



# **THE UNDERMOBILIZATION OF YOUNG VOTERS IN CALIFORNIA**

**TAPPING THE POTENTIAL TO BUILD YOUTH  
POLITICAL POWER**

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**V**oter turnout during midterm elections is consistently much lower than turnout in a presidential election year, when the presidential race draws a lot of media attention. Participation in midterm elections tends to be especially low among young eligible voters. Although they have much at stake in congressional, state, and local elections, young adults may be less aware of the implications of election outcomes than their older counterparts. The next US midterm election, in November 2022, presents an opportunity to activate young adults who remain undermobilized. This report shows patterns of voter registration and turnout in California for eligible voters aged 18–34 in the 2018 midterm election. Results are disaggregated by county to inform efforts to register and educate young voters.

### **THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GAP**

We express voter registration and turnout among young adults in California with the Civic Engagement Gap, which represents the number of young Californians who registered and voted in November 2018 as a share of all California citizens in this age group in the same year. The Civic Engagement Gap reveals that for every 100 eligible California voters aged 18–34, 67 registered and only 32 turned out to vote. In other words, about one-third of California citizens did not register, and about two-thirds did not exercise their right to vote in 2018. These patterns

point to the potential for growing the young electorate in California during midterm elections in 2022 and in the future.

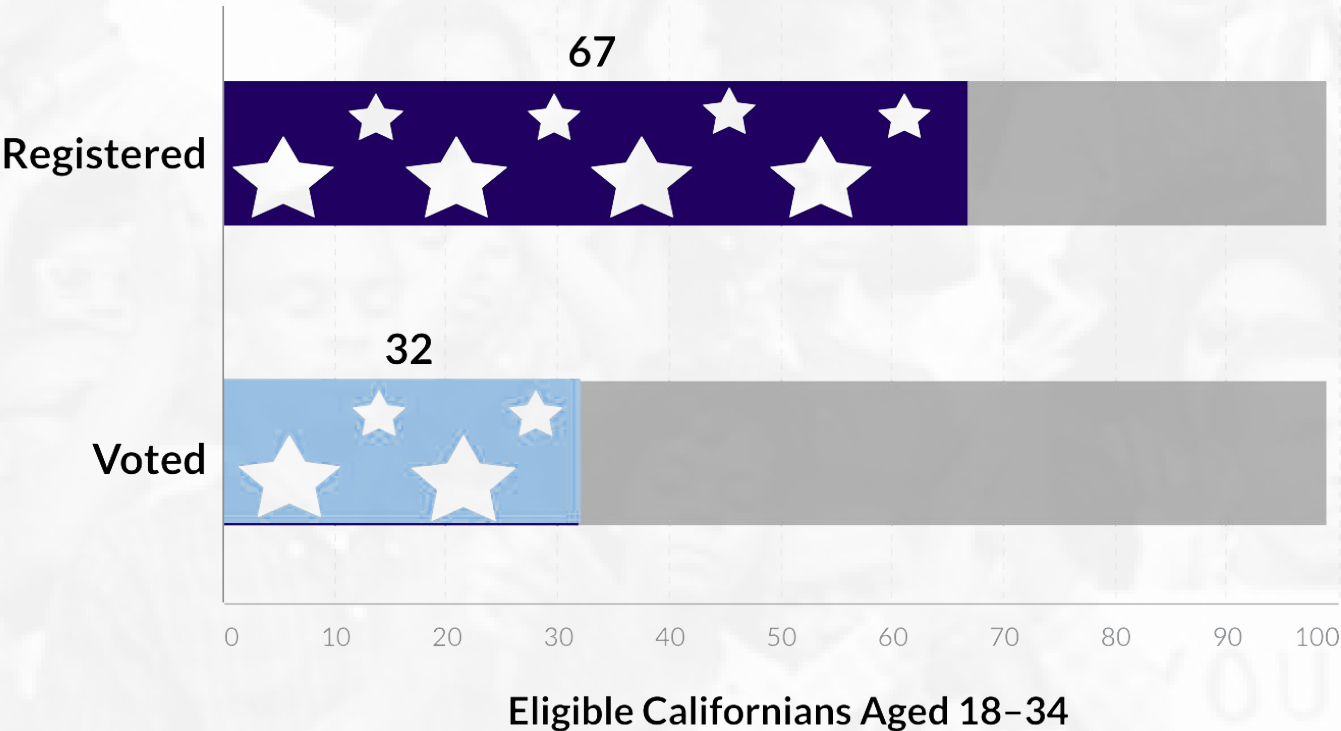
### **COUNTY-LEVEL VARIATION**

The Civic Engagement Gap varies across California’s counties, with some counties recording much higher numbers for turnout and/or registration than others. Table 1 lists California counties with total population sizes larger than 135,000, ranked from highest to lowest in terms of voter registration. The table also lists voter turnout.<sup>1</sup>

The table shows that young adult citizens in the Bay Area—Marin, San Mateo, San Francisco, and Alameda Counties—registered and voted at especially high rates compared to those for the state. In Contra Costa County, also located in the Bay Area, the number of young adults who registered was very high, and the number who voted was above the state rate. In Los Angeles County, the most populous county in the state, citizens have an outsized influence on statewide voter registration and turnout rates. Here, voter registration was particularly high, but turnout was just above the overall rate for the state.

County-level patterns also demonstrate that voter registration and turnout remained comparatively low in the Inland Empire and Central Valley regions. For example, in the Inland Southern California counties of San

# The 2018 Civic Engagement Gap Ratio, California Voters Aged 18-34



Note: The rates represent the number of young adults who registered or voted per every 100 eligible young adults. Sources: American Community Survey, 2018, and Political Data, Inc.

Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial, fewer than 60 out of every 100 young adult citizens were registered, and fewer than 25 voted. (These numbers were especially low in Imperial County.) In the Central Valley, voters in Fresno,

San Joaquin, Merced, Kern, Madera, and Kings Counties turned out in low numbers, especially in Kings County, where only 16 out of every 100, or half the rate for the entire state, showed up at the polls.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW THE ELECTORATE

The Civic Engagement Gap for 2018 offers important lessons for 2022 voter outreach efforts. Prior research indicates that peer-to-peer outreach can effectively increase civic engagement among young eligible voters. For example, voter education during the registration process is important for conveying the significance of congressional and local elections to young voters and their communities.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, peer-to-peer reminders to vote have been shown to increase turnout.<sup>3</sup> Such outreach during election season is crucial given changes to voting processes, as federal, state, and local governments respond to evolving health and safety concerns and technological developments. Furthermore, as demonstrated in this report, civic engagement across California's counties varies widely, and thus strategies for registering and mobilizing voters must be tailored to different regions. Young leaders can play a role in defining non-partisan messaging that addresses local issues and resonates among their peers in their communities.

Young people have a lot at stake as California recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. Investments in voter registration and non-partisan education are critical for ensuring that they use their voices in the democratic process.

## NOTES

1. This study relies on analyses of data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2018 and Political Data, Inc. The ACS does not report population by age and citizenship in its one-year estimates for counties with total populations under 135,000, so California's smaller counties are not included.

2. Veronica Terriquez and Steven Carmona Mora, *The LA Youth Vote and the Activation of a Young and Diverse Electorate* (Los Angeles: USC Equity Research Institute, 2020), <https://transform.ucsc.edu/los-angeles-youth-vote/>; and Veronica Terriquez, Randy Villegas, and Roxanna Villalobos, *Youth-Led Civic Engagement and the Growing Electorate: Findings from the Central Valley Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project* (Los Angeles: USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, 2020), [https://rca.ucsc.edu/documents/cvfs\\_rca-report-by-terriquez-et-al-final-2.pdf](https://rca.ucsc.edu/documents/cvfs_rca-report-by-terriquez-et-al-final-2.pdf).

3. Veronica Terriquez and Jiayi Xu, "Mobilizing Young Voters to the Polls: Lessons Learned from the Power California Network" (Los Angeles: USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, 2020), <https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/MobilizingYoungVoters.pdf>.

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**Cover photo courtesy of Khmer Girls in Action (KGA). KGA is a Long Beach-based youth organizing group with a strong track record of getting out the vote among Cambodian and other young voters.**