SUMMARY:

This bill requires a voter registration application to include a statement that a person’s signature on an identification envelope for the return of a vote by mail (VBM) ballot will be compared against signatures in the voter’s registration record.

FISCAL EFFECT:

One-time costs (General Fund) of $26,000 to the Secretary of State (SOS) in design and translation costs and to update the online voter registration system.

COMMENTS:

1) Purpose. According to the author:

AB 1619 would help address the high rejection rates for mismatched signatures by providing a reminder to individuals who are registering to vote that the signature they provide on their voter registration form, whether in electronic or paper form, will be used to verify their signature on the envelopes for any vote-by-mail ballots that they might cast in future elections.

2) Background. Since 2001, any voter in California could, if requested, vote by mail. During the pandemic, California mostly switched to VBM. AB 860 (Berman), Chapter 4, Statutes of 2020, required county elections officials to mail a ballot to every active registered voter for the November 3, 2020, statewide general election. SB 29 (Umberg), Chapter 3, Statutes of 2021, continued that policy for elections conducted in 2021, and AB 37 (Berman), Chapter 312, Statutes of 2021, made that policy permanent for future elections.

The overwhelming majority of California voters in statewide elections now vote using a VBM ballot. If the signature on a voter’s VBM ballot identification envelope does not match the signatures in that voter’s registration record or if the VBM ballot identification envelope is not signed, the county elections official must contact the voter to give the voter the opportunity to verify the voter cast the ballot. If the voter does not complete that verification process, the VBM ballot is ineligible to be counted. If that happens, the county elections official does not open the VBM ballot identification envelope or process the ballot in that envelope. Historically, the three most common reasons why VBM ballots are unable to be
counted are for mismatched signatures, missing signatures or missing the VBM ballot return deadline. According to the SOS, approximately 99.4% of VBM ballots cast in the November 2020 general election were counted; the lowest VBM ballot rejection rate since at least 2008. This was a significant improvement from the March 2020 primary election when 98.6% of VBM ballots cast were counted. Despite this low VBM rejection rate, the most common reason why completed VBM ballots were not counted was due to a non-matching signature between the VBM ballot identification envelope and the voter’s registration record. This bill seeks to better inform a VBM voter about how an elections official will verify a signature.

3) **Related Legislation.** AB 2608 (Berman) repeals various elections code sections related to VBM ballot applications and makes various conforming changes to reflect existing law that every active registered voter be mailed a ballot for every election in which the voter is eligible to vote. AB 2608 is pending in this committee.

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