

Uneven Landscape: Mapping Underrepresentation of Young Adults in California's Electorate

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Introduction

The foundation of electoral democracy, the principle of universal suffrage, has long been framed in terms of “one person, one vote.” Yet this seemingly self-explanatory slogan has at least two distinct meanings. One involves access to the ballot—the universal *right* to vote. Another understanding of this principle of political equality is geographic—mapping legislative districts based on the equal distribution of the populations represented. In the United States, both dimensions of universal suffrage were established relatively recently in historical terms, with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Supreme Court’s 1964 *Reynolds vs. Sims* decision, respectively. The former created federal enforcement mechanisms to put the principle of universal suffrage into practice, while the latter required legislative districts to have roughly equal populations. Those concerned with extending citizenship rights to young adults would move the historical turning point for universal suffrage forward, to the 1971 extension of voting rights to 18-year olds with the 26th Amendment to the Constitution.

Our discussion addresses a different dimension of the principle of “one person, one vote”—the lack of universal *voting*. Some citizens vote more than others. Within the study of U.S. elections, variation in voter turnout rates is widely associated with formal education, income, gender race, and age. Yet, geography matters as well. Even when legislative district boundaries are drawn so that each legislator represents populations of similar sizes, when voter turnout rates vary widely geographically, the result is that each vote that is actually cast in low turnout districts, in effect, counts more than each vote cast in high turnout districts. We argue this violates the principle of “one person, one vote.”

Using California as a case study, we document how the U.S. political system falls short of the one person,

one vote principle by measuring and mapping geographic variation in the degree to which the state’s eligible citizens exercise their right to vote, first in terms of the electorate as a whole, and then in terms of young adult voters. In spite of the civic energy surrounding the lowering of the voting age to 18, since then young adults have voted at dramatically lower rates than other citizens. However, considering the consistency and magnitude of this disparate participation, there is a relatively small amount of research attention devoted to it compared with examinations of general turnout rates. We conclude our discussion with an analysis of the role of institutional strategies for promoting young adult voting, addressing California’s new experience with the launch of online voter registration towards the end of the 2012 campaign, as well as the underrecognized potential contribution of high schools as institutional entry points for educating new voters on the how (and why) of using voting for political voice.

Mapping Variation

Practitioners, such as election campaign strategists and civic organizations, pay close attention to geographic variation in electoral turnout. Whether they prefer to target “likely voters” or whether their goal is to activate “low-propensity voters,” they analyze fine-grained geographic patterns in turnout trends. In contrast, less scholarly research has addressed subnational variation in election turnout since the landmark 1980 study *Who Votes?* by Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone. Most studies that seek to explain variation in voter turnout compare voter/nonvoter characteristics, institutional features of the voting process, degree of electoral competitiveness/party systems, change over time, or different voter mobilization strategies. Yet, a focus on subnational variation can be very revealing. The U.S. Elections Project documents variation in voter turnout across states, measuring the size of

the eligible electorate with great precision, taking into account both noncitizens and felon disenfranchisement. In the 2012 U.S. presidential elections, for example, the national average eligible turnout rate of 58.6% of eligible voters hides extreme variation across states, ranging from a high of 76.4% in Minnesota to a low of 44.5% in Hawaii. This discussion of variation within California finds even greater variation across the state's counties.

One could argue that geography only matters insofar as it is a reflection of the uneven distribution of some combination of those underlying factors that have so far dominated the attention of political scientists, such as formal education and income. Yet geographic disaggregation can shed light on which combination of underlying causes to look for. We also know that different causal factors may be influencing voters within different contexts. Subnational comparisons can reveal these patterns that would not otherwise be visible. For one notable example, analysis of national Latino voter turnout trends in the 1990s showed only modest growth. This approach might lead one to conclude that ethnicity and socio-economic characteristics were determinant—a fairly intractable obstacle for those concerned with closing the gap between the Latino share of the citizenry and their share of the voting electorate. Yet an examination of the relationship between the demographic growth of Latinos and their increased political influence found the pattern of this relationship varied across states, over the same time period. Additionally, comparison of turnout rates between U.S.-born and naturalized voters in three states with large Latino populations revealed very significant subnational differences. Adrian Pantoja, Ricardo Ramírez, and Gary Segura's highly original study of turnout in the 1996 presidential elections found that U.S.-born Latinos in California voted at significantly higher rates than their counterparts in Texas and Florida, and that that newly-naturalized citizens in California voted at notably higher rates than other Latinos in California (2001). In other words, California's more politicized public sphere—with voter mobilization provoked by polarizing ballot initiatives and increased defensive naturalization among permanent residents—outweighed the “constants” of ethnicity and socio-economic status. Without the application of the comparative method across

subnational units, the variation in electoral participation trends and the associated finding, in both of these studies, of the relevance of contingent political factors would have been rendered invisible. The subnational comparative method warrants greater recognition as a distinct analytical strategy.

