Vote-by-Mail Envelope Design for California

December 15, 2017

In 2018, the first counties in California will start the transition to a new elections model under the Voter's Choice Act, in which all voters will receive their ballots by mail, with options to return them by mail or dropbox, or they can choose to vote in person.

To help prepare for this transition, the Center for Civic Design has worked with the California Secretary of State's office, county election offices, and national experts to design templates for the vote-by-mail packages, including the envelopes sent out by the local election offices, the ballot return packages, and the instructions for voters.

The goals for the design

The goal of this project is to create materials that can be used in any county, whether it is implementing the full Voter's Choice Act or not. A consistent design for vote-by-mail will help election offices and advocacy groups help voters identify and use vote-by-mail more effectively. It is also a fresh design to go along with a new voting model.

This design is intended to be a flexible template, providing consistency and a logical layout, while allowing for variations based on the size and layout of different envelope styles and election management systems.

Another important goal is a vote-by-mail package that even new voters, voters with low literacy, or voters with low civic literacy can use accurately, to reduce the number of ballots that cannot be counted or require corrections.

A successful design will make it easier for voters to vote by mail, within affordable and robust election administration. The design must work for all stakeholders:

- Make it easier for voters to recognize and return their ballot accurately, with clear, effective instructions.

- Support bilingual ballots to meet Voting Rights Act language access requirements, while still making the envelopes easy to read and use.

- Improve election administration by creating materials that reduce errors and make it easier to process vote-by-mail ballots.

- Support a statewide voter education campaign about how to vote by mail, by creating recognizable consistency across the state.

- Support local election offices with flexibility to customize the templates to local information and their procedures and systems for handling vote-by-mail materials.

- Support accurate handling and delivery of ballots sent through the US Postal Service (USPS).

What's in the design?

The design includes:

- A logical arrangement of the content elements that can be adapted to different envelope systems.

- A layout that can adapt to different size envelopes, within a reasonable range of sizes in common use.

- Sample text for the envelopes and instructional inserts that can be customized to the needs of each county.

- Guidelines for how color can be used consistently and meaningfully to support easy identification of the envelopes and specifications.
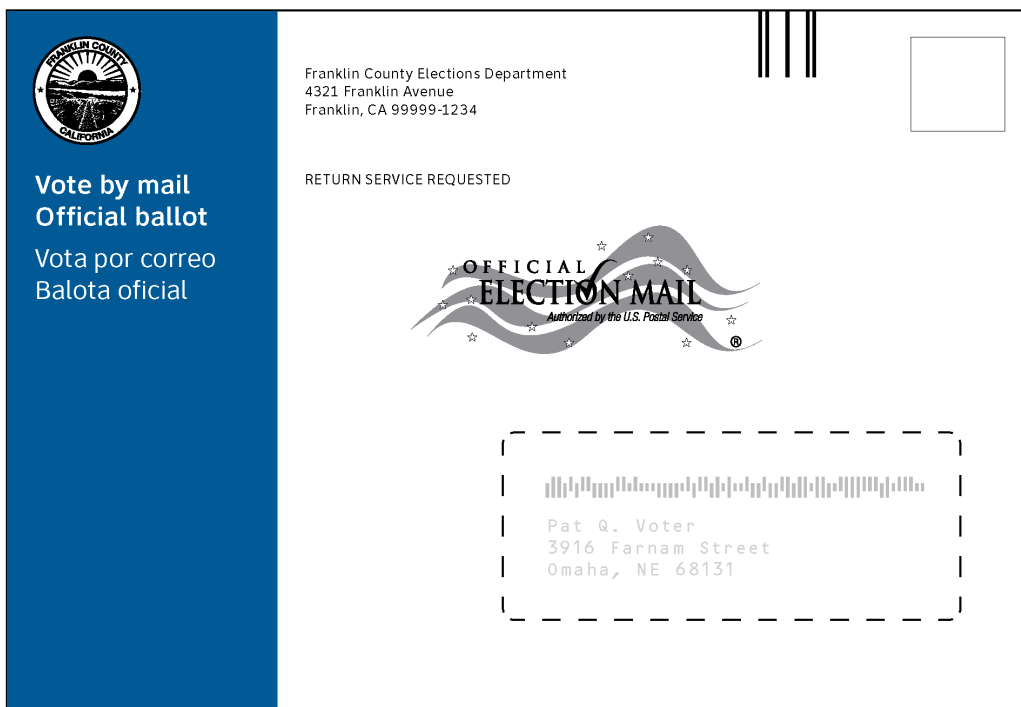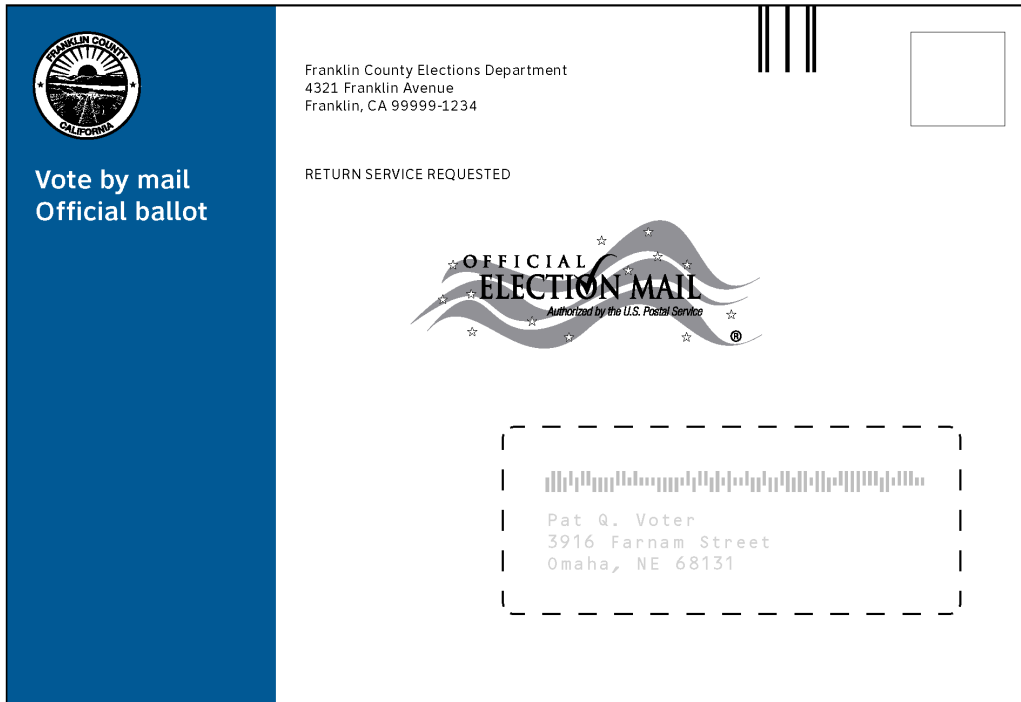
- Sample instruction inserts.

