



**PPIC**

PUBLIC POLICY  
INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA

FEBRUARY 2016

Eric McGhee  
Daniel Krimm

# Putting California's Voter Turnout in Context



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Turnout in California’s recent elections has hit record lows, prompting concern about the implications for the state’s democracy and encouraging many to think of ways the lack of participation might be turned around. To understand and address this challenge requires putting it in broader context. This short report identifies California’s turnout trends over time; separates them into presidential, midterm, and primary elections; examines the separate voting steps of registration and turnout; and places all of these numbers into comparative context with other states.

When seen in isolation, California has a turnout problem. Californians are registering at the same rates as before, but they are not following through and casting a ballot as often. This problem is mostly limited to midterm elections (both primary and fall general), though there is some evidence of a decline in presidential primaries as well. Fall presidential elections continue to draw voters as well today as they did 35 years ago. Thus, if we are concerned about turnout in California, midterm elections ought to be an area of special focus.

But compared to other states, California also has a registration problem. The registration rate has stayed flat in California but climbed elsewhere. California’s recent adoption of automated registration could radically reduce the administrative burden of registering to vote, but what remains will be the same motivational and logistical barriers that impede turnout among the registered.

To address this turnout issue, we briefly examine two possible policy changes discussed recently: 1) the “Colorado model” of voting, and 2) more robust and comprehensive civics education in school. Both demonstrate some promise of increasing turnout, but neither will be a silver bullet. The way forward will increasingly consist of efforts to mobilize already registered voters and get them to the polls.

# Introduction

California’s 2014 voter turnout hit record lows in both primary and general elections. This has prompted a great deal of concern about the potential causes of this low civic participation, where it is headed, and what can be done about it.

Unlike many other states, California has been working hard to make the voting and registration processes as easy as possible. Residents can register to vote online and submit a vote-by-mail ballot in every election. Mail ballots can even arrive slightly late—so long as they are mailed by Election Day and make it to the registrar within three days of the election. Some of the more significant changes to the registration system are yet to come. The state is poised to allow residents as young as 16 to “preregister,” to help automate the process of passing registrations through the DMV, and to enable any remaining unregistered citizens to sign up and cast a ballot after the traditional registration deadline has passed.

These efforts to improve voter turnout are important, but before we proceed further it is useful to step back and get a better sense of the nature and scope of the problem. We need to unpack overall turnout decline by different types of elections, and distinguish between enduring voter apathy and apathy toward specific elections.

Below we address some general questions about turnout in California that ought to be on the minds of everyone concerned about the issue:

1. Has turnout declined in all types of elections—presidential, midterm, and primary?
2. What role does declining registration play, as compared to declining turnout among those who are registered?
3. Are the answers to the first two questions different if we compare California to other states?
4. What are some future solutions we might adopt to address the turnout problem?

The answers to these questions create a more complex and nuanced portrait of voter turnout in California, and reveal insights into the nature of low turnout in recent years.

# Turnout by Election Type

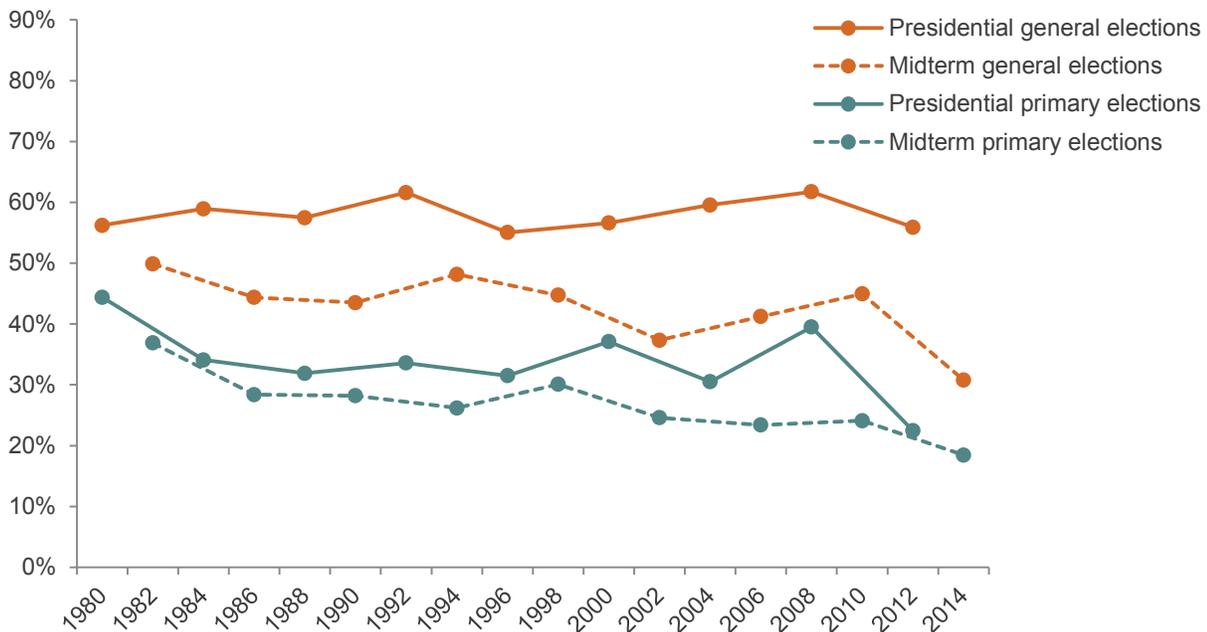
When predicting turnout in a given election, the most important thing to know is whether a presidential contest is on the ballot. Presidential elections receive vastly more media attention and voter interest than even the most contentious and high-profile contest for any other office or ballot measure. That in turn drives far more voters to the polls. At the other end of the spectrum, turnout for primary elections has tended to be weak because the options have usually been limited to candidates of the same party, thus sapping even a presidential primary contest of the excitement that comes from a battle of competing world views. Even in the last two primary elections in California, when the “top-two” system has placed candidates of all parties on the same ballot, the decisions in the primary stage have not determined the final winner and so have not received the same level of attention as a fall general election.

