the quantitative analysis is based on a unique onsite survey I conducted during the ten days of early voting and on Election Day at seventeen vote centers located throughout Sacramento County. I collected 327 completed surveys from voters who were exiting vote centers after casting their ballots.

To ensure a representative data set for the onsite survey, I collected data at a roughly equal number of vote centers located in the North, South, East, West, and downtown Sacramento areas of the county. Two of the seventeen locations were rural (Galt and Walnut Grove). I conducted the survey during various times of the day, during workdays, week-ends, and on Memorial Day holiday, to ensure a representative sample and to gauge voter turnout. Due to the low onsite turnout during the first nine days of voting, majority of survey responses came from the three locations I surveyed on the last two days of voting (June 4 and 5, 2018). With the same goal of a representative sample in mind, I provided translated surveys in seven languages (Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, Russian, and Ukrainian). Survey participants took advantage of surveys in Spanish, Russian, and Vietnamese. Table 3.7 provides a detailed summary of the onsite survey data collection in Sacramento County during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election.

Table 3.7. Locations and Timeframe of the Onsite Voter Survey, May-June 2018

Day #	Day of the week	Date	Time of survey	Location	Vote Center #	Completed Surveys	Languages Used
1	Saturday	26-May	2-4PM	APAPA in Natomas	69	7	English
2	Sunday	27-May	8:30AM - 1PM	Greater Sacramento Urban League	72	1	English
2	Sunday	27-May	2-3PM	Murph Emmanuel AME Church	23	1	English
3	Monday (holiday)	28-May	12PM - 4:30PM	Citrus Heights City Hall	6	13	English
4	Tuesday	29-May	12 - 5PM	Koreana Plaza	28	21	English, Russian, Vietnamese
5	Wednesday	30-May	10:30AM - 1PM	St. Luke's Lutheran Church	53	11	English
5	Wednesday	30-May	2:30-4PM	Florin Road, Dept of Human Assistance	49	2	English
6	Thursday	31-May	12:30PM - 3:45PM	Oak Park Community Center	38	8	English
6	Thursday	31-May	4-6PM	Maple Neighborhood Center	57	0	-
7	Friday	1-Jun	10:30AM - 2PM	Richard Conzelmann Center	58	15	English
8	Saturday	2-Jun	10AM - 12:30PM	Walnut Grove Library	77	2	English
8	Saturday	2-Jun	1-4PM	Galt Dept of Human Assistance	20	2	English
9	Sunday	3-Jun	10AM - 12:30PM	Disability Rights California	32	7	English
9	Sunday	3-Jun	1:30-4PM	Folsom Fire Station	18	22	English
10	Monday	4-Jun	11AM - 2PM	CSUS, Modoc Hall	41	22	English

10	Monday	4-Jun	3-7PM	North Highlands-Antelope Library	1	72	English, Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese
11	Tuesday	5-Jun	10AM - 5:30PM	Sierra 2 Center	40	121	English

I designed survey questions in partnership with the Sacramento County Voter Registrar staff, where the first thirteen questions of the survey focused on the convenience of the new process and the last seven questions probed voters for other information, including demographics. Please refer to Appendix A for sample survey.

Survey Results

The comprehensive changes to election administration and the flexibility of options available to voters under the Voter's Choice Act were expected to lead to a significant change in voter behavior (Padilla, 2019b). As I started visiting the eleven-day vote centers and administering surveys, I came to realize that many voters lacked detailed information about the changes that Sacramento County had put into place. As shown in Table 3.7, the onsite voter turnout was very low during the first nine days of vote center operation. It increased dramatically on days nine, ten, and on the Election Day. While the first several days of vote center operation were valuable to the county staff due to the ability to test new technology and eliminate technical problems, it is my assessment that there was little to no value to voters in having the vote centers open for eleven days. Based on the results of the onsite survey, 65 percent of voters visited the vote centers in the last two days of their operation: the day before the Election Day and on Election Day. If this trend in voter behavior continues through several election cycles, it is my recommendation to the Secretary of State's Office and to California's Legislature to amend the Voter's Choice Act and shorten the early onsite voting as a cost savings and efficiency increasing measure.

Several survey questions elicited responses that were almost unanimous for all respondents, as shown in Table 3.8 below.

Table 3.8. Survey Questions with Responses of Seventy Five Percent or Above

Questions and Responses	Percentage
How safe did you feel when visiting this vote center? Very safe and safe	99
Did you use language assistance at this vote center? No	98
How easy was it to find this vote center? Very easy and easy	96
How satisfied were you with your visit to this vote center today? Very satisfied and satisfied	96
How convenient were the days and hours of operation at this vote center? Very convenient and convenient	93
Did you have to take time off from work or school to visit the vote center? No	93
How convenient was it to receive your ballot in the mail before the election? Very convenient and convenient	91
Which method of voting did you use at this vote center? Paper ballot	91
How far did you travel to get to this vote center? Less than one mile and 1-2 miles	79
Why did you choose this particular vote center? It is close to my home	79

Based on the high percentages of responses to the questions above, it is my assessment that voter behavior in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election in Sacramento County did not adjust to the flexibility of options that were provided to voters under the Voter's Choice Act. For example, 79 percent of survey participants came to the vote center from home and traveled less than two miles, even though under the VCA voters can visit any vote center in the county due to the availability of the county-wide database. Also, 93 percent of survey participants did not take time off from work or school to visit the vote center. Language assistance also did not constitute

a significant factor, as 98 percent of voters did not use it. Granted, the ballots were printed in English, Spanish, and Chinese by federal requirement, but I also observed a low use of surveys in other languages by the participants, even though I offered translated surveys at every location. The high percentages of positive responses to questions on convenience, satisfaction, and safety of the election process speak to the high quality of work by county staff in making the transition to the new election model as smooth as possible.