Table of Contents

Envelope layouts

Outgoing envelope front

Layout designed for 9.5" x 6.5" envelopes

Franklin County Elections Department
4321 Franklin Avenue
Franklin, CA 99999-1234

**Vote by mail
Official ballot**

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

OFFICIAL
ELECTION MAIL
Authorized by the U.S. Postal Service

Pat Q. Voter
3916 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68131

Franklin County Elections Department
4321 Franklin Avenue
Franklin, CA 99999-1234

**Vote by mail
Official ballot**

Vota por correo
Balota oficial

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

OFFICIAL
ELECTION MAIL
Authorized by the U.S. Postal Service

Pat Q. Voter
3916 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68131

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Outgoing envelope back

Layout designed for 9.5" x 6.5" envelopes

Voter's Choice Act
You choose when, where, and how to vote

Contact information

Franklin County Elections
4321 Franklin Avenue
Franklin, CA 99999

www.franklincounty.gov/elections

elections@franklincounty.gov

Information in English: 111-222-3333
Información en español: 111-222-4444
若需更多中文資訊: 111-222-5555

Fax: 111-222-6666

TTY: 1-222-555-1222

How to return your ballot

Drop Box
**Drop off your ballot at a secure drop box —
no postage required.**

Vote by Mail
Mail your ballot so it is postmarked by Election Day.

Vote Center
Vote at any vote center in the county.

**To find the Vote Center or Drop Box nearest you
www.yourcounty.gov/wheretovote**

Voter's Choice Act
*You choose when, where,
and how to vote*

La Ley de Opción del Votante
*Usted elige cuándo,
dónde y cómo votar*

Contact information
Información del contacto

Franklin County Elections
4321 Franklin Avenue
Franklin, CA 99999

Open Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm
Abierto de lunes a viernes, 8am a 5pm

www.franklincounty.gov/elections

elections@franklincounty.gov

Information in English: 111-222-3333
Información en español: 111-222-4444
若需更多中文資訊: 111-222-5555

Fax: 111-222-6666

TTY: 1-222-555-1222

How to return your ballot / Cómo devolver su voto

Drop Box
**Drop off your ballot at a secure drop box —
no postage required.**
Buzón
Entregue su boleta electoral en un buzón seguro –
no se requiere franqueo.

Vote by Mail
Mail your ballot so it is postmarked by Election Day.
Votar par Correo
Enviar por correo su boleta electoral para que sea sellada
el Día de Elecciones.
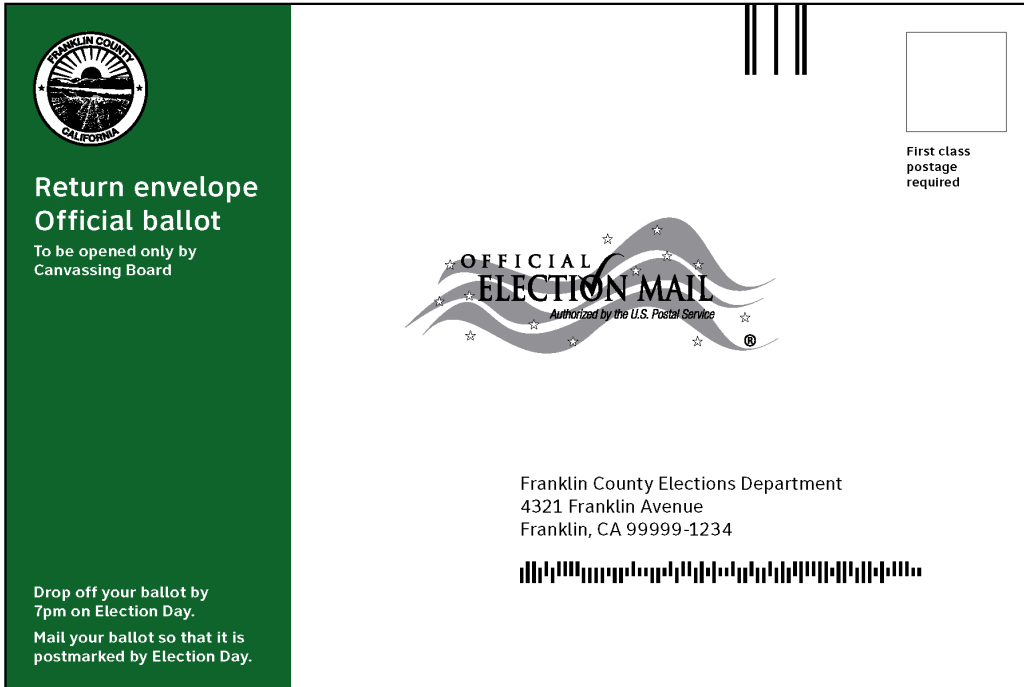
Vote Center
Vote at any vote center in the county.
Centro de Votación
Vote en cualquier centro de votación en el condado.
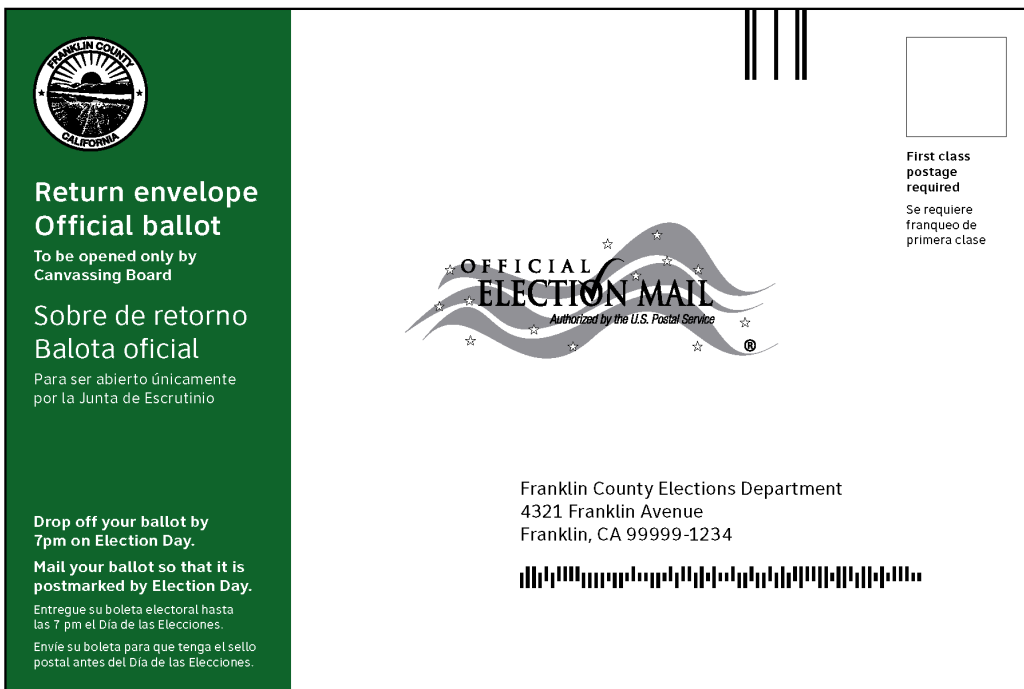
**To find the Vote Center or Drop Box nearest you
www.yourcounty.gov/wheretovote**
Para encontrar el Centro de Votación o Buzón más cercano a usted
www.yourcounty.gov/wheretovote

