



Expanding California's Electorate

Will Recent Reforms Increase Voter Turnout?

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SUMMARY

Over the past 20 years, voter turnout in California has been slipping compared to other states, and this decline may be exacerbating the gap between Californians who vote and the rest of the population. The state has considered or undertaken a variety of reforms to reverse these trends.

In this report, we explore three of these reforms: a system of online voter registration, a same-day registration process, and a more relaxed deadline for submitting vote-by-mail ballots. One could argue that all of these reforms have inherent value because no eligible citizen should be prevented from voting for what amount to administrative reasons. But the administrative costs of a reform and the number of people who benefit from it matter as well.

We find that none of these reforms is likely to produce large gains in turnout but two of the three are likely to cost very little or save money.

- California implemented an online voter registration system late in the 2012 election cycle. It was immediately popular, but it probably did not bring many new voters into the electorate or significantly change the demographic makeup of new registrants. However, the initial rollout probably saved counties considerable time and money. Online registration might have a greater effect on voter registration in the future, and its cost savings make the new system worthwhile.
- California has adopted a new system of same-day registration, which will allow voters to register and cast ballots after the close of the official registration period. This system

will probably boost turnout a few percentage points. But a substantial number of people may take advantage of same-day registration, which could result in significant costs and complications for county registrars.

- Proposed reforms designed to ensure that more vote-by-mail ballots are counted by relaxing the deadline would affect only a tiny fraction of total votes cast but a large share of the ballots that are currently rejected. The cost of counting late ballots is probably minor, and the value of counting legitimate votes is great.

The online registration and vote-by-mail reforms are worth pursuing despite the small turnout benefits evident so far. And because it seems to encourage earlier registration among some voters, online registration might mitigate some of the negative effects of same-day registration on county registrars. Same-day registration, by contrast, creates an administrative burden that is quite heavy, given its modest effect on turnout. Instead, it might make sense to switch to a system of automatic registration, which would put every eligible Californian on the registration rolls and eliminate the need for the patchwork measures now in place.

In any case, the state will have to do more than remove administrative barriers if it wants to expand the size of its electorate. It will need to do aggressive outreach to communities of potential voters who are underrepresented at the polls and often overlooked in get-out-the-vote drives.

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