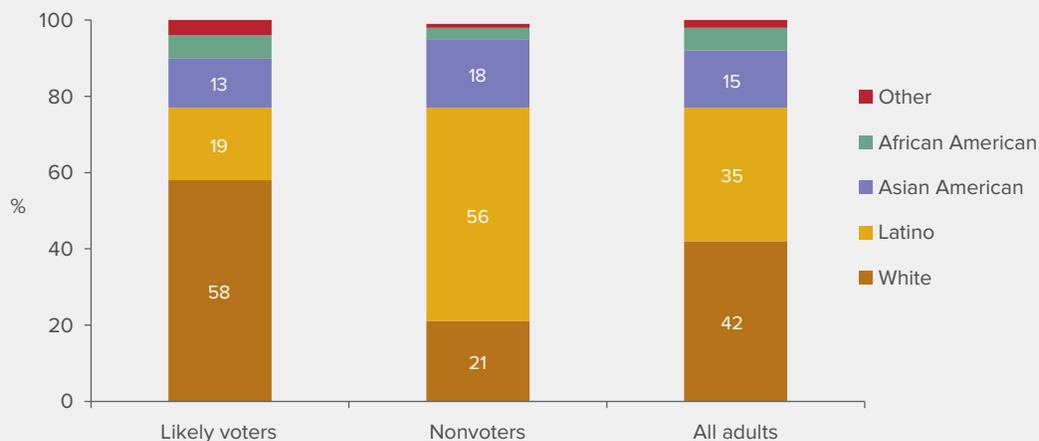


Representation in California faces growing challenges

California has had a Democratic governor since 2011 and the Democrats have a supermajority in the legislature. This has allowed for progress toward Democratic policy goals. Most Californians have been supportive of Governor Newsom's agenda thus far, and there is widespread support for state opposition to some federal policies. But one-party dominance carries a risk of lower accountability, particularly when it comes to issues outside the public spotlight.

While voter turnout has improved in California, it continues to lag behind turnout in other states, and the demographic differences between voters and nonvoters reflect a growing economic divide. Californians who vote regularly tend to be older, white, affluent, college educated, and homeowners, while nonvoters are more likely to be younger, Latino, lower income, less educated, and renters. Voters are more likely to identify as “haves” and nonvoters more likely to identify as “have nots.” Nonvoters tend to prefer a bigger government that combats income inequality, while those who vote regularly tend to prefer a smaller government; this has important implications for policymaking.

VOTERS DO NOT REPRESENT THE STATE'S RACIAL DIVERSITY



SOURCE: 2018–19 PPIC Statewide Surveys.

NOTE: Likely voters are identified per their responses to survey questions about voter registration, previous election participation, intentions to vote this year, attention to election news, and current interest in politics.

The state is increasingly Democratic—but not necessarily liberal

- **In the Trump era, the statewide shift toward Democrats has intensified.**

The rise of Donald Trump in 2016 led to a backlash in California that included traditionally Republican areas, and this backlash deepened in the 2018 election. The Trump administration's positions on key issues such as immigration and climate change are at odds with those of a majority of voters in California, and the state government has strongly contested the federal government in these areas. California's presidential primary has been moved from June to March in 2020, giving state voters a bigger say in the selection of the Democratic candidate.

- **Independents—the fastest-growing group of voters—are politically diverse.**

The share of voters registered as independents—also known as decline-to-state or no-party-preference voters—has risen by 20 percentage points since the 1960s, while the share of major-party registrants has declined. However, about 70 percent of independents say they lean toward and vote reliably for one party or the other. Across the state's regions, the lean is more likely to be Democratic than Republican. Any party that seeks to rival the Democrats and Republicans in size and influence would face the challenge of knitting together this range of views.

- **Many voters are only somewhat liberal, even in heavily Democratic parts of the state.**
Only the Bay Area is strongly liberal on both social issues such as abortion and fiscal issues such as taxes and spending. Even Los Angeles County—where there are high levels of support for Democratic candidates—is only modestly liberal on most issues. But the electorate has become more open to taxation in recent years, supporting tax increases to pay for education and infrastructure. In 2020, California voters will probably decide the fate of additional tax measures, including a construction bond for the K–12 and higher education systems and a measure to change the way commercial properties are taxed under Proposition 13. A majority of Californians and likely voters have said they would vote yes on a school construction bond. Voters have been less supportive of a proposal to change the way commercial properties are taxed.

Californians largely support Governor Newsom’s agenda

- **Californians generally take the state’s side in conflicts with the federal government.**
As the presidential election approaches, Californians mostly support the state government’s opposition to the Trump administration’s climate and immigration policies. Three in four Californians favor requiring all auto-makers to further reduce greenhouse gas emissions from new cars; meanwhile, the Trump administration is rolling back Obama-era vehicle emissions standards and attempting to revoke California’s legal authority to set its own standards. A solid majority of Californians (64%) support state-level policymaking to address global warming; majorities have supported state action since 2005. Similarly, about six in ten Californians (61%) favor state action to protect the legal rights of undocumented immigrants.
- **Californians support Governor Newsom’s investments in early childhood programs.**
After making cradle-to-career education a central part of his campaign, the governor has proposed several early childhood policies. Most Californians have favorable opinions of his universal preschool and full-day kindergarten proposals. Three in four Californians support his proposal to expand pre-kindergarten and early childhood programs and facilities, and two in three support his plan to increase the number of full-day kindergarten programs. Six in ten also support his plan to expand full-day, full-year preschool to all eligible low-income four-year-olds.
- **Plans to address housing and homelessness also garner support.**
Governor Newsom’s plan to increase housing production, which includes an expansion of state tax credits for the development of low- and moderate-income housing, has the support of seven in ten Californians. Three in four Californians support his proposal to address homelessness, which includes onetime spending on emergency aid, mental health programs, and programs that coordinate housing and health and social services at the local level.