These distinctions are useful because if turnout decline is concentrated in certain types of elections, tepid campaigns or uninspiring candidates might be an important cause. At the very least, such a pattern would suggest there is more to the problem than mechanical demographic trends or broad dissatisfaction with government.

Figure 1 shows the share of California residents who voted over the past 35 years, splitting the trend into four types of elections: fall elections with a presidential race on the ballot; fall midterm elections when there is no presidential race but the state’s executive positions, such as governor and attorney general, are filled; and primary elections in both types of years.

**FIGURE 1**

Turnout decline among eligible Californians has been concentrated in midterm and primary elections



SOURCE: California Secretary of State.

NOTE: Graph shows turnout rate among Californians who are eligible to vote.

The graph makes clear that fall presidential contests do not fit the pattern of turnout decline. There was a modest decline up through about 1996, but in the years since, turnout in presidential elections has actually climbed more often than it has fallen. At any rate, there is no sign here of a disengaging electorate.

The same could not be said of primary elections or midterm general elections. Turnout in these races has fallen significantly. In midterm general elections, it has slid from about 50 percent in 1982 to 31 percent in 2014, and in midterm primaries from 36 percent to 18 percent. Turnout in California's gubernatorial races used to be about 10 percentage points lower than in the previous presidential race. That gap is now over twice as large.

Presidential primaries are a more ambiguous case. For most of this period, turnout in these primaries has not fallen at all. But the 2012 presidential primary suddenly produced a new low (23%), raising questions about whether this drop will persist in 2016 or whether turnout will return to the higher levels of the past.

## Registration versus Voting

The turnout trends in Figure 1 actually conflate two separate steps. Before they can vote, Californians must first confirm they are eligible by registering with their county registrar (eligibility is mostly a matter of citizenship).<sup>1</sup> Currently in California, registration must take place at least 15 days before the election, and whenever voters move, it is incumbent on them to reregister at their new address. Thus, potential voters must have the motivation and forethought to register before they can make any further voting decisions. And once they are registered they must still cast a ballot, which requires its own motivation and set of decisions.

These two steps are necessarily driven by similar factors, but they are different enough that they should be considered separately. Traditionally, changes in the registration rate are “sticky”—they occur slowly and persist over time. A relatively consistent voter who does not move never has to reregister, and even inactive voters are rarely removed from the registration list entirely. Turnout, by contrast, can fluctuate significantly over time as the same group of registered voters responds to the politics of the moment. Moreover, although voters who are registered but not voting are relatively disengaged from the current election, they have at least expressed a provisional interest in voting by making the effort to become registered. That means they might be more responsive to future efforts at mobilization.

On a more practical level, addressing the problem of low voter participation requires knowing the community one needs to target. If registration among eligible residents is falling, the problem lies mostly with young people not signing up at rates comparable to older generations. Remedies would focus on the process of registration itself. On the other hand, if turnout is falling among the registered population, it suggests that even those who at some point considered themselves likely to vote have become disengaged from the political process. Since there is no need to register them, reaching out to these voters and convincing them to participate becomes a much larger part of the solution.

