



WILDFIRE AND ELECTIONS IN CALIFORNIA

Case Study, 1 September 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Like other natural disasters, wildfires can have sudden calamitous impacts on communities, destroying buildings, damaging infrastructure and displacing populations. In this chapter we examine the Californian wildfires occurring from September 2015 to November 2018 to assess their effect on two electoral cycles in the state (2016 and 2018), and to study how electoral practitioners cope with these challenges in a developed democratic setting. We thus consider the impact of these events on electoral management, campaigning and voter choices in a period before Covid-19 vastly complicated the US electoral administration context. We seek to establish how electoral officials grappled with the challenges posed by fires, and what lessons can be drawn from their experience.

California's wildfires were an example of a long-term and migrating disaster rather than a single hit in a given location. The analysis will assess whether the responses from election officials changed in any way over the two-year period, by time and location. The research for this case study was conducted through desk studies and a survey distributed in first quarter 2022 to all 58 county election officials in California, to which there were 15 respondents. As there were no international election observers, such reporting was not available for research and analysis in this context.

Risk management, resilience-building and crisis-management are three approaches that election stakeholders can use in dealing with disasters (Alihodžić 2021). The United States takes an unusually fragmented and decentralized approach to electoral administration, which makes risk management strategies challenging. None of the Californian election

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authorities studied here had undertaken comprehensive risk management in advance of the elections. While that might have reduced the likelihood of wildfires occurring, such risk management will therefore not be within the scope of this case study.

By contrast, resilience-building is on the increase in the US. In 2017, the United States Electoral Assistance Commission (EAC) developed comprehensive six-step guidelines to help electoral administrators envisage the impacts of human-caused and natural disasters and undertake contingency planning (EAC 2017), which includes elements of resilience-building and of crisis management. These guidelines are not binding, and their applications vary with the jurisdiction, but as detailed below, many Californian counties have introduced contingency plans in recent years. Crisis-management advice in the EAC guidance includes practices relating to staffing, communications, dealing with logistical challenges and liaising with emergency services (EAC 2017). Many of these suggestions have been implemented by Californian counties.

BACKGROUND (LEGAL PROVISIONS)

In order to have comparable voting data from county to county, the focus of this case study is on national-level contests, which include presidential, senatorial and congressional elections in 2016 and senatorial and congressional elections in 2018.

Primary elections in California are held approximately five months before general elections. The US is unusual among democracies in asking (but not requiring) voters to select a party affiliation when they register to vote. Californian voters can vote in the presidential primary of the party for which they are registered. The US has two main political parties—Democrats and Republicans—with other political organizations playing very marginal roles. The Green, Libertarian, Peace and Freedom and American Independent parties are also active in California. Unaffiliated voters can choose which primary to vote in, if the party allows this (which the Democrats do but the Republicans do not).

Crisis-management advice in the EAC guidance includes practices relating to staffing, communications, dealing with logistical challenges and liaising with emergency services.

Electoral system

Presidential primaries use a simple-majority electoral formula. For the election of seats in the US Senate and House of Representatives, California operates a 'Top Two Candidates Open Primary' system in which all candidates are listed on a single ballot and voters select one name. The top two candidates then advance to the general election. Primary elections are conducted by public electoral authorities, rather than by the parties themselves.

The US president is chosen indirectly through an Electoral College whose members ('electors') are allocated to states according to population. In California, electors are elected through an at-large majoritarian formula, whereby the candidate who wins the largest number of votes in the state

sweeps all the seats. At the time of the 2016 election, California held 55 Electoral College seats, the largest number in the country. The winner of the presidential contest is decided by the Electoral College according to an absolute majority formula. The presidential term is four years and can be renewed only once.

The US Senate is composed of two senators from each state. Senators are elected on a staggered basis for terms of six years. The elections, which are conducted state-wide, are decided by simple majority, although California's Top Two Candidates Open Primary system means that a 50 per cent + 1 vote is effectively delivered. There is no limit to the number of terms a US senator can serve.

The number of seats in the US lower chamber—the House of Representatives—allocated to each state is decided on the basis of the decennial population census. In 2016 and 2018, California had 53 congresspeople of 435 in the chamber as a whole. They are elected for terms of two years (with no term limits) according to the same electoral system as senators.

National-level elections are held in early November on the same day as state, regional and local elections. The US system of electoral administration is unusually decentralized: the national-level Federal Election Commission (FEC) and Election Assistance Commission serve as watchdog and advisory bodies that play little role in the running of elections on the ground. Elections in California are overseen by the state-level Secretary of State and administered by the counties. In March 2020, the Governor of California identified election personnel as an essential critical infrastructure workforce (California State Government 2022).

Registration and postal voting

US electoral administration is also unusually politicized (Norris et al. 2019), especially since the 2020 presidential election (Sullivan and Stewart III 2022). The result is that electoral integrity is lower there than in the vast majority of developed democracies, with California ranking 23rd out of the 50 US states in a 2016 analysis (Norris et al. 2019). When trust in electoral authorities is fragile, even entirely innocent and unintended disruptions to electoral processes can arouse suspicions (Norris et al. 2019). This is all the more reason why wildfires and other natural hazards represent a threat not only to the smooth running but also to the integrity of elections in the US context.

