

## *Race, Ethnicity, and Voting: What Accounts for Turnout Differences in California?*

Although the ethnic composition of California's population has changed dramatically over the last two decades, the voting population's profile is shifting slowly by comparison. The lag is largely the result of differing citizenship, registration, and turnout rates among the state's major ethnic groups. These differences are a source of concern insofar as they prevent segments of the population from gaining representation. In California, where direct democracy through initiatives and referenda has become an important feature of the policy process, the question of who votes carries particular significance.

In *How Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Shape the California Electorate*, Jack Citrin and Benjamin Highton study turnout gaps across California's four largest racial and ethnic groups. They find, among other things, that the relatively low turnout among Latinos and Asians can be traced to markedly different causes. Although facilitating naturalization is an important step toward faster political incorporation, they conclude that no single policy designed to boost voting is likely to work for both groups.

### *What Accounts for Turnout Gaps?*

Drawing on data from the six November elections between 1990 and 2000, the authors note that whites, who will soon lose their majority status among California adults, made up 70 percent of the voting population in 2000. Because public policy is more responsive to the voting population than to the general population, this disjunction has important political implications. The high citizenship rate among whites accounts for a significant portion of their overrepresentation compared to Latinos and Asians. Even among citizens, however, turnout differences are considerable. Between 1990 and 2000, for example, white turnout was about 10 percentage points higher than that of blacks and 18 points higher than that of Latinos and Asians.

After taking into account background factors that affect turnout rates (such as age, education, income, and residential stability), the authors find only minimal differences in

turnout between whites, blacks, and Latinos. Thus, the standard model of political participation, which stresses the importance of such background factors, does a good job of accounting for the relatively low turnout rates of Latinos and blacks. In particular, the lower electoral participation of Latinos can be traced to their lower citizenship rate, their relative youth, and their lower socioeconomic status.

However, this model does not appear to apply to Asian American citizens, who vote much less frequently than would be predicted on the basis of their socioeconomic profile. When background factors are taken into account, Asian turnout lagged that of whites by more than 20 percentage points between 1990 and 2000.

These turnout differences are not unique to California. A similar pattern obtains in other states with high proportions of foreign-born residents, especially New York, Florida, and Texas. In all regions, socioeconomic differences account for the gaps between whites and Latinos, but the anomaly of low Asian turnout persists.

### *Differences Across Latino and Asian Subgroups*

The report also examines patterns of electoral participation for Latino and Asian subgroups. Once background characteristics are taken into account, turnout for Mexican Americans is only modestly lower than that of Latinos from other countries. Moreover, there is little remaining difference in turnout between native-born Latinos and their foreign-born counterparts who have lived in the United States for a long time.

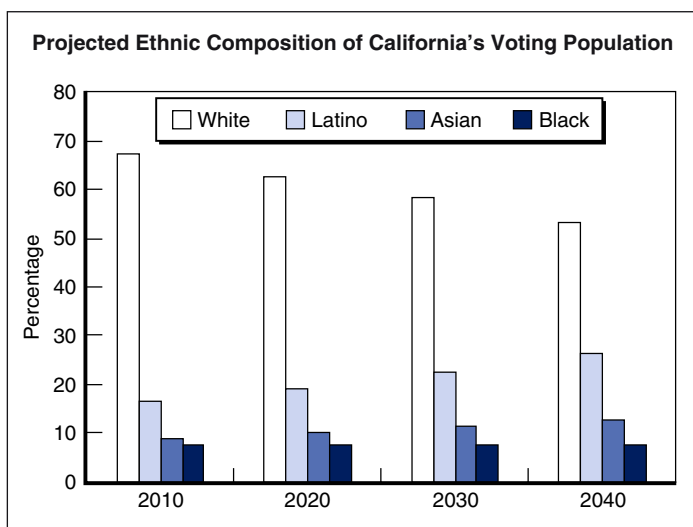
Asian immigrants living in California also have a relatively low citizenship rate (59 percent), and among foreign-born Asian citizens, turnout is barely 50 percent. Those born in the Philippines and Vietnam have the highest rates of citizenship (about 63 percent) and the highest voting rates. These gaps persist even after controlling for differences in socioeconomic status.

Turnout for Latino immigrants who have been in the country for long periods of time cannot be distinguished from that of native-born Latinos. In contrast, duration in the United States of Asian and white immigrants only partially compensates for nativity. For both groups, turnout among the native-born remains higher than that of immigrants, even after controlling for background factors.

Turnout for Mexican, Filipino, and Vietnamese immigrants matches that of white immigrants once background factors are considered. In contrast, turnout among Chinese and Korean immigrants is substantially lower than that of white immigrants. These rates remain lower even after socioeconomic differences are taken into account.

### Projections and Policies

By 2040, whites are projected to be little more than one-third of the adult population in California. However, if the citizenship and turnout rates of Asians and Latinos remain at their 2000 levels, whites will continue to make up a majority (53 percent) of the voting population (see the figure).



Policies to increase political participation should be prepared to accommodate important group differences pertaining to citizenship and turnout. Many immigrants who have lived in the United States for more than ten years still have not become citizens. This tendency is particularly strong among immigrants from Mexico, the largest single group of newcomers. One reason that immigrants from Mexico may

be reluctant to naturalize is the proximity to their “home” country. To the extent that this factor plays a role, liberalizing citizenship laws and facilitating the naturalization process will be relatively ineffective. However, poverty and low educational attainment account for some part of these low naturalization rates. Consequently, many immigrants would likely benefit from such policies as:

- English language instruction
- Instruction for the civics test required for citizenship
- Assistance with initiating and completing the application for citizenship
- Lobbying the federal government to greatly increase staff and other technical resources devoted to speeding up the process of naturalization.

The dynamics of turnout differ substantially between Latinos and Asians. Latino turnout appears to be hindered mainly by a lack of resources, which shows no sign of abating. For Asian citizens, however, the challenge is different and may be rooted in cultural norms and beliefs about the value of voting.

Because there appears to be no common solution to the problem of low turnout among Latinos and Asians, policy-makers should think in terms of multiple solutions. One such solution is election-day registration, which would likely benefit those with fewer personal resources. Another is civic education through schools and community organizations, which can increase the understanding of and interest in America’s electoral system.

Yet another strategy is to mobilize voters during particular elections. Political parties and candidates typically mobilize voters, but unions, churches, and other voluntary organizations are also available to connect voters to the electoral process. Targeted media events and town hall meetings directed at immigrant groups would be another approach the state government should encourage.

Attacking the puzzle of low Asian participation should also enlist ethnically based community organizations and other immigrant aid organizations to mobilize voters. Nevertheless, low Asian turnout may prove a less tractable problem that ultimately involves cultural change through a different pattern of political socialization and an altered balance of native- and foreign-born residents.

*This research brief summarizes a report by Jack Citrin and Benjamin Highton, How Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Shape the California Electorate (2002, 110 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-062-0). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.*