

2016

# PATH TO THE POLLS

Building a More Inclusive Democracy  
by Preregistering California's Youth

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## Preregistering California's Youth to Build a More Participatory Democracy



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# Executive Summary

In the 2014 elections, California had dismally low voter turnout, especially among young people. Fewer than 16 percent of eligible 18- to 24-year olds cast their ballots in the election, and only about half even registered to vote. Among eligible youth, underrepresented population groups were the least likely to become registered voters, a serious problem for a state as diverse as California, where Latino, African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander and other non-White communities comprise a growing majority of the state's youth population.

It will take new steps to ensure that the voices of all eligible young Californians are represented in the state's democracy. Fortunately, California is already making strides toward engaging young voters. With the passage of Assembly Bill 30 (2009) and Senate Bill 113 (2014), and the implementation of the new VoteCAL voter database (which as of this writing, is anticipated in fall 2016), 16- and 17-year-olds will be allowed to "preregister" to vote, ensuring that they are listed on the voter rolls the moment they turn 18.

Voter preregistration provides California with an opportunity to improve young voter participation, but state and local officials must take proactive steps in order to make preregistration a success.

## **Preregistering young people to vote before they turn 18 boosts voter turnout and helps turn them into lifelong voters.**

- Preregistration opens up new opportunities to register young people to vote—in high schools, in General Education Diploma (GED) programs, at community organizations or locations, online through popular websites, and at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV).
- Research shows allowing preregistration can increase young voter turnout by up to 13 percentage points.
- People who vote at an early age are more likely to stay engaged and vote in later elections.

**Allowing preregistration is a critical first step towards engaging young people, but adopting policies that encourage preregistration is essential for making it effective.** Conversations with state and local officials who have implemented voter preregistration in their jurisdictions reveal a common theme: close partnerships between elections officials, government institutions, schools, community organizations that are trusted by youth, parents and student volunteers are critical components of a successful preregistration program.

Several states with voter preregistration have implemented programs to help 16- and 17-year-olds take advantage of the ability to preregister.

- Florida: County Supervisors of Elections are required under state law to conduct outreach activities at every public high school and college campus and report voter education efforts to the Florida Office of the Secretary of State.
- Hawaii: The state Office of Elections runs a Young Voter Registration Program targeting juniors and seniors in high school. Youth engagement efforts have taken the form of school assemblies where music and popular culture are blended with voter registration instruction to engage with young people and encourage them to get involved.
- Louisiana: The state Office of Motor Vehicles is required to preregister 16- and 17-year-olds to vote when they apply for a driver's license unless the applicant opts out of voter registration. While Louisiana just began preregistering 16-year-olds to vote in 2015, it has smoothly incorporated preregistration into this "motor voter" model.

States allowing voter preregistration also report a number of challenges when engaging young people.

- Many teens do not understand the preregistration process or what steps need to be taken in order to become a voter. This information is often absent from school civics curriculums.
- Many teens cannot be reached through schools or at the DMV, particularly populations that are already underrepresented in the electorate.
- Preregistered voters frequently move shortly after turning 18, and do not update their voter registration records with their new locations.

Organizations that work with youth to promote civic participation express concerns that preregistration, a process in which only U.S. citizens are eligible to participate, risks stigmatizing and alienating non-citizens. Because California is a very racially and ethnically diverse state, anticipating these challenges and developing careful plans to manage sensitive issues is critical.

**California should learn from the experiences of other states and local youth leaders and develop its own set of "best practices" to maximize the positive impact of preregistration.**

*The state should implement practices that will make voter preregistration accessible to 16- and 17-year-olds. California should:*

- Provide voter preregistration opportunities in the places 16- and 17-year-olds commonly go—from the DMV to high schools and GED programs.
- Include 16- and 17-year-olds in

the implementation of California's updated motor voter law. As of this writing, stakeholders are involved in discussions with the California Secretary of State and DMV about ensuring that opportunities for preregistration will be integrated into the new voter registration practices.

- Ensure that voter education and preregistration opportunities are offered beyond the traditional venues, including places such as community organizations that are trusted by youth, local government cultural and recreational programs, juvenile detention facilities and home schooling organizations. Youth services workers and community organizations can help involve hard-to-reach populations in programs such as Kids Voting to increase interest in and familiarity with elections. In addition, youth from traditionally under-represented groups should be reached in other settings where there is an emphasis on the value of civic participation, such as naturalization ceremonies.
- Make preregistration as digital-friendly as possible. Post prominent preregistration links online on webpages young people visit. Ensure easy access to mobile-optimized preregistration websites and mobile apps, which can provide election information and reminders about voting.

*The state should work with schools to improve the voter education curriculum.*

- The California State Board of Education should closely monitor the implementation of the California Department of Education's History-Social Science Framework for curriculum, which was released

in July 2016, to ensure that the opportunity for preregistration and voter registration are incorporated into classroom discussions of civic participation, including "Principles of American Democracy," taught in grade 12. This should encompass information about how to properly fill out and submit the voter registration form, which may be paper or electronic, the eligibility requirements for registration and the benefits conferred by voting. Individual teachers should decide who should be responsible for presenting the information—students, community groups, elections officials or the teachers themselves.

- Comprehensive election education programs can increase youth interest in political issues and voting. The Secretary of State should encourage more schools to participate in the MyVote California Student Mock Election, where students can cast ballots for real candidates and practice voting. Mock elections should be preceded by classroom discussion of election topics. Ballot questions should mimic actual ballot items and may include additional questions of particular interest to California teens. Program participation rates and outcomes should be regularly assessed.
- The Secretary of State's office should incorporate preregistration into annual High School Voter Education Weeks. In preparation for these events, elections staff should offer training for student volunteers to help run voter preregistration and registration drives on campus. To assess and improve program effectiveness, the office should regularly seek feedback from program administrators.

*California should develop preregistration strategies that protect the privacy of non-eligible students, yet still provide ways for all students to become civically engaged.* If schools decide to conduct preregistration activities within the classroom setting, it is critical that school administrators develop strategies to handle sensitive immigration status issues that protect the privacy of students who are not eligible to preregister. These strategies include ensuring that classroom presentations are conducted by educators, student leaders or representatives of community organizations who possess the cultural competency to discuss eligibility requirements in a manner that does not stigmatize non-citizen students. Presenters must clearly indicate that registering to vote is an option and is not required for any student. Schools can provide voter registration cards in the classroom, but students should have the opportunity to take the voter registration card home in case they have questions or need to check with their parents. Presenters must also emphasize that if students decide not to return completed registration forms, that information will not be shared with other students, school administration, or outside authorities. Finally, presenters should discuss the opportunity to register to vote in a context which emphasizes the full range of youth civic participation opportunities, including those available to non-citizens, such as volunteering as a poll worker.

