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California's Missing Voters

Who Is Not Voting and Why



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SUMMARY

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Technical appendices to this paper are available on the PPIC website.

In the 2016 election, California's registration rate rose and turnout climbed. But broader voting trends in the state have been disappointing, with record low turnout in the primary and general elections of 2014. Low turnout has generated wide-ranging concerns about the sources of the problem and potential solutions. The state has adopted a number of reforms, most of which make it easier to register to vote. Other reforms aim to simplify the voting process for those who are registered.

An earlier PPIC report (McGhee and Krimm 2016) showed that California's voter *registration rate* has been falling compared with rates in other states. By contrast, California's voter *turnout* among those registered has been falling about the same as in other states, and only in midterm elections when no presidential race is on the ballot.

This report identifies possible causes of these trends and suggests policies to address them. One of the report's key contributions is a statistical analysis that examines the specific effects of a wide range of demographic and other factors, including ethnicity, age, and voter registration history. This allows more precise conclusions about why registration and midterm turnout are falling. The report reaches several conclusions:

- California's falling registration rate relative to other states is strongly driven by the growing diversity of its population. California's Latino and Asian American communities have become eligible to vote at faster rates than their counterparts in other states. At the same time, Latinos and Asian Americans register at lower rates than members of other groups, leading to an overall decline in the registration rate compared with states where the eligible voting population is not changing as quickly.
- The registration problem is especially pronounced for Latinos and Asian Americans more closely connected to the immigrant experience, that is, naturalized citizens and children born in the United States to immigrant parents.
- The behavior of young voters largely accounts for California's declining turnout in midterm elections. Young people have been voting at slightly higher rates in presidential elections and at much lower rates in midterms than voters of the same age did two decades ago.
- No other demographic factors significantly drive declining midterm participation. In particular, California's expanding Latino and Asian American populations are not a significant part of the falling midterm turnout story. Once registered, the voting patterns of these groups have not changed meaningfully over time.

For both falling registration and midterm turnout, the simplest and most direct solution is to mobilize key groups more aggressively. This effort is neither easy nor quick, but it is vital. Research suggests culturally relevant and embedded communication would be the most effective way to mobilize California's Latino and Asian American communities. Registration drives should make personal connections within the community and avoid one-size-fits-all messages from the outside. Recent reforms that ease registration should also help, especially the state's new automated voter registration system. To be sure, lower registration rates also reflect deeper disengagement. Genuine participation cannot be achieved simply by adding people to the voter rolls. To ensure that people vote, aggressive outreach will be essential even after more citizens become registered.

Mobilizing California's young people is a special problem. First-time young registrants turn out at very high rates but do not continue to vote in subsequent elections. Drop-off voters may be good mobilization targets in midterm elections. This report also shows evidence that vote-by-mail registration helps ensure more consistent participation. California has recently adopted a law that can potentially provide all registrants a vote-by-mail ballot by default. This reform may help raise midterm turnout, but there are still questions about the approach. California is rolling out the new law cautiously, which makes sense given the uncertainties.

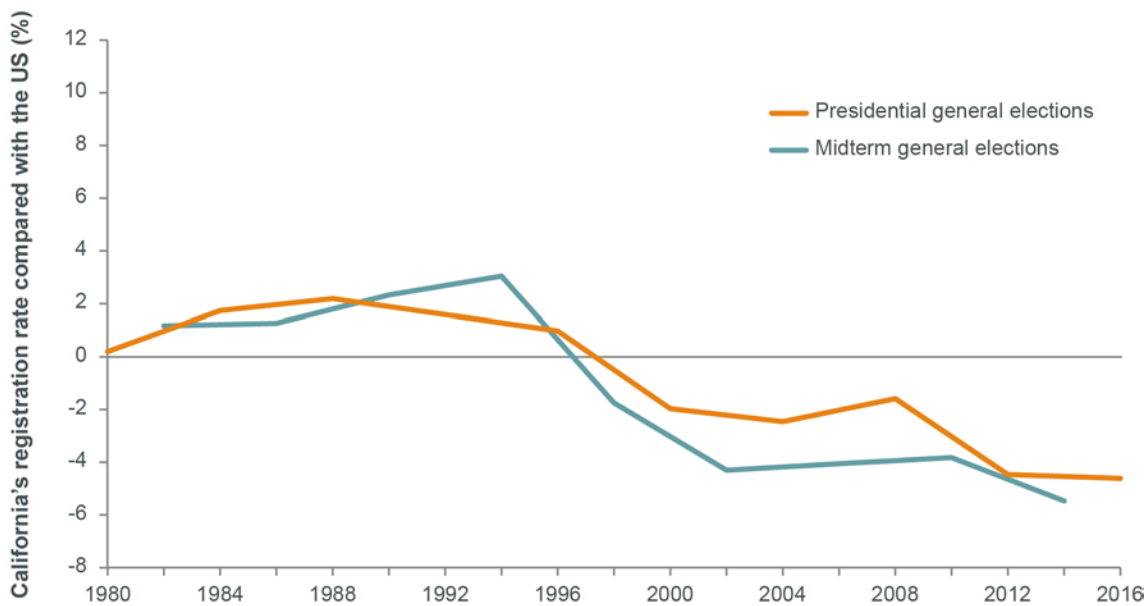
Introduction: The Two Stages of Voting

California’s most recent elections have featured some of the lowest turnouts in state history, including record lows in the 2014 primary and general elections. Serious questions have been raised about the causes of low turnout and how to turn it around. The state has significantly changed its election laws to make it easier to both register and cast a ballot. However, most of these reforms have yet to be implemented and efforts to maximize their impact are just getting started. In this context, it is vital to identify the sources of California’s turnout decline and understand what measures are most likely to boost electoral participation.