Other questions in the survey presented a greater variety of responses. Question #2 “Why did you come to the vote center today?” received the highest number of responses as “I dropped off my Vote by Mail Ballot” (62 percent), but when combined with “I always vote in person” and “I wanted to visit a vote center” responses, the total number reached 93.6 percent. It is my assessment that majority of survey respondents wanted to make the process of turning in their ballot official, by handing it to county employees and bypassing the intermediary step of the US Postal Service. However, only 3.3 percent of participants indicated that they did not trust mail or drop boxes. The survey did not probe for the cost of postage, which could have also been a factor behind the voters’ decision to visit a vote center in person.

Based on the data provided by Sacramento County, 53 secure drop boxes at various locations throughout the county facilitated 90,724 ballot returns; 86,973 ballots were returned in person at 78 vote centers; and 120,000 ballots were returned by mail during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election. These numbers indicate that using US Postal Service as an intermediary could have been a concern for 57 percent of voters – they showed a preference of returning their ballots in person or through a secure county drop box. This is also supported by the response in Table 3.8 to the question of which method the participant used to vote: 91 percent of onsite voters reported using a paper ballot.

Question #13 asked the participants if they were voting for the first time, and 93.5 percent indicated that they were not a first-time voter. Question #14 asked respondents to identify the reason for their decision to vote in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election. Table 3.9 provides the summary of responses to question #14.

Table 3.9. Reasons Behind Respondents' Decision to Vote in the June 2018 Statewide Primary

What was the reason you decided to vote in this election? Please mark all that apply:	Totals:	Percentage:
It is my civic duty to vote	280	85
Because of political climate	117	35
Important candidate on the ballot	75	22
Important issue on the ballot	54	16
Other	26	8

Based on the participant responses, 117 voters out of 327 indicated that political climate was the reason behind their decision to vote in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election, which constitutes 35 percent of all participants. This is a significantly higher number than the mean of 11.8 percent or the weighted mean of 2.82 percent increase in voter turnout in the VCA-implementing counties. This survey result is also significantly higher than the mean of 8.1 percent or the weighted mean of 10.56 percent increase in voter turnout in the counties that did not implement the VCA.

Survey results in the demographic section indicate that 54 percent of respondents self-identified as female and 46 percent as male; 59 percent self-identified as White or European-American, 15 percent as Latino or Hispanic-American, 12 percent as Black or African-American, seven percent of respondents self-identified as East Asian or Asian-American; 14 percent self-identified as an immigrant to United States, with the number of years of residence in the US ranging from 10 to 83 years. Question #20 probed participants for their level of education: 86

percent of respondents stated that they have had some form of higher education (some college, a two-year degree, a four-year degree or higher). Question #16 probed participants for their age group: 56 percent of survey-takers indicated that they were older than fifty years of age, 27 percent were in the 31 to 50 years of age category, and 14 percent were in the 18 to 30 years of age category. A number of survey questions had a write-in option, and I review most significant findings from the write-in responses in the next chapter as a part of the qualitative analysis of this thesis.

Takeaways from the Quantitative Analysis

While more than one factor can have an effect on voter turnout, my analysis of the difference in means for the two groups of counties (five counties implementing the VCA in 2018 and 53 counties not implementing the VCA) indicates that the increase in voter turnout during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election was observed in all but seven of California's counties. The weighted results for the same data indicate that the greatest increase in voter turnout was observed in the ten most populous counties in the state, including Sacramento County. The results of the analysis were statistically significant, and they were also supported by the responses to the onsite survey of voters which I conducted across 17 vote centers in Sacramento County. A significant percentage of respondents (35 percent) indicated that political climate was the reason behind their decision to vote in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election. Other findings from the survey indicated that voter behavior was not consistent with the changes to election administration model implemented by Sacramento County under the Voter's Choice Act. Majority of voters came to the vote center from their home and travelled less than 2 miles; they voted by dropping off their paper Vote by Mail Ballot at the vote center and avoided the third-party delivery by US Postal Service. Also, majority of respondents did not take advantage of the eleven-day vote center operation - they cast their ballots on the last two days of vote center

operation. While majority of voters did not change their usual habits related to turning in their ballots, they were satisfied with vote center locations, safety, days and hours of operation, and the quality of service they received from the county staff. Some of the survey participants took time to write in responses to several questions in the survey, and I review these in the next chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER IV

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Chapter three of this thesis presented a quantitative analysis of survey data and voter turnout numbers across the state of California. It is a valuable tool to identify the impacts of the Voter's Choice Act reform and the political context of the June 2018 Statewide Primary election, which can inform public policy. In addition to the quantitative analysis, a qualitative review of survey responses and expert opinions in the field can help shed light on the realities behind reform implementation. The write-in survey responses can provide important insights into the motivation behind voters' decision to participate in the election, as well as an insight into deficiencies and strengths of the new process. Expert opinions can provide valuable information related to the behind-the-scenes processes, successes, and roadblocks of administering the June 2018 Statewide Primary election under the current election administration model and under the Voter's Choice Act.