California needs to expand voter participation

- **Voter participation in California has fallen below the national average.**
As recently as the 1990s, turnout among Californians eligible to vote was higher than the average in the rest of the country. Over the past 15 years, participation in presidential elections in the state has actually climbed slightly in absolute numbers, and turnout among Californians who are registered to vote has been above rates in the rest of the country. But the share of eligible adults who vote in both presidential and gubernatorial races in California has dropped to the point that it matches or falls below turnout levels in other states.
- **California voters tend to be older, more affluent, and whiter than nonvoters.**
According to the PPIC Statewide Survey, likely voters are older, more affluent, better educated, more likely to own homes and to have been born in the United States, and disproportionately white. They also tend to hold more conservative views on the size and scope of state government. There has been some progress: likely voters in 2018 were slightly more diverse than the recent norm.
- **The state has made it easier to vote by mail.**
A large and growing number of Californians vote by mail. As of 2019, all vote-by-mail ballots include postage-paid return envelopes. Also, a new state law recently authorized counties to mail ballots to every voter and replace traditional polling places with a small number of official vote centers. In 2018, five counties switched to this system: Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo. Evidence suggests the reform produced a modest increase in turnout, but time will tell if the effect is a lasting one. More counties have adopted the reform, so that more than half of registered voters will be covered by the system in 2020.

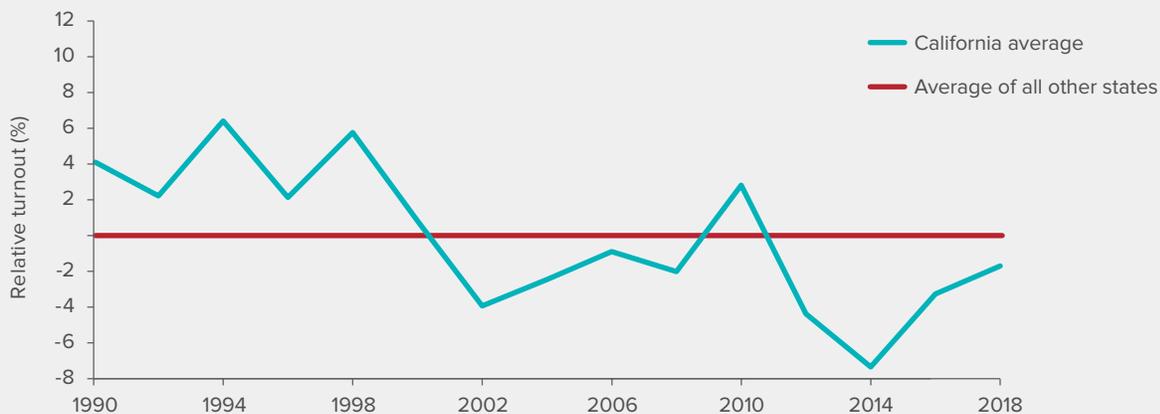
- **California’s below-average turnout stems mostly from lower voter registration.**

The share of Californians who are registered is below the national average; this suggests that getting people to register is as much of a challenge as getting voters to the polls. There are probably many reasons for California’s low registration rate, but the state’s Latino and Asian American communities play a key role: their share of the adult citizen population has been growing, but they register at lower rates. Even though turnout in these communities increased in 2018, their lower registration rates over time have gradually pulled down California’s registration levels in relation to other states.

- **The state has taken steps to increase registration.**

To reverse the downward trend and diversify its electorate, California has implemented a number of reforms to improve its registration rate. The state developed a fully online registration process, a seamless registration process for anyone acquiring or updating a driver’s license, and “conditional” registration after the deadline has passed. These new systems were in place for the 2018 election; a large number of voters used automated registration, and some people registered conditionally.

VOTER TURNOUT REMAINS BELOW THE NATIONAL AVERAGE



SOURCE: United States Elections Project.

NOTE: The trend line shows California’s turnout rate relative to the rest of the country.

Looking ahead

While Californians largely support Democratic policies, one-party control of state government raises the risk of unrepresentative policymaking. So too does the state’s relatively small and unrepresentative electorate. There has been progress in recent years, but California has a long way to go before its electorate reflects the size and diversity of the state as a whole.

The gap between California’s electorate and its nonvoters creates risks. The voting electorate is not wholly representative of the overall population. But effective policy is made by taking the entire population into account. California’s elected officials should be sensitive to broader needs while continuing to back efforts that bring more people into the electorate.

Make voting as simple—and voter outreach as aggressive—as possible. It is notoriously difficult to increase turnout beyond the voters who are already inclined to participate, but it makes sense to make voting as easy as possible. California now has one of the simplest registration processes in the nation, and it has taken steps to make voting easier. But the state also needs to make ongoing and aggressive efforts to get every voter to take part in every election, with special emphasis on those who are least likely to participate.

Eliminate differential treatment of independents and party members. Voters without a party preference are on track to become a plurality of the electorate, and the new automated registration law may greatly accelerate that trend. These voters can participate in every congressional and legislative primary election under the state’s top-two primary law. But they should also have full access to presidential primaries and internal party decision making. Otherwise, the number of voters making these decisions will continue to fall.

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