*The state should also take follow-up steps to increase the likelihood that preregistered voters will vote in the first election in which they are eligible to participate.*

- Confirmation letters mailed to preregistered teens should explain in simple and welcoming language that they will be eligible to vote

when they turn 18 and that it is their responsibility to keep their registration address information up to date. The letters should provide clear and simple instructions to preregistered teens about how to maintain their own records.

- Preregistered teens should receive follow-up emails and texts from officials at least three times: once immediately after their preregistration, again when they turn 18 to remind them that they are now eligible to cast a ballot, and a third time right before Election Day. The third email and text message should provide new voters with easy access to all information they need to know to cast their ballots.

*All preregistration outreach and education efforts should be undertaken in a manner that recognizes the full diversity of California's youth population.* For example, the staff of schools or community programs that promote preregistration should reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the youth the programs are trying to engage. These staff should be individuals who are viewed as “trusted messengers” by youth, who possess the cultural competency to effectively reach them. Institutions and organizations should consider using multiple approaches to preregistration outreach and education that take into account the diversity of the youth they serve. All preregistration materials and information should be accessible to youth with disabilities. In addition, election officials and administrators should reach out to organizations that conduct non-partisan voter registration and voter mobilization efforts among youth and encourage them to incorporate a preregistration component in their activities.

*California should keep data on preregistration outcomes to help*

*policymakers understand how well programs are working and which teens are not being reached.*

*Data should be publicly available and include preregistration rates by age, sex, race and ethnicity.*

# Introduction

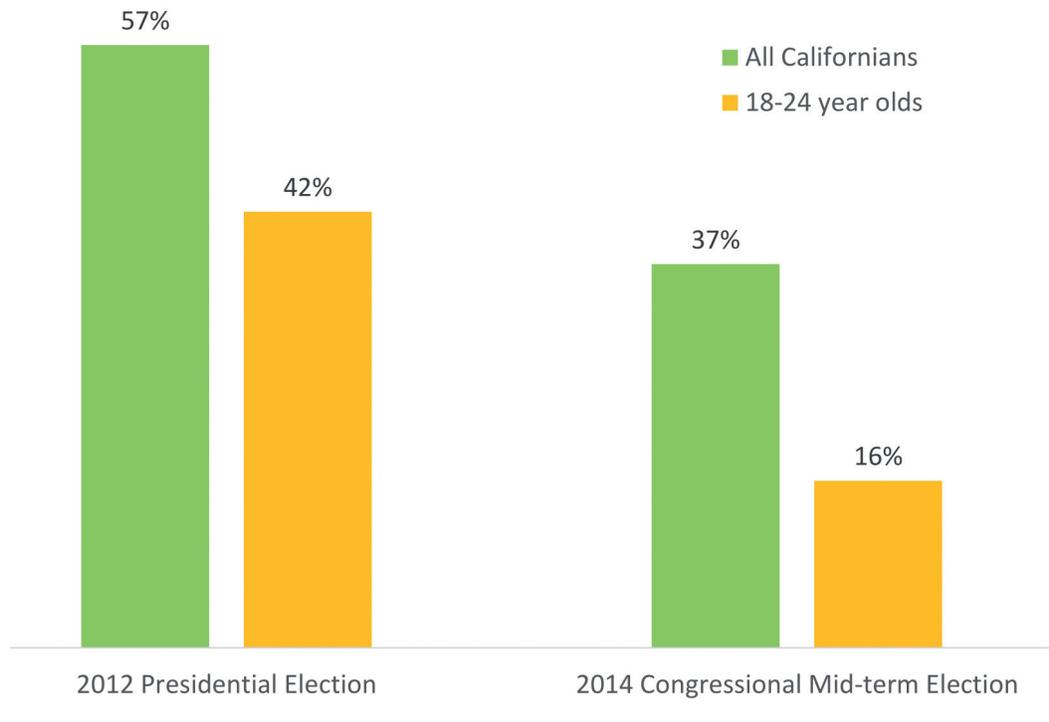
An effective democracy reflects the voices of all of its members. It is particularly important that young people participate in the electoral process, because many of their policy concerns are unique and they will have to bear the consequences of policy decisions made today for their entire adult lives.

However, both nationally and in California, data from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey suggest that young people are the least likely of citizens to participate in elections.<sup>1</sup> In the 2012 presidential election, 41 percent of 18- to 24-year old citizens (hereinafter referred to as “eligible youth”) turned out to vote nationwide.<sup>2</sup> This rate was far below the 62 percent of all American voting-age citizens who cast ballots in 2012.<sup>3</sup> In California, 42 percent of eligible youth cast ballots, compared to 57 percent of all California voting-age citizens.<sup>4</sup> In the 2014 midterm congressional elections, while participation rates among all voting-age Californians reached an historic low (37 percent), they were particularly low for California youth, with only 16 percent of eligible youth voting.<sup>5</sup> (See Figure 1, next page.)

Because Census data are based on self-reported information, most experts agree that these figures likely overestimate actual voting rates. An analysis of California voter records found that actual youth voter turnout was as low as 8 percent in 2014 and 25 percent in 2012, significantly lower than the statewide turnout rates of 31 percent in 2014 and 53 percent in 2012.<sup>7</sup>

A large part of the problem is that many of California’s eligible youth are not even registered to vote—particularly youth from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. At the time of the 2012 presidential election, Census data indicate that only 46 percent of Latino eligible youth and 41 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander eligible youth were registered to vote, compared to 59 percent of non-Hispanic White eligible youth and 54 percent of African American eligible youth.<sup>8</sup> During the 2014 midterm congressional elections, 34 percent of Latino eligible youth and 31 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander eligible youth were registered, compared to 45 percent of non-Hispanic White eligible youth and 40 percent of African American eligible youth.<sup>9</sup> (See Figure 2, page 8.)

**Figure 1. Voter Turnout Among Eligible California Voters, 2012 and 2014 Elections<sup>6</sup>**



Such disparities in voter registration rates are especially problematic for democracy in California, a state with one of the youngest and most racially and ethnically diverse populations in the nation.<sup>11</sup> The low registration rates of eligible Latino and Asian American/Pacific Islander youth are of particular concern considering that these are the fastest growing population groups in the state. Of the nearly 1.1 million 16- and 17-year olds in California, nearly half are Latino.<sup>12</sup> While Latino, African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander and other non-White communities comprise 61 percent of the state’s total population, they account for 71 percent of the state’s 16- and 17-year olds.<sup>13</sup> (See Figure 3.) As California’s electorate will become even more diverse in the future, it is critical to

address these persistent racial and ethnic gaps in youth voter registration rates.

