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California Elections - Why the Wait? - Testimony

Thank you Chair, and committee members. My name is Austin Gilbert and I am a campaign field operative and consultant, and have run numerous campaigns over the last decade in the Central Valley and High Sierras in California. I have dealt with elections offices and officials during counting procedures, ballot curing operations, and recounts across 13 different counties, and have been a resident of Fresno County, California for my entire life.

California elections can be described in one word - slow. Over the last decade, California has prioritized voter access over efficiency, effectiveness, and safety. Inundating election officials with time consuming verification and sorting processes, security flaws, and a reliance on mail for voting. With the passage of the Voter's Choice Act in 2016, California changed from the traditional in person precinct voting, to the new method of vote centers, drop boxes, and mail in voting. This process was designed to be slow from the beginning. To start, State Law mandates that any election official accept and count ballots postmarked on or before election day, and received within 7 days of the election. This immediately slows results from being disclosed to the public, as election offices do not even receive an accurate count of total votes until most of the nation has finished counting.

The centralization of the election process from precincts to vote centers and the elections office, has also complicated the ballot sorting process. Specifically within Fresno County, we typically deal with upwards of 300-500 different ballots types. That being, any ballot with different contests included on it. While in years past, you would vote at a precinct of your neighbors and there were very limited numbers of unique ballot types, vote centers are now required to provide every single unique ballot as any voter can vote at any vote center. You can imagine, it is a lot easier to sort 2-3 different ballot types in one location than between 500 in one centralized vote center.

California also has an extremely arduous signature verification process. One that relies heavily on human interaction, and interpretation of handwriting. While most states verify identity before voters receive a ballot, California sends ballots out to every voter, and verifies the signature after the ballot has been returned. This process of signature verification usually works in three steps: ballots are received in the elections office and scanned for a signature, the signature is compared to the voter's signature on file, and the ballot is either accepted and opened, or denied. At the point of denial, a 'ballot cure' form will be sent to the voter so they have a chance to correct their missing or non-matching signature. While in theory this sounds simple, in practice it becomes the most complicated process in administering an election.

In the days following an election, you can often see thousands of ballots in one room at different stages of the ballot verification process, including: ballots that have yet to be verified, ballots that are waiting on cure forms, ballots that have been accepted and are being separated from

the envelope, provisional ballots awaiting verification, and conditional voter registration forms. All of this, before elections officials can even flatten, sort, and count to provide results to the public. There are also multiple deliveries of different ballots types to the elections office on election night from ballot boxes across the county, vote centers, and USPS. All of these added steps and processes revolve around the signature verification process, which is largely done by temporary workers and elections employees inside of the county warehouse.

It is important to compare this to the original process, where voters would sign next to their name in a precinct, it would be verified and that voter crossed off the list from their specific precinct, and a ballot would be issued. Now, rather than just sorting ballots, the elections office is single-handedly tasked with the entirety of the verification, sorting, and counting process.

California also does not maintain clean voter roles. In many counties across the state, voters are tasked with updating the elections office on changes to their registration, including if a relative dies or no longer lives in the state. In many instances, households would receive ballots for members of their family that were recently deceased or no longer live there. While that is a massive security concern, it also adds to the extremely high cost of administering elections in the State. In virtually every elections office, you can ask to see their 'undeliverable' ballots, which usually surpass the thousands. These ballots are ones the USPS couldn't verify an address for, or were returned to the elections office for a number of reasons. With the price of paper, printing, and postage, you can imagine this amounts to a massive cost.

Complicated verification processes, ballots still being received up to a week after election night, the ability of voters to cure ballots 28 days after an election, and messy voter roles have led to one of the slowest, and most costly, election processes in the nation. The prioritization of voter access has led to a lack of speed, security, and diminishing trust in California elections in the last decade. Thank you.