Since September 2016, California has maintained a centralized voter registration database, VoteCal, that contains voter registration data for the state's 58 counties. Voters can register and update their registration information on the VoteCal website. Counties each maintain their own Election Management Systems (EMS) to register voters and update voter information (Secretary of State of California, n.d.a). Same-day voter registration was available for the first time in 2018 (Center for Election Innovation and Research n.d.).

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California was in 1978 the first US state to introduce postal voting on demand ('no-excuse mail-in voting' in US parlance) (Waxman 2020). In-person early voting was available in 2016 and 2018 at all county election offices; some states also set up satellite polling stations for this purpose (Secretary of State of California 2016a). Under the 2016 Voter's Choice Act, which came into effect on a trial basis for the 2018 elections, all eligible electors in selected counties in California were automatically sent a ballot by post. They could then return the ballot by the same means; alternatively, they could deposit it in a drop box or bring it to an in-person early voting centre (Center for Election Innovation and Research n.d.). California did not in either of these elections require identification to be shown at the polling station, except for first-time voters who had not supplied sufficient identification when they registered to vote. In the elections considered here, most people voted by mail. In the 2016 primary election the proportion was 58.9 per cent and 57.8 per cent in the general. In 2018, 67.7 per cent voted by mail in the primary and 65.3 per cent in the general (Secretary of State for California n.d.b).

Mail-in voting became highly controversial at the time of the 2020 election (Sullivan and Stewart III 2022), but already in 2016 and 2018 there were hints of discontent with a practice that had by then been used successfully in the state for four decades. After winning fewer votes than his opponent in the 2016 election, president-elect Donald Trump claimed that his failure to secure a popular mandate was due to fraud, citing California as a state where malpractice was likely to have taken place; yet the Californian Secretary of State, the president of the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials and the president of the California Voter Foundation all categorically denied that there had been any significant degree of misconduct in the elections (Nichols 2016). Several weeks after the 2018 election, Republican congressman and House Speaker Paul Ryan insinuated that California's mail-in voting system may have been used to illicit ends, including the harvesting of votes cast on mail-in ballots (Wong 2018). An editorial in the Los Angeles Times refuted allegations of vote-harvesting but noted that the practice of allowing party operatives to handle postal votes was nevertheless 'concerning', as it could in theory facilitate vote harvesting (Los Angeles Times 2018).

TYPE OF HAZARD AND ELECTIONS

Wildfires are one of the climate change effects expected to be observed with increasing frequency in many drier areas of the world. As stated in the sixth 2022 IPCC report, climate change is a catalyst for wildfires:

In the Amazon, Australia, North America, Siberia, and other regions, wildfires are burning wider areas than in the past. Analyses show that human-caused climate change has driven the increases in burned area in the forests of western North America. Elsewhere, deforestation, fire suppression, agricultural burning, and short-term cycles like El Niño can exert a stronger influence

than climate change. Many forests and grasslands naturally require fire for ecosystem health, but excessive wildfire can kill people, destroy homes, and damage ecosystems.

– Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaption, and Vulnerability' (2022: 2-57)

The study projects that with a 4-degree Celsius warming, the net increase in wildfires would be 30 per cent. The study also reveals that wildfires as natural hazard are claiming more vegetated areas as a result of increasing temperature, aridity and drought. In the western part of the United States, the areas burned by wildfire beyond natural levels doubled between 1984 and 2018 (IPCC 2022:2-66). Burned areas have increased in the Amazon, Arctic, Australia, and parts of Asia and Africa. Wildfires also generate up to one third of global ecosystem carbon emissions, and up to two-thirds in major fire seasons (IPCC 2022:2-62).

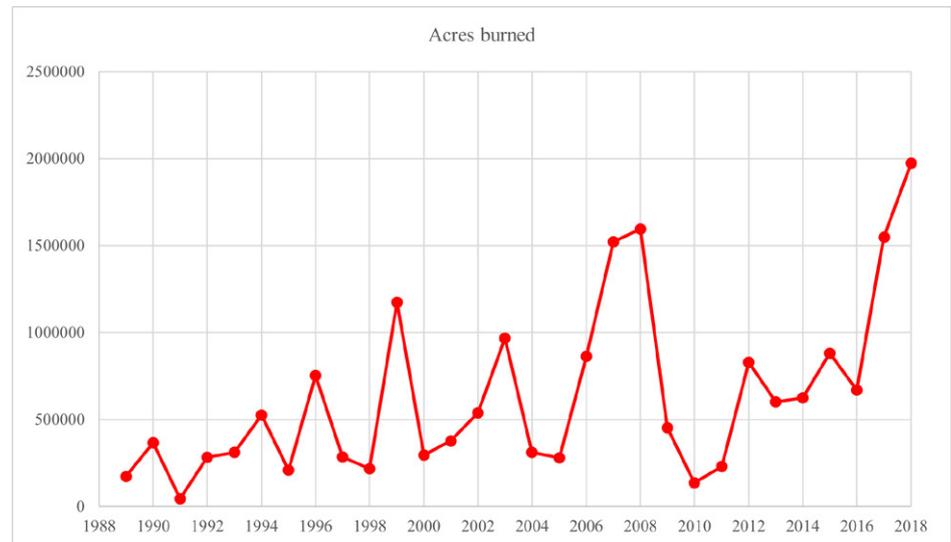
Wildfires are already a chronic problem in California, affecting many thousands of acres and dozens of communities each year. In this sense their impact on elections is different from that of many other natural hazards, as they can be anticipated and prepared for by procedural and behavioural means. While California has long been vulnerable to wildfires, their incidence, severity and impact on communities has increased dramatically in recent years. By the 2000s, the Western US wildfire season was 2.5 months longer than it had been in the 1970s and large, long-duration fires had increased fourfold due to earlier snowmelt, temperature changes, and drought consistent with the known effects of climate change (National Research Council 2010). Moreover, there has been an especially marked increase in autumn fires, bringing the fire season closer to the early November election period (Goss et al. 2020). This trend has been linked to climate change, and a further increase in fires is expected in future years (Westerling et al. 2011). Figure 1 plots the number of acres burned in California for the three decades up to 2018. As can be seen from these data, there is a stark upward trend.