Voting is a two-step process in the United States. Citizens first establish their eligibility to vote by registering, and then they cast a ballot. The effort required for either one may discourage participation in elections. Registration and voting also reflect citizen engagement, because someone who is disconnected from politics will be less likely to take either step. But the two steps differ in that voting is more active and ongoing. Even a committed voter might sometimes miss an election. By contrast, registration is not repeated unless a person moves. Thus, failure to register may reflect a more profound disengagement than failure to vote.

FIGURE 1

Registration rates have declined relative to other states



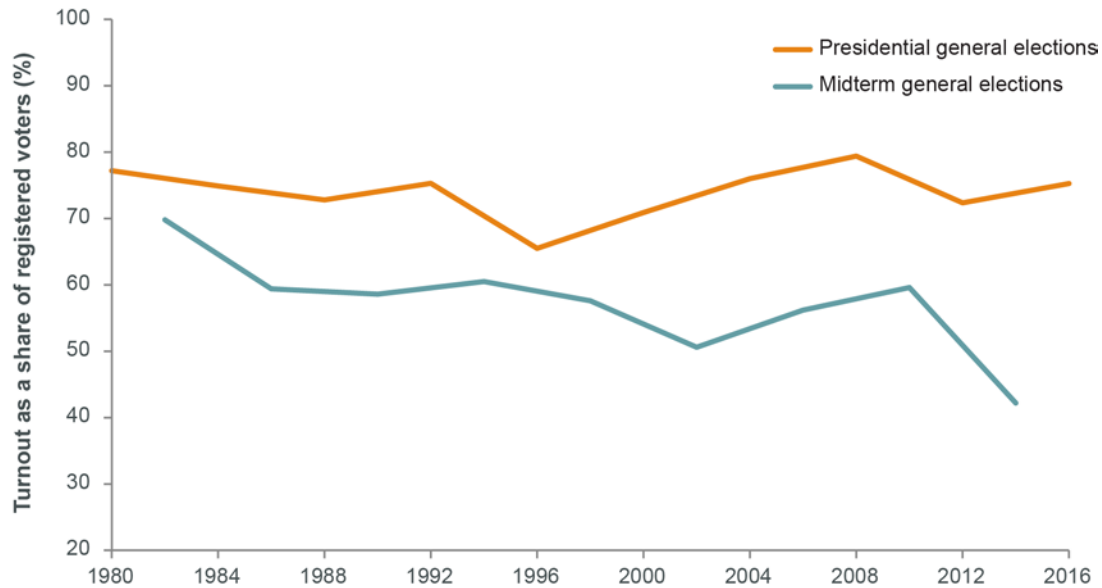
SOURCE: US Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, 1980–2016.

An earlier PPIC report examined how the two stages of voting have changed over time (McGhee and Krimm 2016). The results pointed to some special features of California voting and some important distinctions between California and other states.

Figure 1 shows that California has a registration problem compared with other states. The state’s flat registration rate—always falling between about 70 and 80 percent of total eligible residents—masks a *relative* decline that started in the late 1990s. California registered at higher rates than the rest of the country in the 1990s, but by 2014 it had fallen about 5 percentage points behind. California’s registration rate in 2016 did rise some—to a level not seen in decades—but this accelerated participation barely made a dent in the state’s lagging national position.

In addition to the relative registration problem, Figure 2 shows California has an absolute turnout problem. More specifically, it has a *midterm* turnout problem. Turnout in midterm elections has been falling, while turnout in presidential elections has largely remained flat, creating a widening divide between the two types of elections. Unlike registration, this problem is not unique to California. Other states have experienced similar midterm turnout declines.¹ As with its registration rate, California’s turnout climbed a little in 2016. But to avoid a widening gap between presidential and midterm elections, there will have to be at least as large an increase in turnout in 2018.

FIGURE 2
Midterm election turnout has declined among registered Californians



SOURCE: California Secretary of State.

In sum, California’s registration is holding steady when seen alone but is still falling behind other states. Meanwhile, California turnout is declining, but only in midterms. This raises two issues that are addressed in this report:

1. What are the differences between California and other states that might explain why it is falling behind in registration and what does that say about potential solutions?
2. Who is voting in presidential elections but failing to show up for midterms and what can be done to ensure more consistent voting?

Declining Relative Registration

California’s registration rate is falling relative to other states. Three explanations are possible: (1) All demographic groups in California have become less likely to register, which could reflect a policy change, or that elections have become less competitive or politics less trustworthy. (2) The composition of the California electorate has changed,

¹ The denominator in Figure 2 is registered voters, but the substantive results are the same if eligible residents are used instead. This report uses registered voters when analyzing the midterm turnout problem because it facilitates comparison with the analysis conducted with the registration file.

with a rising share of lower-registration groups relative to higher-registration groups. (3) Certain groups in California are falling further behind in registration compared with the same groups in other states.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. All three might be happening to some degree. This report presents the results of a statistical analysis estimating the effect of each of these factors and explores what California registration trends might look like if demographic differences with other states were eliminated. The results provide the most support for explanation number two, and specifically that the state's rapidly growing Asian American and Latino communities register at lower rates than other groups.

