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FROM ELIGIBILITY TO THE BALLOT BOX EXAMINING THE RACIAL AND ETHNIC VOTER TURNOUT GAPS IN THE U.S. AND CALIFORNIA



Rodrigo Domínguez-Villegas and Michael Ríos¹

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¹ Rodrigo Domínguez-Villegas, Ph.D., director of research, UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute (LPPi);
Michael Ríos, Data Scientist, LPPi

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About LPPI

The UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute addresses the most critical domestic policy challenges facing Latinos and other communities of color through research, advocacy, mobilization, and leadership development to expand genuine opportunity for all Americans.

Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the University of California, Los Angeles as a whole. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the increased role of Latino voters in determining elections and vast evidence showing the crucial role of long-term and sustained contact for their turnout, investment in the mobilization of Latino voters has lagged behind other major demographic groups. This lack of investment, coupled with other systemic barriers has kept many Latinos away from exercising their right to vote.

Even though Latinos' share of the electorate has rapidly grown in the past decade, a large turnout gap between Latino voters and those of other racial groups remains. In this data brief, we quantify the size of the turnout gap between Latinos and other groups in the 2020 election. Comparing the number of eligible, registered, and actual voters we illuminate whether the turnout gap between Latino voters and others is due to lower registration rates or to lower mobilization of registered voters.

Our main findings are:

At the national level:

- Latinos had the lowest registration rate among racial and ethnic groups during the 2020 general election at 61.1 percent. This was more than 10 percentage points lower than the 72.7% registration rate for all voters regardless of race.
- However, once registered, 88 percent of Latino voters cast a ballot, which is only 4 percentage points lower than the 92 percent of registered voters who cast a ballot regardless of race.

In California:

- Similar to national-level trends, Latino voters also had the lowest registration rate of all voters in California. Only slightly more than 60 percent of eligible Latino voters registered statewide which is lower than the overall 69.4 percent registration rate.
- However, just as the trend at the national level, once they are registered, the vast majority of Latino voters cast a ballot, and the gap in turnout between them and the rest of other voters decreases. Close to 91 percent of registered Latinos voted in the 2020 election, just three percentage points lower than the overall rate.
- Latinos were the only racial or ethnic group whose share of the electorate decreased from eligibility to the ballot box. Latino voter representation dropped from 32% of eligible voters to 28% of registered voters and to 27% of those who voted.

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At the county level:

- Turnout rates as a percent of those who registered varied considerably across the 10 counties with the largest Latino populations in California. For Latino voters, turnout rates were highest in Sacramento, Santa Clara, Orange, and Alameda counties (where over 75 percent of registered Latinos voted) and lowest in Kern County (where only 60.2 percent of registered Latinos voted).
- The gap between county-wide and Latino turnout rates was highest in San Diego County with a 9.3 percentage point difference and lowest in Los Angeles County, with a 4.6 point difference between Latino turnout and overall turnout.
- San Diego and Alameda counties had overall turnout rates above 80 percent; however, these counties had the largest gaps between the county-wide rate and Latino turnout rates, respectively. Counties should not only aim for high overall voter turnout but also implement targeted mobilization strategies that close the racial and ethnic group turnout gaps (particularly for Latino, Black, and Asian voters). If overall turnout is the only measure of effective voter mobilization, racial and ethnic disparities in voter turnout will likely persist.

At the national, state, and county levels, the largest gaps between Latino voters and others lie in registration. Once Latino voters are registered, a turnout gap between them and others exists, but it is much smaller than the registration gap. This shows that further efforts into registration are key to increasing the overall participation rate of Latino voters at all levels.

The data in this brief shows that Latinos have the lowest registration and voter turnout rates of all major racial or ethnic groups. Even though other research has shown that the sheer increase in the number of Latinos in the country has led to an increase in their share of the electorate, our data showcases a persistent turnout gap relative to others. In other words, when it comes to electoral power, demography is not destiny.

Persistent turnout gaps between Latinos — one of the fastest-growing demographic groups — and the rest will lead to election results that are increasingly unrepresentative of the wishes of many voters.

Even though the data presented here does not speak to why Latino voters have lower registration and turnout rates, a large body of research has shown that having sustained and direct face-to-face voter engagement with Latino voters is imperative to get them to the polls. It is up to political parties, election administrators at the state and local level, and community-based organizations to mobilize the untapped opportunity to grow the electorate through deeper engagement with Latino voters.

