

YOU ONLY VOTE ONCE
Elections Integrity in Yolo County
May 9, 2022

ABSTRACT

Yolo County continues to provide a secure and accurate voting process.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

Our U.S. democracy is supported by the active engagement of citizens during periodic voting processes. It is a public goal to have children and new citizens be aware of the importance of voting, and how such actions support the smooth transition of power from one individual to another over time. Public education and substantial media coverage are often used to ensure that the U.S. population is aware of the importance of voting and when key election dates will occur. Maintaining the integrity and accuracy of the voting process is necessary to maintain public confidence in this vital piece of the American democratic process.

The U.S. Constitution empowers each state in the Union to run its own elections process. Voters may participate either in person on established election dates or through submitting mail-in-ballots to specified locations and during specified periods. In recent years, and perhaps in part fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, mail-in ballot methods have increased by which voters submit their votes.

The prior 2019-20 Yolo County Grand Jury (YCGJ) addressed the important issue of election security, concluding that:

“...the quality, security, and transparency of work performed by the Yolo Elections Office met the requirements of California Election codes. Furthermore, the Yolo Elections Office ensured that the public had many opportunities to observe the election process in action by advertising those opportunities by way of multiple platforms. The office went beyond minimum requirements to increase voting opportunities for Vote by Mail drop-offs and same day voter registration. The Grand Jury also found that the Yolo Elections staff interfaced and trained with a variety of local, state, and federal election and security entities and organizations to improve County election security and cybersecurity.”

Based on its findings from investigations during that term, the 2019-20 Yolo County Grand Jury recommended that a public-domain disaster response plan should be available for the Yolo Elections Office. As of April 13, 2022, we are still waiting for the County to implement this recommendation.

After receiving a complaint alleging improprieties at our County Elections Office in 2020, the 2021-22 Yolo County Grand Jury decided to investigate our county elections process and evaluate its integrity.

This time, the 2021-22 YCGJ was pleased to find that our County carried out its electoral duties with award-winning dedication, professionalism, and meticulous adherence to state and federal guidelines during the timeline alleged in the complaint. We have found no evidence of inappropriate behavior by any member of the County Elections Office, and can therefore only make a general commendation regarding the integrity of our voting system. The purpose of the remainder of this report is to consider the outstanding issues raised by the previous grand jury, such as the request for a public viewing of a disaster response plan, even in advance of a county-wide department-by-department plan.

APPROACH

The 2021-22 Yolo County Grand Jury conducted this investigation through a number of parallel strategies including: conducting interviews of Yolo County employees; collection of citizens' reports of election monitoring; conducting unannounced site visit to the Elections Office; reviewing of newspapers and online news media; and reviewing of publicly-accessible county, state, and federal websites and guidelines.

DISCUSSION

The 2021-22 Yolo County Grand Jury investigation found a well-organized Elections Office (office). We can confirm this is an efficient voting system that invites expanded participation by all eligible voters and opportunities for citizens to monitor its operations. The office was inspected during a grand jury unannounced visit on January 4, 2022. The grand jury found clean and efficient facilities, meticulously organized supplies, and enthusiastic staff who engaged with the public in person, over the phone, and via internet portals. We inspected the Agilis ballot scanning and sorting machine, the Hart ballot tabulation machine, and their electronic and physical security measures. We learned that in the 2020 general election, approximately 120,000 ballots were cast in Yolo County, of which fewer than three percent were referred for a curing process to verify the identity of the voter. No single case of voting fraud was found. This office follows state and national guidelines for training its staff to collect, verify, tabulate and secure ballots, and to maintain the voter roll.

FACTS

1. Yolo County uses both electronic and physical security measures to assure the integrity of our elections process.

2. Yolo County uses a state-of-the-art ballot tabulation and sorting machine that is produced and monitored by a state-certified vendor and that does not connect to the internet.
3. Physical security measures include having tamper-resistant ballot drop boxes bolted to the ground, signature verification procedures, and at least two trained county employees present at every step of the elections process, such as when emptying ballot drop boxes.
4. Election observers are welcomed at many points in the process.
5. Maintenance of the voter roll is a continuous process that follows the guidelines of the California Secretary of State and of the National Voter Registration Act.
6. Yolo County elections staff keep its websites updated and continuously seek to engage with the public regarding voting rights, registration to vote, and the elections process in general.
7. The Yolo County elections office mailed all active and inactive registered voters a Living Location/Address Confirmation postcard on Friday, March 11, 2022.
8. Yolo County Elections Office won the EAC Clearinghouse Award for Best Practices in Election Administration for outstanding innovations in elections on January 31, 2020.

FINDINGS

- F-1 The Yolo County Elections Office is an exemplary administrator and guardian of our democratic electoral mechanism. Its employees are dedicated to the provision of a comprehensive and transparent mechanism for the citizens of our country to participate in elections.
- F-2 We have found no evidence of systemic or other significant fraud in our county elections since at least 2001.
- F-3 The Yolo County Elections Office has not published a departmental emergency response plan, as the YCGJ 2019-20 had recommended.

RECOMMENDATION

- R-1 Yolo County Elections Office should prepare a departmental summary of an emergency response plan that is appropriate to release to the public by October 1, 2022.

COMMENDATION

Yolo County Elections Office deserves congratulations for its efforts at keeping our democracy safe from potential fraud using state-of-the-art technology and practices.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05 the Grand Jury requests responses from the Yolo County Registrar of Voters for Finding F-3 and Recommendation R-1.