Wildfires affect most areas of the state, as shown in Figure 2, which maps the 104 major fires (burning over 5,000 acres each) that broke out between 2015 and 2018. The fire season starts in late June, after the California primaries, which were spared the disruption caused by contemporaneous fires. In 2016 there were 12 major fires in the three months leading up to the November general election, and in 2018 there were 15.

In addition to climate change, the risk to Californian communities has been exacerbated in recent years by increased numbers of people living on what fire scholars term the 'wildland-urban interface'—in other words, areas at the edge of human settlements where people are most likely to be affected by conflagrations (Brenkert-Smith et al. 2006). The 2018 Camp Fire that started on 8 November, two days after voters went to the polls, was the deadliest fire California had ever experienced, killing 85 people and destroying 18,804 structures. The 2017 Tubbs Fire was the fourth most lethal on record, leading

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Figure 1. Territory affected by wildfires in California by year, 1989–2018



Source: Constructed from data in CalFire, 'California wildfires and Acres for all jurisdictions', n.d., <<https://www.fire.ca.gov/media/11397/fires-acres-all-agencies-thru-2018.pdf>> accessed 27 June 2022.

to the loss of 22 lives. The 2017 Redwood Valley and Atlas 2018 Car fires also rank in the top 20 most deadly fires in the state's history (CalFire n.d.c). Focusing on the 2015–2018 period under analysis here, Table 1 provides an indication of the magnitude of physical and social effects of fires between 2015 and 2018.

The survey of electoral administrators (described in detail in the next section) queried respondents about the following kinds of damage inflicted by the wildfires.

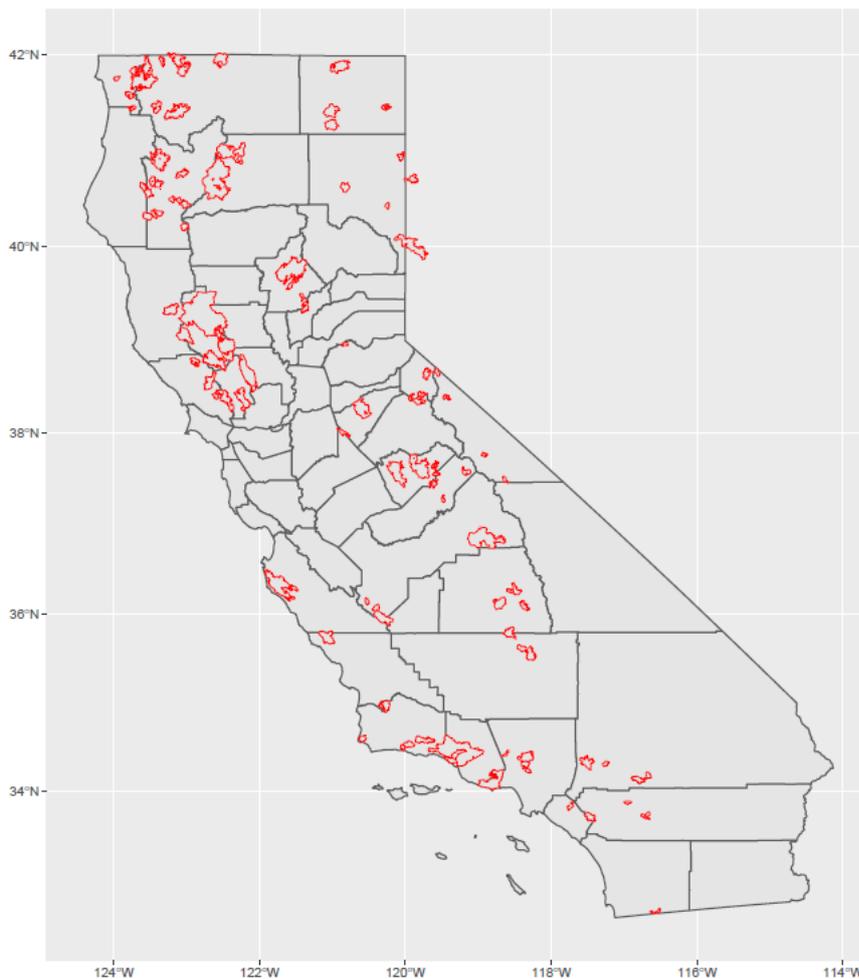
- Polling stations burned;
- Residences burned/voters displaced;
- Election materials burned;
- Shortage of poll workers;
- Air quality limiting movement of electoral officials and voters;
- Disinformation related to elections;
- Polling station conflicts because of overcrowding or other wildfire related factors;
- Difficulty keeping voter registries up-to-date with death rates;
- Electoral malpractice or perceptions of malpractice;
- Limitations posed to election observation; and
- Chemical and biological hazards, Communications failures, Electrical outages; and Technological failures affecting the electoral process.

