

Planning for High Election Day Turnout in the California Primary

MAY 2026

Voting in the California primary has begun. A staggering 61 candidates are vying to succeed term-limited Gov. Gavin Newsom. Seven of them qualified to participate in the race's final televised debate, and six are [polling](#) close to or above 10 percent among likely primary voters.

In 2020, many Californians [waited](#) to see the results of other states' presidential primaries before voting themselves, contributing to [hours-long lines](#) across the state on election day. This year, if many people [wait](#) until the end of the voting period to see whether any of the leading candidates drop out, they could similarly see long lines on June 2. Voters and election officials should plan accordingly and follow best practices.

Recommendations for Voters

1. Check wait times.

Many California counties, especially larger ones, publish regularly updated trackers of wait times at each voting location. Voters should check their [county elections website](#) to assess current wait times when deciding when to vote.

2. Take advantage of vote centers.

[More than half](#) of counties participate in California's Voter's Choice Act, allowing voters to cast their ballot at any vote center in their county, instead of having to go to their local precinct, and many other counties voluntarily provide this option. In these counties, voters can check whether nearby vote centers have shorter lines than their precinct.

3. Consider bringing your mail ballot to the polls.

All registered voters in California receive a mail ballot at their home. Ballots submitted by mail must be postmarked by election day to count, and [changes](#) at the U.S. Postal Service mean that postmarks might not be applied the day a ballot is dropped in the mail. Voters who wish to avoid long lines but also hand their ballot directly to an election worker can fill out their mail ballot and bring it

to an official drop box or polling location at any time during the voting period. Voters do not need to wait in line to turn in a mail ballot. In some counties, voters can even feed their ballot [directly](#) into a scanner.

4. Ask a trusted person to deliver your mail ballot.

Voters who cannot go to an official ballot drop box or polling location to deliver their mail ballot can ask a trusted person to drop it off on their behalf.

Recommendations for Election Officials

1. Publish and regularly update wait times.

Election officials should publish wait times for all polling locations on county websites and share relevant updates on social media. They should also assign staffers to re-evaluate wait times and regularly update the trackers. Retaining wait time data can help with planning future elections.

2. Anticipate staffing needs.

More voters may wait to vote until the final few days of voting than is typical, despite the typical encouragements from elections offices to vote early. Officials should staff accordingly for the days leading up to and including election day. Additional staff may also be needed in the following days to process ballots submitted at the end of the voting period.

3. Stock up on emergency supplies.

Election officials should ensure that they have ample emergency supplies, including paper ballots, in case of technical malfunctions.

4. Remind voters that they can turn in their mail ballot at poll sites.

Election officials should remind voters who are unable to wait in long lines that they can go home, fill out their mail ballot, and submit it in person.