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 U.S. presidential election had the highest rates of voter registration and turnout in over a century. Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, all race and ethnicity groups saw their voter registration and turnout rates increase from the 2016 presidential election. While these improvements in overall voter participation are noteworthy, they mask a disparity in registration and turnout for non-white minority groups.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only 2 percent of eligible voters who did not register reported not doing so because of concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Furthermore, only 4 percent of registered nonvoters reported not voting due to the pandemic.² In a year of historic turnout rates, what prevented the remaining eligible non-registered individuals and registered nonvoters from casting a ballot if not the COVID-19 pandemic? Racial and ethnic inequities in voter mobilization (e.g., insufficient targeted voter education efforts, targeted outreach efforts, and linguistically and culturally relevant communications) may have played a role. These inequities have troubled the electoral system long before COVID-19.

This report presents the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute's analysis of the racial and ethnic disparities in voter registration and turnout to provide a data-driven landscape of the opportunities to increase the participation of voters of color in the 2022 midterm elections.

NATIONWIDE ANALYSIS: VOTER REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT DISPARITIES IN THE 2020 GENERAL ELECTION

Much of the narrative following the 2020 election centered on the record-breaking voter turnout rates, specifically among Latinos and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). Even with high overall voter turnout rates, racial and ethnic disparities in registration and turnout persisted

Despite being the second largest group of eligible voters, Latinos had the lowest registration and voter turnout rates among racial and ethnic groups during the 2020 general election at 61.1 percent and 53.7 percent respectively (See Table 1). Latinos were the only demographic group whose registration and turnout rates were more than 10 percentage points below the national rates (72.7 percent registration and 66.8 percent turnout rate). Asian Americans had the second lowest registration and turnout rates at 63.8 percent and 59.7 percent respectively. In contrast, non-Hispanic whites were the only group with a higher registration and turnout rate than the national average.

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Table 1: Nationwide Voter Registration and Turnout Rates by Race and Ethnicity, November 2020

	ELIGIBLE TO VOTE	REGISTERED TO VOTE	% REGISTERED (OF ELIGIBLE)	VOTED IN 2020 ELECTION	% VOTED (OF ELIGIBLE)
Total	231,593,000	168,308,000	72.7%	154,628,000	66.8%
White	154,827,000	118,389,000	76.5%	109,830,000	70.9%
Latino	30,627,000	18,719,000	61.1%	16,459,000	53.7%
Black	30,204,000	20,844,000	69.0%	18,922,000	62.6%
Asian	11,530,000	7,354,000	63.8%	6,881,000	59.7%
Other	4,405,000	3,002,000	68.1%	2,536,000	57.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey, November 2020 - Table 4b. Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2020," accessed August 15, 2022, [available online](#).

CALIFORNIA STATEWIDE ANALYSIS: RACIAL AND ETHNIC VOTER REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT DISPARITIES IN CALIFORNIA

In this section, we present voter registration and turnout rates by race and ethnicity to determine if California suffers from comparable inequities as the nation. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique obstacles to voter registration and turnout in 2020. Many states, including California, sought out innovative solutions to ensure ballot access, including automatically mailing ballots to registered voters, establishing vote-by-mail ballot drop-off locations, and expanding early voting.³ California was a national leader in enabling access to the ballot box. Most notably, the state sent out mail ballots to all registered voters for the 2020 November election, and in September 2021, the state made this a permanent policy for future elections.⁴

California was home to more than 10 percent of the nation's eligible, registered, and voting electorate in 2020. As shown in Table 2, white voters were the only racial or ethnic group with a higher registration and turnout rate than the state average. Conversely, Latinos, Blacks, and Asian Americans all had lower registration and turnout rates than the state average. Latinos had the lowest registration and turnout rates of any group in California. The gap between white and Latino turnout rates in California was approximately 20 percentage points making it the most significant disparity between any two racial and ethnic groups in a year of historically high voter participation.