For the 2016 electoral cycle, one respondent cited burned residences and voter displacement as the only impact of the wildfire on electoral infrastructure. For

Table 1. California fire statistics 2015–2018

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of fires	8,283	6,959	9,270	7,948
Acres burned (million)	0.88	0.67	1.55	1.98
Structures destroyed	3,194	1,274	10,868	22,905
Financial damage (billions USD)	3.06	0.15	12.14	4.08

Source: Data from CalFire 2016; 2017; 2018; n.d.a; n.d.b.

Figure 2. Major fires, 2015–2018

Source: California wildfires and acres for all jurisdictions', [n.d.], <<https://www.fire.ca.gov/media/11397/fires-acres-all-agencies-thru-2018.pdf>> accessed 27 June 2022.

the 2018 cycle, two respondents cited burned residences and voters displaced, and one cited polling stations having burned.

Enabling voting by people who have been affected by fires involves overcoming informational, logistical and psychological challenges. As California State Senator Anna Caballero notes: ‘The problem is, quite frankly, when you’ve lost everything—I gotta think the last thing you’re thinking about is voting. [...] We need to get the message out so voters know they have lots of options’ (in Mansoor 2020).

A number of different types of organizations have a role to play in this awareness raising. Electoral administrators can help by providing clear guidance designed to address the specific obstacles that voters face in the wake of a fire. Examples of how this might be done at state level include the fire-specific guidance offered by the states of California, Oregon and Washington, targeted at voters who have been displaced (Secretary of State for California 2020; Secretary of State for California 2021; Secretary of State for Oregon n.d.; Secretary of State for Washington n.d.). At the level of California counties, there are also examples of fire-specific information for voters, such as El Dorado County’s webpage with details of the locations of voting facilities and information on how to check voting status online (El Dorado n.d.).

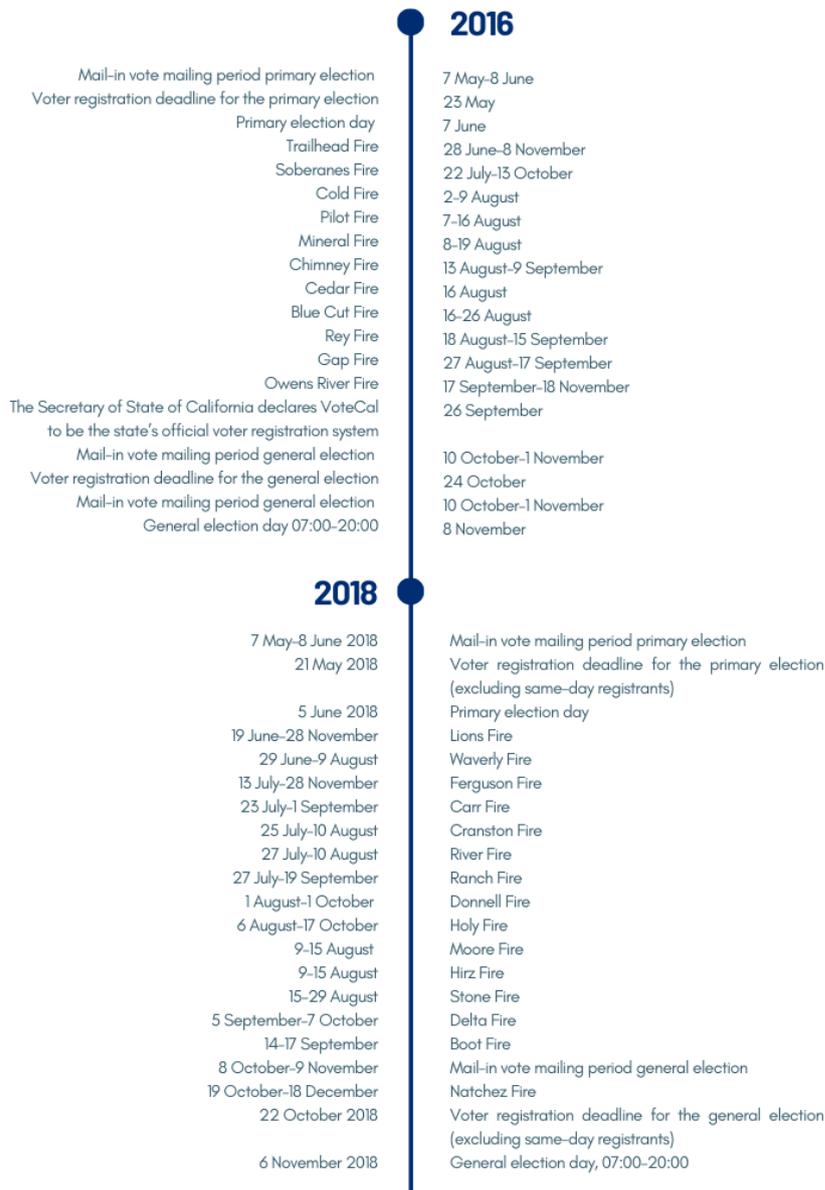
Voluntary sector organizations have played their part in helping fire-affected voters to exercise their franchise, by reaching out to ethnic minority groups (Mansoor 2020). The media have also risen to the challenge, offering detailed advice on voting provisions for those whose lives have been thrown into chaos by conflagrations (Nichols 2021). Part of the human dimension to the damage inflicted is the death toll, which was at least 31 in 2018, of which 29 were in the Camp Fire. In the same year an estimated 250,000 people were displaced from their homes by the wildfires. In the town of Paradise/Butte County, more than 6,700 homes and businesses were burned down (BBC 2018). Figure 3 provides a chronology of electoral events against the dates when the wildfires were active.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Enabling voting by people who have been affected by fires involves overcoming informational, logistical and psychological challenges.