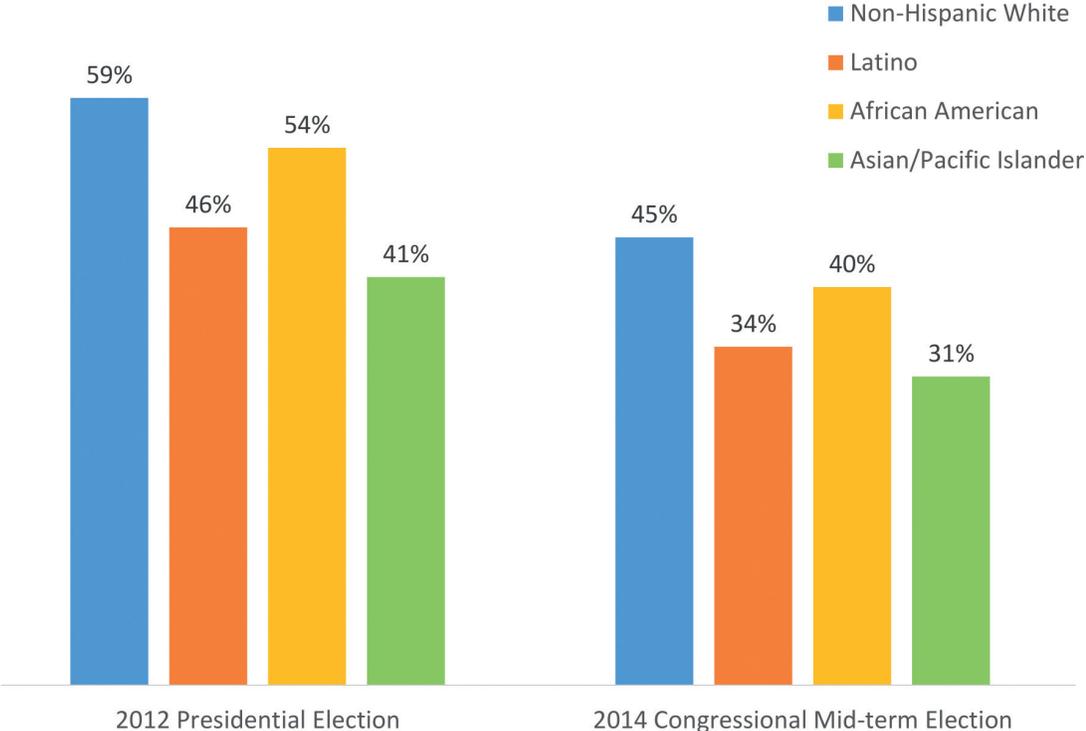
U.S. policymakers have long recognized that voter registration is a hurdle for many eligible Americans—especially young Americans—to access the ballot box. To make it easier for people to vote, legislators have worked to expand registration opportunities. For example, in 1993 Congress passed the National Voting Rights Act (NVRA), also known as “Motor Voter,” which allows Americans to register to vote at the same time as they apply for a driver’s license or state identification card at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), or when they file for public assistance.<sup>15</sup> These NVRA provisions apply to all U.S. states that require voter registration prior to Election Day.

Motor Voter worked to increase voter participation rates nationally.<sup>16</sup> However, even with full compliance at state DMVs, including California’s efforts to streamline voter registration at its own DMV agency, the growing population of non-drivers is far less likely to benefit from the policy.<sup>17</sup> Nationwide, driver licensing rates among young people are on the decline and many teens never visit the DMV or other government offices prior to turning 18. In 2008, 31 percent of 16-year olds in the United States had a driver’s license, compared with 46 percent in 1983.<sup>18</sup> Licensing rates among 17- and 18-year olds fell by 19 and 15 percentage points over the same time period, respectively.<sup>19</sup> According to survey data collected between May 2013 and 2014, only about 53 percent of American teenagers had obtained a

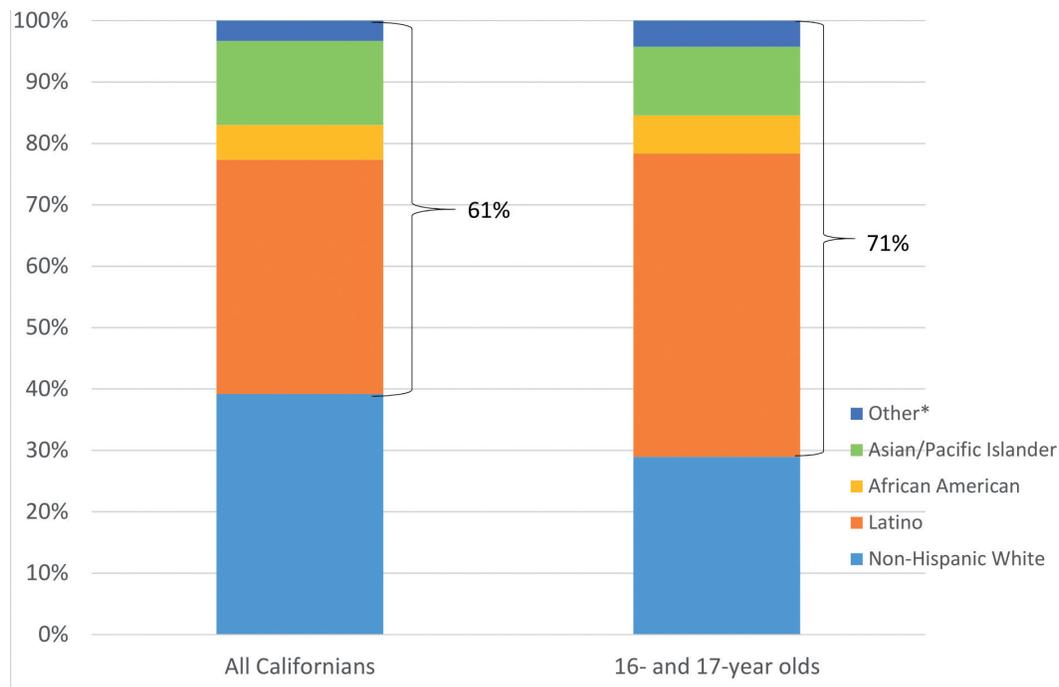
driver’s license by the age of 19.<sup>20</sup> This rate is lowest for Latino and African American teens.<sup>21</sup>

In 2014, only around 866,000 California teenagers had obtained a driver’s license by age 19, according to data compiled by the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Highway Administration.<sup>22</sup> But that same year, the Census American Community Survey found there were 2 million U.S. citizen teens aged 16-19 living in California, a number that far exceeds the number of youth who obtained driver’s licenses.<sup>23</sup> Thus, voter registration programs centered solely on the DMV may not effectively reach large numbers of eligible or soon-to-be eligible youth. Additionally, the California DMV’s current two-step process for voter

**Figure 2. Voter Registration Rates Among Eligible Californians Aged 18-24, 2012 and 2014 Elections<sup>10</sup>**



**Figure 3. Racial and Ethnic Composition of California’s Population, Selected Age Groups<sup>14</sup>**



\*“Other” includes non-Hispanic Native Americans and individuals who identify as another race or two or more races.

registration is complex and confusing. Among visitors to DMV field offices who attempt to register to vote, about a third leave without providing all information required to process their applications.<sup>24</sup>

A potentially more promising strategy for increasing election participation rates among today’s youth is voter “preregistration.” Preregistration does not change the minimum voting age, but allows persons as young as 16 years old to sign up to become registered voters on the day that they turn 18. Eligibility for preregistration is based on age and differs from “early registration” opportunities in

that it is not restricted to particular periods of the election cycle. Including California, 20 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws granting individuals younger than 18 the right to preregister to vote.<sup>25</sup>

California will begin preregistering young voters in fall 2016 as part of the transition to the VoteCal statewide voter system. If properly implemented, preregistration could play an important role in increasing youth electoral participation, including within communities of color. But to do this, California policymakers must consider the unique challenges faced by the state’s diverse population of first-time voters and recognize

that while allowing preregistration is a critical first step, it must be accompanied by sound policies that make it as accessible as possible to all eligible youth.