California's Eligibility Revolution

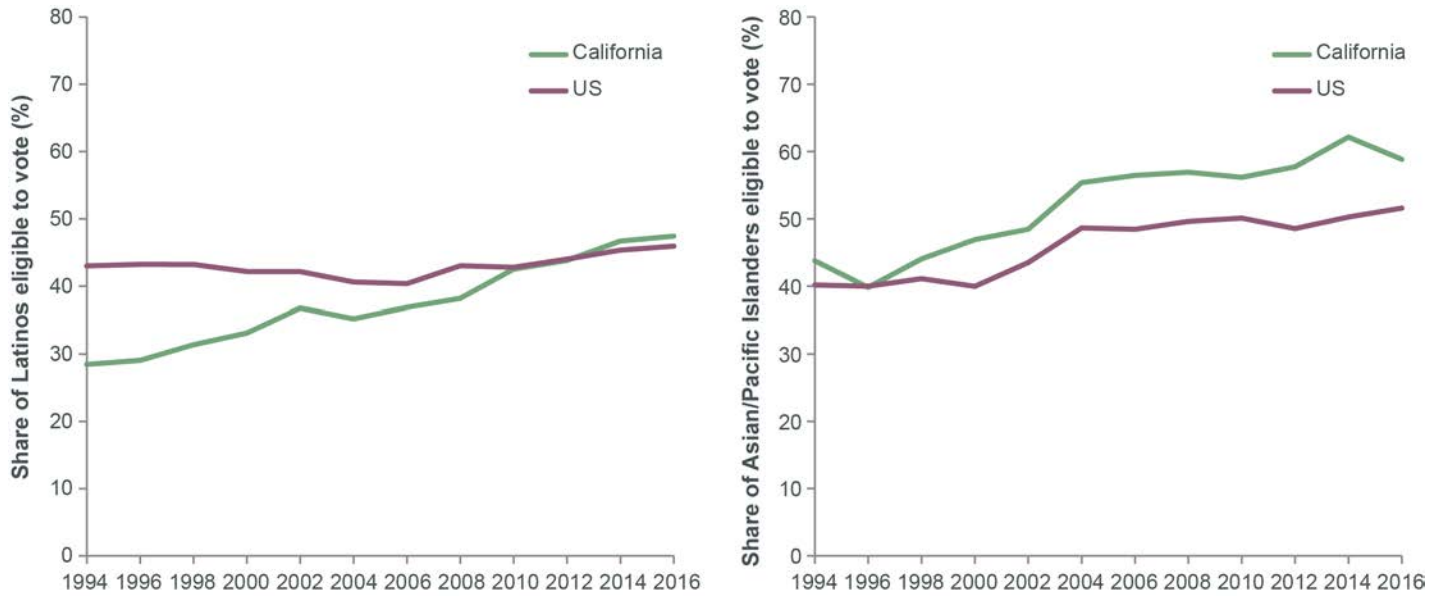
California has one of the most diverse populations of any state, due largely to high rates of immigration from Asia and Latin America from the 1970s through the 1990s. Non-Hispanic whites are no longer a plurality of the state's population. The number of adults who are eligible to vote naturally lags behind this transformation because many immigrants either are not eligible or do not plan to become citizens. But many noncitizens can naturalize and many are doing so. In addition, a large share of California's youngest residents are children born in the United States to immigrant parents. As this second generation comes of age, it is only a matter of time before the diversity of the eligible population catches up with the overall diversity of the state (Romero 2014b).

California is not the only state experiencing these changes, but they are happening faster here. Figure 3 shows the share of the California Latino and Asian American populations eligible to vote compared with the same groups elsewhere. In the early 1990s, California Latinos were less likely to be eligible than Latinos in other states. Since then, California Latino eligibility has steadily increased and now slightly exceeds Latino eligibility rates elsewhere. To a lesser degree, the same is true for Asian Americans. Their eligibility rates have been climbing faster than those of Asian Americans in other states. Substantial shares of both groups are still ineligible—more than half of Latinos, for example—but this is changing fast.²

² These numbers include children younger than 18 who are not eligible to vote even if they are citizens. Thus, while fewer than half of California Latinos are eligible to vote, more than half are citizens.

FIGURE 3

Latinos and Asian Americans are becoming eligible to vote faster in California than in other states



SOURCE: US Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, 1994–2016.

California’s Latino and Asian American communities have typically had lower registration and turnout rates than other groups, so it stands to reason that the state’s overall turnout might fall as their share of the electorate expands. On the other hand, factors such as age and education explain much of the lower turnout of these groups (Dobard et al. 2016). If demographic factors other than ethnicity explained the difference from other states, the implications for how we think about turnout in the Golden State would be very different. For that reason, it is important to take these other factors into account in analyzing election patterns.

To test this, I calculated the difference between California’s registration rate and the average in other states. I then adjusted California’s Latino and Asian American population shares to match those of the rest of the country. Crucially, I did so *after* accounting for demographic factors such as age, education, and home ownership.³ I then calculated the registration difference again with this statistical adjustment. This tells us how California would compare with other states if it had Latino and Asian American populations similar in share to the rest of the country but was otherwise demographically unchanged.

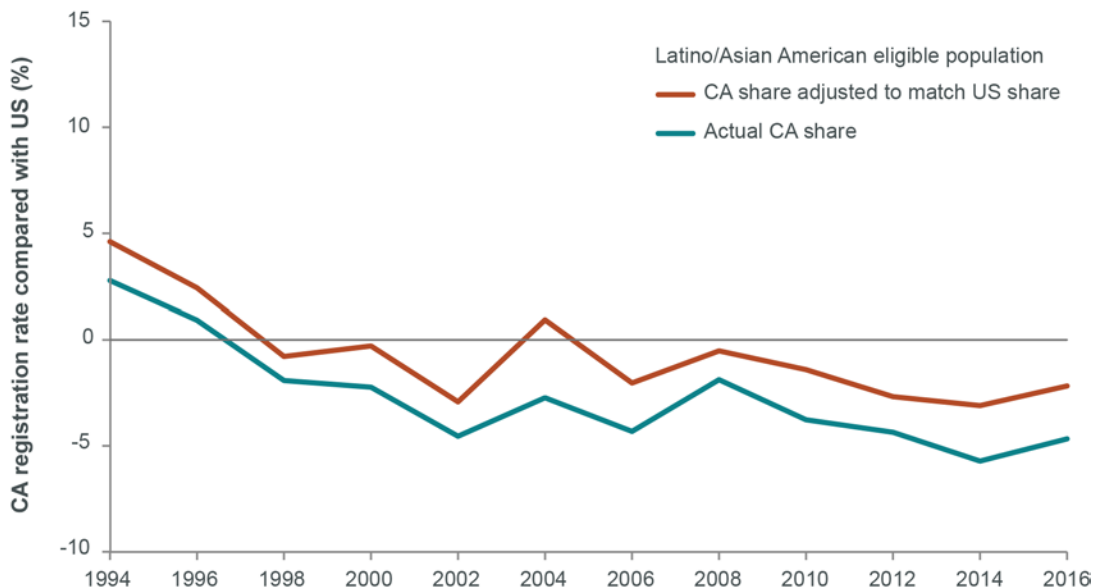
Figure 4 presents the results of this statistical exercise, showing that California’s larger Latino and Asian American populations can explain a substantial portion of the registration decline. No other combination of demographic characteristics comes close to altering California’s trend line as much as the rising Latino and Asian American populations. (Technical Appendix B shows the results of this analysis.) Nor does declining partisan competition, which might seem a logical explanation for the registration decline. Statewide elections have certainly become less competitive. Democrats have won all statewide offices and the state has fallen completely

