

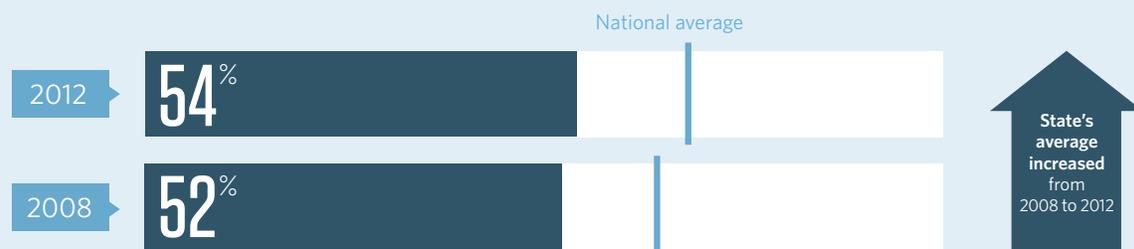


# California

## Elections Performance Index

This profile reports important trends for California that emerged from the 2012 update to The Pew Charitable Trusts' Elections Performance Index, or EPI. The EPI analyzes 17 key indicators of election administration and scores each state's performance by indicator and overall. For more information and to view the full interactive index, visit [www.pewstates.org/epi](http://www.pewstates.org/epi).

### Overall EPI Average\*



Key indicators	2008	2012
Mail ballots unreturned	16.2%	29.4%
Military and overseas ballots unreturned	37.3%	46%
Provisional ballots cast out of all ballots	5.8%	8.1%
Registration or absentee ballot problems	8.6%	9.4%
Voting information lookup tools	0 of 2	0 of 5

\*The overall EPI average is a simple average of all 17 indicators.

## Beyond the numbers

California's EPI average increased from 2008 to 2012 but at a rate below the national average. In 2008, 2010, and 2012, the state was among the five lowest-performing states, and one of only six states in the bottom 25 percent in all three years.

California did improve its average wait time to vote, which fell from nearly 14 minutes in 2008 to less than six minutes in 2012. The state also added online voter registration before the 2012 election, and by the end of that year, more than 900,000 Californians had used the system to register or update their information.

Declines on other indicators, however, overwhelmed these improvements. The increase in California's rate of provisional ballots cast was the second-highest in the nation. In 2008, the rate was already the country's fourth-

highest at 5.8 percent, and in 2012, when the state issued more than 1 million provisional ballots, the rate was 8.1 percent, the second-highest. California issues provisional ballots for many reasons:

- Almost 30 percent of the ballots requested by mail in California do not get cast, the highest rate in the nation. Any voter who requests a mail ballot but then shows up at the polls on Election Day without it is required to cast a provisional ballot.
- California allows any voter who shows up at the wrong polling place to cast a provisional ballot, but it is one of just two states in the country without a polling-place lookup tool on its state website to help voters get to the correct location.
- When California voters have a registration problem (e.g., if they moved within the same county and did not update their address or if their eligibility is called into question), they are issued a provisional ballot.

The state also had the largest jump in the rate of provisional ballots rejected. In 2012, more than 175,000 provisional ballots were rejected, equivalent to almost 1.4 percent of all ballots cast in the state, the third-highest rate nationwide.

As noted above, the state's rate of unreturned mail ballots was the highest among all states in 2012, when it jumped to 29.4 percent from 16.2 percent in 2008, the fourth-largest increase in the country. California has permanent mail voting: Any registered voter can choose to automatically receive mail ballots for all future elections.

## Room for improvement

California is one of only two states (the other was Vermont) in 2012 that offered no voting information lookup tools in 2012. Adding these tools would improve the accessibility of election information for Californians and improve the state's overall performance.

The state should also examine its rates of provisional ballots cast and rejected. Although there are many valid reasons why provisional ballots may be cast or rejected in California, upgrading voter registration lists by participating in data-sharing agreements, such as the Electronic Registration Information Center can help address these issues, allowing states to get accurate and more up-to-date information on voters who move or die, and to reduce the rate of provisional ballot use.<sup>1</sup> Participating in such data-sharing agreements also is one of the recommendations of the [Presidential Commission on Election Administration](#).

California also has high rates of rejected and unreturned ballots from military and overseas voters, and both increased between 2008 and 2012:

- The rate of military and overseas ballots unreturned rose from 37.3 percent in 2008, the fourth-highest in the country, to 46 percent in 2012, the nation's second-highest.
- The rate of military and overseas ballots rejected increased from 5.7 percent to 8.5 percent, among the 10 highest rates nationwide. State administrators may need to evaluate how they communicate with this population and whether they provide enough time for military and overseas voters to receive and submit their ballots.

Finally, California should pay significant attention to the prevalence of nonvoting due to problems with registration and absentee ballots. The state had the fifth-highest rate on this indicator in 2012. More research is needed to understand why this is the case and how the issue may be addressed administratively.

## Endnote

- 1 Gary Bland and Barry C. Burden, *Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC): Stage 1 Evaluation; Report to The Pew Charitable Trusts* (Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International), [http://www.rti.org/pubs/eric\\_stage1report\\_pewfinal\\_12-3-13.pdf](http://www.rti.org/pubs/eric_stage1report_pewfinal_12-3-13.pdf).

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### For further information, please visit:

[pewstates.org/epi](http://pewstates.org/epi)

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**Contact:** Stephanie Bosh, officer, communications

**Email:** [sbosh@pewtrusts.org](mailto:sbosh@pewtrusts.org)

**Project website:** [pewstates.org/elections](http://pewstates.org/elections)

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