Table 2: California Voter Eligibility, Registration and Turnout by Race and Ethnicity, November 2020

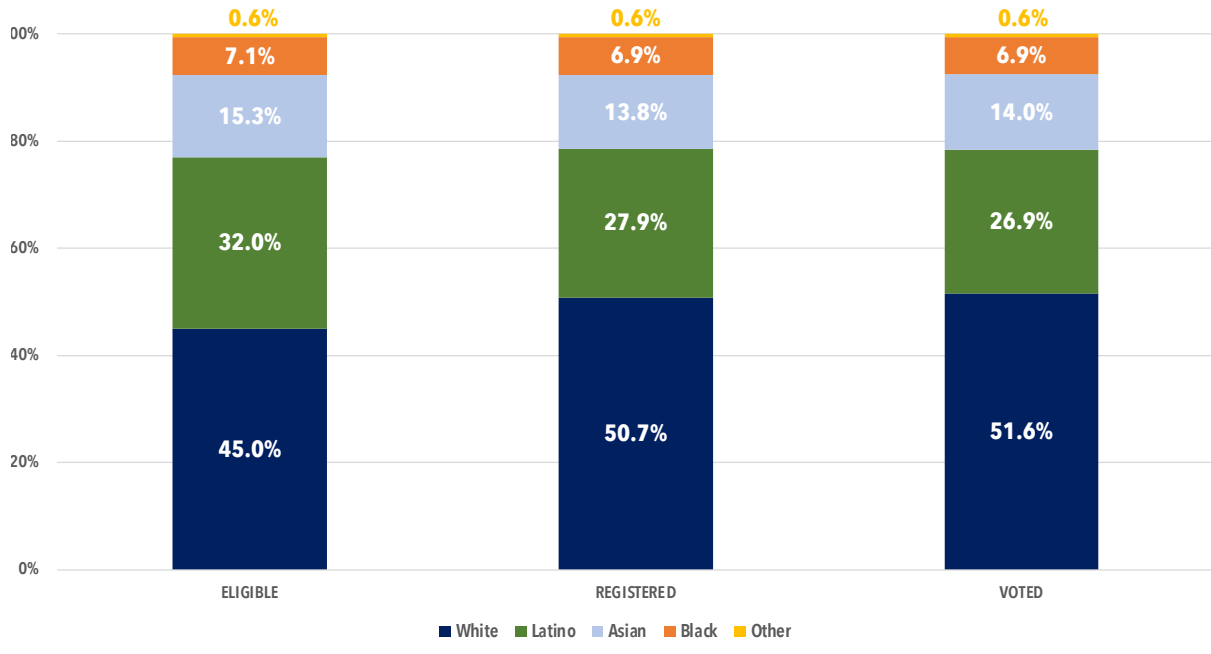
	ELIGIBLE	REGISTERED	% REGISTERED (OF ELIGIBLE)	VOTED IN 2020 ELECTION	% VOTED (OF ELIGIBLE)
Total	25,946,000	18,001,000	69.4%	16,893,000	65.1%
White	11,685,000	9,133,000	78.2%	8,711,000	74.5%
Latino	8,305,000	5,014,000	60.4%	4,539,000	54.7%
Asian	3,958,000	2,491,000	62.9%	2,370,000	59.9%
Black	1,834,000	1,249,000	68.1%	1,173,000	64.0%
Other	164,000	114,000	69.5%	100,000	61.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey, November 2020 - Table 4b. Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2020," accessed August 15, 2022, [available online](#).

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Because of lower registration and turnout rates, Latinos were the only racial or ethnic group whose share of the electorate decreased from 32% of eligible voters to 28% of registered voters and to 27% of those who voted. In contrast, non-Hispanic whites were the only racial or ethnic group that saw their shares increase from eligible (45.0%) to registered (50.7%) and then to voted (51.6%) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of Eligible, Registered, and Voting Populations in California by Race and Ethnicity, 2020 General Election



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2020 - Table 4b. Reported Voting and Registration, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2020

In California, most of the individuals that were mobilized to register ultimately voted in the 2020 general election. However, over 30 percent of the eligible voting population was not registered. This gap between eligible voters and registered voters may signal that mobilization efforts in the state are focused on ballot submission rather than voter registration, thus focusing on voter registration might be particularly important.

COUNTY ANALYSIS: REGISTRATION AND VOTING GAPS IN THE TEN COUNTIES WITH THE LARGEST LATINO POPULATIONS IN CALIFORNIA

In this section, we present registration and turnout rates by race and ethnicity for the top 10 California counties with the highest Latino populations. Table 3 below shows the 10 counties analyzed in order of the Latino population size. Combined, these 10 counties comprise 75 percent of California’s Latino population and approximately 19 percent of Latinos nationwide.⁵

Table 3: California Counties with the Largest Latino Populations (Top 10) in 2020