³ Specifically, I ran a linear probability model that regressed registration on dummies for different age groups, the average margin of victory in statewide races, and separate indicators for women, single residents, those without a college education, those with some college, those with a college degree, the unemployed, those who moved in the last year, those who moved in the last two years, home owners, Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans. I ran this model separately for each election year, and also interacted all the variables with an indicator for California (except the margin of victory, which varies only by state). Coefficients and standard errors for this model are available in Technical Appendix A.

out of the battleground column in presidential contests. But statistical analysis shows that this fading competition accounts for surprisingly little of California’s registration differences from other states.

FIGURE 4

California’s growing Latino and Asian American populations explain much of the registration decline



SOURCE: US Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, 1994–2016.

NOTES: The teal line is the actual trend of California’s registration rate when compared with the national rate, as depicted in Figure 1. The red line represents what California’s relative registration rate would be when its Latino and Asian American populations are statistically adjusted to match the shares in the rest of the country. The model used for this statistical adjustment does not account for any immigration-related factors (see Figure 5).

It is possible that Latinos and Asian Americans have become less likely to vote in California than in other states, completely apart from their rising share of the state’s population. However, statistical analysis suggests almost no difference between California and other states in this respect.⁴ Each demographic group in California appears to register at a rate similar to its rate in the rest of the country.

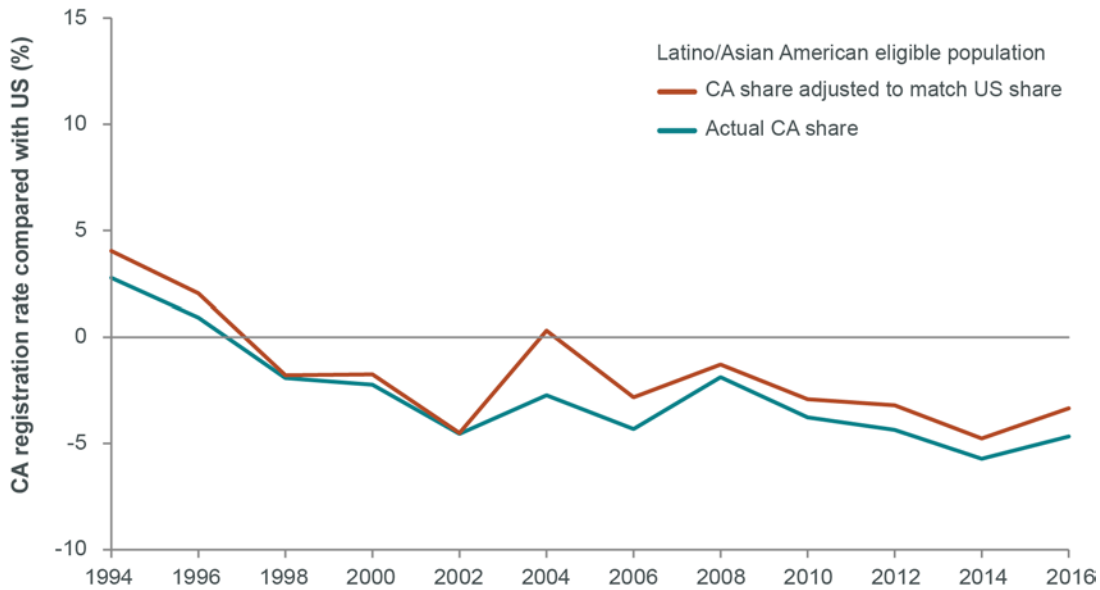
Thus, California is not doing a poorer job than other states of registering Asian Americans and Latinos. California Latino and Asian American registration rates are as high as those in other states and have climbed over time. But in any *given* election, California Latinos and Asian Americans register at lower rates than the state’s non-Hispanic whites or African Americans. The growing Latino and Asian American share of California’s total eligible population flattens the state’s registration when it would otherwise be climbing.⁵

⁴ The interaction terms for California were almost uniformly small and statistically insignificant. Those that were significant were rarely significant for more than one election cycle. See [Technical Appendix A](#) for details.

⁵ A linear probability model that regresses registration on election year using the California sample of the Current Population Survey suggests a total registration increase of just 0.5 percent from 1994 through 2014. When indicators for Latino and Asian American ethnicity are added to this model (thus accounting for the changing composition of the eligible population), it suggests a total registration increase of 2.5 percent, five times as large.

FIGURE 5

Latino and Asian American communities explain less of the decline after adjusting for immigration-related factors



SOURCE: US Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, 1994–2016.