The EAC has issued six tips for election authorities to follow when confronting the impact of natural disasters on elections (EAC 2017): 1) Identify possible disasters and create contingency plans; 2) Make certain you create a comprehensive contingency plan; 3) Have a plan for communications failures; 4) Develop a contingency plan for relocating polling stations; 5) Be sure to plan for staffing shortages; and 6) Have a plan for ballot shortages or technology failures.

For the 2016 electoral cycle, 87.5 per cent of respondents to the survey for this study indicated that they had developed wildfire contingency plans for the elections and followed at least one of the EAC guidelines. There were

Figure 3. Wildfires and Elections Chronology*

*Note: Includes only fires within three months of polling day.
Source: Secretary of State for California.

no election postponements in either the 2016 or 2018 electoral cycles. The guidelines followed and percentage reporting doing so are shown in Table 2.

In their contingency plans, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, King's, Madera, Los Angeles, Mariposa and Merced Counties all reported having provided staff (including those working the Vote Centres, and those providing technical and compliance support) with broadly standardized set of training programmes. These covered the operation and securing of the voting equipment, setting up

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a Vote Centre, assisting and processing voters, securing sensitive equipment each night, and the proper procedures in case of an emergency. Such standardized training may be provided in other counties as well.

Amador, Merced, Nevada and Tuolumne Counties referenced training for polling staff to deal with potential disruptions at Vote Centres and provided mobile telephones to poll staff to directly connect with the Registrar of Voters if necessary. Mobile telephones for poll workers were also provided by many reporting counties.

Voter Registration

For 2016, there were no special modalities for in-person registration at regular locations and 83.3 per cent of counties offered an online option. However, for 2018, 16.7 per cent of counties provided in-person registration at emergency locations and online registration became available in more (91.7 per cent) of the counties.

For 2016, 16.7 per cent of respondents indicated that a special application process was in place for voters displaced by wildfires, with 8.3 per cent involving interviews at county offices. Otherwise, there was no special process for 58.3 per cent of the respondents. Special application processes were reduced in 2018, but 33.3 per cent indicated that other processes were established.

For 2016, obituaries and hospital records were indicated as sources to identify deceased voters at 16.7 per cent and 8.4 per cent, respectively. For 2018, obituaries as sources increased to 25.0 per cent of respondents with hospital records increasing to 16.7 per cent and police records to 8.33 per cent.

After the 2016 and 2018 elections, many counties adopted contingency plans to manage the impact of wildfires for future voter registration. The Amador, Merced, Santa Clara and Ventura Counties contingency plans describe a provision that:

Table 2. Implementation of EAC Tips by Californian Counties 2016/2018

Tips	2016	2018
Identify possible disasters and create contingency plans	61.54% (8)	64.29% (9)
Make certain you create a comprehensive contingency plan	61.54% (8)	64.29% (9)
Have a plan for communications failures	46.15% (6)	50.00% (7)
Develop a contingency plan for relocating polling stations	69.23% (9)	71.43% (10)
Be sure to plan for staffing shortages	53.85% (7)	64.29% (9)
Have a plan for ballot shortages or technology failures	76.92% (10)	92.86% (13)

Vote Centre staff has access to the Election Information Management System (EIMS) to be able to determine if a voter is properly registered, whether the voter has received a ballot, whether the voter has returned a ballot, and what type of ballot to issue the voter (...) all laptops connected to the election management system will also be connected to VoteCal, the official statewide voter registration database managed by California Secretary of State. VoteCal will track voters across the state and notify vote centre staff if a voter is actively registered in another county and if the voter has received and/or returned a ballot in another county.

—Amador County Voter's Choice Act Election Administration Plan, 2021 revision, p. 10

Campaign period

Devastating wildfires have risen to prominence as election campaign issues in jurisdictions such as Australia (Chow 2019) and Greece (Vasilopoulos and Demertzis 2013). In California, major issues in the 2016 election campaign were housing, health and social protection (Paul 2016), and wildfires did not figure prominently. This changed in the 2018 campaign. In addition to inequality, housing, health and education, California's fires—and related issues such as forest management and utility liability—were debated at local, state and national levels (Dillon and Mejdrieh 2018; Lagos 2018; Tolan 2018).

Discussion revolved around both policy proposals and spending. The tempo of the debate increased when a pro-Democratic group pointed to the fact that Republican Congressman Tom McClintock had voted against post-wildfire assistance (Bowman 2018). The Congressman also cast doubt on anthropogenic climate change, even in the face of dramatic evidence from his locality; in response, opponents campaigned against him on the issue (Wildermuth and Garofoli 2018; Worland 2018). Republican President Donald Trump intervened with comments blaming California's recent fires on forestry management practices in the state, an allegation that was widely discredited by forestry experts (Fuller 2018) and criticized by California Democrats (Marinucci and Hart 2018). In 2018 State Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson (Democrat) nevertheless backed legislation to expand prescribed burns and introduce other forest management practices on both public and private lands (Lagos 2018).