	TOTAL POPULATION	LATINO		WHITE	BLACK	AAPI
Los Angeles	10,014,009	4,804,763	48.0%	2,563,609	760,689	1,494,759
Riverside	2,418,185	1,202,295	49.7%	788,235	146,762	171,656
San Bernardino	2,181,654	1,170,913	53.7%	566,113	173,322	182,377
San Diego	3,298,634	1,119,629	33.9%	1,422,205	145,014	413,580
Orange	3,186,989	1,086,834	34.1%	1,198,655	49,304	706,838
Fresno	1,008,654	540,743	53.6%	271,889	44,295	110,898
Kern	909,235	499,158	54.9%	279,600	46,776	45,384
Santa Clara	1,936,259	487,357	25.2%	555,708	42,148	759,344
Alameda	1,682,353	393,749	23.4%	472,277	159,499	553,720
Sacramento	1,585,055	374,434	23.6%	650,271	145,724	294,306

Note: Table is sorted in descending order according to the raw Latino population in each county
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau; Social Explorer. Race by Hispanic Status 2020, 2020.

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As seen in Table 4, Latinos made up over 40 percent of all registered voters in San Bernardino, Fresno, and Kern. counties, over one third of registered voters in Los Angeles and Riverside counties, and over 20 percent of registered voters in San Diego and Orange counties.

Table 4: Registered Voters by Race and Ethnicity in California Counties with the Largest Latino Populations, 2020 General Election⁶

	TOTAL REGISTERED	LATINO	WHITE	BLACK	AAPI
Los Angeles	4,444,869	37.7%	38.0%	11.0%	11.3%
San Diego	1,960,647	24.6%	59.2%	6.1%	7.6%
Orange	1,799,565	21.5%	55.2%	2.5%	18.6%
Riverside	1,283,331	36.4%	48.3%	8.9%	4.3%
San Bernardino	1,139,207	42.4%	39.1%	10.9%	5.7%
Santa Clara	938,095	17.9%	43.8%	3.5%	32.4%
Alameda	898,835	14.9%	43.4%	13.7%	24.9%
Sacramento	867,215	14.5%	57.5%	12.3%	12.4%
Fresno	503,426	41.0%	42.1%	6.4%	8.4%
Kern	439,620	40.2%	47.4%	7.2%	3.1%

Note: Table is sorted in descending order according to the raw Latino population in each county

Source: LPPI estimates based on California's voter file.

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Turnout rates as a percent of those who registered varied considerably across the 10 counties with the largest Latino populations in California. As shown in Table 5, Orange County had the highest overall turnout rate at 84.2 percent. Four additional counties – Santa Clara, Sacramento, San Diego, and Alameda – had turnout rates above 80 percent. In contrast, Kern County had the lowest turnout rate at 69.3 percent and was the only county with a turnout rate under 70 percent. Among Latinos, turnout rates were highest in Sacramento, Santa Clara, Orange, and Alameda counties (where over 75 percent of registered Latinos voted) and lowest in Kern County (where only 60.2 percent of registered Latinos voted).

Variation in overall turnout rates across counties can be influenced by various factors including the age and education structure of voters. Older voters, and voters with a college degree or more, regardless of their race or ethnicity, turn out at higher rates.⁷ However, further investigation to understand turnout discrepancies across racial and ethnic groups in specific counties is important to gauge potential disparities in voter mobilization and engagement across racial and ethnic groups.

Table 5: Voter Turnout (Percent of Registered) by Race and Ethnicity in California Counties with the Largest Latino Populations, 2020 General Election

	TOTAL VOTED		LATINO	WHITE	BLACK	AAPI
Los Angeles	3,297,231	74.2%	69.6%	80.1%	69.0%	74.1%
San Diego	1,592,363	81.2%	71.9%	85.6%	76.9%	80.1%
Orange	1,514,690	84.2%	76.5%	88.1%	84.0%	81.2%
Riverside	996,223	77.6%	70.1%	83.3%	77.4%	76.7%
San Bernardino	833,517	73.2%	67.8%	79.3%	70.5%	75.6%
Santa Clara	782,050	83.4%	76.7%	87.2%	81.7%	82.0%
Alameda	724,995	80.7%	75.2%	85.2%	75.1%	79.1%
Sacramento	717,635	82.8%	77.7%	86.1%	78.1%	77.8%
Fresno	361,217	71.8%	64.6%	81.0%	66.2%	63.8%
Kern	304,509	69.3%	60.2%	77.3%	65.0%	71.1%

Note: Table is sorted in descending order according to the raw Latino population in each county

Source: LPPI estimates based on California's voter file.

