

Participating in Democracy: Civic Engagement in California

National studies have shown that civic engagement—which includes voting in elections, other forms of political participation, and volunteering for community and non-profit services—has declined over the past two decades. This trend does not bode well for the long-term health of American democracy. Declining participation means fewer opportunities for state and local governments to understand the needs and concerns of their constituents. And group differences in civic participation can lead to disparities in citizen influence over legislation—whether it be through elected representatives or the initiative process—as well as the unequal distribution of social benefits.

Such a trend could be especially troublesome in California, given the large and growing diversity of its population, the complexity of the problems it faces, and the sheer size of the state. Yet there has been little systematic information available about group differences in civic engagement in the state, other than voting. In *The Ties That Bind: Changing Demographics and Civic Engagement in California*, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Mark Baldassare provide the first detailed and comprehensive picture of the relationship between demographic diversity and citizen involvement in civic affairs in California.

Using data gathered by national studies and numerous statewide surveys in California conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California, the authors examine the participation rates of various demographic groups across a wide range of political and volunteer activities. Their principal finding is that those who have the most to say in California elections are also those who participate more in the broader political and civic life of the state. Specifically, those who are white, older, more affluent, homeowners, and more highly educated demonstrate the highest levels of civic engagement. Thus, other types of political activities do not necessarily diminish the kinds of demographic inequalities found at the ballot box: Differences in participation associated with voting are also found in such activities as writing letters to

elected officials, signing petitions, and contributing money to political causes. Similar levels of participation inequality are also found for volunteerism. In sum, patterns in broad-based political participation and volunteerism do not make up for a lack of voting. They tend, instead, to reinforce the divisions between those who are actively involved in civic life in the Golden State and those who are not.

Among other key findings: Voter turnout in California is lower than in the rest of the United States. California also lags behind the rest of the nation in its rate of campaign contributions to state legislators and national officeholders. Although rates of volunteerism are similar to those in the rest of the nation, there are notable differences in the types of activities in which volunteers participate. For example, Californians are less likely to volunteer for religious organizations and more likely to participate in children's organizations.

There are distinct differences across the major regions of the state (the San Francisco Bay Area, the Central Valley, Los Angeles, and the rest of Southern California). For example, those living in the San Francisco Bay Area are the least likely to be involved in religious groups and the most likely to participate in children's organizations. There are also notable differences in participation based on political party registration. Among those registered as Independents, residents in the San Francisco Bay Area have the highest rates of political participation and those living in the Central Valley have the lowest. In every region, participation is lowest among those who are not registered to vote, even for political activities unrelated to voting.

There are sizable differences in participation associated with race/ethnicity and immigrant generation and language use. Whites are overrepresented in California in almost every political activity. Thus, the option of participating in political activities other than voting tends to reinforce the dominance of whites at the ballot box. Asian Americans are

consistently underrepresented in various types of political activities. In terms of other demographic characteristics, the highest levels of participation inequality are those based on education, homeownership, and income.

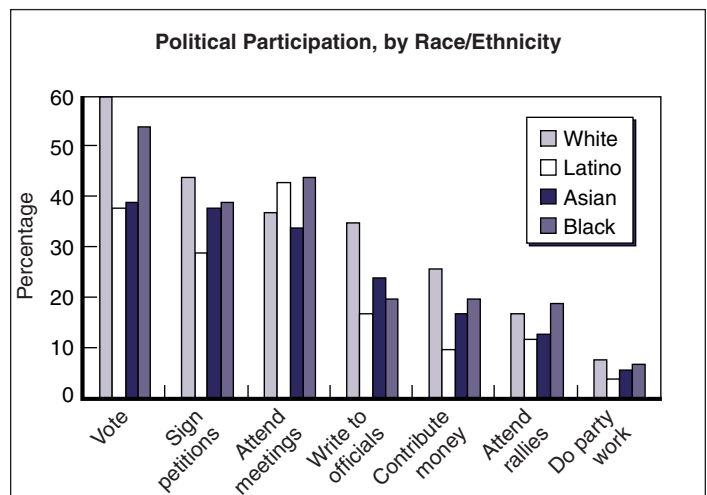
A number of policy implications and recommendations can be derived from the analysis. First, the dramatic racial and ethnic changes that are under way in California today may alter the rates of civic engagement in the future, not necessarily for the better. Second, declining levels of civic engagement could further aggravate one of the most serious societal problems facing the state today—economic inequality between the “haves” and “have nots.” Low-income and minority communities are less likely to address social problems on their own through volunteer activities, which could be particularly important when state and local governments are faced with budget deficits and program cuts, and the limited community participation among disadvantaged groups means that their voices may not be heard as different interest groups compete for state and local government services. Finally, the state’s governance structure relies heavily on direct democracy—that is, voters making important local and state policy decisions at the ballot box. If current trends persist, members of underrepresented groups may never be heard in the policy process because many do not vote or participate actively in the broader political process that leads to policy changes.

The authors offer a number of specific recommendations:

- There is a need to inform and motivate citizens about participation beyond the ballot box. In addition to improving economic conditions and educational attainment, greater outreach efforts by civic and political institutions are necessary to reduce gaps in participation between various demographic groups.
- First-generation immigrants represent an untapped resource for civic involvement. The authors found an especially strong interest in volunteering among immigrants. This segment of society would benefit directly from increased community involvement in improving local conditions. However, many immigrants are unaware of volunteering opportunities, and outreach and education efforts by community organizations could help raise participation.

- Increasing civic engagement should have a regional approach. In designing programs to increase political participation and volunteering, public and nonprofit groups should consider the unique differences among racial/ethnic groups in each of the state’s major regions.
- Current disparities in civic engagement associated with race/ethnicity and immigrant generation are linked to differences in economic conditions, English language proficiency, and educational attainment. These disparities in civic engagement are not likely to disappear over time unless there is general social and economic progress among today’s disadvantaged groups.

With sustained attention to the issue of civic engagement from researchers, community organizations, and political leaders, it is possible to reduce the divide between those who participate regularly and have a greater say in policy decisions and those who are disengaged from civic life in California. The state could become a model society for a large “majority-minority” democracy with many diverse groups participating actively in the political process.



Although the rank-ordering of political activities is similar across racial groups, there are significant group differences for each type of activity.

This research brief summarizes a report by Karthick Ramakrishnan and Mark Baldassare, The Ties That Bind: Changing Demographics and Civic Engagement in California (2004, 126 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-084-1). 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.