Return envelope front

Layout designed for 9" x 6" envelopes

**Return envelope
Official ballot**
To be opened only by
Canvassing Board

Drop off your ballot by
7pm on Election Day.

Mail your ballot so that it is
postmarked by Election Day.

OFFICIAL
ELECTION MAIL
Authorized by the U.S. Postal Service
®

First class
postage
required

Franklin County Elections Department
4321 Franklin Avenue
Franklin, CA 99999-1234

**Return envelope
Official ballot**
To be opened only by
Canvassing Board

**Sobre de retorno
Balota oficial**
Para ser abierto únicamente
por la Junta de Escrutinio

Drop off your ballot by
7pm on Election Day.

Mail your ballot so that it is
postmarked by Election Day.

Entregue su boleta electoral hasta
las 7 pm el Día de las Elecciones.

Envíe su boleta para que tenga el sello
postal antes del Día de las Elecciones.

OFFICIAL
ELECTION MAIL
Authorized by the U.S. Postal Service
®

First class
postage
required

Se requiere
franqueo de
primera clase

Franklin County Elections Department
4321 Franklin Avenue
Franklin, CA 99999-1234

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Return envelope back with overprinting

Layout designed for 9" x 6" envelopes. Text under the flap not shown in this view

I authorize the person below to return my ballot:

Their name _____

Their signature _____

Relationship to voter _____

Did you...
☐ Sign the voter's declaration in your own handwriting?
☐ Put your ballot in the envelope?

Voter's declaration I declare that
- I am a resident of and a voter in the county, and the person whose name appears on this envelope.
- I have not applied, nor will I apply for a vote-by-mail ballot from any other jurisdiction in this election.
- I declare under penalty of perjury that this is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

You must sign in your own handwriting. Your signature must match the signature on your voter registration card.
Voting twice in an election is a crime.

Voter, sign here in ink.   Power of attorney is not acceptable.

✗ ◯

Date (MM/DD/YYYY)

Print name   Pat Q. Voter

Print your voter registration address

1245 Residence Street

Your Town, CA 99999

If you are unable to sign, make your mark and have a witness sign below:
Witness, sign here _____

Franklin County
General Election
November 7, 2018

Pat Q. Voter
3916 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68131

I authorize the person below to return my ballot:
Autorizo a la persona abajo a devolver mi boleta:

Their name / Su nombre _____

Their signature / Su firma _____

Relationship to voter / Relación con el votante _____

Did you...
☐ Sign the voter's declaration in your own handwriting?
☐ Put your ballot in the envelope?

Revise si...
☐ ¿Firmó la declaración del votante con su propia letra?
☐ ¿Colocó su boleta electoral en el sobre?

Voter's declaration I declare that
- I am a resident of and a voter in the county, and the person whose name appears on this envelope.
- I have not applied, nor will I apply for a vote-by-mail ballot from any other jurisdiction in this election.
- I declare under penalty of perjury that this is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

You must sign in your own handwriting. Your signature must match the signature on your voter registration card.
Voting twice in an election is a crime.

Declaración del votante Yo declaro que:
- Soy residente y votante en el condado, y la persona cuyo nombre aparece en este sobre.
- No he solicitado, ni solicitaré una boleta electoral de voto por correo de ninguna otra jurisdicción en esta elección.
- Declaro bajo pena de perjurio que esto es verdadero a mi leal saber y entender.

Debe firmar de puño y letra. Su firma debe coincidir con la firma en la tarjeta de inscripción del votante.
Votar dos veces en una elección es un crimen.

Voter, sign here in ink.   Power of attorney is not acceptable.
Votante, firme aquí con tinta   No se aceptan poderes notariales.