This chapter will discuss the qualitative side of my research. In the following sections, I discuss the write-in responses of survey participants and oral responses of the experts I interviewed for this thesis. I group both sets of responses into broader themes and provide a comparison of the importance of these themes to survey respondents and county officials. The experts I interviewed represent two counties: Sacramento County that implemented the VCA in 2018 and San Joaquin County that is comparable to Sacramento County in its urban/rural population composition, but did not implement the VCA in 2018. The following sections will summarize the write-in responses and information gained through the interview process.

Onsite Survey Write-In Responses

The onsite survey that I administered during the eleven days of vote center operations in Sacramento County during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election included several options for

write-in responses. The write-in responses I analyze in this section belong to two questions (14 and 15). Question 14 probed survey participants for the reasons behind their decision to vote in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election. In addition to the suggested responses (“it is my civic duty to vote,” “important issue on the ballot,” “important candidate on the ballot,” “because of political climate”), survey participants could also mark “other” and write-in their answer.

Upon review of the write-in answers to question 14, I concluded that nine out of 28 responses (31 percent) were related to the political context of the election, which is similar to the number of respondents marking “current political climate” as the motivation to participate in the election (35 percent).

Question 15 of the survey was an open-ended question designed to allow the participants to express their opinion on the new voting process, share concerns or make suggestions for improvement to the county. This question received 57 write-in responses.

When analyzing the write-in responses to question 15, I grouped them into broader themes. This allowed me to compare participant responses with the interview responses of county officials in the next section of this chapter. The themes and the number of responses in each theme are listed in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1. Themes of write-in responses to question 15 of the onsite survey

Themes	Number of Responses
Information and convenience related to the new process	19
Other comments (thank you, I always vote, get young people to vote, etc.)	13
Vote center staffing and helpfulness of staff	8
Loss of polling places or dislike of the new process	6
Concerns related to voter fraud	6
Technical problems	5

My assessment of participant responses allows me to conclude that the most important topic for survey participants was the information and convenience related to the new process of voting. Responses included hours and days of vote center operation, lack of information for

voters, and improved signage. Vote center staffing and helpfulness of staff was the second most important theme. Responses related to this theme included compliments to staff and staff expertise. Technical problems constituted another theme, but the number of write-in responses on this topic was fairly low (nine percent). This is important to note because technical problems presented a much larger concern for county officials as described in the next section.

Overall, 31 of the 57 write-in survey responses (54 percent) conveyed a concern or a suggestion for improvement, and 26 responses (46 percent) were positive and conveyed satisfaction with the new process or staff at the vote centers. While the loss of a familiar polling place and traditional voting on Election Day surfaced in the write-in comments, this theme did not constitute a significant portion of the responses. As I discussed in the literature review, a change to an all-mail election model can cause dissatisfaction among voters who consider Election Day voting at their neighborhood polling place a tradition and an important ritual. The low number of responses may have been due to the high percentage of Sacramento County voters (over 60 percent) already voting by mail in prior elections (SacCounty News, 2019).

Positive comments regarding county staff friendliness and helpfulness can be complemented by my own observations of the diversity of vote center staff and availability of bilingual staff in designated languages at every vote center. Sacramento County administrators took racial, gender, and language diversity into account during the process of vote center staffing.

In the next section, I analyze several larger themes in interview responses of county officials and compare them to the survey participant responses to assess the general trends of concerns and successes during the VCA implementation.

County staff interviews – Sacramento and San Joaquin counties

Voter perspectives and comments are very important during the process of election administration reform: however, the wide range of voter opinions can be overwhelming as voters

adjust to changes at a different pace. Therefore, it is also important to understand the inner workings of the reform and the challenges that it presents to county staff. With this goal in mind, I interviewed two Sacramento County officials and one San Joaquin County official. Comparing their experiences in administering the June 2018 Statewide Primary election in the county that implemented the VCA and a comparable county that did not implement the reform will provide some valuable insights. These expert opinions will help inform policy makers and public administrators at the state and county levels as the rest of California's counties move to implement the VCA in 2020 and beyond.

I designed interview questions by considering the two different election administration processes (Appendix C). Based on the information received during interviews, I grouped the responses into five broader themes: reasons behind the decision to implement or not to implement the Voter's Choice Act; concerns prior to implementation and steps to address them; successes and roadblocks during implementation; innovative methods; and recommendations to counties deciding to implement the VCA in 2020 and beyond. Although it is impossible to capture every detail of the election administration process in this thesis, the summary I provide will inform public policy makers and county administrators of best practices and possible barriers in the process of implementing the Voter's Choice Act reform.

Reasons behind the decision to implement/not implement the VCA

The Voter's Choice Act was signed into law in 2016 and initially authorized 14 counties in California to implement the election administration reform in 2018 by choice: the counties of Calaveras, Inyo, Madera, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Sacramento, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Shasta, Sierra, Sutter, and Tuolumne could choose to implement the VCA (California Legislative Information, 2019). Effective in 2020, the rest of California's counties can also choose to implement the reform. Out of the 14 initial counties, only five chose to implement

the VCA: Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo. While San Joaquin County was not included in the initial 14 counties and did not have to decide whether to implement the reform, Sacramento County had a difficult decision to make. On one hand, its voting equipment was old and failed frequently, plus some of the fully staffed and equipped neighborhood polling places saw no more than 12 onsite voters during the 2014 election cycle. On the other hand, switching to an all-mail/vote center election administration model would produce a significant change for voters who historically did not vote by mail.