In this paper, we review existing voter preregistration policies in other states and the impact they have had on youth voter turnout. We examine the results of recent studies as well as the first-hand experiences of public officials involved in implementing preregistration programs. We also consider both concerns and suggestions from California leaders who work closely

with youth and understand the barriers to civic participation that a successful preregistration program must overcome. With these perspectives in mind, we compile a set of recommendations for elections officials charged with implementing preregistration in California, as well as policy makers, school administrators, and state and county government officials. The recommendations include a plan for effective outreach, age- and culturally-appropriate voter education, and follow up to help youth stay engaged and feel prepared to vote once they turn 18.

# Why Voter Preregistration?

Voter preregistration allows individuals under the age of 18 to complete the voter registration process before they are legally eligible to cast a ballot. Preregistration laws address certain barriers to voter registration that are unique to young people:

- First-time voters are often unfamiliar with voter registration laws and as a result, are more likely than experienced voters to miss a registration deadline.
- First-time voters are less familiar with the concept of elections and the different components of a ballot form. They may not have time to learn how to vote between registering and the first election in which they're eligible to vote.
- First-time voters tend to be overlooked by candidates and political campaigns, which often mobilize prospective voters and serve as a direct source of election information. This is because campaign organizations tend to target people already registered to vote who are frequent voters, are already politically engaged or have an existing party affiliation.

In 2009, California became the eighth state to allow voter preregistration when it granted 17-year-olds the right to complete the registration process before eligibility was officially activated on their 18th birthdays.<sup>26</sup> In 2014, California lowered the minimum preregistration age to 16.<sup>27</sup> There are several reasons why extending preregistration to Californians as young as 16 years old could increase the likelihood that they will get involved as potential voters. Common events that take place at the ages of 16 and 17 may provide prime opportunities for youth to preregister:

- At the age of 16, California teens first become eligible to obtain a provisional driver's license, which requires a visit to the DMV.<sup>28</sup> This provides a strong incentive for many young people to visit a government agency that has the obligation to provide voter registration opportunities to customers, and that should provide preregistration opportunities as well.
- This age group is typically still enrolled in high school, one effective venue for delivering information. Voter preregistration drives may overlap with required high school

civics courses, which can educate youth about our political system and mobilize

them to become full participants in our democracy.

# Research on the Benefits of Voter Preregistration

Several lines of research strongly suggest that allowing 16- and 17-year olds to complete the voter registration process so that they become automatically eligible to vote on their 18th birthdays increases the likelihood that they will cast their ballots in subsequent elections.<sup>29</sup>

## Voter Preregistration Increases Turnout, Especially When Combined with Outreach Programs

Voter preregistration programs make it easier for young Americans to participate in elections.<sup>30</sup> Not only do these programs eliminate the delay between registration and the moment when teens can legally cast ballots, but they also reinforce their intention to vote when they become eligible.

Studies show that preregistration increases youth voter turnout. For example, researchers Holbein and Hillygus analyzed 2000-2012 Current Population Survey data, comparing how often young respondents (aged 18 to 22) reported voting with whether or not their home states had implemented

preregistration programs. Based on these results, researchers estimated that allowing preregistration increases young voter turnout by between 2 and 13 percentage points.<sup>31</sup>

In a second analysis, the authors found evidence that preregistration has a lasting impact on young voter behavior. Researchers examined the 2012 turnout of two groups of 21- to 22-year old Florida residents: individuals who turned 18 shortly before Election Day and could therefore legally vote in 2008; and those who turned 18 shortly after the 2008 election and could not vote in that election. The second group, however, was more likely to be targeted by one of the state's preregistration drives than their slightly older peers. Researchers found that compared with the first group, members of the second, younger group were more likely to vote four years later in the 2012 General Election.<sup>32</sup> This difference was consistent across gender and racial subpopulations.

These results suggest that the added support provided by voter preregistration programs targeting 17-year olds encourages voting more than simply providing the legal ability to register, and that exposure to such programs can influence behavior beyond

the short term. People who vote once are much more likely to vote again, suggesting that preregistration programs that help set voting patterns for young generations could shape the level of democratic participation in a state for decades or longer.<sup>33</sup>

A study of Florida voter files found that preregistered voters turned out at higher rates during the General Elections in 2000, 2004 and 2008 than individuals of the same age who registered after turning 18.<sup>34</sup> Preregistration programs in Hawaii were also associated with greater youth participation in elections. Even after their first elections, tens of thousands of preregistered young people in Florida and Hawaii remained on the voter rolls at rates comparable to the adult population.<sup>35</sup>

## Comprehensive Civics Education Programs Can Increase Youth Interest in Elections

Becoming a voter can be a daunting process for a young person who has never participated in a political process before. According to Sacramento County Registrar of Voters Jill LaVine, “voting is more than just going to the polls. It is the decision that is made, the outcome, how it affects them [the voters], now and in the future.” To help prepare teens for civic participation, elections officials often partner with educators to run programs at schools that familiarize youth with the election process and allow students to practice voting.

Research suggests that civic engagement programs like Kids Voting have lasting impacts on a teenager’s interest in elections. Kids Voting is an interactive, election-based curriculum that involves classroom

instruction, political debate with peers, mock elections, interviews with family members about views on voting, and even helping with local voter registration drives. One study found that high school students who participated in Kids Voting were more likely than non-participants to pay attention to internet news, engage in political debate with friends or family members, or to get involved in campus activism three years later.<sup>36</sup> The study did not detect a significant direct connection between program participation and voting at age 18. However, another study found that in Kansas counties where schools had implemented the Kids Voting program, voter turnout was higher both overall and specifically among 18-year-olds, compared with counties that did not have the program.<sup>37</sup>

Another election-centered civics education program is Student Voices. Like Kids Voting, Student Voices involves classroom discussion and mock voting, but emphasizes the role of media in framing political debates. Participating students research and write about election issues, candidate positions and campaign strategy. The program also uses a companion website containing relevant election information and serves as a forum for political debate.