✗ ◯

Date / Fecha **(MM/DD/YYYY)**

Print name / Imprimir nombre   Pat Q. Voter

Print your voter registration address /
Imprime tu dirección de registro de votante

1245 Residence Street

Your Town, CA 99999

If you are unable to sign, make your mark and have a witness sign below:
Si usted no puede firmar, haga una marca y haga que un testigo firme abajo:
Witness, sign here / Testigo, firme aquí _____

Franklin County
General Election
November 7, 2018

Pat Q. Voter
3916 Farnam Street
Omaha, NE 68131

Using colors to identify ballot types and counties

The colors of the envelopes help voters and election administrators identify different types of ballot envelopes easily. The colors are also helpful for the USPS, because they help distinguish envelopes on their way to voters from those returning to the elections office. The color wraps around the edge of the envelope so it is visible in a stack of mailers making them easy to identify at the postal facility. [4]

- All outgoing envelopes use the same color, a medium blue.

- The standard color for return envelopes is a dark green.
  There are also 7 alternative colors (3 additional colors and 4 lighter variations) that can be used for overlapping special elections return envelopes, to differentiate neighboring counties, or (for non-VCA counties) to identify all VBM districts vs. voters who have chosen vote-by-mail.

- UOCAVA return envelopes use brown or an alternative lighter tan.

- Provisional ballots use pink. CVR provisional ballots use yellow.

Example of how colors might be used in two neighboring counties

County A
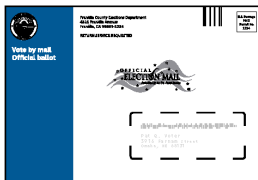
Outgoing (blue)

General election return (dark green)
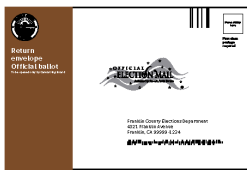
General election UOCAVA return (dark brown)

County B
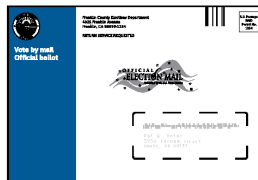
Outgoing (blue)
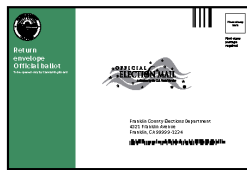
General election return (light green)
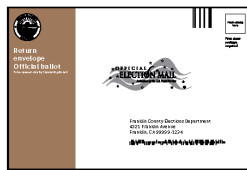
General election UOCAVA return (light brown)

Special election return (dark purple)
Water District Election
December 15, 2018

Vote-by-mail color palette

Outgoing
c100 m50 y0 k23,
r0 g91 b153
Hex 005699

**Return
(standard)**
c90 m0 y100 k50
r0 g104 b44
Hex 00672c

**Return
(alternate)**
c68 m0 y75 k38
r64 g142 b97
Hex 31824e

**Return
(alternate)**
c100 m40 y30 k28
r0 g96 b123
Hex 00607a

**Return
(alternate)**
c75 m30 y22 k21
r64 g136 b155
Hex 005f7a

**Return
(standard)**
c65 m75 y0 k15
r99 g77 b145
Hex 624c91

**Return
(alternate)**
c049 m56 y0 k11
r138 g121 b173
Hex 7e6da6

**Return
(alternate)**
c0 m0 y0 k85
r77 g77 b79
Hex 4c4c4e

**Return
(alternate)**
c0 m0 y0 k64
r121 g121 b123
Hex 797a7d

Provisional
c0 m30 y8 k0
r249 g193 b205
Hex f6acbb

**CVR
Provisional**
c0 m11 y38 k0
r255 g226 b171
Hex ffd88f

**UOCAVA
(standard)**
c48 m75 y100 k20
r127 g76 b41
Hex 7f4c29

**UOCAVA
(alternate)**
c36 m56 y75 k15
r159 g121 b95
Hex 7f4c29

The envelope colors meet accessibility requirements for large white text. The dark colors meet WCAG 2.0 Level AAA at 7:1 contrast. The lighter colors meet Level AA at 4.5:1 contrast. The provisional envelope colors have greater than 10:1 contrast with black text.

Color specifications

Envelope Type	Color	Sample	Hex	RGB	CYMK
Outgoing	Blue		#00607a	0, 96, 112	100, 50, 0, 23
Return	Green		#00662b	0, 102, 43	90, 0 100 50
Alternates	Lighter Green		#318241	64, 142, 97	68, 0, 75, 38
	Purple		#624c91	99, 77, 145	65, 75, 0, 15
	Lighter Purple		#7e6da6	138,121,173	49, 56, 0, 11
	Teal		#006071	0, 96, 123	100, 40, 30, 29
	Lighter Teal		#005f7a	64, 136, 155	75, 20 22, 21
	Grey		#4c4c4e	77, 77, 79	0, 0, 0, 85
	Lighter Grey		#797a7d	121, 121m 123	0, 0, 0, 64
Provisional	Pink		#f6acbb	249, 193, 205	0, 30, 8, 0
CVR Provis.	Yellow		#ffd88f	355, 226, 171	0, 11. 38, 0

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Description of the elements on the envelopes

Postal and Election Mail requirements

Outgoing envelope

Return envelope (top)
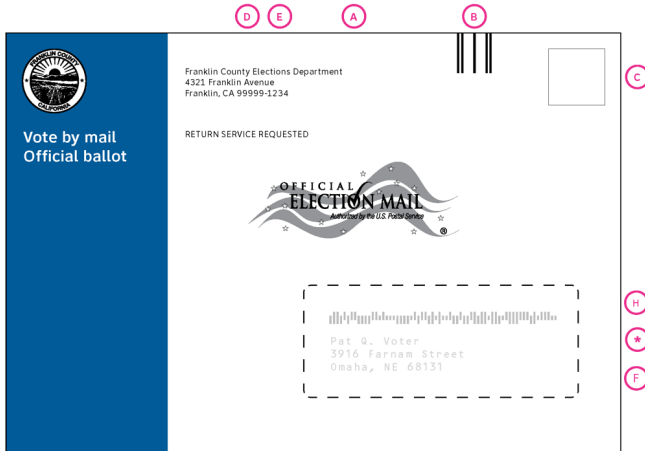
(A) Election mail logo

