

Assembly Bill No. 2530

CHAPTER 906

An act to amend Sections 3019, 14310, 15101, 15320, and 15350 of the Elections Code, relating to elections.

[Approved by Governor September 30, 2014. Filed with
Secretary of State September 30, 2014.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 2530, Rodriguez. Ballot processing.

Existing law requires an elections official to compare the signature on the envelope of a vote by mail ballot, a mail ballot precinct ballot, or a provisional ballot with the signature that appears on the voter's affidavit of registration, as specified. If the elections official determines that the signatures do not compare, existing law requires that the ballot be rejected, as specified.

This bill would provide that if a vote by mail ballot, mail ballot precinct ballot, or provisional ballot is processed using signature verification technology that determines the signatures do not compare, the elections official is required to visually examine and verify that the signatures do not compare before rejecting the ballot. By imposing additional duties on local elections officials, this bill would impose a state-mandated local program.

This bill would incorporate additional changes to Section 15101 of the Elections Code proposed by SB 29, to be operative only if SB 29 and this bill are both chaptered and become effective January 1, 2015, and this bill is chaptered last.

The California Constitution requires the state to reimburse local agencies and school districts for certain costs mandated by the state. Statutory provisions establish procedures for making that reimbursement.

This bill would provide that, if the Commission on State Mandates determines that the bill contains costs mandated by the state, reimbursement for those costs shall be made pursuant to these statutory provisions.

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

SECTION 1. Section 3019 of the Elections Code is amended to read:

3019. (a) Upon receipt of a vote by mail ballot, the elections official shall compare the signature on the identification envelope with either of the following to determine whether the signatures compare:

(1) The signature appearing on the voter's affidavit of registration or any previous affidavit of registration of the voter.

(2) The signature appearing on a form issued by an elections official that contains the voter's signature, that is part of the voter's registration record, and that the elections official has determined compares with the signature on the voter's affidavit of registration or any previous affidavit of registration of the voter. The elections official may make this determination by reviewing a series of signatures appearing on official forms in the voter's registration record that have been determined to compare, that demonstrates the progression of the voter's signature, and makes evident that the signature on the identification envelope is that of the voter.

(b) In comparing signatures pursuant to subdivision (a), the elections official may use the duplicate file of affidavits of registered voters or facsimiles of voters' signatures, provided that the method of preparing and displaying the facsimiles complies with the law.

(c) (1) If upon conducting the comparison of signatures pursuant to subdivision (a) the elections official determines that the signatures compare, he or she shall deposit the ballot, still in the identification envelope, in a ballot container in his or her office.

(2) If upon conducting the comparison of signatures pursuant to subdivision (a) the elections official determines that the signatures do not compare, the identification envelope shall not be opened and the ballot shall not be counted. The cause of the rejection shall be written on the face of the identification envelope.

(d) The variation of a signature caused by the substitution of initials for the first or middle name, or both, shall not be grounds for the elections official to determine that the signatures do not compare.

(e) In comparing signatures pursuant to this section, an elections official is authorized to use signature verification technology. If signature verification technology determines the signatures do not compare, the elections official shall not reject the ballot unless he or she visually examines the signatures and verifies that the signatures do not compare.

(f) A ballot shall not be removed from its identification envelope until the time for processing ballots. A ballot shall not be rejected for cause after the identification envelope has been opened.

SEC. 2. Section 14310 of the Elections Code, as amended by Section 1 of Chapter 611 of the Statutes of 2009, is amended to read:

14310. (a) At all elections, a voter claiming to be properly registered, but whose qualification or entitlement to vote cannot be immediately established upon examination of the index of registration for the precinct or upon examination of the records on file with the county elections official, shall be entitled to vote a provisional ballot as follows:

(1) An elections official shall advise the voter of the voter's right to cast a provisional ballot.

(2) The voter shall be provided a provisional ballot, written instructions regarding the process and procedures for casting the provisional ballot, and a written affirmation regarding the voter's registration and eligibility to vote. The written instructions shall include the information set forth in subdivisions (c) and (d).

(3) The voter shall be required to execute, in the presence of an elections official, the written affirmation stating that the voter is eligible to vote and registered in the county where the voter desires to vote.

(b) Once voted, the voter's ballot shall be sealed in a provisional ballot envelope, and the ballot in its envelope shall be deposited in the ballot box. All provisional ballots voted shall remain sealed in their envelopes for return to the elections official in accordance with the elections official's instructions. The provisional ballot envelopes specified in this subdivision shall be a color different than the color of, but printed substantially similar to, the envelopes used for vote by mail ballots, and shall be completed in the same manner as vote by mail envelopes.