California wildfire funding also gained legislative attention at the federal level on Capitol Hill in 2018. Confronted with a massive spread of wildfire as in California, to cover the costs the US Forest Service had resorted to a practice termed 'fire borrowing' where the Service extracts funding to combat the wildfire from other sources in its budget. This practice was prohibited by legislation taking effect in 2020 (Dillon and Mejdrieh 2018) compelling the Forest Service to seek other sources of emergency funding.

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VOTING OPERATIONS

In the survey responses from some counties, contingency plans describe procedures to follow for potential disruption of voting at vote centres or drop-off sites and provide signage and staff to direct people to an alternative location. Poll workers are to receive written instruction of emergency procedures. In some counties, emergency responders receive a list of all vote centre locations.

Disruptions may also result from electrical power failures. The Butte County plan states, 'for every election, the county provides a notification letter and list of facilities being used to the planned outage coordinator [...] In the event of a power failure, the power agency is asked to contact the Butte County Clerk-Recorder/Registrar of Voters or the Assistant County Clerk Registrar of Voters immediately to provide information on the outage. During the outage period, all voting system equipment shall be run under battery power until electrical services are restored. The county has purchased uninterruptable power supply (UPS) battery backups to be provided to Voter Assistance Center locations'.

UPS and battery backup are also described in contingency plans for other counties as well. San Bernadino County provide for different contingency actions depending upon the length and source of the disruption. For example, if the disruption is a power outage which lasts over 15 minutes, the voter will be directed to an alternative location. A list of such alternative locations is drawn up in advance of election day. If the electronic voting equipment goes down, the poll workers can continue voting through the issuance of paper ballots.

The Los Angeles County plan states:

If a Vote Centre is significantly disrupted, the election authorities will immediately deploy a Pop-Up Vote Centre. This Pop-Up Vote Center consists of staff and all the equipment needed to set up ePoll books and [Ballot Marking Devices]. Mobile voting units could be deployed to serve as supplemental or replacement voting locations.

– Los Angeles County Election Administration Plan, pp. 20-21

Mobile vote centres are referenced also in the Orange and Sonoma County contingency plans. However, Sacramento County evaluated the need for mobile vote centres and declined to pursue this option for the 3 March 2020 primary election or for 3 November 2020. This was due to concerns over cost and available staff to move, set-up and configure the required equipment.

Orange County takes a decentralized approach to managing disruptions in voting. Its contingency plan states:

During the voting period, election support personnel are located throughout Orange County, ready to respond to any incident.

These field personnel have replacement voting equipment and supplies and are trained to handle technical issues. The response time of these support personnel will typically be less than 15 minutes. Field personnel can also respond to loss of power at a vote centre location with mobile electric generators. Vote Centre staff have emergency contact information, including a dedicated helpdesk that can quickly resolve issues, or dispatch a member of the support team in the field

—Orange County 2017

To assure continuity of service Ventura County employs a system of redundancies (over-supply) for equipment, voter centre personnel, server and network, and voting supplies. The contingency plan also offers guidelines on how to deal with suspicious objects or persons. A number of counties include security measures in their plans also.

In summary, given the structure of US elections, the contingency planning is decentralized by county. While on the downside this results in a lack of consistency in approach, it can also be viewed as allowing counties to experiment with a range of potential solutions, enabling trial-and-error and peer learning.

Special voting arrangements

The survey results revealed the following responses (Table 3) about the use of special voting arrangements (SVAs) in the 2016 and 2018 electoral cycles.

With small variations, the use of SVAs remained fairly constant from 2016 to 2018: an expansion in response to the wildfires was not in evidence.

Coordination across jurisdictions/levels of government

The survey inquired whether the county election authorities had any coordination mechanisms with other county, state or federal agencies to enhance responses to wildfire threats. Table 4 shows the responses for 2016 and 2018.

For 2016, there were virtually no coordination activities with state agencies (Other – 2 responses). The only federal agencies where coordination was cited were the EAC and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. As a result, only 2018 responses are listed in the Balance in Table 5.

Informational environment

The survey inquired whether polling stations had been forced to close by wildfires and whether there was any special communications outreach to voters to inform them of the change. For 2016, 13 respondents (93 per cent) indicated that no special communication arrangements were made and one response each (15.4 per cent) indicated that the county website, Facebook, Instagram, other social media, conventional media, and postal notices had been used.

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Table 3. Special voting arrangements

Special voting arrangement	2016		2018	
	%	Responses	%	Responses
No SVAs were reported by	16.67%	2	20.0%	2
Absentee – Excuse	–	0	–	0
Absentee – No excuse	50.0%	6	50.0%	6
Early in-person	50.0%	6	60.0%	6
Mail-in ballots	75.0%	9	80.0%	8
Election day drive-up	33.33%	4	40.0%	4
Drop box	66.67%	8	70.0%	7
Mobile telephone	–	0	–	0
Internet	–	0	–	0
Other (please specify)	16.67%	2	–	0

In 2018, special communications activities increased, with two more counties reporting having used county websites, Facebook, Instagram, conventional media, and postal notices, and one each having used social media platforms and other means.