(B) Facing Identification Mark (FIM)

(C) Postage Paid or Postage instructions

(D) County return address

(E) Return service requested notice

(*/F) Voter's mailing address (and window on the outgoing envelope)

(G) Election office mailing address (on return envelope front)

(H) Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMB)
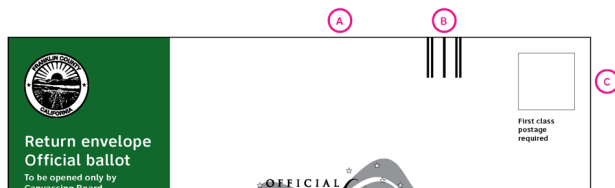
In this design the USPS "addressing area" is the space to the right of the colored area.

This section includes all of the elements needed to accurately send the envelopes through the US Postal Service. When designing an envelope, please consult the postal manuals to be sure you understand the entire requirement. [3]

Election Mail logo

See USPS Pub 631 for information about the election mail logo.

- Follow requirements for clear space required around the logo.

- Be sure to use the correct size of the logo -most vote-by-mail envelopes will use the medium size.

Facing Identification Marks (FIM)

Follow USPS specifications for spacing and placement of these marks, which are used to help the automation equipment find the front of the envelope.

Postage Paid or Postage instructions

Follow USPS regulations for the postage block in the upper right corner.

- Text must be a minimum of 8 points.

  > Research with low-literacy, low civic engagement voters in inner city Baltimore suggests that the instruction "Postage Required. Post Office will not deliver without proper postage" is more effective if placed below an empty rectangle because participants interpreted anything *except* an empty box to be postage-paid mail. [7]

Election office return address

See USPS DMM-603 for addressing instructions.

- The election office return address on the outgoing envelope must match the postal permit number used for postage. Be sure to include the full ZIP+4.

- For return envelopes that are "Courtesy Return" (that is, not postage-paid return), USPS requires that there be a place for a return address.

- The layout leaves a blank space on the return envelope corresponding to the location of the election office return address on the outgoing envelope. Some mailing specialists suggest including 3 blank lines for the voter to write a return address. (USPS 703.82.5)

Ancillary Service Endorsements

See USPS Pub 507d for return service or address service requests.

- There are 4 possible locations for this text, with the space under the return address the least confusing on the crowded outgoing ballot.

- An endorsement must be at least 8-point type in all capital letters. It must stand out clearly against the background and have ¼" clear space on all sides.

Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMB)

See IMB details and guidelines at **https://ribbs.usps.gov**.

- The Intelligent Mail Barcodes (IMB) support the USPS Intelligent Mail Services, including tracking mail pieces.

Mailing addresses

- The election office mailing address is printed on the front of the return envelope, with the associated IMB code.

- The voter's outgoing mailing address is either printed on the *back* of the return envelope and shows through a window in the outgoing envelope, or can be printed on the outgoing envelope.

An open issue: the voter's outgoing mailing address

The location and treatment of the voter's outgoing mailing address is still an open issue. Election departments want to print it on the *back* of the return envelope so it shows through a window in the outgoing envelope. This allows all of the information for each voter to be printed on one envelope, eliminating the challenge of synchronizing two envelopes and the ballot types.

However, during the 2016 election, some returned envelopes were delivered back to the voter, when postal automation equipment read the voter's address and IMB as the destination. The USPS is still testing possible solutions to this issue.

Suggested solutions being tested include:

- Placing two duplicate IMB above and below the elections office mailing address on the front of the return envelope. This may increase the algorithmic "weight" of that side of the envelope for the automation equipment. [3]

- Place an IMB for the elections office in the lower right corner of the back of the return envelope, where it is hidden below the window on the outgoing envelope, but visible for the automation equipment during the return trip. [13]

Please consult your election mail specialist before finalizing your envelope layout.

Identification as an official vote-by-mail envelope

Outgoing envelope
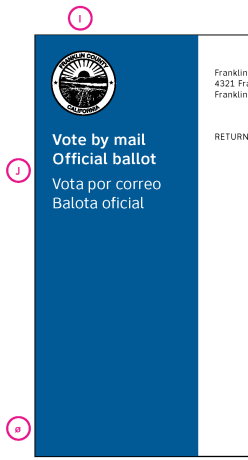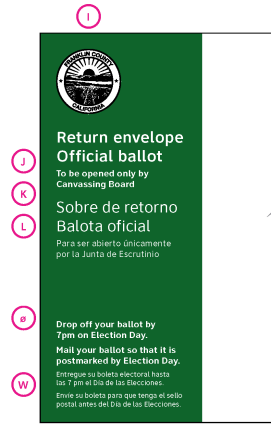
Return envelope

Identification as an official ballot

(I) County seal [8]

(J) Official ballot notice [1 - a.5]

(K) Envelope type (return envelope)

(L) Canvassing board notice (return envelope) [1 - a.5]

(W) Deadlines

(ø) Colored area

Back of the return envelope

Identification of the county and election

(M) The name of the county [13]

(N) The name and date of the election [13]

Official ballot identification and canvassing board notice

In the colored area, the county seal and text identify the envelope and what it holds.

- The county seal or other official logo appears on all envelopes. Although voters might not identify a *specific* county seal, they do see seals, in general, as a sign of official information. It will also help election workers differentiate between envelopes from their county or another one.

- Both outgoing and return envelopes include notice that the envelope contains an official ballot.

- The Return Envelope is named in the identification so it can be matched to instructions, making it easier for voters to understand which envelope to use.

- The return envelope includes a notice that the returned ballot is to be opened only by the canvassing board.

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Deadlines for returning the ballot by mail or by dropping it off

- The deadlines for returning the ballot are included so that this critical information is available to the voter on the envelope itself.