In order to probe voters for their receptiveness toward the new model, Sacramento County commissioned a telephone survey in March of 2017. Survey results indicated that voter preferences relative to models of voting were almost evenly divided between the traditional polling place model and the new all-mail/vote center model. When survey participants were told that the latter would save the county about four million dollars, the proportion favoring the all-mail/vote center model increased to two-thirds (Franz, Holbert, 2017). Replacing the aging equipment at 78 vote centers under the VCA model was much more cost effective for the county than replacing the same equipment at 550 polling places, and then adopting the Voter's Choice Act model two years later, which would require to replace the equipment yet again. In summary, the already high percentage of vote by mail voters in the county (over 60 percent) and the potential savings of four million dollars in equipment costs became the two driving factors behind the Sacramento County's decision to implement the VCA reform in 2018.

In comparison, San Joaquin County officials are currently undecided whether to opt in for the VCA implementation in 2020. The County's Board of Supervisors will review this option in early 2019, and if the decision is to explore the VCA implementation option, then a cost-benefit analysis will be conducted by the county officials to inform the Board of the feasibility of such option. Based on my interview with the San Joaquin County official, close to 76 percent of

voters currently vote by mail in this county, so it is possible to estimate that a change to an all-mail/vote center model will produce a reaction from voters that is similar to that of the Sacramento County voters.

Concerns prior to implementation and steps to address them

The biggest concern for the Sacramento County officials prior to the June 2018 Statewide Primary election was the loss of the traditional polling places and the negative perception of the changes in the Election Day routine by voters. Based on the survey responses in March of 2017, the cost-effectiveness of the new model was a compelling reason for some voters to support the reform (Franz, Holbert, 2017). However, it was challenging for the county staff to bring this type of information to every voter. County officials made a concentrated effort to address this concern by disseminating information through the two newly formed advisory committees required under the VCA: Voter Accessibility Advisory Committee and Language Accessibility Advisory Committee. The Voter Registrar's Office also mailed two post cards to every registered voter as required under the VCA, with information on the upcoming changes. In addition, county staff reached out to many advocacy groups and held a series of informational meetings for the community.

Other concerns were related to the behind-the-scenes aspects of reform implementation: drafting new procedures, staff and volunteer training, new signage for the vote centers, and new information on the website and in the voter's guide. These concerns were addressed internally as the implementation process was unfolding.

Successes and roadblocks during reform implementation

Changes to established public processes can be difficult to manage: they can be costly, troublesome, unfamiliar, threatening, difficult to understand for constituents, and difficult to accomplish for organizations (Raney, 2014). Researchers indicate that all successful

organizational changes have one element in common: a comprehensive approach to change that includes experimentation. This appears to be the case with the VCA implementation in the Sacramento County, where county officials had a wide variety of options available to them in the design and implementation of this multifaceted reform. Adaptability of staff and procedures to unexpected roadblocks and challenges is also key to successful implementation of a large-scale change (Raney, 2014). In this section, I examine the successes and roadblocks of the VCA implementation in Sacramento County based on the county staff interview responses.

Communication of the details of the VCA reform to voters was one of the concerns of county staff prior to reform implementation. As it turned out, this was a justified concern, and communication ended up being one of the deficiencies of the reform process. The two required postcard mailers delivered limited information to voters, as there wasn't much room on a small postcard. While mailing postcards two months in advance helped the internal process at the county by cleaning up erroneous voter mailing addresses, it was definitely not a sufficient source of information about the reform. In addition, the small postcards could have gotten lost in the high volume of political campaign mailers that were arriving at voter mailboxes around the same time. County officials acknowledged that their efforts in disseminating information about the functionality of the new vote centers to voters were limited. As a result, many voters lacked the understanding that they could visit any vote center in the county and that vote centers were open for ten days prior to the Election Day. The confusion with the days and hours of vote center operation surfaced in the write-in responses to my survey. Another communication deficiency turned out to be the informational meetings hosted by the county – they had very low turnouts. County staff took all of these factors into consideration for the November 2018 election cycle, and made changes to the postcard mailing schedule, information in the postcards, and information in the ballot inserts listing days and hours of vote center operation. County officials also reformed

their approach to the informational community meetings: they started targeting community events instead of holding separate meetings about the VCA reform. While it may take several election cycles to change voter behavior from voting on the Election Day to voting early, county staff showed great flexibility and adaptability to the realities of the reform.

One of the reform's successes was the popularity of drop boxes among the Sacramento County voters. Drop boxes were introduced to voters in 2010 at city halls as an alternate and faster way to drop off vote by mail ballots. County officials stated that voters regard drop boxes as a more direct way to deliver their ballots to the county, bypassing the US mail as an intermediary. In addition to avoiding paying for postage, voters prefer drop boxes due to the increased likelihood of their ballots getting to the right place and a lower likelihood of ballots getting lost in the mail. This is consistent with the results of Colorado's Voter Access and Modernized Elections Act of 2013, where a greater percentage of ballots were returned through the county drop boxes (The PEW Charitable Trusts, 2016). According to Sacramento County staff, 53 secure drop boxes around the county facilitated 90,724 ballot returns, which is greater than 86,973 ballots returned in person at 78 vote centers. For comparison, Sacramento County voters returned 120,000 ballots by mail during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election. Due to the popularity of the drop boxes during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election, county administrators made adjustments to the drop box operation at the most popular locations (such as city halls and Bel Air stores), placing two drop boxes and scheduling more frequent pick-ups by staff in the November 2018 election cycle.