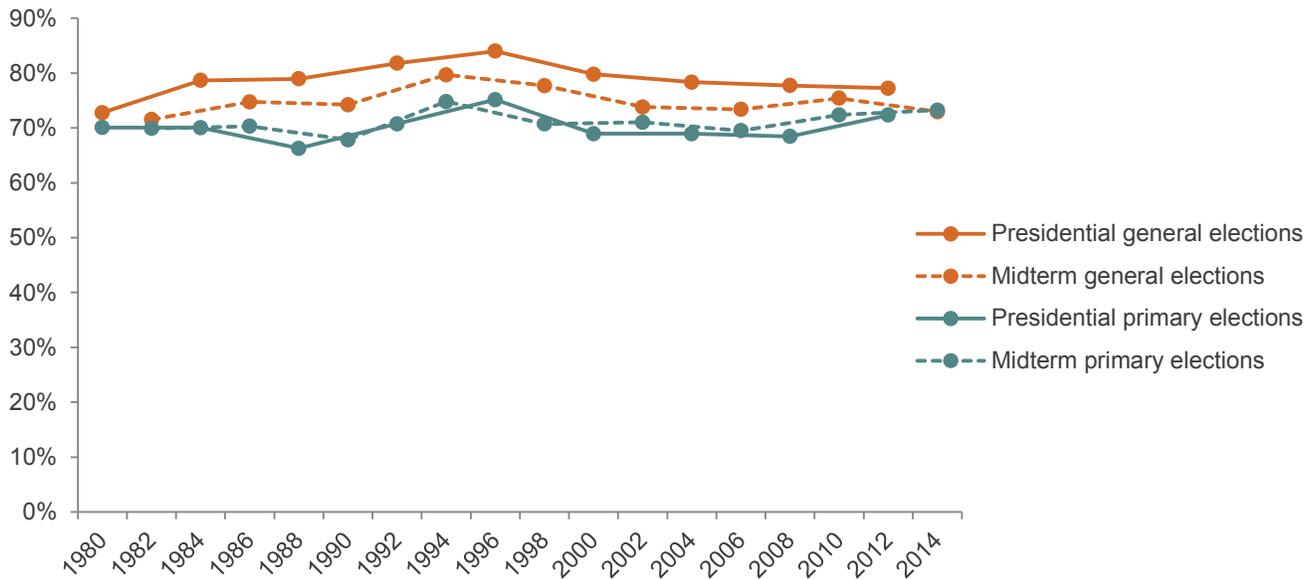
Figures 2 and 3 split the trends in Figure 1 into these two separate stages: the registration rate among eligible residents and the turnout rate among registered voters. In the past 35 years there has been almost no change in the overall registration rate (Figure 2). It tends to be somewhat lower in midterms and primary elections, as relatively more voters leave the rolls than are added to them. There has also been a modest decline of a few percentage points since the mid-1990s. But there is otherwise little sign of a broader trend over time.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, for qualified noncitizens living in California, the decision to become a citizen is really a third step that must precede these other two.

**FIGURE 2**

California's registration rate has been flat



SOURCE: California Secretary of State.

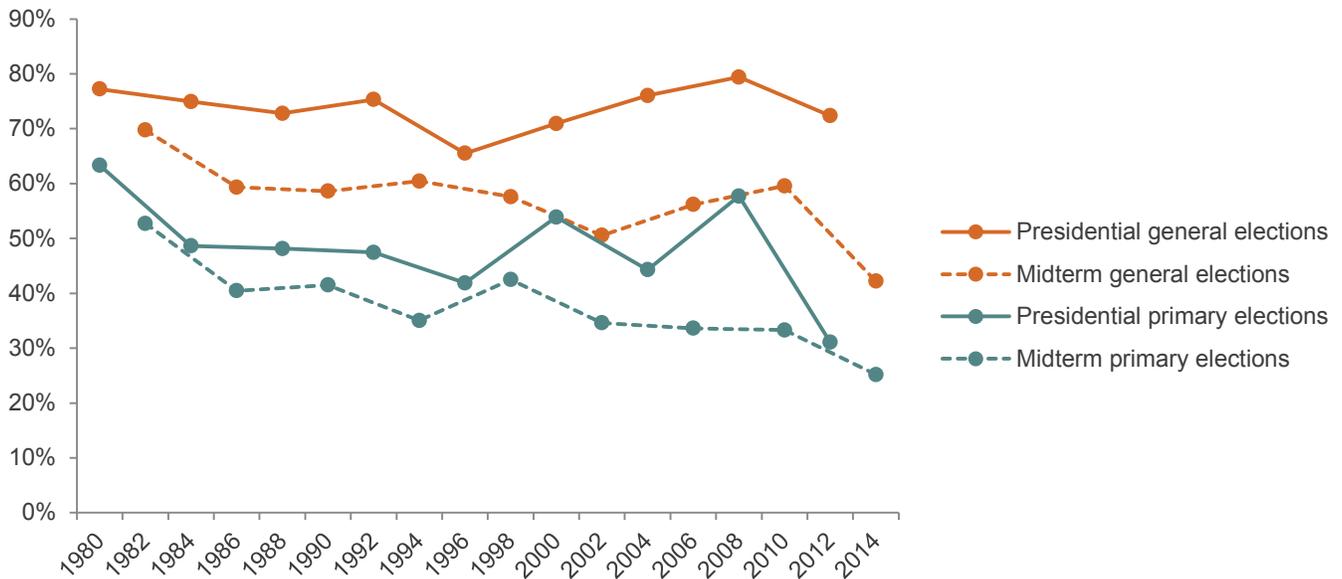
NOTE: The 2008 election season had two primary elections—one for president in February and one for all other offices in June; the graph shows turnout only for the presidential.