Our discussion focuses on geographic variation of voter turnout rates within the especially large, diverse state of California. While we identify the historical disparities in voter turnout in California, we take a deeper look at the state's 2012 general election, mapping differences across its counties. By focusing on geographic variation in turnout within one state, some elements of institutional context are held constant (especially since in the U.S., state governments are responsible for regulating the administration of elections). With this analysis, we do not attempt to explain variation in voter turnout present across counties, but rather seek to further identify the degree of variation (by age) and highlight the extent of the geographic disparity in political voice.

In contrast to studies based on self-reported voter turnout data, this examination utilizes the official voter records from the California Secretary of State. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for greater accuracy than survey data in terms of measuring how many citizens actually voted, as a share of the eligible electorate. Voter eligibility is identified by citizen of voting-age data provided by the California Department of Finance. The principle disadvantage of using actual voter records to measure turnout is that it is limited to analyzing those voter characteristics that are recorded as part of the registration process. The official voting data therefore allow for a focus on age and geography as key variables, but not income, formal education or race. Because income, race and access to education are unevenly distributed across counties, future research may well find that geographic variation in California's turnout is a proxy for these other underlying variables. However, from the point of view of those interested in possible institutional entry points for addressing low voter turnout, geographic variation is especially relevant insofar as counties are responsible for administering the electoral process. County government actions can therefore either facilitate or create obstacles for registration and turnout by low-propensity voters.

California Electoral Context

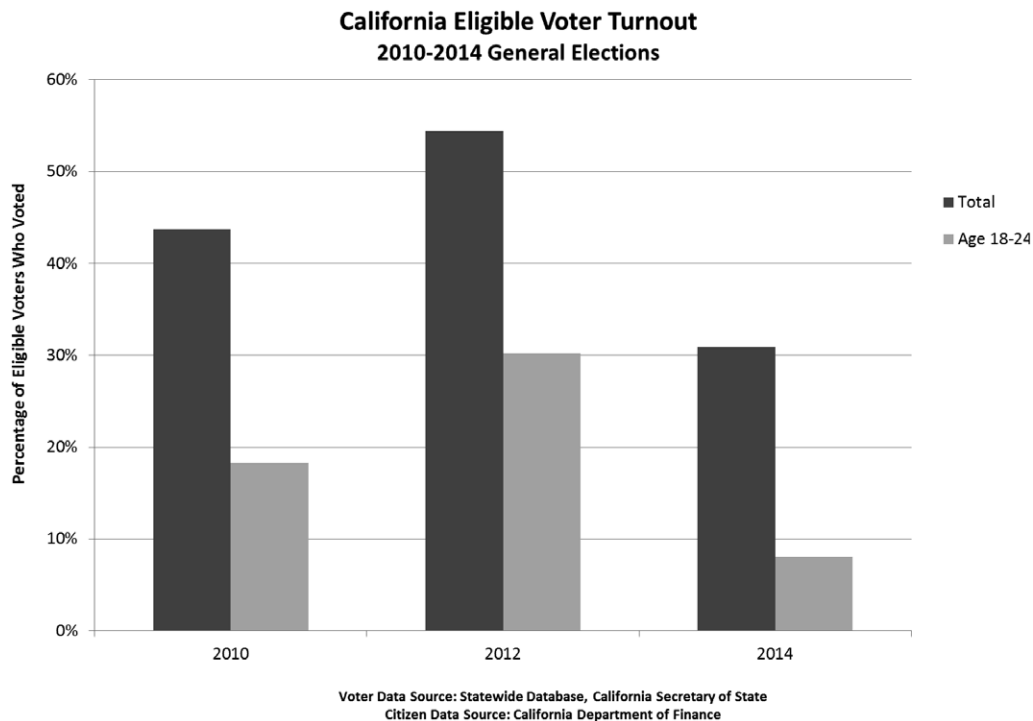
Over the past decade, California has experienced lower eligible turnout than the U.S., as a whole, in both midterm and presidential elections. For the state, its youth (age 18–24) turnout is always far lower than its total electorate’s turnout. **Figure 1** shows that in recent elections, this pattern has remained consistent, even widening in the record low turnout year 2014.

2012 General Election

In the November 2012 election in California, overall voter turnout was below the national average of 58.6%, ranking California in the bottom 20% of states in terms of turnout. This is not surprising, insofar as the vast bulk of presidential campaign resources were invested in 10 swing states, and California was not among them. Following the 2012 party conventions, two thirds of campaign events that involved the presidential and vice-presidential candidates were held in only four swing states (Ohio, Florida, Virginia, and Iowa).