Table 4. Coordination with other jurisdictions/agencies

Agency	2016		2018	
	%	Responses	%	Responses
No county level coordination	33.33%	1	–	0
Fire Department	33.33%	1	75.0%	3
Sheriff – Coroner	66.67%	2	100.0%	4
County Counsel	33.33%	1	75.0%	3
District Attorney	–	0	24.0%	1
Environmental Health	–	0	50.0%	2
Health Service	33.33%	1	50.0%	2
Social Services	33.33%	1	50.0%	2
Other (please specify)	33.33%	1	25.0%	1

The survey reveals that the main voter education messages in 2016 focused upon describing any changes to polling station procedures (12 responses). There was one response each for messages concerning polling location changes, SVA availability and changes to voting procedures. The only case of misinformation messaging was noted by one county respondent and related to citing false claims of electoral malpractice in 2016.

In 2018, changes to polling station procedures remained the top voter education message (11 respondents, 85 per cent), followed by polling station changes and SVA availability and procedures by 15.4 per cent (2) each, and registering residential displacement and air quality notices on election day with one respondent for each (7.7 per cent).

As in 2016, 91.67 per cent (11) respondents reported no mis-disinformation messages and one respondent (8.3 per cent) reported messaging on false claims of electoral malpractice.

Orange County has developed an Incident Response Plan which can be used in the event of a cybersecurity incident, electrical power outage, or physical attack. The plan's communications flowchart (Figure 4) depicts how information will be disseminated to voters, staff, and media outlets during a disruption. Delegations of authority have been set to avoid misinformation and make policy or operational decisions as appropriate.

The plan identifies all critical processes required to administer an election. Each of these critical processes is analysed, and the technical dependencies for each of those processes are determined. For each of those technical dependencies, a recovery strategy is defined, including the restoration of required data. As an example, providing vote centre support is one of the many critical election processes identified. In order to provide support to vote centres, employees need access to a database with vote centre information and contact information. Therefore, the Incident Response Plan requires that there is a backup of that database and a strategy to be able to restore the data in a reasonable amount of time to continue operations.

Other procedural considerations

The survey respondents were asked if the impact of the wildfire prompted any legal, infrastructure or operational changes in 2016. Changes to the SVA legal framework were cited by one (10.0 per cent) respondent. There were no changes to infrastructure, and the operational change cited by three (30.0 per cent) of the respondents was the establishment of coordination mechanisms.

For 2018, changes to the SVA legal framework were cited by one (10.0 per cent) respondent. For changes to infrastructure, one respondent (11.11 per cent) cited the introduction of a crisis management protocol. Operational changes included an increase in coordination mechanisms by four respondents (40.0 per cent) and the development of a strategic communications capacity by one other respondent.

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Table 5. State and federal responses, 2018

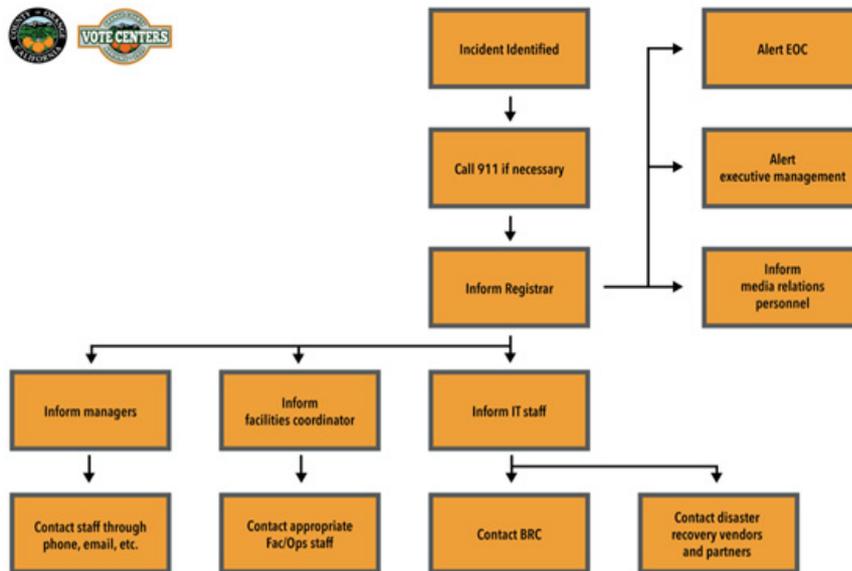
State	%	Responses
No state level coordination	–	0
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection	50.0%	2
California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force	25.0%	1
State and Regional Emergency Operations Centers	50.0%	2
County Police Department	25.0%	1
California Highway Patrol	25.0%	1
California National Guard	25.0%	1
California Conservation Corps	25.0%	1
Emergency Medical Services Authority	25.0%	1
California Department of Public Health	–	0
California Air Resources Board	25.0%	1
CalVolunteers	–	0
Other (please specify)	50.0%	2
Federal		
No federal level coordination	25.0%	1
Federal Emergency Management Agency	50.0%	2
Electoral Assistance Commission	50.0%	2
Disaster Survivor Assistance	–	0
Environmental Protection Agency	25.0%	1

In 2016, the survey revealed that no respondents reported additional election costs associated with the impact of the wildfire. However, in 2018, additional costs were reported by one response each (10.0 per cent) for facilities and training; and 20.0 per cent (2) for materials. Otherwise, 80.0 per cent (8) of the respondents reported no additional costs. There were no reports of EMBs being underfunded for either the 2016 or 2018 electoral cycle.

