Expanding California’s Electorate

Eric McGhee

Supported with funding from the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation
California’s turnout problem

California vs. average of all other states

Average of all other states

California is at the forefront of reforms

- Online registration
  - Passed in 2011
  - Implemented in September 2012

- “Conditional” registration
  - Passed in 2012 but not yet implemented

- Counting late vote-by-mail ballots
  - Under consideration (SB 29)
Online registration

- Registrants can conduct the entire process online
- More than 50% used it in 2012
- Lower cost, higher accuracy
  - AZ study: 1/28 the cost of paper registration
- Registration effect: number small, timing big
Many voters registered earlier in 2012

New registrants as share of potential (%)

Online registration available in 2012

- 2004
- 2008
- 2012
Conditional registration

- Allows voters who miss the 15-day deadline to register and vote at the same time
  - Ballots are “conditional” (must be verified)
- Likely to have modest effects on turnout
- May add to administrative burden
States with similar systems have a lot of late registrants

Late registrants as a share of all voters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Iowa</th>
<th>Minnesota</th>
<th>Montana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td></td>
<td>21%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LA County comparison:
- 3% = 97,101 late registrants
- 21% = 679,707 late registrants
Counting late vote-by-mail ballots

- SB 29 (Correa): count ballots postmarked by election day and arriving less than 4 days late
- Puts polling-place and VBM voters on more equal footing
- Likely to affect less than 1% of total VBM ballots
- But would keep legitimate votes from being tossed out
Conclusions

- **Online registration**
  - Turnout effects: nonexistent to small (so far)
  - Administrative effects: large and positive

- **Conditional registration**
  - Turnout effects: small to modest
  - Administrative effects: large and potentially negative

- **Counting late VBM ballots**
  - Turnout effects: tiny share of all ballots, but large share of uncounted ballots
  - Administrative effects: small
Policy suggestions

- Adopt automatic registration
  - Would register citizens who engage with any government agency (e.g., DMV, Covered CA)
  - Voters could opt out instead of having to opt in
  - Could smooth out the “boom and bust” of conditional registration

- Shift from *facilitating* to *mobilizing*
  - California’s election administration laws are about as liberal as they can be
  - Need aggressive outreach to hard-to-reach communities
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Notes on the use of these slides

These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. To avoid misinterpretations, please contact:

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Thank you for your interest in this work.