This extreme geographic bias is due to one of the core institutional features of the U.S. electoral system—the Electoral College, whose delegates choose the president, as mandated by the Constitution. These delegates are not elected based on the one person, one vote principle. First, they are not allocated to the states in direct proportion to their population. Second, in almost all states, delegates are chosen by a first-past-the-post, winner-take-all system (this is determined by state law). In other words, the winner of 51% of California’s votes wins 100% of California votes in the Electoral College. This system has two implications for the one person, one vote system. First, the 49% of votes for the loser does not count toward their national total. Second, every winner’s additional vote, above 50%, does not count. This system sharply weakens the incentives for national political campaigns to contest non-swing states. This system can also lead to counter-intuitive and contentious outcomes in which the winner of the Electoral College vote is not the winner of the popular vote—as in the case of the 2016 Trump-Clinton election and four other presidential elections.

Figure 1. 2010–2014 Eligible Voter Turnout



At the same time, in California's 2012 election, there were other ballot choices to make that could have attracted voters to the polls. Federal and state legislative elections were in some cases more competitive than in previous decades, as a result of a recent reform that turned the districting process over to an independent, non-partisan commission. Previously, state legislators had drawn the district boundaries, and they had strong incentives to favor incumbency. As the saying goes, "the politicians chose the voters, rather than the other way around." This system persists in most U.S. states.

In addition, one might expect that California's unusual system of direct democracy, the ballot initiative process, would also encourage voter turnout. Yet ballot initiatives rarely draw more than a slight majority of the electorate to the polls. Long lists of very complex ballot initiatives are daunting for those with less formal education – indeed, for all voters. The November, 2012 official state voter guide was 144 pages long. In a very large, diverse and dispersed electorate, is difficult for disinterested parties to inform most voters effectively about what is at stake. Critics now argue that the ballot initiative process favors interests that can afford to pay for mass media campaigns in multiple, costly media markets.

Moreover, the democratic potential of California's ballot initiative process was further undermined by the fact that until a 2011 reform, ballot initiatives could be scheduled for state primary elections, when turnout is always lower than in general elections. For example, recall California's famous Proposition 13 in 1978, which both limited local funding for schools and imposed a 2/3 legislative supermajority to pass state taxes. Press coverage and the history books recall that anti-tax victory as a landslide. It did win 62.6% of the vote. But only 44.9% of the electorate actually voted—it was a June, primary election (California Secretary of State). So if we do the math, this means that *only 28% of the electorate* made a law that gave one third of the legislature veto power. That voting electorate was notably older, high income, more likely to be homeowners, and whiter than California's citizenry as a whole. In effect a minority of voters locked in minority rule at the state level for decades.

Uneven Turnout

Not only does California have one of the lowest eligible voter turnout rates in the U.S., there is also a high degree of voting disparity by age and geography within the state. This disparity contradicts the principle of "one person, one vote" and results in systemic under-representation for the state's young adults.

Dramatic Geographic Disparities in Voter Turnout Rates Across California

When looking at the voting of all eligible citizens, California turnout is at only 54.4% for the same 2012 election—meaning almost half of the state's eligible citizens were not represented in the state's electoral process. However, this statewide rate conceals significant disparities in eligible turnout within California. **Map 1** shows that 2012 general eligible turnout ranges across California's counties vary by 42.1 percentage points—from a low of 32.7% (Kings) to a high of 74.8% (Marin), with almost half of counties (a total of 25) below the statewide eligible turnout average.

