



## **SANTA CRUZ COUNTY Civil Grand Jury**

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# **Election Integrity**

## **An Indispensable System Working Well**

### **Summary**

Because many aspects of election integrity continue to be questioned and re-examined by residents, state legislatures, and the federal government, the 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury felt it was important to once again review how the County of Santa Cruz assures the integrity of elections.

The Civil Grand Jury defines “election integrity” as an intricate system of safeguards that ensure that every person who is eligible to vote can vote freely and without unreasonable constraints; a system where all ballots are accurately counted and reported; and a system with process controls that prevent persons who are ineligible to vote from registering and voting.

There have been no known cases of voter fraud in the County (see: [The Heritage Foundation](#)).<sup>1</sup> And, over the past 50 years, no election has been challenged in the County of Santa Cruz. These facts suggest that the Elections Department in County of Santa Cruz is a textbook example of election integrity.

This time the Civil Grand Jury asked: do our county elections department and election officials do everything within their administrative powers to protect and maintain election integrity?

The 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury finds the answer is a resounding YES.

## Background

In the County of Santa Cruz, the [Elections Department](#)<sup>2</sup> is responsible for the integrity of elections held within the County. The department oversees all aspects of all elections and is led by the County Clerk who is an elected official.

In accordance with California state law, the Elections Department maintains the voter roll and prepares the ballot for each election. They distribute mail-in ballots to each registered voter. They recruit staff to work at the polls. They receive and count the ballots and they report election results.

The County Elections Department is also responsible for the content on the website [votescount](#). This site provides clear information to County residents, as well as to registered voters, on the processes for registering to vote, how to vote, and where to vote. The website has also reported the results of County and presidential elections since the year 2000.

This Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) defines “election integrity” as being an intricate system which provides safeguards that ensure every person who is eligible to vote, can vote freely and without unreasonable constraints; a system where all ballots are accurately counted and reported; and a system with process controls that prevent persons who are ineligible to vote from registering and voting.

Despite administrative processes and laws, the possibility of election fraud is always present and has occurred in California. [The Heritage Foundation](#) maintains a national voter fraud database that covers the past 44 years (1982—2025), and over those 44 years, only 1,176 cases of proven election fraud nationwide are reported. Over the same 44 years, more than 1.3 billion votes have been cast in presidential elections alone.

The Heritage Foundation data also shows [71 convictions](#)<sup>3</sup> of election fraud in California. While the State has approximately 11% of the nation’s eligible voters, these 71 convictions represent only 6% of all convictions nationwide. And, of note, there have been zero cases of election fraud convictions in the County of Santa Cruz over those 44 years.

## Who Can Vote: Election Integrity vs. Voter Suppression

Election integrity and voter suppression are different concerns. Election integrity means that the process of voting within a jurisdiction is protected, sound, and based on the laws in existence at the time of the specific election. Voter suppression is defined as systemic political interference in voting, with the goal of changing the criteria for how, who, where or when residents can register to vote and cast a ballot in an election.

It must be noted that under the U.S. Constitution, elections and voting are not controlled by the federal government, and voting is not a federal duty. (For more details, see: [State Legislatures Decide: Federal Election Laws](#)).<sup>4</sup> Nationwide, the laws that govern elections are written and enforced by each state. In California, those laws are designed to make voting as accessible as possible, while maintaining appropriate verification and process controls to ensure all voters and all ballots meet the letter of the law.

While residents and registered voters can have confidence in how elections are held and reported in the County of Santa Cruz, many aspects of election integrity are currently under scrutiny and being questioned by some state legislatures and the federal government. Changes to who is eligible to register and vote, which documents are required to register, and how and where voters can vote (e.g. by mail or in-person) have been enacted in various jurisdictions and changes have also been proposed at the federal level.

These efforts are often put forth as election integrity measures but have instead caused voter suppression by discouraging registration and voting. For example: in 2011, Kansas passed laws intended to better ensure election integrity. Research shows that the laws did more to suppress voter registration rather than finding fraud (New York Times, *Should You Need to Prove Citizenship to Vote?* [Ask Kansas](#)<sup>5</sup> March 24, 2026).

At the federal level, both the [SAVE act](#)<sup>6</sup> (see also: [Vote.org](#)<sup>7</sup>) and [Executive order #14399](#)<sup>8</sup> (see also: [The American Prospect](#)<sup>9</sup>) propose changes to the criteria for how, who, where or when residents can register to vote and cast a ballot in an election. These efforts have been criticized as flawed because they would require an ID showing citizenship. A California Real ID does not show citizenship. Nation-wide at least 28 million citizens of voting age do not have an ID or other document that shows their citizenship. (See: [TSA.gov](#)<sup>10</sup> and [The Bipartisan Policy Center](#).<sup>11</sup>) Additionally, a law that requires an ID that a voter had to pay for could be considered a “poll tax”. The [24th Amendment](#)<sup>12</sup> of the U.S. Constitution specifically outlaws [poll taxes](#)<sup>13</sup>.