NOTES: The teal line is the actual trend of California’s registration rate when compared with the national rate, as depicted in Figure 1. The red line represents what California’s relative registration rate would be when its Latino and Asian American populations are statistically adjusted to match the shares in the rest of the country. In contrast to Figure 4, the model used for this statistical adjustment accounts for the independent effect of immigration-related factors.

Latinos and Asian Americans from longer-established American families might be more likely to register because they face fewer language barriers, are more likely to be targeted for outreach, and are more likely to be part of politically engaged social networks (Dobard et al. 2016). Figure 5 shows that when immigrants and US-born children of immigrants in the Latino and Asian American populations are accounted for, the growth of the Latino and Asian American communities no longer explains as much of the downward registration slide. Thus, the challenge of lower registration is especially large with those members of the communities who are closer to the immigrant experience.

In short, the effect shown in Figure 5 is a function of three factors: (1) Latinos and Asian Americans have lower registration rates in *all* states. (2) These groups are a larger and faster-growing share of the eligible population in California than elsewhere. (3) Eligible Latino and Asian American immigrants and their children are especially likely to have low registration rates.

Growing Midterm Decline

California’s registration problems concern all elections. By contrast, voter turnout among the registered is mostly a problem in midterm elections. Presidential elections are cultural touchstones that attract far more attention than midterms, so a gap between turnout in presidential elections and turnout in midterms is historically normal. But the gap in California has been growing. Turnout in presidential elections has largely been flat, while midterm

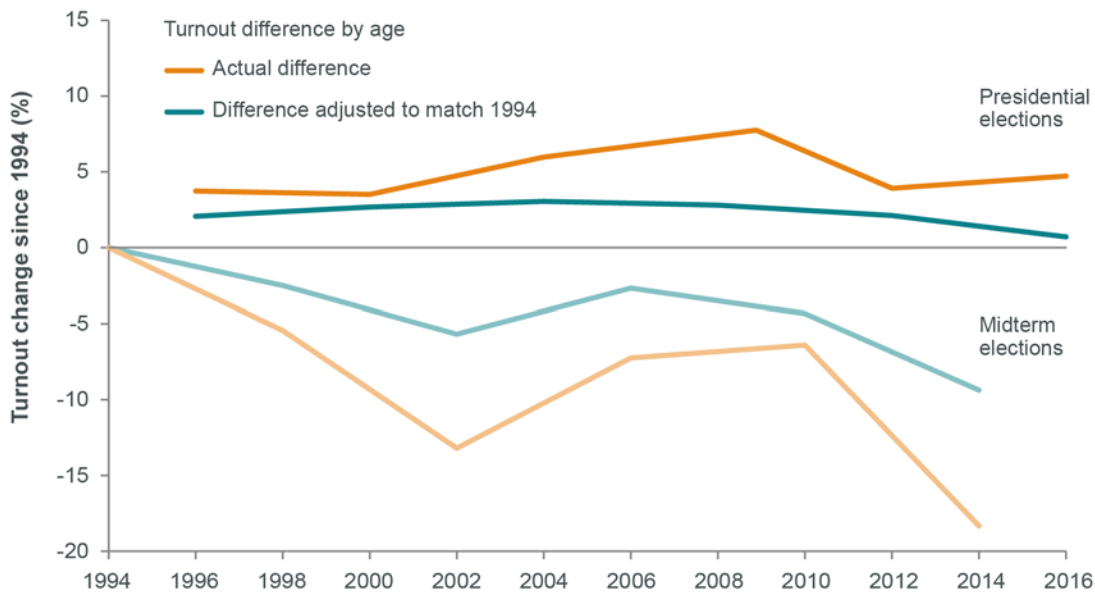
turnout has been declining.⁶ For the most part, the problem is not specific to California but occurs to varying degrees across the country.

To explore the causes of the growing midterm decline, I performed a statistical analysis of turnout similar to the one for registration. I first developed a model of turnout among registered voters based on a list of demographic factors. I then used the estimates generated by my statistical model to see how the midterm decline would change if either the size of each demographic group or its effect on turnout were set to its 1994 level.⁷ This allows me to estimate the weight of each demographic factor in explaining the midterm decline.

This analysis suggests the changing role of age is the most important determinant of California’s midterm turnout decline. Figure 6 shows the change in turnout from the 1994 election. The solid lines show the actual trends, while the dotted lines show the trends once differences in turnout by age are set to their 1994 levels. For example, in 2014 the turnout rate for voters under 25 was 27 percent lower than for those 65 and older. The dotted line shows what would happen if it had been 13 percent lower, as it was in 1994. This exercise is repeated for all age categories.

FIGURE 6

Growing midterm turnout decline is strongly affected by the changing behavior of young people



SOURCE: US Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, 1994–2016.

NOTE: Trend lines show the change in turnout from 1994. The dark and light orange lines show the actual trends for presidential and midterm elections, respectively. The dark and light teal lines are the trends after the differences in turnout between each age group and those 65 and older has been set to equal the 1994 level. See [Technical Appendix A](#) for technical details.

Because the 1994 election is a midterm when young people are always less likely to vote, the adjustment in Figure 6 brings down turnout in presidential elections by making them look more like midterms.⁸ In general, the adjustment

⁶ California’s midterm turnout has declined even in comparison with other states, but the average decline has been weak and erratic, and the state continues to have midterm turnout that is higher on average than in the rest of the country (McGhee and Krimm 2016).

⁷ The earliest year for which data are available is 1994. Using a later reference year such as 1998 produces results that are similar but more muted than the ones reported here, though the turnout decline to be explained is also smaller in such an analysis.

⁸ Young people turn out at lower rates than older people in presidential elections, but the difference is smaller than in midterms.

for presidential elections is fairly uniform over time, though the effect is slightly larger in 2004 and 2008. This suggests that the turnout increases in those two elections were produced by higher turnout among young people.