Another success story of the June 2018 VCA implementation in Sacramento County was the introduction of touch-screen technology to voters. The rationale behind this VCA requirement was to accommodate disabled voters - the large print and automated voice assistance features allowed disabled voters to have equal access. The only negative feature related to touch

screens was their positioning in the vote center: county staff stated that some voters complained about being able to see how other people voted using touch screen technology.

Based on the interview responses, new equipment performance during the election was a significant concern to county staff prior to the opening of vote centers. Ballot printer performance turned out to be an unanticipated roadblock. County staff indicated that printers frequently failed or malfunctioned during the June 2018 Statewide Primary, which required intervention from the mobile information technology teams. Due to such poor performance, county administrators ended up replacing all of the ballot printing machines with a different model for the November 2018 Gubernatory General election. With the replacement of the ballot printers, the county was able to reduce the need for IT support during the November 2018 election which resulted in significant cost-savings.

Even though technical problems were a significant concern for the county staff, they received a small number of write-in comments in my survey during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election – only five respondents indicated that technology presented a problem. Based on the interview responses of county staff, having the IT mobile teams on stand-by during the 11 days of onsite voting proved invaluable during the VCA implementation: a timely response was key to reducing wait times and voter frustration with the new process.

The changes in technology required under the VCA had other implications. As discussed in the literature review, switching to an all-mail election administration model leads to a slower vote count process where the county reports final election results with a significant delay of days or weeks. This is due to the requirement to verify every signature on the pink return envelope, which takes time. However, switching to a county-wide database under the vote center model produces the benefit of a much faster reconciliation process once all votes are recorded. The implication here is that once other California counties start adopting the VCA, the media and all

stakeholders in the election outcomes should realize that the immediate election night results will become a thing of the past. Results reported on the election night will be preliminary, based on the ballots that the county was able to process until that point in time.

Another success story during the VCA implementation was the vote center model. Based on the interview responses, county staff worked very hard to secure locations that could host 11-day vote centers. Developing relationships with community leaders, libraries, and community centers proved to be very important in securing the required number of vote center locations. The 11-day requirement for vote center operation could be a potential roadblock in other counties where real estate rental prices are significantly higher: not many landlords are able or willing to provide a space at a rate that a county's limited budget is able to support.

One of the unanticipated aspects of vote center operation during the June 2018 Statewide Primary was that the majority of onsite voters came to the vote center not to mark their ballot or use the touch screen, but to drop off an already filled out vote-by-mail ballot. This is reflected in the responses to my survey, where 203 out of 327 respondents (62 percent) indicated that they visited the vote center to drop off their vote-by-mail ballot. County administrators took this fact into account for the November 2018 Gubernatorial General election and redesigned the layout of vote centers to allow for a more convenient ballot drop off to reduce congestion.

Another challenge during the VCA implementation for Sacramento County administrators was the restricted and centralized access to social media, where all postings were controlled by a different department within the county. This is reflected in the survey results: only five of the 327 respondents indicated that they received information about vote center locations through social media. This area presents a potential opportunity for voter engagement for the county officials.

Other challenges shared during the interviews with staff from Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties included internal dynamics, such as the uneven workload distribution and staff turnover resulting in the loss of institutional knowledge, which could be detrimental when implementing a comprehensive reform such as the Voter's Choice Act.

Innovative methods of election administration in the two counties

As discussed in the previous section, secure drop boxes at convenient locations became a success story for the Sacramento County administrators in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election. Based on the high numbers of ballots returned through the drop boxes, county officials are actively looking at the drive-through drop box option to relieve congestion at vote centers during the next election cycle. San Joaquin County took the first step in this direction during the June 2018 Statewide Primary by introducing a small number of drop boxes at city halls 30 days prior to Election Day. This option was very well received by voters – county staff collected close to 2,000 ballots through drop boxes during the 30 days of early voting.

Even though San Joaquin County did not have an opportunity to implement the VCA reform in 2018, its election officials innovated in other ways, trying to make the process of casting a ballot more convenient for voters. For example, San Joaquin County staff designed a process which they named “Drive up Democracy.” These were 13 ballot pick-up stations set up during the four days prior to the Election Day with the goal of allowing voters to drive up and drop off their vote by mail ballots in a more convenient manner. This approach proved to be successful: county staff collected around 4,000 ballots in the four days of “Drive up Democracy” pilot operation.

The loss of traditional polling places includes the loss of the “I voted” sticker that is typically available to voters. Sacramento County staff made sure to provide these stickers at every drop box and vote center location during the June 2018 Statewide Primary. However, these

stickers were not available to those voters who returned their ballots by mail. The availability of stickers as the reason for visiting a vote center was marked by six percent of survey participants in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election, which could be a significant number of people when applied to the total population of registered voters in the county. As a remedial step, Sacramento County officials are considering the option of including the “I voted” sticker in the ballot packet that is mailed to every registered voter in the next election cycle.