Turnout among the registered tells a very different story (Figure 3). This figure looks like an exaggerated version of Figure 1: there has been no real decline in turnout for fall presidential races, but both primaries and fall general elections in midterm years have seen participation plummet. Turnout among registered voters is down almost 30 percent in these elections.<sup>2</sup> Presidential primaries once again offer an in-between case, with some signs of stability and some signs of decline. However, turnout does tend to be higher in years like 2000 and 2008, when there was no incumbent on either side and California's primary fell early enough in the process to potentially make a difference in the outcome.

<sup>2</sup> At least some of the decline in primary elections might reflect the lower primary turnout rate of registered independents (officially called “no party preference” voters), who have been a growing share of the electorate over time.

**FIGURE 3**

Turnout among registered voters in California has fallen



SOURCE: California Secretary of State.

NOTE: The 2008 election season had two primary elections—one for president in February and one for all other offices in June; the graph shows turnout only for the presidential.

In sum, California’s decline in voter turnout is hard to pin on registration. Nor does it have much to do with fall presidential races, which continue to engage the public as much as they did 35 years ago. The problem lies with midterm elections where no presidential contest is on the ballot, and to a certain extent with presidential primaries as well. Next we will broaden our view to see how California measures up to other states and whether these dynamics may reflect a larger trend across the country.

## California in Comparative Perspective

California’s midterm primary and general election turnout may be falling, but is California doing any worse than other states? If turnout decline is occurring everywhere at the same rate, then California may have no relative decline at all. The opposite is also possible: if turnout or registration in other states is rising or falling, even the absence of change in California might reflect a declining or improving position in relative terms.

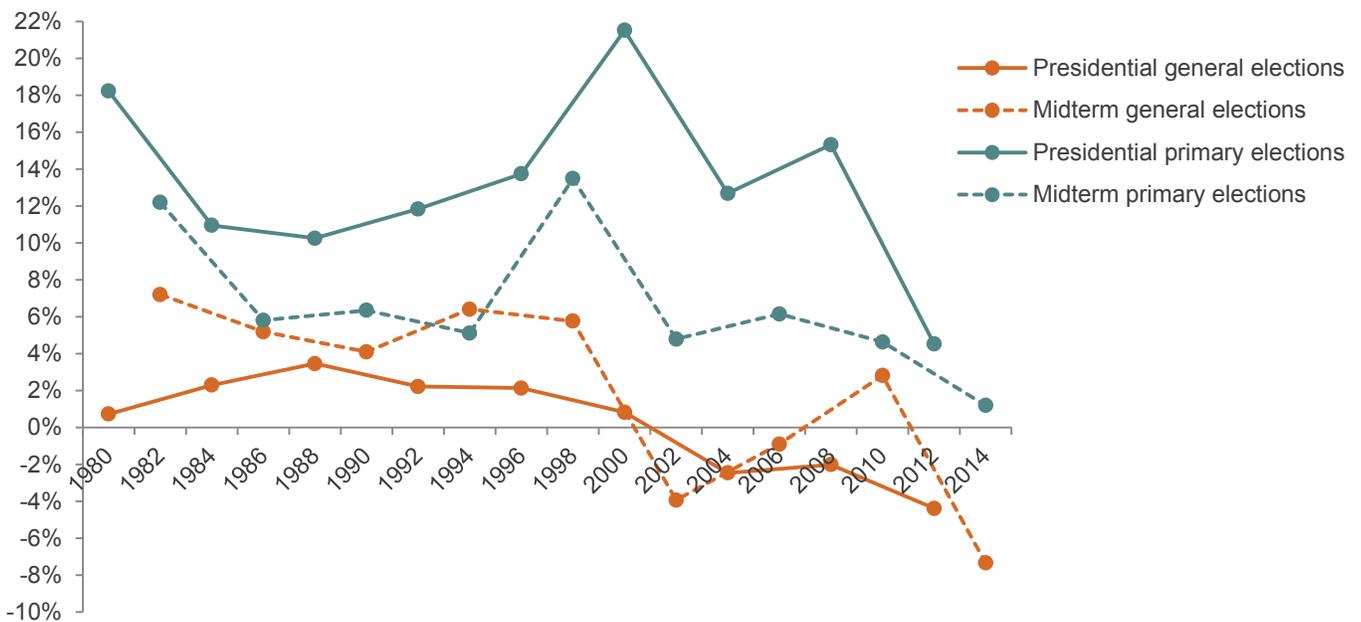
If California’s turnout has declined at the same rate as in other places, then the explanation likely does not lie with anything about the state’s particular demography or politics, but rather with broader trends in American society. This would not absolve the state of responsibility to address the problem, but it would put the magnitude of the problem in the proper perspective. By contrast, if the state’s turnout has fallen even faster than in other states, it would suggest something specific to California. It would also suggest both the possibility of more control over solutions and a greater sense of urgency about finding them.