TURNOUT AND ELECTION RESULTS

Wildfires can potentially alter the choices that voters make when they go to the polls. Analysis of the electoral effects of wildfires in California have found that the experience of a fire is more likely to make voters in Democratic-dominated

Figure 4. Incident Response Plan, Orange County



Source: Orange County, California.

areas opt for pro-environmental local referendum (ballot initiative) options but has virtually no impact on Republican-dominated areas (Hazlett and Mildenerger 2020). Wildfires can also shift voters' policy preferences, which may have electoral consequences. Hui and colleagues find that fire experience makes Californian Republicans more willing to support spending public funds on fire resilience measures (Hui et al. 2021).

Certainly, Californians appear for the most part to be aware of the link between climate change and the severity of fires. According to a 2017 survey, 66 per cent made this connection (Marlon and Cheskis 2017). There is also evidence that wildfires increase both taxation and public spending in Californian municipalities (Liao and Kousky 2021), suggesting that local residents are keenly aware of their effects, even if they have not been directly impacted by fire damage.

The best way to analyse the impact of fires on vote choice is by examining bipartisan congressional contests, where we can compare average vote shares across districts and across time for the same party. This approach smooths out any possible impacts that candidate-specific factors might have. The Californian top two candidates open primary system means that not all general election contests are between the two main parties, but this was the case for 44 out of 53 congressional seats in both 2016 and 2018. In the 2016 election, Democratic candidates in such districts won on average 54.0 per cent of the vote where the district had been affected by one or more major fires that year,

Californians appear for the most part to be aware of the link between climate change and the severity of fires.

but 61.6 per cent in seats not affected in this way. In 2018, the party won 57.6 per cent in fire-affected districts and 64.4 per cent in those not affected.

On the face of it, this would seem to suggest that the recent experience of a wildfire might depress the Democratic vote. However, this conjecture would be somewhat misleading, as fires occur predominantly in rural and semi-rural areas which tend to have lower Democratic support anyway. The two-way fixed effects statistical method provides a way around this problem by controlling for both district- and election-specific effects and thereby allowing us to isolate the impact of fires on the vote.¹ Using this method, we find that in 2016 the Democratic vote was reduced on average by 2.4 percentage points in fire-affected seats, but that in 2018, there was no statistically significant difference in support for this party in seats affected by fires and those not affected. There is therefore only weak evidence that fires have a meaningful impact on voter choice in California.

It is also worth considering the possibility that wildfires might affect the proportion of the electorate that turns out to vote in California. There is limited research on the impact of wildfires on turnout, but one study found that wildfires that took place in California between 2006 and 2010 and were within 15 kilometres of an electoral precinct reduced turnout by approximately 1 per cent (Hazlett and Mildemberger 2020).

Turnout in the state was not far from the national average in either of the two years. In 2016, 58.7 per cent of Californians exercised their franchise (75.3 per cent of those registered to vote) against a national average of 60.2 per cent (Secretary of State of California 2016b); in 2018, 50.5 per cent of eligible electors turned out (64.5 per cent of those registered), while the national average was 50.3 per cent (Secretary of State of California 2018b).

Average turnout as a proportion of eligible electors in the 15 counties that experienced major wildfires in 2016 was 59.8 per cent, a figure almost identical to the 59.6 per cent mean turnout recorded in counties with no major fires that year. The 26 counties that experienced major wildfires in 2018 had turnout figures of 51.7 per cent on average that year, as against 52.9 per cent in counties with no major fires, hinting at the possibility that fires might have made people less likely to vote. Yet two-way fixed effects analysis of the sort described above does not find any statistically significant difference in turnout in either year, between counties that experienced major fires and those that did not. Similar analyses that break turnout down into participation by mail-in voters and that by in-person voters also fail to yield any significant differences between affected and non-affected counties in either year.

Although aggregate-level analysis of the sort offered here provides only a coarse approximation of the impact of wildfires on voting behaviour, there is little evidence that fires are having a major impact on whether or how

¹ In order to ensure comparability, two-way fixed effects regressions were run on one data set covering the 2012 and 2016 races, and a second data set based on the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Californians vote. Of course, if the frequency and intensity of fires increases in future, that could well change.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The United States has already begun to learn lessons from the increased frequency of wildfires, hurricanes and other natural hazards that are affecting the country, not to mention the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019 the Election Assistance Commission established a Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Working Group to encourage and guide states in establishing risk management and resilience strategies (EAC 2019). In addition, 2016 California state legislation requires county election officials to develop contingency plans to mitigate disruptions caused by natural disasters and other events. The main lesson from California's recent experience of wildfires is therefore that contingency planning can help to reduce election disruption in the wake of fires.

Given the likely increase in weather-related hazards in the years to come, the USA would benefit from moving its elections from November, which falls during the fire and hurricane seasons, to an earlier part of the year. However, this would require legislative action on the federal level and would impact the election calendar for the entire country, not solely California.

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Although aggregate-level analysis of the sort offered here provides only a coarse approximation of the impact of wildfires on voting behaviour, there is little evidence that fires are having a major impact on whether or how Californians vote. Of course, if the frequency and intensity of fires increases in future, that could well change.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The section on survey findings was researched and written by Jeff Fisher, who designed and carried out the survey of electoral administrators.

We would like to thank Hyowon Park, Electoral Processes Programme, International IDEA for her support with the survey.

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This case study is part of a collaborative project edited by Erik Asplund (International IDEA), Sarah Birch (King's College London) and Jeff Fischer (Georgetown University).

Design and layout: International IDEA



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