The same adjustment raises turnout in midterms, and the size of the adjustment grows over time. In fact, about half the decline since 1994 can be accounted for if turnout among young people is set to the 1994 level. Combined with the lower turnout in presidential elections, it appears that the lion's share of the growing midterm decline has occurred because young people are voting at slightly higher rates in presidential elections and much lower ones in midterms.

No other demographic characteristic affects the growing midterm decline as strongly as young voter turnout, including California's expanding Latino and Asian American populations, which played such an important role in declining registration rates. Once registered, the state's Latino and Asian American communities seem to have been voting at consistent rates over time. Likewise, it is the changing *turnout rate* of young people that has had the largest effect, not any change in their *share* of the registered population. This contrasts with the analysis of registration, which suggested a change in the composition of the electorate was the most significant root cause.⁹

Policy Implications

Two trends have shaped California's turnout in recent elections: sliding registration compared with other states and a decline in midterm election turnout. This report has looked at possible explanations. This section explores the implications of this information for efforts to increase voter turnout.

Declining Relative Registration

The registration decline appears to be a function of the growing Asian American and Latino shares of the eligible population in California. These communities are not signing up to vote at the same rate as non-Hispanic whites or African Americans, fueling the longer-term registration decline.

If California's relative registration decline is a function of its growing Latino and Asian American communities, the causes may be rooted in such factors as language barriers, a lack of outreach, and limited access to social networks that provide connections to politics and civic affairs (Dobard et al. 2016). However, recent developments might alter this situation. The Latino registration rate spiked in 2016, perhaps partly due to a presidential campaign in which immigration and relations with Mexico played a central role (Mitchell 2016). This might mark an inflection point that permanently improves registration in the state's Latino and Asian American communities.

Likewise, California has recently made legal changes that promise to dramatically simplify the registration process. These include a "conditional" registration system that permits voters to register and vote in a single trip to the county registrar after the normal registration deadline has passed. In addition, the state has adopted an automated registration system that registers voters essentially by default when they visit the Department of Motor Vehicles. This second reform is especially likely to produce large registration gains if implemented effectively

⁹ A statistical model that interacts age with Latino and Asian American ethnicity suggests no consistent added difference between young people of different ethnicities. See [Technical Appendix A](#). Similarly, using Latino and Asian American ethnicity instead of age to adjust the midterm turnout trend produces almost no effect. See [Technical Appendix B](#).

(McGhee and Romero 2016). These measures may go a long way toward undoing the underrepresentation of Latinos and Asian Americans in the registration rolls.

Still, neither of these developments is likely to be a panacea. Figure 1 shows that the 2016 registration surge—as large as it was—barely dented California’s declining position relative to other states. Moreover, it may not sustain itself after the heat of the 2016 election cycle has died down. The reforms may help increase registration permanently, but they do not address the root causes of lower Latino and Asian American registration rates. They might increase registration without a comparable increase in turnout.

More aggressive education, outreach, and mobilization are probably the most effective means of correcting this problem. Research suggests such outreach will be more successful if it is embedded in the communities it is trying to mobilize, with communication by members of the community in ways others in the community understand and can relate to (García Bedolla and Michelson 2012). This is especially important because Latino and Asian American immigrants and their children are least likely to register and may be more culturally and linguistically distinct. In any case, such mobilization work is hard and must be sustained over many election cycles. Yet it is the effort most suited to the source of the problem.

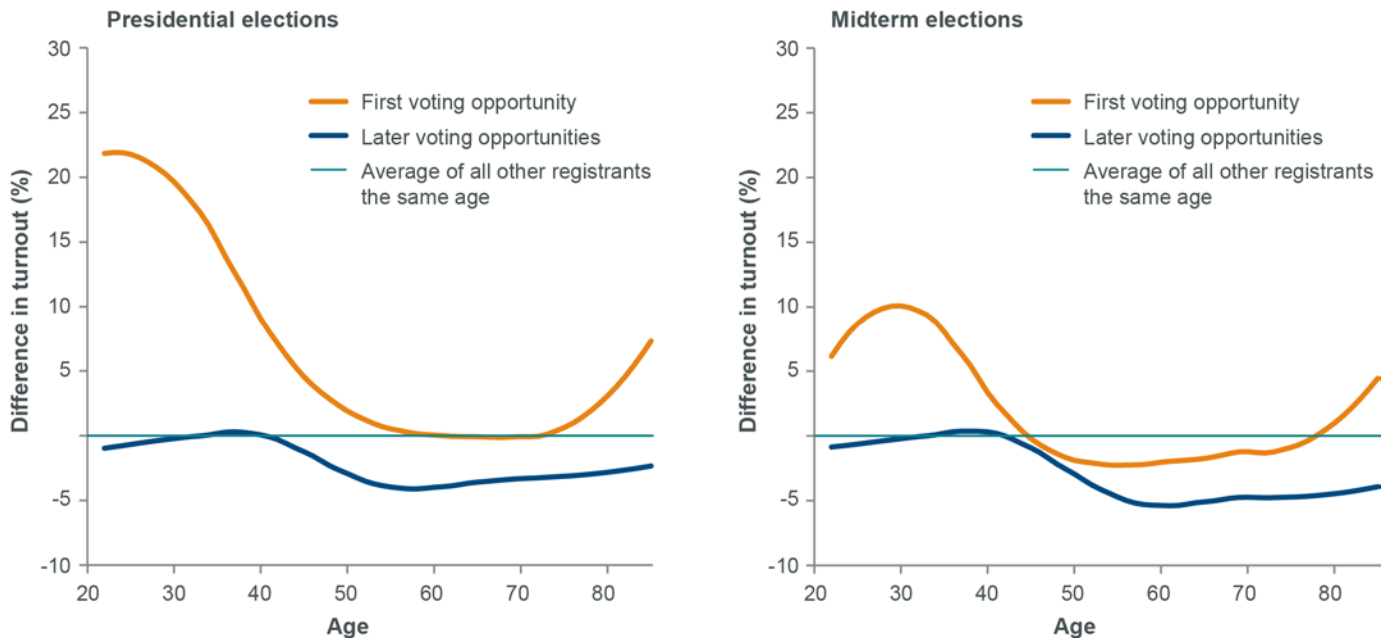
Growing Midterm Decline

In contrast with the registration decline, the drop in midterm turnout is largely about age. California’s young people have been showing up for presidential elections but increasingly staying home for midterms. The most straightforward solution is to target young voters more aggressively for mobilization. In some ways, this task should be made easier by the fact that these young people have already registered and, in many cases, voted.

