



# Ballot boom

## Turnout for California's historically underrepresented Latino, Asian and youth voters increased in 2018

BY DAVE KEMPA

**With 50 percent of eligible voters hitting the** polls this past November, California saw its highest midterm turnout in 36 years, punctuated by a dramatic increase in historically underrepresented populations.

Latinos, Asian Americans and young adults all voted at a higher rate than previous midterm elections, according to a new report by the California Civic Engagement Project at the University of Southern California.

Both Latinos and Asian Americans effectively doubled turnout from the last midterm election, with 36 percent of eligible Latinos and 33 percent of eligible Asian Americans voting—up from 17 percent and 18 percent in 2014, respectively. (Polling experts cannot parse out black voters using this methodology, which involves pulling traditionally Hispanic and Asian surnames from the state's voting record, since their last names are often indistinguishable from white voters'.)

In Sacramento County, eligible Latino turnout rose from 20 percent in 2014 to 38 percent, while Asian-American participation rose from 18 to 30 percent.

Young voters 18 to 24 more than tripled in representation from the 2014 midterms, when only 8 percent cast ballots. In 2018, 27.5 percent of registered youth voted—a figure comparable to the youth share in most presidential election years, when historically underrepresented populations are more likely to vote.

According to CCEP founding director Mindy Romero, it's not easy to pinpoint the reasons for this rise in numbers. "It's really a long game when you're trying to make a causal connection," she said.

Still, many recent developments may have played a role. For instance, California has made unprecedented efforts to make voter registration easier. Today a potential voter can register online or just show up at the polls on election day, register and then fill out a ballot. The state has started a pre-registration process for teens as young as 16, which automatically registers them on their 18th birthdays.

On top of all of this, five counties, including Sacramento County, participated last year in

California's Voter's Choice Act, in which every registered voter in the county received a ballot in the mail 28 days before the election, with the option to fill it out and mail it from home. Los Angeles County plans to participate, at least in part, in 2020, with around five other counties showing interest.

Simply put, it's easier to vote in California today. But other factors, including the tumultuous national political climate, could have played a role in increased turnout as well.

"There were two things in this election cycle that really we felt should drive turnout significantly higher than past elections," said Paul Mitchell, vice president of Political Data, Inc., a voter data company based in Sacramento. "One of them is the phenomenon of Trump."

Leading into the election, President Donald Trump tried to stoke Republican turnout by agitating anxieties over immigration. Not only might this have increased turnout on the right, it also had the potential to mobilize the Latino community against the president's rhetoric.

The other potential factor for an increased California turnout was that the state's ballot was the most diverse in history. In particular, residents saw more Latino candidates in 2018—and, now, more statewide elected officials—than ever before.

While Latinos and Asian Americans showed improvement with one-third of their registered populations turning out in 2018, 61 percent of non-Latino/Asian registered Californians showed up at the polls. Registered youth made up 14 percent of the state's eligible voters, but just 8 percent of all voters last November. All three populations have lower than average registration rates.

"We're still not seeing the full impact of their potential and future voting power," Mitchell said.

Romero said that there is always work to do to get underrepresented communities to the polls.

"I think it's important that people don't rest on assumptions for 2020," she said. "It's about mobilization, it's about people being contacted and reached out to and being told why it's important to vote."

**California has made unprecedented efforts to make voter registration easier.**



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