Recommendations to counties deciding to implement the VCA in 2020 and beyond

Sacramento County officials have already administered two election cycles under the Voter’s Choice Act requirements and made many adjustments to the process based on the initial experience. They recommend that those counties wishing to implement the VCA in 2020 should start their preparations as soon as possible. Counties should focus on communication and messaging: explaining the vote center model and continued communication about the changes should be a priority. Building relationships with community leaders, libraries, special districts, and other stakeholders is a useful tool not only to ensure the flow of information and development of voter buy-in, but also as a means of securing locations for the 11-day vote centers.

Collaboration and partnership with other departments within the county should be a part of the new election administration model, as strong support from the Information Technology department will be needed in the process of database development and acquisition of new equipment. Securing an appropriate level of financing will be a key part of the decision to implement the VCA. Realistic budget assessments will be needed to ensure that all of the VCA provisions are met.

Takeaways from the qualitative analysis

Several themes in the qualitative analysis aligned between the county officials and survey participants, and several did not. The biggest concern voiced by the county officials was the

anticipated negative perception of the loss of traditional polling places by voters; however, it was one of the lower-ranking topics in voter responses. The highest concern for survey participants was the information and convenience related to the new process, which was one of the pressing concerns for the county staff as well. An opportunity for improvement is the use of social media as an informational tool by the county. While technology was a big concern for county staff, it did not translate into a significant issue for the voters. A timely response by the county IT department may have made a difference in the end-user experience. Drop boxes were a success story in both counties, and this option can be further developed to decrease congestion at the vote centers. A majority of onsite voters were dropping off their vote-by-mail ballots under the VCA model, and this presents an opportunity to further explore alternate means of collecting these ballots at vote centers to alleviate foot traffic and congestion. The 11-day vote centers may pose a problem for some counties in terms of the ability to secure facilities due to the limited budget. And last but not least, election results are no longer immediate under the VCA model, which may require an adjustment in expectations for the general public, the media, and political campaigns.

These are some of the most important takeaways for the counties looking to implement the VCA in 2020 and beyond, and I include them in the larger summary of findings and policy recommendations in chapter five.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

California's use of choice architecture measures related to elections continues into 2020 and beyond. For example, the upcoming 2020 Presidential Primary election will see two significant changes in its administration across the state: the election will take place in March for the first time as opposed to June, and every vote by mail voter will receive pre-paid return postage for their ballot (Padilla, 2019a). Six additional counties will start implementing the provisions of the Voter's Choice Act in 2020 (El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Mariposa, Orange, San Mateo), and Los Angeles County will test out another choice architecture measure – the reversed order of ballot printing (California Legislative Information, 2018). Currently, all of the aforementioned measures are presented to voters as steps to help modernize election administration processes and make voting more convenient. Election administration officials hope that the increased convenience and modernization of the process will lead to an increase in voter turnout.

This thesis attempted to address the role of the Voter's Choice Act as a factor behind the increase in voter turnout in Sacramento County during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election as compared to the role of political context as the driving factor behind the increase in voter turnout. In the concluding chapter, I summarize the findings from my research, discuss limitations, recommend areas for further research, and make policy recommendations related to VCA's implementation in the rest of California's counties.

Summary of Findings

My thesis had three major findings. The first finding came from the onsite survey that I administered during the June 2018 Statewide Primary election in Sacramento County: 35 percent of survey respondents (117 responses out of 327 surveys) indicated that political climate was the

reason behind their decision to vote. This is a significantly higher number than the mean of 11.8 percent or the weighted mean of 2.82 percent increase in voter turnout in the five counties implementing the VCA in 2018. Based on survey results, my original hypothesis (drawing on similar research in other areas) was confirmed: the political context of the June 2018 Statewide Primary election was a much more significant factor influencing the increase in voters in Sacramento County than the implementation of the Voter's Choice Act.

The second finding from this thesis was that choice architecture measures related to election administration have a limited effect. Previous studies and experiments support this finding and show the highest effect of choice architecture measures on voter turnout to be at eight percent. To test this finding, I first performed an analysis of unweighted voter turnout data for the counties that implemented the VCA reform in 2018 and for the counties that did not. The unweighted data comparing voter turnout between 2014 and 2018 showed a statistically significant difference in means. The increase in voter turnout in five VCA-implementing counties was higher by 3.7 percent based on unweighted data.

Because the size of voter population is different in each county, and a one percent increase in voter turnout in a less populous county does not equal the same number of voters in a more populous county, I also conducted an analysis of weighted data. Assigning weights to voter turnout data reversed the significance of the increase in voter turnout in the two groups of counties, those implementing the VCA (lower weighted mean of 2.82 percent) and those not implementing the VCA (higher weighted mean of 10.56 percent). It is possible to conclude that the nine most populous counties not implementing the VCA propelled the overall increase in voter turnout in the state.

The third finding was that 60 percent of Sacramento County voters chose to return their ballot by handing it to a county official at a vote center or by dropping it into a secure drop box,

thus bypassing the usual intermediary function of the US Postal Service. According to county officials, voters regard drop boxes as a direct way to deliver their ballots to the county and prefer drop boxes over mail due to the lower likelihood of ballots getting lost. This finding is consistent with the results of Colorado's Voter Access and Modernized Elections Act of 2013, where a greater percentage of ballots were returned through the county drop boxes (The PEW Charitable Trusts, 2016).