New young registrants are especially inconsistent about voting. Figure 7 shows registration cohorts as defined by the election year when cohort members registered. For example, voters of any age who registered in the 2008 election cycle are part of the 2008 cohort for that election and all future elections. In a cohort’s first election, its young members are much more likely to vote than registrants of the same age in an earlier cohort. The gap is 20 points or more in presidential elections but is also visible in midterms. But in later elections of the same type, these young voters fall more in line with the average for other cohorts.

FIGURE 7

Turnout is higher in the first election after registration compared with later elections of the same type



SOURCE: Political Data, Inc.

NOTES: The orange line is the turnout difference between those creating or updating a registration record in each election (a “registration cohort”) and all other registrants of the same age. The blue line shows the difference for the same registration cohort in later election cycles. Zero on the vertical axis represents the average of all other cohorts. The graph shows the average for the 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 cohorts for presidential elections, and the 2006, 2010, and 2014 cohorts for midterm elections. The results are similar for each cohort separately.

Figure 7 probably understates the difference between first-time registrants and all others. It is based on data that cannot distinguish between reregistration after moving and registering for the first time. Some assumptions are possible; for instance, those under 20 are all first-time registrants because they are too young to have registered in previous elections. But for older ages, the share that consists of true first-time registrants probably falls a great deal. This may explain why the differences are smaller for older ages. Thus, for true first-time registrants, the drop-off may be larger than depicted.¹⁰

Vote-by-mail voters avoid this pattern to a significant degree. Figure 8 shows the same comparison as Figure 7 but for vote-by-mail registrants alone, excluding precinct voters who must vote in person.¹¹ Turnout among vote-by-mail registrants is anywhere from 5 to 25 points higher, depending on age and type of election. But vote-by-mail registrants also appear to turn out more consistently from one election to the next. In fact, the great majority of the turnout decline in Figure 8 comes from slackening participation by in-person precinct registrants.

What might explain these patterns? Some of it is certainly interest. Recent registrants choose to register because the current election engages them. For whatever reason, they find future elections less compelling. But this does not explain why vote-by-mail voters are more consistent over time. Vote-by-mail voters might simply be people

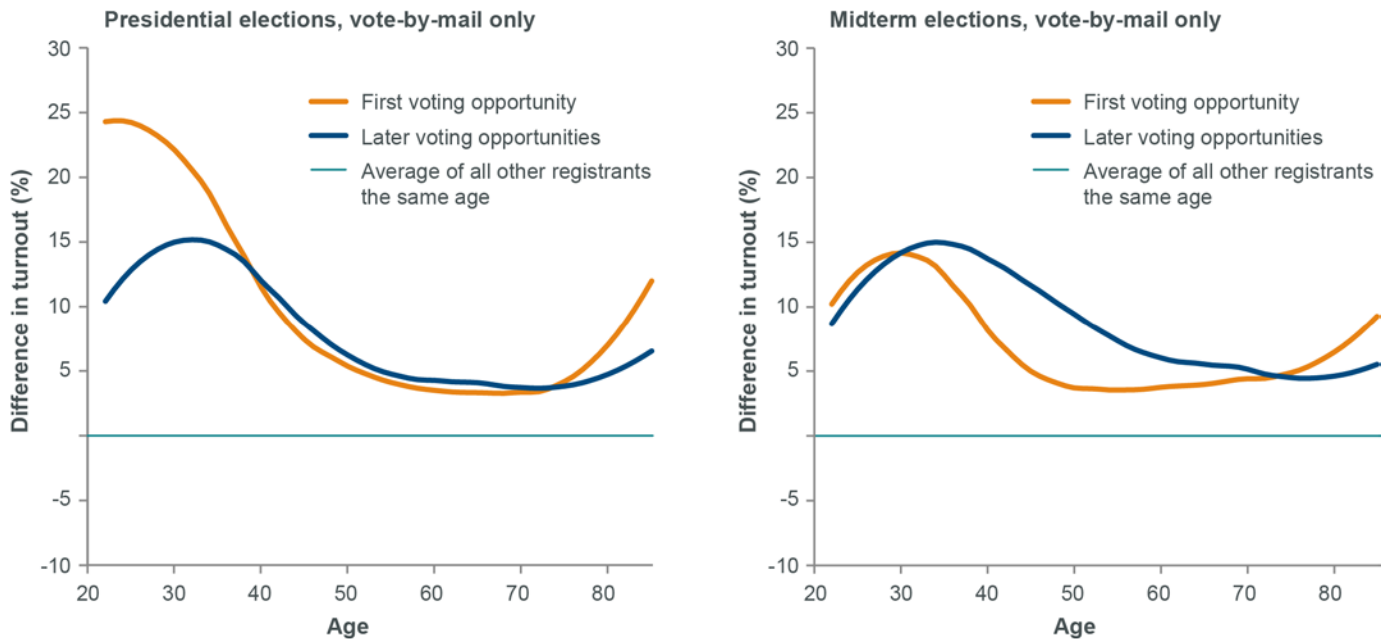
¹⁰ There is also what is known as panel attrition in these data, in which registrants who move are reregistered, making them “new” registrants again, while those who die are removed from the file. Because these registrants are probably low-propensity voters, when they leave the cohort, average turnout among the remaining members *increases*. Those who reregister also bring down turnout in their new cohort. Thus, this pattern probably minimizes the turnout decline. Consistent with this idea, the actual turnout in the registration file is about 6 points lower than the lagged turnout for the same cohort two years later. Absent panel attrition the two should be identical.

