



March 15, 2017

The Honorable Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher  
California State Capitol, Room 2114  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**RE: Assembly Bill 216 - SUPPORT**

Dear Assembly Member Gonzalez Fletcher:

The California Voter Foundation (CVF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to improving the voting process to better serve voters, is pleased to support your bill, AB 216, which, if enacted, would require election officials to provide vote-by-mail voters with a return envelope for their ballot with the postage pre-paid.

In the November 2016 election, CVF's research found that at least eight counties provided paid postage to all of their vote-by-mail voters. Three of these counties – Alpine, Sierra and Plumas – are “all vote-by-mail” counties where all voters are placed in precincts of 250 people or less and thus are not provided with a local polling place voting option. The five other counties – San Francisco, San Mateo, Marin, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz – are all located in or near the San Francisco Bay Area and provided paid postage to all vote-by-mail voters, including those who also had a local polling place option. It is my understanding that of these five counties, San Francisco has made it a long-standing practice to cover postage while the other four counties made this policy change in the past one or two years.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, the California Legislature enacted Senate Bill 450, giving counties the option to implement a new voting model, where all registered voters are automatically sent a vote-by-mail ballot, and neighborhood polling places are eliminated and replaced with regional, county-wide vote centers and ballot drop-off locations. The new law does not require counties to provide paid postage to voters. It is our understanding that counties do provide postage-paid envelopes to voters who are placed in all vote-by-mail precincts and do not have access to local polling places; whether counties provide this same courtesy to voters who no longer have polling places but do have regional vote centers they can utilize remains to be seen.

Research conducted in 2014 by Dr. Mindy Romero with the UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project found that California's young and Latino voters are much less likely to vote by mail. Dr. Romero's research found that in 2012, a little over one-third of 18-23 year olds voted by mail, compared to nearly

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<sup>1</sup> See this news release from Santa Clara explaining why the county made this change:  
<https://www.sccgov.org/sites/rov/Resources/Pages/Press%20Releases/PR-2015-08-06.aspx>.

two-thirds of voters aged 64 and over. Among Latinos, 37 percent voted by mail in 2012, compared to 49 percent of all voters statewide.<sup>2</sup>

These findings indicate that young people and Latinos may have more difficulties transitioning to the SB 450 model. Providing paid postage is one way to help voters overcome reservations about voting by mail. A recent experiment in King County, WA with paid postage in a special election found turnout in the two jurisdictions that conducted the election rose above the predicted 30 percent turnout to 37 and 40 percent. The local election administrators attributed this higher-than-expected turnout to the use of pre-paid mail ballot envelopes.<sup>3</sup>

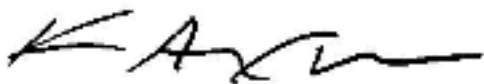
Paid postage may sound like a small thing but it can be a big deal to voters. Polls have found younger Americans are less likely to use the postal service at all, causing the agency to conduct targeted advertising and outreach programs designed to attract more young people.<sup>4</sup> Young Californians may simply not have ready access to postage stamps, which may be one reason why they are less frequent users of vote-by-mail ballots.

Another challenge voters face is knowing the correct amount of postage to affix. With our lengthy ballots and numerous propositions, a “ballot” is often several ballot cards, requiring additional postage. A 2014 CVF experiment found that two different USPS employees working *in the same post office, side by side at the same counter*, instructed a voter to put varying amounts of postage on a Sacramento vote-by-mail ballot and envelope. Counties reportedly do set up “fail-safes” with local post offices to cover any missing postage but they are not required by state law to do so and voters typically don’t know such fail-safes exists (counties do not advertise them). If the postage is paid by the county, voters will no longer have to worry whether they have put a sufficient amount on their envelopes.

Additionally, not covering postage costs may be perceived by some as a “poll tax” and sends a message that the government is putting up barriers, rather than facilitating, the voting process. This perception is likely to be heightened if counties implement SB 450 and eliminate local, neighborhood polling places.

Thank you for introducing this important bill. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at 916-441-2494 or at [kimalex@calvoter.org](mailto:kimalex@calvoter.org).

Sincerely,



Kim Alexander  
President

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<sup>2</sup> See “Disparities in California’s Vote-by-Mail Use: Changing Demographic Composition, 2002-2012”, March 2014: <http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/projects/ccep-issue-brief-one-disparities-in-californias-vote-by-mail-use-changing-demographic-composition-2002-2012> .

<sup>3</sup> See “Stamp of Approval” in Electionline, March 2, 2017:  
<http://www.electionline.org/index.php/2017/2132-electionlineweekly-march-2-2017>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-postal-youth-idUSBRE91J1BA20130220> .