  > During usability testing of the prototypes, voters wanted this text as large as would fit on the envelope easily. [14]

Identification of the county and the election

- Printing the name of the county on the back of the return envelope is helpful for election administration, so that a worker looking only at the back of the envelope can easily identify ballots from another county

Signatures and other forms

California Elections Code 3011 and 354 [1] require several different signatures on the ballot return envelope. This section includes all of the additional forms the voter may need to complete signing and sealing the envelope. The layout also includes related design elements that help make the envelopes easier to use.

All of these elements are on the back of the return envelope so that someone examining the envelope can see them all at the same time.

The most important of these forms is the area for the voter's signature and related information.

To the extent possible with different envelope styles, the location of the signature on the return envelope should be as consistent as possible, so that statewide voter education can accurately portray the location. [5]

Even if the signature area moves so that it can be placed appropriately around the envelope flap or below a peel-away tab that hides the voter signature, the signature area should be consistently placed below the voter's declaration.

Voter signature area with witness signature

Blank signature form

Form with voter information printed

(O) Voter's signature [1-a.2]

(P) The date of signing [1-a.4]

(Q) Voter's name and registration address [1-a.3]

(R) Voter scan code for the election management system [13]

(S) A witness to a mark in place of a signature [354.5]

(+) Holes to identify the signature area [12]

Voter's signature and address

The voter's signature block includes several elements, arranged in a consistent layout.

- The area for the voter's signature is enclosed in a rectangle, with a large X inside. This makes it visually distinct, and encourages voters to sign within the space provided. This also helps with signature verification for both manual and automated systems. No other signature on the envelope should have this mark or be enclosed in a box. [4, 9, 10]

- The *title* for this area is an instruction, "Voter: sign here in ink," placed just above the signature box, with "Power of attorney not acceptable" in small type on the same line or just below it. [4, 9, 10]

> During usability testing of the prototypes, voters asked whether they had to sign in ink. They wanted confirmation that they had all the details right. [14]

- Punched holes around the signature area can serve as guides to help blind or low literacy voters sign accurately

The two holes help blind voters to tactilely identify the location of the signature space and the correct orientation of the envelope. One goes all the way through the envelope, one only through the front or back. [12]

Blank or pre-printed form

The form for the voter's name, and address can be left blank, to be filled in by the voter, or can be printed on the envelope as part of the addressing process.

- When a name must be printed, include that information in the prompt, making it a clearer direction. [4, 10, 14]

- Printing the name helps avoid *spousal swaps* (when family members return their ballot in the other's envelope). This causes problems when the wrong voter is "checked in" as having returned a ballot. [4]

- Preprinting the voter's registration address (rather than the address for their vote-by-mail ballot) on the envelope helps low literacy and low civic literacy voters comply with this requirement for accepting a vote-by-mail ballot.

- Some counties also print a small code that can be scanned to bring up the voter's record in the EMS.

Witness signature area
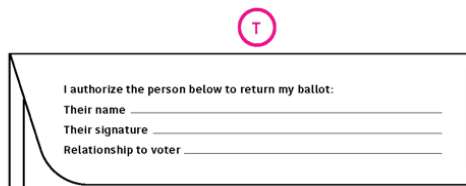
A witness to the signature is required for voters who only make a mark.

- This signature should be placed on a line (not in a box) so that it does not compete with the critical voter signature.

    During usability testing of the prototypes, voters were confused about whose name to write and who should sign when the prompt just said "Name" [14]

Bearer name and signature

Back of the return envelope

(T) Bearer's name and signature [1-a.9, 10, 11]

California law requires that if someone other than the voter returns a vote-by-mail ballot, they must be identified. This section of the code was amended in 2017 to allow any person, not just those with a list of specific relationships.

- The name, relationship, and signature of a person authorized to return a ballot for a voter is in a small form on the outside flap of the envelope.

  > In usability testing the prototype, voters were confused about whose name and signature was needed, so the prompt was changed to say "Their name" and "Their signature" to clearly identify who should sign. [14]

- The name and date of the election is helpful to ensure that only envelopes with voter information for the current election are used. It is also useful in the case of overlapping special elections. It is also on the back of the return envelope with other active elements.

Voter's declaration and warnings

(V) Voter's Declaration (1-a.1, 8)

(X) Signature warning (1-a.6)

(Y) Voting twice warning (1-a.7)

The voter's declaration includes several sections:

- A declaration, under penalty of perjury, stating that the voter resides within the precinct in which he or she is voting and is the person whose name appears on the envelope. (a.1)

- A statement that the voter has neither applied, nor intends to apply, for a vote by mail voter's ballot from any other jurisdiction for the same election (a.8)

- A warning that the voter must sign the envelope in his or her own handwriting and that it must match the voter registration signature for the ballot to be counted. (a.7)

- A warning that voting twice is a crime. (a.6)

Final checklist and reminders

Did you...
☐ Sign the voter's declaration in your own handwriting?
☐ Put your ballot in the envelope?

Revise si...
☐ ¿Firmó la declaración del votante con su propia letra?
☐ ¿Colocó su boleta electoral en el sobre?

(Z) "Before you seal" checklist

GLUE STRIP

(U) How to get a replacement ballot

Make a mistake on your ballot?
Call the election office for a replacement
111-222-3333 or elections@yourcounty.gov

¿Cometió un error en su boleta electoral?
Llame a la oficina electoral para un reemplazo
111-222-4444 o elections@yourcounty.gov

A final checklist, placed so that it is visible as the envelope is sealed reminds voters to:

- Sign the voter's declaration

- Put their ballot in the envelope

    In Shasta County, some voters checked off items in the instructions and the final checklist, showing that they had seen and used this information. [11]

Other helpful reminders include how to correct a mistake on the ballot. This information can be in the instructions insert in more detail, but should also be on the ballot.