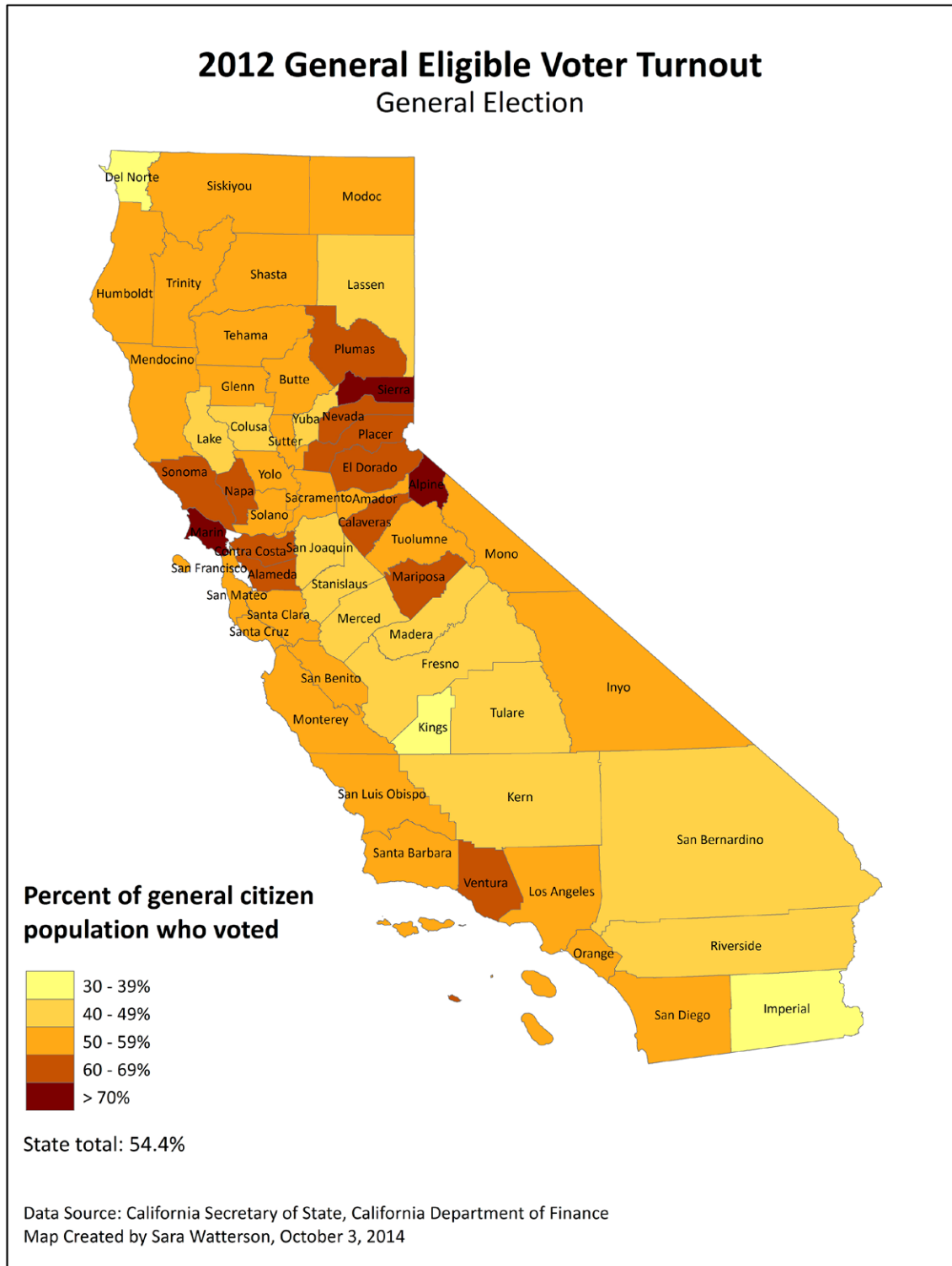
The concept of underrepresentation can be operationalized as follows—if members of a specific segment of the citizenry vote at lower rates than others, then its share of the actual electorate will be lower than its share of the eligible electorate. **Table 1** compares age cohorts in terms of their respective shares of the voting electorate, versus their share of the eligible voter population.

Disparities in Voter Turnout by Age—Youth Underrepresented

Breaking down California's 2012 general eligible vote, we found dramatic variation in turnout across the state's age groups, with youth (age 18–24) experiencing the lowest rates of participation. The turnout of eligible citizen youth is low at an estimated 30.2%. This turnout rate means about two thirds of California's eligible youth are not voting in the state's electoral system.

From **Figure 2**, we can see that 18- to 24-year olds in California are also underrepresented in the electorate compared to their share of the state's citizen voting eligible population. In 2012, youth accounted for 14.5% of the eligible electorate, but only 8% of

Map 1. 2012 California Turnout of Eligible Voters



(Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com.)

Table 1. California Voter Turnout of Eligible Population by Age Cohort: 2012 General Election

	Age, 18-24	Age, 25-34	Age, 35-44	Age, 45-54	Age, 55-64	Age, 65-74	Age, 75+	Total
California								
Citizen voter turnout	30.2%	42.5%	51.6%	59.3%	67.5%	73.2%	70.0%	54.4%
Percent of total voters	8.1% (1,028,242)	13.6% (1,732,170)	15.3% (1,951,438)	19.9% (2,540,052)	20.0% (2,555,955)	13.0% (1,653,854)	10.2% (1,303,164)	100% (12,765,318)
Percent of total voting eligible pop	14.5% (3,407,415)	17.3% (4,078,962)	16.1% (3,781,708)	18.2% (4,285,716)	16.1% (3,784,435)	9.6% (2,259,389)	7.9% (1,862,352)	100% (23,459,977)

Voting Data Source: California Secretary of State, January 11, 2013.

Citizen Data Source: California Department of Finance.

the actual voting electorate. For 25- to 34-year olds, they account for 13.6% of the actual voting electorate, and 17.3% of the eligible population. However, we see opposite trends for older cohorts. Cohorts that are age 45+ are overrepresented in the voting electorate compared to their citizen population proportion. In other words, older California voters have a disproportionately larger voice in the state’s electoral process.

An even greater contrast in youth eligible turnout is seen across the state’s counties. **Map 2** shows young adult turnout rates varied by over thirty percentage points—from a low of 12.8% (Del Norte) to a high of 46.7% (Marin). Marin is a coastal county in the San Francisco metropolitan region, with a population that is 73% white, non-Hispanic, with one of the lowest poverty rates in the state and one of the highest median household incomes. Interestingly, the statewide turnout average for eligible youth was lower than the lowest county turnout for the eligible general population.