The goal of this thesis was to find out whether the political context of the June 2018 Statewide Primary election or the changes to election administration procedures in the VCA-implementing county had greater effect on voter turnout. While the weighted and unweighted statewide voter turnout data showed that there may have been a limited effect of VCA implementation on voter turnout, survey results showed that a far greater number of voters decided to participate in the election due to its political context. When given a choice of ballot return methods, a greater number of Sacramento County voters chose direct contact with the county as opposed to returning their ballot through an intermediary (US Postal Service).

Limitations and Further Research

My research and the results of this thesis were limited by several factors. It is important to disclose these limitations in order to provide a complete assessment of possible gaps in current research and opportunities for further studies. It also helps the readers improve their understanding of the overall analysis presented in this thesis.

One of the main limitations was related to survey response collection. As I stated in chapter 3, onsite turnout during the first nine days of voting was low, and I collected the majority of survey responses at the three locations I surveyed on the last two days of voting (June 4 and 5, 2018). While the goal of my research was to get a geographically representative sample of Sacramento County voters, this did not become possible due to voter behavior. My

recommendation to researchers who decide to administer onsite surveys during the 11 days of election is to plan for a greater number of surveyors and resources in the last three days of onsite voting in order to capture a more representative sample.

Another limitation is that my research included responses of onsite voters only. Including responses of voters who chose mail or drop box as their method of ballot return would have been advantageous as it would have allowed me to assess the decisions of that segment of voters as well. I attempted to administer telephone surveys of Sacramento County voters in August and September of 2018. However, the response rate was extremely low – around six percent. My recommendation for future research on this topic is to include telephone surveys of voters who chose to vote by mail or drop box, but to plan for a very low response rate.

Additionally, my survey did not probe for the cost of postage. This factor could have been important in shedding some light on additional reasons behind the voters' decision to visit a vote center in person. My recommendation for future research in this field is to probe for the significance of a pre-paid return ballot option since pre-paid postage is already in effect in all California counties as of 2019.

Further research in the area of choice architecture and its effect on voter turnout can include the shift of California's primaries to March, additional six counties implementing the VCA in 2020, and the reversed ballot printing order in Los Angeles County.

Policy and Administrative Implications

Based on the literature review and the first two major findings of this thesis, I conclude that choice architecture measures are bound to have a limited effect on voter motivation to participate in any particular election. Political context of an election may play far greater role in getting voters to cast their ballots. Public policy officials need to keep this in mind when designing choice architecture measures. Increased efficiency of the election administration

process and increased cost-effectiveness should be the deciding factors when considering adoption of any reform measures. These two factors represent a far more compelling justification for an administrative reform to taxpayers than an elusive increase in voter turnout that may be influenced by many other factors.

My finding that voters prefer a direct contact with county officials or county resources when returning their ballots also has important implications. A greater number of voters returned their ballots by drop box or by dropping them off at a vote center than through the intermediary (US Postal Service). Accordingly, policy makers should consider adjusting VCA provisions, possibly changing the voter-to-drop-box ratio to accommodate for the direct county contact preference by voters. For the county officials, administrative changes may also be justified, including shifting staff from processing ballots received in the mail to servicing drop boxes and vote centers. However, this dynamic may change with the introduction of pre-paid ballot return postage in California in 2019.

Additionally, my research also identified other implications unrelated to specific details of Voter's Choice Act implementation in Sacramento County. One of the implications is the lack of information available to voters about the changes under the Voter's Choice Act. My survey results indicated that 65 percent of participants visited the vote centers in the last two days of operation. Also, 79 percent of survey participants came to the vote center from home and traveled less than two miles; and 93 percent did not take time off from work or school to visit the vote center. Voter behavior in the June 2018 Statewide Primary election in Sacramento County did not adjust to the flexibility of options that were provided to voters under the Voter's Choice Act. County officials acknowledged lack of effective mechanisms to disseminate information, as well as budgetary constraints in this area. Sacramento County did its best to utilize social media under the restrictions of a centralized coordination within the county, but this opportunity was not

explored to its full potential. I recommend that the Secretary of State's Office and county officials explore further ways to inform voters of the upcoming changes through online and social media platforms. Prime time television ads would also be an effective way to reach voters; however, this would likely necessitate a budgetary increase.

The next implication is related to the 11-day requirement for vote center operation. In addition to the difficulties in disseminating information to change voter behavior, this requirement can become a significant roadblock to counties with high real estate rental costs: it can be difficult if not impossible to find locations for 11-day vote centers due to limited resources. If voter behavior does not change through several election cycles and majority of onsite voting continues to happen in the last two to three days of the 11-day window, I recommend that the Secretary of State's Office and to California's Legislature amend some of the provisions of the Voter's Choice Act to shorten the early onsite voting as a cost savings and efficiency increasing measure.



The last policy implication is related to the shift in the reporting of election results under the Voter's Choice Act model. Switching to an all-mail election administration model leads to a slower vote count process where the county reports final election results with a significant delay of days or weeks. This is because every signature must be verified on the return envelope. As more of California's counties implement the VCA, media, political campaigns, and other stakeholders in the election outcomes need to adjust their expectations of the immediate election night results. Public policy officials may need to adjust election certification deadlines for the more populous counties in the state.