## Investigation and Methodology

The Jury conducted interviews with agency officials, longtime observers of the local political process, and individuals representing varied constituencies and political parties. We reviewed Elections Department documents and election manuals and attended poll worker training. We also surveyed the Elections Department’s local website, state and national voter-related websites, including the [California Secretary of State](#)<sup>14</sup> website for elections and the Bipartisan Policy Center’s webpage title “[How Every State Protects Your Vote in 2026](#).”<sup>15</sup>

To further expand our understanding, we reviewed CGJ reports on elections written by past juries in Santa Cruz County: [2016-2017 Every Vote Counts](#)<sup>16</sup> and [2019--2020 Voter Data](#). We also reviewed CGJ reports written by [Sonoma County 2023](#),<sup>17</sup> [Sutter County 2023](#), and [Orange County 2024](#).

Finally, Jurors put their boots on the ground and served as poll workers for the November 2025 election.

California election laws are designed to make voting as accessible as possible, while maintaining appropriate controls to ensure that unqualified persons do not vote. In Santa Cruz County, that tenet has been upheld election after election. The Elections Department has proven that they maintain accurate voter rolls, secure each ballot, and accurately report election results.

Elections in Santa Cruz County are run fairly and conscientiously. The Jury identified several procedures and safeguards that help maintain election integrity and, as importantly, minimize the likelihood of fraud or systemic errors, including:

- The County conducts comprehensive audits of the voter roll before and after every election, cross-checking voter registrations with state and County records such as death records and DMV records. After the roll has been updated, ballots are mailed only to voters whose names have been verified.
- The Elections Department recruits, trains, and supervises poll workers for each election. Many poll workers return election after election, which helps provide the County with an experienced pool. In-person, hands-on training for new and returning poll workers is required before each election. Printed materials are provided to each poll worker, and a detailed manual is at each polling place as a reference for all poll workers.
- Each day the polls are open, in-person support for poll workers is provided by County staff who rotate through each polling place to answer and troubleshoot any questions poll workers or voters may have.
- The procedures for opening and closing each polling place are carefully delineated in the polling manual.
- Collecting and delivering ballot boxes to the County Offices for official counting is always done by at least two poll workers to assure the integrity and maintain a chain of custody.
- "Voting machines" in Santa Cruz County are voter aids only. The machines do not record or count votes. Each voter who chooses to use a voting machine at a polling place receives a printed copy of their marked ballot. After printing their ballot, the voter must review and verify their ballot. The ballot must be deposited into the polling place ballot box by the voter.
- Ballot counting is a public process. Anyone can watch the count as it happens at the County Election office every election evening after the polls officially close.

- Every signature on every mail-in ballot is verified by machine scan at the Election Office. Signature verification of any rejected ballot includes a second scan and a visual review by at least two Elections Department staff members. Rejected ballots constitute less than .001% of ballots in each election cycle.

These processes are systematically carried out before, during, and after each election by the Elections Department. The processes have proven to be time-tested safeguards that protect the integrity of elections in the County. Therefore, the Jury confidently concludes that voter fraud is not an issue in Santa Cruz County.

A critically important aspect of maintaining the integrity of the election processes noted above is the Elections Department's access to adequate space for records retention and management. The Jury finds that the Elections Department faces growing space constraints. In order to continue to meet all records retention requirements, an annual review of current space use and longer-term space needs should be conducted by the Elections Department and reported to the County Board of Supervisors.

## **Conclusion**

Most voters who have exercised their right to vote have probably never considered the breadth and depth of preparation and effort required to run an election. As the Jury investigated the Elections Department and followed along in the election process, from voter registration through the reporting of election results, we were consistently impressed by the layers of protection and redundancy built into the system. We were also impressed by the personal efforts of the Elections Department staff to ensure and safeguard the integrity of the vote. The Department's commitment, dedication and attention to detail are beyond reproach.

While the broader, politicized claims of election fraud show no signs of abating in the near future, the Jury is convinced that all residents of Santa Cruz County should have faith in the integrity, reliability, and commitment of the County's Elections Department, the integrity of the ballot security and the ballot counting process, and the reported results of our County elections.

## Findings and Recommendations

**Required Respondent: Santa Cruz County Clerk**

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**Finding 1.**

Judicious legal procedures and safeguards protect the integrity of elections in the County of Santa Cruz, resulting in accurate ballot counting and election results reporting.

**Finding 2.**

The Civil Grand Jury learned that County “voting” machines are only voter aids, but there is little public information describing how to use a County “voting” machine or how they work, which can cause the public to be skeptical about the veracity of the machines.

**Recommendation for Findings 1 & 2**

The Civil Grand Jury requests that the Elections Department expand their website to better educate County residents, voters, and the media by:

- a) by highlighting and specifying the procedures and safeguards the Department uses to maintain election integrity.
- b) including information on how “voting machines” work; clearly noting that the machines do not record how a voter voted nor do the machines count votes.

