

# Do Registration Reforms Add New Voters or Keep Californians Registered?

In the last few years, reforms such as California New Motor Voter (CNMV) and streamlined address updates have brought on new voters while helping those who move within the state to stay registered. Registration rates overall are up due to a mix of new voters and a spike in address updates.

- ▶ After the adoption of CNMV, new registrations and address updates both became more common, to roughly equal degrees.
- ▶ With the 2016 launch of VoteCal, a statewide voter file, the process for updating addresses across county lines also became more seamless. Even so, CNMV was a bigger driver of address updates during this time.
- ▶ The recent reforms have added or maintained more voters as a share of the total voting-eligible population, but they have not improved the representativeness of the electorate by much.

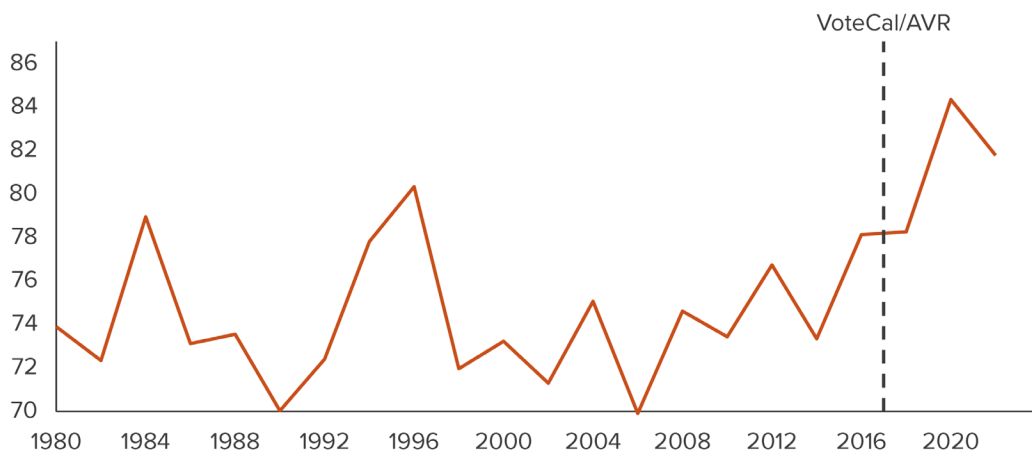
Both the rise in address updates and in new registrations are policy successes. But only new registrations expand the electorate to include Californians who are not already participating. To better engage young people and diversify the electorate, the state may need to broaden its efforts to register new voters, and these new voters may need targeted outreach to help get them to the polls.

## How does California add or update voter registration automatically?

Under California New Motor Voter (CNMV), customers at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) are now required to answer voter registration questions on an electronic touchscreen in order to complete a transaction such as applying for or renewing a driver's license. Registration rates have grown about 4 percentage points over the past five years—and CNMV may account for over half of that increase.

### Voter registration climbed in California after the state implemented automatic options

Registered as a share of eligible (%)



Source: California Secretary of State.

Notes: Trend line shows the official registration rate as a share of total voting-eligible population; vertical dotted line indicates the point at which both the single statewide voter file (VoteCal) and California's version of automatic voter registration (California New Motor Voter) went live.

Address updates have also become easier with the advent of VoteCal, a single statewide voter file. Voters moving across county lines no longer need to re-register in their new county; the transfer is handled behind the scenes when they file a change of address with the DMV.

## How can we be sure the reforms caused the registration changes?

Excitement around national politics reached a fever pitch in the presidential elections that included Trump. Voter turnout in California and the country surged from high rates in 2016 to record rates in 2020. In such a climate, address updates and new registrations also might be expected to surge. Both did indeed surge across all states—especially swing states. Yet states adopting automatic voter registration saw increases above and beyond what could be explained by voter enthusiasm. This suggests AVR caused at least some of the rise in address updates and new registrations in California and other AVR states.

## Are registration reforms making the California electorate more representative?

California is home to an “exclusive electorate,” [a population of voters](#) that is older and more likely to be white than the state population as a whole. Automatic address updates and new registrations might have added more young people to the voter files because movers and eligible-but-unregistered Californians tend to be younger than the [overall voting-eligible population](#). But registered voters who move are still disproportionately white, while the eligible but unregistered population has greater shares of Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans. That makes new registrations more likely to add voters of color.

In reality, address updates added disproportionately more middle-aged and Asian American Californians, while the rise in new registrations was concentrated among young and middle-aged Californians and Asian Americans. Given that Latinos, African Americans, and young people participate in elections at lower rates, registration gains needed to be larger than those of older or white Californians in order to correct past imbalances.

## What actions are needed to get more Californians registered and voting?

Changes in total registration mask the fact that some gains come from maintaining the voter file as it is, through address updates. Other efforts will be necessary to promote more new registrations. To reach a wider spectrum of the voting-eligible population, California could extend an approach like CNMV to other agencies and programs, such as offering a registration option when people interact with the Covered California health insurance exchange or when residents apply for MediCal benefits.

While new registrations bring in those who have been most underrepresented in voting—young Californians and Californians from communities of color—new registrants may need the most [outreach to become regular voters](#). In recent elections, average voter turnout varied across race/ethnicity and age; but even within these groups, new CNMV registrants always had the lowest turnout. New registrants may not show up to vote because they may not know enough about when, where, or how they can vote. Voter education can help, especially when targeted at new CNMV registrants.

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Source: Adapted by Stephanie Barton from [Do Registration Reforms Add New Voters or Keep Californians Registered?](#) by Eric McGhee, Jennifer Paluch, and Mindy Romero.