Studies of the Student Voices program have found that relative to non-participants, high school students who complete the curriculum gain more confidence in their ability to cast an informed vote, understand the voter registration process, influence the election outcome, discuss political issues, and understand political media.<sup>38</sup> They also become more interested in political issues and more likely to follow current events. Students enrolled in the program for a second semester demonstrate even larger gains in political knowledge and voting confidence.<sup>39</sup>

While studies have yet to reach a consensus on the direct link between elections-focused civics education programs and youth voter turnout, they consistently find that enrollment in both Kids Voting and Student Voices is statistically linked to a number of

intermediate outcomes to voting, such as interest in the political process. This suggests that actively engaging potential voters in the classroom can, at a minimum, establish critical building blocks for future civic participation.

## Lessons from Other States

As California looks to best realize the potential of voter preregistration, it can look to the examples of states across the country that have made similar efforts to register 16- and 17-year-olds to vote—and to get them to the polls once they turn 18. The experiences of the following three states provide both helpful best practices and a few cautionary tales for California as the state moves forward with its own preregistration program.

### Florida

Florida became the first state in the nation to implement a preregistration law in 1990 and has allowed teenagers as young as 16 to preregister to vote since 2007. By May 2013, preregistrants accounted for 8 percent (300,000 people) of the individuals on the Florida voter rolls.<sup>40</sup>

Supervisors of Elections in each of Florida's 67 counties are required under state law to conduct voter registration drives at every public high school and college campus in their jurisdiction and to report outreach efforts to the Florida Office of the Secretary of State. Some supervisors

have implemented additional voluntary programs, like outreach to private schools and juvenile detention centers.<sup>41</sup>

According to Brian Corley of Pasco County, president of the Florida State Board of Supervisors of Elections, the key to successful preregistration is the active engagement of Elections Department officials with students. Supervisors of Elections spend time in classrooms, engaging students in active discussions about what issues matter to them now and what issues they think will matter most in the future. It is also important to “treat them like adults,” letting them know that voters are the people whom politicians care about and that every vote is important. As a local example, he describes how even a small number of votes in Pasco County could have changed the outcome of the entire 2000 presidential election.

Voter education begins as early as middle school, when election officials inform students that they can preregister to vote when they receive their driver's license at the age of 16. To make sure that frontline staff at the DMV and some other public agencies are prepared and motivated to preregister young applicants,

Corley's office provides regular trainings. This has helped increase the number of preregistrations at these facilities.

Supervisor Corley notes that follow up is extremely important for getting preregistered voters to turn out for elections. His office promptly sends a follow-up letter to the homes of preregistered voters, congratulating them for taking an important step towards participating in democracy. Supervisor Corley has found that parents whose teens receive these notices often feel proud and help reinforce their children's decisions to become voters. The letter also informs preregistered voters that they will receive voter registration cards once they turn 18 with election and polling place information and provides a web address through which they can keep their registration address up to date.

## Hawaii

Hawaii has allowed 16- and 17-year olds to preregister to vote since 1993.<sup>42</sup> The state Office of Elections runs a Young Voter Registration Program (YVRP), for which it recruits student volunteers to run preregistration drives on high school campuses, targeting juniors and seniors. Office staff members also give presentations at schools when invited. In the past, youth engagement efforts have taken the form of school assemblies where music and popular culture are blended with voter registration instruction to engage young people and encourage them to get involved. As part of the program, a school contact is selected as an Office of Elections liaison for each institution, and students are informed that this person is available to answer any questions about preregistration and to walk through preregistration forms with them. Beyond schools, the Office of Elections works to

get out into the community and engage potential young voters at community events and festivals where they set up booths and have preregistration forms available. Nedielyn Bueno, Voter Services Specialist for Hawaii's elections office, reports that one of the biggest challenges in getting Hawaii youth preregistered is that young people "don't always know that they can [pre]register to vote—they think the minimum age is 18... Education is key."

A comprehensive civics education helps to fill this knowledge gap for many Hawaii students. For example, the We Vote Hawaii program, (formerly "Kids Voting Hawaii") provides voter education curriculum and materials to public, private and charter schools for grades K-12.<sup>43</sup> Students discuss current election issues in the classroom and have the opportunity to debate them. This is followed by an online mock election, allowing kindergarteners through high school seniors to vote on a combination of actual candidate races and a number of additional questions covering topics relevant to their age group (e.g., rules against bullying, school mascots, etc.).

At schools that elect to participate in We Vote Hawaii, the program generates a lot of enthusiasm among students about the democratic process, even during non-presidential election years.<sup>44</sup> We Vote Hawaii Board of Directors Chairwoman Linda Coble reports that in 2014, 109,000 students cast ballots online, only slightly fewer than the 120,000 who participated in 2012. Students discuss issues in the classroom first, and then are given online accounts through which they may participate in the mock election. At many schools, Hawaii integrates high school voter education programs with preregistration drives on school campuses, which can be run by adult volunteers with the help of students. In recent years, new technologies allowing teens to participate using social

media and other online resources have made the process more accessible and appealing to Hawaii students.<sup>45</sup>

A major challenge in Hawaii is that civics education programs in schools often fail to engage youth outside of the mainstream. Judith Clark, Executive Director of Hawaii Youth Services Network has found that partnering directly with youth-led community groups has been an effective way to engage young people in foster care, homeless and runaway teens, and teens with developmental disabilities in civic affairs.<sup>46</sup> She argues that reaching out and providing voter preregistration opportunities to youth-led community

organizations serving hard-to-reach populations is critical for increasing their participation in elections.

## Louisiana

While Louisiana just began preregistering 16 year olds to vote in 2015, the state has now incorporated preregistration into its preexisting “motor voter” program.<sup>47</sup> The state Office of Motor Vehicles is required to register 16- and 17-year-olds to vote when they apply for a driver’s license unless the driver opts out of registration.

## Keeping Preregistered Voting Records Updated is a Challenge

State officials in states with preregistration find that young voters frequently leave the counties where they preregistered and fail to update their voter records. According to Ernie Roberson, Registrar of Voters in Caddo Parish, Louisiana, one of the main challenges of keeping Louisiana youth engaged is that it is “difficult to stay in contact with these voters. Many have had changes to their addresses or phone numbers between the time they preregistered and the time their registrations were [activated].”<sup>48</sup> When this happens, election officials often lose contact with these voters and are unable to send them the information and materials they need to vote on Election Day. These youth then risk becoming disengaged from the process.

These problems are compounded by widespread misunderstanding of how voting records are managed. For example, 40 percent of California voters did not know that the post office does not automatically update their registration addresses when they move.<sup>49</sup> First-time voters are particularly unlikely to know what is required of them to ensure that the state voter rolls contain accurate information about them.

