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A Response to Paul Gronke's blog,
"Measuring Turnout Effects of Vote
by Mail in California"

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I read Professor Paul Gronke's critique of a recent article of mine, "The Continuing Growth of Mail Ballot Voting in California in 2008," published in the *California Journal for Politics & Policy* (Volume 1, Issue 1) and feel compelled to respond. Gronke's critique was posted on the *Election Updates* blog, of which he is a collaborator <<http://electionupdates.caltech.edu/?p=2608>>.

In his critique Gronke asserts there are two problems with the analysis presented in my article. The first relates

to the relationship between the recent acceleration in the rate of mail ballot voting in California and the recent rebound in voter turnout in California between the 2000 and 2008 presidential elections. The second has to do with the significance of the higher turnout rate of voters who were sent mail ballots in the 2008 presidential election compared to those who were not.

It is curious that Gronke's critique fails to discuss the central thesis of the paper; i.e., that the introduction of permanent mail ballot registration in 2001 and its rapid growth has been a primary driver of the accelerated use of mail ballot voting in California over the past eight years.

Let me respond to Gronke by first taking issue with his assertion that there is no significance to the fact that California registered voters who were sent a mail ballot in the 2008 presidential election voted at a significantly higher rate than other registrants not receiving a mail ballot. In that election about 5.7 million of the approximately 6.7

million registered Californians issued a mail ballot voted in the 2008 election, a turnout rate of 84.9%. By contrast, of the approximately 10.5 million registered Californians not issued a mail ballot, about 8.0 million voted, for a turnout rate of 75.9%.

Gronke discounts the significance of this by stating that: (1) "it is impossible to conclude anything from a single year," and (2) "*excluding those on permanent absentee rolls* (emphasis added), those requesting absentee ballots have already indicated a strong preference to actually vote," and that because of this, "you can't compare these voters to those who are just registered to vote who have made no positive action toward casting a ballot."

The problem with Gronke's second statement is that relatively few Californians who received a mail ballot in 2008 needed to take any action to obtain their ballots. This is because only 822,000 of the estimated 6.7 million Californians who were sent a mail ballot in 2008 were voters who needed to request that a ballot be sent to them for this election. All others, including the state's nearly 5.6 million permanent mail ballot registrants, were automatically sent a ballot without having to take any action at all. Thus, his claim that "you can't compare these voters" to those "who made no positive action toward casting a ballot" does not apply, since a voter's permanent mail ballot status said nothing about that voter's interest in or motivation for voting in the 2008 election.

Nor is there any evidence that the differences in the turnout rates of mail ballot recipients to those not receiving a mail ballot were unique to the 2008 election. In my review of the last three statewide elections in which detailed data about the number of Californians sent mail ballots is available, the turnout rates of those receiving their ballots in advance of the election exceeded that of all other voters by significant margins. This includes elections with a very high turnout rate like November 2008, a very low turnout rate like the May 2009 special election, as well as a more moderate turnout election in November 2006.

As my paper notes, the growth in mail ballot voting in California has been a long-term trend that dates back to when state election laws were changed in 1979 to allow any voter the right to vote in this fashion. Yet, prior to the introduction of a permanent mail ballot registry, there was no positive correlation between the steady increase in the number of Californians choosing to vote by mail and voter turnout in statewide elections. In fact, the reverse appeared to be true. For example, as the number of mail ballot votes cast in California presidential elections climbed from 367,000 in 1976, when mail ballots accounted for just 4.5% of the total votes cast, to 2.7 million in 2000, when 24.6% of all votes were cast by mail, turnout actually declined from 81.5% to 70.9% of the registered voter population.

Following the 2000 election, state law was changed to permit any California voter the option of becoming a

permanent mail ballot registrant. This resulted in a huge number of registered voters completing the necessary paperwork to put themselves on this registry in a relatively short period of time. By the time of the 2008 presidential election the number of Californians choosing this alternative had grown from just 279,000 in 2000, representing 1.8% of the state's registered voters, to nearly 5.6 million, or nearly a third (32.2%) of all registered voters.

The dramatic increase in the number of Californians who have become permanent mail ballot registrants raises a number of interesting questions for political science besides the turnout issues that Gronke seems so intent on dismissing.

For example, what are the reasons behind California voters' desire to have their voting ballots automatically be sent them by mail four weeks before each election? Will the rapid growth in the number of Californians choosing to become permanent mail ballot registrants continue at its current pace or will it subside in upcoming years? The state has held three special statewide elections (in 2003, 2005, and 2009) since the introduction of the permanent mail ballot registry. Has the greater frequency of statewide elections served as an additional stimulant to voters in wanting to automatically be sent their ballots four weeks before each election?

The intent of my article was to provide *Journal* readers with a descriptive account of a fairly significant

change in the way California registered voters choose to receive their ballots. The fact that the period in which an increasing number of California voters chose to become permanent mail ballot registrants coincides with a rebound in California voter turnout in the next two presidential election cycles adds but one more question to the mix for political scientists to ponder and debate.