Figure 4 below shows how eligible turnout deviates from the trend in the rest of the country. Positive numbers mark higher turnout for California, and negative numbers lower turnout. Most of the conclusions are unchanged when seen in comparative perspective: turnout is still declining in relative terms for midterm primary and general

elections, and there are still signs of concern from the 2012 presidential primary.<sup>3</sup> Each of these trends is less pronounced because turnout elsewhere has also been declining. Interestingly, turnout in California’s primary elections has been higher than the rest of the country throughout this time period, including for the record low turnout of 2014.<sup>4</sup>

However, the story for fall presidential elections does change when seen from this comparative perspective. Relative to other states, turnout in California’s presidential elections has been slipping since at least 2000, and the state’s turnout in those years has been below the average for all other states since about 2004. In short, California’s fall presidential turnout has remained steady, but in other states it has risen, increasingly leaving California behind.<sup>5</sup>

**FIGURE 4**  
Turnout relative to other states has fallen in midterm and presidential elections



SOURCE: United States Elections Project (eligible voters and turnout, 1980–2014); National Conference of State Legislatures (primary ballot measure outcomes for determining turnout for some states in some years); Congressional Quarterly Voting and Elections Collection (primary election outcomes); various secretaries of state (other primary election outcomes data).

NOTE: Graph shows California’s turnout among the eligible population as a deviation from the average turnout in all other states. Positive values show higher turnout than the nation as a whole, while negative numbers show lower turnout. Because primary turnout was not available for all states in all years, a standardized comparison case was created with a multilevel model with no fixed effects and random effects for years and states. The year random effects established the reference point for each year, purged of the idiosyncrasies of the states that happened to be included in the data in that year. The 2008 election season had two primary elections—one for president in February and one for all other offices in June; the graph shows turnout only for the presidential.

<sup>3</sup> California’s *rank* has slipped some, reflecting the fact that a small number of states have been doing quite well with primary turnout in recent years. See McGhee (2014) for details.

<sup>4</sup> At least some of this difference likely reflects the fact that, until recently, California was one of the only states to regularly feature initiatives on the primary election ballot. However, the legislature recently banned citizen initiatives from the primary ballot, so they will only appear on the fall ballot in the future.

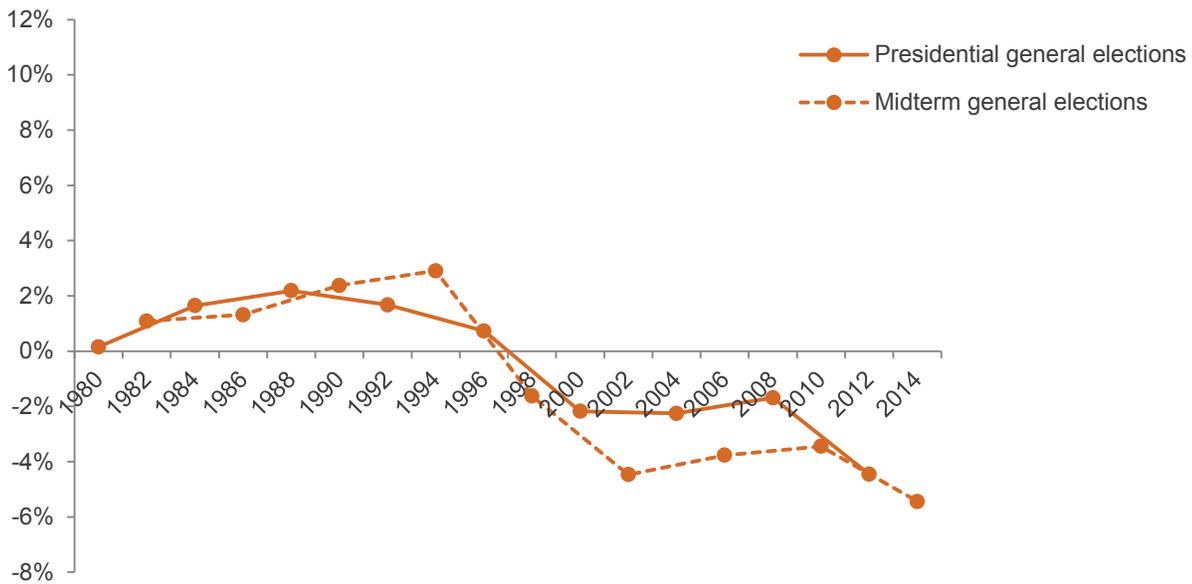
<sup>5</sup> Eligibility in Figure 3 comes from the United States Election Project, which works to develop nationally comparable measures of eligibility that incorporate multiple eligibility factors, including citizenship and status as a convicted felon.