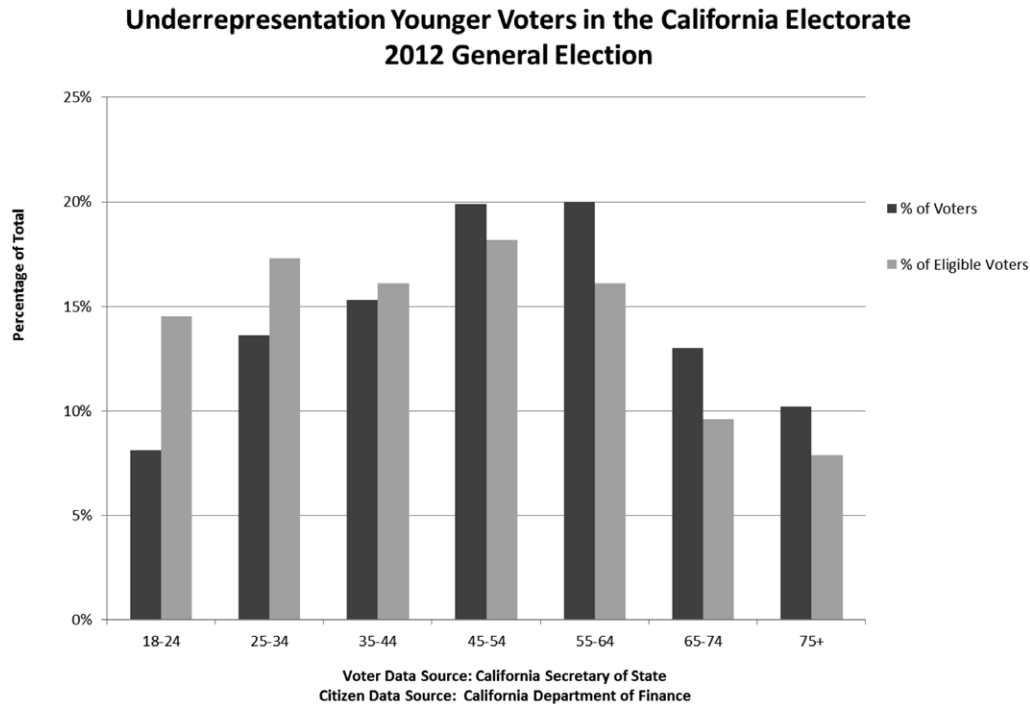
2008 Versus 2012 Youth Voter Turnout

The 2012 pattern was not unique. Geographic disparities California turnout were very similar in 2008. While overall eligible youth voter turnout declined 2.6 percentage points in 2012 (from 32.8% in 2008), variation in regional and county turnout showed similar patterns to 2008, with low turnout counties and high turnout counties remaining the same. The turnout gap between youth and the total electorate was the same in both presidential elections, for the state, as a whole (only 0.2 of a percentage point lower than 2008). Individually, nearly all counties experienced very little change in the age turnout gap, with the exception of San Luis Obispo and Santa Cruz which both experienced significant reductions (10.5 and 11.4 percentage points, respectively) in 2012.

What Difference can Institutional Changes in Voter Access Make?

The extreme patterns of variation in voter turnout rates, both by county and by age group, raise two sets of questions, in terms of both possible causes and possible strategies for addressing these disparities in representation. One line of inquiry focuses on voter characteristics, following the body of research

Figure 2. Share of 2012 Total Voters and Eligible Voter Population, by Age Cohort



on political behavior that focuses on voters as individuals. This approach tends to imply that inequality in voter participation is an intractable problem, not amenable to large-scale change—at least in the foreseeable future. This approach tends not to address the potential influence of public institutions, even though some of the individual voter characteristics that closely correlate with voter participation are direct reflections of the unequal performance of public sector institutions, as in the case of high school completion rates. More importantly, research that addresses only correlations between individual voter characteristics and turnout does not address either the determinants of voter motivation nor access to the electoral system as potential major variables. Research by Lisa García-Bedolla and Melissa Michelson shows that targeted voter education strategies can significantly influence the participation decisions of ostensibly “low-propensity” voters, across a wide range of settings and social groups. In other words, individual voter characteristics influence, but do not completely determine turnout rates.