(c) (1) During the official canvass, the elections official shall examine the records with respect to all provisional ballots cast. Using the procedures that apply to the comparison of signatures on vote by mail ballots pursuant to Section 3019, the elections official shall compare the signature on each provisional ballot envelope with the signature on the voter's affidavit of registration or other signature in the voter's registration record. If the signatures do not compare or the provisional ballot envelope is not signed, the ballot shall be rejected. A variation of the signature caused by the substitution of initials for the first or middle name, or both, shall not invalidate the ballot.

(2) Provisional ballots shall not be included in any semiofficial or official canvass, except upon: (A) the elections official's establishing prior to the completion of the official canvass, from the records in his or her office, the claimant's right to vote; or (B) the order of a superior court in the county of the voter's residence. A voter may seek the court order specified in this paragraph regarding his or her own ballot at any time prior to completion of the official canvass. Any judicial action or appeal shall have priority over all other civil matters. A fee shall not be charged to the claimant by the clerk of the court for services rendered in an action under this section.

(3) The provisional ballot of a voter who is otherwise entitled to vote shall not be rejected because the voter did not cast his or her ballot in the precinct to which he or she was assigned by the elections official.

(A) If the ballot cast by the voter contains the same candidates and measures on which the voter would have been entitled to vote in his or her assigned precinct, the elections official shall count the votes for the entire ballot.

(B) If the ballot cast by the voter contains candidates or measures on which the voter would not have been entitled to vote in his or her assigned precinct, the elections official shall count only the votes for the candidates and measures on which the voter was entitled to vote in his or her assigned precinct.

(d) The Secretary of State shall establish a free access system that any voter who casts a provisional ballot may access to discover whether the voter's provisional ballot was counted and, if not, the reason why it was not counted.

(e) The Secretary of State may adopt appropriate regulations for the purpose of ensuring the uniform application of this section.

(f) This section shall apply to any vote by mail voter described by Section 3015 who is unable to surrender his or her unvoted vote by mail voter's ballot.

(g) Any existing supply of envelopes marked "special challenged ballot" may be used until the supply is exhausted.

SEC. 3. Section 14310 of the Elections Code, as amended by Section 3 of Chapter 497 of the Statutes of 2012, is amended to read:

14310. (a) At all elections, a voter claiming to be properly registered, but whose qualification or entitlement to vote cannot be immediately established upon examination of the index of registration for the precinct or upon examination of the records on file with the county elections official, shall be entitled to vote a provisional ballot as follows:

(1) An elections official shall advise the voter of the voter's right to cast a provisional ballot.

(2) The voter shall be provided a provisional ballot, written instructions regarding the process and procedures for casting the ballot, and a written affirmation regarding the voter's registration and eligibility to vote. The written instructions shall include the information set forth in subdivisions (c) and (d).

(3) The voter shall be required to execute, in the presence of an elections official, the written affirmation stating that the voter is eligible to vote and registered in the county where the voter desires to vote.

(b) Once voted, the voter's ballot shall be sealed in a provisional ballot envelope, and the ballot in its envelope shall be deposited in the ballot box. All provisional ballots voted shall remain sealed in their envelopes for return to the elections official in accordance with the elections official's instructions. The provisional ballot envelopes specified in this subdivision shall be of a color different than the color of, but printed substantially similar to, the envelopes used for vote by mail ballots, and shall be completed in the same manner as vote by mail envelopes.

(c) (1) During the official canvass, the elections official shall examine the records with respect to all provisional ballots cast. Using the procedures that apply to the comparison of signatures on vote by mail ballots pursuant to Section 3019, the elections official shall compare the signature on each provisional ballot envelope with the signature on the voter's affidavit of registration or other signature in the voter's registration record. If the signatures do not compare or the provisional ballot envelope is not signed, the ballot shall be rejected. A variation of the signature caused by the substitution of initials for the first or middle name, or both, shall not invalidate the ballot.

(2) (A) Provisional ballots shall not be included in any semiofficial or official canvass, except under one or more of the following conditions:

(i) The elections official establishes prior to the completion of the official canvass, from the records in his or her office, the claimant's right to vote.

(ii) The provisional ballot has been cast and included in the canvass pursuant to Article 4.5 (commencing with Section 2170) of Chapter 2 of Division 2.

(iii) Upon the order of a superior court in the county of the voter's residence.