What about the distinction between registration and voting? Relative to other states, is California falling behind more in one than the other? Figure 4 splits the data into registration and turnout as before, but now presents those trends in relative terms.<sup>6</sup> These data are not available for primaries, so the analysis here focuses only on presidential and midterm general elections.

Figure 2 showed that the absolute registration rate for California has been flat over the past 35 years; Figure 5 shows that the registration rate relative to other states has steadily fallen. Given the stickiness of registration, it is not surprising that this decline has been fairly measured and steady, and that the pattern has been virtually identical in presidential and midterm elections.

**FIGURE 5**

Compared to other states, California’s registration rate has fallen in both presidential and midterm elections



SOURCE: U.S. Census Current Population Survey.

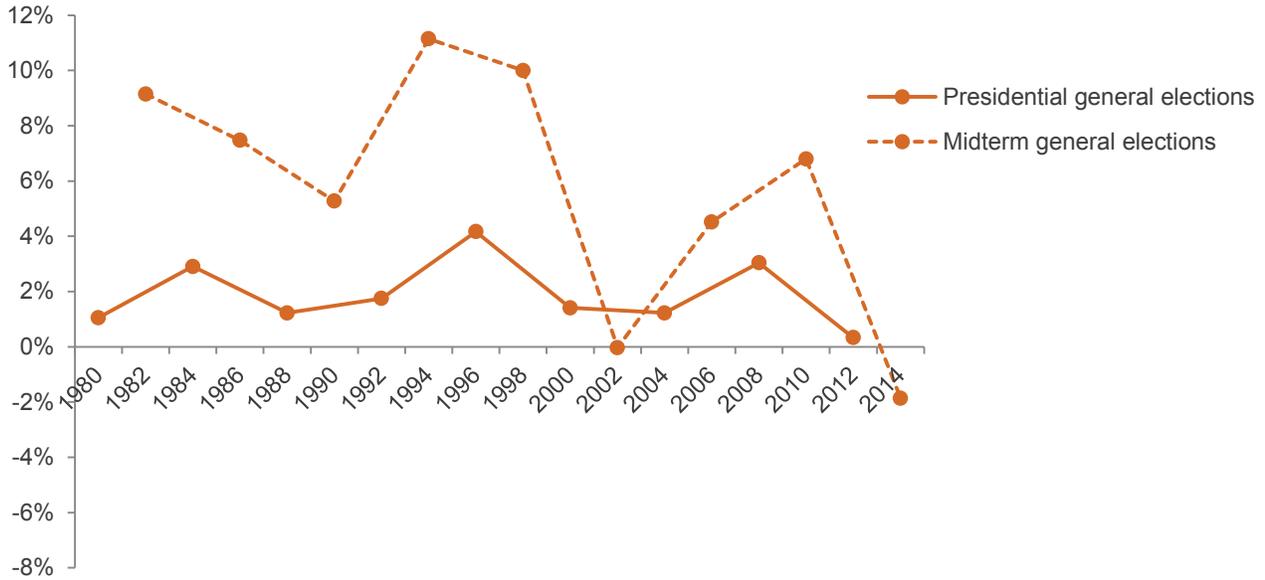
NOTE: Graphs show California’s deviation from the average registration rate of all other states.

<sup>6</sup> Because official registration records from other states are often poorly kept and difficult to compare, this analysis uses the Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census, a survey that is only administered in fall elections with a federal contest on the ballot. Missing data on the registration and turnout questions in this survey have been imputed using the procedure described in the technical appendix of the PPIC report *Expanding California’s Electorate: Will Recent Reforms Increase Voter Turnout?* (McGhee 2014).

Figure 6 shows California’s relative turnout among those who are registered. Here the story is more familiar: turnout in presidential elections has been mostly flat compared to the rest of the country, while turnout in midterms has been erratic but generally trending down. In both types of elections, with only a few exceptions, California has beaten the rest of the country at getting voters to the polls once they are registered.

**FIGURE 6**

Compared to other states, California’s turnout has been higher and has fallen more slowly and erratically



SOURCE: U.S. Census Current Population Survey.

NOTE: Graphs show California’s deviation from the average registered voter turnout of all other states.