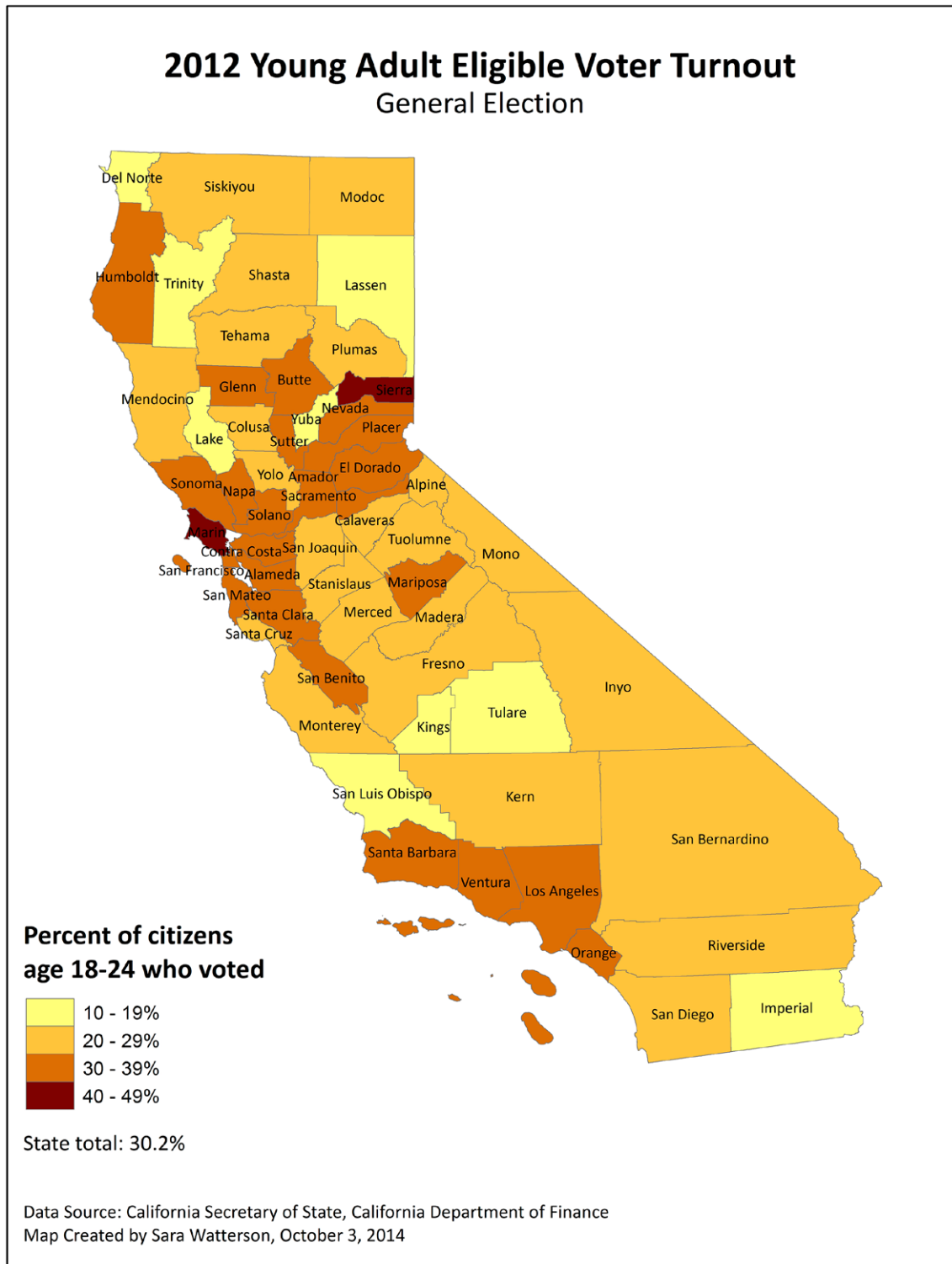
This leaves open the question of the scope for institutional change strategies that could reduce

geographic and social inequality in voter participation rates. Institutional barriers clearly matter, but what role can institutional changes intended to facilitate access play?

Two institutionally based strategies in California are especially relevant for potentially increasing the electoral participation of young adult voters: online voter registration and high school-based registration.

In late 2012, California implemented its online voter registration system, creating expectations for the potential changes new online registrants would bring to the state’s electorate. In particular, the new system was touted as a way to increase electoral access for California’s eligible youth. Although established for only a month before the state’s close of registration (October 22, 2012), this method of voter registration quickly became the dominant choice for new California registrants, both youth and the electorate, as a whole. Thirty percent of almost all online registrants in 2012 general election were youth and the number of youth online registrants appears to have helped increase youth

Map 2. 2012 California Turnout of Eligible Young Adult Voters (18-24)



(Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com.)

registrants to make up 11% of the state’s overall electorate. While we cannot know with certainty whether these new online youth registrants would have not registered by another method, we do know that online registrants did add to the state’s voter turnout rolls.

Figure 3 shows that in the 2012 general election, online registrants turned out to vote 8 percentage points higher than voters who registered using other methods, with this difference in turnout by registration method much larger for younger voters. Seventy percent of 18- to 24-year olds that registered online turned out to vote—25 percentage points higher than those ages 18 to 24 that did not register online. These turnout rates mean there was a much smaller age gap in voter turnout for online registrants compared to the large age difference in turnout for non-online registrants (UC Davis California Civic Engagement Project, 2013).