¹¹ The comparison group at the zero line is unchanged and still includes both in-person and vote-by-mail cohorts from earlier cycles.

who are more interested in elections from one year to the next. Nonetheless, vote-by-mail is probably playing some role in boosting turnout among current registrants. In fact, in any given election, the turnout difference between vote-by-mail and precinct registrants is larger among those who are less consistent about voting.¹² That extra vote-by-mail boost may be enough to overcome flagging interest over time.

For the sake of policy, the most interesting possibility is that vote-by-mail status actually *causes* consistency. Precinct registrants might find it easy to locate their polling places and vote the first time, when they are also registering. But they may have more trouble getting voting information the second time. Moreover, precinct voting offers fewer options. In-person voters must show up at the appropriate place, usually on Election Day, to avoid complications. By contrast, voting by mail gives these voters the same options as precinct voters but also offers the convenience of mailing ballots and eliminates the need to determine polling times and locations. From this perspective, it makes sense that voting by mail would encourage greater voting consistency over time, even among the same group of voters. The arrival of a vote-by-mail ballot might also serve as an election reminder, playing an informational role beyond the convenience benefit.

FIGURE 8
Turnout remains higher over time for people registered as vote-by-mail



SOURCE: Political Data, Inc.

NOTE: The orange line is the turnout difference between those creating or updating a registration record in a presidential election campaign (a "registration cohort") and all other registrants of the same age. The blue line shows the difference for the same registration cohort in later election cycles. The graph shows the average for the 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 cohorts for presidential elections, and the 2006, 2010, and 2014 cohorts for midterm elections. The results are similar for each cohort separately.

¹² A statistical analysis that controls for Latino and Asian American ethnicity, foreign-born status, age, home ownership, and lagged turnout suggests higher vote-by-mail turnout across the board, but especially among lower-propensity registrants. Turnout is 12 percent higher for continuing vote-by-mail registrants who voted in the last election and 22 percent higher for continuing vote-by-mail registrants who did not. See [Technical Appendix A](#).

Nevertheless, there are important reasons to be cautious about a wholesale switch to vote-by-mail. Young people currently choose vote-by-mail less often than older voters because of confusion about what address to use and other issues. If they do choose to vote by mail, they are less likely to send in their ballots on time (Romero 2014a, 2016). Moreover, the evidence here is only suggestive. Some studies indicate that vote-by-mail status increases turnout, but these do not speak to consistency over time (Gerber et al. 2013; Stein and Vonnahme 2008). On balance, the evidence justifies more experimentation with voting by mail, albeit carefully and with frequent opportunities to correct course.

California is moving toward broad vote-by-mail implementation by enacting a reform first adopted by Colorado in 2012. All voters get vote-by-mail ballots by default. They can either mail in those ballots or drop them off at any of several drop boxes or “vote centers” that replace neighborhood precincts. If they lose their vote-by-mail ballot, they can have a new one printed at a vote center, and the vote centers are open for early voting several weeks before Election Day. In short, the new law gives all voters the chance to vote by mail if they want. Each county decides whether to switch to the new system and the law phases in the counties that are allowed to make the change. This offers numerous opportunities to assess the rollout and make any necessary adjustments. Given the Colorado model’s promise and potential risks, it is important to manage the phase-in to ensure the reform is going as expected.

Other prominent voting reforms recently enacted by California target the registration stage of voting and so are probably not as useful for addressing the midterm turnout problem. These include conditional, online, and automated voter registration, as well as allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to “preregister” by creating a placeholder record that is activated when they turn 18. It is far from certain that young Californians added to the registration rolls as a result of these changes will be as likely to vote in midterms as those already registered.¹³ This is not an argument against registration reform, but rather a recognition that turnout is a separate concern.

Conclusions

There are two elements to California’s turnout problem: the state’s registration rate has been slipping compared with other states, while its midterm turnout rate has been falling in absolute terms. This report has shown that these problems have different demographic origins. The registration decline is a function of the state’s growing Latino and Asian American populations. These groups register at lower rates than otherwise similar non-Hispanic whites or African Americans. By contrast, the midterm turnout decline reflects the fact that young people vote in strong numbers for president, but fail to show up in the following midterm election.

Recent reforms to California’s voting and registration process—such as conditional registration, automated registration, and the Colorado model of distributing vote-by-mail ballots by default—might help alleviate these problems. However, none of these is likely to be a solution by itself. Reform must be coupled with aggressive mobilization. While it always makes sense to mobilize as many people as possible in every election, this report has identified specific groups that appear to need extra attention: Latinos, Asian Americans, and young people. Moreover, among Latinos and Asian Americans, special focus should be placed on first-generation immigrants

¹³ However, there is some evidence that young people who preregister are more likely to vote than similarly situated young people who register the traditional way (Holbein and Hillygus 2015). One possible explanation is that young people often preregister in large events at their high schools, creating an excitement around the experience and providing key information that would otherwise be missing.

and their children. Improving registration and turnout for these groups would go a long way toward reversing participation declines.

The part that Latinos, Asian Americans, and young people play in shaping California's registration and turnout trends suggests these problems will not disappear on their own. These groups represent California's future and they will dictate the future of electoral participation in our state as well. In recent years, California has been a creative and energetic force for voter participation. But the state must continue its efforts and even accelerate them to ensure future civic engagement.

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