## Lessons from Recent Trends

This examination of trends leaves us with a more nuanced picture of turnout in California than we had before:

- California's registration rate has been mostly flat over the past 35 years, but it probably should have been climbing. Other states have improved their registration rates on average over the same period.<sup>7</sup> This relative decline in California's registration is dragging down California's relative turnout across both midterm and presidential elections.
- Midterm general elections—when California elects its governors and other statewide officers—present the most serious cause for concern. Turnout is falling in both primaries and general elections, and in both absolute and relative terms.
- California's turnout in presidential primaries has been falling, but inconsistently enough that it does not yet merit serious concern. In fact, if turnout in the June 2016 presidential primary manages to be about 35 percent of eligible residents or higher, it would indicate no persistent decline at all.

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<sup>7</sup> California's relative decline may in part reflect the fact that California is no longer a battleground state in presidential elections, in a time when presidential contests overall have become more competitive. In fact, other large non-battleground states with similar demographics to California's such as Illinois, New York, and Texas have also seen relative turnout and registration declines. By contrast, Florida, which has similar demographics but is a battleground, has seen its relative registration and turnout increase. However, even if presidential competition is the cause, it is still worth considering what California might do to make up some of the difference.

## Possible Policy Changes

When comparing the two steps of the voting process—registration and turnout—it is perhaps easiest to make the case for targeting registration as the focus of state policy. A higher registration rate would likely produce a modest improvement in turnout among those eligible to vote, and the natural stickiness of registration would give such changes greater staying power.

Recent policy changes in California will make registration so simple as to virtually eliminate it as a separate barrier. AB 1461, which was signed by Governor Brown in 2015, initiated a system that will soon begin to register many more California citizens when they apply for a new driver’s license, renew an old one, or change their address with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). Though the change will not happen overnight, this new system will eventually draw many more citizens onto the voter rolls.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, future policy will need to focus more on getting out the vote among those who are already registered. Turnout among the registered has fallen sharply in primary and fall midterm elections, even if at least some of that decline is common to the rest of the country.

Moreover, the decision whether or not to register is about more than the immediate procedural headaches of doing so. In part it reflects one’s engagement with the political world, and so has a lot in common with the decision about voting itself. Many unregistered citizens have never been asked to participate nor given a reason to think it matters, and many see politics as lacking relevance to their own lives. Thus, once automated registration is in place, there will still be a need to encourage these new voters to cast a ballot.

What, then, can be done to encourage more people to cast a ballot? Two possibilities have been receiving attention lately: adopting the “Colorado model” of voting; and beefing up civic education in schools.

### The “Colorado Model” of Voting

In its 2015 session, the California legislature considered SB 450, which would adopt a system of voting similar to the one currently used in Colorado. For counties that choose to participate, the traditional precinct system would be replaced with a smaller number of larger “vote centers.” Unlike polling places, each vote center would be able to handle all county residents, not just those who live nearby. Moreover, all voters would be sent a vote-by-mail ballot by default, which they could return by mail, drop off at any vote center in the county, or deposit in one of a number of ballot drop-off locations. If they chose not to vote by mail or if they lost or spoiled their vote by mail ballot, they could have their ballot printed out at any of the vote centers in the county, which would be open for early voting up to 10 days before Election Day. Finally, the system would also plug into the state’s new “conditional” registration system,<sup>9</sup> meaning unregistered citizens could come to a vote center and both register and vote at the same time.

Research suggests vote centers and vote-by-mail elections are much cheaper to run, which is attractive in a time when funding for elections has been on the decline (Gronke and Miller 2012; Folz 2014; Hall et al. 2012). However, the effects on turnout are more mixed. Though vote centers do not seem to produce a decline in turnout,

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<sup>8</sup> AB 1461 is a somewhat less aggressive version of a system recently adopted in Oregon. Oregon will automatically add eligible voters from its DMV database to the voter rolls, and then send follow-up letters allowing those new voters to opt out of the system. The California system will require DMV customers to attest to their eligibility to vote and give them an “opt out” question before their records are sent to the Secretary of State.

<sup>9</sup> The “conditional” registration system will allow California citizens to both register and vote simultaneously at any time between the traditional close of registration deadline 15 days before the election up to and including Election Day itself. However, while many states that have similar systems allow registration and voting at a polling place on Election Day, the California system will require users to go to a county registrar’s office. Allowing vote centers to serve as county registrar offices for the purposes of conditional registration could greatly expand the system’s reach.

early experiments have not consistently produced an increase, either (Folz 2014; Hall et al. 2012; Stein and Vonnahme 2008). Likewise, the effect of vote-by-mail elections has generally been to increase turnout, though at least one study actually found a decline, and it is not clear whether the increase in turnout persists over time (Gronke and Miller 2012; Kousser and Mullin 2007; Southwell and Burchett 2000; Gerber et al. 2013; Leighley and Nagler 2014).