**Due Date:** To be completed and published by October 31, 2026.

**Finding 3.**

Space needed to meet the legal requirements of records retention is constrained because the Elections Department has limited space.

**Recommendation for Finding 3.**

The Civil Grand Jury recommends that the County Clerk annually review the space needs of the Elections Department and report those needs to the County Board of Supervisors.

**Due Date:** February 27, 2027, and synchronized annually thereafter with the Department’s budget request.

**Required Respondent: Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors**

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**Finding 3.** Space needed to meet the legal requirements of records retention is constrained because the Elections Department has limited space.

**Recommendation for Finding 3:** The Civil Grand Jury recommends that the County Board of Supervisors annually review the space needs report of the Elections Department and work with the Elections Department to ensure they have the space needed to meet the legal requirements of records management and retention.

**Due Date:** March 31, 2027, and synchronized annually thereafter with the Department’s budget request.

### Commendation

This is the third Civil Grand Jury report on elections in Santa Cruz County over the past decade (2016-2017 and 2019-2020). Like those past Juries, the 2025-2026 Jury sets a high bar when issuing commendations, noting that the performance of an agency must far exceed due diligence and expectations.

We commend the Elections Department for providing unfettered access to the staff and resources needed to conduct this investigation. This Jury also commends the Santa Cruz County Elections Department for its ongoing efforts supporting the integrity of elections and voting rights in Santa Cruz County through:

- Staff and volunteer training
- Providing mail-in ballots for all registered and verified voters
- Maintaining a robust website that is a useful public resource

In closing, we quote the 2019-2020 Civil Grand Jury and once again, [we] commend ... Santa Cruz County Elections Department for their exemplary performance of one of the most complex and indispensable functions of local government—the democratic process of voting.

## Endnotes

1. The Heritage Foundation (n.d.). *Election Fraud Map*. <https://electionfraud.heritage.org/>
2. Santa Cruz County Elections Department (n.d.) <https://votescount.santacruzcountyca.gov/>
3. Heritage Foundation reported convictions in California (n.d.) *Explore the Data* <https://electionfraud.heritage.org/search?state=ca>
4. Olson, G. (2025, June 9). *The States Decide How Elections are Run*. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/the-states-decide-how-elections-are-run>
5. Hippensteel, C. (2026, March 24). *Should You Need to Prove Citizenship to Vote? Ask Kansas*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/24/us/politics/proof-of-citizenship-voter-registration-kansas.html>
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7. *The SAVE Act: What Every American Needs to Know*. (n.d.) Vote.org. <https://www.vote.org/save-act/>
8. Executive order #14399: *Ensuring Citizenship Verification and Integrity in Federal Elections*. (2026, March 31). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/03/ensuring-citizenship-verification-and-integrity-in-federal-elections/>
9. Gurley, G. (2026, April 6). *Voter Suppression, Executive Order Style*. The American Prospect. Ideas, Politics & Power. <https://prospect.org/2026/04/07/trump-voter-suppression-executive-order-14339-citizenship-post-office/>
10. *Real ID FAQs*. (n.d.). Transportation Security Administration. <https://www.tsa.gov/realid/realid-faqs>
11. Orey, W. & Adler, W.T. (2026, March 16). *Do Documentary Proof of Citizenship Disadvantage One Party More Than the Other?* The Bipartisan Policy Center. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/article/do-documentary-proof-of-citizenship-requirements-disadvantage-one-party-more-than-the-other/>
12. *24<sup>th</sup> Amendment*. (n.d.). U.S. Constitution. <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-24/>
13. *Abolition of Poll Taxes*. National Constitution Center. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments/amendment-xxiv>
14. California Secretary of State. <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/>
15. Adler, W.T., et al. (2026, February 6). *United in Security: How Every State Protects Your Vote in 2026*. Bipartisan Policy Center: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/united-in-security-how-every-state-protects-your-vote-2026/>
16. *Every Vote Counts*. (2017, June). Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury Reports. 2016-2017. [https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/Portals/0/County/GrandJury/GJ2017\\_final/EveryVoteCounts.pdf](https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/Portals/0/County/GrandJury/GJ2017_final/EveryVoteCounts.pdf)

*Voter Data – Registering Concerns.* (2020, June). Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury Reports 2019-2020. <https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/Departments/GrandJury/2019-2020GrandJuryReportsandResponses.aspx>

17. *Election Integrity in Sonoma County.* (2023, June). Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report: <https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/grand-jury/grand-jury-consolidated-final-report-2023-2024.pdf#page=5>

*Voter Integrity: Yay or Nay.* (2024, June). Sutter County Civil Grand Jury Report. <https://www.sutter.courts.ca.gov/system/files/general/final-report-2023-2024-sutter-county-grand-jury-filed-6-27-2024.pdf>

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