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In each county we evaluated, white voters had a higher turnout rate than the county-wide rate. Conversely, Latino and Black voters had lower turnout rates than the county-wide average in each of the 10 counties (See Table 6). The gap between county-wide and Latino turnout rates is highest in San Diego County with a 9.3 percentage point difference. For Latinos, the turnout gap is lowest in Los Angeles County, with a 4.6 point margin. The turnout gap is the highest for Black voters in Alameda and Fresno counties, with a 5.6 point margin. Orange and Riverside counties had the lowest Black turnout gap with a 0.2 point margin.

Table 6: Voter Turnout Gap Between Each Racial or Ethnic Group and the County-wide Rate in California Counties with the Largest Latino Populations, 2020 General Election (Percentage Points)

	LATINO	WHITE	BLACK	AAPI
Los Angeles	-4.6	5.9	-5.2	-0.1
San Diego	-9.3	4.4	-4.3	-1.1
Orange	-7.7	3.9	-0.2	-3.0
Riverside	-7.5	5.7	-0.2	-0.9
San Bernardino	-5.4	6.1	-2.7	2.4
Santa Clara	-6.7	3.8	-1.7	-1.4
Alameda	-5.5	4.5	-5.6	-1.6
Sacramento	-5.1	3.3	-4.7	-5.0
Fresno	-7.2	9.2	-5.6	-8.0
Kern	-9.1	8.0	-4.3	1.8

Note: Table is sorted in descending order according to the raw Latino population in each county

Source: LPPI estimates based on California's voter file.

San Diego and Alameda counties had overall turnout rates above 80 percent; however, these counties had the largest gaps between the county-wide rate and Latino and Black turnout rates, respectively. Counties should not only aim for high overall voter turnout but also implement targeted mobilization strategies that close the racial and ethnic group turnout gaps (particularly for Latino, Black, and Asian voters). If overall turnout is the only measure of effective voter mobilization, racial and ethnic disparities in voter turnout will likely persist.

CONCLUSION

In 2020, political organizers successfully mobilized voters of color at historic rates despite a global pandemic and the expansion of restrictive voting laws. During that election, the racial and ethnic turnout gap remained. This was evidenced by the nearly 20 percentage point difference between non-Hispanic white turnout and Latino turnout in California. The data presented here demonstrates that additional analysis is necessary to identify the efficacy of current laws and programs to ensure all eligible voters can cast a ballot irrespective of demographic background, including race and ethnicity. Here, policymakers should further analyze the cause of these gaps and implement data-driven interventions that make it easier for voters of color to cast ballots. Given the comparatively low Latino voter turnout in the Central Valley, Inland Empire, and Los Angeles, geographically targeted voter mobilization efforts could have a notable impact in these regions. As a best practice, state and county elections administrators should also institute public-facing progress indicators that disaggregate voter turnout by race and ethnicity and measure success based on improvements in the turnout of voters of color rather than county-wide averages alone.

Increasing the number of eligible voters who successfully register and vote in subsequent elections, including the 2022 midterms, is essential. Since one-third of California's eligible electorate is Latino and research shows that they possess the largest turnout gap among racial and ethnic groups, special emphasis needs to be put on mobilizing these eligible voters to register and cast ballots. This report describes inequities in voter registration and turnout during the 2020 U.S. general election, but more research needs to be done to determine what efforts need to be made to engage this large electorate.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jacob Fabina, *Despite pandemic challenges, 2020 election had largest increase in voting between presidential elections on record* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), [available online](#).

² Ibid.

³ Zachary Courser, *An Analysis of State-Level Vote Access Changes and Turnout in the 2020 Election*, (Claremont: Policy Lab, Claremont McKenna College, 2022), [available online](#).

⁴ Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, "Governor Newsom Signs Landmark Elections Legislation Making Vote-by-Mail Ballots Permanent for Every Registered Voter, Strengthening Elections Integrity," (news, September 27, 2021), [available online](#).

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Social Explorer "Data Dictionary: Census 2020 - PL94 Redistricting Data," accessed August 15, 2022, [available online](#).

⁶ Methodological Note: The software package eiCompare was used to perform Bayesian Improved Surname Geocoding (BISG) and obtain probabilistic estimates of each voter's race from the publicly available California voter file for the 2020 general election. The BISG method projects an individual's race/ethnicity based on probabilities assigned from the demographic composition of the census block in which they reside and their surname.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "2020 Presidential Election Voting and Registration Tables Now Available," (press release, April 29, 2021), [available online](#).

UCLA

**Latino Policy &
Politics Institute**

 **UCLAlatino**

 **UCLAlatino**

latino@luskin.ucla.edu