One complicated issue with vote centers concerns how many to make available for a given population. Since the goal is generally to open fewer vote centers than precincts, it is always possible that too few will be opened and voters will have trouble finding a convenient one nearby. Research on the effect of distance on voting has found turnout declines up to 5 percent for distances up to 10 miles from the precinct (Dyck and Gimpel 2005). But since vote centers are more flexible than precincts—they will accept all potential voters no matter where in the county they reside and will be open for more than just Election Day—voters may more often find themselves in closer proximity to a voting location at a moment when they have some free time to cast a vote.

## Civic Education

Another possible way to increase turnout is to focus on the low participation rates of young people (Romero 2015) and do a better job of acculturating them into the habit of voting. There has been some work on this front already. The recent California Task Force on K–12 Civic Learning has offered a lengthy list of recommendations rooted in six “proven practices” (*Revitalizing K–12 Civic Learning In California: A Blueprint For Action, Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*). The six practices cover both classroom activities (instruction, discussion) and participatory exercises (service learning, simulations, civic extracurriculars, school governance).

Research suggests why these practices work and what will help them work better. Young people often distrust politicians and political institutions and feel that their participation in elections does not matter (Bowler and Donovan 2013; Blais et al. 2004). At the same time, they are surprisingly receptive to volunteering and activism (Andolina et al. 2003; Chareka and Sears 2006). At its best, civic education connects the latter to the former by imparting a broader understanding of institutional levers of power and connecting them to current events and local concerns (Bennett 2007; Hart et al. 2007).

The specific effects on voter turnout can be notable. One study found that high school extracurricular participation in political organizations increased subsequent adult turnout from 21 to 38 percent (Andolina et al. 2003). Another found that one year of coursework in American Government or Civics increased the probability of voting as an adult by 3 to 6 percent, with a more pronounced 7 to 11 percent effect among students whose parents did not make a practice of discussing politics with them (Bachner 2010). A study of students participating in the Kids Voting USA program found modest but significant correlations after an agenda of interactive classroom instruction and discussion with parents (Kioussis and McDevitt 2008). Ideally, civic education that combines more of these practices in an integrated program should see larger effects on civic engagement in general, and voting in particular. Preregistration of 16- and 17-year-olds may be particularly helpful here, as more high school students will have the opportunity to register to vote at the same time that they are taking a civics course.

## Conclusion

These potential reforms are not the only means of possibly increasing turnout. But as California's voter registration process gets easier, we move further into a world where the main barrier is the cost of and motivation for voting. Indeed, much of the registration problem we currently have may actually reflect these deeper issues.

The Colorado model is about lowering the costs of voting for voters, and there may be other steps along the same lines that we can take. But it is impossible to eliminate all the costs, so improving turnout will require an ongoing process of outreach and mobilization. Civic education is one step in that process. But aggressive outreach should become the new normal if we seek to increase participation.

For this reason, it will be important to identify which Californians are not registering or voting, and why they are not. This will help us better understand who to mobilize and what policy options might be best suited to improve the situation. Something about California's midterm elections is failing to energize the electorate, but there is more to learn about which portions of the electorate have become especially disengaged.

In short, our portrait of turnout in California is marked by both broad and detailed brush strokes. Our registration rate lags other states in a way that affects many types of elections and suggests a more general disengagement. But turnout decline is also concentrated in specific types of elections, suggesting disengagement with the politics of the moment. Addressing the turnout problem will require acknowledging that both types of disengagement exist and attempting to alleviate them.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Eric McGhee** is a research fellow at PPIC, where he focuses on elections, legislative behavior, political reform, and surveys. His research on elections and electoral reform has appeared in numerous academic journals, and his work has been profiled on National Public Radio, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *The Economist*. He is an occasional contributor to the *Washington Post*'s Monkey Cage blog on politics. Before joining PPIC, he was assistant professor of political science at the University of Oregon and served as a Congressional Fellow through the American Political Science Association. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of California, Berkeley.

**Daniel Krimm** is a research associate at the Public Policy Institute of California, where he works on topics related to state governance, such as redistricting, election systems, political geography, state-local relations, and realignment. Before joining PPIC, he was a global policy fellow at IP Justice, addressing issues in information and communication technology and internet governance. He holds an MPP degree from the University of Southern California and a BA from Princeton University in the history and philosophy of science.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the helpful and insightful comments of Mindy Romero and Kim Alexander. Inside PPIC, the report has benefited greatly from the comments of Mark Baldassare, Dean Bonner, Abby Cook, Hans Johnson, and Lynette Ubois.

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Public Policy Institute of California  
500 Washington Street, Suite 600  
San Francisco, CA 94111  
T: 415.291.4400  
F: 415.291.4401  
PPIC.ORG

PPIC Sacramento Center  
Senator Office Building  
1121 L Street, Suite 801  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
T: 916.440.1120  
F: 916.440.1121