- How to get a replacement ballot [13]

Instructions on the envelope
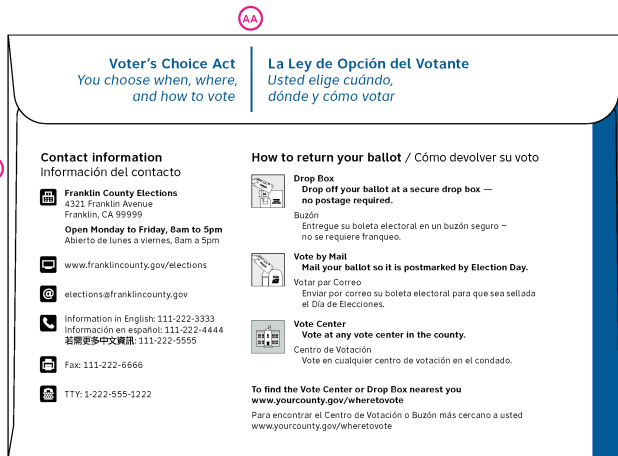
(AA) Message area

(BB) Contact information

(CC) How to return the ballot

The outgoing envelope has room on the back for instructions or other helpful information

Message area
- The back flap of the outgoing envelope can be used for a message. This area can call attention to anything new in the election – such as the Voter's Choice Act

Contact information
- The contact information should include all of the ways to communicate with the elections office, including information in any languages the office supports.

Summary of how to return the ballot
The other area for instructions is an overview of how to return the ballot.

- The information is tailored to each county and the options available.

- Include a link to find a list of drop boxes, polling places, and vote centers.

- Bilingual envelopes have a shorter version to allow both languages to fit.

- Both versions use icons to illustrate each option.

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Envelope structural elements

Some features are built into the envelope, rather than printed on it. When these features are used, the layout of the other elements may need to shift to fit the envelope dimensions.

- The bottom of an address window should be at least ¾ of an inch from the bottom of the envelope to ensure the stability of the envelope.

- A punched hole in the return envelope shows election workers if a ballot is in the envelope without opening it. This hole might be part of the pair of holes surrounding the voter's signature area as a guide.

- Some outgoing envelopes have a small window positioned to make it easy to check that the correct ballot type has been inserted into each envelope.

- Using a signature privacy tab means that the signature area must be positioned under the flap of the return envelope

- Any colored area that wraps to the back of the envelope must be narrow enough that it does not interfere with the USPS clear space around the address or automation features. A maximum of ½" is a good starting rule of thumb.

- The size of the return envelope should allow voters to easily fit all of the materials (including ballot and secrecy sleeve, if used).

In the VSAP study, when the fit was too tight, participants worried that the envelope would "not stay safely sealed in the mail." [6]

Instructions insert or secrecy sleeve

To support voters, the design includes a voter guide insert with detailed instructions, appropriate to whether the county has implemented the Voter's Choice Act. These inserts give voters complete, clear, plain language instructions included with in the ballot package that walks through the entire process from marking the ballot to returning it.

The instructions include:

- The process for voting, including reminding voters to return their ballot [5,7, 8]

- A list of options for returning the ballot, including drop boxes [4, 13]

- A way to find the location anywhere to return a vote-by-mail ballot [4, 12]

- Instructions for Remote Accessible Vote by Mail, if available [4 13]

- The deadline for returning ballots and any related requirements [1, 4, 13]

Some counties use a secrecy sleeve so the ballot is protected while the ballot is being opened. Instructions for marking the ballot can be printed on the secrecy sleeve. Final instructions for signing the return envelope and returning the envelope, however, should be on an insert that is not returned with the ballot.

> In usability testing in Baltimore, participants had less trouble understanding how to pack their ballot when an inner envelope or secrecy sleeve was distinct in size and appearance from the mailing envelope. [7]

Good practice for packing the envelopes is to pack the ballot inside any instruction insert or a secrecy sleeve so voters notice it. [6, 7]

Sample inserts

The sample inserts in a half-page brochure
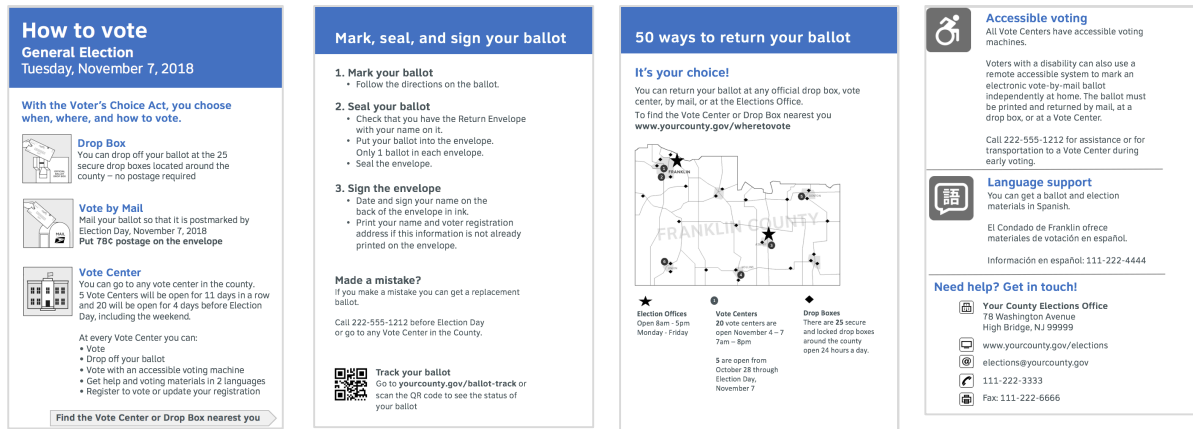
Cover

How to vote

Election name and date

Options for returning the ballot

Information about polling places or vote centers

Inside left

Mark, seal, and sign your ballot

Instructions for voting

How to get a replacement ballot

How to track your ballot

Inside right

50 ways to return your ballot

Information about options and hours

Map to show range of locations

Back

Accessible voting

Accessible voting machines

Accessible remote voting (if available)

Language support

Contact information

The sample insert is available online as a PowerPoint file in three versions:

- English version for the Voter's Choice Act counties

- Spanish version for the Voter's Choice Act counties

- English version for other counties

The translations files are also available. The translations were made by CTS Language Link, but have not been verified.