Conclusion

This thesis attempted to address the question of whether the political context of the June 2018 Statewide Primary election or the choice architecture measure known as the Voter's Choice

Act had a greater effect on the increased voter turnout in Sacramento County. My findings indicate that public policy officials should not count on choice architecture measures to bring about significant changes in voter behavior, but should instead focus on the measures' efficiency and cost-effectiveness to provide the best possible service at the lowest cost to taxpayers. Perhaps the greatest contribution of my thesis is to suggest a number of specific changes that could help to reach these goals. The California State Legislature should consider revising some of the provisions of choice architecture measures based on the results reported from the counties upon implementation. Pilot programs designed for a small number of counties, such as the reversed ballot printing order measure for the Los Angeles County, will serve as innovation labs for election administration reforms. There remains much opportunity to learn from the recent election reforms in California.

Appendix A: Onsite Voter Survey, June 2018 Statewide Primary Election

VOTER SURVEY (ONSITE) - 2018

Dear participant –
Your responses to this survey are very important. They will help us evaluate the new process of voting in Sacramento County. We thank you for your participation!

1. How convenient was it to receive your ballot in the mail before the election? Please mark one:

very convenient
 convenient
 somewhat convenient
 not very convenient
 not at all convenient

2. Why did you come to the vote center today? Please mark all that apply:

I did not receive my ballot
 I needed a replacement ballot
 I needed language assistance
 I needed disability assistance
 I wanted to visit a vote center
 I don't trust mail/drop boxes
 I always vote in person
 I wanted to get a sticker
 I dropped off my vote-by-mail ballot
 Other: _____

3. Why did you choose this particular vote center? Please mark all that apply:

It is close to my work
 It is close to my child's school
 It is close to my home
 It is close to my usual shopping
 It is close to my school
 It is close to bus/light rail stop
 Other: _____

4. How did you know where this vote center was located? Please mark all that apply:

I found it in the ballot mailer
 I learned about it from a friend
 I found it on county website
 I called the county office
 I saw it on social media
 I saw it when I passed by
 Other: _____

5. How easy was it to find this vote center? Please mark one:

very easy
 easy
 somewhat easy
 not very easy
 not at all easy

6. How far did you travel to get to this vote center? Please mark one:

Less than 1 mile (1.6 km)
 1-2 miles (1.6-3 km)
 3-5 miles (5-8 km)
 6-10 miles (9-16 km)
 11-15 miles (17-24 km)
 More than 15 miles (24+ km)
 Not sure/unknown
 Decline to state

7. How convenient were the days and hours of operation at this vote center? Please mark one:

very convenient
 convenient
 somewhat convenient
 not very convenient
 not at all convenient



8. Did you have to take time off from work or school to visit the vote center? Please mark one:

Yes
 No

9. How safe did you feel when visiting this vote center? Please mark one:

very safe
 safe
 somewhat safe
 not very safe
 not at all safe

Please continue on the back page →→→

VOTER SURVEY (ONSITE) - 2018

10. Which method of voting did you use at this vote center? Please mark one:

Paper ballot
 Touch screen

11. Did you use language assistance at this vote center? Please mark one:

Yes. Indicate language: _____
 No

12. How satisfied are you with your visit to this vote center today? Please mark one:

very satisfied
 satisfied
 somewhat satisfied
 not very satisfied
 not at all satisfied

13. Are you a first-time voter? Please mark one:

Yes
 No

14. What was the reason you decided to vote in this election? Please mark all that apply:

It is my civic duty to vote
 Important candidate on the ballot
 Important issue on the ballot
 Because of political climate
 Other: _____

15. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your voting experience today?

Yes: _____
 No

16. What is your age group? Please mark one:

18 – 20 years old
 21 – 25 years old
 26 – 30 years old
 31 – 40 years old
 41 – 50 years old
 Over 50 years old
 Decline to state

17. What is your gender? Please mark one:

Male
 Female
 Other: _____
 Decline to state

18. Which ethnicity or race best represents your heritage? Please mark all that apply:

White or Euro-American
 Latino or Hispanic American
 Black or African American
 East Asian or Asian American
 South Asian or Indian American
 Middle Eastern / Arab American
 Native American / Alaskan Native
 Other: _____
 Decline to state

19. Do you identify yourself as an immigrant to the United States? Please mark one:

Yes. How many years have you lived in the US? _____
 No

20. What was the last grade you completed in school? Please mark one:

Less than high school
 High school graduate
 Vocational/trade school
 Some college
 2 year degree
 4 year degree or higher
 Decline to state

Thank you for participating! Please return the survey to receive a prize!

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Sacramento County Officials	
1.	What were some of the reasons behind your office's decision to implement the Voters Choice Act reform in the county for the June 2018 election?
2.	Did you have any concerns about implementing the Voter's Choice Act? If so, how did you address them?
3.	What was your expectation of voter turnout in June of 2018? What were your reasons for this expectation?
4.	What went well during the June 2018 election?
5.	Based on your experience in the June 2018 election cycle, what changes did you make for the November 2018 election cycle?
6.	Do you have any recommendations for the counties that will be implementing VCA in 2020?

San Joaquin County Officials	
1.	What were some of the reasons behind your office's decision NOT to implement the Voters Choice Act reform in 2018?
2.	What percentage of voters voted by mail in the June 2018 election cycle in your county?
3.	Do you plan to implement the VCA in 2020? Why or why not?
4.	What was your expectation of voter turnout in June of 2018? What were your reasons for this expectation?
5.	Were there any unusual challenges your office experienced during the June 2018 election cycle?

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