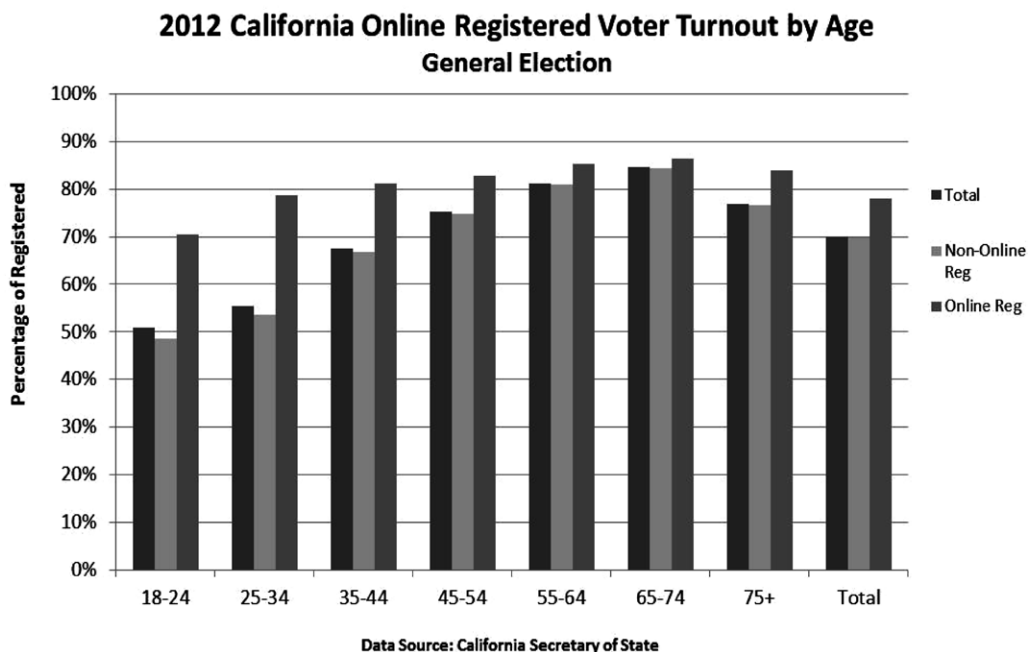
In addition, voter turnout rates for online registrants also vary across the California’s counties. While reasons for these variations are still being examined, we know that disparate use of online registration by counties, at least for the 2012 election, translates into differing impacts on the age

make-up of counties’ overall voting electorate. In the November election, counties with higher percentages of online registrants, generally gained a larger bump in their overall registered voter turnout rates, for all party affiliations. These counties also saw larger percentages of youth participation, with young online registrants helping to narrow the participation gap youth have with the rest of the counties’ electorate.

As of California’s 2016 primary election registration deadline (May 23, 2016), the California Secretary of State has received and processed a total of 3,857,513 applications for online voter registration (filed by new registrants and including applications to re-register). There were 2,289,859 online registrants on record, comprising 12.8% of then 17.9 million registered voters in California. Of all people who were registered to vote by the registration deadline and who registered since OVR became an option in September 2012, 36.7% have registered online.

Californians under age 35 are using the state’s online voter registration system in much larger percentages than older Californians. Nearly 37% of 18- to 24-year olds registered from May 2016 to September 2012 did so through OVR and 44.0% of registrants

Figure 3. 2012 Online Registered Voter Turnout by Age



age 25 to 34 used OVR. These use rates mean that for the total population that registered since September 2012, those who registered online were much younger than those who registered offline. Indeed, a majority of Californians who registered to vote online were under age 35. Older millennials aged 25 to 34 comprised the largest share of the OVR population at 29.8%, followed by those aged 18 to 24 at 22.4%. Relatively few voters over the age of 55 registered to vote online in California.

Historically, public education has been assumed to play a major role in the civic socialization of young citizens. Yet, young adult voter turnout rates have dropped since 18-year olds won the right to vote in 1972. This suggests that the schools have not fulfilled their civic role effectively. State educational and election codes encourage high school voter education and registration, but these provisions are largely not bolstered by institutions and mandates that would encourage their implementation. In addition, educational policy, in practice, leaves the actual delivery of convincing answers to the “why bother to vote” question largely left up to the discretion of individual teachers. Moreover, the high degree of geographic variation in young voter turnout rates closely tracks inequality in high school completion rates in California. This is consistent with national survey research, underscoring the close connection between unequal access to quality education and eventual access to political representation.