California election officials are already familiar with the challenge of keeping young voter records up to date. John Gardner of the Solano County Registrar of Voters reports that when it comes to keeping young people engaged through their 18th birthdays, “moving and not providing updated information is the biggest hurdle.” Lucas Zucker of Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE) agrees that “moving out of the house for college and not having an absentee ballot [in order to vote at the youth’s home address] is a huge problem” that keeps many youth from voting once they turn 18.

According to Lindsay Pryor, Voter Education Outreach Coordinator with the Washington Secretary of State’s Office, Washington passed a law to help young voters maintain updated address records.<sup>50</sup> As a result, each time a student registers for classes at a public university or a community college, a pop-up window appears with text asking the student if he or she wishes to register to vote, and provides a web link through which the student can register or update existing registration address information.<sup>51</sup> Working closely with the office of Secretary of State, California’s public colleges and universities are currently considering incorporating a similar voter registration question into their own online interactions with students.

# Expanding Youth Voter Participation: Next Steps for California

**V**oter preregistration is a proven method of increasing voter turnout among the youngest group of eligible voters. Initiating the process of becoming a voter at age 16 helps acquaint young people with the democratic process well in advance of the time when they are actually eligible to vote. However, for preregistration to result in more young people actually casting ballots in elections, teens need to know that they are eligible to preregister, as well as when, where and how they can take advantage of the opportunity. Therefore, preregistration must be accompanied by carefully-designed outreach and communication strategies tailored to this age group.

To arrive at a set of “best practices” for California to reach the largest number of eligible young people possible through voter preregistration, including racial and ethnic population groups historically underrepresented on the voting rolls, we sought input from a wide range of stakeholders. (See Methodology.) We surveyed community leaders and youth services professionals, school administrators, teachers and high school students. (See Appendix A.) We interviewed elections officials both

in California and in other states that have implemented preregistration. We consulted academic researchers with expertise in youth civic engagement. Based on the ideas and suggestions offered by these participants, we propose the following policy recommendations:

**California should implement practices that will make voter preregistration accessible to 16- and 17-year-olds by providing voter preregistration opportunities in the places where young people commonly go—from the DMV to public school campuses.** Now that the minimum age of voter preregistration aligns with the age at which teens become eligible to obtain a California driver’s license, the DMV can serve as a more effective venue for adding young people to the voting rolls. Policymakers should include 16- and 17-year-olds in the implementation of California’s updated motor voter law. As of this writing, stakeholders are involved in discussions with the California Secretary of State and DMV about ensuring that opportunities for preregistration will be integrated into the new voter registration practices. The DMV should streamline its current two-step voter registration process so that all visitors who indicate that they

want to register to vote are prompted to provide all required information in a single session.

However, some 16- and 17-year olds will never visit the DMV, either because they do not need to drive or cannot afford a car. As noted above, the number of California teenagers who possess driver's licenses is far smaller than the population that would be eligible for voter preregistration. These groups are however, well-represented in the California public school system, suggesting that public high schools are an important venue for preregistration outreach to non-drivers.<sup>52</sup>

**The California State Board of Education should monitor the implementation of the state's History-Social Science Framework for high school curriculum and ensure that it encompasses the opportunity for preregistration to be addressed in the classroom.**

A 2013 state law already requires voter education information to be included in U.S. government and civics classes: From the California Department of Education's 2014-2016 History-Social Science framework:

As a practical matter, students should know how to register to vote, both online and by mail, what the requirements are for registration, how to request, fill out, and return an absentee ballot, what to expect on election day, how to find a polling place, and where and how to access and understand the voter information pamphlet and other materials to become an informed voter... Teachers may want to consider an activity where students go through the above steps in order to help prepare them for the exercise of their rights as voting adults.<sup>53</sup>

Individual teachers should be empowered to decide who presents voter preregistration information—trained students, non-

partisan community groups, teachers or elections officials. The discussion of preregistration can be integrated into the class time that schools are already required to set aside for voter education.<sup>54</sup>

Full buy-in from faculty members or administrators is important for a school-based preregistration program's success. Many of those surveyed and interviewed who work with high schools on voter registration activities addressed how essential it is to partner with teachers who embrace and understand the importance of voting. Henry Perez, Associate Director with InnerCity Struggle, noted in an interview for this project that developing relationships with high school leaders is essential to school site voter registration efforts. Similarly, Lynwood School Boardmember Briseida Gonzalez said that teachers who are empowered to emphasize the importance of being civically engaged and voting are best at promoting voter registration.

**Elections officials and school administrators should develop a strategy to handle sensitive immigration status issues during preregistration outreach activities that protects the privacy of non-citizens.** If students are provided the opportunity to preregister to vote in the classroom setting, classroom presentations should be conducted by educators, student leaders or representatives of community organizations who possess the cultural competency to discuss eligibility requirements in a manner that does stigmatize non-citizen students. Survey respondents consistently emphasized that while eligibility requirements must be clear to students who are being offered the opportunity to preregister to vote, there is no uniform way to address the fact that some students may not be eligible.

Presenters must clearly indicate that registering to vote is an option and is

not required for any student. Schools can provide voter registration cards in the classroom, but students should have the opportunity to take the voter registration card home in case they have questions or need to talk with their parents. Presenters must also emphasize that a student's decision to not return completed registration forms will not be shared with other students, school administration, or outside authorities. Finally, survey respondents agreed that presenters should discuss the opportunity to register to vote in a context which emphasizes the full range of youth civic participation opportunities, including those available to non-citizens, such as volunteering as a poll worker. As Andrea Gaspar, San Diego Youth Organizer mentioned, "An environment of empowerment should be created at the school site and you need to tell students and they need to understand that, regardless of their citizenship status, it is important to be civically engaged within their community."

Some students may be contacted in person at school, but do not want to preregister on campus or in front of friends who are potentially ineligible, and may instead want to preregister at a later date or at another location. All teens should be provided with information cards that give list a website or physical address where they can obtain and submit a voter preregistration form.

**California should assess the effectiveness of High School Voter Education Weeks, and look for meaningful ways to incorporate voter preregistration into existing activities that are working well.** The California Education Code designates the last two full weeks in April and September to be High School Voter Education Weeks.<sup>55</sup> This is an opportunity for county elections officials to provide easily accessible information

for students or other participants on how to become registered voters. The California Secretary of State's office provides printable materials on its website to assist with voter education programming, including registration forms, motivational flyers to post on school billboards, and a list of best practices for classroom instruction.<sup>56</sup> This website should add relevant voter preregistration materials to these resources.

**To reach more traditionally under-represented groups, elections officials should also offer preregistration opportunities at the state's private schools, homeschooling organizations, juvenile detention facilities, GED tutoring programs, naturalization ceremonies, afterschool programs and foster youth services agencies. Election officials should also reach out to community groups that are trusted by youth, as well as local government cultural and recreational programs, to assist them with implementing preregistration programs.** Many teens do not have social networks that will inform them about preregistration opportunities or encourage them to seek out ways to get involved in elections. A number of San Diego area high school students suggest the mall, libraries, and coffee shops as good places to find teens outside the classroom.<sup>57</sup> Cathy Allen of the Shasta County Registrar of Voters suggests that to reach youth in more rural areas, community centers, churches and temples may be good venues.