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Ballot secrecy and signature security

There is a wide variety of designs for how ballot secrecy is protected and whether signatures are hidden or exposed on the return envelope.

Although election officials do not report many issues with exposed signatures, in an age of increasing identify theft, hiding the voter's signature might be an issue in the future.

There is some evidence that voters, especially in cities, do not trust street-corner mailboxes as safe or secure [7, 11]. Officials in other all-vote-by-mail states report that a significant majority of ballots are returned using drop-boxes or other election office. This may be motivated by the desire to return the ballot directly to an arm of the election office, concerns about USPS reliability, concerns about protecting their personal information, or a mix of all of these issues.

Hiding the signature
There are several envelope designs that hide the signature in use. They include:

- Large envelope flaps that cover the entire form with the voter's signature and address. Typically the flap can be opened without opening the part of the envelope holding the ballot, so the ballot remains secret until the voter is authenticated.

- Rolled envelope flaps, which are folded twice to hide the signature. Like the large flaps, the main compartment of the envelope is opened separately.

- Signature windows or small sections of the envelope that are torn away to reveal the signature.

These designs, however, have an impact on election administration processes, as almost all of them require the envelope to be handled twice: once to reveal the signature so the voter can be authenticated, and a second time to open the envelope and extract the ballot.

Other ballot security or privacy solutions
- In addition, some counties position the signature block so the voter signs over the sealed flap, making tampering easier to detect.

- Some counties include a secrecy sleeve. This is a paper folder open on two sides, which protects the ballot from casual visual inspection as the envelope is opened.

List of elements on the envelopes

ID	Name	Used on
Postal and mailing elements		
A	Election Mail logo	Outgoing, Return
B	FIM	Outgoing, Return
C	USPS Postage	Outgoing, Return
D	County return address	Outgoing
E	Return service requested	Outgoing
F	Voter's mailing address	Return
G	Election office mailing address	Return
H	Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMB)	Outgoing (voter), Return (office)
Elements to identify the envelope or election		
I	County seal	All
J	Official VBM notice	Outgoing, Return
K	Envelope type	Return
L	Canvassing board notice	Return
M	Name of county	Return
N	Name and date of election	Return
ø	Colored area	All
Voter's signature and other forms		
O	Voter's signature	Return
P	Date of signing	Return
Q	Voter's name and registration address	Return
R	Voter's EMS scan code	Return
S	Witness signature	Return
T	Bearer's name and signature	Return
Voter's declaration and other notices and reminders		
V	Voter's declaration	Return
W	Election deadline notice	Return
X	Signature must match	Return
Y	Voting twice is a crime	Return
Z	Before you seal checklist	Return
Instructions		
AA	Promotional area	Outgoing
BB	Contact info for elections office	Outgoing
CC	How to return instructions	Outgoing
Structural elements on the envelope		
*	Window to show voter's address	Outgoing
+	Holes to identify the signature area	Return

How we ran this project

The design guidelines are drawn from the Center's experience testing a variety of election materials, including vote-by-mail envelopes in Baltimore and Shasta County, voter registration forms, other election forms, and usability testing of design prototypes, as well as from the experience and wisdom of the election officials who have worked on this project with us.

Preparation for the project included:

- Review and analysis of the contents and format current vote-by-mail envelopes from all California counties, collected by the Secretary of State's office.

- Review of the California Election Code requirements for information and forms on vote-by-mail return envelopes.

- Review of US Postal Service requirements for election mail.

- Review of best practices in vote-by-mail designs from other states.

- Review of recent research on vote-by-mail design and work conducted for the Voting System Assessment Project.

Feedback during the project included several sources:

- Review and feedback from California election officials and the Secretary of State's office.

- Review and feedback from the USPS Election Mail unit and other experts on election mail, including Tammy Patrick.

- Usability testing with voters in Calaveras, Santa Cruz, Shasta, and Tuolumne counties, including review of the returned envelopes by election officials in those states.

We created sample envelopes:

- We used the most common size in the collection of envelopes in use in California— 9.5" x 6.5" outgoing envelopes and 9" x 6" return envelopes.

- The first set included outgoing and return envelopes in English and bilingual English and Spanish. After usability testing the bilingual return envelopes were reprinted with corrections.

Sources for requirements

Election officials suggested many of the requirements during our interviews. Other sources that either confirmed that input or added specific details based on policy or research are listed here.

1. California Elections Code Section 3011 and 354

2. USPS Publications (including Pub 631 Official Election Mail—Graphic Guidelines)

3. USPS presentations to the EAC Standards Board, CACEO, and other conferences

4. Presentations or personal communication with Tammy Patrick (Presidential Commission on Election Administration and postal election mail expert)

5. California Secretary of State's Office presentations or personal communication

6. "Vote-by-Mail Research Report" – LA County VSAP and IDEO, March 2016

7. "Making Voting by Mail Usable, Accessible, and Inclusive" – Kathryn Summers, Whitney Quesenbery, Amy Pointer, paper at AHFE 2016

8. "Best Practices for Official Voter Guides" – Center for Civic Design and League of Women Voters of California

9. Showcase: Absentee Ballot Instructions in Minnesota – Center for Civic Design and Minnesota Secretary of State's Office

10. Showcase: Voter registration forms in Pennsylvania (and others) – Center for Civic Design and Pennsylvania Secretary of State's Office

11. Usability testing vote-by-mail envelopes in Shasta County (2015)

12. Oregon vote-by-mail accessible envelope design

13. Feedback from California elections officials or mailing specialists

14. Usability testing for this project with voters in Calaveras, Santa Cruz, Shasta, and Tuolumne Counties (November 2017)

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Download this report

You can download a copy of this report and all sample files for envelope layouts and inserts from:

https://www.civicdesign.org/projects/vote-by-mail

For more information

If you would like more information about this project, or help using these designs to update your vote-by-mail envelopes, we'd love to talk to you:

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