In a state in which voters have direct influence over budgets for public education, one might expect the public schools to have an institutional interest in encouraging informed voting by young adults. Yet little is known about how and why institutions of public education dedicate resources to this process. One League of Women Voters study of volunteer efforts to register high school students to vote produced revealing results. Their 2010 action research project yielded a useful “best practices” manual entitled “Empowering the Voters of Tomorrow.” Their research found that smaller-scale, longer classroom-based approaches were more effective than school assembly appeals. Yet the impact of the LWV project was limited: LWV volunteers collected registration forms from only one third of students encountered in their classroom visits. This low rate of return may have been due in part to the campaign’s focus on

18-year olds, even though in several states (including California), 17-year olds who will be 18 by the next election can also be pre-registered. As of January 1st, 2017, 16- and 17-year olds in California are also able to preregister to vote.

The LWV’s most remarkable finding was that their volunteers were only permitted to organize registration visits in *less than half of the high schools contacted*. This suggests that high school authorities generally do not perceive voter registration as a priority. Moreover, subsequent field research in Monterey County by U.C. Santa Cruz students found that high school principals did not promote voter registration, relying on the discretion of individual government teachers. While volunteer-based high school voter registration efforts appear to have limited impact, school-based efforts have only been tried on a limited scale in California. Recognizing this, there is currently an effort by the Power of Democracy, a statewide collaboration of judicial and civic learning leaders, encouraging California schools to prioritize civics in K-12 learning.

Preliminary field research by C. Avalos, V. Diaz, C. Magaña, and A. Rayburn indicates that one set of external actors can influence whether or not high schools encourage voter education and registration. County governments, which are in charge of voter registration, can dedicate staff resources to high school outreach programs—and they are well-positioned to pre-register young people who will be 18 in time for the next election (as in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties). Nonetheless, this same field research found that remarkably few civic stakeholders in the state (even those who are well-informed politically) were aware that 17-year olds have the right to pre-register to vote. Moreover, many county governments lack either the resources or the orientation to invest in voter registration outreach of any kind. In summary, school-based high school voter registration often falls between the cracks.

Conclusion

In both the scholarly research and media discourse on U.S. electoral turnout, persistent low rates and disparities across social groups are both widely acknowledged and sometimes lamented. This public recognition occasionally provokes

reform initiatives to broaden the electorate in some states, while other states pursue institutional changes to the voting process that would narrow the electorate, such as restrictive voter ID laws. This examination attempts to provide additional evidence to inform policy discussions by drawing attention to two under-addressed dimensions of unequal rates of electoral participation: variation by geography and by age group. Using official voting data, this study documented both of these patterns, separately and together. This data source—official voting data—was a strength, insofar as patterns were not distorted by the sampling or over-reporting issues that can confound survey data on voter turnout. Yet using official voting data was also a limitation, in that it did not allow documentation of the relationship between geographic variation and social categories other than age (such as education, income, race, and gender).

This study's findings of extreme patterns of variation by both county and age reveal two of the dimensions in which the California political system falls short of the one person, one vote principle.

While our analysis cannot test whether differences in turnout among California counties could be explained by differences in counties' demographics, we would expect that many of these differences are, indeed, attributable to demographics. However, location also matters. Documenting the dramatic geographical differences across the state reveals patterns of inequality in political influence and they provide an argument for remedying turnout disparities, because doing so will benefit the state's least-advantaged counties.

Mapping the geographic variation in turnout can inform the testing of additional analytical and explanatory hypotheses. For example, while education levels are well known to be associated with voter turnout as a generic trend, more fine-grained analysis of the geographic correlations between young adult voter turnout rates and performance levels of territorially defined public education systems would allow analysts to highlight both best practices or especially lagging regions. Such research could in turn inform the design of young adult civic engagement strategies that are more geographically targeted to areas with extreme participation gaps. Moreover, county governments are responsible

for administering elections in California, and are therefore key potential sites for pursuing innovative strategies to increase voter turnout.

This examination's findings underscore the extreme rates of variation in voter participation, both by geography and by age. Perhaps the most striking result is the degree to which these two trends are self-reinforcing in many regions of extreme underrepresentation, such as California's Central Valley. In a context of a scholarly literature that finds few institutional "magic bullets" for increasing voter turnout, this study also reviews the available evidence on two promising institutional change strategies. Online voter registration has already established itself as doing a formidable job in reaching young voters. Meanwhile, the apparent lack of widespread high school voter education is puzzling, suggesting the need for more in-depth research to explain why high school administrations do not make the informed electoral participation of their seniors an institutional priority—especially in a state where voters have an unusually degree of power over education funding. Both approaches to broadening the electorate have potential, and warrant more in-depth study.

In conclusion, the geographic disaggregation of voter turnout patterns can reveal participation trends that would not otherwise be evident. This more fine-grained, visually accessible mapping of who is actually represented in the political system can also inform both new research hypotheses and new institutional change strategies. Moreover, further emphasis on geographic disaggregation could help to move the study of voter participation patterns from general correlations to identify more specific causal pathways.

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