**In addition, youth from traditionally under-represented groups should be reached in other settings where there is an emphasis on the value of civic participation, such as naturalization ceremonies. Native-born youth from immigrant families often accompany their relatives to these ceremonies when**

their family members are being sworn-in as new U.S. citizens. Depending on the region of the state, these ceremonies are conducted in an administrative setting by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), or by the federal courts, through judicial oath ceremonies. Generally, the ceremonies include USCIS officials or other speakers who emphasize the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship and the importance of civic participation. The USCIS should encourage speakers at these ceremonies to also highlight the opportunity of preregistration for the youth who are present.

California should create opportunities for youth to get involved through communication tools they commonly use. Josh Rosmarin of the Analyst Institute suggests that because youth are digital natives, election officials should work to engage them online, including through mobile phones. Elections officials should make preregistration as digital-friendly as possible, providing mobile-optimized preregistration websites and mobile apps that can provide election information and election-related reminders about voting. They should also encourage administrators of websites that young people regularly visit, from high school webpages to social media forums, to post preregistration links there.

The state should also take follow-up steps by mail, email and text message to make these preregistered voters more likely to vote in the first election in which they are eligible to participate. Information that a minor provides to election officials in order to preregister to vote should be kept off the official voter rolls that campaigns can access until they turn 18. However, elections officials should be able to use not only addresses, but also phone and email contact information in

order to follow up with preregistered voters, especially to ensure they know to update their voter registration if they move. Elections officials should consider modifications to the voter registration forms or accompanying materials to allow for the addition of a cell phone number and should clarify privacy rights and the ways in which this information would be used. In addition, election officials should create a mechanism for entities such as academics and non-profit organizations to obtain information about the 16- and 17-year old preregistered population, if they agree to use the information solely for non-partisan, non-commercial purposes, such as research or outreach for poll worker recruitment.

Current law requires the following notification to be mailed to individuals who preregister to vote:<sup>58</sup>

#### *VOTER NOTIFICATION*

*Thank you for registering to vote. You may vote in any election held on or after your 18th birthday.*

*Your party preference is: (Name of political party)*

*Before any election in which you are eligible to vote, you will receive a sample ballot and a voter pamphlet by mail.*

*If information on this card is incorrect, please contact our office or update your registration at the Internet Web site of the Secretary of State (SOS).*

In addition to the above letter, preregistrants should be contacted via email and text at least three times, including:

- 1) Immediately following preregistration to confirm that their application has successfully processed,

- 2) Once when they turn 18 to remind them that they are now eligible to cast a ballot. These messages should include a web link through which they can update their voter registration address, and
- 3) Shortly before election days—these messages should link recipients to all information they need to prepare for voting.

Jennifer Tolentino of Rock the Vote suggests that information sent to preregistrants cover “what elections are happening in their area during the upcoming year, where to find relevant election information (polling location, ballot info, etc.), who to ask if they have questions, and what to bring to vote [e.g., in the case that photo identification is required in their county].”

**Election officials should expand opportunities for young people to practice voting through statewide mock elections.** The MyVote California Student Mock Presidential Election program allows high school and middle school students to cast ballots for real candidates. According to the SOS, it is an enjoyable activity that stimulates thinking about real-world issues and can make elections seem more relevant to teenagers’ lives.<sup>59</sup> In 2008, more than 275,000 California students cast ballots in the mock election, joining millions of other mock voters across the country.<sup>60</sup> The program webpage provides useful materials to help schools administer this valuable opportunity.<sup>61</sup> State officials should encourage more schools to take part in the program and provide additional resources to schools as necessary to facilitate their participation. They should also collect data on participation rates and solicit feedback from both administrators and students, so that the program can be continually evaluated and improved.

**State and county officials should make sure that preregistered voters know to keep their registration up to date and have many easy and convenient opportunities to do it.** John Gardner of the Solano County Registrar of Voters suggests that contacting young people by email may be a promising way to get them to update their registration addresses or to “point them in the direction of registering to vote at their new residence.” In addition, elections representatives should be available on college campuses within their counties to re-register students who have relocated to vote in their new locations. Cathy Allen of the Shasta County Registrar of Voters argues that “making email and phone/cell numbers available to election administrators but not campaigns would go a long way to helping...keep track of the 18-24 year olds, and...military voters as well.” Election administrators should ensure that youth are able to conveniently update voter registration addresses through a variety of digital channels, such as college course registration webpages.

**Elections officials and administrators should use appropriate messengers and messaging to communicate with youth.** Survey results reinforced that effective messengers include peers, respected teachers and community leaders. “The message will probably be heard best from other youth and also by people of high influence,” says John Gardner of the Solano County Registrar of Voters. Rock the Vote’s Jennifer Tolentino writes that “young people respond to messengers that seem genuine. Rock the Vote has found great success in meeting young people where they are—online—and pushing out information from celebrities that have their attention.”

In this connection, the staff of schools or community programs that promote preregistration should reflect the racial

and ethnic diversity of the youth the programs are trying to engage. These staff should possess the cultural competency to effectively reach youth. Institutions and organizations should consider using multiple approaches to preregistration outreach and education that take into account the diversity of the youth they serve. All preregistration materials and information should be accessible to youth with disabilities.

In addition, election officials and administrators should reach out to organizations that conduct non-partisan voter registration and voter mobilization efforts among youth and encourage them to incorporate a preregistration component in their activities. These organizations already possess expertise with youth electoral engagement, and are well-positioned to promote preregistration. Some California county election officials work with advisory groups of community organizations who address issues of accessibility for language minorities and voters with disabilities. These advisory groups may include organizations that can also become involved in preregistration activities.

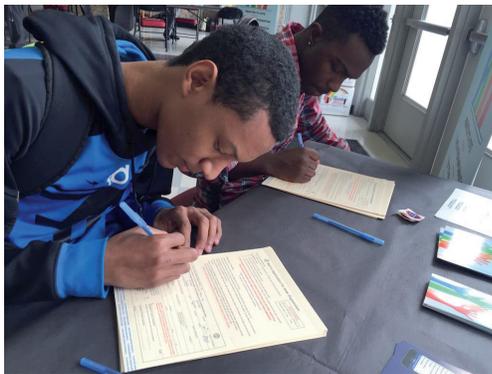
**Poll worker opportunities should be made available to students at the time of**

**preregistration.** High school poll worker programs provide a great opportunity for students to learn more about the elections process.<sup>62</sup> County elections officials always need poll workers, especially bilingual poll workers, and a recent state law extends these opportunities to 16- and 17-year olds who are legal permanent residents.<sup>63</sup> These programs allow California teens to participate in their democracy even when they are not eligible to vote.