(B) A voter may seek the court order specified in this paragraph regarding his or her own ballot at any time prior to completion of the official canvass. Any judicial action or appeal shall have priority over all other civil matters. A fee shall not be charged to the claimant by the clerk of the court for services rendered in an action under this section.

(3) The provisional ballot of a voter who is otherwise entitled to vote shall not be rejected because the voter did not cast his or her ballot in the precinct to which he or she was assigned by the elections official.

(A) If the ballot cast by the voter contains the same candidates and measures on which the voter would have been entitled to vote in his or her assigned precinct, the elections official shall count the votes for the entire ballot.

(B) If the ballot cast by the voter contains candidates or measures on which the voter would not have been entitled to vote in his or her assigned precinct, the elections official shall count only the votes for the candidates and measures on which the voter was entitled to vote in his or her assigned precinct.

(d) The Secretary of State shall establish a free access system that any voter who casts a provisional ballot may access to discover whether the voter's provisional ballot was counted and, if not, the reason why it was not counted.

(e) The Secretary of State may adopt appropriate regulations for the purpose of ensuring the uniform application of this section.

(f) This section shall apply to any vote by mail voter described by Section 3015 who is unable to surrender his or her unvoted vote by mail voter's ballot.

(g) Any existing supply of envelopes marked "special challenged ballot" may be used until the supply is exhausted.

SEC. 4. Section 15101 of the Elections Code is amended to read:

15101. (a) Any jurisdiction in which vote by mail ballots are cast may begin to process vote by mail ballot return envelopes beginning 29 days before the election. Processing vote by mail ballot return envelopes may include verifying the voter's signature on the vote by mail ballot return envelope pursuant to Section 3019 and updating voter history records.

(b) Any jurisdiction having the necessary computer capability may start to process vote by mail ballots on the seventh business day before the election. Processing vote by mail ballots includes opening vote by mail ballot return envelopes, removing ballots, duplicating any damaged ballots, and preparing the ballots to be machine read, or machine reading them, but under no circumstances may a vote count be accessed or released until 8 p.m. on the day of the election. All other jurisdictions shall start to process vote by mail ballots at 5 p.m. on the day before the election.

(c) Results of any vote by mail ballot tabulation or count shall not be released before the close of the polls on the day of the election.

SEC. 4.5. Section 15101 of the Elections Code is amended to read:

15101. (a) Any jurisdiction in which vote by mail ballots are cast may begin to process vote by mail ballot return envelopes beginning 29 days before the election. Processing vote by mail ballot return envelopes may include verifying the voter's signature on the vote by mail ballot return envelope pursuant to Section 3019 and updating voter history records.

(b) Any jurisdiction having the necessary computer capability may start to process vote by mail ballots on the 10th business day before the election. Processing vote by mail ballots includes opening vote by mail ballot return envelopes, removing ballots, duplicating any damaged ballots, and preparing the ballots to be machine read, or machine reading them, but under no circumstances may a vote count be accessed or released until 8 p.m. on the day of the election. All other jurisdictions shall start to process vote by mail ballots at 5 p.m. on the day before the election.

(c) Results of any vote by mail ballot tabulation or count shall not be released before the close of the polls on the day of the election.

SEC. 5. Section 15320 of the Elections Code is amended to read:

15320. Vote by mail ballots and mail ballot precinct ballots returned to the elections office and to the polls on election day that are not included in the semifinal official canvass phase of the election shall be processed and counted during the official canvass in the manner prescribed by Chapter 2 (commencing with Section 15100) and pursuant to the requirements of Section 3019.

SEC. 6. Section 15350 of the Elections Code is amended to read:

15350. Provisional ballots cast pursuant to Section 14310 shall be processed and counted in accordance with the provisions outlined in Chapter 2 (commencing with Section 15100) and pursuant to the requirements of Sections 14310 and 14311.

SEC. 7. Section 4.5 of this bill incorporates amendments to Section 15101 of the Elections Code proposed by both this bill and Senate Bill 29. It shall only become operative if (1) both bills are enacted and become effective on or before January 1, 2015, (2) each bill amends Section 15101 of the Elections Code, and (3) this bill is enacted after Senate Bill 29, in which case Section 4 of this bill shall not become operative.

SEC. 8. If the Commission on State Mandates determines that this act contains costs mandated by the state, reimbursement to local agencies and school districts for those costs shall be made pursuant to Part 7 (commencing with Section 17500) of Division 4 of Title 2 of the Government Code.