**Election administrators must implement a system to track the results of preregistration, note problems and solicit regular feedback from program administrators.** Elections officials should keep good data on number of preregistrations, where teens are preregistering, whether forms in other languages are effective, what percentage of preregistrations are incomplete or come back invalid, what the common problems are with invalid or incomplete preregistration forms, the rate at which preregistered voters participate in elections, and how many of them update their addresses, along with other information. Administrators should also track preregistration rates by key demographic categories, including age, sex, race and ethnicity. This data, once anonymized and aggregated, should be made accessible to the public.

## Conclusion

Voter preregistration for 16- and 17-year-olds has the potential to significantly expand youth participation in California elections, but only if it is accompanied by comprehensive new voter education and outreach. This will require strong partnerships between state election officials and public and



*Teens registering to vote.* Photo courtesy of Tony Gonzalez/Nashville Public Radio

private schools, community organizations and other government agencies.

California must identify cost-effective and proven solutions to the challenges of getting young people onto the voter rolls and out to vote. State officials will be in an optimal position to respond to implementation problems and improve supporting programs if they keep good data on what works and what does not. Research on young voter engagement and feedback from other states will continue to inform preregistration and related policies.

To be effective, our democracy must represent the voices of all of its members. By supporting preregistration laws with age-appropriate and culturally-competent preregistration programs, California can help to ensure that its diverse youth have a say in the policy decisions that will shape their future.

# Methodology

## Data on California Youth Voter Registration and Turnout

Figures 1 and 2 of this report utilize data from the biennial *U.S. Bureau of the Census' November Current Population Survey (CPS)* and its Voting and Registration Supplement.

The CPS data and the survey from which they are derived are subject to certain limitations. First, actual voter turnout and registration is typically overestimated by the CPS, because individuals may tend to over-report electoral participation. Additionally, the CPS is a national survey, and estimates derived for smaller sub-groups within the national population (for example, racial or ethnic sub-groups in California), may be based on relatively small sample sizes. Consequently, the margin of error associated with estimates of voting and registration for these sub-groups is greater than the margin associated with the national population. For studies of youth election participation based on actual vote counts according to official records provided by the California Secretary of

State, see the California Civic Engagement Project website, available at [explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/ccep/projects/ucdavis-ccep](http://explore.regionalchange.ucdavis.edu/ourwork/ccep/projects/ucdavis-ccep).<sup>64</sup>

In Figures 2 and 3, data on Non-Hispanic Whites, African Americans and Asian/Pacific Islander racial groups are presented for Non-Hispanics who are only of one race.

## Expert and Stakeholder Input

The narratives and policy insights in this document were informed by individual conversations and written communication with election administrators, youth organization leaders, school administrators and board members, academic researchers, and youth. We are extremely grateful for the willingness of the following individuals to share their thoughts. Participation does not imply endorsement of the project or its recommendations.

(See Appendix A for a list of questions that we asked many of these participants)

## Participants

### California

Cathy Allen, County Clerk and Registrar of Voters, Shasta County  
Ludovic Blain, Director, Color of Democracy Fund  
Adele Failes-Carpenter, Director, San Francisco Youth Commission  
Astrid Garcia Ochoa, Deputy Director, Future of California Elections  
John Gardner, Assistant Registrar of Voters, Solano County  
Andrea Gaspar, San Diego Youth Organizer, American Civil Liberties Union  
of San Diego & Imperial Counties  
Briseida Gonzalez, School Board Member, Lynwood Unified School District  
Sergio Hernandez, President, Lennox School District Board of Trustees  
Deanna Kitamura, Project Director, Voting Rights Project, Asian Americans  
Advancing Justice Los Angeles  
Jeff Klein, Governmental & Legislative Affairs, Los Angeles County Office of  
the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk  
Jill LaVine, Registrar of Voters, Sacramento County  
Maria de la Luz Garcia, City Clerk, City of Long Beach  
Dean Logan, Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, Los Angeles County  
Gail Pellerin, County Clerk, Santa Cruz County  
Henry Perez, Associate Director, InnerCity Struggle  
Freddie Quintana, Legislative Aide, Office of Assemblymember Jimmy Gomez  
Steve Reyes, Chief Counsel, Office of the California Secretary of State  
Josh Rosmarin, Director of Special Projects, Analyst Institute  
James Schwab, Chief of Legislative Affairs, Office of the Secretary of State  
Arshya Sharifian, California Organizer, California Common Cause  
Jennifer Tolentino, Civic Technology Program Manager, Rock the Vote  
Lucas Zucker, Researcher and Community Organizer, Central Coast Alliance United  
for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE)  
Youth Leaders Survey, “Pre-Registering Californians to Vote,” administered by the ACLU  
San Diego Youth Activists for Change program, December 1st, 2015.

### Other States

Nedielyn Bueno, Voter Services Specialist, Hawaii State Office of Elections  
Judith Clark, Executive Director, Hawaii Youth Services Network  
Linda Coble, Chairwoman, Board of Directors, We Vote Hawaii  
Supervisor Brian Corley, Supervisor of Elections, Pasco County, Florida, and President,  
Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections  
Lindsay Pryor and Jackie Wheeler, Voter Education Outreach Coordinators,  
Office of the Secretary of State, Washington  
Ernie Roberson, Caddo Parish Registrar of Voters, Louisiana

# Appendix A: California Voter Preregistration Survey Questions

1. Do you have thoughts on where and how California should implement preregistration in high schools? Who should help oversee the process? Do you have ideas about the curriculum that should be included?
2. Besides high schools and the DMV, what other places should youth be reached to preregister them to vote?
3. What do you think youth need to know in order to preregister to vote? Do you have specific ideas about what information newly registered voters should receive in addition to handing them a voter registration form or asking them a couple of questions at the DMV?
4. What would prevent youth from registering to vote, once given the opportunity? (e.g., Materials aren't in the right language; they don't know whether they are eligible.)
5. What would encourage youth to register to vote? (e.g., Who would be the right messengers; what type of materials would they need?)
6. With California's significant immigrant non-citizen population, how do we preregister youth in a manner that does not stigmatize youth that are not eligible due to their citizenship status?
7. What would get in the way of youth voting once they turn 18? (e.g., They move and don't receive any follow up; they don't think they know enough.)
8. What ideas do you have to make youth more likely to vote once they turn 18?

# Notes

- 1 U.S. Census Current Population Survey data are based on self-reported rates of voter registration and voter turnout. Due to over-reporting by survey respondents and sampling error, these estimates are typically higher than the number of actual votes cast in an election.
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- 18 Michael Sivak and Brandon Schoettle, University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, *Recent Changes in the Age Composition of U.S. Drivers: Implications for the Extent, Safety, and Environmental Consequences of Personal Transportation*, June 2011, available at [deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/85149/102751.pdf](http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/85149/102751.pdf).
- 19 Ibid.
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